THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

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THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

by spicyshimmy

Summary

Prince S'chn T'gai Spock of Vulcan, engaged to Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth through an arrangement made by their parents many years ago, writes to his intended on the day of his birth in the interest of diplomacy. Jim is not interested in diplomacy. Though there is no precedent set for the commencement of a written correspondence begun due to these specific parameters, I will strive to maintain, to the best of my abilities and with ample preparatory research previously conducted, the appropriate level of formality between us, based on a number of factors, primarily examples of a similar nature.

Notes

Inspired by prince-AU art done by pixiepunch/kristalbabich on tumblr. And an attempt to bash through writer's block. And a love of arranged marriage scenarios. Better than no-win scenarios.
FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk  
SUBJECT: General Greetings; Acknowledgments on the Subject of Your Day of Birth; Other Matters of Note  
STARDATE: 2250.04

Though there is no precedent set for the commencement of a written correspondence begun due to these specific parameters, I will strive to maintain, to the best of my abilities and with ample preparatory research previously conducted, the appropriate level of formality between us, based on a number of factors, primarily examples of a similar nature.

This correspondence has been initiated with considerable forethought.

I have learned that it is a common practice among humans to acknowledge the date of an individual’s birth with celebratory actions as well as gifts. My mother, as you know, is a human female and is aware of many of your traditions. With her providing advice and personal insight, I trust that you will not find my attention to detail lacking in this matter. As today is your seventeenth birthday and humans find it compulsory to congratulate one another on this occasion every year, whether or not their actions have merited special, complimentary mention: Happy Birthday. May this day and subsequent days until your approaching visit to Vulcan find you in good health. The gift was chosen after similar consultation. I also trust that you will find it satisfactory in some way.

As you must certainly be aware, I am Spock—information I did not provide sooner within the body of this message as it was already indicated in the outgoing address—son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth. As per the arrangements of our parents prior to our conception, in order to encourage diplomacy between our planets and following in the footsteps of the tradition set forth by the match made between my father and mother, it has been decided that we are to be one another’s intended. This tradition of arranged sexual and nuptial partnership is not uncommon on Vulcan, though understandably its strictures as applied to us cannot and will not provide a comprehensive parallel.

It has been suggested that I convey that the divergences in tradition will place us both on equal ground as far as familiarity—or lack thereof—is concerned.

I shall conclude with a general sentiment expressed often by my people. As Vulcans cannot lie, it is offered with honest intent.

Live long and prosper—as written in Standard, rather than in Vulcan, since it is regularly too difficult for humans to read or pronounce.

Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek

FROM: jim t. kirk  
TO: spock  
SUBJECT: oh my god
it took me longer to read that letter than it would've taken to come all the way to vulcan and pick it up myself, probably. tell your mom thanks for me. mine said i’d better write back or risk putting off the whole thing, but i’m bad enough at letters that i told her it might ruin everything anyway.

she never listens to me, so here we are. damned if i do, damned if i don't.

so, thanks. i wasn't expecting a present or anything, but it was cool seeing a vulcan ship model. you guys have different schematics than what we use on earth so the blueprints were a little tricky to figure out. fortunately i'm pretty great with my hands.

seventeen's not really that big a deal on earth. sixteen is a HUGE deal for girls, they have big parties and whatever, but not so much for guys. i don't know if they have distinctions like that on vulcan or not. am i supposed to know when your birthday is? do they celebrate them over there?

you could try me on the vulcan you know, i figure i'm gonna have to learn it eventually if i'm your intended. speaking of which, you don't think it's a LITTLE weird to agree to marry someone before you've ever seen them? i mean, it's definitely not earth tradition. there's dating, and more dating, and other fun stuff and finding out if you can live with someone without wanting to pop their head off... seems pretty illogical to go rushing to the finish line if you ask me. you don't even know what i look like what if i'm physically repulsive.

anyway, call me jim i'm not gonna address you by four names all the time.

jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: In Direct Response to “oh my god”
STARDATE: 2250.05

Hello again, Jim T. Kirk.

I have been informed that the technological state on your home planet of Earth is not in such comparative disrepair to that enjoyed on Vulcan that the personal communication devices belonging to someone of your diplomatic and social status should regularly malfunction. With that in mind, I must therefore ask: Is there some reason your response lacked any signs of proper capitalization as it was sent?

If you are in need of a replacement device, though it is no longer technically your day of birth, I would not be averse—in order to ease our only means of communication prior to physical introductions—to gifting you with a non-malfunctioning device that will afford you less difficulty.

Live long and prosper.

Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek

FROM: JIM
TO: SPOCK
SUBJECT: Are you doing this on purpose?
STARDATE: 2250.05

Hi, Spock.

No, it's not broken. That's just how I type. It goes faster. And I don't think we should be heading into this marriage with you doing me favors all the time, you know? I might get the wrong idea. You might spoil me before we ever meet and then I'll be all smitten and I have it on good authority there's nothing worse than a smitten, sweaty human on Vulcan.

I read that Vulcans don't have sweat glands, but... You know about that, right? From your mom. Humans, sweating. It's a thing. The staff's trying to put together a summer wardrobe for me but I doubt it's gonna be enough from what I'd seen of your guys' climate. What's the policy on public nudity over there?

J

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: I Do Many Things “On Purpose”; To Which Action Are You Referring?
STARDATE: 2250.05

Once more, I set forward the customary greetings appropriate to both our cultures, Jim T. Kirk. May this message find you in continued good health.

It is a relief to note that your technical malfunctions have been adequately repaired either by you or at your behest; despite your insistence that the errors were made purposefully, for the sake of personal ease and comfort, I understand that it is a particularly human endeavor to excuse minor accidents in order to assuage feelings of embarrassment.

Vulcans, however, do not lie; though I am only half Vulcan on my father’s side, I have been raised on the principles of Surak, as befits the location of my upbringing. Embarrassment is not a matter with which Vulcans waste resources—both time and energy—concerning themselves.

I do not—rather, I cannot—blame you for behaving as is familiar to you, as a human. As you introduced the topic of my mother in your previous communication—in order to satisfy your peculiar curiosity, know that she is not prone to idle perspiration—I will add that she is an exemplary individual for her race, though she has done her best to prepare me for the inconsistencies of human nature.

I have likewise attached, for your edification, information relating to matters of public decency on Vulcan. It is a point of some concern that you have not already researched and studied these areas in preparation for your arrival. Perhaps you were unable to gather ample resources. I, however, had many at my disposal. I included the most relevant.

Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek
FROM: Jim  
TO: Spock  
SUBJECT: Thanks for the pamphlets  
STARDATE: 2250.05

Seriously, just call me Jim. I think it'll save both of us a lot of time and effort. Doesn't it tire you out writing all that? Jim's just three letters. Nobody calls me James. I mean, I guess you could, but I'd feel weird having a ton of names if you've only got the one. Jim and Spock. See? Nice ring to it. Or we could do Spock and Jim. You are cordially invited to the nuptials of Spock and Jim, Providing Jim Hasn't Done Anything Knuckleheaded and Messed It Up.

To be honest, there's not a lot of information on Vulcan culture out there. I mean, there's the basics, but you guys are crazy private about a lot of stuff. The info you sent was all right, although I'm warning you right now I'm gonna faint in one of those get-ups.

As long as we're exchanging particulars, I'm supposed to forward you a list of known allergens and my CMO's contact info. It's nothing to worry about, just standard Federation procedure for sending me offworld. You don't even need to check it out, if you just give it to whoever's in charge of that stuff.

I promise not to get naked on Vulcan, but it seems like a waste for people who don't get embarrassed not to take advantage of that hot climate.

Do you swim?

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk  
SUBJECT: There is no need to express gratitude over a purely logical action  
STARDATE: 2250.05

Jim T. Kirk, your request that I refer to you henceforth as simply ‘Jim’ has been noted; however, as of yet, I am unable to comply. Do not assume that my lack of conformity is a failure to acknowledge and respond to your expressed preference. It is, rather, an adherence to that which is proper on Vulcan, given our current lack of familiarity.

In the interest of ‘evening the playing ground’—a colloquialism my mother has assured me is appropriate, despite the lack of ground upon which we are ‘playing’—I shall enlighten you as to my full name, though you will likely have some difficulty in pronouncing it. It is S’chn T’gai Spock. I have once again accompanied this communication with an attachment, this one with a recording of the appropriate pronunciation so you do not embarrass yourself.

My studies leave me with no excess time for indulging in unnecessary exploits such as swimming. Likewise, it is clear that the particulars of your decidedly under-performing immune system should cause your CMO to proscribe any recreational activity that brings you in contact with water-born parasites.

Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek
FROM: Jim Kirk  
TO: S'chn T'gai Spock  
SUBJECT: You weren't supposed to read those files.  
STARDATE: 2250.05

Spock, I said you didn't have to read that stuff.

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk  
SUBJECT: That was not implied.  
STARDATE: 2250.06

Jim T. Kirk, salutations. I must debate the veracity of the accusation leveled in my direction within your previous subject line.

I will now quote the exact particulars included in the communication that contained the files in question.

>> As long as we're exchanging particulars, I'm supposed to forward you a list of known allergens and my CMO's contact info. It's nothing to worry about, just standard Federation procedure for sending me offworld. You don't even need to check it out, if you just give it to whoever's in charge of that stuff.

Your statement (as bolded) ‘You’ (in this, referring to me) ‘don’t even need to check it out, if you just give it to whoever’s in charge of that stuff’ implied that my own familiarity with the information within was not strictly mandatory—neither did it imply that it was specifically unwanted. As I forwarded the not insubstantial list of potential threats to your good health to those ‘in charge of that stuff’ I also had every reason to familiarize myself with those threats so as to avoid a future in which one might take any of us by surprise. In other words, the human memory can be faulty even when regarding the well-being of the individual who possesses it. Vulcan memory, however, is not faulty under any circumstances.

Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek

FROM: Jim  
TO: S'chn T'gai Spock  
SUBJECT: It was totally implied.  
STARDATE: 2250.06

All right, my bad. I guess I should've assumed that you'd actually WANT to read all that boring stuff. I was giving you an out. Which you didn't take, but you were totally supposed to.

I think it's sweet that you wanna look after me though. Kinda romantic. That's what we're supposed
to be doing, I guess.

You're not gonna call me Jim T. Kirk when we're alone together, are you? I don't think I could handle it.

I'm practicing your name.

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: Your implications must, therefore, be lacking the universal specificity required of them.

STARDATE: 2250.07

Jim T. Kirk, greetings. Though needless and functionless repetition is not within my nature, my mother frequently assures me that compulsory attention paid—however minimal—to the subject of health is always appreciated by human beings. As a human nicety and social gesture, to illustrate my intellectual curiosity after your Earth habits, if nothing else, I inquire after your health. Also, given what I now know of your constitution and the regular threats made to your immune system, it is apparent to me now that this inquiry is more than superficial and may in fact be more likely relevant than not.

That being said, though I am passably familiar in all manners of medical care for the physiology of every race in the Federation and many that have not yet joined, it would be unwise to eschew the services of a CMO as per regulation standard.

Nevertheless, I shall refocus certain studies so as to be prepared for all eventualities.

What else would I call you, if not by your name? I fail to see how privacy will impact or somehow alter the facts.

Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek

FROM: jim
TO: spock
SUBJECT: sorry i guess i'lll, work ofn tha.

STARDATE: 2250.07

ok so goodn news hbad news this is gonna ofend your vulcan eyes whcjh i get are way better than human eyes so im sorry for thei IS IN ADVANCE but had a little hovebrike accidnet supposed to keep limbs staiotionary forawhile BUT i knew youd worry if i didnt write u and here you are prving me right asking about my healthS O.

goodnews is i have PLENTY of time to practiec vulcan now

i;;l be able to say your name too
Jim T. Kirk, once again, hello. As my customary inquiry after your health has no purpose, given
the subject matter of your recent communication, I will instead advise you to locate the voice-to-
text option on your communication device and speak into its receiver loudly and clearly in order to
dictate your responses rather than type them. Otherwise, you will be working against the efficacy
of the casts I have reason to believe are currently restricting the mobility of your hands and fingers,
as they are meant to limit your movements so as to promote swift bone healing.

If your medical consult has not already made you aware of this then please see attached
information on the human skeletal system in order to educate yourself. Also it is a distinct
possibility that a new medical official should be assigned to you, as the one currently treating you
is committing egregious errors in your primary care.

Vulcans do not ‘worry,’ as you suggest I might have if you were to forego our correspondence for
any short amount of time. Therefore I can assure you—as worry is a human emotional weakness—
that no worry on behalf of an imagined, unbalanced emotional state on my part is necessary. You
are the one who should not worry.

Spock of Vulcans, Son of Sarek

Jim T. Kirk, as an addition to the communication I dispatched earlier today, I have attached a
Vulcan pronunciation guide. Your tongue may not be as inherently talented as a Vulcan’s—there is
some question as to whether or not scales of merit can be applied in this physiological comparison
—yet if your jaw was unharmed by the hoverbike accident of which you spoke, then this may
serve as an appropriate recreational pastime.

Spock of Vulcans, Son of Sarek

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock of Vulcans, son of Sarek AND AMANDA GRAYSON
SUBJECT: Thanks.
OK, voice to text... I guess you can't hear what I'm saying, so I don't have to worry about that thing where your voice sounds weird over a recording. Uh. Thanks for the pronunciation guide, I'm gonna do all my practicing where it won't short out this thing, since it's programmed for Standard, and even if it could understand Vulcan, I doubt my accent could carry it off yet. Yet's the key word there, um...

Glad to hear you wouldn't worry if I disappeared. Not that it's likely to happen, I don't slip away all that easily these days. Kind of... Kind of notorious being the human face of our marriage and all. Impending nuptials. You'd think a human and a Vulcan never got married before, but you're living proof that someone else beat us to it. Well, two someones. You probably don't wanna think about that though, right? Gross.

...

Did you really think I needed educating on the human skeletal system, Spock? I mean, it's inside me. I know how it works. I wasn't moving that much, I was just kinda moving my hands around and banging them down onto the right keys. Totally within my rights.

My jaw is totally fine and it's a good thing too because my whole face would look messed up without it and it's a good face. Even if it houses a subpar tongue. I'm starting to think maybe you're gonna have to teach it to be more Vulcan. Maybe in person?

Ugh, this is weird I don't know how to...

See you around, I guess. Thanks for the letter.

Kirk out.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: Requesting and offering clarification.
STARDATE: 2250.08

Jim T. Kirk, as per your suggestion, I have included my mother’s full name and shall continue to do so in all future communications between us.

Lest you remain under what appears to be a misimpression—that is, my omission of her name in my official title was due in any part to unfavorable judgment of her person or character—let it be known that she cannot be found lacking on any account. It is true that she is human and therefore susceptible to human whims and flights of marked emotionalism, which are not appreciated in Vulcan culture, yet as a representative of her race, she is in all facets commendable.

What she cannot help or manage due to her nature is minimal and it does not overly impede her ability to adhere to the standards of Vulcan and its native inhabitants. She has performed her duties as a wife and a mother most adequately. Vulcan’s climate is without mercy—nor should it be expected to offer mercy to those from other planets—yet despite the difficulties presented on Vulcan for a human female, my mother has maintained this household efficiently and to standard. Though a Vulcan would admittedly consider her company mildly abrasive, due primarily to the
expressiveness presented by all humans, she is far less bothersome than any other individual.

It is true that my father, Sarek, chose to marry her for logical reasons, diplomacy being chief among them. However, it is my impression that he chose most logically a woman who would not embarrass herself given what was expected of her.

I trust that I have clarified sufficiently as to this topic.

As for my own requested clarification, you suggested that you were ‘out’. What, exactly, are you out of?

Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: I'll give it my best shot.
STARDATE: 2250.09

Spock,

Listen, I wasn't trying to imply anything, I'm sure your mom's great. I figured it was just Vulcan tradition, and on top of that I was teasing you a little about how you start and end your letters. It doesn't have to be so formal. I mean, considering the nature of our impending relationship I don't see why you need to be so formal with me at all.

Human marriages aren't formal. Well, the weddings are, but the stuff that comes after it isn't. I'll try and live up to your mom's example but I gotta warn you, most humans find me more than mildly abrasive.

As far as I know, and so long as we're swapping stories, my parents got married because they were in love. Either that or my mom was already pregnant with Sam and they had to rush things, I can never get the details right.

Anyway, the point is, Spock: you don't have to include our parents' names. You're just writing to me. I hope. I mean, there are some things you say to your betrothed that you wouldn't repeat to a member of the family, if you catch my drift.

I'm not out of anything. That's an old habit, from when I thought I was going to be a starship captain instead of somebody's treaty husband. My arms are better now so I can write without having to talk at the same time. Except that apparently my lips move when I read.

Actually, I'm told that's an annoying habit. I'm gonna attach a list of my annoying habits, just so you know what you're dealing with when I get to Vulcan.

You never answered me about my proposal for tongue lessons. Does that mean no?

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: Merely offering clarification at this time.
STARDATE: 2250.09
Jim T. Kirk, peace and long life.

If you believe that these communications are at any point truly private—that they are not monitored by those invested in our union—then you have failed to consider the importance of our alliance and those other parties involved in the match that was made, fifteen years ago, between us. It is a unification that affects more than simply two individuals. While marriage, as a concept in both Vulcan and human cultures, does itself exist within the greater context of family and society, a marriage of diplomatic convenience such as ours is one which exists within the greater context of both cultures entirely. As such, I cannot assume that our interaction is in some way monitored. This is merely logical—a logic that is as natural to humans as it is to Vulcans. A point of commonality, if you will, few though there may be.

Therefore, formality is not a choice undertaken lightly. We are to meet in Vulcan’s winter, which will prove milder than its summer and will therefore present fewer difficulties to your constitution. This meeting is one which will have a lasting impact upon two planets and the Federation as a whole. Our common goal is to ensure that this effect is positive and beneficial, after all. On the anniversary of your birth, now five days ago, I began this open line of communication in an effort to set this precedent. An undertaking such as ours is not a private one. It is by its very parameters most public and shall always be so.

For this reason it is of paramount importance that all protocol is followed to the letter. This shall allow us to avoid miscommunication as well as any unintended offense. Our cultures are most different, as no doubt you are by now cursorily aware. (I presume, not without reason, that your ministers of state and other instructors have prepared you, based on the knowledge provided of Vulcan and its customs.) It has been implied in the past that no one is more aware of these differences than I, already a son of two worlds; as I am not wholly Vulcan and the son of a Vulcan ambassador, I am the most logical candidate.

I shall inquire after lessons of the tongue. Those to whom I have spoken on the subject lack the frame of reference to prepare me for the activity you anticipate.

Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

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FROM: James Tiberius Kirk, Son of George and Winona Kirk, Brother of Sam Kirk, Resident of Earth.
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: Are people really reading these?
STARDATE: 2250.09

Spock,

You don't have to tell me what I'm getting into. I've had staff poking and prodding me into a state of Vulcan readiness for as long as I can remember. Some kids get hoverbikes for their birthday, I got books on the modern history of Vulcan culture. Which I'm told was twice as expensive and way harder to come by. Not that I'm complaining, but trust me, I'm practically the local expert.

Not that I expect that to mean something to you, considering the standards for knowledge on Earth are probably way lower than anything you guys have over there.

I'm not gonna embarrass you, is what I'm saying. I just thought that maybe our correspondence was gonna be a lot more low key than all that. I know how to behave in front of other people. I didn't
know I was writing to other people, that's all. You say stuff to your fiancé that you wouldn't necessarily to another person. At least, that's what I always figured.

I know we didn't choose each other, so there's no real reason for you to feel comfortable with me, but I thought maybe that was why you were writing. So we could get to know each other before we get to know each other on Vulcan.

The tongue thing was a joke, it's OK. Never mind. Don't ask anyone about it.

If you're still interested I can show you when I get to Vulcan.

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: On the subject of jokes.
STARDATE: 2250.10

Jim T. Kirk, peace and long life.

The subtleties of humor as expressed by humans yet elude me. Since our last communication I have researched the subject thoroughly on my computers and have come to understand there are multiple categories of ‘joke’ popular among your race, including the pun (also referred to as a play on words), sarcasm (indicated tonally, therefore unlikely to be successful in text format), and practical jokes (whether they are delivered maliciously or ‘all in good fun’ appears to be a matter best interpreted textually).

For my edification, I have also consulted with my mother, as her experiences with this human form of expression are primary rather than research-based. This provided more difficulty, as it confirmed my understanding that humor, even when it is most obvious, is simultaneously a matter of individuality and subtlety. She has suggested—and I concur with her good judgment—that I must apply myself to the study of your humor, after having familiarized myself with these concepts more generally.

Having applied myself thoroughly to the study—so as to avoid future misunderstandings, such as the ‘tongue joke’ in particular—I am compelled to inquire whether or not your statement about the birthday hoverbike was another instance of irony deployed in the joke context. As has already been established, you are in possession—by your own admission—of a hoverbike, though whether or not it survived the accident that left you with physical injuries, I cannot surmise given my lack of evidence. Therefore it seems probable that this reference was intended to be humorous.

Are your preferred forms of humor pun-based, sarcasm-based, or rooted in jokes of a practical nature? The more specific you are in response to my query, the better prepared I shall be to express acknowledgment of your humor in the future.

Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

FROM: J
Spock, dif-tor heh smusma,

You didn't tell your mom I was making jokes about your tongue, did you? Because you probably shouldn't do that.

Not sure how I feel about you adding me to the list of things you're already studying. That doesn't seem very romantic. I get that a certain amount of research is mandated and blah blah blah, but if you learn too much it'll take all the spontaneity out of it, you know? All the discovery and mystery.

I don't know whether Vulcans enjoy that or not. But it'll be a pretty boring marriage if we know everything about each other beforehand. Unless that's the kind of thing that revs your engine. I know how Vulcans feel about knowledge.

Along those lines, I'd say all three categories of humor suit me just fine. I've been known to pull a few pranks in my day, though I'm told that kind of "behavior" gets "less charming" with age.

You know you're older than me, right? Makes sense you'd be more mature.

Anyway, I'll try not to be too sarcastic in our communications, because you're right -- that kind of thing doesn't carry well through the written word.

I was serious about the hoverbike. I finally just bought my own two years later, but it's not the same as getting one for your birthday.

Say hi to your mom for me.

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: What is the precise meaning of “:O”
STARDATE: 2250.11

Jim T. Kirk, good time of day. I am certain this is the appropriate human greeting; however, as I cannot be certain when you will receive this message and the greeting preceding it, I will not presume to fill in that time of day for myself. You may do so at your leisure.

Now, I shall address your topics of conversation with as much chronological sensibility as possible. They were, however, varied and without sequitur.

1. I had expressed to my mother the possibility that you were predisposed to ‘crack jokes’ as it pertained to my motives for broaching the subject of humor with her. When she requested further clarification, I did so without violating the semblance of privacy you have been determined to preserve. I did not at this juncture mention either of our tongues, though it may relieve you to learn that I have since discovered no significant variance between Vulcans and humans where glottal musculature is concerned.
2. I have no engine to “rev”. However, if you are in need of another hoverbike and its presentation as a gift is as important as you suggest, then I shall acquire both engine and hoverbike bequest for a future celebratory acknowledgment.

3. I am aware of our relative ages.

4. I am not, as you suspect, inclined to spontaneity.

5. I am, however, certain that to study a matter fully is to grant it the respect of study it deserves. In preparation of our union, I have undertaken many thorough studies on a variety of topics.

6. I am charged to convey a “Hello, Prince Kirk” from my mother, as well as a mention of her gratitude that you should have thought of her at all. If you and she find one another’s companionship agreeable, then I am certain you will “enjoy” her company just as she will be relieved to know someone of similar predisposition and conduct.

7. Though we have not discussed her, it would seem only politic that I request you extend the same greeting to your mother the queen on my behalf.

8. Do not neglect proper formality in the extension of my greeting to your queen mother.

Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: It's a face. The face I was making at you.
STARDATE: 2250.12

1. Are we writing in list format now?

2. You researched our tongues.

3. I'm attaching a picture of me and my tongue for your research.

4. Do they have paparazzi on Vulcan?

5. Paparazzi /pəpəˈrætsi/, /pæpəˈrætsi/ (singular: (m) paparazzo Italian: [papaˈrattso] or (f) paparazza) are photographers who take pictures of athletes, entertainers, politicians, and other celebrities, usually while they are going about normal life routines.

6. Because let me tell you, there are TONS more where that came from -- apparently I stick my tongue out a lot. Although if you've been doing a lot of research on me you've probably already seen them. The pictures.

7. I make a better impression in motion than as a still life. Don't judge too harshly.

8. I told my mom you said hey, does that count?

9. That was a joke.

10. She says hey back, though she used more words than that. Called you Prince Spock. Am I supposed to call you Prince Spock, or is that an Earth thing?
11. She also says that if we're writing, I might as well get to know you better instead of dicking around. I don't really write people, so I think she thought I was kidding at first.

12. What do you do when you're not writing long letters, or reading other people's medical histories?

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: Vulcans do not say “hey”
STARDATE: 2250.12

1. A list is a convenient way to structure any document in order to address all separate points clearly and succinctly, as well as to guarantee that no point is forgotten.

1a. However, a list is not strictly necessary. Whether or not we continue with this format can be decided upon mutually.

1b. If you have something against lists, it would be prudent to mention this at your soonest convenience, along with any other preferences of which I should be aware before we move forward. Diplomats have been offended by less in the past and shall continue to be offended by less in the future. For example: the Tellarites, whom my father recently entertained, had equally unexpected reactions to the most simple and benign of gestures. Politeness and etiquette offended them in a variety of unanticipated ways.

Note: Though I cannot say that I have anything against the Tellarites (to do so would be to harbor personal prejudice—and, as a Vulcan, I do not; as an individual of my standing, I cannot) I would not compare any human to a Tellarite.

From the picture you have sent as well as the dialogue you have provided, I can safely state that you are unalike Vulcan’s nearest neighbors in every way.

Note again: I do not seek to insult either you or the Tellarites by comparing you, though if comparisons are necessary, yours would be the more favorable in this instance. I do not believe this statement can be taken as an insult regarding the Tellarites. You are my fiancé and therefore it is within diplomatic regulations to compliment you without incurring incident.

There has been a great deal of emphasis made on Tellarites lately. I will now cease to discuss the topic as the delegation has departed for the time being, leaving relative peace in their wake.

Though you have doubtless already been given visual evidence—such as a digital photograph or other manner of portrait of me—I know that humans place a significant amount of stock in how an individual, especially a romantic partner, looks. Therefore I have attached pictures of myself; it is suitable that we should see one another in similar capacities. I have no trouble with my tongue, yet the picture here forwarded is in the spirit of the same you offered to me.

As for your final request (number twelve in your list) the numerous pastimes with which I engage on a daily basis are focused as appropriate on knowledge—social, historical, mathematical, linguistic, astronomical, theoretical, physical, literary, to name a few.
Will you explain the colloquial meaning of “dicking around”?

Spock, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: JESUS CHRIST THAT PICTURE
STARDATE: 2250.13

Oh my god, Spock. Spock, oh my god.

You sent me a picture of your tongue. Did you take that of yourself? It's great. I'm keeping it. I'll make it my PADD screensaver or something.

I've SEEN official portraits and stuff, but nothing like that, oh my god.

You look cute.

I'm obviously really thrilled to hear I look better than a Tellarite. Really. You guys sure know how to give a compliment over there. If I didn't know better, I'd ask if you were talking about the Tellarites so much because I got you a little flustered with all this talk of tongues and pictures. Do you get flustered?

If you never have before, it's all right. I have that effect on a lot of people.

To answer your question: I get carried away with the colloquialisms sometimes. That's another thing you should know about me. Dicking around is like when you're wasting time doing nothing. It doesn't have anything to do with... What it sounds like. Something I'd bring up if there weren't people READING our MAIL.

Hello, other people reading our mail. Pleasant weather we're having here. I should probably steer this around before it turns into a diplomatic incident, huh?

That's a hell of a lot to be focusing on, Spock. What do you do when you aren't studying?

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: Jesus Christ as an expostulation can carry both positive and negative connotations. In which way did you intend it?
STARDATE: 2250.13

Jim T. Kirk,

I utilized the timer option on my PADD in order to capture the image. Having run a simple algorithm to calculate the exact amount of time it would take to set up the frame and relocate myself within it, it required only a single attempt, with practice beforehand in a mirror, in order to make a similar “expression”. It was not a “candid shot” as many of your Earth paparazzi are so
fond of procuring of you, among other persons of interest as their primary subjects.

That being said, I do not believe it an image entirely worthy or appropriate of the status of screensaver.

Vulcans do not get flustered.

The business with the Tellarites is merely one that you shall also be implicated in after your arrival and our marriage ceremony; therefore, it is relevant information to be presented to you so that you may possess full awareness of its delicacy. As the Tellarites and the Andorians are both in close proximity to Vulcan, delegations from both races are regularly stationed on Vulcan and entertained by my father’s house. (Entertainment, in this context, does not mean something affording pleasure, amusement, or diversion, as in a performance, but rather hospitable provisions for the needs and wants of guests.)

My studies are my chief concern, as they will prepare me for my future duties to both our planets and their roles within the Federation. These studies are my focus; I believe that the proper human analogy cannot be found. Vulcans do not have hobbies in the human interpretation of the word.

I have been advised to share other personal information, for example, that I have a pet and companion, the sehlat I-Chaya. He is a bear and has been in my family since my father’s youth. At times he has joined me while I am studying or meditating.

Spock, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

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FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Positive, definitely positive.
STARDATE: 2250.14

Spock,

All right, that makes sense. Figures you wouldn't have gotten anyone else to take it for you. You can send me more pictures if you want to replace my screensaver, but I'm pretty fond of the one I've got right now. :P

I know Vulcans don't get flustered, but you're half human, right? You said in one of your first letters that you'd decided to do things the Vulcan way, but I assume you still feel things. I read about this kolinahr thing during one of my union prep courses (I guess that's what's taking the place of dating in our little arrangement here), but not all Vulcans do that, right? That's not what you meant by adhering to Vulcan precepts. I mean, it'd make sense if that was since it doesn't seem like you could get any more Vulcan than that, but I thought I'd ask. Since we're learning more about each other and all.

It'd be hard to love a sehlat if you didn't have any feelings, though. Animals can sense these things. I looked them up on my terminal -- do you have to brush those teeth? Yowza. Give him a pat on the head for me, will you? Can I bring him treats when I come to visit?

Don't worry, Andorians love me.

Does this mean we're sharing hobbies now? I used to have a bunch more before it got to be crunch
time, but now I spend all my time studying how to be a proper Vulcan husband. Which is so -- I mean, don't you think it's weird our parents never asked us about any of this? It's banking a lot on two people who weren't even born yet, let alone haven't even met. What if we hate each other? What if there's no sexual chemistry? Don't answer that, it's a rhetorical question.

Anyway, I like tinkering with the bike, running flight simulations, setting the grade curve for Starfleet entry exams. I don't have any pets.

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Pets, addendum.
STARDATE: 2250.14

Unless you count Bones.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Happy Halloween, even though it is illogical, and also this chapter has nothing to do with Halloween. I want candy. This chapter has sad things though. Hm.

Chapter Notes

The fantastical pixiepunch drew some accompanying tongue pictures for the previous chapter.
FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: Vulcan histories and other miscellaneous discussion items, including the pet named Bones.
STARDATE: 2250.14

Jim T. Kirk, peace and long life.

The Rite of Kolinahr is a topic of profound delicacy as one of Vulcan’s many private rituals, shrouded in necessary mystery. Given time, there is little doubt in my mind that you will come to have more understanding of it than you possess now, just as my mother, Amanda Grayson, has done over the course of many patient years. Kolinahr is undertaken by those of strictest emotional discipline. To succeed is no small undertaking and is worthy of utmost respect.

For some time, the possibility of my participation in this rite was under consideration. However it was decided ultimately that to embark on this path when mine is to remain between two worlds as a bridge between cultures would be unwise. This was the logical choice. And, as it was a choice informed by faultless logic, there is little more on the subject that requires discussion.

To assume that Vulcans naturally have no emotions is a misconception long propagated, a misapprehension that the union of our two races by means of our union as a symbolic or microcosmic representation of the aforementioned shall, ideally, work to undo. It is true that Vulcans regulate and control their emotions; this requires diligence that is as constant as it is unflinching.

The history of Vulcan is not without its share of illogic and illogical actions. Vulcan emotions run most deep. But these emotions do not rule us. They do not and cannot for our own well-being as well as our usefulness in contribution to the Federation.
Attached is a historical overview of Surak and his precepts. You may already have passing familiarity with the same. However I have included notes of my own within the documents for clarification, should certain concepts prove challenging. The translation is mine.

Having consulted on the topic of Earth pets with my mother, I must now explain that I-Chaya is not a pet in the strictest sense. He is a companion and a bodyguard. He provides company that does not interrupt and is therefore ideal for a young Vulcan unable to socialize generally with other young Vulcans of his own age. Also, one of his incisors was broken before my birth. This does not minimize the effect he has, nor does it negate his natural strength. He prefers a scratch under the chin to a pat on the head. It is in this spot he is most sensitive, though to offer it more than due attention would be to spoil him, which is inadvisable.

What species of pet is Bones? I am unprepared to address him as you have been prepared to address I-Chaya. Please send all information on the species and sub-species, along with individual information. I am told that popular human animals kept as pets are felines, canines, and, less commonly, large varieties of rodent. It would be preferable not to leave this up to conjecture.

By preparing ourselves in this fashion, I believe that the matter of personal preference shall not have significant influence. The arrangement was, after all, intended to be made between myself and your older brother. However, as you shall arrive in his place due to unforeseen events, a measure of adaptability in order to serve the greater good—the needs of the many, rather than the needs of the few—appears within both our natures, despite the distinctions of upbringing and race.

In what way do you maintain feelings of positivity with the Andorians? I would logically seek to cultivate a similar effect.

Spock, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

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FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: We both have T middle names.
STARDATE: 2250.14

Sam had a dog, but he took her with him when he bailed.

Never really bothered with getting another one after that. I'll keep that in mind about I-Chaya.

Bones is my CMO, so I'm attaching all the relevant details there. Pictures included, though it's impossible to get one of the guy where he looks halfway decent instead of like he's coming at you with a hypo in each hand. He's a big pussycat really. HATES it when you scratch him under the chin though.

I'm glad you're not doing the kolinahrt thing. I don't know enough to comment on it one way or another, probably, but it sounds like a big deal. That, and a lot of my charm hinges around being funny and handsome and so if none of those things affected you anymore it'd probably be a really dry marriage.

That's how I get around the Andorians, mostly. Flirting. They don't know to respond at first, but everyone likes it when you pay attention to them. Got my crash course in diplomacy a little late but I'd say I'm a natural.
Your translation's better than the one they gave me here.

I don't know, Spock. It doesn't seem healthy to bottle everything up like that. I know you're not human, but it still doesn't seem right. Bones would say that's the kind of thing that gives you cancer, but he's kind of a worrywart.

Did you write letters to Sam too?

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: That is indeed an accurate statement. However to introduce topics of conversation within the subject header seems rather unconventional.
STARDATE: 2250.15

Jim T. Kirk, peace and long life.

As Vulcans do not flirt—the practice, I am told, often involves falsehoods presented by means of over-emphasized praise, which may or (more likely) may not have its basis in the strictest of truths—I regret that I will be unable to court the favor of the Andorians as you have done.

This is another example of the wisdom of our union, as there are talents and skills you possess that I do not. Of course, the same is true in reverse as well.

In response to your query, I had once written a similar communication to your older brother Sam four years ago on the seventeenth anniversary of his birth. I received no response but did not take offense. Vulcans do not rely on pride and therefore have little ego to be bruised.

Indeed, there is much that Vulcans do not do, as no doubt my communications have conveyed.

Is there a method of transferring my dissatisfaction with your CMO's preventative care? The reasons for referring to him as your "pet" have eluded me. Is this a distinctly human expression of some kind, adhering to the principles of ironic or sarcastic humor? I could not find a direct corollary in any colloquial dictionaries, and I cross referenced no fewer than seven.

I have been informed that a Klingon delegation is soon to attend a meeting on Earth and that the situation is considered a volatile one. I trust you will be safe during this time.

Spock, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: OK duly noted.
STARDATE: 2250.16

I might not be able to write back right away, for the reasons you said. Gotta take some time off from my Vulcan prep to learn some things about Klingons. I figured I'd let you know, since I didn't
wanna pull a Sam. I know you said you don't care one way or the other, but I read somewhere that missed communications have been the foundation for a ton of diplomatic incidents, so I figured I'd get started on practicing that. Not starting diplomatic incidents.

Do you think flirting with the Klingons will work?

Bones is all right. It was both sarcastic and ironic, I guess. He's not a pet in the literal sense, but he spends a lot of time running around after me and getting underfoot. He's got those hangdog eyes too. Search for Earth hound dogs, you'll see the resemblance.

Anyway, my Klingon lessons call. Do you speak Klingon? Maybe I could teach you a little sometime.

That's another reference to our tongues, just so you know.

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Listen,
STARDATE: 2250.17

Don't send me anything for awhile I think they're monitoring my ingoing and outgoing activity I'll get back to you soon.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: With careful hands.
STARDATE: 2250.17

Jim T. Kirk, peace and long life. What is, is. I have understood the meaning of your communication and intend to meditate on future diplomatic successes. It would be illogical to interrupt proceedings further. When you have time and inclination, message me again.

Spock, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of George and Winona Kirk
SUBJECT: I have encrypted this communication. It is doubtful that any Klingon will manage to intercept it.
STARDATE: 2250.17
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, what has happened?

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
i can't talk right now i'm

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: ok good
STARDATE: 2250.20
SECURE CHANNEL

sorry about that last one, the power shorted out before i could keep going i figured at least you knew i was alive though
can't believe you beat me to encrypting a secure line i was gonna do that to impress you
im fine don't know what theyre showing on the news there in vulcan or anything
im fine
mom's fine too
dad

well youre good at procession of elimination im sure you can infer

we don't know if it was the klingons or someone real pissed that the klingons were visiting at all

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: In response to “ok good”
STARDATE: 2250.20
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

There has indeed been news, from many sources, though as with all such news, some of the finer details are without verification; others fall prey to typical sensationalism. However, all accounts as they have been presented are certain that the actions of George Kirk were noble, selfless, and brave. Many speak of him as a hero. Surak once said, “Nobility lies in action, not in name.” In understanding this, I understand that nobility lies in the actions and the name of your father, George Kirk.

Vulcans consider and respond to death in ways most different from human grief. I have seen my mother shed tears over the smallest of losses—over a baby bird that did not last the night. I could not pretend to understand how or why these emotions of hers were and are expressed so freely. I only know that they have been.

Therefore, I offer my condolences in the spirit with which they may be received. As a human would receive them, if not as a Vulcan would offer them. To you, and to your mother, Winona
Kirk. Though we both know I have no culpability in what has transpired, I believe the appropriate statement is to say I am sorry, Jim.

You have assured me that you are safe. This detail was less than apparent in the bulletins and transmissions from Earth. Surak also said, “The calm mind is the one that truly knows.” If your mind remains calm, fear will not follow in the footsteps of chaos.

What you may not yet know is that the act was a hostile overture extended by a rebel Klingon faction protesting the peace talks made without their support. As such, given the nature of the alliance between your people and mine, Vulcan shall do what it must to fulfill and honor its obligations to Earth.

Do not endanger yourself to assure me of your well-being, as such behavior is inherently a conflict of interests. It will compromise that which I would prefer to ascertain. When you are able to communicate, communicate. I would have more information, but not at an expense too great to pay.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: thanks
STARDATE: 2250.21
SECURE CHANNEL

thanks for hailing back. i wasn't gonna reply, but it's nice to have something to focus on that's just mine, you know? i look forward to it at the end of the day. or sometimes in the morning, before the servants start preparing us for the day. that's pretty much the only time i have to myself now.

we're still sorting stuff out, you know, funeral arrangements. whatever. my mom's doing as well as can be expected. sam might come back to help her out with stuff but i doubt it. wrote to him and i haven't heard anything.

guess you know what that's like.

i'll probably go crazy if i don't have anything to distract me so i'll probably keep sending communications over whether i'm supposed to or not. sorry if that goes against your logical sensibilities. don't stop writing.

maybe we should just stick to this channel for awhile. all right by you?

j

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: There is no need to express gratitude for a task performed when it was required. Nevertheless, you are “welcome”.
STARDATE: 2250.21
SECURE CHANNEL
Jim, peace and long life.

Your stated desire to maintain a private channel for our communications indefinitely is as understandable as it is logical. I have made the necessary corrections to the security protocols. If you have reason to believe at any point that the channel has been compromised, then perhaps we may consider a rotating security system made of multiple encryption programs. You had mentioned interest in the task, though I would have little difficulty establishing the encryptions myself, if you do not find yourself at liberty to contribute.

Perhaps you are already aware of the skirmishes now taking place in the Neutral Zone. Two Klingon factions are pitted against one another. To the victor, it would seem, go the spoils—the spoils being either war with the Federation or peace with the Federation, depending on said victor.

When space travel is less hazardous—a small Vulcan vessel was lost early this morning in that sector—a Vulcan delegation will be arriving on Earth for the planned summit, and to pay our respects at the public funeral of George Kirk.

If you are not careful, then your good health is now in the hands of this medical officer “Bones”. It does not seem a prudent gamble.

Live long and prosper.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: still, thanks
STARDATE: 2250.21
SECURE CHANNEL

spock,

thanks for reminding me of what i have to look forward to if i get sick on top of everything else. if that was your roundabout way of asking me whether i'm all right after the attack, i'm fine. nothing major, just the usual. it's not the first time i've gotten the crap beaten out of me and it definitely won't be the last.

though i'm not exactly looking forward to a repeat performance by the klingons anytime soon. they hit hard.

guess i did all that language practice for nothing. i could still show you a thing or two, if you wanted. might as well not go to waste.

listen, spock, i think everyone should stay on vulcan until things are less hot. just lay low. you said yourself there are firefights all over the place right now, and vulcan's in a more volatile spot than earth. i know you said you were gonna wait for the optimal moment anyway, but maybe you should just hold off until i was supposed to visit. then you don't have to go out of your way.

it's not that i don't want to see you. we have delegations in and out of here all the time. right now we're still cleaning up from the last one, but i know we're prepared for vulcans. your parents stayed here before i was born, probably meeting sam. sorry that didn't work out.
still haven't heard from him, so it looks like we're gonna be flying solo for awhile.

but you should think about what i said. unless you weren't planning on coming with that delegation and i'm totally misreading the situation. sometimes your letters kinda blur together and i read them a bunch of times but it's late and as i'm sure you're aware i only have a human brain to work with here.

the whole delegation should just steer clear for awhile if you ask me, but that's not an official request or anything like that. just my opinion.

j

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Still welcome.
STARDATE: 2250.22
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Your original gratitude as offered in the subject line appears to have a meaning separate from the repetition of “thanks” within the body of your following communication. If this is another instance of sarcasm, I will make note of it in order to maintain a constant awareness of that which does not come naturally to me. I would not, through lack of attention, mistake your intent. Though the focus of our duties now lies with issues of diplomacy and political relations, I would not eschew the duties I also bear toward you in the process.

As far as intentions are concerned, despite the plans already set in motion for a delegation of medium size to depart Vulcan and arrive on Earth, further hostilities in the neutral zone have caused Federation lockdowns of all transport ships for the present time. Of this you are doubtless already aware; an official briefing communication from Federation headquarters in Earth’s San Francisco was broadcasted earlier this morning to all allied planets and governments, and Vulcan will comply in order to maintain our unified front.

There was also a matter of terrorist activity near a space station close to Vulcan this afternoon. The explosion could be seen from the window of my private chambers and we wait now for reports of the casualties. I have been informed that there will be little chance I shall be cleared for travel until it is deemed safe for someone of my status to do so.

My mother suggests that it is at times such as these that distractions are of paramount importance, though I do not agree with her assertion. It is at times such as these when the full focus of a calm and analytical mind, unencumbered and unhindered by emotionalism, is vital to the survival of an ideal peace. The Vulcan High Council has been in conference session for four days. As my admission to the college was denied, I make conference alone.

How is your health?

Spock of Vulcan
FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Starting to think you might have a sense of humor after all.
STARDATE: 2250.22
SECURE CHANNEL

i'm doing all right, spock. like i said, i was black and blue for awhile, but it's starting to fade. a few cracked ribs, one hell of a shiner and what bones insists is a mild concussion but that's just part of my charming personality.

i took a picture for you. the bruise on my stomach looks a little like part of the delta quadrant.

anyway, my head's fine now and i've got nothing in a cast. i was on bed rest for a couple days but i'm all right now. your letters saved me from going nuts, which you probably guessed from the way i was begging for them.

sorry about that. not exactly a great side of me. maybe bones was right about my head after all.

to be perfectly honest, i'm glad you're on lockdown. i wasn't sure you'd listen to all my perfectly logical reasons why you should stay at home, so it helps to have a law backing me up. at least, that's how i feel about it.

you said that we still have duties to each other, beyond what we have to do for other people, right? so i'm gonna keep telling you how i feel, even if it's inconvenient. writing isn't always the best indicator of emotional stuff, so i figure that's part of my duty as the human in the relationship. i can call it a relationship, right?

feels weird when we've never met. but i guess that's what letters are for.

how exactly do you go about making conference alone? i'm not sure i read that last part right, but what kind of idiot denies YOU from a college? any college. isn't that against the law or something? you should be allowed to do whatever you want. more than that, what in the hell kind of standards does this place have that someone like you gets shot down? are they out of their minds? can that even happen to vulcans? i mean, from what you've told me all you do is study. you sound like the perfect candidate to me.

hope you're not going too crazy on lockdown.

stay safe, okay?

j
Chapter Summary

Things get, briefly, naughty.

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU FOR READING and commenting! I will be replying to comments soon and I'm sorry for being slow on that front but things have been stupidly busy! <3

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: I have a sense of what humor is, but I do not believe you were referring to that definition of sense.
STARDATE: 2250.23
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

It would be unwise to assume that I would not have listened to your logic were it, as you claim, perfect. The truth is, however, that perfect logic is a rare achievement, even on Vulcan. Were it that simple to attain then so many would not have devoted their lives and their great intellect to its pursuit. Even the wisest elders of the Vulcan Council must apply rigorous dedication in adhering to Surak’s precepts.

My mother suggests it would also be unwise to assume that you would wish to be lectured on these topics. “Lecture” as it stands offers a variety of possible interpretations depending on contextual evidence; one would simply be a lecture as offered in a lesson, toward the enlightenment of a subject, which is how it was intended, rather than an unwanted recitation of facts meant to shame or admonish.

To say that I have kept a conference of one is, upon reflection, not a strictly accurate statement. Rather, I have ascertained the most likely subjects of discussion amongst the elders of the High Council and have meditated on them, given their importance, while confined to safe quarters.

Though I applied to the Vulcan Science Academy and studied with my peers, as was logical of an individual in my position, a child of Vulcan—my birthright meant from the start that I would not be brought among the fold of those scholars. Not only am I half human, which no member of the academy before me has ever been, but I am also charged with matters of state rather than the freedom of intellectual pursuits, and could not have been committed to the Academy fully.

This has not prevented me from contemplating these sensitive diplomatic issues—potential solutions along with historical implications. I have attempted to consider multiple viewpoints. Anything that will lessen hostilities and prevent future loss of life is logically worthy of thorough
investigation. It is simply that I conduct my research alone and separate, and submit my findings to the proper channels when they are complete.

It does not appear that your CMO is attending the bruises as thoroughly as they demand. I would not have thought on my own to compare the shape of the bruising patterns to any system or constellation, but I should add that the coloration more closely resembles the Horse Head Nebula than the Delta Quadrant. If this is your CMO’s method of diagnosis, it is clear to see why you are not receiving proper care.

I confess I do not understand the concept of “going too crazy” in this context. In your grief, is your mental condition compromised?

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: In addition
STARDATE: 2250.23
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. I noted you mentioned reading single communications multiple times. As that implies I may not have sent enough to occupy you adequately, I may offer additional communications in the future.

Good night.

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Back at you.
STARDATE: 2250.23
SECURE CHANNEL

if you want me to dream about you, all you have to do is say so.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Morning, sunshine.
STARDATE: 2250.24
SECURE CHANNEL

hey,

you can tell your mom it's okay, i know you were just trying to enlighten my human mind and all that. for someone who's remarkably condescending, you actually manage not to be too terribly offensive most of the time.

i'm trying to say i get it. i usually reply to your letters at night but i thought i'd take a swing at one in the morning and see how that went. obviously not very well. i like the extra letters thing though.
are you gonna start doing that more often? does this mean you were thinking about me before you went to bed?

these are all things i couldn't ask with the chaperones up my ass so i figure i might as well take advantage of a secure channel while i can. they're probably gonna start asking why we don't talk anymore, but i figure i have at least a few weeks before i'm supposed to get back to business as usual. we should probably enjoy our privacy until then, though i guess it's never bothered YOU that we're being monitored.

you don't have anything to say to me that could only be said in private? how do vulcans cultivate intimacy anyway?

feel free to be as detailed as you'd like.

going crazy is another colloquialism. i wanted to know whether it was agitating you to have your freedom of movement taken away, essentially. i don't do well with being told where i can't go or what i can't do -- wanted to know whether you felt the same. it's a human thing to try and find points of similarity between themselves and other people, especially people they want to relate to.

i'll pass along your diagnosis to bones. :) i'm touched you care enough to dig up a comparison of your own. what do you think it looks like now?

xo
j

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: I am not inclined toward the distribution of the particularly human occurrence known as the “nickname”.
STARDATE: 2250.24
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Now, it would seem that the discolored area of the hematoma on your abdomen is at least fading, perhaps not as quickly as it would have if tended to by Vulcan’s doctors, but not so slowly that it is of additional concern. Human tolerance for pain is not as high as a Vulcan’s. (Note: this is not a judgmental comparison, merely a factual statement.) Perhaps the distraction of your physical ailments have contributed to the mental and emotional stress you are currently enduring. “Going crazy” may be a colloquialism. I believe it is also a relative state.

Meditation is a means to a calm mind and clear thoughts. It is an invaluable practice. I recommend it to you as it allows for accelerated physical healing, though of course you will not be able to achieve the same rate as a Vulcan in an equal time-frame. That is purely biological, not something over which you have any control. Meditation has proven unerringly useful in the past week, for example. I offer this suggestion to you with that in the forefront of my mind. When there is nothing one is able to specifically do—if one is to feel frustrated, or prone to such feelings—then certainly there are steps that may be taken to ameliorate that failure of self-management.

As for the question of Vulcan intimacy, that is—in essence—an intimate subject. Our rituals are
shrouded in secrecy for many reasons, but as you will be a part of them, in your own way, in time, there is no reason that I should not be detailed.

Have you any specific request for clarification in mind, or should I begin with a more general overview? It is a broad topic. Do you require answers that range toward the anatomical or the spiritual? Definitions? Instructions? Diagrams?

Perhaps diagrams are the most logical place to begin.

As for matters of intimacy, I shall tell you now that though I am aware of how it is achieved, I have not—as in other areas of focus—yet practiced.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Peace and good night.
STARDATE: 2250.24
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

Hands. Our hands are the locus of great sensitivity.

Spock of Vulcans

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: OK, fair enough.
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

Jesus, well if you were hoping to shoot me a distraction from my physical ailments by suggesting diagrams of Vulcan intimacy then mission accomplished, Spock. That's – unexpectedly kinky of you. I approve. Way better than meditation. I gotta warn you, I'm no good at quieting my mind. Every time I try to shut things out it only gets worse, and I come out way more agitated than I when I started. Whenever I need to calm down I do a few combat circuits in the holodeck, or go for a long ride on my hoverbike. Since we moved to San Fran, there are all these coastal roads by the ocean. It's a nice view, pretty soothing. I haven't been out on my own in awhile, though. Security detail's pretty heavy since the Klingon attack.

I tried to shake them once, but it made my mom cry.

Don't worry, I'll do my best to stay sane. You already had to put up with one Kirk replacement and my parents obviously aren't gonna have any more kids, so I'm kinda our last hope there. Gotta protect the dynasty and all.

I've had some practice in human intimacy, from before we were supposed to get hitched. I was pretty young when Sam bailed, but it took awhile for my parents to sort out a new deal, I guess. Either way, it was from before I was spoken for. It's not a big deal. I just figured since you were honest I should do that back. I've never done anything Vulcan style before, so that should –
We'll be on even footing there, anyway.

I'm not gonna send you a diagram, I'm sure there's plenty out there on human sexual practices. Considering how often we think about it and all. Kinda looking forward to practicing with you.

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: dfgfffffffhhfgj
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

oh my god, spock.

i can think of some things we could do with your hands. and my mouth, maybe. mouth's a comparable erogenous zone, right?

hard to spell erogenous this late

erogenous

you have sensitive fingers huh

gonna think about that before i go to sleep tonight

xoj

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Is “dfgfffffffhhfgj” a human acronym?
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I am compelled to suggest that what you mistake for amplified agitation is merely your half-calmmed mind reacting more immediately to the thoughts and emotions you are constantly experiencing. When you have managed to achieve a near-tranquil state, that near-tranquility allows for a clarity of cognizance that places all significant thought in sharp relief—having swept away the distractions that once stood between your acknowledgement of these thoughts and the thoughts themselves. It allows you to recognize the fullness of your agitation. Therefore, the sense that you have become more agitated is merely an illusion. If you are able to push past your instinct to withdraw from the not insignificant weight of all you are thinking and feeling, then you will at last achieve true tranquility of mind.

This did not come as instinctively to me as it did to my peers, as, due to my human mother, that element of humanity stood in my way for some time. However, I trust that the frustrations at the time gave me practice with the concept that not everything will or should come easily. There is
merit to be found in those engagements that prove more difficult.

What I mean to say is that I am familiar with frustration. I do not speak as someone who has never experienced it for himself. I am in control of my emotions; that does not mean they do not exist. Rather, it is clear that such a state of control implies they do exist, for it would not be necessary to exert control over something nonexistent.

It is unusual behavior for a Vulcan to depart from the main topic of conversation and pursue one that is merely tangential. I have—to become relevant to our dialogue once more—included diagrams that will provide specific information rather than the general. Though I am half human, I more closely resemble my father than I do my mother. However, the points of anatomical and biological similarity between Vulcans and Humans is no doubt in part a deciding factor behind our union.

You reference your brother often despite his notable absence. It appears to me to be without logical purpose to refer to him at all. He is not there with you or your mother, Winona Kirk of Earth. He was once my intended, but he is no longer. I never had ample opportunity or indeed opportunity at all to “get to know” Prince George “Sam” Kirk beyond our introduction when the two of us were young—both of us not yet five years of age—whereas we have communicated now for twenty days without a break in those communications, save for those beyond our control. The conversation, though it has been conducted within a specific, textual format, has not been unpleasant—although admittedly that is only my position on it, and does not take into account your personal opinion of its merits, or lack thereof.

With whom did you practice human intimacy? In what rituals of intimacy did you engage?

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: A minor query.
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

Why is it that you would behave in a fashion that would elicit a negative reaction from your mother?

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: A more immediate response to “dfgfffffffhhfgj” despite not knowing its precise meaning.
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

Clarify “some things” if time permits it.

Spock of Vulcan
FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: No it's a keysmash.
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

So you know me better than you knew Sam and you like me better.

Good, I'm glad we got that out of the way.

It's kinda cute thinking about you getting all frustrated with meditation too, though. I know you said Vulcans don't get flustered, but that sounds pretty flustered to me. It's a human thing, which I guess you get half of. Although sometimes the way you talk about it, it's like you feel it way more than half. Maybe it's like a canker sore, where it feels huge in your mouth but it's not actually that big when you look at it in the mirror. You guys get canker sores? I think they're a vitamin deficiency thing, so probably not. Don't worry, I'm on a big old health regime now to prepare me for visiting Vulcan -- whenever that happens now. Bones wants to build me up before I escape his clutches so I won't drop dead off his watch.

That's another joke. I'm not that bad. Then again, you read my files, so I guess you already know that.

Not sure what kind of information you're looking for when it comes to my past conquests. I didn't exactly keep records. I've messed around with girls, mostly. Kissing and stuff. We do that with our mouths, not our hands. Nothing serious. I didn't really think of it as practice at the time, and then after our situation changed I was too busy with research and getting a crash course in how to be a diplomatic envoy. Didn't leave much time for fooling around.

I like your tangents, Spock. You can keep it up if you feel like it.

XO
J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Clearing up some things.
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

It's a human thing.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Clearing up redux.
STARDATE: 2250.25
SECURE CHANNEL

It's not rational, or logical. Sometimes after people go through a serious emotional change it makes them act out.
I'm not proud of it.

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: oh my god spock.
STARDATE: 2250.26
SECURE CHANNEL

things we could do with my mouth and your hands; a brief overview

1. i could suck on your fingers
1a. i have what is known in human colloquial terms as an excellent mouth for sucking.
1b. before you ask, it's related to the lips.
1c. i have good lips.

2. biting.
2a. not hard.
2b. it's a foreplay thing not an attack.

3. i should not send this.

4. i could kiss you for encrypting a secure channel.

5. you ever resent that we never got to ask each other out or anything i feel like that's a vital process we're not even gonna have a good proposal story spock.

6. i am a little drunk.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Elucidation required regarding human nature.
STARDATE: 2250.26
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

If you are not proud of it—if it is not rational, logical, or in any way agreeable to you or other involved parties—why do you not cease the behavior you have already recognized as unpleasant?

I cannot answer this question for myself. I suspect it has something to do with a facet of human nature that, as it is not logical, has heretofore eluded potential study.

However, if at all possible, I believe it of utmost importance to pursue an understanding of the rationality—or irrationality—behind this particular riddle.

“It’s a human thing” implies that it cannot be a half-human thing.

Spock of Vulcan
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Addendum to communication titled “Elucidation required regarding human nature.”
STARDATE: 2250.26
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I have been informed by an interested and tangentially involved party who also has passing familiarity with my personal communications that to discuss philosophy and philosophical theory is not necessarily “romantic”, and that topics more traditionally considered “romantic” would be preferable, at least as far as this stage of our acquaintance is concerned. I have been advised to “take things slowly” so as not to overwhelm or over-complicate. However I believe your mind capable of deeper intellectual pursuits. I do not see myself why this topic would bother you where others of equal weight have not.

What is your preference?

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Assurances
STARDATE: 2250.26
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I assure you I am no longer “flustered” or “frustrated”, nor would my experience with those states be recognizable as entirely human for I am not, as you must recall, entirely human. I cannot fathom why this state would be considered “cute” or anything other than unsightly and ultimately reprehensible.

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Request
STARDATE: 2250.26
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

An accurate, up-to-date, numbered list with names, if you are capable of providing it, would not go unappreciated. Descriptions of the individuals as well as your appraisal of their capabilities is not required but would not be refused.

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: In direct response to “oh my god spock”
STARDATE: 2250.27
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Am I to understand that, due to your inebriation, it was not your intention to send that particular message and therefore, in the interest of diplomacy, I should not reference its contents again?

Spock of Vulcan
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Vulcan sext lessons.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Ditching my security detail.
STARDATE: 2250.27
SECURE CHANNEL

Look, I said I'd cut it out. It's not like I go around trying to upset my mom or anything. Things have just been -- different, since my dad. You know. And I don't exactly do well with people following me around at the best of times, but at least the old security kept a reasonable distance. Now it's like I can't even take a nap without five people standing around me. Makes it tough to get a second to myself. You know how I like my privacy.

Anyway, I didn't adapt great at first, as you can guess. I'm sure you never acted out at seventeen and now that you're past that it seems even more distant but there's no way I'm as well behaved as you. Just another head's up. Mom would say I should follow your good example, since you're gonna be my better half and all. That's the point of our union anyway, to fill in each other's shortcomings. You've said as much before. It seems to me like you're getting the short end of the stick. Sucks for you. Sorry about that.

I only meant that it probably wasn't a half-human thing because you seem pretty logical even by our standards. I doubt you'd lash out like that.

Anyway, I'm not doing it anymore. Consider me sufficiently smothered by the best team our family can buy until further notice.

Dad's funeral's tomorrow. There'll probably be a broadcast or something, if you wanted to watch.

I'll be there.

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Cuteness; romanticism.
STARDATE: 2250.27
SECURE CHANNEL

You should talk about whatever you want in your letters. Especially now that we don't have to worry about other people reading them. I wouldn't mind if you got a little more romantic now and then, but if you'd rather talk sociological differences and meditation techniques then that's cool too. I'm smarter than I look. Dunno if I can keep up with your Vulcan mind, but I'll sure as hell try.
I'm gonna be doing that for the rest of my life anyway. Might as well get a little practice in.

XO

J

P.S. Maybe humans and Vulcans have a different idea of what's cute because I'm picturing it again and no, it's still cute. Could have something to do with your face.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: I don't believe this.
STARDATE: 2250.27
SECURE CHANNEL

Are you serious? You're serious. If I've learned anything about you, Spock, it's that you're always serious.

All right, here goes.

1. Marlena Moreau; cute little brunette, smart as hell, total social climber but she turned out all right; i think she wanted to be a princess more than she liked me. good kisser though.

2. Helen Noel; met her on a balcony at a family christmas party. think she's a psych student with starfleet? eloquent; good with her tongue.

3. Janice Rand; worked for my family, got bumped up to security.

4. Gary Mitchell; we grew up together, used to fool around before he left to study at starfleet, he's the one who introduced me to carol after i gave him his first handjob.

5. Carol Marcus; too smart for me.

6. Starfleet Candidate; can't remember this guy's name but we enjoyed some mutual friction in a bar bathroom by the shipyard.

That's all I have, hardly complete enough by your Vulcan standards, but in my defense I didn't know I'd have to be keeping records.

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: That thing we're not talking about.
STARDATE: 2250.28
SECURE CHANNEL

we could talk about it if you want.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: On the topic of security  
STARDATE: 2250.28  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I will not be troubled if you are unable to find time to reply to me today, as it is after all the day of the service for your father’s funeral. Though I have only familiarized myself through research as to the duties required of you and have never had cause to undergo them myself, I know that you will no doubt be otherwise engaged.

The topic is, I will admit, a sensitive one, a sensitivity compounded by the differences in outlook possessed by humans and Vulcans when regarding life and the cessation thereof. There is the possibility that I would commit to words a response interpreted as inappropriate or in some manner callous, due to cultural inconsistencies rather than offensive intent, and it would be illogical to court a misunderstanding while knowing full well the effect such a misunderstanding would have.

However, it would also be illogical to say nothing of it.

We on Vulcan do intend to observe the proceedings as they are broadcast with all due respect for your father and your family—and Earth’s government, and our alliance therewith—though Vulcans do not mourn in the same sense as the human funeral demands. But it will not go unmarked or unacknowledged. We will stand with you, though such metaphor has never been a particularly Vulcan proclivity.

In moments like these, perhaps it may provide comfort to know that matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed.

Then again, perhaps it may not provide comfort at all.

I will see you today, though it will not be a mutual experience. If you wish for me to make it mutual in some small way I would oblige.

Our communications to this point suggest that you are without question an individual possessed of the fortitude necessary for the task that awaits you, as you have already yielded to logic on a variety of occasions—including that of your security detail. It is important for one in your position to attend thoroughly and rigorously to maintaining your protection.

Live long and prosper.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: On the subject of romance (you are not compelled to read or reply to this swiftly)  
STARDATE: 2250.28  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Again, there is no need to respond before you are able and before your duties have been concluded.

On the subject of romance, I will confess in the interest of honesty—Vulcans cannot lie—that I have such minimal experience as to pass without mention. As you have enjoyed experiences with
no fewer than six romantic and/or sexual partners, it would stand to reason that I will have to rely
on you and your experience to instruct me as to how these matters are addressed to mutual
satisfaction. I have not shirked my own responsibilities in this area, however, as I have begun to
study human male anatomy based on anatomical models and other instructional manuals.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: A communication before rest
STARDATE: 2250.28
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, whether or not I “want” to discuss that which we have not yet discussed is irrelevant. I believe
that the matter of whether or not you want to discuss it is the question that must be addressed.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Additionally
STARDATE: 2250.28
SECURE CHANNEL

Good night, Jim. My mother has long since abandoned expression of the concept that my dreams
should be sweet. Yet if sugared or candied unconsciousness is desired by humans then it would be
beneficial for you to achieve that ideal tonight.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: sure. we'll talk soon
STARDATE: 2250.28
SECURE CHANNEL

i appreciate it, spock.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: re: On the topic of security.
STARDATE: 2250.30
SECURE CHANNEL

Hey, Spock,

Funeral’s over. Which I guess you know, since you were watching and it's been a couple days now.
I mean to get back to you sooner, I just lost track of time. Like you said, I have way more
responsibilities than I used to. Bones says we're in dire straits if it's my judgment we're suddenly all depending on, but he's a notorious pessimist and he knows how much I love to prove him wrong.

Don't know if I thanked you before, but your letters were great. It was good to have something to read on the day of. I had a hard time not just whipping my PADD out in the middle of the ceremony, but I figured you'd see me do it and then you'd see all the faces I make reading what you write me and that's no good. It's up to someone to preserve the mystery in this relationship, Spock, and I can already tell that someone's gonna be me.

Here's hoping I don't let you down. I know it wasn't in my medical file, but you could consider that a chronic condition I have too. Ditching security's only a part of it. Not that I'm gonna keep doing that, but it's been a habit of mine for awhile. I'm used to taking care of myself. Between Mom and Dad and Sam I never thought I'd have to amount to anything. I figured I'd do the palace life for awhile until that got old then maybe join up with Starfleet, take off and do my own thing.

I never expected to wind up in this position, but it sounds to me like it's something you're used to. Hopefully you won't mind me leaning on you for advice too much.

Guess that's what fiancés are for. Right?

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: How anatomically correct are these anatomical models exactly?
STARDATE: 2250.30
SECURE CHANNEL

You don't have to study anything, it's not a big deal. It's not like I know what I'm doing with Vulcans anyway, and if that's the parent your anatomy more closely follows we'll probably be on even ground in terms of experience.

Anyway. Anyway, Spock, that's the kind of thing that's a lot more rewarding to learn in person.

You're cool with the whole male anatomy thing though right? I mean we never talked about it but. You know.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: you keep sending me messages right before bed I'm gonna start thinking you're flirting with me.
STARDATE: 2250.30
SECURE CHANNEL

forget it.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT:
STARDATE: 2250.31
SECURE CHANNEL
Sweet dreams is just one of those things you say. It's not a literal meaning so much as it's understood that you hope someone has good dreams instead of bad ones.

It's more like telling someone you care about them. But I guess Vulcans don't dream so I don't know how that crosses over.

Have a good night, Spock.

xo

j

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Clarification requested  
STARDATE: 2250.30  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

What, exactly, should I commit myself to forgetting? If I am unable to “forget it” as such—Vulcan memory is without fault—and I am unable to lie about having forgotten “it”—though I am half-human, I do not lie as my father would not, and his father before him; I believe I have made myself clear on this issue already—then it would appear we have encountered an unforeseen difficulty that requires immediate strategies and action taken. We must act swiftly in order to ameliorate any damage prior to compounding it further.

Does the “forget it” refer to the subject line involving flirtatious intent or that which we have, it would seem, committed ourselves to avoid mentioning, despite the fact that our avoidance serves only to highlight its impact and presence by means of granting it excess power by devoting ourselves so rigorously to the task of ignoring it?

In other words, and in the interest of full and honest disclosure, I have not forgotten either “it” and doubt I shall “forget” anything in regards to our correspondence at any point.

I consider all our discussions frequently.

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Vulcan temperature  
STARDATE: 2250.30  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Regardless of anatomies, Vulcans are naturally “cool” in temperature, as compared to the average bodily temperature of a human being. Does this satisfy your curiosity?

Spock of Vulcan
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Amounting to anything
STARDATE: 2250.30
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Why is it that you have compared yourself on multiple occasions unfavorably to an individual who abdicated his responsibilities, while you alone remained to shoulder them in his stead?

This is the height of illogical comparison.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Vulcan memory
STARDATE: 2250.31
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

I have not and cannot “forget it”.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: your vulcan memory
STARDATE: 2250.31
SECURE CHANNEL

good.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: temperature
STARDATE: 2250.31
SECURE CHANNEL

i wasn't asking you about your body temperature i was asking what kind of bodies you'd rather be touching. not that there's anything i can do about my body but we could probably work something out if you... preferred other things.

that's all

j

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sam
STARDATE: 2250.31
SECURE CHANNEL

You might've guessed but I'm not good at talking about this stuff. Good at bringing it up but I don't have any follow-through. It might be kinda tough to follow -- doubly so for someone who likes logic as much as you do. I'm not very logical. Even by human standards.

That's probably why I get so caught up in the comparison. Sam always knew what he was doing, even if it was the wrong thing.

You liking me better is kinda new. I'm not used to it. I know you're an only child, so it might not be easy to understand, but being born second gave me a lot to live up to. And at the same time a lot of freedom to goof around. Stepping into his shoes, I felt like I'd have to be him, and I'm really not.

I never thought it might be a good thing that I'm not, but you sure have a way of turning my head around on a few things. Must be the Vulcan side of you. Either way, I like it. Maybe our marriage won't be a total bust.

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: good, a follow-up
STARDATE: 2250.32
SECURE CHANNEL

I mean do you know how tough it was to find information about Vulcan finger sensitivity in the first place? I might have first-hand experience with other humans but at least you can research stuff, Spock. I'm mostly on my own here.

But I take it you'd like that.

The things I said.

j

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Regarding Sam
STARDATE: 2250.32
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

“Follow-through”, or more directly the ability to continue what one has begun, will be a talent you must cultivate for your future for a variety of reasons, all of them valid. As a representative of Earth; as a delegate for our Federation; as a human living on Vulcan; as an ambassador, a diplomat,
a prince, and an individual. Do you not also accept this to be factually accurate?

Therefore it would be wise to begin working on that which you know to be lacking in order to improve over time. You are able to recognize the flaws in your illogical behavior, which is admittedly more than can be said of most humans I have known—though I have not known many. I have known many other races and from your self-reflection can safely say that you are at least more logical than the Tellarites.

I am able to say this because the channel is secure.

Granted, it is not difficult to be more logical than the Tellarites; therefore, it would appear that the praise I have offered is relatively faint, either implying that you are lacking by comparison, or sharing a moment of mutual understanding regarding Tellarite behavioral patterns.

I will clarify. The above was intended both as a compliment to your self-reflection as well as a preliminary attempt at your human sarcasm. There is, I have learned, always room for improvement in all of us, though in some more than others.

Humor appears to still elude me. More study is required. That these studies of foreign cultural instincts take time is in ways proof of their merit.

Naturally, you are not your brother. Nor am I my brother. I did not know your brother; therefore I cannot like you better. Also, a system of hierarchical appraisal is most undiplomatic. However I cannot say that I find your conversation lacking. Vulcans do not imagine where inference and data can supply a more accurate evaluation. With the data available to me I can infer that I am not displeased to have these communications with you.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Liking that
STARDATE: 2250.32
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

As I wrote earlier this day, Vulcans do not imagine where inference and data can supply a more accurate evaluation. (An exact quote.)

With the data available to me, there are far too many variables yet unknown. Without a frame of reference I cannot say that it is possible for me to imagine what these acts would “feel like” or if I would “like that”—and, furthermore, there are no avenues of research open to me that will allow me to simulate the experience in order to confirm or deny your assumption.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Liking that, again
STARDATE: 2250.33
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, I find that I am unsure.
FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: Elaborating.  
STARDATE: 2250.33  
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Don't you know what you like? Even before I ever did anything, it was all I could think about. Especially after I hit puberty. You're older than me, so I assume even given differences in Vulcan biology you might have been through something similar by now. I guess you don't have much imagination, but (not an insult, I just think you might've mentioned it before) but usually I can imagine what I'm gonna like and what I'm not based on what kind of a thing it is.

I mean, you know you wouldn't like getting punched in the face, right? So there are other kinds of physical contact you can assume you WOULD like.

Barring that, you could always try touching yourself. That's usually how human kids figure it out.

XO

J

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: You'd like it. I'd make sure of it.  
STARDATE: 2250.33  
SECURE CHANNEL

I mean, I'm more than willing to help you run experiments when I'm there, Spock.

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: Follow-up.  
STARDATE: 2250.33  
SECURE CHANNEL

What's the policy on fooling around before marriage on vulcan?

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: Sam and other stuff.  
STARDATE: 2250.34  
SECURE CHANNEL

I didn't know you had a brother.

It's actually weird the stuff you can learn from a file and the stuff you can't. When they slapped me with all the info on 'Prince Spock' I figured I was gonna know you inside and out by the time we got married, no surprises and nothing to look forward to. Then you wrote to me. I kinda stopped
doing my research after that, because I like this better.

I've always preferred unorthodox research methods anyway. I'm not very good at just sitting and reading page after page of a personnel file. Spending too long on the terminals hurts my eyes and I'm allergic to Retinax. Too young and handsome for glasses, you know how it goes. I bet you'd look good in glasses. You've got a whole dark, intelligent charm going for you. Do Vulcans have to worry about presbyopia?

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: suggestion.
STARDATE: 2250.34
SECURE CHANNEL

you should definitely try touching yourself though.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Not merely suggestions
STARDATE: 2250.34
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, I find your propensity for rappelling between topics of conversation from the mundane to the inappropriate nothing less than fascinating.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Continued communications after adequate time to formulate response
STARDATE: 2250.34
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Do not misunderstand the nature of my previous communication. It was the truth, though I recognize now that I should not have replied so late in the evening. Vulcan judgment is rarely impaired due to exhaustion as human judgment has proven susceptible to such in the past, nor would I rely on such an excuse as anything other than a crutch. It was an observation as well as an accurate response to your facility with shifting between conversational topics that would not be out of place elsewhere than a secure channel and those that rely on channel security in the extreme.

My eyes are fine; my sight is in prime condition. There is no need to concern yourself with these matters. Even if there should be difficulty in the future, advances made with Retinax continue to allow those of us without allergies to eschew eyewear.

I already knew from reading your files, however, that you are allergic to Retinax. (It was not necessary to remind me. Perhaps it would not be unnecessary to remind your CMO.) In time, it is likely that your eyesight will only worsen—deterioration due to the natural aging process of the human body—and you will be the one to require glasses, not me. If you believe yourself “too young” to wear glasses—a peculiar statement indeed, and one which suggests a certain amount of vanity over your obvious good looks—then it would be prudent to avoid excess strain on your eyes
even now, or at least to adjust the brightness setting on your private terminals and other devices, as well as to avoid writing late into the night as so many of your communications suggest you habitually do.

My brother’s name is Sybok. He is the son of Sarek, but not the son of Amanda Grayson. This was a time before my father’s diplomatic inclinations and status as ambassador to Earth compelled him to marry my mother; as Sybok is fully Vulcan, as well as the child of Vulcan royalty, we do not see much of one another.

Comparisons drawn between us are without purpose.

We are not alike.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Experimentation
STARDATE: 2250.34
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, as a Vulcan, committed first and foremost to the pursuit of knowledge and the exploration of sciences, experimentation is as welcome as it is logical. Therefore it is safe to say I would experiment with you on any subject. The one in question is, in particular, an experiment that I would conduct with you as my partner in study and no other. Logically.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Regarding “suggestion”
STARDATE: 2250.35
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

In what way, manner, and location do you “suggest” I touch myself?
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Apt pupils.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay on this!

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: fascinating
STARDATE: 2250.35
SECURE CHANNEL

adjective
of great interest or attraction; enchanting; charming; captivating.

well back at you, your majesty. that's something neither of us has any trouble agreeing on.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You think I'm good-looking, and other less important topics of discussion.
STARDATE: 2250.35
SECURE CHANNEL

Obvious good looks. I won't get into a habit of replying to your letters by quoting your own words back and you, but that was just too good to pass up. I'm sure on Vulcan obvious isn't an admirable quality. But subtle good looks aren't exactly something a person aspires to. Not that looks have anything to do with aspirations, but you know what I mean. At least, I'm hoping you do, because otherwise I'm talking myself around in circles for no good reason.

I guess that's always a distinct possibility. I'd like to say I'm better in person, but there's a reason I don't handle the family speeches. I'm supposed to get lessons for that too, but I can't really see the point in being taught something we should all know how to do already. I mean -- talking classes? Please. I think I've got it under control. I impressed YOU didn't I? As long as I can average being more impressive than I am confusing, I figure I'm doing all right. You'll probably tell me I should just shut up and take the lessons, so let me get ahead of you and tell you I'm not gonna ditch them or anything.

I just feel like I should be able to figure it out on my own.

None of the files I had on you ever mentioned a brother, so I thought maybe you were kidding. Doesn't really seem like your style though, even taking your sense of humor into account. Which I
do, obviously. You definitely have one and I like it.

While we're on the topic of things I like: you pinning all your experimenting interest on me is pretty daunting. Which isn't a complaint, I'm just letting you know I recognize the challenge and I'm more than up to it.

Now you know why we have to stick to a secure channel all the time, because there's no telling when I'm gonna up and switch the conversation to something a little more salacious. With everything that's been going on here, I doubt anyone's even noticed that I don't write to you as much. Either that or they've resigned themselves to the fact that I cut them out of our communications. No one needs to know it was really you.

Except me, of course.

And I'm still impressed.

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: suggestive suggestions
STARDATE: 2250.35
SECURE CHANNEL

well if it were me, spock, i'd start between my legs.
then again if it were me touching you i'd start with the hands.
your fingers, probably.

some intense nerve clusters in there, you know. on humans anyway. it's the focus of a lot of tactile sensation.

figure it's gotta be the same for vulcans.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: On obviousness
STARDATE: 2250.36
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

The word “obvious” in that context was meant to imply that it is hardly a matter of personal taste. I am aware that attraction is subjective—and that what is subjective tends to defy logic or rationality because it is without general definition or distinction.

Vulcans often “choose” their mates in advance of such a time when union is expected, with matches arranged by parents or other members of their family unit, in order to avoid situations that
would encourage illogical emotionalism.

That is not to say Vulcans are not, on occasion, overcome by biological impulses they are unable to control. As I am only half Vulcan and subject to the limitations—as they have been referred to in the past—of my human half, it is unclear whether or not I will be affected in the same way as another of full Vulcan heritage would be.

But this is a digression, one that was pursued in order to bolster a distinct point: that your physical good looks are not in question. They are objective rather than subjective, for they clearly adhere to multiple classical classifications of the term “handsome” as far as humans have interpreted physical appeal throughout their history. Your blond hair and blue eyes, the shape of your jaw and your cheekbones, the form and figure of your body as I have seen it—broad-shouldered, with a strength of arm and power denoting your prime musculature—are all “obvious” in that they are not up for debate.

What is likewise not up for debate is my recognition of my duties and my commitment to our union as it is and has been logically made. It will be a beneficial alliance for both our planets and for the Federation as a whole; in light of recent events with the Klingon empire, that alliance is more important than ever before. I know that I need not remind you of these facts, yet they remain as unshakeable as the day I first opened this line of communication.

This, by my understanding, is not “romantic” in the slightest.

However, your definition of fascinating was not inaccurate.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Suggestions of a suggestive nature
STARDATE: 2250.36
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

I have followed your advice, to the best of my abilities, to the letter, though a portion of said advice involved sentence fragments, which erred more on the side of the suggestive than they were complete suggestions.

Is this the point where I am to describe my findings?

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: oh my god
STARDATE: 2250.37
SECURE CHANNEL

yes describe your findings tell me everything
be thorough

spare no details

if you want to you should record the experiment you could send it to me i could appraise the information

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: oh my god pt 2
STARDATE: 2250.37
SECURE CHANNEL

don't listen to me im being facetious

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: oh my god pt 3
STARDATE: 2250.37
SECURE CHANNEL

you say i shouldnt answer things late at night but see i think that's the perfect time for addressing these things theres no way i could deal with this in the middle of the day

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: My handsome body.
STARDATE: 2250.38
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I think you're more romantic than you give yourself credit for.

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Our alliance.
STARDATE: 2250.38
SECURE CHANNEL

All right, so you're marrying me because we have to and you're in love with your duty, but you said I was obviously good-looking, so at least you're going into this with a reasonable consideration of how much worse this could be. You're resigning yourself to a lifetime of sitting across from someone who's aesthetically appealing.

And fascinating.

This is flirting, just so you know.
Jim, peace and long life.

I was relieved to learn that your initial suggestion of a video/audio recording of my research process and subsequent findings was not made in earnest, as I do not believe I need to inform you of the difficulties that might arise from such a recording being discovered and made public. Of course, this channel is secure, and I have implemented since its inception numerous additional failsafes in order to reinforce and protect our privacy. I am not implying that there would ever be a breach of security, not with an encryption program of my engineering. Nevertheless, such a recording cannot exist for reasons of which you are no doubt already aware.

Despite the illogical nature of that insincere suggestion—and despite its approximation of sincerity at the time, prior to your clarification—I find that the thought of such an endeavor is not unwelcome.

Vulcans and romanticism should not coexist. The contradictions are perhaps too extraordinary.

Spock of Vulcan

Jim, peace and long life.

I must assure you once again that I am not romantic in any way. My insistence is merely to prevent any anticipation or expectations that will not, upon the time of our meeting in person, be unfulfilled, to your disappointment.

That is no way to begin any union—with expectations that are not met, rather than expectations that are formed, logically and with full disclosure, together.

Spock of Vulcan
Jim.

You must understand that Vulcans have segregated their passions so completely from their intellectual pursuits that adult Vulcans, both male and female, are subject to an experience known as *pon farr* once every seven years—it is that which is shrouded in secrecy, not being shared with any outside of our race. It strips us of what we strive to be and reduces us to what we once were, our basest selves. It is not logical. It is the antithesis of logic. It is this I strive to avoid, and perhaps this which shall be avoidable—an unexpected boon from the peculiar circumstances of my birthright.

I warn you of this, for it may be your burden to bear as well as it is mine.

In the interest of full disclosure—for expectations formed logically and together.

Spock of Vulcan

**FROM:** Spock of Vulcan  
**TO:** James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
**SUBJECT:** On findings, part four  
**STARDATE:** 2250.39  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Jim,

I find myself uncertain once more. Yet what was sent has been sent and cannot be unsent.

Spock

**FROM:** Spock of Vulcan  
**TO:** James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
**SUBJECT:** On findings, part five  
**STARDATE:** 2250.39  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Jim.

Here is the list of my research findings, as requested.

1. My hands shook.  
   1a. They have not shaken in this manner before.

2. When exploring, with my fingers, the areas of my anatomy you outlined as optimal choices with which to begin, that trembling did not render, as I had suspected, the exploration impossible.  
   2a. Rather, it enhanced the experience.  
   2b. No further research into Vulcan anatomy could explain this result.  
   2c. Could this, perhaps, be due to my human, rather than my Vulcan, side?

3. There are some details I do not strictly remember.

4. Therefore, I shall have to conduct the experiment again in order to gather more complete results.
FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You and your findings.
STARDATE: 2250.39
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I didn't even think of a leak, which is why you're the brains of this little operation of ours and I'm the good looks. In fact, if our positions had been reversed, I definitely would've recorded something. Wouldn't have even thought twice. So as you can see, it's a good thing I'm the one doing the stupid questions thing. Obviously I don't have the judgment to discern between what's a great idea and what's a PR disaster in the making.

I've never sent dirty stuff via PADD before, not so much for security concerns on my end but there's always someone else on the other line and what am I gonna do -- personally verify the specs of everyone I fool around with? No. And now that we're betrothed and all (officially) that's not something I have to worry about. Lucky for me I'm hooked up with someone way smarter than me. Good taste, too.

So no salacious recordings in our near future. I got it. Tempting, but I gotta be responsible for more than just my own dignity these days.

Still, it's a shame, though. It'd be a great vid.

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Query.
STARDATE: 2250.39
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Does this mean I can't send you naked pictures anymore?

XO

J

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: FYI.
STARDATE: 2250.38
SECURE CHANNEL

The vital parts weren't visible, but I was naked in some of those pictures.
There was nothing about *pon farr* in any of my pamphlets. I think I'm gonna have to complain to whoever my Vulcan research team is -- they're clearly missing some of the greater details. I did some digging on my own now that I had a real term to search, and I have to say, once every seven years seems a little extreme. Are you saying that's the only time you ever feel like... Or is there some wiggle room since you're half human?

Because so long as we're being completely honest with each other, human sexual cycles are a little more frequent than that.

Like.

A lot.

Yeah I retract my *pon farr* question there. I think we should explore your human side more.

god I would do so much to your shaking hands spock

--

Jim, peace and long life.

It is possible that I did not elucidate in full on the matter when I first broached the subject; its intentional secrecy is such that it maintains its own shroud even on Vulcan and among Vulcans. We do not often speak of it. The rituals are known to all of us, but they are kept private amidst a more general privacy. It is an unsavory topic and therefore one with little precedent for simple discussion, much less with an outworlder.

That is the general term—it’s meaning is not individually meant.

*Pon farr* is that which occurs on a biological level beyond even a Vulcan’s ability to control. However, even amongst full Vulcans, it is not the only time at which intimacy of a physical nature can be achieved. It is merely the most obvious—and the most unavoidable.

To my understanding.

As I am not a full Vulcan, I must reiterate, its effects on me will be singular; a variety of predictions as to the effect of my human blood on my reaction to this purely Vulcan experience
may be made, yet there is no certainty until I do or do not experience the first flush of *plak tow*, the blood fever.

I am not proud of the necessity for this unpleasant and indelicate topic of conversation. It was a brief detour. I trust it was as illuminating as it was able to assuage your concerns.

You would not be expected to abstain from that which would give you peace and long life—from that which would satisfy your requirements as a human—from anything that would place you in a state of displeasure or dissatisfaction in our union.

Should I prove unsatisfactory or unable to provide what you want or require, arrangements can undoubtedly be made.

Spock of Vulcan

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**FROM: JTK**

**TO: STS**

**SUBJECT:** Our future sex life.

**STARDATE:** 2250.40

**SECURE CHANNEL**

Spock,

I don't know why you thought you had to put classified on there, buddy, I'm not showing these letters to anyone. I mean even if I was in the beginning, they've long since gone past that point, and you were the one who pointed out how much I'd prefer to keep these communications between us anyway. We spend so much time with other people up in our business that I really don't feel the need to make it worse. I don't get a lot to myself these days so I'll take anything. Even highly secretive, closely guarded mating rituals.

Which is all just a long-winded way of saying that ALL the stuff you send me might as well be classified. I'm not sharing it.

Does that soothe your sense of privacy? Anyway, who's gonna believe me if I tell them any of this stuff?

Kidding, kidding. That was a joke.

You might've noticed that my sense of comedic timing is a little off. Inappropriate, we call it here. But I'm not gonna go revealing planetary secrets so don't worry.

I kinda like being one of the few humans who knows about this stuff anyway. Makes me feel important.

But hey if we're gonna go planning for our futures right now I should say the offer extends in both directions -- if I'm not master of Vulcan hands or something by the time we're supposed to settle down then I guess you should feel free to go looking in other places for that kinda thing too.

Don't get the wrong idea, though. I might not be a diplomatic savant or anything and I might not know as much about the Tellarites as you do but I definitely take pride in my OTHER areas of skill, and I plan on being a fully-functioning husband if you know what I mean, so don't go making
auxiliary arrangements just yet. I can handle it. I can think of a lot of things I'm gonna handle where you're concerned.

So don't worry so much. I know, I know, Vulcans don't anyway, but I have a pretty healthy teenage libido so I can see where you might get the impression I was a sex-crazed maniac.

XO

J

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Points of worry (or, more accurately, concern)
STARDATE: 2250.41
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

If you were indeed a “sex-crazed maniac” I can only assume that the arrangement of our union would be called into question and, more likely than not, dissolved in order to preserve our planets’ alliance, rather than allow an unfortunate match to potentially destroy it.

Therefore I shall advise you not to worry, as humans often do, for according to all the research I have conducted—it has been extensive, I should not have to remind you—there is a significant distance between “healthy teenage libido” and one who is interested in these activities beyond the sensible, allowable, or sane.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: In the future, please signify humorous intentions
STARDATE: 2250.41
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

It occurs to me after a brief period of prolonged study—I could not in good conscience employ another human’s consultation, and therefore had to depend on comparison with prior communications to establish pattern and precedent—that it was likely much if not all of the tone in your latest communication was intended as humorous, in the sarcastic or facetious interpretation of the word.

If I have not “gotten” the joke, then it was because the parameters thereof were not made explicit.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: On the duties of a “fully-functioning husband”
STARDATE: 2250.42
Jim,

I too intend to provide the services and actions of a “fully-functioning husband” though it would be wise in this instance to enumerate the duties, as there may be points of cultural departure.

Neither would I mind the enumeration, based on previous examples thereof.

They have been illuminating.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Jokes.
STARDATE: 2250.42
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Bones always called this my worst quality, but I tend to joke around most when I'm serious about something. I know, I know, it's the antithesis of logic. That's why I'm telling you outright instead of being coy and letting you figure it out. Communication's supposed to be good for relationships AND long distance is the kiss of death so I figure we need all the help we can get beating the odds.

I'm not usually this forthcoming, is what I'm trying to say. I like to make people work for it a little more.

Then again, considering the way you work for things I bet you'd have me pegged in less than a week. Can't have that. It'd suck all the fun out of our relationship.

I want you to keep on thinking I'm fascinating, after all.

XO

Jim

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: On the nature of husbands.
STARDATE: 2250.43
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I can't believe you made me look this stuff up. I can't believe I looked this stuff up for you of my own free will.

Look, there are no universally-agreed-upon ideals for what makes someone a good husband. I can tell you that the foundation of every solid relationship is trust, which is how you know I'm not
gonna ask anyone about pon farr and how I know YOU'RE not gonna go around telling everyone Prince James Kirk likes to write dirty letters in bed.

Personally, I was talking about sex but I don't tend to get too in-depth about serious topics I don't know if you've noticed.

Trust, no cheating, plenty of physical intimacy. Don't hog the blankets. I know you don't eat meat but I don't think that should be a problem. You already have a pet so I know you're an animal lover.

Anything I should know about or your end?

XO

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: I will secure extra blankets
STARDATE: 2250.43
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

As it is information easily acquired—not, as other details on Vulcan have a tendency to be, kept hidden from outworlders—that the average temperature on Vulcan is significantly higher than the temperature of your San Francisco on Earth, it may be that you will not require as many covers when you are sleeping here as in your current home.

However, Vulcans do require a higher level of heat for optimal comfort than humans. I would not allow potential “hogging” of the blankets in our shared bed to come between us, or to hinder my ability to fulfill my role as husband. This is a simple enough matter to prepare for. I will have extra blankets at the ready in advance of your arrival later this stardate year.

You are correct in your assertion that Vulcans—and I by association—do not eat meat, but there are a variety of synthetic replacements available on this planet, which my mother herself would assure you provide an ideal substitute.

I shall be certain to cross-check their ingredients with the list of your allergens so that there will be no incident there.

Trust is a matter that, as you have already indicated, is not in question. This was in part the inspiration for commencing this line of communication nearly 40 days ago.

Physical intimacy is far more important to humans than it is to Vulcans. This does not mean that we are incapable of joining with one another or with a human in intimately physical acts. It is possible. The marriage between Sarek and my mother has proven satisfactory to them both. Therefore, under the right circumstances, and making appropriate compromises, we may arrive at a point that is not unpleasant or unwanted.

With that last issue, I shall ask only that you be patient with me. Physical intimacy does not come
naturally to me as it must to you and indeed I have eschewed it whenever possible for some time. When I, as per your suggestion, touched myself, I was alone, and the privacy was ideal.

Nevertheless, it was not uncomplicated or even straightforward.

Perhaps additional guidance will be required.

I have been told I am an apt pupil.

Spock of Vulcan
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Asses. And poetry.

Chapter Notes

I'm mega-behind on life but your replies give me life and I will reply to them after I have dinner if I am still alive!

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You could keep me warm with your body.
STARDATE: 2250.43
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

It's an old Earth convention that when your partner gets cold, you roll over and hold them in your arms. You can search the human colloquial term *spooning* if you want to know more. I feel like you now, spouting off research subjects, practically giving you homework. Something tells me you wouldn't care even if I did give you homework. Call it a hunch.

I gotta assume this is what you were talking about when you said you wanted us to get to know each other better. Makes it easier to talk to someone when you can anticipate how they'll react, even if it's only thirty percent of the time. (And now since I know you better, I can assume that you're gonna tell me thirty percent is way too high an estimate for my rate of accuracy. But I'm getting there!)

Personally, I can't even begin to wrap my head around why anyone would wanna eschew touching themselves but I guess that's one of those big Vulcan-human divides. Or maybe it's just me. I'm not always what you could call open-minded, but I figure now's as good a time as any to start. With the guy I'm gonna marry.

Man, that still sounds weird.

Don't you feel too young to get married? I know you're older than me but it's not by MUCH.

Are you saying you want more detailed instructions because I gotta have a few drinks in me before I go there. Be easier with a vid demonstration but we've already talked about why that's a no go. I don't know enough about Vulcan anatomy to understand whether we're totally identical down there, but I might be able to make an educated guess or two.

Don't get me wrong, I'm totally willing.
And I don't care how these letters make me sound, I am totally capable of being patient.

XO

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Spoons versus spooning
STARDATE: 2250.44
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Having familiarized myself with the meaning of the colloquialism “spooning” while also being aware of the shape and purpose of the utensil known as the spoon, I will express my concerns and uncertainty regarding the etymological origins the former, as it appears to possess little to no relation to the latter. If there is something about human anatomy when one body is placed in close physical proximity to another body that resembles the shape and/or purpose of the spoon, then this factoid has not been made readily apparent in any of the biology texts I have read in preparation of our union. Neither have any of the visuals with which you have provided me once indicated you are spoon-like in any fashion.

The aphorism is disturbingly illogical and will require deeper research to determine its reasoning, if any.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: “XO”
STARDATE: 2250.44
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Another point of inquiry I have harbored for some time is the matter of the “XO” at the end of your communications, which appears now to be a regular occurrence, as you have offered it no fewer and no greater than exactly twenty times. As this has now presented itself as a consistent choice and is clearly not a typological error, nor can it logically refer to “commanding officer” as the letters “XO” in that order often signify, I will ask you to clarify its meaning as you have intended it.

I would have asked my mother; however, as I determined it may be something private and therefore of a delicate, sensitive nature, I did not believe it wise to breach the trust we have established between one another in order to arrive at a swifter conclusion.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
Jim,

My father was my age when he married for the first time.

My mother was a few years my senior when she married Sarek.

Your parents were a year older (your father) and two years older (your mother) than I am when they were joined in a human marriage ceremony.

If you do not believe you are prepared to commit to the rigors of a Vulcan ceremony or even our second, human ceremony, then it would be vital to inform officials as soon as possible, so that new arrangements can be made.

If I have given you reason to doubt my own readiness, then it would appear I owe you a grave apology. That was never my intention.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You and your research.
STARDATE: 2250.44
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

No, it's called spooning because...

Well, I don't actually know why it's called spooning, but my guess would be that it has something to do with how spoons fit together when you stack them in a drawer. Don't ask me why it's spoons of all things when it could just as easily be a fork. Maybe someone thought forking had a different connotation. ;)

Anyway, I'm including a diagram that I made of two people spooning. The little frowny one is you and the blonde one is me. Obviously. It's a sleep position, and not always a comfortable one because you can never figure out what to do with your other arm, but in general it's not so bad.

XO

Jim

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: XO.
STARDATE: 2250.44
SECURE CHANNEL
Look, you have your ways of signing on and off and I have mine, all right?

**FROM:** JTK  
**TO:** STS  
**SUBJECT:** XO 2.  
**STARDATE:** 2250.44  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

It's an Earth way of signing a communication, kind of like shorthand. The o's are hugs and the x's are kisses. So if you put them together like that: xoxoxo it's hugs and kisses.

**FROM:** JTK  
**TO:** STS  
**SUBJECT:** Marriage.  
**STARDATE:** 2250.44  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Never mind, Spock. It's fine.

Anyway I don't have any more brothers, so I'm not sure what kind of other arrangements you could make this late in the game.

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**FROM:** Spock of Vulcan  
**TO:** James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
**SUBJECT:** XO 1 and XO 2.  
**STARDATE:** 2250.45  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Jim, peace and long life.

The iconography of the Xs and Os are most curious. Most icons in Earth’s cultural history, at least to my knowledge, begin as visual symbols representing the information they have been utilized to convey. As far as I can see, the X bears no resemblance to any visual symbol of kissing; neither does the O appear to express the act of hugging.

Are these acts so common on Earth among its human residents that the X and O are regularly deployed among acquaintances, or does this sign-off denote a higher level of intimacy?

That is, I inquire after whether or not the X and the O are reserved for me alone, or if you offer them to all your communication partners.

Spock of Vulcan

**FROM:** Spock of Vulcan  
**TO:** James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
**SUBJECT:** Spooning and artistic representation  
**STARDATE:** 2250.45  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Jim, peace and long life.
It took me forty five minutes of uninterrupted study, but, based on the written description you provided regarding the artwork attached, I was at last able to determine which element of the artistic rendering was the head and which appeared to be an exaggerated posterior.

Are your feet that large?

Did that gluteus maximus belong to you or to me?

I believe those were arms and not snakes. Yet I do require clarification in order to be completely certain.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: XO 3.  
STARDATE: 2250.45  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

You have ceased to sign off in the customary way. Is there a meaning behind this, other than casual neglect?

“XO”

Spock

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: Exes and ohs.  
STARDATE: 2250.45  
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I was hoping you wouldn't ask me to explain the etymology on that one, because I've got no clue. It's just a convenient way to say the thing without being downright explicit. Though you know I don't have much trouble being explicit when the situation calls for it.

Then again, I guess it's not your preferred kind of explicit, so maybe that doesn't count as much. Like I've been saying, I don't send out written messages much. So no, I haven't been sending out X's and O's to the greater San Fran area.

Just you.

XO,

Jim

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Two years of liberal art study, Spock.
STARDATE: 2250.45
SECURE CHANNEL

Jesus I didn't realize I was submitting my work to an art history professor. That's the last time I make you any diagrams.

XO

Jim

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Liberal arts.
STARDATE: 2250.45
SECURE CHANNEL

Anyway, it's called ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION it wasn't a life study.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: re: Liberal arts.
STARDATE: 2250.45
SECURE CHANNEL

That is obviously my butt unless you have some kind of secret Vulcan junk in that trunk you've been hiding from me.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: re: Liberal arts.
STARDATE: 2250.45
SECURE CHANNEL

Why would our arms be SNAKES???

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: re: Liberal arts. THIS IS A JOKE.
STARDATE: 2250.45
SECURE CHANNEL

The wedding's off.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: This is not a joke.
STARDATE: 2250.46
SECURE CHANNEL

I don't want the wedding to be off.
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Junk in trunks
STARDATE: 2250.46
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

To my knowledge, my trunk has no junk inside of it. I do however have a trunk that contains multiple artifacts from my father Sarek’s diplomatic travels—which, upon my mother’s suggestion, were gathered as “mementos”, a singularly human concept.

If this is considered junk—and it may well be—it falls within the jurisdiction of that which has sentimental meaning to my mother, and therefore I intend to keep it.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Junk in trunks, part the second
STARDATE: 2250.46
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

To your inquiry as to why our arms would be snakes, I submit an inquiry of my own.

Why would there be junk in either of our trunks?

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: “Liberal” arts
STARDATE: 2250.46
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

It is possible that I viewed the piece you sent literally, rather than liberally. As a work of abstract
art—I have compared it to many of Earth’s movements—it is not lacking, though I would not say it is exceptional. The fact remains that I could not have done much better. My ability to copy what I see is limited by a lack of imagination inherent in the Vulcan half of me, limiting my artistic expression.

Spock

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: XO ad nauseum
STARDATE: 2250.47
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

There is no need to be facetious with the Xs and Os, unless you are intending to express a certain zealousness of what they represent.

Flirtation is a language of subtlety, is it not?

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Your trunk full of junk.
STARDATE: 2250.47
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I'm not gonna ask you to get rid of a bunch of your dad's stuff, what do you think I am, a monster? A lot of objects of sentimental value are considered junk to other people. It's like that saying, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Only instead of beauty it's an estimation of value. I'm sure you have a bunch of great stuff in that trunk, Spock.

Oh my god, I can't even say that with a straight face.

OK, look, it's an Earth expression, another colloquialism, used to refer to someone's backside. Trunk like the trunk of a car? Well it's at the back of a car, where the ass is on a human. I gotta say, I've never given a lot of thought to how dumb our language is until you made me explain all these things to you.

You guys have cars there? I've been told the setting on Vulcan's more rustic than what I'm used to, but I'm more concerned about that heat. Not that it matters now, we're locked in either way, til sweat do us part.

XOXO

Jim

FROM: JTK
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: Art and asses.  
STARDATE: 2250.47  
SECURE CHANNEL

Lucky I'm not marrying you for your art criticism.

It's a euphemism Spock, for a juicy behind. I have one, you don't, it's fine. Both are acceptable.

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT:  
STARDATE: 2250.47  
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I wasn't going to say this but you make subtlety a hard thing to achieve. In case you haven't noticed, if I have to tell you half the time I'm doing it, I think that takes some of the snap out of the effect. I haven't worked out how to properly balance it yet, but you can't give me heck for being so obvious in the meantime.

XOXO

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Perspiration (or the lack thereof)  
STARDATE: 2250.48  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Another point of Vulcan biology is that Vulcans do not sweat. This is another area in which I more closely resemble my father than my mother. This is not to say that my mother, Lady Amanda, sweats a great deal or even a little. So perhaps I resemble both my parents—from whom I take after on this point, we may not ever know. In either case, it is unlikely that sweat, or at least my sweat, will part us.

While the terms of our union stipulate that we will spend the first two years on Vulcan—and, from the news I have followed, Queen Winona Kirk has proven herself more than capable in maintaining the diplomatic standards of your late father the king—it is not unlikely that, in the interest of fair compromise, our entire lives will be spent on my planet alone without an even distribution of relocation.

I have been to San Francisco, but only once. I remember it to the best of my abilities.

However, I was three years of age at the time. The trip paid was, among other things, to celebrate the birth of a second son and prince born to the king and queen. It would certainly behoove me to...
return when I am better able to absorb the cultural and historical elements of a planet so far from the one I have known as my home.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Behinds that are “juicy”
STARDATE: 2250.48
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

Euphemistically, I am still unable to understand how one’s posterior can be, as you say, “juicy”. Is the intended association that one would be able to bite it in order to ascribe this description in particular to the part of anatomy in question?

Spock

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Behinds that are “juicy” 2
STARDATE: 2250.48
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim.

After thorough inspection I can confirm that your assertion that my behind is not juicy is correct. Does this present disappointment?

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Your juicy badonk
STARDATE: 2250.48
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I can't say I've ever seen it for myself -- your official portraits all seem to hide that particular asset of yours, and I know I won't be able to tempt you into sending me a pic of your own -- but trust me when I say that I'm sure your behind is beyond satisfactory.

I'm saying this because I have general idea of your somatype now and it's not at all right for a juicy butt. It'd be all wrong. You look great the way you are.

Since you asked, I wouldn't mind if you took a bite to test me out. I'm into that. figuratively speaking.
Literally speaking.

You should give it a shot once we're together.

XO

Jim

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Our intergalactic marriage.
STARDATE: 2250.48
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

OK, first of all, I demand baby pictures of you immediately. You might not remember, but you got to SEE me as a baby, so I think it's only fair to even up the odds. My mom showed me pictures of our first official meeting, we look like a mini-Vulcan standing next to an apple dumpling wrapped up in blankets, respectively. Not exactly my best look. You, however, are adorable.

I think that should be on our wedding invites. That sounds like a joke, but I might actually be serious this time.

If you're visiting San Fran, you should come for the summer. I know that isn't a very long visit -- barely makes the space travel worth it -- but from what I've been reading you're gonna find it cold and damp here. I'll have to keep you warm. That's where spooning comes in. You see, it seems like I come up with all these inappropriate non sequiturs but a lot of it actually turns out to be relevant. Anyway, that'll be more fun than me getting up to run cold showers in the middle of the night. You never did tell me about swimming. Are there really parasites?

Baby pictures, though. Send them to me. I'm attaching that one I told you about, Fatface and Baby Spock. You look like you're not all that sure about my status as a sentient lifeform. You're probably right.

XO

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Attached items of interest
STARDATE: 2250.49
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Though it is not a traditionally Vulcan custom to preserve photographic evidence of infancy as it is a human one, my mother was able to preserve a few less for posterity than for the sake of her very human nostalgia. I had not known of her collection, but apparently there was an album she kept that allowed her to express her affection for me when I was younger and smaller in a private
fashion, as well as to enjoy her talents as an amateur photographer. I have learned more about my mother than I had known I had left to learn before this inquest.

I found it an illuminating insight into human behavior.

I have attached the pictures my mother determined were the best representatives of my early childhood—her “favorites”, as she called them, though she hastened to add that favoritism was not a matter of hierarchical determination but had more to do with specific and fond memories associated with the images. They are labeled appropriately and as you will see they are representative of my appearance aged six months, one year, and two year. Though my mother is prone to sentimentality—I cannot fault her for something that her very nature dictates—she has managed to cultivate an order of mind to better acclimatize herself to her surroundings. Therefore each image was clearly dated and kept chronologically.

Most babies at the age you were when we were first introduced do not appear to be sentient life-forms. Nevertheless, that is what they are. My uncertainty, as I recall, involved the degree to which you were wriggling and my recognition that a diplomatic incident would surely be incurred if I were to drop you.

Also attached is a complete list—compiled by me, so that I could be certain not a single organism would be omitted—of aquatic bacteria and parasites native to Vulcan. They are classified from uncommon to highly common, with a brief overview of their various effects on Vulcan and human immune systems.

If I am to visit for a as-yet undisclosed summer in our shared future, would it not also be wise to obtain “extra blankets” for this potential eventuality? However, the desired effect would not be to make your temperature uncomfortably high.

Your dictionaries contain no instances of the word “badonk”. Are you a poet as well as an artist?

My mother enjoys poetry. The picture in which I am two years of age will in fact show you that she read Vulcan poetry to me at that time. The piece in question in *Shadows in the Garden*.

“XO”

Spock of Vulcan

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**FROM:** JTK  
**TO:** STS  
**SUBJECT:** Family photos.  
**STARDATE:** 2250.49  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Spock,

First off, tell your mom thanks for me. The more I learn about Amanda Grayson the more I like her, but it's even more pronounced now that I know she saved a whole book's worth of baby pics for me to look at. Not that she saved them *for* me, but I'm the one who gets to take advantage of them. I'm glad the two of you got to bond over it too. It'd be a crying shame if some of these images never saw the light of day again.
I'm particularly enjoying Spock at one year old, because that's when you really start to see that haircut taking shape.

But I have to say, Spock, you look way too tidy for a baby. Those big dark eyes, serious baby mouth, tiny little baby fists. I can't handle it. Didn't anyone tell you babies are supposed to look like reconstituted bags of protein, all glop and no substance? You even have a gleam of intelligence pre-birthday. That doesn't seem fair. We look like a totally different species.

You might say that's because we are, but I'd tell you you're ruining the moment.

I'm glad you already saw me once as a baby, because I'm not sure I'd have the balls to send my own pictures after seeing these.

You don't look very happy as a Vulcan kid. Cute as hell, but not exactly carefree. Does that have something to do with you trying to stick to the Vulcan way of life? That can't have been easy. Maybe I was wriggling because you looked so cranky to be holding me. You ever consider that? Anyway, I can promise that the next time you've got me in your arms, I'll wiggle up against you for all the right reasons.

Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not a poet. I am attaching a reference file of colloquial expressions I put together, from the database on Earth, but cultivated by me to give you a better idea of what the hell I'm talking about. It's not stuff you'd find in a research terminal and it'd take too long to explain the proper parameters to search some of this stuff out yourself.

Standard is pretty ridiculous that way. It has its roots in probably some of the most illogical languages around though, so that might have something to do with it.

This is all to say that your mom might be a poetry aficionado but I wouldn't go telling her I said you had a great badonk anytime soon. The full term as you'll find it in my Jim-to-Standard dictionary is badonkadonk. Sounds good in the mouth, loses a little on the page.

I'll check out that book.

Do you like poetry?

XO

Jim
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Cameos.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Regarding family photos
STARDATE: 2250.50
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I have passed along your gratitude for my mother’s foresight—though I am not certain it can be strictly classified as such since, as you yourself have expressed, she did not create her collection of potentially incriminating evidence regarding my previous appearances throughout my childhood and adolescence with this purpose in mind—and she has requested that I, in turn, express to you her acknowledgment of your gratitude.

The exact phrase she employed was, “I am glad to hear it. Please tell Prince Jim that I am very glad.”

She was also pleased to discover that our communications have continued now with little interruption, save for those that were unavoidable, for forty-five days. This was noted with some disbelief, though she managed to keep it well hidden; my mother is exceptionally reserved for a human, though far too emotionally obvious for a Vulcan.

I was at first uncertain of her reasons for this particular reaction, though upon further investigation she offered minimal illumination. Her positive response to my simple statement of fact had, it appears, stemmed from a private worry she has harbored for many years that we would not “get along”.

When I expressed to her that—being fully aware of our duties as well as more than amply equipped to fulfill them as we must—the two of us would manage to commit ourselves to our roles regardless of our personal preferences, she maintained that it was of utmost importance that we should be capable of conversing with one another and even that we should enjoy that conversation, though our means of enjoyment and our expressions thereof would in all likelihood prove dissimilar.

My mother’s perspective and her specific advice in this instance intimated that being able to talk freely on any number of topics would serve us well in our marriage. She also suggested that friendship would be the foundation upon which great meaning and even a sort of poetic beauty could be built.

I have considered her words in full since she expressed this viewpoint earlier today. Here, it would seem, is another unknown—space being full of them infinitely, cosmic and microcosmic.

I cannot say that, until the present, I have known anyone I would categorize as a “friend” in the
sense of the word as my mother spoke it in that precise moment. I have had peers, schoolmates, and other Vulcans in my specific age group with whom I have socialized for one reason or another. But we have never spoken—conversed—at such great length, so personally, on such a variety of topics, to form the foundation of which my mother spoke.

In closing, I will add an anecdotal reference my mother imparted, one that I was too young at the time to recall. It is her assertion that I assumed “the baby prince”—who regularly reached with questing hands after any and all objects that caught your interest—was attempting a manner of mind-meld while touching the side of my face with great frequency and insistence.

A most illogical assumption. Had my mother dispelled this foolish notion sooner, the image in the picture would likely be a different one.

“XO”

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Baby princes.
STARDATE: 2250.50
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

That's the cutest damn thing I've ever heard. You thought I was trying to baby mind-meld? Can babies even do that? Humans can't. Oh my god, three year old you must've been the sweetest little thing. I'm keeping copies of these. Whenever anyone asks how we met, we're gonna have a great story. Only you gotta let me tell it because you'll just blow it by saying we were arranged or betrothed right from the beginning. That'll ruin the whole lead-up to me whipping out this picture. Love at first sight.

I can't say I remember my motivations for grabbing your face, since as you say babies are barely sentient, but I was always precocious. I claim prescient good taste. Or maybe I just wanted to squeeze those chubby cheeks of yours.

I'm sure it's not a compliment to a Vulcan to be called cute so often and with such enthusiastic frequency, but I can't help myself, Spock. I like to think I have a pretty good vocabulary, but I keep coming back to cute where you're concerned. Just thought you should know I'm aware of it, and while I'm trying to fix it right now I don't see how there's much I can do. Even my mom agrees that as a baby you'd beat me on aesthetics hands down. I'm not taking that as an insult, since she's the one who made me I'd say it's more a slight on her design skills than anything else.

You can tell your mom I think you're great. I've never had much reason to write anyone before this, and so long as you're able to put up with my epistolary shortcomings I don't see any reason to stop. I'm told I'm an acquired taste and I do way better in person than through any other form of communication, so ideally if you're even a little fond of me now, we'll only improve when I arrive on Vulcan.

Of course, everyone who's ever told me that has met me on Earth when I'm not sweating out my water weight and trying to memorize a hundred little etiquette rituals for another notoriously fussy
race, so maybe I'm overselling myself here.

Sure, I grew on YOU. But I might not be so lucky with other people.

You can say we're friends, though. I have a bunch, or I did before they all signed up with Starfleet. Don't get to see much of them now that I'm the first in line and all. Diplomacy doesn't leave much room for socializing, which is something I'm sure you're aware of.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I get what it's like to be lonely. You didn't come right out and allude to it in your letter, but I got a certain sense. I'm sensitive. Sensible. I sense things.

That's a stupid thing to say to a telepathic race probably, but there you go. I say stupid things sometimes. I feel like I should warn you, if we're gonna be friends on top of being betrothed. You should know what you're getting into.

Right now I'm sure you're saying to yourself that I've said many stupid things before now, and it hasn't put you off any. It's sort of weird being able to imagine the expression you're making, or the things you'd say. If I had to define friendship as anything, I'd say it has something to do with that. Knowing each other. Being able to anticipate responses and reactions.

I'm sending your mom some pictures of you and your family on your last outing to San Fran. There are a couple nice ones of her and your dad. She might like that. You can tell her I'm sucking up shamelessly, if you need an explanation. I figure I'm gonna need all the allies I can get on Vulcan.

XO

Jim

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Your continued usage of the word “cute”
STARDATE: 2250.51
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

My mother expresses her gratitude not merely for the pictures you provided for her album—she has included them in the appropriate section of her digital collection, the sub-section dedicated to that trip to San Francisco—but also for your continued efforts made toward maintaining our correspondence. She is apparently disposed toward supporting your choices as you have made them thus far. She believes you have proved yourself to be judicious, or at the very least in agreement with her on most important matters.

Though I informed her the similarities likely end at the level of human individuals in contact with me, she has continued to impress upon me the need to reiterate to you that she anticipates meeting you again now that you are a more sentient conversational partner than the last time she saw you.

There will not, however, be cause or reason for you to make alliances within the Vulcan government, beyond the main alliance that has already been made for us—between us. You will find that everyone around you will act logically. Certainly, if they do not approve of your behavior, your methods, your appearance, your actions, and so on, they will not speak of it outright for the
simple reason that you are a prince of Earth and therefore above them in rank. To speak out against the husband of one of their princes is as illogical as speaking out against that prince himself.

Yet perhaps, however illogically, it may assuage your concern that my brother Sybok—as he is a true prince of Vulcan, the child of Sarek and a noble princess from a revered Vulcan family—is the one upon whose shoulders fall many of the same duties practiced and attentions experienced by our father.

My position is of a different nature. I believe it likely that we will travel; that we will be envoys for the Federation; that we will together represent the best of their intentions, embodying the acceptance of diversity and differences that has motivated galactic exploration and peace.

If certain members of the Vulcan High Council do not acknowledge the logic or appreciate the commendable nature of this singular goal then it appears to me to be a flaw in their reasoning.

However, this may in fact be due to a flaw in my reasoning, after all. I have little doubt that they would come to this conclusion, and they are, after all, the Vulcan High Council. I am not one of their numbers and would not claim to be.

I shall meditate on the matter.

No further meditation is required on the question that I have contemplated recently. I have come to the conclusion that your usage of the word “cute” to describe me is as irregular as it is inaccurate. My comprehension of the word as given to me by my mother is that it is reserved for the description of small animals, usually fluffy—not, for example, a horned toad or a poisonous lizard—and therefore is not relevant to me.

Neither is the word “lonely”. Not strictly. Though I have often been alone, this is due to my singular position. I would not equate the position of being alone with the position of lonely. The former is a constant. The latter is inconsistent as best.

Yet it is possible I have some familiarity with the state, inasmuch as it is one, rather than a feeling.

Do you not remain in contact with your friends? Starfleet is in San Francisco, which is also where you are located. Can you not spend recreational time when your schedule permits it at mutually agreeable places?

“XO”

Spock

---

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sorry, you're still cute.
STARDATE: 2250.51
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

OK, I'll give you that cute is usually used for girls or tribbles, but I'll have you know that it can also mean having a pleasing appearance or attractive in a sexual way. That's more the definition I was
going for. But not for you as a kid, because that'd be weird.

This wasn't a great way to open a letter I'm gonna try again.

Dear Spock,

It's been raining all week. Not all that notable for San Francisco, but still a little drearier than I'd like. They closed the rooftop pool to do maintenance, which isn't normally something I'd complain about except it's putting a serious cramp in my morning calisthenics. Does it rain on Vulcan? From what I've read it doesn't seem like there's enough moisture in the atmosphere to even generate clouds for you guys, let alone anything wetter than that.

That much sounds like something to look forward to. Do they do a lot of sunbathing on Vulcan? Seems like perfect conditions for it.

I might be delirious because of all the rain. Or I might just be angling for a way to see you in a bathing suit. You can never tell with me. I'm very crafty.

I showed Bones your list of aquatic parasites. He had a FIT. Throwing things, howling. He turned red as a tomato. It was the best thing I've ever seen. I thought that big vein in his forehead was finally gonna pop once and for all. You haven't seen a man truly on the brink of sanity until you've seen a doctor shouting about systemic infections and the quality of human immunotherapy on a foreign planet. Even a Federation planet. I think he's starting to have separation anxiety. The old guy can't manage without me.

He doesn't have anyone else to yell at.

No one who takes it as well as I do, anyway.

I'm good with traveling. Never liked staying in one place too much anyway. That was part of the reason I wanted to join up with Starfleet in the first place -- being the first person to chart new worlds, make contact with alien species. Always thought that sounded kind of cool. Plus, it doesn't hurt that I have natural charm. I'd be a great ambassador to the people. I guess in some ways that's what I'm gonna be doing anyway.

I'm not planning on making you do all the heavy lifting, is what I'm trying to say here, Spock. I give off a certain impression as a second son. It's probably not the same position you got to enjoy with having an older brother. It seems to me like Vulcans don't really get to be irresponsible no matter what order they're born in. But humans -- well, there's a certain hierarchy to these things. Sam had all the responsibilities for awhile, but that doesn't mean I don't understand them.

I guess that's a roundabout way of answering your other question. I can still keep in touch with my friends, but we live pretty different lives these days, and they're all busy. Doesn't leave much time for hanging out.

Speaking of which, I'm supposed to go on some Sol system tour to boost morale on some of the nearby colony worlds. Can you believe morale would be down after a little thing like the Klingon attack?

I'm glad you're not lonely, Spock. Gonna work on that other thing, too. You won't always be alone either.

XO

Jim
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: A request of “Bones” – a public/open communication
STARDATE: 2250.52

Jim, peace and long life, despite the apparent incompetence of your CMO.

It is in this transmission that I must express my conclusion, based on the facts as they have been presented to me, that your “Doctor Bones” is hardly qualified to be in charge of anyone’s health, much less in charge of yours. If the information you shared with him regarding the aquatic parasites and other dangers to the human immune system found on Vulcan distressed him as completely as you have indicated—and if you are not exaggerating his overwhelmingly unprofessional response—then I can only determine that he is in need of a doctor himself, and that you are in need of a new one to better secure your continued good health.

What are his credentials? Do you employ him because you feel affection, guilt, or does he have some other hold over you perhaps due to a matter of blackmail or bribery? Is your family in his debt in some way? Or is this a “quirk” of your personality that causes you to place yourself in the very pathway of obvious danger?

Attached is another list—one of qualified and highly recommended physicians in the San Francisco area.

If “Doctor Bones” has any argument to make in his defense then he may contact me at the address and I will speak to him directly on the matter of your well-being. You are royalty; you are also a living, breathing, multi-celled organism. There are many who would prefer to see that you remain alive, in one piece, and unmolested by the very individual charged with protecting your person from illness and injury.

Spock of Vulcan.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Human females and tribbles
STARDATE: 2250.52
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Females such as the ones I have known and tribbles do not have any qualities in common whatsoever.

I am concerned about your health.

“XO”

Spock
FROM: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
TO: Spock of Vulcan
SUBJECT: My patient.
STARDATE: 2250.52

Listen here you green-skinned, pointy-eared basard, i have about as much time to send ROYAL COMMUNICATIONS as i do to sit down for a massage and drink at the end of a long day.

i've got patients to attend to and the last thing i nee'd sto be DEFnDiNG MY PRACTICE to a vlcan who's go t no business prying into my personal or professional medical history.

jim's a pain in the ass and a frequent pain in MY ass, but he;s fine and that's the last i'll hear of the kid changing physicians. not on my watch.

i'm no one of consequence, so i hope it's not gonna start a diplomatic incident when i tell you to kindly keep your nose outta my business.

yours VERY SINCERELY
leonard mccoy

FROM: The Office of Leonard McCoy, MD
TO: Prince Spock of Vulcan
SUBJECT: An official apology.
STARDATE: 2250.52

Your Royal Highness,

Please accept the sincerest apologies of the Kirk medical staff. We were unaware that communication had been extended in our direction, otherwise a prompt and proper reply would have been extended, as is only courteous.

It seems likely that Prince James must have shown your message to Dr. McCoy directly instead of forwarding it through the proper channels. He took it upon himself to formulate a reply, and -- well, you've seen the results for yourself.

I must inform you that he is a brilliant man. Gifted in the medical arts. Nonetheless, I can see where his manner might be offensive to those not acquainted with his peculiarities.

I hope that your image of our staff has not been irreparably tarnished.

Christine Chapel

FROM: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
TO: Spock of Vulcan
SUBJECT: Everything's fine.
STARDATE: 2250.53
SECURE CHANNEL
Spock,

I'm healthy as a horse, although I might not be after Bones is through with me.

I'm not gonna replace him, he's the best CMO we've ever had. A little prickly, but way sweeter than he lets on. Trust me when I say his bark's way worse than his bite. And he's not gonna come with me to Vulcan, so it's unlikely the two of you will have to spend much time together.

You didn't have to write to him.

XO

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
SUBJECT: Your patient.
STARDATE: 2250.53

Leonard H. McCoy, MD.

Your practice and your credentials are being investigated. Rest assured that this is being done lawfully and properly and shall not infringe upon any of your rights. However, know that I am thorough, and I intend to familiarize myself with your cases, your past employment, your performance, and any pending warrants there may be on your person for your arrest.

Are you currently inebriated? Your typing patterns suggest either inebriation or compromised motor skills, hardly a desirable trait in an individual of whom surgery may at any time be required.

Prince Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan, and Amanda Grayson of Earth

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: Christine Chapel, The Office of Leonard McCoy, MD
SUBJECT: Regarding Leonard H. McCoy
STARDATE: 2250.53

Christine Chapel of the Office of Leonard (H.) McCoy, MD.

I do not intend to press charges as to do so would be an act lacking in delicacy and diplomacy. I do not intend to incite intergalactic incident. However I must inform you that the behavior of your employer and superior is erratic and unpredictable. He cannot spell and appears to have difficulty with typing as a general rule. If he is as careless with his practice and his patients as he is with his communications, then it is clear that another doctor should replace him in the care of Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, son of the late King George Kirk, and the Acting Queen Winona Kirk.

I am not without appreciation for the swift and tactful reply you have delivered. I must question the choice of a nurse with your qualifications to work for and with someone of Leonard H. McCoy, MD’s proclivities.

Someone of your skills and aptitude would serve a Starfleet vessel’s medical requirements.

Be wary of Leonard H. McCoy.
Sincerely,

Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Your health
STARDATE: 2250.53
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

“As healthy as a horse” is neither specific nor obvious enough to explain what your current status may truly be. A horse may be healthy or unhealthy depending on its breeding, its living conditions, its age, its diet, and so on. That you are healthy as a mammal whose health is a variable does not reassure me of anything—if this statement was meant as reassurance, rather than a coded communiqué.

Your personal preferences regarding Leonard H. McCoy, MD’s disposition aside, your health should be entrusted to individuals who are trustworthy.

Anything else would be illogical.

“XO”

Spock

FROM: Leodard H. CMCONY MCD
TO: prince smug
SUBJECT: A fwew choice words.
STARDATE: 2250.53

All right, your amjesty I think I made my self prety clear in the last communciation that i don't have TIME to be writing lesetters back and forth like two schoolgirls on a cultural exchange. good god, man, you'd think with that enhanced vulcan sight you woudnt miss a cue like that but i guess it was TOO MUCH TO ASk that you might have better things to do than harass an old country doctor.

listen, no disresctpt meatn and i'm sure youre a lovely person but frankly if anyone has the right to be concerned it's me who knows how jim's gonna handle VULCNA of all places with your VULCAN DOCTORS

i'm not inebriated in the slighest and i hope this is the last time we have to have one of these charming little communiques.

yours sincenerely,

I mccoy
FROM: The Office of Leonard McCoy, MD
TO: Prince Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
SUBJECT: Further apologies.
STARDATE: 2250.53

Your Royal Highness,

It is the sincere hope of this office as well as the staff employed by the Kirk family that you have taken no offense during your communication with Doctor McCoy. Given that our medical facility is currently under investigation by your royal self, I feel it might be prudent to suggest cessation of communications between all parties, until tempers are a little less hot.

Christine

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Stop instigating.
STARDATE: 2250.53
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Remember that time I said I do better in person than through still images? Well, the same could be said of Bones. He's what we call an acquired taste here on Earth. You could also cross-reference the term all bark and no bite. He talks a big, big (and frequently, frankly disturbing) game, but he'd never harm a fly. And before you chime in, that's an expression that's meant to take into account all life. He's the gentlest person I know, even with the hypos.

It's like your sehlat. I told you Bones was my pet at first because the truth was they remind me a little of each other. I-Chayalooks like he'd chomp your arm off as soon as say hello, but he's really a big sweetheart who likes getting scratched under the chin, right?

Not that I'd scratch Bones under the chin. It's a flawed analogy. I don't expect you guys to get along, but trust me, he's not all bad.

I'm touched that you care this much about my health, though. Worried I'm not gonna make it to eighteen? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were getting attached to me, Spock.

XO
Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: At no point in time was I instigating; therefore, I cannot cease any activity I have not already begun.
STARDATE: 2250.54
Jim, peace and long life.

The difference between I-Chaya the pet sehlat and Leonard H. McCoy, MD, the “country doctor” also referred to as “Bones”, is that one is a large breed of Vulcan ursidae whose only required duties are to guard small Vulcan children, whereas the other—the latter—is a medical professional whose duties are varied and unpredictable, requiring a steadiness of hand and a calmness of mind in order to effectively apply himself to his daily tasks.

At no point has your health been anything but my concern, if only tangentially. We are not attached—not as of yet—but that does not imply your well-being is not related to my future, as is mine to yours.

If I was being cared for medically by a sehlat, I would trust that your response would be of equal severity.

Nevertheless, having concluded my thorough investigation into Leonard H. McCoy, MD’s past, his training, his satisfied previous patients, his practice, his associates, his family history, and other points of relative interest, I have concluded that there is no evidence of anyone under his care perishing due to carelessness or neglect. Neither is there an instance of a patient suffering unnecessary and crippling injury because of a mistake on the doctor’s part.

In fact, his record is in a word exemplary.

Perhaps you should bring him with you to Vulcan after all.

We have now been in communication for fifty days

“XO”

Spock
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Naked Orion girls.

FROM: Lady Amanda Grayson  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Please convey my sincere apologies to Leonard H. McCoy, MD  
STARDATE: 2250.54

Prince Kirk—though, from all I have heard about you lately, I feel as if I really should be less formal, perhaps by calling you Jim; but of course, I don’t wish to cause any intergalactic incidents—it is a pleasure to speak to you, however briefly, and however limited our communications will surely be until we have met again. I remember you, of course, from so many years ago. If you’ve changed, and surely you must have done, then I trust you’re still as charming now as you were then. I look forward to our chance to speak and truly come to know one another. Your effect on my son has already been remarkable. I count him lucky; I count myself lucky by association.

The purpose for this missive, Prince Kirk, is a simple one. I wish, on behalf of myself and the house of Sarek, to extend our apologies to the practice of Leonard H. McCoy, MD—to the man himself, as well as to his employees. (I believe one Christine Chapel, in particular, was so good as to make amends between the involved parties?) It’s but a minor hiccup—but of course, I wouldn’t allow anything, anything at all, to endanger the good relations between our houses... Or the union that shall come of those good relations.

Until we meet again, Prince Kirk.

Lady Amanda Grayson

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: You've got me there.  
STARDATE: 2250.54  
SECURE CHANNEL

Happy anniversary.

I know, I know. Anniversary implies a yearly cycle and we're only fifty days in. But it felt like I should say something to commemorate the occasion. It's been awhile since I went to bed without one of your letters. I'm starting to get used to it. Kind of like a routine. Not in a bad way, it's just -- I'd miss 'em if they stopped, you know?

Not that they're gonna. The only problem with answering these letters so late at night is that I sometimes lose my train of thought. No doubt it's something you've already noticed, being as
you're so observant when it comes to these things. Me. I like that you notice things about me.

See, in traditional flirting I'd never admit that, but I get the sense that I need to give you a bit of an advantage to even the playing field every now and then. Subtlety isn't something that comes naturally to Vulcans, I take it. Given your recent inquest into my CMO and all associated staff, I think I can safely assume you prefer the direct approach.

I'm not falling for your suggestion that I bring Bones to Vulcan though. He'd be miserable and he'd get in the way, like a chaperone only about a thousand times worse. He'd probably wanna do scans on you too. He is the very opposite of romantic and having him around wouldn't set the mood at all.

I'll ask him if he wants to come, though.

XO
Jim

FROM: James Tiberius Kirk
TO: Lady Amanda Grayson
SUBJECT: Apologies conveyed, but not necessary.
STARDATE: 2250.55

Lady Amanda,

Funny, I was wondering if I should call you Mom.

Didn't want to come off as irreverent, though. I told Spock I don't tend to make the best first impression (or second, for that matter, or third) but that doesn't mean I don't put any effort into it. That almost makes it worse, probably.

Don't worry about Bones, he has a lot going on. I'm sure the investigation barely scratched his surface. He doesn't tend to pay attention to anything unless it's a screaming patient in front of him. Spock said I should invite him to Vulcan, but I'm not sure that's a good idea.

You raised a pretty great kid, if you don't mind my saying so. Weird as hell, but then he grows on you to the point where you're arguing on his behalf to allow all kinds of medical files to be released.

I look forward to meeting you again. I can assure you I don't drool half as much as I used to.

James Tiberius Kirk

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Where have I “got” you?
STARDATE: 2250.55
SECURE CHANNEL
Jim, peace and long life. And good evening, if I understand the nature of your designated communication time correctly, which I believe from all indicators that I have not misjudged. I would suggest that reading while in bed is counterproductive as it creates expectations of that space that do not involve proper rest cycles, but I am not your primary physician. Has Leonard H. McCoy, MD, already informed you of this fact, and have you neglected to act on it?

There is much, it would appear, that I do not yet know—that which you have not seen reason to share; that which you have no reason to; minor details that only a life shared in close proximity rather than one described in available moments as part of a familiar routine cannot possibly hope to illuminate. Despite the trust we have managed to foster in fifty-one days there is no need to question whether or not some mysterious element still remain between us. I would posit that many mysterious elements are yet a part of the very fabric of our relations.

This is the essence of diplomatic outreach. Yet based upon similar definitions of mystery, it may have something to do with the romantic as well, as far as the human desire for such reaches. On this matter I would not even speculate.

Your instincts for it are keener than are mine.

I shall from now on endeavor—in an act of solidarity—to read your communications at the same late hour. My ability to follow a thought from start to finish will not be impaired in a similar fashion, yet there will be a definite parallel that cannot be denied.

It is now seven past twenty-three hundred, local standard time. (The time stamp on this message will corroborate.) I-Chaya is outside the door. There are nights when he snores, though this is not one of them. There is a sand storm approaching and the air is dry. I am alone but I am not, as the state would suggest, lonely in any way whatsoever.

I realize now that I did not ask you for your thoughts on poetry—Vulcan; human; otherwise.

I am told the Orions are experts in free verse. But their sensuality does not generally appeal to a Vulcan audience.

“XO” – and “V” which to me approximates the salute of my Vulcan ancestry; that is, to live long and prosper.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Lots of places.
STARDATE: 2250.56
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Did you just compare our letters to diplomatic outreach? Because I think I'm offended.

I mean, diplomacy is one thing, but outreach is so... Makes me feel like a charity project, you know? That's not how you meant it, though. I get you. And before you ask, that's an expression that means I understand. I don't actually, physically have you. Not yet, anyway. I'm looking forward to
that part of our acquaintanceship. Is that even a word?

God, I'm tired.

Let me tell you, Spock, nothing takes it out of you like a Venusian colony tour. I knew when I signed up for it that there weren't any Class M planets on the agenda, but there's knowing and then there's knowing. If I have to listen to one more lecture on terraforming, I'm probably gonna lose it. Did you know Earth agriculture is probably the most boring topic in the universe? It's true, I did a study.

That's a joke, but if I had done a study? It would be more interesting than listening to foreign dignitaries talk about the strain on their resources oh my god, Spock.

Oh my god.

All right, that's my daily allotted amount of complaining. If you're gonna start reading my letters in bed then I'm gonna have to talk to you about better stuff. More soothing, bedtime-y topics. I tried to practice that Vulcan salute, but it's not going so well. Is that the kind of thing you have to start on early, because I might've missed the boat there. Still, I'm working on it. Gives me something to do under the table while various representatives go on and on about the cost of dilithium mining and whether or not there might be a more profitable resource on one of the gas giants.

See, there I go again. Let's try another tactic.

I don't snore. So if I was there with you right now, you wouldn't have to worry about me keeping you awake in bed.

Although in all fairness, I might be keeping you up with other stuff.

I'll check out some of that Orion poetry. You never know -- you might surprise yourself with how sensual you can be. You might just need to hear it in the right context.

XO
V
Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Outreach.
STARDATE: 2250.56
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I am relieved to note that you “get” me in terms of the suggested analogy between acts of diplomacy and acts of a more personal unification. Though ours is a union that found its inception in diplomacy, the ways in which it mirrors the galactic scale of these diplomatic envoys is not, as you suggest, lacking in romance or romantic interpretations.

On a base level it is indeed logical—for only together can we achieve our goals to the best of our
combined abilities. The logic, therefore, cannot be denied. There are those who would seek to undermine or even fracture these alliances toward their own brief profit or short-term gain but as a long-term endeavor, it is simply not viable. Their way will only bring harm to themselves and to the galaxy as a whole.

Yet as precise and obvious as this logic may appear to us, and while our enemies are in violation of that same logic, I believe there is a poetry in the common sense shared by one of your background and one of mine. There is little else that we share, save for anatomical points of reference. The very make-up of our blood is quite dissimilar. Were it not for diplomatic envoys and the concept of diplomacy as a whole, we would not be in communication. We might never have come to the point of knowing one another at all—much less of “getting” them.

You will inform me if I do not use that word correctly, when your travels and duties in the Venusian colonies are not limiting your time.

I shall also inform you—after I have recorded a wide enough sampling of instances—as to whether or not I snore, so that you will be prepared well in advance that such knowledge will prove relevant.

As for I-Chaya, as I have already noted, it will be possible to move him to another room or area where the sounds he makes in his sleep do not disturb your rest. For a creature as large as he, it is remarkable how easily he makes himself comfortable in the most unlikely of places.

I went on a similar tour when I was a year younger than you are, studying dilithium mining facilities owned by Tellarite interests. As much as we rely on the crystals in order to power the Federation’s galactic exploration missions, I will submit that once you have spent an hour considering their properties as they are currently employed, you have spent all the time necessary on those considerations.

The Tellarites, however, are able to argue about them for days, at times weeks, on end.

I know that Klingon interest in dilithium mines is high, for the same mechanisms that power travel also power photon-based weapons, torpedoes, cannons, phasers, and so on. Naturally you are traveling with an adequate security detail and are not, as the tabloids suggest, “recklessly endangering” yourself during “flagrant stunts” in order to impress an Orion girl of your acquaintance?

XOV.

Spock
None of that's sarcasm either, I'm just too tired to dance around it the way I normally would. You're pretty great, Spock. I never noticed up until now how passionate you could be on certain topics and I think that's been to your disservice. Anyway, I'm only telling you this now so that you'll believe me when I tell you you're capable of making one hell of a speech. You're gonna make a great diplomatic representative for Vulcan. And I'm looking forward to standing by your side while you do it.

Now that that's out of the way, I have three things to say in my defense.

1. *Someone* had to pilot that mining shuttle out of the crater before it collapsed. Valuable resources, Spock. I can't listen to anymore whining about Federation attention to Class M colonies taking priority over those in our own backyard.

2. Gaila's my instructor in Orion poetry and she is NOTORIously difficult to impress.

3. It can't have been that dangerous if there were photographers there. I'm just saying.

Anyway, I don't care so much if you snore. I'll just roll you over. I-Chaya can sleep wherever he wants. I doubt he'd like me very much if I just showed up one day and started dictating the terms when he's way older than me AND he's been there longer. It's not up to me to go setting down rules in his house, you know?

I'm still working on that finger thing.

Live long and prosper, Spock.

XOV,

Jim

P.S. I'd say you've got getting down to a fine art.

______________________________________________________________

**FROM:** Spock of Vulcan  
**TO:** James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
**SUBJECT:** Diplomacy and partnership.  
**STARDATE:** 2250.57  
**SECURE CHANNEL**

Jim, peace and long life.

In correction of a finer detail, I must clarify that I wrote of diplomacy and partnership not with fervor, but in a way that seems to me little more than purely logical.

The attempts on a major scale of Federation unification as exhibited on the minor scale with the unification of two disparate individuals from equally disparate backgrounds (ourselves) is a parallel that should be obvious to anyone who seeks to overcome the prejudices that made our initial period of contact fraught and uncertain. In those days, certainly, no one could say whether or not alliance or even unsteady peace of any kind would be possible—yet now, with the perspective of time and experience, these possibilities have unfolded in near unlimited fashion.

As I said: this should be obvious.
According to Sarek, my father, who has a wealth of knowledge of diplomacy from his years of service as an ambassador of Vulcan, one is best served—if one intends to be thoroughly diplomatic—to speak less than one listens. This is the Vulcan intellect at work, the Vulcan understanding. I have good reason to infer that I have been chosen for my particular duties because of a perceived lack of qualities essentially Vulcan in origin, in other words the human influence that has separated me from my family on my father’s side, and my peers.

Whether or not I agree with your complimentary assessment in those exact terms—nor am I ultimately clear on what those terms, exactly, are—I understand that gratitude should be expressed at this time.

I am expressing gratitude.

You are many things—I would suggest in need of caution and care, as the impulse that drove you to drive that mining shuttle out of danger yourself indicate you are “pretty” reckless as well as “pretty” impulsive. (Pretty is not specific and I would not employ it, yet it appears appropriate, since I have not yet calculated just how reckless and impulsive you are.) There were many photographs of the incident. After familiarizing myself with the evidence briefly, I was able to determined that all images were gathered via long-range photographic equipment. The photographers were not in the center of danger as you placed yourself. Nonetheless, I understand that the locals were grateful and impressed; this positive outcome, however, should not encourage you toward making the same choices again.

Of course, some would call your actions brave. But brave has a multitude of interpretations. It has a time and a place. It ends when the individual who possesses it is compromised, injured, or lost. It is merely a concept; it is not a living organism.

Gaila the poetic instructor does not appear to favor poetry lessons given in anything other than the nude. Is this an Orion custom with which I am not familiar?

XOV.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Naked Orion girls.
STARDATE: 2250.57
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I hope this topic doesn't trigger your spam filter. A lesser man would change it so that doesn't happen, but I'm too far gone now. Gotta stick it out. I don't even know why I bother making jokes where you're concerned, but I figure one of these days I'm gonna break through and you'll realize how charming you find me. Either that or you'll get sick of them and tell me to stop. Either way, I'm doing all right so far.

OK, so she's not my poetry instructor so much as she is my friend. She's one of the Starfleet cadets assigned to shadow the big dogs while we make our rounds, but I figured she might help me get a literal interpretation of some of these verses. The cadet who introduced us, Uhura, is a linguist, but
she won't use her talented tongue to help me out, so I've had to go looking elsewhere.

Anyway, the naked thing.

Thanks for the heads up. Didn't realize there were guys camped outside the windows, but it's not so surprising. When you lead the kind of hell for leather daring nonstop adventure kind of life I do, you run into constant interest. I'm just lucky there aren't any naked pictures of me floating around yet. Mom'd have my head. And before you ask, there definitely could've been, because Gaila's a big fan of feeling the poetry with every part of your body. According to her, clothes get in the way of the experience, and I'm sure not gonna tell my Orion grandmother how to suck eggs.

Anyway it makes for a nice view, which I'm sure you've discovered.

I'll have security make a sweep, maybe keep the blinds down next time.

I'm sorry to inform you that your logic was incredibly passionate and not something I'm liable to forget anytime soon either. As soon as I've mastered some of the intonation on these Orion verses I'm gonna record you a little something, maybe brighten up your night. You're still reading these at night, right? It's a nice image, that's all. You all cozy in bed, me...all cozy in another bed.

Night, Spock.

XOV,

Jim

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Orions do not suck eggs.
STARDATE: 2250.58
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

“Hell for leather”—meaning unclear. You are not wearing any of that fabric in the pictures taken by the interested and dedicated paparazzi. Explain.

“Nonstop adventure kind of life”—I have responded to this already. It is unwise to behave so recklessly when there are many who depend upon you and look to you. Needless to say you are meant to set an example for those who look up to you. The constant presence of the paparazzi should be a prime indicator of this truth. At the very least you will instill in a younger and impressionable human generation an affection for Orions that may fall, broadly, under the heading of good diplomacy, but we both know that is a generous interpretation at best. As your brother Sam’s whereabouts are currently unknown, it is your face associated with the representation of your planet and its government.

I cannot imagine the peculiar freedoms allowed on Earth, among humans. Were you truly raised beyond the confines of strict formality, or is it that your personality stretched beyond the rules and regulations inherent in your upbringing? Again, there are few words as apt to describe the phenomenon of your behavioral patterns as fascinating.
A security sweep would not be amiss. Some of those visuals were not acquired by means of a long-range apparatus.

If I understand correctly, the Orion named Gaila who prefers to eschew clothing while experiencing poetry socially is your grandmother—perhaps a step-grandmother, as there are no Orions in your bloodline, Jim—which explains the familiarity expressed between you. For a grandmother, she appears quite young. I understand females of certain races enjoy being told this fact.

Your foray into Orion poetry is noted as what may be considered a romantic gesture. If it was not, I would know the truth of your sudden interest, so that your motives—your intentions—are not misunderstood. I have made a foray of my own into poetry as well, though I began on Earth rather than on another planet between ours, with a scribe of great historical distinction. The name Shakespeare is ubiquitous among your people, is it not? There is a structural logic in much of his verse that gives his passion structure. It, too, is fascinating.

Good night, Jim.

XOV.

Spock
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Sleep and the lack thereof.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Are you even USING that dictionary I made you?
STARDATE: 2250.59
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Okay, give me a minute.

Hell for leather: an expression stemming from the 19th century, it means with great speed. I lead a fast life. It seemed like an appropriate allusion at the time.

Nonstop kind of whatever I said: I'm just being facetious. That being said, surely you can't expect me to just sit back and keep out of danger because it's the diplomatic thing to do? I saw an opening and so I took it. I'm a good pilot, I knew how to operate the shuttle. If I hadn't moved when I did then a lot of people could've been hurt and the headline would've been MINING TRAGEDY instead of that dumb picture of me and Gaila.

Speaking of the pictures of me and Gaila, security plugged up a few holes in the setting. We had someone on the staff keeping the paps informed of my movements, letting them know what room I was staying in, that kind of thing. Bones practically popped his cork when he found out, but that's only because he's convinced I'm gonna get assassinated every other minute. That's what happens to him when we leave Earth -- he loses his mind completely. Anyway, we're picking up and leaving for the back-end leg of this little morale tour soon, so I wouldn't worry too much about my compromised position. Lucky it wasn't compromised assets. Gaila got an official royal apology, and she's been signing pictures for the colonists ever since, so I'm guessing she's not too broken up about it.

She's not my grandmother either. Teaching your grandmother to suck eggs is another expression. It's like teaching someone who already knows more about the subject than you do. I don't know where the eggs come in. The point is, she's Orion so if she says something about Orion territory, I'm gonna take her word for it.

I like Shakespeare.

*He was a man, take him for all in all,*
*I shall not look upon his like again.*

I'm not crazy about the sonnets, but the plays aren't bad.

XOV,
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Your dictionary is not complete.
STARDATE: 2250.59
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Popped his cork was, surprisingly, included in the dictionary you once sent me. Hell for leather was not. Neither was the adage about the metaphorical grandmother who is skilled at sucking eggs. I have, I need not remind you, endeavored to do my research without disturbing you for clarification; I have checked and cross-checked the information with which you yourself chose to supply me. It has made itself useful to me in the past—just as our communications have their uses as well, regarding the finer points of colloquialism among humans.

I consider this practice, among other things, for my future inclusion in delegations to starbases, as well as to Federation outposts within your solar system, and indeed to Earth itself.

Leonard H. McCoy, MD, was correct to react in such a fashion to the clear breach of security and protocol in your staff during your tour of the Venusian colonies. When anticipating danger from those who sought to gain access to dilithium mines for their own benefit, I did not foresee there would be danger from those who sought to gain profit—also for their own benefit—from their access to you.

This is not a mistake I will make again and, if you are as wise as you have proven yourself clever, it is not one you will make either.

There is another Tellarite convoy on Vulcan; the delegates from the Tellarite system arrived this morning. As they stand between Vulcan and the Neutral Zone, many of their own dilithium mining colonies have come under regular attack by rogue Klingon ships, warbirds grouped three to five in number, firing upon photon cannons in order to weaken the mining colonies’ defenses. There have been casualties. The Tellarites are most displeased and these actions have made them uncertain about where they have placed their allegiances. Pending my father Sarek’s arrangements and the conclusion of the talks with the Tellarite convoy, we will send our support to the front in order to protect their outposts, fortifying their faith in the Federation along with their defenses.

I write you from the balcony of my private chambers. From this vantage point I am able to view that which passes beneath the window without myself being observed, should I wish to avoid observation. There are no paparazzi here. Vulcans do not pry, nor do they waste their time with idle gossip or with the circulation of digital magazines regarding the “celebrities” of the planet, as there are none who fall under that status, likely because there are none who would elevate them to that status. I am able to see the members of the Tellarite envoy depart the council chambers, followed by members of the High Council and my father as well.

I-Chaya has come to join me. Uninterrupted, I write to you as the sun sets. Vulcan has no moon; I know that Earth has only one, and that it is the subject of much human poetry, despite its relative simplicity as a celestial object. There appears to be a correlation between moonlight—a misnomer;
that light is merely a reflection of the sun—and poetry.

Remain safe, Jim.

XOV.

Spock

FROM: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
TO: Spock of Vulcan
SUBJECT: Sorry your royalness I'll get right on that.
STARDATE: 2250.60
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I'm en route right now, taking the long way around some solar radiation so we don't fry ourselves or something with the warp drive. I'm not too clear on what the problem is and everyone talks to me like I'm either an idiot or I'm about to fire them for getting the details wrong. Neither of which is true OR fair, but it makes it tough to get information out of anyone. Anyway, I'm better at piloting shuttles than I am understanding the engineering bay of a starship. Suffice it to say, I'm delayed and I'm bored and I thought colony tours were bad but I'm gonna make a radical statement now and suggest there's nothing worse than interstellar travel when you don't even care about where you're going.

Maybe it wouldn't seem so bad if they'd let me out of the Sol system, but everyone's on edge from what happened with the Klingons. Something you'd say is probably understandable.

Don't let the Tellarites get you down. Seems like you've had to spend a lot of time with them, and given your description of how sweet and even-tempered they are, I can't imagine it's been pleasant. Your dad's all right, isn't he? It sounds like you guys are out of harm's way, but I just wanted to make sure. I like to know how worried I need to be ahead of time.

Hopefully the answer is not that worried.

Moonlight's romantic, though I doubt you'd have an intrinsic understanding of that, having grown up without it and without an appreciation for romance in the first place. Because it's a reflection it doesn't illuminate the way sunlight does. The silver and the shadowy quality put people in a romantic state of mind because it's all private and secluded. You can still see, but you have to be close to someone to really get there. Proximity is also a big part of romanticism, though that can also be classified as basic sexual tension.

God, you've got me talking like you now.

I promise I'll show you what's so romantic about moonlight when you visit Earth next.

It must get dark on Vulcan at night. That sounds pretty peaceful. The lights on the starship never go out all at the same time, though I've got a blackout setup in my quarters which is pretty adequate. The hum of the engines sometimes puts me to sleep, although I don't want you thinking I'm so undisciplined that I could drop off without warning. I'm TRYING to sleep now. Which I will do as soon as I've finished writing you.
I'll be OK.

Maybe I'll work on that dictionary while I'm stuck here.

XOV,

Jim

P.S. You take care of yourself too, all right?

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: There is no need to be facetious in the subject area as well as in the body of your communication.
STARDATE: 2250.60
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. Though there is currently no reason for worry there is always a place for well-measured caution. The distinction may be subtle but it is also a subtlety with which I am familiar, unlike the subtleties of romance, with which I am less so. This is likely due to the logical application of the distinction in my daily life, whereas there has been no logical need for romantic subtleties thus far.

It is a curious realization to discover that this is the topic to which I return more readily than any other during our communications. Of course, it was the initial subject of our dialogue, given the nature of our connection. Logically, we should return to it more often than any other singular topic —situational, chronological, personal, historical, pedagogical, economical... However it is also undeniably true that there are matters concerning us that are of far greater import and will have more lasting impact. Surely we should be more inclined to maintain conversation that pertains to the livelihoods of our people and to the very real threats that now face them.

I once asked my mother what the use of poetry was. It serves no logical purpose in anyone’s life. Moonlight may be, as you have described it, an experience of light and shadow to the point of great physical beauty, but the most impact a moon has upon a planet is its effect on the tides, a minor shift in gravitation and orbit.

The Tellarites do not trouble me as I am not their attaché; they have no reason to broach contact with me, though if they did, I would manage as befits a son of my father. Even should they prove most illogical and irrational, as they have in past talks, I would maintain my composure as though I were a full Vulcan, rather than only half of one. However, that is merely conjecture, though it is based upon precedent and prior performance under similar, if not equal, circumstances. I have no reason to meet with the Tellarites and therefore it is not the Tellarites which trouble me.

Is a boring trip not preferable to one that is assaulted by unwanted excitement?

Another conjecture, this one with only slightly less evidence, is that you would not agree with this assessment of mine. That you would, in fact, insist the opposite is true. That “adventure” despite its risks and even its costs should regularly outweigh the steadfast course that adheres to protocol and maintains proper procedures.

It is a distinct possibility, Jim, that due to our differences in perspective, there will not be friction of
the sort that seems to bring you your most desirable form of pleasure. I will not be—according to your dictionary—akin to the sensations brought about with a “wild ride”. If the tedium of an uneventful space trip causes you to experience boredom, when it is the tedium of a course that is predictable because it is logical, then I must posit that the same may be said of the “ride” you will take with me.

Does this trouble you?

If you are unable to answer directly before bed, place your rest above the agitation of contemplating this matter. I know that humans require ample time for “R and R” and that without it they become “pissed off” and “grumpy”.

XOV.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You're right.
STARDATE: 2250.60
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

You ARE using the dictionary. I'm thrilled. No, really, it warms the cockles of my heart, and that's not just because we're finally reaching the home stretch of this little tour of ours. The Venusian Scandal (as we're now calling it) ate up some of my free time, so mom's wanting me back sooner than we thought. Thank god, because I'm not entirely convinced this wasn't some latent punishment to try and bore me to death. Before you ask, I haven't done anything worthy of punishment that I'm aware of. I wouldn't put it past her to try and get in a preemptive one either, though. Just to give me an idea of what's gonna happen if I mess around during another diplomatic dinner rehearsal.

As far as I'm concerned, so long as it's the rehearsal and not the main event who cares? The answer is a lot of people care, Spock. I'm sure Vulcans don't even have rehearsals -- you guys probably just know what you're doing from the get-go and everyone follows suit. I'm looking forward to a change of scenery, even though I've been complaining about starship travel lately. It'll be nice to actually get somewhere I'm excited about.

Plus, I've seen the preliminary designs for my Vulcan wardrobe and none of them includes a cape, so I'm all for that. Down with unnecessary layers.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sorry.
STARDATE: 2250.61
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,
Sorry about that. Fell asleep with my face on the PADD.

If you think you're boring, Spock, you're way off. I wouldn't be writing if I couldn't be bothered. It's not like I have anyone breathing down my neck to reply these days, what with all the other stuff going on. So the only thing keeping me going is because I want to hear from you. I don't know if you've noticed, but you're easily just as capable of surprising me as I am of doing the reverse. And if you were all wild and spontaneous than what would I even bring to the relationship? My good looks?

We balance each other out pretty well as far as I'm concerned. If we were too alike we'd probably hate each other. There's all kinds of human literature on the idea that opposites attract. Not that I'm saying you should be attracted of me because of how illogical I am but, well, you find me fascinating, right? That's probably something that wouldn't kick in if I didn't catch you off guard every now and then.

Anyway, maybe I like how protective you get when I do stupid stuff. You ever think of that?

XOV,

Jim

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Naturally.  
STARDATE: 2250.61  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Though it would appear that ‘peace and long sleep’ would be a more apropos greeting at this particular time.

Are you not resting adequately? Or is it that other business concerns you and consumes so much of your time that you are responding to private messages at a later hour than usual? If you believe correspondence takes precedence over your health then the spirit in which my customary greeting is intended has eluded you. Humans require a longer period of rest, as well as those which are taken more frequently, than Vulcans; there should be no shame to your ego in acknowledging that simple fact as the truth.

Though I appreciate the regularity of your replies and the routine established by their expected arrival and would not encourage you to write less often for my own sake, I would also not have your strict attendance to this self-appointed duty outweigh your physical needs.

At such a time as you have rested and relaxed—enjoying the aforementioned and much-praised “R and R”—I would also appreciate the opportunity to speak with you again in the efforts of continuing a previous thread regarding your physical needs, those unrelated to either rest or relaxation.

Have you considered that your mother the queen’s desire to be reunited with you may have something to do with the rising Klingon tensions coupled with your astounding capacity for finding trouble no matter where it is that you are sent? Are you equally pleased by her protective responses
surrounding your reckless behavior as mine?

It seems to me the only logical response to have when considering an individual whose immune system is as immediately compromised as his ability for rational thinking in the face of self-appointed adventure. I do not disagree with the queen’s decision to recall you from your brief sojourn among the Venusian colonies, since the mining shuttles were not the only source of danger to your person, but also the numerous—seven, by my count—potentially fatal allergens in the atmosphere alone, not to mention the assault the plant life, if unchecked, would make upon your respiratory system.

Perhaps that qualifies as “protective”. Yet, as you remain my husband-to-be, I believe it is only logical. If you will not acknowledge these dangers for yourself then I shall have to continue to acknowledge them for you.

XOV.

Spock

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
SUBJECT: Your patient.
STARDATE: 2250.61

Leonard H. McCoy, MD.

I am aware that our previous communications were made under your duress and your ability to communicate was thereby hindered. However our mutual interest in your patient, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth, should allow us to place the past behind us in order to safeguard his future.

Is he well? He appears to be suffering from a yet-unknown measure of exhaustion.

I would appreciate a swift and thorough response befitting a medical professional of your credentials.

Prince Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan, and Amanda Grayson of Earth

FROM: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
TO: His Royal Vulcanness
SUBJECT: My patient.
STARDATE: 2250.61

Prince Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan, and Amanda Grayson of Earth,

Jim's fine, unless you've got a disease on Vulcan called TOO STUDPID AND STUBBORN TO OBEY MEDICAL ORDERS. Kid runs himself ragged doing goodwill missions shaking hands and letting babies sneeze on him and god-only-knows what else, he comes back and tackles a mountain of boring paperwork, he's got those damned CAMERAMEN on his ass twentyfourseven like he doesn't have ENOUGH TO DEAL WITH not even COUNTING THE HAREBRAINED TURNCOATS ON HIS OWN STAFF who'd sell him out to the highest bidder just to get a little extra salary
it's

DISGUSTING

But he's not sick, if that's what you're asking. Not on my watch.

sincERELY,

LH McCoy, MD

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: NATURALLY
STARDATE: 2250.62
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

It's sweet when you worry about me. When my mom does the same thing, it's called meddling.

I never had to deal with that much before. People mostly paid attention to Sam, until they had to hire on Bones to deal with my allergy attacks. So maybe I'm enjoying the attention a little bit. From you, anyway.

Don't think I missed that subtle little cue to my physical needs you slipped in there, that was downright flirtatious. Spock, I don't care what you say about your romantic proclivities, you might be something of a natural. Well, OK, not a natural, but you're better at it than you think. A quick study. Or maybe I'm just easy to get to. Never really given it that much thought, since like I said before I've never got too involved in the talking part of a relationship. Guess you've been a good influence on me. Not that I'm any better about answering my correspondence these days, but to be fair I don't get a ton of personal stuff anyway.

I should be home tomorrow, if it's all smooth sailing. Not literal sailing. Flying. The Klingons would have to be idiots to try anything again so soon after their first hit. Tensions haven't exactly died down, and neither has security. So I doubt you need to concern yourself, but if you're thinking about me, I'll take it.

I'm not trying to be reckless, I'm just taking care of my subjects. You'd -- well, you probably wouldn't do the same thing. I'm sure you'd have found a very logical way to keep from piloting a mining shuttle out of the cave-in's range. We can swap strategies some other time maybe, when I'm visiting.

Why don't we talk more about your physical needs anyway? You spend so much time worrying about me, Spock, it's almost like you're cooking up reasons to keep the topic off yourself. Wonder why that could be...

Well, I'm thinking about you anyway. You can't stop me.

XOV,

Jim
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Mutual pain in the ass.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
SUBJECT: Your patient, a follow-up.
STARDATE: 2250.62

Leonard H. McCoy, MD, salutations.

If your reasons behind the erratic spelling choices and grammatical liberties you took in your response was for the purpose of encrypting our communications, I regret to inform you that, one, though it was difficult to parse, the code was easily cracked despite its lack of cohesion, and, two, I am quite capable of establishing a secure channel through which privacy can be maintained. This is not a topic that requires privacy whatsoever as it regards the continued good health of Prince James Tiberius Kirk.

Venusian allergens aside, I do not believe that the prince is experiencing the requisite amount of sleep for a human male of his age, height, weight, and disposition. Without the requisite amount of sleep, his immune system—which already does not operate at optimal efficiency—may become further compromised.

It would also be prudent to keep him away from babies.

I would not imply that your job is anything but difficult, doctor, yet it is because of its importance that its difficulty is multiplied. From the information I have gathered you appear to be a dedicated and well-considered practitioner in your field and I do not intend to teach you how to “suck eggs”. I am merely expressing a shared interest in your patient as well as expressing that which I have come to understand from my communications with the prince.

Sincerely,

Prince Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan, and Amanda Grayson of Earth

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Naturally?
STARDATE: 2250.62
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I would not once suggest that the Klingons are “idiots”. Rather, I would say that they—like you—have a tendency to act in a fashion that might, by some, be regarded as reckless. Their actions cannot be understood by us without further study, even dialogue with those who have dedicated
their livelihoods and indeed their very lives to serve that foreign ideology.

For now, they are still a relative unknown, and for this reason they have presented clear danger to us. We have been shown that if they believe they have an opportunity then they will take it; if they see a weakness, past experience suggests that they will take it without thought to personal or individual safety. Rather, they will act for the glory and the victory of the whole of their empire. It is an ideology that is not shared by humans or by Vulcans or indeed by any other willing member of the Federation. I would not call this idiocy. I would simply call it formidable. If their greatest act can be to die in service of battle, then they fight without thought to loss of life, including their own. We cannot meet them on that same level of self-sacrifice. Nor should we. It will prove a most sensitive battlefield to negotiate.

But I take it this divergence of topics to focus on the Klingons is not a part of my natural aptitude for learning, in this case, the language of flirtation.

With knowledge of this, I shall now attempt to correct my course before it veers beyond the point of correction.

I have always applied myself to new and unfamiliar topics with the intent to master them. Swiftness and efficiency. That is the Vulcan way. Yet the malleable nature of “flirtation” as it varies from individual case to individual case has shown itself to be a unique study. There is no single equation to act as the framework for anticipating reactions based on actions; there are more variables than there are constants.

I neglect self-reference because I have less experience in the subject than you have enjoyed. In point of fact, I have only variables, and no constants.

There is also the fact that, for Vulcans—among whom I have been raised, and to whose standards I expect to cleave—these topics are distasteful. They are reminiscent of a carnality in our pasts to which we will never return. Therefore, these subjects are not addressed. They are cloaked in ritual, hidden in our histories. We acknowledge them in ceremony, but not in conversation.

XOV.

Spock

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FROM: Leonard H. McCoy, MD.
TO: His Royal Prince Spock
SUBJECT: My patient, a follow-up.
STARDATE: 2250.63
SECURE CHANNEL

Listen, your worship,

In the interests of being diplomatic, I'm gonna ASSUME you've never been in the unfortunate position of ever trying to jget James Tiberius Kirk to do ANYTHING he's not interested in doing. If not, I have a grave knowledge to pass on: there's no telling jim ANYTHING. I do my best - and you acknowledge i AM the best, but damned if that kid doesn't have the stubborn will of a tenfold of oxes at harvest time.

Believe me, I'm keeping an eye out for the kid. And i"m not about to let anything happen to him.
But if you think I can avert tragedy by simply sitteing him down and explaining things in a very logical fashion then boy are you in for teh shock of a lifetime.

Candidly, I don't mind saying he'll be your problem soon enough. You'll see for yourself soon enough. Until then, he's my problem and I'm gonna keep him as strong and prepared as I can. no thanks to that goddamn klingon envoy.

If I have to, I'll find a way to cut out power to his PADD after a certain hour. Somethin' s gotta get him to sleep.

Sincerely,

LH McCoy, MD.

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FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sorry I'm being facetious again.
STARDATE: 2250.64
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Hey. Bones says I should apologize for the quality of my correspondence, whatever in the hell that means. Apparently I wasn't supposed to be writing letters at all because he had me on mandatory rest cycles. I keep telling him it isn't a big deal, that it doesn't take a lot of brain power to write you anyway because I pretty much go on autopilot these days, but he says if I was talking to anyone in that state of mind -- anyone I care about -- then I owe them a big old apology.

So here I am. Apologizing? You guys haven't been talking behind my back, have you? Because I think that's sweet, but also I don't like my odds if the two of you team up against me. I'm taking good care of myself. There's more work these days now that it's just the two of us, that's all. I'm doing more than I used to, but that's part of getting older.

You like that? It sounds mature, doesn't it? That's your influence. At least, that's what I'm gonna assume. It's sure as hell not mine.

I don't have much time for Orion poetry since landing back on Earth, but Gaila said to say hello next time I wrote you. She thought you might be jealous after the whole naked thing at the Venustian colony, but I told her Vulcans don't go in for that. Anyway, she's back at Starfleet now, so my studies would be on hold whether I had time or not. Mom and I are meeting with some of HQ's admirals to talk about Federation defenses in Klingon space, so I'll have a lot of mental fuel if I need a nap later.

After that, I'm supposed to double down on my Vulcan language lessons. I've tried telling them that even you said it was a lost cause, but everyone here seems to think much more highly of my intellect than you do. Maybe that's one of the reasons I like you so much.

I get it, you know. You were raised a certain way, I was raised a certain way. There's bound to be discrepancies between the two. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable when I talk about flirting all the time and stuff. I'm willing to dial it back, but I'm not gonna stop entirely because I think some amount of friction's healthy. And if we back off entirely, then our letters are gonna be dry,
diplomatic treatises and I've had about all of those I can take.

Give I-Chaya a scratch under the chin from me and say hi to your mom. I'm thinking about you. Even if you said the Klingons were formidable.

XOV,

Jim

P.S. Sixty days.

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson  
TO: Leonard H. McCoy, MD  
SUBJECT: Your patient, another follow-up.  
STARDATE: 2250.64

Leonard H. McCoy, MD, salutations.

Have you at any point attempted to explain, in a calm and reasonable fashion, without outbursts of any kind—if your vocal communications in any way resemble your written ones, then it is clear this is not a natural instinct for you—what it is you ask of the prince and why it is that you are asking it of him?

He may be stubborn as any form of Earth-based live-stock; I cannot qualify which animal is more so than others. That is not presently in question. His personality has little to do with the matter of his health, except as it exists to exacerbate pre-existing conditions or establish new ones. He is, however, intelligent enough and mindful enough of his duties that a concise statement of purpose would likely assist you in moving him to understand and perhaps even comply with your directives.

Have you considered employing lists with sections and subsections in order to clarify your motives?

The prince in my experience reacts well to lists.

Sincerely,

Prince Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth

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FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: “Again” implies a cessation at some point.  
STARDATE: 2250.64  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life, as well as good sleep, which it seems from the increased time lapse between communications is now closer to your grasp than it was previously.

Though I would not say that I was worried about your sleeping patterns or the disruption in them or even your obvious lack of sleep in general, it is nonetheless preferable that matters appear to have improved, rather than worsening or simply reaching an uncomfortable plateau. I once again recommend a period of meditation prior to the hour of retirement, as it structures thoughts, relaxes
the muscles, soothes the mind, and settles breathing patterns, all excellent preparatory action for achieving optimal REM sleep in human beings. As there are many topics up for debate during your waking hours, duties you must attend, defenses to consider, meetings over which to preside, it is of no real surprise to me that you may need to meditate in order to calm any understandable over-activity of the brain.

I have spent time meditating on similar matters, as defenses from Vulcan have been sent to safeguard the Tellarite dilithium mining colonies bordering the Neutral Zone. There were similar hearings held and they will continue to be a topic of discussion while the High Council and my father determine what most logical steps must next be taken in order to prevent further incursion on Federation space.

Do not concern yourself with apologies made to those who do not require them. I am not in need of that attention. You have not harmed me by denying yourself the rest you so clearly need during these trying times. In point of fact, you have harmed only yourself; therefore, if you find it within yourself to turn that apology inward and, rather than wasting your energies on words issued to those not directly affected, instead spend it on proper treatment of yourself, I will of course be satisfied. Thus no apologies will be necessary from or for anyone at all.

What gave you the impression that I do not think highly of your intellect?

I will send another communication in an hour, when I am alone and in bed, after I have meditated.

XOV.

Spock

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Clarification.
STARDATE: 2250.64
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

There is no need to “dial” anything “back”. But if you are able to find reserves of patience within yourself for me, and those reserves do not deplete any other patience required for your many other duties, then that is all I require.

That you are able to speak candidly on these matters is unexpected, but not unwanted.

XOV.

Spock

FROM: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
TO: Prince Spock
SUBJECT: Our mutual pain in the ass.
STARDATE: 2250.65

Your Royal Highness,
FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Very funny.
STARDATE: 2250.65
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Yeah, I slept. Not sure how long. Bones must've hit me with a hypo when I wasn't looking. He's a real crafty son of a bitch. That's a colloquial you probably shouldn't repeat in decent company. Then again it's tough to picture you outside of decent company. Do they even have Vulcans who aren't decent? What do you guys do with the bad seeds on your planet anyway, shoot them off to some distant moon? I've never found any records of troublemaking Vulcans in our archives. Maybe they're just kept secret, alongside your personal reproductive cycles.

I'm glad it doesn't make you uncomfortable that I talk about these things. That's definitely not what I'm shooting for -- although an argument could be made for a certain kind of enjoyable discomfort. I think you'll know what I'm talking about from those experiments. Before. You touching yourself. That kind of uncomfortable. I wouldn't mind being a source of that and other similar stimuli for you, but I'm not looking to mow down your cultural preferences in favor of my own or anything.

When I say that if it weren't for me we'd talk about nothing but diplomacy and the Tellarites, I'm not saying that like it's a bad thing. Some of the contextual facts might get dry, but contrary to how I might act I like knowing what's going on with you. Even if it's boring. You'll keep me appraised on what's happening in the Neutral Zone, right? The last thing we need to worry about is the Romulans on top of everything else.

I don't see why everyone can't just join the Federation and call it a day. Don't worry, that's not a plan I'm trying out on you to express later in full diplomatic company. In case you haven't worked it out by now, I say a lot of things to you that I wouldn't to anyone else.

Maybe that's not so bright for a guy looking to make a good first impression, but I like to think I've hooked you a little by now. You like me. Not to say I'm gonna just let it all hang out and stop trying, but I think we've attained a certain understanding with each other, no?

We write each other at night now. We never had a rhythm before.

I don't get back to you quite as late as I used to, but I'm in bed now anyway. It's dark, warm. I sleep with the window open, but the covers on. I like a cold room but not being cold. How's that for illogical?

XOV,

Jim
P.S. You’re worth being patient for.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan, Son of Sarek and Amanda Grayson
TO: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
SUBJECT: Indeed.
STARDATE: 2250.65

Leonard H. McCoy, MD, salutations.

It is in thanks to our mutual “pain in the ass” that I understand your colorful human metaphor. It is not strictly correct. Neither is it strictly incorrect.

It would also appear that I “owe you one” to coin a parlance likely familiar to you, though I shall not be able to form my repayment with any of the barn animals of which you are so fond.

For future reference: what is contained within your hypos? I will await the response at your leisure.

Sincerely,
Prince Spock of Vulcan

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: We are past the point of first impressions, Jim.
STARDATE: 2250.65
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

The establishment of routine followed by a “rhythm” is the natural conclusion of a successful venture, especially as far as contact and diplomacy are concerned. Not, I will hasten to add, that I am comparing our communications to diplomacy in the “dry” sense that you have frequently referenced. I believe that I have divined its specific parameters to include that which fits the textual definition, such as treatises; historical anecdotal reference; points of chronological interest. What is happening in the Neutral Zone—though that does seem to hold your interest more than the rest, likely because it is an immediate and current event.

The Romulans are always in our thoughts. They always factor into our choices, our actions, and our plans. You are correct to assume that it would be unwise to pursue an action that would incur their unfavorable interest along with the present Klingon threat.

This phrase is “biting off more than one can chew”.

(A product of my continued interest in the James T. Kirk Colloquial Human-To-Vulcan Helpful Dictionary. I consult it regularly and have utilized my findings with my mother, who has exhibited pleasure at my progress. The dictionary, despite its shortcomings, has managed to prove its usefulness all the same, at least in some regard. My gratitude, once again, for the time and the effort you devoted to compiling it. However, I will be certain not to invoke the “crafty son of a bitch” within earshot of my mother, as you have cautioned it would be improper.)

There is much that you will learn in the natural course of time, and with the facilities that will be
available to you when you are here and living on Vulcan. Its databanks and libraries, to an extent, will be at your disposal. The answers to a portion of the questions that you have may be found within the archives of Vulcan’s many esteemed library facilities. Though you will be considered an outworlder, you will also be my companion—he who is my husband—and you will be witness to many secrets of the Vulcan people that no other outworlder would be permitted access to.

You will, therefore, come to understand that which is most private to us. The depths of our passions. The deserts here are dry but also burning hot. There are some historians who would suggest that in the darkest days of our history as a people we were nothing but makers of trouble, as we ourselves were troubled by the weight of our own, unchecked passions.

But then, it is most difficult to imagine any of the Vulcan High Council, any of my father Sarek’s retinue, or my father himself, as mindful of this struggle as I have been.

I add, before a post-script, acknowledgement of the “anniversary”. Sixty-one days.

XOV.

Spock

---

FROM: Leonard H. McCoy, MD
TO: Blah blah blah
SUBJECT: You’re welcome.
STARDATE: 2250.65

Typical benzodiazepine compound. I don’t like to rely on it, but it’ll do in case of emergency.

You don’t owe me anything for doing my job, your majesty. I’d say he’ll be your headache soon enough but a doctor’s work is never done.

Sincerely,

LH McCoy

---

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: So it’s too late, is what you’re saying.
STARDATE: 2250.65
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I’m glad your mom likes the dictionary. I never claimed to be an experienced dictionary-maker or anything like that. God, there’s probably a word for that but I’m not looking it up. I bet you know what it is though. You can tell me if you want, but I’m guessing that since it’s a word that doesn’t apply to me, I’m probably not ever going to need to use it.

Watch that come back to bite me in the ass now that I’ve said it.

You could say I’m more interested in the Neutral zone because it’s addressing a current concern,
but more than that Spock it's got something to do with your immediate safety. This might be my human prejudice talking (go easy on me, I don't know any better) but it seems to me like you're in a bad region of space these days. Vulcan is a little further out than I'd strictly like, speaking in terms of comfort. That's right, I'm saying your place in the galaxy isn't where I can keep an eye on you and that's why I don't like it. Illogical it might be, but I can't do much about how I feel.

I've always wondered if that sounds like an excuse to Vulcans, since they up and did something about their own feelings. There's definitely an enviable quality about the kind of control you guys have. I'm not sure I'd want it myself, but I can see where it'd be useful in the right situation. Usually diplomatic ones.

What should we do to celebrate our sixty-one day anniversary, Spock?

XOV,

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: That is not at all my implication.
STARDATE: 2250.66
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I have come to the conclusion that expending worry for that which you cannot effect or even see is a waste of time and mental faculties better served as expended toward other, more logical pursuits. That is not to say that ample preparation for prospective unfavorable potentialities is not advisable; quite to the contrary. Yet as you are on Earth and I am on Vulcan and plans for your location to change have been made for the future—a future much later in this stardate year—for the present there are a number of immediate matters you may set your mind to with the intention of having a real effect on them, ideally one for the better.

There is little you can do about the Neutral Zone or what lies beyond it, or Vulcan’s nearness to the Romulans. Therefore do not concern yourself with thoughts regarding either topic, beyond the preparatory studies for your arrival.

Have you considered my suggestion of meditation, rather than the solution of—as your physician Leonard H. McCoy is so fond—medication? I believe, given your intellect, which I must reiterate is not lacking by human standards, that through meditating on the subject you would have come to this same conclusion on your own, and perhaps would have saved yourself a day of unnecessarily disturbed thoughts in the process.

Yet it is a matter of interest—even if it is not a matter I may directly effect by contemplating it in this fashion—that Vulcans and Romulans should share such common ancestry, yet maintain such radically different ideologies and positions. We may have history and biology in common, but there is no ground we have yet found it within ourselves to meet upon.

It is in moments when I consider the complexities of our similarities and our differences that I do not question logic, but am forced to consider that it may be a matter of perspective after all. However it appears that no member of the Vulcan High Council is plagued by this notion. I must
therefore conclude that this avenue of thought is a flaw within my own logic. Does that not seem an accurate conclusion?

Nevertheless, if your inability to “keep an eye” on me is worthy of such note, I will attach a current visual reference.

I have now attached a current visual reference.

As far as an appropriate celebration of a sixty-two day acknowledgment of communications, I am unable to extemporize an adequate commemorative action. Vulcans do not “celebrate” in the same sense as humans over minor chronological demarcations.

I am therefore open to suggestions.

XOV,

Spock
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Voices.

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: I was joking.  
STARDATE: 2250.68  
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Sadly, all my suggestions run along the lines of things we've already decided are forbidden due to the potential for them leaking and getting plastered everywhere. Not that I don't trust the integrity of your secure channel, but after that mess with Gaila I'm feeling a little more circumspect regarding when and where I get naked. It's totally weird. But probably for the best. Anyway, since I won't be sending you a spicy little anniversary recording I've decided to do the next best thing and get you a book.

Hopefully it's there by now -- I wanted to wait until I got it to write back so it wouldn't spoil the surprise.

Uh. I don't know what Vulcan gift culture is like or anything, I haven't been able to read about it, among other things, but if you don't want it that's fine, I won't be offended.

Don't tell anybody this, but I prefer the hardcopy stuff to reading off a display. It's got nothing to do with my eyes or what Bones says or the kinds of programs I prefer to keep loaded on the PADD. I'll be honest, it's damn inconvenient too, because you gotta keep a light on just to see the pages, but -- there's something about reading a story in a real book, Spock.

I can't explain what it is, there's no formula, no factoring that'll explain why one yields more enjoyment than the other, but this is the conclusion I've come to. My own personal experience.

By now you've probably made it through the complete works of Shakespeare anyway, but just in case you hadn't, well. Like I said, you don't have to keep it if you don't want it. Anyway, it should have all the plays and sonnets and everything. That's what complete means. You got it. You'll figure it out.

Thanks to the paparazzi you probably have pictures of me floating around all the time, but I slipped one into the cover of the book anyway. Just in case you wanted a hard copy of that too.

I'll give meditation a shot. I hate to disappoint you, but I think I might not be any good at it.

XOV,

Jim
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: There is no dictionary of sarcasm.

STARDATE: 2250.68
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I received the “anniversary present” if it can be termed as such, given that no parameters of anniversary have technically been fulfilled, before I received your communication. You will be pleased to learn that your timing was not incorrect. And the arrival of that present was unexpected—I believe the proper phrase is that it was a “good surprise”—for you gave me no indication that a present was to arrive. I had not prepared myself for it, nor was I able to prepare a similar, tangible commemoration in return.

To do so now is necessary; it is only polite, correct procedure. Yet it will seem an action done in haste to match your actions. There is much I do in reaction to your action, for instinct is not a Vulcan’s first choice as catalyst.

You are impulsive and your imagination is most inventive, Jim. There was also logic behind your choice, as you inferred my preferences for human verse from mentions I have made of Shakespeare in the past, and you offered a gift that was perceptive and is appreciated.

Once again I find myself expressing gratitude for that which I know to be illogically offered—that which is truly superfluous—yet my mother has assured me the gesture is romantic, that romance may present itself as illogical at the best of times, and that rules of diplomacy should not apply even to a diplomatic union such as ours.

I acknowledge this along with acknowledgement of the contradiction inherent in that which I must accept as the truth.

You are a romantic, Jim. This may come as no surprise to you; I am not a romantic, by my nature, nor have I been able to chart the precise balance of manufacturing surprise. Therefore I shall say thank you, as is proper, when one is presented with a gift that is well-considered and honestly given.

I will continue as I must to maintain my end of this—for lack of a more complete word—equation. As I must, but it is not undesirable to approach the challenge, either.

In the interim and while you are awaiting the response to the gesture you have given I will offer that which is regularly considered romantic in nature. Though I do not write to you by moonlight, for again, Vulcan has no moon, I have determined from my research that the terms of romance may be met with poetry alone and that moonlight is agreeable but not demanded. I have used the collection gifted to me by you in order to transcribe the following, written by Shakespeare. Note also that I am employing your gift, which is not merely romantic, but also serves a distinct purpose.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

That is Shakespeare’s 116th sonnet, for your reference.

XOV,

Spock.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: It's all in the tone.
STARDATE: 2250.68
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

Am I the star, or the wandering bark in that poem?

I'm glad you liked the book. The whole point of a surprise is that you aren't supposed to know what's coming; not being able to reciprocate comes with the deal. It's unfortunate, but part of the process. So I'd apologize, but I'm not truly sorry. I'm one of those people who actually gets off on giving presents. It's a corny old saying that the best part of gifts is picking them out and handing them over. Not many people believe it, but I'm definitely one of them. So don't feel like you have to get me anything in return. I had fun getting you something.

That, and it's fun to surprise you.

Of course, if you hadn't liked the book I'd be feeling like a real jackass right now, so it's all in how the gift's received. I usually go for the plays over the sonnets, but I like histories. Of course, not all of them are accurate to the time period, but they're fun to read if you have a spare moment.

The cool thing about Shakespeare is that there's never been anyone else like him. Most of Earth's famous writers have contemporaries, but he was kind of one of a kind. I mean, there were other guys LIKE him but not on the same level. I think it's neat, anyway. You must've too, if you were sending me poetry by moonlight. Or lack thereof.

How do you guys find your way around at night if there's no moon? Artificial light? I'm not planning on doing a lot of running around after hours, but I'm curious about your way of life, I guess.

That makes it sound like an anthropological interest, but the truth is I like to be able to picture what you're doing. Sometimes at night, I lie back and try to picture what you're doing. I know we aren't on the same cycles, can't possibly be sleeping at the same time, but the nice thing about human hubris that the knowledge doesn't get in the way of my imagination one bit.

Guess that's part of what makes me a romantic.

XOV,

Jim
FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Tone lessons would be appreciated.  
STARDATE: 2250.69  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

More information that likely will not surprise you: as I cannot forget what I know of the differences in time between our two planets, I cannot allow myself to lie back and imagine that we are both in similar positions at similar times.

When I begin my period of rest, by my calculations, you are either having lunch or just finishing your afternoon meal, unless you take it at a particularly irregular time. From eleven hundred to thirteen hundred, with twelve hundred as the median standard, is the average time chosen on Earth to conduct lunch and lunch related activities such as the “break”, according to my findings. If you adhere to the standard in this—though past experience suggests you do not adhere to the standard whenever possible—then as I am preparing myself for bed, making any additional preparations before I begin to write to you in private, you are most likely eating your noontime meal, such as a salad, a sandwich, a “wrap”, or a “hamburger”, among other options. I am not certain of your “favorite food” which I have understood perhaps too late is a point of special inquiry amongst humans.

Jim, what is your favorite food?

Vulcans do not have favorite foods. However, my mother makes a tea with sash-savas, a Vulcan fruit, that I associate with childhood memories that I suppose are pleasant enough to recall. She would make me this tea when I returned from school and we would share a cup together while I regarded her with anecdotes of that which I had learned during my lessons before I retired to self-monitored study. It was important to her to be kept informed of my proceedings, and during those times when there were difficulties with my peers, the tea itself had a calming property enhanced by the individual with whom I was sharing it.

Vulcan eyes are distinctly sensitive to the light. The brightness of the artificial lighting on Earth, as I recall from my time there, require some concentrated adjustment. My father does not complain of the need to adjust or at least accept the conditions of foreign ships and environments but he has remarked upon the difference, as it is something of note, a simple truth that there are those who favor brightly lit environments. We are accustomed to the darkness and, of course, there are many stars, visible when there are no sandstorms, which provide light as well. On nights of certain rituals, torches are light. You may see the fires in their sconces from house to house and set into the stone walls, or in their stone braziers. They burn until morning, at which time they are no longer needed.

Firelight is often connected with the romantic, though I am not certain of the reasons why. Fire burns without care or caution and is capable of great destruction, of causing great pain. Nonetheless, having corroborated this fact with my mother, I am forced to accept that it is another illogical choice, of which romanticism is so fond.
Jim, when you are lying back for your rest it is likely that I have already risen from bed and have begun to dress for the day. There are few natural water resources on Vulcan so we do not shower with water; rather, we maintain our cleanliness through dry-shower methods primarily, though the royalty of Vulcan do enjoy, on occasion, a long, heated bath. I rise early. Therefore it is best to assume that our periods of rest have no overlap.

XOV.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: OK I'm on it.
STARDATE: 2250.69
SECURE CHANNEL

"Testing, testing. This is, uh, James Tiberius Kirk the first, recording a message for his betrothed, Prince S'chn T'gai Spock of Vulcan.

...Jesus, I should erase that. Try again. But part of the fun of recording is you can't take anything back, I guess. It's not like a letter. It's full of mistakes. I think it's more honest, though. In a way. And you're gonna have to hear me talk eventually, right, Spock? It'd be a shame to get all the way to Vulcan and then have you realize I'm boring or I drone on and on about nothing because I get nervous when I don't know what to say, and you'd think that would stop me from talking but in fact it makes it worse.

You wouldn't know it, but I've actually been working on my Vulcan pronunciation. The real problem is: I don't have a Vulcan to teach me, so I'm getting everything second-hand at best. Well, that's not fair either. Maybe I'm just making excuses for my own shortcomings.

...This isn't helping you with sarcasm at all, is it? That was the original idea. But at least this way you have a baseline for what I sound like when I'm blathering on about nothing.

I liked your last letter. It made me think of sitting with you on some dark Vulcan night, in the light of a fiery brazier. I don't know whether I'd be able to explain it any better than your mom, but that's -- that's the very height of romance, Spock.

And so was your last letter.

I'm not sure if I can get into the habit of thinking about you at noon, but I'll give it a shot. My favorite food is hamburgers. I'd eat 'em every day for every meal if I could, but Bones gets on me for the cholesterol. I've tried telling him I'll eat a salad on top of a burger, but so far it's no dice.

I looked up sash-savas tea. I'm gonna see if I can have some of those suckers imported to practice a couple recipes. Not that I'm looking to outdo Amanda Grayson at her own game, but I'd like to master anything that reminds you of home. Since we're gonna be a big part of each other's homes someday.

But you already know that, don't you, Spock? You're pretty smart.

Tonight when I drift off I'll picture you already up, getting into that nice, hot bath.
I gotta admit, it's not a very restful image.

Talk to you soon, Spock.

Kirk out."

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Tone lessons have been appreciated.
STARDATE: 2250.70
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.70, recording a response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

You have expressed that the purpose of the voice recorded message is to impart a sense of spontaneity, of extemporaneous communication, which is valued by humans, who treasure the worth of imaginative swift-thinking and experimentation without specific intention. The experimentation, lacking in guidelines, is therefore not the sort of experiment as they are favored by Vulcans, on Vulcan.

Understand that despite having written my recording with forethought, my lack of spontaneity does not equate dishonesty. Rather, an attempt at spontaneity would itself prove the dishonest course, for it would be an attempt to act as does not befit a Vulcan, of my standing or otherwise. You have offered your tonal examples in the spirit of human honesty and I reply now that you may hear my voice in the spirit of Vulcan reciprocity.

That was not sarcasm.

The “dry wit” associated with sarcastic humor is not the same as a clinical—or “dry”—tone employed by Vulcans while speaking of facts and truths. I say truths because I have been nothing but truthful with you, Jim. It is true again that Vulcans cannot and do not lie but that does not proscribe the act of remaining silent on matters that are too private to divulge.

Yet I have divulged many such private matters to you.

I have found during this process that they are easier to write of than they are to speak.

I shall now continue to address the significant matter of your favorite food. Having researched the hamburger, I have come to the following conclusions. One: I am uncertain as to why an object that is not expressly made of the Earth-based meat product known as ham would be described as a “burger” of said meat. Two: as the hamburger is traditionally served with a potential choice for a variety of “toppings” including vegetables, cheeses, and other crispy Earth meats, I must request further clarification as to the specifics of your favorite food.

As for the sash-savas, I shall send you the items in question. Consider it a gift. Likewise, if there are any phrases or pronunciations with which you are experiencing difficulty, you may request a “tonal” lesson of your own. That too will be a gift. Both are offered with practical applications in mind.
FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Good.
STARDATE: 2250.71
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

I got the sash-savas. You could've warned me before I popped a whole one in my mouth that the things are full of citric acid. I practically burned my tongue off. Bones was real pissed. Said only a cornfed cowbrained moron would ever put a whole alien fruit in his mouth without trying a piece of it first. But I've never had a food taster and I live life to the fullest. Anyway, I knew you wouldn't send me anything poisonous.

Tastes better in tea but I'm still getting the hang of that recipe. I got Bones and Chapel to try some in the med bay, and I'm having some people over for a party later so I'll use them as my guinea pigs. You must have a tougher mouth than I thought. Guess that's good to know, considering how much of a factor our mouths are gonna play into our relationships.

Although... I dunno about that, actually. You said Vulcan hands and fingers are your guys' big erogenous zones, but you've never said anything about lips and mouths. On humans there are some serious nerve endings clustered there -- that might have something to do with why the sash-savas almost killed me. Uh. You should know that when I say almost killed, I'm totally exaggerating. It was a minor discomfort at most.

And maybe I burned my tongue.

I should warn you that I might be a little better at talking private matters than you are, but that doesn't mean I share your discerning opinion of when might be an appropriate time to share them. Between the two of us, we should come to a pretty good balance.

As far as I can tell this whole arrangement of our parents' might've easily been a crapshoot, but it's worked in our favor. I'd even go so far as to say we might be a good match, Spock. I know you're not into expressing personal preference that way, but I'd wager even you can see we're more compatible than we aren't. Even though we'd be stuck together no matter what, I'm starting to think...

Well, I don't know. It's too late to go getting philosophical.

Anyone ever tell you the sound of your voice is incredibly soothing? I've been listening to your letter all night, not the words so much as the cadence. I guess this is the closest I've ever got to meditating. You ever have sound files on in the background when you're going into that Vulcan trance state? It makes a difference.
Although I guess the sound of your own voice probably wouldn't work on you. I like it, though. 'S deep. Never thought I'd be the kind of guy who... Ah, sorry. I was just -- yawning. But...

Anyway, you sound good. I'm into it, Spock.

I don't care if you write scripts for all your letters either, you should do what makes you comfortable.

...

Uhh.

I –

Shit.

Dif-tor heh smusma, Spock.

Hugs and kisses.

I'll talk to you soon.

Kirk out."
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Thank you guys for sticking with this fic I promise...something...soon...

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Tonal instruction.
STARDATE: 2250.71
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.70, recording a second response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

The word “crapshoot” as defined by your dictionary of colloquialisms is not one I would have had the opportunity—or indeed the motivation—to learn without our exchanges. While I am nearly certain it will not be vital to diplomatic proceedings in the future, it does appear that these unusual turns of phrase are vital to our proceedings in the present. Though I would not have employed the same vocabulary, I believe I am in agreement with the sentiment. The union indeed could have been a “crapshoot” in the sense that there was no way for our parents to predict that anything other than a mutual adherence to duty would bring us together and maintain the peace between us.

If the sash-savas does not undo what peace we have established—your attending physician Leonard H. McCoy is entirely correct, and you should have familiarized yourself with all its properties prior to allowing the foreign comestible to assault the inside of your mouth and your tongue—then it seems likely that the union will not approach “crapshoot” status at all.

Though the sash-savas is highly acidic, I will note that it is mellowed by the brewing process. Attached is my mother’s recipe for the tea in order to contribute to the efforts of your tea party.

Who, exactly, do you plan on inviting? I make this inquiry for two specific reasons beyond idle curiosity. Idle curiosity is never an indulgence.

The first specific reason is that it is important to be aware at all times of those you have granted access to your person, given your predilection for placing trust in those who are not strictly worthy of that trust. The second is that I would suggest, if one of the attendees is to be the Orion poetry teacher Gaila, that she wear clothes on this occasion, as tea is hot and sash-savas is, as your mouth has already established, highly acidic. The combination is far from ideal. It would present a danger to her person and excess fodder for your overly interested paparazzi, outcomes also less than pleasant.

My mother said that the Orion poetry teacher Gaila was “an attractive young woman”, which objectively speaking is a true statement, given her long hair and her well-proportioned figure.

I have not known any Orions personally and cannot vouch for their tastes, whether they are
susceptible to acidic content, as you are, or if it is something they enjoy.

If my voice is soothing then perhaps you should use this evolved form of our communications to encourage your pursuit of optimal sleeping patterns. I would prefer not to contact Leonard H. McCoy, MD, regarding your rest—or lack thereof—again, as his correspondence is erratic and unprincipled, grammatically unsound and often unsettling. However, that you yawned four times in your previous recording suggests that you have reverted to your old habits and if necessary I will send you recorded phrases in Vulcan with their standard translations without further commentary until such a time as I am assured of your intentions regarding ample periods of rest.

Despite your altered cognition due to lack of sleep, your pronunciation was nearly adequate.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Dif-tor heh—

Ah. That whine was I-Chaya. I shall do as you instructed and scratch him under the chin “for you” though, as he is only a sehlat, he will not understand what I am about to tell him.

I-Chaya, this is from Jim.

...He appears pleased, though do not allow yourself to believe he has any idea who you are. In time, perhaps, you will be able to do the same for him yourself. Be warned that, due to his advance age, he produces excess saliva when happy.

Good night, Jim.

Here ends the second recording made by S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.71, for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Good.
STARDATE: 2250.72
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

And I-Chaya. Don't worry, I'm not forgetting about you, boy!

I told Gaila you were looking out for her, she said to blow you a kiss. Which you can't see, but that's what I'm doing. That's what that sound was. I'm not passing along her kisses, mind. I told her you were my fiancé which means lips off, but she thought it was sweet that you cared so much in the first place.

Do you really want a list of everyone I'm inviting to what you're calling a tea party? Everyone thinks it's pretty hilarious that I've finally decided to man up and learn Vulcan culture, so naturally they all want to be around for when I screw up. Not that I'm planning on screwing up. I've made a couple more trial runs and like I said, some of the natural acidity in the fruit's way toned down
after it's brewed. Mom can drink it without her eyes watering, and Bones stopped accusing me of trying to poison him, so I guess that's progress.

All right, people coming over, people coming over...

I was thinking Gaila, obviously. Bones, 'cause she likes him and I promised, Uhura -- she's the linguist -- Gary Mitchell, Hikaru Sulu, this wonder kid from the Academy Chekov... I think you'd like him, Spock, he's probably almost as smart as you.

Sorry, that was a yawn.

Uhura's bringing her latest pet project Scotty, to cheer him up from the fact that he's on academic probation for killing some admiral's dog or something, I don't know, I couldn't really get the details out of her.

Anyway, I'm thinking it'll be a big bore anyway. They'll drink the tea and then they'll probably swap stories about Starfleet while Bones has an infarction over the idea of being in space and I get to remember that the closest I've gotten to Starfleet flight simulation was piloting the mining shuttle on the Venusian colony job.

I don't know, Spock. I know what I'm supposed to do with my life, but sometimes I worry I'm not all that well-suited to it. It's not my thing. I'd do better at...

Ahh, I don't know. Sometimes it just seems like I'm doing a lot of work to get halfway decent at anything. I'm not saying it shouldn't take work, mind you, but the proportions are all off. It's a ton of effort for limited success.

...

Do you ever feel like you're having a tough time with something that should come easily? Like maybe you would've been better at anything else?

Whatever.

Boy, is it existential crisis o'clock already? I better take a cue from your pointed hints and turn in early.

I wouldn't say no to more of those recordings, though. Your voice is like velvet. Better than Bones' hypos by a mile –

Don't you dare tell him that. I know you guys talk. Not the biggest fan of that, by the way.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Am I getting any better?

Exes and ohs.

Kirk out.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Existential crisis o’clock does not exist in your colloquial dictionary.

STARDATE: 2250.72

SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.72, recording a third response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

Though I-Chaya is a male sehlat and not a female, he is currently far too old to be considered youthful, and has never been considered a “boy”. Nonetheless, he was not so hard of hearing that he did not recognize the sound of his own name being spoken through the speakers of my PADD and his more active ear perked forward in recognition. He is unable to differentiate the proper term of reference from an improper one. The next time he has reason to hear his name in your voice I will be certain to record his response, though it will not be illuminating. It will sound similar, save for a few tonal shifts, to the sound you have already heard him make unprompted.

It was thoughtful of you to include him in your greetings but unnecessary. I-Chaya is particularly intelligent for a sehlat but he understands names and simple commands alone. Nevertheless, it is not unwise to accustom him to the sound of your voice. With your permission, I shall allow him into my private quarters when I am listening to your messages, though I will share the headpiece with him, as Vulcan hearing is keen, and I would not incur the possibility of someone in my household overhearing communications that are intended for my ears alone.

I-Chaya, as he can neither comprehend complex sentences nor form the vocal utterances required to pass them along, will be as capable of preserving your secrets as he has always been of preserving mine.

Fortunately, he will not be able to share those confidences I imparted to him when I was a child and he was a younger creature. No Vulcan is born with an instinct for logic, and Vulcan children, myself included, are capable of behaving illogically until such a time as logic is quickly and thoroughly integrated into their considerations as a superior instinct.

It is a relief that you have already informed Gaila the Orion poetry teacher that I cannot receive her kisses however they are delivered. A blown kiss would of course not reach me at all, and to accept even the gesture would be highly inappropriate, given the fact that I am already involved with the individual she has charged with delivering the intimate gesture. Orion social behavior is curious indeed, even more unexpected at times than human social inconsistencies.

I trust that the party for the tea will have a security detail present, as there are multiple unknowns attending, individuals you have not already met and personally vetted. I have researched the individuals in question and have not discovered any criminal histories; however, I did discover that Gary Mitchell, whose name I naturally recall from your list of previous romantic experiences, has a few notes on his personal file at Starfleet that suggest potential psychological uncertainties. If Leonard H. McCoy, MD, is indeed attending, perhaps it would be prudent of him to bring a sedative hypodermic in the case that it becomes necessary. Precautions in these cases are highly advisable.

...
have been given that you are of above-average intelligence and well-suited to the position you have inherited, despite the unusual circumstances surrounding that evidence.

It is becoming clear that you would prefer to join Starfleet with your peers, those you consider your friends and companions, and the friends and companions they have found the freedom to make as they pursued a path that appeals to your nature—that is, your tendency for adventure, as the life of a Starfleet cadet and officer seems to encapsulate, however broadly, the adventure you seek.

If you have reason to believe that this life is your true calling, and that you would not be suited to any other path, then there are examples in your Earth history of royalty serving in Federation capacity. Even your own father, when he was not yet king but the heir apparent, served as a Starfleet captain aboard a Federation vessel. Despite the position your brother, Sam, has placed you in by abandoning his duties, your duty, Jim, is to serve Earth as you are best qualified to serve it. If you intend to alter the means by which you serve Earth, then I do not doubt your commitment and passion will work to the achievement of all that you desire.

You have asked me if I have ever experienced difficulty with that which should be simple. I have. There have been times when I have seen those who are my peers arrive at logical conclusions regarding my mother—logical to them, and with a clear mind I was at last able to understand the course of their logic—yet when they voiced these logical conclusions, it took me years when it should not even have taken me hours to quell the illogical, passionate, and obviously human response that was felt within me. Felt, too deeply. Not even my father Sarek, by his own council, would have responded to such accusations the way that I did, more than once, despite my logic telling me otherwise.

It was not simple. I believe I have asked myself the same question you posed to me. But just as the matter is not simple...

There is no simple answer.

Good night, Jim. Dif-tor heh smusma—you are approaching a more accurate pronunciation—whatever choices for the future you come to make.

End recording.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: I'm gonna have to make some adjustments to that thing.
STARDATE: 2250.73
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock,

In the interests of helping along your experiment, I'm gonna say hi to I-Chaya first, all right?

Heeeey, buddy. I-Chaya! Who's a good boy? Spock tells me you're reacting to the sound of my voice, I think that's preeeetty adorable, mister. Are you gonna be a good sehlat when I come out and visit? Do you think Spock'll tell me what kinds of treats I can give you? Or does he not give you treats because he thinks you're a sensible Vulcan pet? I am gonna spoil you rotten, buddy, all
right? Get ready. Ahh, you're totally ready.

OK, Spock, I'm back on you. Although I gotta say, it's tough talking dirty when I know your faithful companion's gonna be listening in. You probably wouldn't have a problem with that, since a pet's not gonna understand what I'm saying anyway, but it's the idea of having an audience that's... Just. I don't know, it feels wrong somehow. I-Chaya might be a distinguished old gentleman, but there are some things that even he's not prepared to hear.

Probably, I mean. I'm just assuming.

...Kinda like that tone you get when you say we're involved, Spock. Invoooolved. Involved. You and me. Involved.

See, there I go again, upping the rating. Sorry, I-Chaya. Lemme see if I can pretend to be a responsible sehlat co-owner for a hot minute.

Why does it not surprise me that you managed to dig into the Starfleet personal records, Spock? If you're trying to show up my security team, you're doing a great job. I think they have better things to do than look into the files of a handful of teenagers, but if you listen to Bones, teenagers are the true menace of our society, so I guess I should be thanking you. Party's tomorrow, anyway. I'm still not sure party's the right word, but I'll take your observations into account.

Turns out Scotty didn't kill a dog, he just beamed it somewhere and it hasn't shown up yet. So there's still a chance, right? I gotta admit, I thought I had a pretty good handle on the basic principles of molecular dispersion, but Scotty makes me feel like I've got no clue what I've been talking about all these years. Should make for good conversation, anyway. And Mitchell's not so bad, he just gets stressed easy, always has. We used to joke about how I could handle his life, but there was no way he could handle mine. He didn't seem to think it was so funny, but it makes me laugh, anyway.

I'm gonna be a sash-savas tea brewing champion by the time we meet, Spock. I've started drinking it in the afternoon, right around when you go to bed. I like it way better than the fresh fruit. Uh, no offense.

... 

I'm sorry I laid all that stuff on you, last night. I get chatty when I'm tired, which seems counter-intuitive when you think about from an evolutionary standpoint. You'd think my parents would've discouraged it or something. I dunno.

Anyway, I'm not planning to run off and join Starfleet anytime soon. Does it suck sometimes? Yeah. But I don't know that I could dedicate myself full-time to being a captain and deal with all the political ramifications at the same time. I can't be Federation-impartial if I've got obvious ties to Earth and humanity. And to tell you the truth, I'm not so sure it'd be right for someone in my position to join Starfleet anyway. I couldn't separate myself from being an advocate for our people, and that doesn't tie in too well with exploring the galaxy.

Jesus, I'm doing it again. What I wanna say, Spock, is that you don't have to worry about me having second thoughts or shirking responsibility. Or, more accurately, I don't want you to think me having second thoughts will lead to me shirking responsibility. I know what kind of a life I'm in for and I'm ready to commit to it.

Doesn't hurt that my pronunciation's getting better.
Have a good day, all right? Dif-tor heh smusma. Dif-tor heh smusma. Maybe I’d see what I was doing wrong if I could follow along with your mouth.

We’ll talk soon.

Kirk out.

Wait. ...Hugs and kisses.

Kirk out.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Indeed, that would be appreciated.
STARDATE: 2250.73
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.73, recording a third response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

The resulting information culled from “our experiment” regarding I-Chaya was as follows. He reacted to the sound of his name, sniffed the PADD in an attempt to locate the source of the voice directed at him, and, having uncovered no distinct scent unfamiliar to him that may belong to the owner of the unfamiliar voice, with no further avenues of search available to him, he proceeded to excrete saliva on the screen and chew the upper right-hand corner of the PADD. Fortunately, one of his front canines is chipped, and he did not do any significant damage beyond a slight dent as he was chewing with aforementioned tooth. Though I cannot be certain beyond the shadow of a possibility, I would say that he is both confused but interested.

The excitement in general appears to have been enough to tax him, as he has now retired to the balcony to sleep where the wind is cool in the desert at night. As such, if you will indicate the point at which your I-Chaya experiments begin followed by a clear point of cessation, I will escort him to the balcony after the experiment is over, so that you may speak freely to me as you so desire. If the dialogue turns “dirty” as you have described it, I-Chaya will not have to bear witness—though he would not make an adequate witness in any court—to anything unclean.

As in all things, Jim, I will maintain privacy, both yours and mine.

I-Chaya and I no longer sleep in the same room together as we did when I-Chaya was younger and I was not yet an adolescent. He was less a pet then and more of a guard—one that cannot be bought or bribed, whose loyalty lay first with my father during his childhood, and then with me during mine. He was ferocious, and once protected me from a Le-Matya in the desert. We were not instructed to play with him as human children play with their pets, according to all sources on the common treatment of typical Earth domesticated animals.

I do not know if this is attention or distraction that I-Chaya has missed. How can one miss what one has never known? And yet, if you wish to attempt to “spoil” him, as you say, he is advanced enough now in years that I do not think this will have any unduly adverse effect. Obviously he will
be too old to act as sentry to any other children of my family line. Therefore, to “spoil” him would not be equivocal to ruining him.

You may do as you wish. But be forewarned of the salivation. It can be excessive during periods of heightened stimulus.

I have already devoted more time to the subject of I-Chaya than is wise, much less due. I must acknowledge that the reason for this is to gather my thoughts in order to address fully the deeper, more private matters of future and personal desire you have raised.

I am accustomed to the sort of critical thinking required for delicate and multifaceted subjects. Yet when one factors in the added element of more personal emotion...my experience is limited.

Jim, it would appear to me that you have made your decisions. Is there some reason why you would repeat your intentions when you are already certain not only of what is right, but of what course you intend to follow? Naturally I must concur with the conclusion at which you have arrived for yourself. It is most logical. Though I will acknowledge that you would be an asset to Starfleet, given the records of yours which I also uncovered during my research; your aptitude was the highest in your level and likely you are aware of all that you would be able to bring to the Federation by serving it in this other capacity.

Yet if you are certain—and it would appear that you are certain—then there are many ways your skills and aptitude can find meaning and expression through the service you have accepted as yours, and yours alone. As you suggested to Gary Mitchell at a point in the past, before I knew you, you would be well suited to act in his stead and fulfill his role, but I do not believe there is anyone of whom the same could be said in regards to you.

If this message reaches you after you have served your guests your tea, I trust that they have enjoyed the gathering and nothing untoward has occurred regarding Gary Mitchell or this “Scotty”, the latter of whom has caused domesticated animals to disappear in a past that is as concerning as it is shrouded with convoluted details of his, to use the polite term, exploits.

...Was the party...fun?

Know that you have now adequately mastered that one phrase. Dif-tor heh smusma, Jim.

And...

Good night. Jim.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Jim knows how to throw a party.

Chapter Notes

Wee!Spock holds Baby!Jim, drawn by pixiepunch over at tumblr, anyone?
"Hey, Spock,

I'm a little tired, so I might not record a message for I-Chaya tonight. Although... Jesus, now that I've said his name I've probably ruined it. He's already paying attention. All right, all right, I'll do something anyway. Here goes. Ahem.

Hey, boy. You being a good boy for Spock? Yeah, I'll bet you are. Ease up on the PADD, will you? Electronics and drool don't mix, and it can't taste very good. I looked up a le-matya and those things are scary as hell -- you really fought off one of those all by yourself? What a brave boy. Thanks for taking care of my fiance, buddy. If things had worked out differently, I might've ended up engaged to Sybok.

Brr. Not so sure I like that. I'm kinda attached to the brother I've got.

...

All right, I'm -- I'm gonna move onto you now, Spock. Is that OK? That's the pause. Consider this the pause. Bye-bye, boy. I'll talk to you again real soon.

...

...

That long enough?

The party went pretty well, no notable psychotic breaks. Scotty offered to beam me from one end of the castle to the other, but you'll be very pleased to hear I told him no. Guess I'm growing up after all. That, and I don't like to think what'd happen to him if he lost an admiral's dog and the second prince of Earth in the same month. Doesn't exactly make for a good resume. And he seems like a good guy. I wouldn't want to get him in trouble.

Also I'd rather not disappear into nothingness, but you know. It's the little things in life.

I'm glad you're in agreement with my assessment of my personal skills and future. I think it's a good thing if couples are in alignment about that kinda thing.

Dif-tor heh smusma, Spock.

It doesn't sound any different to me, but I'm glad you like it.

We'll talk soon, OK?

Have a good day, Spock.

Kirk out."
SUBJECT: On second thought.
STARDATE: 2250.74
SECURE CHANNEL

"I lied.

The party didn't go all that well. Mitchell called me a Vulcan princess halfway through, wanted to know if I was gonna do your laundry and have your Vulcan babies too. Anyway he got personal after that and I decked him. I'm guessing sash-savas tea and fistfights don't go together on your planet, so I'm not sure I can count that as practice for my eventual cultural assimilation.

Anyway, I'm only telling you because Bones said he'd write you if I didn't, and I'm not risking you and him getting into cahoots with each other. Too dangerous. Too scary.

Probably not gonna have another tea party for awhile.

But yeah, Spock. It was fun.

Hugs and kisses.

Jim."

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Your unfathomable definition of fun.
STARDATE: 2250.74
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.74, recording a fourth response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

It is possible that your definitions are personal—individual—by which I mean fundamentally skewed, and not generally accepted as I had once thought. For you to describe an experience such as the one you endured as “fun” suggests that when committing myself to devoted study of your colloquial dictionary I was in fact studying you, and not broad human interpretation or commonly accepted colorful metaphors as I had initially thought.

I do not suggest that this is without its uses, for it is of great importance that I come to understand—or at least approximate an overarching understanding of—you, as I simultaneously approach the matter of learning human morality, subtlety, humor, and impulse as a whole. That is to say that I am not displeased, Jim, merely making note that a shift of comprehension is required, else I continue to operate on an incorrect assumption.

I am relieved to hear that you did not allow “Scotty” to practice his yet unfinished projects of science on your person, especially as he has already endangered the life of another. Whether or not that life belonged to a canine is irrelevant. It expresses a distinct lack of practicality that should not be applied to your well-being. I am less relieved to hear of the incident with Gary Mitchell, though I cannot say I am surprised, given the notes in his file, that he would behave in a
manner such as he did.

While it would have been more far-sighted to inform him that you would not be a princess on Earth and that custom is clearly to be preserved on Vulcan, and that ours is a diplomatic union of incredible importance, and that it is an honor to be given this chance to improved, immeasurably, the relations between our two planets... I also know that it is not always possible to remain calm when being “teased” or goaded or even spoken to of topics that resonate in some way.

On this matter I do not require a dictionary for the definitions of an experience I have myself undergone.

Beginning with my introduction to school, my classmates were conscious of bringing to my attention my mother’s human emotionalism and linking it, however incorrectly, to what they perceived as a defect in me. At the time I did not behave admirably or wisely. Of course, I knew as I did it that rising to their bait and engaging in physical altercations was not the proper answer to their accusations or suggestions of my deficiency and as a matter of fact merely proved them correct, at least in their perspective. I responded to their charges of emotionalism and sadness with emotionalism and anger—anger, which is a cousin to sadness.

My father was not impressed with my behavior and I believe it caused my mother her own measure of distress. Their attempts to speak to me on the matter were logical on Sarek’s part and equally logical, in a human fashion, on my mother’s. Yet knowing all I knew and being certain my peers were incorrect in their charges against me—a certainty which should have stood for itself, rather than relying on violence to assert its veracity—I will admit to you now that I fought them still, on more than one occasion after the first, when once should have been one time too many.

A tangent. Perhaps it is not one appreciated. The situations are, obviously, dissimilar enough that no clear parallel may be drawn between them. But perhaps I recognize my responsibility, as it was I who supplied the sash-savas and suggested the practice of brewing its tea.

No; it is not that. Not entirely.

I have not even spoken of those times as candidly with my mother and my father as I have spoken of it just now. Even recognizing that I am speaking to you, the medium allows for a certain circumvention of logic. It allows for illusion.

It would appear that even now, analyzing and acknowledging my motives, I have not learned enough to avoid these brief lapses in logical judgment.

And even now, after all this time, I cannot completely accept that it is a flaw of my parentage. I do not disagree with your choice to approach Gary Mitchell as you chose to approach him, even though I know that another choice would have been far more prudent.

Jim.

...Good night.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: I guess that was sarcasm.
STARDATE: 2250.75
"Hey, Spock.

Yeah, I guess the dictionary's always had a personal slant to it. I don't see where that's a problem though. It's not like I speak a totally different language from everyone else here on Earth. Sure, I play a little fast and loose with the definition of fun, but Bones says that's because I had one too many screws knocked loose when I was a kid.

Guess that's not something you share, even though it sounds to me like you got into your fair share of personal battles.

That's kinda hot, Spock.

I mean -- shit, that's probably not the kind of response you were looking for. You make a heartfelt confession and I tell you how attractive it is. Well, that's something you should probably get used to. I'm not very good at emotional stuff. Which should make us pretty compatible now that I think about it. Anyway, I appreciate it, you telling me that. We have more in common than I thought. Not that having stuff in common is a non-negotiable part of a relationship, but it's weird and ... I dunno, kinda neat to find out that you were just as scrappy as me.

Never would've expected it. Anyone ever tell you you're full of surprises, Spock?

No, probably not.

I'm sorry those kids were such shits to you. I hope you kicked their butts. By comparison my own problem seems relatively minor. Just Mitchell pulling his jealousy act. Guess I didn't think of what it looked like on the surface, me fussing around and making tea and learning your language and -- whatever. Some people aren't very secure in their masculinity, I guess. Which, let me tell you, is understandable considering the size of what some people are packing down there.

Anyway, whatever. It's not important. The party was fine. There was an incident, I dealt with it. You know I'm not gonna be a Vulcan princess.

And even if I was, hey. I can get kinky like that if that's what you want. If other people don't understand it then they're the ones missing out. That's what I'd tell you, if you were still having those problems. I'd like to say I promise not to beat on any of your Vulcan peers if they're still making snide little remarks but the truth is I've never walked away from a good fight. I make that sound like a good quality but it's not. I'm sure you know that.

Bones hates it, but I've given him plenty of experience in healing lumpy human heads, so really who's doing who the favor here?

Don't you dare hold yourself responsible for what happened. The blame lies in my shitty taste in friends and my enthusiasm for sash-savas tea. I'm starting to really get a taste for it, Spock.

Maybe it's just because I can't taste anything else after drinking the stuff.

Have a good day, Spock.

I'd say hugs and kisses, but I'm thinking about something a little more intimate tonight.

Talk soon.

Kirk out."
“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.75, recording a fifth response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

...Should your own actions and enjoyment of physical confrontation not prevent it, that is.

In the absence of any guarantees to that effect I shall simply have to trust that you will avoid serious personal injury—and, as trust appears to be our currency, I do not believe I am “going out on a limb” to place my certainty in that which is decidedly uncertain.

Be careful, Jim.

The events of my own, past indiscretions did indeed involve an elevated internal temperature, not to mention the metaphorical “hot-headed” state of being described in your dictionary. However, I did not kick, nor did my physical blows land on their posteriors. In truth I do not recall the precise style of fighting I employed. Neither do I have a clarity of memory regarding those incidents. I acted upon a sudden and uncontrolled anger of which I am not proud, nor do I intend to be overwhelmed by my passions in such an unsightly manner again. I am too old now for that behavior to be excused by the folly of youth and inexperience.

At the time, my mother wished for me to know that such lapses in judgment appeared to her as natural, even though they were not laudable. Natural for a human child, I explained to her, but not for a child of Vulcan, and certainly not for a Vulcan prince. Needless to say it is also unnatural for a human prince whose standing is such that others look to him for guidance and exemplary behavior. But I have reason to think that you already know this, Jim, as indicated by your commentary. You are aware of the reasons why you behaved as you did—and aware of ways to better yourself by bettering your response in the future.

Though perhaps you have also resolved not to involve yourself with Gary Mitchell further. That would certainly prevent a similar circumstance from ever coming to pass.

If there is any dish in particular—like, for example, a recipe for your favored hamburger—that requires a specific preparation with which I can familiarize myself, I request that you inform me. I do not spend time socializing with my peers beyond lectures and other educational gatherings and therefore I will devote my extra-curricular time to allaying any potential accuracy of Gary Mitchell’s claims that, because you have learned to prepare a Vulcan specialty, you have been placed in any position other than that of a culturally sensitive ambassador. On this matter as on any other, we would be best served acting as equals.

You have practiced the art of brewing sash-savas tea. I, in turn, with practice the art of making a hamburger.

Also, do not do your head a disservice. It has not appeared lumpy to me in any of the visual evidence I have been given.
If you have the opportunity and the inclination, you may clarify what, exactly, you are thinking of that is more intimate than hugs and kisses.

Goodnight, Jim.”

---

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: REALLY? I love it.
STARDATE: 2250.76
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

Are you really gonna learn how to make hamburgers for me? You don't have to do that, Spock. I know you guys aren't all that into meat. I don't want you to have to touch it and stuff if it's gonna make you feel uncomfortable. That being said, I don't think you'd offer if you thought it'd make you sick. You're smarter than that.

Still, it's the polite thing to offer. So I'm telling you up front, you're gonna have to get your hands all up in the meat and it might be gross, and I'll totally understand if it's a failed experiment. All right? No hard feelings, no losses. I don't want you to turn this into some kind of Vulcan pride thing either. I'll eat whatever you have there and I'll be fine. You've got a lot there to keep me interested beyond hamburgers.

All that being said, I'm attaching some of my favorite recipes. You can analyze whichever one seems like it might have optimal flavor or whatever. Final disclaimer that you really don't need to do this, but if you want to I'm into it.

...Don't worry, I didn't hurt myself. You're giving Mitchell waaaaay too much credit in that area. So I guess what I'm saying is your trust isn't misplaced.

I kinda like that you trust me. I trust you too, Spock.

I do have a bruise on one cheek, but that's only because I slammed into the couch when we went over the table. And I got a burn on my arm from when the boiling water went everywhere, but as far as injuries sustained by Mitchell, the guy can't touch me. So no, that's not something you gotta worry about. I think we'll take some time apart, let him stew around in Starfleet for awhile.

I never said anything before, but I'm glad you checked out my records. Might as well mean something that I took those tests three years running. Those scores aren't gonna impress anyone when I can't apply them to the Academy training program. But I don't mind you knowing about them. You're kind of the person I'm looking to impress these days.

...

Ahh. That was a little -- right. Anyway.

Alongside the hamburger recipes I'm gonna attach a recent picture I took myself, rather than the paparazzi stuff. You can see for yourself how you feel about my head.
And -- Spock? You remember awhile back when we talked about spooning, right? One person lies on their side and the other person curls up around them, putting an arm around their waist, tucking their knees up against the backs of the other person's legs. You get in close, touching everywhere... You'd be able to feel my breath on the back of your neck. Yeah, uh, in this scenario I'm the one holding onto you. That's -- what I was picturing. You in bed with me, under my arm, tucked up against my chest. I don't know if Vulcans cuddle, but it seems to me like something's gonna need to keep you warm out here on these cold San Francisco nights.

I'd be willing to keep you warm, is all I'm saying.

This would -- sound like an insult to anyone else, but I like falling asleep to the sound of your voice, Spock.

Thanks for doing this with me. The recordings.

Have a good day.

Kirk out.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Really. I do not and would not lie to you.

“"This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.76, recording a sixth response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

I have procured the materials required for the preparation of the recipes you attached for me. I cannot however acquire real meat on Vulcan and will therefore be required to conduct my experiments with synthetic meat substitutes. Though I have never eaten anything other than these synthetic substitutes, my mother informs me that they are “close to the real thing” as far as consistency, texture, and flavor are concerned.

She has not found reason to complain of the substitutes and she has lived on Vulcan eating the products Vulcan has to offer for longer than I have been alive, since she married Sarek, before I was conceived.

I have begun with the hamburger, as you have already stated it is your favorite. This will require additional practice. I have requested my mother’s assistance, as she is the only individual of my acquaintance who has had a true hamburger, and therefore she is the only individual of my acquaintance who can corroborate whether or not I have achieved an approximate facsimile of the hamburger experience. Though I will add the caveat that it has been many years—my mother was not specific—since the last time she had a true hamburger, and therefore the frame of reference in which I am operating is not without a margin for error.

Most unusual for the experiments I am accustomed to preparing. They are generally without
margin for error, planned for completely to the twelfth decimal.

I-Chaya, unlike my mother, was more than happy to finish the hamburger without comment or complaint. Then again, I-Chaya’s palate is not discerning. He once ate a shoe. As his appraisal cannot be trusted, I include it only for the sake of thoroughness.

I believe tomorrow I will procure a different kind of cheese.

As you can readily see, there is nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to attempting to understand points of culture that have no parallel on another, distant planet. Is this not Starfleet’s first, best purpose, and the goal of the Federation: to acknowledge differences, to embrace them, to learn from them? I find that humans often react with unexpectedly wounded egos or injured pride to the most fascinating of minuscule slights—Gary Mitchell fell prey to one which was wholly imagined in his own mind, and that is a fault in the breadth of his intelligence, or lack thereof, not in the actions we have undertaken in order to better understand one another and each other’s ways of life.

I will express my gratitude regarding the visual with which you provided me. I can see that despite the injuries you suffered—due to your own zealously or Gary Mitchell’s capabilities or a combination of both factors—your head does not appear overly harmed. There are no obvious lumps or bruises. Having seen it for myself I will acknowledge once again the facts as I have already stated them. Your features are aesthetically agreeable. I find no fault in them. Your hair is an unusually vibrant color, similar to certain stretches of the Vulcan desert where the sand appears golden in hue under the sunlight. Your features and your face are...as my experience with other Vulcans, at least, quite...expressive. Even in a single, still image, you are...mobile.

Jim, I cannot...

Though I do not make excuses for that which I should know or be capable of learning, my skills as far as imaginative speculation are... They are lacking. You have laid out the parameters of holding—embracing me, the two of us, together in bed—that it would be best implemented on a planet with a cold climate, so as to logically share the heat of your body with mine—and I am able to draw a mental diagram of the position as you described it, transposing your verbal explanation to a visual image—but without my own frame of reference I cannot say what I would do.

But I do...think of it.

Goodnight, Jim.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Enjoy this. It will not last. ;)

Chapter Notes

Life's kicking me in the butt so I'm just trying to keep updates regular! <3 Thank you guys for reading you are keeping me warm!

FROM: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
TO: Spock of Vulcan
SUBJECT: I know, Spock.
STARDATE: 2250.77
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

Are you trying to tell me that your hamburger was better or worse than the shoe I-Chaya ate once?

I've never eaten a shoe, so I can't say for myself whether your efforts would be better or worse. I'm guessing better. I have faith in your replicating skills. And your mom's palate.

I forgot about the meat substitutes, so I withdraw my former objection. You go on and get elbow-deep in that stuff, make the perfect burger. You're gonna spoil me.

Just don't tell Bones, all right? He's pretty picky about my diet these days, and even worse whenever I bring up Vulcan. To hear him talk, you'd think I was leaving next week. He keeps all these charts of how much I'm gonna sweat and what my caloric intake will need to be to maintain my usual muscle mass. I swear he's lost it. Gaila was supposed to distract him for me, but so far she hasn't been all that successful. I'm starting to wonder if Bones is really a human male at all, Spock, given his immunity to her charms.

But I guess I'm not writing you to talk about Bones the salad dictator.

Salad's not a food, though.

It goes on top of food. With food. As an accompaniment to food, when you think you're gonna need a palate cleanser after you've eaten a real meal. But no way is it enough to fill a human stomach.

OK, I swear I'm finished with that now. Totally lost my train of thought, though. Do you edit your recordings, or do you just let 'em run? You can probably tell I've been letting mine run, but I like to think I'm pretty good at speaking extemporaneously. Not that I've ever been graded on the subject, but I haven't left you with too many long awkward pauses. ... At least I'm hoping I haven't.
Now I'm starting to get self conscious.

What were we talking about?

Oh yeah. You liked that picture.

Listen, Spock, we don't have to...

Don't feel like we've GOTTA keep doing the voice recordings, if there's stuff you'd rather write than say. I might've expressed a preference for it but I'm human and mercurial and I don't know what I want half the time anyway. My judgment's -- well, let's just say I'd trust yours over mind any day.

But you don't have to say it either, Spock. I kinda like... imagining.

Are your ears sensitive?

Have a good day, Spock.

Kirk out."

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Voice recordings.
STARDATE: 2250.77
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.77, recording a seventh response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

I do not “feel” as though we “gotta” continue in any fashion. It is true that there are elements of the spoken communication that may be perceived as more difficult, yet I believe that the difficulties presented are worth the effort required to surmount them. In our positions, public speaking will surely be expected of us. In that sense, the voice recordings may be considered practice for our future duties, as well as practice spent in the private task of becoming accustomed to one another.

The fact that a task does not come swiftly is not a sign that it is an undesirable one. That which is unfamiliar is worthy of a more extensive study; the pursuit of its mastery will provide challenge and reward.

But there is more to its value than the logical or practical application of the skills that are being developed by this format.

I believe that the proper phrase to employ here is “I do not mind.”

I do not mind, Jim.

As you have already mentioned, the sound of my voice is pleasant to you. Knowing that, I would not deny you that pleasure. Similarly, it appears to me to be the natural progression of intimacy
that we began with the written word and have progressed to that which is spoken, allowing us a better sense of what it will be like to converse when we are face to face. We are to spend a great deal of time with one another in our shared futures and this is a closer approximation of time spent together than text-based communications.

Despite how illogical that may sound, I have come to accept that marriage, of all things, is not always logical, even if it has its roots—like ours—in a logical beginning.

Though I am also unaccustomed to dealing with the whims of an unpredictable human being—in this instance, I refer to you, Jim—that is behavior with which I must also familiarize myself. And though it is not natural to me in any sense of the word, I would not say that it is unpleasant.

When you ask such unexpected questions, I come to ask myself questions of my own, which I would not have considered were it not for your perspective being presented to me. That, too, is not unpleasant.

In regards to my ears, I cannot say that they are more sensitive than other parts of my anatomy I have not found reason to consider until I have considered them in relation to your attentions. They are of similar sensitivity to touch as my lips. My fingers remain more sensitive...than either.

Goodnight, Jim.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: The sound of your voice.
STARDATE: 2250.78
SECURE CHANNEL

“Hey, Spock.

I like that you call me Jim, now. Jim without all the precursors and attachments, I mean. I'm not sure when it started, but I'm into it.

Guess admitting that means I'm giving you an inside look into just how slow I can be. But I figure if anyone should get the head's up on that particular character trait it's you. I wouldn't want you to go having crazy high expectations of me, just because you read some things in a file about my test scores.

I'm just as lunk-headed as the next human.

You're still gonna be the brains in this relationship, Spock. Since, as we've already established, I am clearly the beauty.

...

Ahh, I'm just messing around with you. I mean, not about the part where you're wickedly smart or I'm disarmingly good-looking, but I'm not so vain that I think that's all there is to us. I'm comfortable enough when we talk now that I say things I probably shouldn't. I just assume you'll know when I'm kidding around, but the truth is we don't quite know each other that well yet. I don't mean to put that kind of burden on you, Spock.
Understanding's something that takes two people to achieve, I think.

Damn, wait, I wanna write that down. That sounds good, doesn't it? That's definitely going into my next speech.

I guess what I'm trying to say, Spock, is that I'm more than willing to do my part in helping you understand illogical human behavior, because I get that you're doing the same for me in reverse. Logical Vulcan behavior isn't something I even begin to understand, but it seems to go down easier coming from you. Maybe if we spend enough time together -- exchange enough letters, say -- I won't start any intergalactic incidents by getting all emotional in the middle of a negotiation.

Don't worry, even humans get that that's bad manners. Most of them, anyway. I can't speak for the Mitchells of the world.

Anyway, better not waste our time together talking about other people.

The reason I asked about your ears, Spock, is because I was thinking that if we were gonna lie like that, spooning each other, with me behind you... I was thinking... I might lean forward and just get the lobe between my teeth, bite you a little where it's soft. It looks soft. I know you guys have a whole mess of cartilage stuff going on up top, but down around the bottom they look the same as ours. I'm willing to bet they'd react the same too. Sensitive.

Still can't get over that thing about your fingers though. I'm gonna have to get creative there.

Have a good day, Spock.

We'll talk soon.

...Jim.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Informality of address.
STARDATE: 2250.78
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.78, recording an eighth response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

I altered my more formal greeting upon your insistence and after a period of time had elapsed to make informality possible. I did not intend to insult you by maintaining adherence to a more formal address when you had specifically requested I do otherwise; by the same token, I would not have insulted you by relinquishing formality before it was acceptable to do so. The period of time was a calculated one on my part. If you wish for the specifics, I would be able to tell you exactly when it began—though perhaps you have found it more obvious because, when speaking, it is not so difficult to repeat the name of the individual to whom the spoken word is addressed.

...Jim.
You have in return spoken my name simply on many more occasions, and even included many shorthand references to it, such as “STS” and so forth. For me to meet your casual tone somewhere other than halfway would be needlessly stubborn and not in the spirit of diplomacy. It also denotes a level of familiarity—to refer to you by something other than your full, given name—that is pleasurable for the two of us to achieve.

Perhaps it should have always seemed...only logical that we should arrive at this point, or at least that we should intend to—should strive to.

Yet, as you say, we do not know all that there is to know about one another. Not yet. There is a great deal left for us to discover. Your humor—your sarcasm—does not present the mystery it once may have been to me, but it is not Vulcan by any interpretation, and there are still many occasions when I am presented with that which I do not fully comprehend. I must assume therefore that it is wholly human—or, at the least, a wholly human aspect of you, not shared with any other.

I will have to assume that the self-referential “lunk-headed” conclusion is an element of this tendency, as it is far from truthful.

Your head is without lunks. To behave as though it is lacking in some way suggests either a false humility, which is without a functional purpose, or a distinct lack of self-awareness, which may be more damaging than even that. Sarcasm would be, in this instance, the preferable explanation.

...A proper segue at this point is not entirely possible. Yet I will not ignore or simply fail to address the matter of my ears. I have studied them in response to your suggestion of actions regarding them—regarding us—by touching both the cartilaginous areas and the softer lobe beneath. You are correct in your assumption that the latter is more sensitive than the former, though there are points—particularly at the tip—that do appear receptive to physical stimulus.

What of your ears? If I were to bite them, would that be a pleasant sensation for you?

I will anticipate your reply.

Goodnight, Jim.”

---

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Nicknames.
STARDATE: 2250.79
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

I realize now that awhile back when I was giving you a hard time about being all formal with me, I never actually gave you a valid reason. Told you why it bugged me so much. I guess I just expected you to get it, and when you didn't I gave up on trying to change things. I should've noticed sooner than you'd gone and done it yourself. I'm gonna try and explain it now, though. I figure I owe you that much.

...Not that I'm entering into this relationship with a tally of who owes who. I've got a feeling it
wouldn't go well for me.

Anyway, humans associate informality with intimacy. You referring to me like a stranger just made me feel like I was gonna marry a stranger, and that seemed -- I dunno... Weird. You'd probably think it was totally logical, since we are strangers, but...

I don't know, I guess I like lying to myself. Or stretching the truth a little. I wanted to feel like we had a shot at getting to know each other, or maybe I wanted to skip ahead past the stilted introductions. And -- I recognize that now I think because where we're at now -- that's where I wanted to be before, Spock. I feel like we do know each other. And that maybe we even... Like each other?

I gotta stop recording these messages late at night. My train of thought's not exactly on track here.

I'm gonna take note of what you said about the relative sensitive spots of those ears of yours. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to track down information on an innocent little thing like Vulcan erogenous zones. I'm gonna have to talk to some people when we're married, Spock. Your records make it really tough for a culturally-sensitive guy to do any kind of research at all on how to be a proper Vulcan husband.

I'd like it if you bit my ears, though.

You could bite me anywhere and I'd like it. Just for the record. Humans aren't overly picky about that kind of thing, and some are more into it than others. I'm -- on the "into it" side of things, I guess. Well, I don't guess. I know. Or I think I know. I've never...

Well, let's just say it'd be our little experiment.

Talk soon.

Jim.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Formality.
STARDATE: 2250.79
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.79, recording a ninth response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

Though you have taken certain detours along the way, I would say that your “train” of thought is not as convoluted as you seem to believe. Though it does suggest illogical choices or impulses, the connections as you have explained them are satisfactorily made. I understand your perspective better now as well as the motivation behind your initial insistence on informality.

Yet I must now remind you that the presence of formality will always remain, for it is my place as the son of a Vulcan royal family to adhere to that formality as my father has done, and his father
before him, and his father before him. That is not to suggest I will not do what is within reason to meet you again halfway for the sake of compromise.

I am trying.

Again, do not think that because effort is required that expending the effort is an unfavorable choice. The effort affords its results extra meaning—meaning that is earned because together we have accomplished what would not have been possible to achieve separately, independently of one another.

I acknowledge that my approach must to a human mind effected by human passions appear clinical or even formal. This acknowledgment was not easily earned, either. Quite the opposite. I have considered my mother’s relationship with her husband, my father, and the concessions she has made, the interpretations she has chosen to espouse. Yet she does not to me exhibit the signs of one who is unhappy. As a human, she would not be so advanced in the obfuscation of her true emotions that her own son would not recognize unhappiness, if this were her customary state.

These are not confidences I would share with just anyone—or indeed with anyone else. My formality does not equate a lack of intimacy, Jim. It is not intended to be interpreted as such.

If you are capable of overlooking this inherent difference in our methods of approach, or embracing it as preferable to what would come more easily if we were less dissimilar, then I assure you, I will be devoted to the pursuit of providing intimacy in my own way. It is not the human way, though I cannot say, as I am not fully Vulcan, if it is the Vulcan way either.

I have no points of comparison. No one to speak to on the subject.

Except, it would seem, for you.

The expansion on my perspective is appreciated.

...As is your patience.

For you have been patient. Though I am not inclined to speak speculatively—a talent which to you appears to come quite easily—I will endeavor to at least offer something in return.

Where would you desire that I bite you? And, for the sake of preparation, precisely how hard?

Your reply will be appreciated.

Goodnight, Jim.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Biting.
STARDATE: 2250.80
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock,

I wish I could quote you on some of this. Patient's not a word most people would associate with me, and I have a feeling your word would go a long way with the more respectable types in my life.
I guess that's one of the things my family and by association Earth's interests are hoping to get out of this arrangement of ours. A little respectability. I might have a lot of natural charm, but I don't think it'll come as a shock to hear I'm not exactly thought of as the serious type. At least, it wouldn't surprise you. You're smart. You pay attention to things. You have to know how I'm thought of politically, on a galactic scale. Pretty and well-meaning, but not exactly a wise ruling type.

Wise sounds old, now that I think about it. Wise. Wiiiise.

Yeah, I wouldn't mind if people skipped over that part when they talked about me.

Anyway, I just thought you should be aware that we're kind of using you for your smarts and your credibility. And your dark, handsome good looks -- but that last part's just for me. A personal preference.

Have I told you lately that I find you... How would a Vulcan say this? Incredibly physically appealing. You've got this whole...serious thing happening that's really...

Really...

...

Agh. This is harder than I thought it would be. It's the kind of thing that it feels stupid to say into a PADD instead of face to face, but I'm not gonna have that chance for awhile and the more we talk it feels like the less I've said. I feel like, like I'm playing catch-up with myself, a little. But that's something I got used to talking to you in the first place.

Maybe that has something to do with the formality you were talking about. Or maybe it doesn't and I'm starting to see connections where none exist.

Did I tell you Bones has me on my official bulk-up-for-Vulcan diet starting tomorrow? I'm not looking forward to it. The words skinless chicken breasts were uttered several times, Spock. And spinach. And boiled pasta. My life's about to turn into a wasteland without a hamburger in sight. If his goal's trying to get me to look forward to going to Vulcan even more, then he's definitely on the right path.

Basically what I'm saying is everyone here's driving me crazy. At least your recordings give me something to look forward to.

I think you should bite me wherever you want, Spock. Chief erogenous zones for Jim Kirk are as follows:

Ears, lips, a spot on my throat, nipples -- wow, that's a hell of a word to say out loud, I'm feeling my way down as I do this, Spock, I want you to know.... Thighs.

I could get more specific but if this stuff gets out I think it could still pass as an anatomy lesson if I contain myself.

Thinking about you, Spock. I'm still drinking sash-savas tea with lunch.

Talk soon.

Jim."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Well, I said it wouldn't last.

Chapter Notes

Yikes real early today because otherwise it would be super duper late!

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: If you wish to quote me, you may do so.
STARDATE: 2250.80
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.80, recording a tenth response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

While it may appear that your physician, Doctor McCoy, is exhibiting frustratingly strict behavior designed to limit your enjoyment of your favorite Earth delicacies, I must ultimately concur with his choice of dietary proscriptions and prescriptions, at least to a point. It is wise—wiser than his communications would suggest he is capable of being—that you should be as prepared physically as possible for the climate of Vulcan, for you to arrive in the peak of health. Therefore a diet is not without its obvious benefits in fortifying you for the difficulties of Vulcan’s atmosphere, temperatures, and mineral composition. However, to deny you the ability to enjoy, while you are still able, those foods that you will only be able to experience authentically for a limited time longer, is understandably “unfair” from your perspective.

Yet knowing what I do of you, I suspect that you are already aware of this, and will continue as is demanded of you, despite the tribulations these demands have put you through.

Though there is a tendency to exaggerate obvious external details of an individual’s personality or behavioral patterns in the news and media—for example, the many pictures the paparazzi have culled of your tongue not retracting inside your mouth—it is a desire for reductive, understandable simplicity that drives them to paint a picture with the broadest possible strokes. You will disprove these generalized assumptions with your actions—if not solely because you are capable of making well-balanced and intelligent decisions, then with the additional component of your stubbornness with regards to proving people who are wrong to be wrong.

Have I analyzed your tendencies and your personality correctly?
With the chances I have been given to learn about you, both from what you have said as well as what you have not said, what you have neglected to say or clearly chosen not to address, I believe that my calculations are sound. Whether you are not thought of as the “serious type” has less bearing on the truth than whether you are yourself capable of being, or becoming, the “serious type” when occasion calls for it. It would seem to me that, based on your actions in the Venusian colony mine, your... This is a human expression, but from its definition, I have determined I will now employ it correctly: your “heart is in the right place”.

Humans place more stock in the heart’s location and motivations than do Vulcans, but as it is of importance to you, I shall endeavor to respect that importance, even though it is not mine.

The prospect of this shift in valuation is not unpleasant.

I would even say it is fascinating.

As you “look forward to” my recorded messages, I too find myself anticipating the arrival of the same from you. I do not have the number of companions as you; while I am never without the pursuit of knowledge to occupy my time, the conversation which you provide is a pursuit of knowledge in its own right, and...a stimulating one. I also appreciate your discretion. It is most logical of you to avoid language that would prove more incriminating. The choice of caution is intelligent.

Is there nowhere between nipples and thighs that you would appreciate the sensation of my teeth on your skin?

I shall construct a complete diagram, thanks to your efforts.

Until we speak again, good night, Jim.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Maybe I wanna keep what you say all to myself.
STARDATE: 2250.81
SECURE CHANNEL

”Hey, Spock,

You're really gonna make me say it, huh? I can't even tell you to use your imagination, since I have it on good authority Vulcans don't exercise that part of the brain too often. I believe that you can do it, just that it probably seems like a waste of time to somebody with your intellect.

All right, Spock. Here goes nothing. There's a particular part of the human male anatomy that happens to exist within range of the area you described, between my nipples and thighs, so to speak -- god, Spock I was just talking off the cuff it wasn't an actual thought-out list or anything -- but it's notorious for its design as a pleasure center, delicate skin and thousands of vulnerable nerve endings just waiting for the right person to touch them. It, uh, springs to life, so to speak. And that is the tidiest most textbook way I can think of going there without getting properly down to the nitty gritty details, Spock.

Don't mistake this for my best effort at dirty talk either, because that's not even close. I'm just not sure I trust the things I could say to the vast recesses of space. I'll make it up to you when we’re
together, just you and me. If you’re into that kind of thing. I’ve got a feeling you’re gonna tell me you don’t know, but that’s why I’m bringing it up good and early now, so you can think it over. Decide what you’re in the mood for.

Of course, my dirty-talking ability might be a distant memory by the time I’m there, since Bones is trying to fatten me up and starve me at the same time. You’d think a protein gain for "all the goddamn pounds I’m gonna sweat out" on Vulcan would be fun, but it’s not like he’s letting me eat pizza and ice cream sundaes all day every day. And the work-out routine! Spock, I hope you weren’t too attached to the way I looked before because I’ve got a feeling it’s about to be all over.

I’m gonna be chunky as hell when we finally meet, no two ways around it. I can already feel it happening. Let’s just say it’s a good thing we’re long past the point where the aristocracy rode horses, because mine would be giving up the ghost. Collapsing out from under me. Death by princely girth.

I guess at least you can rest assured that my heart is HEALTHY and also in the right place. Man. You probably don’t have to worry about this stuff either. Efficient metabolisms, I bet.

...This probably wasn’t the scintillating talk you were looking forward to today, but I have visions of skinless chicken breasts dancing in my head, Spock. It’s not right. You think it could be treason?

Tell me more about this diagram you’re making.

Hugs and kisses.

Jim.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: About the diagram I am making.
STARDATE: 2250.81
SECURE CHANNEL

“This is S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth, stardate 2250.81, recording an eleventh response for his betrothed, Prince James Tiberius Kirk of Earth.

Jim, peace and long life.

The diagram—as you requested clarification and elaboration on my methodology, I will now provide it—is a generalized anatomical schematic of a human male with the sensitive areas, which I believe are known as “erogenous zones”, labeled specifically based on your personalized suggestions. I do intend to be prepared for your arrival and would not allow myself to use this time in any way other than that which is most wise. When you speak of these matters, if the most that I am able to do is listen, if not respond in kind, take note and commit the data to memory, then that is what I shall do.

I am determined to do my most—my best—in anticipation of your arrival and your needs, so that when you are here you will not be disappointed by the gap in our sexual knowledge.
Experimentation of my own continues with your guidance. Though I would not “imagine” any scenario between us as you have already proven yourself too much of a rogue element—that is, too spontaneous for my algorithms to accurately predict your spur-of-the-moment decisions—I will say this: that I anticipate such a time as you transcribe your words from mere suggestion to true action.

...I do not currently think that I would mind the embrace you described in your recordings on stardate 2250.76 and stardate 2250.78, nor would I decline the opportunity to hold your hand in mine.

It is true, as you expressed in the recording you made on stardate 2250.79, that I have come to “like” you. Your conversation is adequate and your outlooks unanticipated but ultimately valuable to consider. As I have said before, these communications have not been unpleasant. If the same can be expressed in return, then our efforts here may be considered a success.

However, if your dietary restrictions and requirements are presenting insurmountable difficulties—both psychological and physical—then perhaps a modified version of the meal plan should be implemented. Hallucinations are not the ideal outcome. Doctor McCoy should be aware of this.

If your only concern is a matter of physical presentation, then that is easily assuaged. If you wish to attach images so that I am kept regularly updated on your appearance, you may be assured that there are elements of your physiognomy that will not be affected by preparatory weight gain, and which are not likely to lose their aesthetic appeal any time soon. Barring, of course, unfortunate accident.

Good night, Jim.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: The news.
STARDATE: 2250.81
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, news travels swiftly. Perhaps not swiftly enough.

I do not trust rumors, nor do I listen to idle gossip. Yet I have heard from sources otherwise reliable that your brother has returned.

Is this true?

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sam.
STARDATE: 2250.82
SECURE CHANNEL

Yeah, he's back.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sam.
STARDATE: 2250.82
SECURE CHANNEL

I don't believe this.

I don't believe this, Spock.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sam.
STARDATE: 2250.82
SECURE CHANNEL

I thought he was a spinach-based hallucination.

I was wrong.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sam.
STARDATE: 2250.82
SECURE CHANNEL

Jesus christ he says he was in the Delta Quadrant and didn't hear about dad until now spock 'm losing my mind here i'm gonna die.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Sam.
STARDATE: 2250.83
SECURE CHANNEL

"Ahh.

Hey, Spock.

Sorry I didn't get time to answer your recording until now. It's been a busy day. Busy couple days. I'm obviously not dying. I shouldn't have sent that.

It's been a lot to process. A lot of arrangements. Mom's thrilled, of course. It's all she can talk about and she goes around the house with this glow like... Well, like her number one son's come home. Firstborn, I mean. Or maybe I meant the first thing, I don't know.

I kinda wish you were here, Spock. I know it's inappropriate on Vulcan, but I could use a hand to hold. I have a feeling you'd be good at that. Bones called off my diet after a dedicated application of puppy eyes and begging. So I guess you don't have to worry about me getting fat -- although if I read your letter right, you might be into that?

Anyway, no news on Sam's intentions yet. He acts like he's here to help us out, but we'll see how long he actually sticks around this time. We haven't talked. I stayed up here to write you over dinner.
"I should probably go see what I can whip up with the replicator.

I’ll tell you if I hear anything, Spock. And you do the same?

Dif-tor heh smusma, Spock.

Jim.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Regarding Sam.
STARDATE: 2250.83
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

There is no need for apology.

The complexities of your emotional response to your brother’s return are not immediately understandable for someone of my upbringing and proclivities. Perhaps on the surface this is because your reaction may appear illogical. That he is your family, that he has returned to rejoin your family once more, appears to be a cause for positive feelings. That he is your brother is a fact, one which cannot be denied.

Yet it is also true that he left without warning for reasons that were not immediately obvious—that even now may remain unclear—and in doing so abandoned his responsibilities, as well as his individual ties to the members of your family. On a personal as well as on a public level, he behaved in a way that you did not and do not admire.

On this point I find no fault in your conclusion. It was not admirable behavior.

But he is still your brother. And he is still the first son of your royal parents.

I understand that I may not be the first or best choice of conversational partners where matters of emotional sensitivity or emotions of any sort are the primary concern. I will unsurprisingly lack the sentimentality necessary to provide suitably sympathetic responses or to predict what it is you may need. Though I have grown to know you better than I did seventy-nine days ago, I am still of Vulcan.

We have our limits.

Distance, too, is a limitation.

It is a relief to be informed that you were exaggerating when you described your condition as fatal. Jim, I am relieved to learn that you are not, as you suggested, dying from the shock to your system upon your brother’s unexpected return.

I am not there. The distance between us is considerable. I cannot therefore hold your hand as you have expressed a desire for touch. I am unable to provide that, as well. I do not deal in the speculative. Yet as an exercise in a clause involving “if”...

If I were there, I would be certain to hold your hand.
FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: I don't wanna talk about it.
STARDATE: 2250.84
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

Maybe we could just -- I don't know -- not talk about my brother for awhile? Or maybe that's too much like ignoring the elephant in the room. I dunno. Mom's had Sam in these meetings with the Federation ministers I guess trying to work out what the hell to do with him. I guess he's been spending time on colonies and stuff, helping them deal with outbreaks and terraforming hiccups. He's not a doctor or an engineer, but I guess he's pretty smart on his own terms too. Kind of a jack of all trades.

Sam of all trades.

I just don't want everyone getting their hopes up. Mom especially. You don't see me leaping to join Starfleet now that he's back, because I know what he's like. He's probably just here sorting things out because he missed the funeral. Or hell, maybe he's just looking to get in on his inheritance.

...

That wasn't nice. I don't know what's wrong with me, Spock, I'm all antsy. You'd think I'm one of those guys who can't handle a tiny change in his life, but I've never been all that attached to routine.

Maybe I just need a good night's sleep.

You're wrong that you're not my first choice of people to talk to these days. You were the first person I told about Sam, even if -- technically you asked me about him first. I haven't really wanted to bring him up with anyone else.

There's not much point if he's just gonna bail on us all again anyway.

But you're better at this talking stuff than you think. Matters of emotional sensitivity. I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit.

I get what it means when you say you'd hold my hand, you know.

I'm into it.

We'll talk more soon, all right?

Dif-tor heh smusma, Spock.

Jim."
I've got no clue what's going on I got shut out of a meeting with our Vulcan attaches today??? Did I miss a cultural holiday or something again.
	his is unbelievable no one's telling me anything

Jim, I believe they were discussing the matter of the arrangement of marriage between the royal houses of Earth and of Vulcan.

That is what the ambassadors from Earth have been discussing.

There is a likely connection. Logic dictates that we cannot assume this confluence of events is mere coincidence.

I will communicate with you again when I know more.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Spock
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I was correct in my deduction. The present topic is that of the union between your planet and mine. Now that your brother, Prince Sam, has returned, the matter of the marriage that will foster this union is under reconsideration.

I will communicate with you again when I know more.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Spock

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: no
STARDATE: 2250.86
SECURE CHANNEL

yeah i got the memo

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: no
STARDATE: 2250.86
SECURE CHANNEL

what the hell spock they can't do that

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: no
STARDATE: 2250.86
SECURE CHANNEL

you could sound a little more upset about it

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: more info
STARDATE: 2250.86
SECURE CHANNEL

all right i bugged the assembly hall when they were out to lunch

topics of discussion include what a loose cannon i am and that my boisterous lifestyle could conflict with vulcan precepts. they think i'm gonna start more problems than i solve not like a guy who just up and practically abdicates no he's way more reliable.
this is unbelievable they can't REALLY do this.

spock i learned VulCAAn.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: “Upset about it.”
STARDATE: 2250.87
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, I cannot “sound” like anything in a text-based communication as it does not include “sound” of any kind.

Would an agitated writing style better serve a situation that is disagreeable? I hold that it will not. It will not serve any purpose at all.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Ill-advised behavior.
STARDATE: 2250.87
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, I need not advise you that it is highly unwise to plant a recording device in a private council chamber, especially if the members of said council already believe you to be an unpredictable element, someone who disregards the rules as he sees fit.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: How to proceed.
STARDATE: 2250.87
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim,

Have you informed them that you have learned Vulcan? Is your Vulcan superior to Sam’s facility with the language?

Your pronunciation is decidedly acceptable. Without Vulcan instruction it is highly unlikely that Sam would be able to approximate your diction and inflection.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Jim.
STARDATE: 2250.88
SECURE CHANNEL

Spunau bolayalar t’Wehku bolayalar t’Zamu il t’Veh.

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.” These are the principles of Surak.
I have repeated it to myself many times, and never more so than these past few days.

Spock of Vulcan
Chapter Summary

For those of you who are currently feasting: first of all, I'm so jealous.

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FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: i can't with this
STARDATE: 2250.88
SECURE CHANNEL

no, that's bullshit, spock i can't

this is bullshit they can't just change the rules halfway in sam's vulcan SUCKS i worked so hard on that

this is

no, this is dumb

i get a FEW stupid shots of me pulling wild stunts splashed all over the news media and all of a sudden i'm not a safe bet, like i haven't been here the whole time.

it's not like gaila even cared about those naked pictures

jesus i can't believe this is happening

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: don't worry
STARDATE: 2250.88
SECURE CHANNEL

they aren't gonna find the bug spock i'm better than that have some faith

i told them about the vulcan i'll speak vulcan all day if i have to i'll undergo the oral examination right now if i have to

FROM: jtk
TO: sts
SUBJECT: spock
STARDATE: 2250.89
SECURE CHANNEL

i guess i just didn't realize how much they were settling for me until they jumped at the chance to make arrangements with someone else
FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: I am not worried.
STARDATE: 2250.89
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, the word “settle” implies a judgment of merit, a valuation of worth, which were mostly likely not inherent in the initial decision, as it was made solely to avoid incident between our people when Sam absconded his responsibilities. You were a substitute, that is true, but to ascribe hierarchical implications to that substitution is not logical.

At this time it is necessary to present a united front and maintain propriety in our actions, to behave as is required of us for the sake of the many. There are more futures involved in these arrangements than our own. That those futures rely upon our futures does not alter the fact of that reliance.

Despite your emotional distress at this unanticipated turn of events I am certain from my knowledge of your character that you will behave as is right.

Bugged council room notwithstanding.

Another meeting has been called. I will attend this one and listen to what is presented. I will learn for myself what the logic is behind the proposal and I shall respond to the proposal accordingly. These are my intentions. That it is not mutually desirable is not enough.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Spock of Vulcan

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FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Bugged council room.
STARDATE: 2250.89
SECURE CHANNEL

If I didn't bug the council room then we might not've found out what was going on. This way we -- you -- can get ahead of the action and form some kind of plan because like hell did I spend the last month of my life brewing sash-savas tea for nothing I will challenge that asshole to a Vulcan-off if I have to.

I mean. It just doesn't make sense I've been putting in all this practice.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Oh my god.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

Mom says I could join Starfleet now.
I'm starting to understand why Bones wants to punch everyone in the face all the time.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Mutually undesirable.
STARDATE: 2250.89
SECURE CHANNEL

Does that mean what I think it means Spock?

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Mutually undesirable.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

because you're damned right it is

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Mutually undesirable.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

I guess I just thought you might want to upgrade too while you had the chance

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Mutually undesirable.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

Let me know how it goes. You said you would. Right. OK.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Mutually undesirable.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, as you must already know, I will not put to words anything which might challenge the peace between our planets and the alliance I have always intended to uphold. Yet, as we have always been honest with one another, itself a chosen course to uphold that same peace and alliance, I would not disclose anything other than the truth in our communications. Nor, in the absence of a pleasant truth to tell, would I remain silent in order to maintain the Vulcan way—that we do not lie.

If I wrote that this alteration in the course of events was not ideal then I certainly meant it.

Dif-tor heh smusma.
Spock

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Request for clarification.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, by concurring that the alteration in the course of events was “mutually undesirable” this implies that you do not wish to join Starfleet, having been offered the opportunity to do so vis-a-vis a potential release from your obligations to me?

I request clarification.

Spock of Vulcan

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Obligations.
STARDATE: 2250.90
SECURE CHANNEL

When did I ever say I wanted to be released from anything?

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Clarification.
STARDATE: 2250.91
SECURE CHANNEL

“It wasn’t an obligation, Spock.

I mean, maybe it was at first, but --

I don’t know. I thought it might not be so bad, us getting hitched. We were learning about each other, making progress. I’d say these letters have been an accurate depiction about what we’re supposed to be doing for our people, forming a bond, overcoming cultural differences, presenting a united diplomatic front.

I’m gonna talk to our Vulcan representation here, and ... Mom, I guess. Sam too if I have to. Anyway, don’t worry. You're not the only one working on this.

...Call me crazy, I thought you might miss the sound of my voice."

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Regarding obligations.
STARDATE: 2250.91
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, you had not said outright that you wished to be released from your obligations regarding the union of our royal families. Yet you had expressed on more than one occasion your desire to join Starfleet with your peers and all your mentions of said peers was presented with a distinct wistfulness that suggested disappointment you could not join them. Those instances, coupled with your aptitude and how well you scored on your admittance tests, allowed me to infer that it would have been your choice to enlist, were you not bound to duties elsewhere.

If my inference was incorrect, then it was my error.

I will not allow myself to make the same mistake again.

You, however, were correct, Jim. There is a definite pleasurable experience connected with the hearing of your voice.

Dif-tor heh smusma.

Spock

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Regarding clarifications.
STARDATE: 2250.92
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

If you believed that I might have “missed” the sound of your voice then it is my understanding this is likely due to projection of the same sentiment in reverse. It has been some time since we last communicated with recordings and it is true that its continuation as a part of our routine was familiar; however, as our relation to one another is yet uncertain, a measure of informality must be employed in my customary greetings where otherwise there would be proper, personalized address.

...Hello, Jim. Before I continue, I must be completely assured that you would not be disappointed—that you would not be displeased—if you were to remain bound to me as has been our understanding prior to the return of your brother, Prince Sam. Since one of my inferences has proven to be incorrect, I do not intend to continue operating upon a false assumption.

I would not have you remain in a situation that is not your preference.

If it is your preference, then I will proceed with the assurance that our preferences are aligned.

A swift response would be appreciated.

...

Goodnight, Jim.”
"Spock, it's not your fault. If you've misunderstood anything, it's because I haven't exactly been clear.

The truth is, I never expected I'd have to be clear, since we were gonna get married either way. But now that all that's up in the air I don't think there should be any confusion.

There was a time when all I could think about was joining Starfleet, making captain in four years -- or three -- charting new worlds with my very own crew. Maybe some of my friends. And when I got slapped with Sam's responsibilities I resented them. It wasn't my life, it wasn't the future I'd planned out for myself.

But I never expected to...

Damn it.

I don't consider you a responsibility, Spock.

Dif-tor heh smusma."

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Clearing things up.
STARDATE: 2250.92
SECURE CHANNEL

We're aligned, Spock, we're aligned, we're aligned.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Alignment.
STARDATE: 2250.94
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I have not been paying attention to the rumors that have made their way to Vulcan from Earth or any of the gossip. Similarly, I have ignored the visuals of your person obtained by the paparazzi and will consider only what I have heard from you to be accurate. I will trust in what you have written to me. Likewise, I will trust in you.

You may also trust in me. As I cannot lie—as I will not lie to you—you may be assured already that in this, as in all things, I am telling you the truth.

With regards to the current position of certain members of the Vulcan High Council and certain members of your royal cabinet who believe your older brother to be the better choice for the union of our two houses, I have consulted with both of your records and presented the evidence to my
advisors. I have done so as diplomatically as possible when I suggest to them—with nothing more than logic based upon the facts—that you are a superior and indeed more dependable choice, given Prince Sam’s earlier, unannounced, unanticipated disappearance.

They have drawn their own conference without calling for my presence. In attendance are representatives from the Earth delegation on Vulcan and, as I have not “bugged” the conference hall, I will simply wait to be informed of what their conclusions will be.

During this time when patience is mandatory, I have conferred with my mother, as she approached me in private to ask me how I am “holding up”.

I recalled this turn of phrase from your dictionary and was able to divulge that the match between us would be preferable due to the elapsed period of our communications and our ability to enjoy one another’s conversation—which, as I understand it, is vital to the achievement of a “solid” marriage. Having understood my position, she has offered to assist, though I informed her that it is unlikely her assistance will hold much sway with the council.

What has your mother the Queen spoken of to you on this matter?

Dif-tor heh smusma.

...XOV.

Spock

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Assistance.
STARDATE: 2250.95
SECURE CHANNEL

Spock,

I talked to my mom, I don't know. She doesn't understand what the big deal is, since I wanted to join Starfleet in the first place. She has that mom thing where she remembers you at a certain age and refuses to see you as you are now, with all the personal growth and everything. I think I've gone through some personal growth. You probably wouldn't be that interested in me if I hadn't. And I know you're not gonna come right out and say it, but I'm a way better option than Sam.

I mean, maybe not from a totally objective perspective. He is the heir and I guess that comes with a certain amount of sway. And people like him, he's easy to get along with. I bet he hasn't put an entire sash-savas into his mouth.

But there's a lot of other stuff he hasn't done either. Like writing back.

As far as I'm concerned, he missed his shot.

Anyway, I don't really have the same kind of relationship as you do with your mom. She wrote me, once, you know. I liked her. I do like her. I think I asked if I could call her Mom, which seems a little premature now given the circumstances.

I hate these circumstances, Spock. I really do.
There's been a lot of crazy thoughts swirling around my head, lately. I thought about hopping the next starship heading to Vulcan, asking you to abdicate and join Starfleet with me... All kinds of things. But I figured I knew what you'd say to all that. And I guess I'm trying to set a good example. Bugged conference halls notwithstanding.

I guess if we're gonna do this, we should do it right.

XOV,

Jim

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Doing it right.
STARDATE: 2250.96
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

I have initiated the audio recording function for this message with the recollection of your suggestion that my preference would be to hear your voice, operating upon the conclusion that you based that decision upon a projection of your own preferences. Therefore, the sound of my voice may provide something my written words would not, despite my lack of spontaneity. I have written the following communication in full before recording it now, but it is with that forethought that I apply myself to any task, regardless of its intimacy.

I have encouraged diplomatic contact between Vulcan and Earth in an attempt to establish an open dialogue regarding the arrangements as they were initially conducted, and then rearranged when the constants became variables.

Prince Sam is, as you have said, the first son and rightful heir to your father’s throne; his return has faced him once again with the numerous duties of his unique position. They are the same duties to which you would have devoted yourself had he not made his return, yet the truth remains that the political climate of the present is not the same as that which faced the Federation prior to Prince Sam’s departure. There are the multiple Klingon factions to consider; there is the distinct possibility that the Romulans will exploit the tensions inherent in the fractured Klingon Empire to their own profit; there are simultaneously myriad incursions along the edges of the neutral zone, which cannot be ignored.

And these are but the most obvious of the very real threats the Federation now faces.

It is not illogical that Earth would seek to maintain a centralized figure of leadership in San Francisco—nor is it illogical to assume that Prince Sam, who was trained specifically since birth to succeed your father, would be the one to remain upon the throne there.

The terms of my arranged marriage for Vulcan’s complete alliance with Earth were always that a member of Earth’s royal family would spend the first year in this union on Vulcan as an ambassador primarily—and it appears less and less likely that Prince Sam will be in a position to leave Earth in the near future. Therefore, it is only logical that Earth’s second son of George and Winona Kirk would be the ideal member of the royal family to enter into the pre-determined union. Your relative freedom would allow you to be an ambassador first and foremost. Any other choice
would simply not be logical.

Likewise, Jim, I am also the second son. It would not be a suitable match for a first son and a second son to be joined and as Sybok is devoted to the Vulcan way and currently committed to the Vulcan Rite of Kolinahr, the only reasonable union is that which was determined subsequent to Prince Sam’s disappearance.

Now, all that is left to us is to wait for the mutual conclusion of our councils. Should it be mutually agreeable or mutually disagreeable cannot be predicted.

I will adhere to their decision. But I have also done all that is within my ability to offer legitimate evidence as to why this is the more logical decision.

It is the superior decision.

...Goodnight, Jim.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Oh.
STARDATE: 2250.96
SECURE CHANNEL

"You liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiike me."

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Substantive follow-up.
STARDATE: 2250.97
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

Sorry, I just needed to get that out of my system. Apparently.

But if you aren't rethinking your statement after hearing that then I guess I'm in good hands. Your hands. Specifically. Not that I'd put myself in your hands. I mean, I would, but I know that'd start an incident with your people and all so I'd have to wait until we did it in private.

Sometimes I wish I had gone to Vulcan. Just taken off as soon as Sam arrived. I could've seen you, we could've figured something out. At least then we would've been together. I felt like I was going crazy for days after he showed up, like I couldn't sit still and all I could think about was -- well. You. I just wanted to get at you somehow, and you seemed so calm...

I didn't mean to make you say anything you were uncomfortable with before. I know it's not your style to outright state a preference for one perfectly serviceable situation over the next. I just had to know you wanted me over Sam.

...

I'm not exactly used to being first choice."
I don't know. I didn't think I'd be able to change anyone's mind at first. Debating's more your strength than mine, but I've been trying to handle things properly. No yelling or turning over tables or taking long ocean-side motorcycle trips. It feels wrong to be doing this without you, but I guess it's not like we're alone. We're doing the diplomatic thing, working from opposite sides of a problem to solve it.

There, see? I sound like a diplomat already.

At least, that's what diplomats always sound like to me.

I never thought of our marriage -- Jesus -- as something I'd be freed up to do, rather than something I had to do. Now that you've put it like that, it does seem pretty logical.

So you wanna marry me, huh.

Dif-tor heh smusma, Spock.

And.

Hugs and kisses, all right? I don't care if it's inappropriate anymore.

Jim."
You guys totally got me through Thanksgiving. You guys and Spirk.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: I trust you wear a helmet when riding your motorcycle.
STARDATE: 2250.98
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

It would appear that we are to be joined in marriage. As such, should you continue to ride your motorcycle, be it sea-side or elsewhere, it is highly advisable that you wear appropriate protective gear for the entire period of this chosen recreation, as I have consulted with statistics only to discover the high rate of injury incurred during motorcycle rides.

All other counsel I might offer at this time is irrelevant as it is no longer information that will allow you to alter your decisions. For us, the decisions have already been made. It would be illogical to attempt to argue against that for which I already gave my support.

There are not many places to ride a motorcycle on Vulcan, Jim. It is not a common form of recreation employed by the natives of this planet. If this revelation should prove disappointing, then perhaps a substitute in the form of a hoverbike or other desert-terrain-ready vehicle may provide the recreation you have come to expect.

It is obvious that your companionship has not been unpleasant. You were the first to suggest that we “get along” in that we have communicated regularly and appreciate each other’s conversation. According to my father, some conflict is inevitable in any union. In that way it is not dissimilar to diplomacy, though it has different applications and functions, and is not a public but a private matter. There are, however, distinct parallels.

To state the obvious is unnecessary.

You may already know that this course will be difficult and I already know that your interests appear to lie with, or be enticed by, that which is obviously difficult. Regardless of how illogical it may seem to me, and regardless of how frustrating my relative calm has seemed to you, there is the possibility of maintaining common ground, honesty, and understanding.

I know that I maintained control of my emotions, Jim, but do not interpret this control as a lack of feeling. The control is necessary because the very opposite is true. During the time in which I was forced to consider the possibility that it would be most logical—yet not desirable—to leave that which we have established together behind and commit myself to a lifetime with another, I was calm because to be otherwise would have been detrimental to that which was of greater importance.

You behaved with admirable restraint. I, too, knew that this would be required of me.
Dif-tor heh smusma, Jim. I trust that you will not consider this expressed sentiment as self-serving.

And good night.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: My head's naturally dense.
STARDATE: 2250.98
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey there, Spock.

Hey...

...

God, sorry, that was. That was a long pause there. All right, uh. I sort of lost my train of thought. Do you know who I have to thank for this sudden matrimonial security? Because I have this suspicion that it's you and I should be kissing you right on the mouth right about now. Or holding your hand like you offered to do for me once. I still remember that. Couldn't exactly appreciate it at the time since I was frothing at the mouth practically but -- I'm good now. Things are good. We're good, I think, Spock.

Things are gonna be all right.

I'm still not sure how you pulled it off. Quite frankly I wouldn't believe you if you said you didn't have at least something to do with it. I'm sure I didn't. Even if I did barge my way into more than one meeting to advocate for Vulcan-Earth relations. I even threw in a few choice catchphrases. I'm sure my pronunciation was effortless. Just because I needed to practice the same proverb for weeks on end doesn't mean the same would be true of every proverb, right, Spock? It's like riding a bike. Once you know it, you know it.

Sam can't even get his tongue around the words.

Speaking of bikes, I'm kidding about not wearing a helmet, of course I wear a helmet. I've got this jacket too, all shielded leather, you'll love it. I'd bring it to Vulcan but I'm pretty sure I'd die of heatstroke the minute I put it on there.

Speaking of which, the only downside of this whole arrangement is me having to go back on the diet. Turns out Bones caught wind early that things were looking to shift, and he took me off it so I at least wouldn't be going out of my mind with hunger on top of everything else.

He's pretty smart, for a doctor.

Spock, everyone's gonna start thinking I like you after our display of unity over this marriage. What will the Vulcans say?

I'm pretty sure I heard that you desire me somewhere in there. Well I desire you right back, Spock.

We passed three months in there somewhere. Ninety days. You think we'll talk this much when we're together?
Hey, Spock...

Congratulations.

...

Now that was self-serving.

Jim.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Its natural density merely places it, gravitationally, in greater danger.
STARDATE: 2250.99
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

I did not “pull” anything “off” as you suggest I might have. I merely utilized what was logical in order to express what was desirable.

I also did not act alone and would not have you believe, entirely erroneously, that I am the only individual to whom you must express gratitude—or even that gratitude is necessary in the first place. In matters that are, as aforementioned, self-serving, it seems unsuitable to be grateful to someone who was acting in his own interests.

But also logically, for the sake of the greater good.

It is rare, I have discovered, that these two motivations are so completely aligned. I have told you before that I do not believe in luck; that which appears to be “lucky” is generally the product of manifold, unseen efforts, which are anything but spontaneous or naturally occurring. Yet there is some rogue element at work in my dealings with you that only further studies will be able to elucidate and I await such a time as I may conduct them in person rather than from a distance, in order to clarify my findings and formulate my theories more soundly.

Yet, as stated, I did not work alone. My mother, having determined that this was a matter of personal importance—and ignoring my caution that to behave as was personally beneficial was not strictly the logical choice; that, despite our preferences, the needs of the many still outweighed the needs of the few, and if the two proved to be in conflict, the only proper decision was therefore obvious—took it upon herself to speak with Sarek. Fortunately, she made no impassioned speeches to my knowledge, and must have outlined the simple, unemotional facts as you and I had come to appreciate them, for my father would not have been swayed by a sentimental argument and must have therefore been impressed instead by the force of our logic alone.

Having understood that placing the weight of Vulcan’s future relations with Earth on the shoulders of a prince for whom Earth would always be the greatest priority—and who had already once behaved in a fashion that suggested not simply Earth but his own interests were of even greater priority than that—it was Sarek who spoke to the Council and to the ambassadors, whereupon the conclusion was drawn that to once again restructure the terms of union between our houses would be overly complicated and ultimately unnecessary.
When these findings were presented to me as a matter of course, that I might be fully aware of my duties, I found them as logical as ever, but perhaps more agreeable than I had considered them in years past.

Though the logic itself did not change, I must therefore conclude that I am the one who has been in some way altered. Perhaps it is through our companionship that this transformation occurred.

I intend to meditate on it further. Meditation may also aid you in the difficulties of adjusting your diet based on Leonard H. McCoy’s restrictions.

Jim, why should we cease to communicate or lessen our communications when the means of communicating is greatly facilitated by our immediate proximity? I have no plans to behave in such an illogical fashion.

I anticipate your reply.

Good night, Jim.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Oh my god, Spock not literally.
STARDATE: 2250.99
SECURE CHANNEL

"Jesus, Spock, it's not like I thought you marched in there and made an impassioned argument that turned the heads of Vulcans everywhere, but maybe that's what I wanted to picture. You were kind of my hero. You're still kind of my hero, I'm not gonna lie, I still think you did more than you're admitting, but that's OK. You're the modest type. I can accept that.

Congratulations on our engagement, Spock. I don't know if Vulcans do that kind of thing -- I'm guessing no -- but humans are pretty big on congratulating themselves for relatively minor milestones. I'm gonna throw myself a big old gala and we'll serve sash-savas tea and listen to -- I dunno, what do you listen to on Vulcan? Chanting? Rhythmic drums?

You'd think if you were ever in the mood to take a compliment, now would be the time. I was perfectly willing to heap all that credit on your handsome shoulders, but noo, you had to go and be all modest about it.

I don't get you.

I would've taken credit.

But then again, that's what makes us different. And that's probably part of what makes you so great. That you're not like me. Yeah. That's definitely one of the things I like about you.

We get to talk about that thing now. I wasn't sure we would, considering.

God, can you imagine? I mean, not that there's any point in talking about it now, since it's obviously not happening. But that would've been a pretty awkward wedding considering half the things we've talked about. I said an awful lot of things you don't say to a brother-in-law. Can you imagine being married to Sam and thinking about my mouth all over your fingers? No way.
Doesn't work. Well, it does work but it's an invitation for another intergalactic incident if you ask me.

This is the first time I've ever been on the logical side of things. It feels... Itchy. I'm not sure I like it. But I'll say this for you, Spock, you're always getting me to try new things.

Don't bring up the diet, I'm celebrating! That means I don't have to work out OR exercise unless I feel like it. That's what that means, you can look it up.

...OK, don't look it up.

I'm no good at meditating. I'm only letting you know because now that we're getting married I'm not going to be able to hide much from you.

Hope this was worth the wait.

I'm thinking about you, Spock.

Jim.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: A caveat was not included.
STARDATE: 2250.100
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

It is far better to have reasonable expectations and thereby avoid disappointment than to allow your imagination to run wild only to discover Vulcan—and I, by extension—are not as you had hoped. If I were to knowingly allow a misimpression to continue, your arrival here would be coupled with unpleasant surprises based on improper conclusions, the most damaging of which would have been drawn during a time of particular emotionalism.

Regardless of what you were “picturing”—and I have in the past been made all too aware of the pictures you are capable of drawing—I must be honest, thereby eliminating any participation in the formation of a harmful illusion.

That is to say, Jim, that I am aware of what an asset you would have been to Starfleet. No one would take the entrance examination three times in three years if they did not have a decided interest in the program. Your scores were exceptionally high and your thirst for adventure is obvious to those who do not know you—but I believe it is even more starkly apparent to those who do.

It is also my belief that there are many kinds of adventures to be found, given the universe’s infinite unknowns. Some are dry like the desert and may not be immediately apparent; they will prove adventurous in retrospect alone. Others involve Venusian colonies, naked Orions, and malfunctioning mining vessels. Those do not require the advantage of distance to apply the label as they are more obvious.

I would not have you come here anticipating the latter when the former is that with which you will
be greeted. I would not have you “paint” a “picture” of someone—in this instance, I speak of myself—who will not be what you desire.

I would prefer that you were to desire me.

...Logically, it is preferable.

I have attached a selection of recorded musical arrangements—you will recognize the bells and gongs primarily—that is native to Vulcan and its ceremonies. I will also suggest that if you are to celebrate that you do not invite Gary Mitchell to join you. It does not appear to me that he is capable of experiencing positive emotions to support an acquaintance who is celebrating his own positive news.

Had I been fore-armed with the perspective you have intelligently expressed—that it would not be suitable for me to be joined in marriage with your brother after we had exchanged communications of a highly personal nature—I would have included that in my informational presentation to Sarek. Though I would have been more than capable of redirecting my thoughts in order to focus on that which was immediate and necessary, it is also true that there is much you have promised in the way of instruction that I can only conclude will be edifying.

Now that the matter is settled, I will continue my studies.

I have also kept the diagrams specific to your person.

Good night, Jim.”

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: I have a normal head.
STARDATE: 2250.100
SECURE CHANNEL

“Hey, Spock.

I think you should keep all your diagrams specific to my person. Since you don't have to worry about paparazzi, you can probably get away with keeping stuff like that around. I got people going through my garbage looking for a story they can hock on a slow news day. So don't worry, I'm not gonna be making anything like that of you. I think I'm gonna enjoy the privacy on Vulcan, if nothing else.

Although a lot of the things I wanna get away with are probably things that are frowned on over there. Public displays of affection. Bedroom eyes. Getting undressed without having to close the shades on the windows. It's gonna be great. I'll be the heartthrob of Vulcan.

Though I guess you guys aren't into heartthrobs either.

You don't have to tell me it's not gonna be all wild shuttle chases and naked girls, Spock. I have an idea of what to expect, and it's not that. I don't even think Starfleet would be that. I might say that was why I was joining up: the chance to do great things for good-looking people, maybe earn a few intergalactic favors while I'm at it, but nothing's like that all the time.
It’s just -- I really flourish in those moments. I do well with danger. I'd even go so far as to say it's what I'm best at. It's all the day-to-day where I can't quite measure up. I don't exactly have a head for routine.

But that's got nothing to do with you Spock so I don't want you to think for a second that I'm...

Whatever you said.

Gonna find you undesirable.

Believe me, Spock, there's no chance of that happening. When I thought about Sam being the one to go to Vulcan, meeting you, having those moments on the balcony and -- and learning about your hands, Spock...

...

It made me crazy. I couldn't handle it. I'm glad we don't have to learn what I would've done if they'd decided to go through with it, because I guarantee you it would've been something stupid. And then you wouldn't have gone along with it because you're so Vulcan and logical and it would've been for nothing.

So yeah, I think things worked out for the best.

If you want me to give you some visual references for that chart of yours I might just be willing to throw caution to the wind.

Hugs and kisses,

Jim.”

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Primarily it appears above average.  
STARDATE: 2250.101  
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

While I may believe you—or believe that you are at least certain of your own certainty—you have not yet been to Vulcan or experienced its privacy, its rules, its structure, and its heat for yourself. You cannot be certain of that which you have not yet experienced.

The best of intentions aside, Vulcan is not like earth, and that which you may now crave may not be delivered in a manner you will find yourself able to appreciate.

Yet travel is not outside our purview. We will spend a year on Vulcan, but after that, our location will not be static. As ambassadors, we will be expected to attend multiple destinations; we will shuttle between your home planet of Earth and mine of Vulcan as well as to any other where our Federation duties lead us. While it will not be the same as rising through the ranks of Starfleet, working toward captaincy, it will at least afford a change of scenery and a broad array of experiences that will provide entertainment for an individual with your exploratory inclinations. Granted, you will not be afforded the freedoms of an officer—but you will be afforded freedoms an
officer would not have, and access to sights an officer would not be given.

I believe the term on Earth is the concept of “quid pro quo”.

Given the current political climate, there may even be danger in these travels—though I would prepare myself for it so as to avoid being caught unawares, I would not say that I am “looking forward” to it in the same sense as you have employed the phrase: imbuing it with eagerness and hopeful expectations. It would be preferable that all our future envoys be undergone without trouble, but what is preferable is not always what comes to pass.

Do not throw caution anywhere—to the wind or otherwise—for my sake, Jim. As you have yourself said, there are many on your planet eager to catch you in a private moment in order to exploit your status for their own profit and gain. There are no paparazzi on Vulcan and while I would not encourage you to “throw” your modesty to the desert wind, you will no longer have to concern yourself with that worry.

There will be others to take its place, but on that matter, the Vulcan attaches at Earth’s galactic embassy will spend much of the next few months informing you of every point of etiquette that life on Vulcan will require of you.

When we are alone, I will continue my studies. If you are willing, as these will be experimental, at least until I have familiarized myself with the physical form, rather than having to work from a diagram.

I will be thinking of you, Jim.

Good night.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Once I get past the letters and into their First Meeting (in the next couple of chapters) I may have to update once every three days, depending on how slowly I move. And how long the chapters suddenly become. Will you hate me?

Because I love you.

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You flatterer.
STARDATE: 2250.101
SECURE CHANNEL

"God, don't remind me I have etiquette to learn. My instructors keep badgering me about that only they always seem to want to do it when Bones has me eating, and let me tell you, Spock, nobody frowns like a Vulcan attaché when you're accidentally slopping half a chicken parm onto the control console for a basic Vulcan study terminal. I told Bones it was a bad idea to combine the two things, but he seems to think that when I'm not unconscious I should be shoving food into my face because, and I quote:

'We lost enough goddamn time in that snarl-up with your brother and you'll be thanking me after you've sweat out the equivalent weight of a prize dairy cow on that shade-forsaken rock of a planet that pointy-eared silver-tongued bastard calls home.'

...What do you think of my accent, Spock? I realize you've never actually heard Bones talk before, but you gotta trust me when I say it's dead on. Anyway, I'm gonna do my best with this etiquette stuff but I gotta warn you in advance that it's nothing like passing a Starfleet exam. What in the hell do you need three screens to study off of simultaneously? I went cross-eyed trying to do that thing.

...I'll get better, it's just. Yikes. I have a feeling you're gonna adapt way better to life on Earth than I am to life on Vulcan. But then maybe I just have a better impression of your all-around ability to adapt. You're way better at pushing down your personal feelings in service to the greater good.

I can always get there, but it doesn't come naturally. Usually it's only after I've made a big scene. Lately, when I listen to your messages sometimes they steer me around.

If my parents -- my mom -- knew you'd have this effect on me, they probably would've arranged this marriage a lot sooner so they could use you to make me eat my veggies and stop racing hoverbikes and stealing Dad's vintage classic cars and... Well, a whole mess of stuff.

That's my way of saying you're a good influence on me, Spock.

I can't promise the reverse will be true, but I'll try to be useful in other ways. Like as a sounding board for your experiments. Consider me all yours when we're alone together. That's not always a stipulation for the more benign stuff when it comes to human intimacy but I kinda want you all to
myself, Spock. It's weird. Almost spilled my hot chocolate thinking about all the stuff you wanna do to me.

Not that you got into detail, but there's something about a good implication.

You keep me up at night sometimes.

Talk soon.

Jim.”

FROM: James Tiberius Kirk I
TO: Lady Amanda Grayson of Vulcan
SUBJECT: Thank you.
STARDATE: 2250.101

Lady Amanda,

I hope this message finds you well. Spock recently sent me a selection of popular musical recordings on Vulcan, which I'm glad to have some extra time to get used to, otherwise I might've assumed there was a shuttle crash somewhere in the vicinity and everyone was howling over the injuries.

He also told me I have you to thank for making the Vulcans on your end see straight when the subject of our arranged marriage was being tossed around.

I just wanted to say -- I really appreciate you going to bat for us like that. I'll make sure you don't regret it.

All best,

James Tiberius Kirk

__________________________________

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: It was not flattery.
STARDATE: 2250.102
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

Having analyzed your adopted accent with samplings from the American South, I can now safely say that your attempt was closer to a Tennessee drawl than a Georgian drawl—and, as Leonard H. McCoy’s records state he is from Georgia, I am uncertain if it is his accent that is incorrect, or your approximation thereof which has veered from accurate to exaggerated caricature. I cannot simply assume the latter is true, as Leonard H. McCoy has behaved erratically in the past, enough so that it is possible his accent may behave in a similar fashion.

What is his opinion of your imitation of his voice?

According to Earth records, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”.
As you have been studying Vulcan etiquette and phrases, I have been doing the same, so that we are both equally prepared to adapt to our surroundings. The Vulcan mind is from an early age trained to focus on multiple problems simultaneously so as to maximize mental acuity. Therefore, during this preparatory period, I have been learning from multiple encyclopedias at once—one of the sources I have consulted has been your dictionary of slang. Yet I also believe that personal lessons will still be required on a variety of subjects.

If you have begun your remedial instruction in Vulcan etiquette then despite your complaints I must assume, given your mental acuity, you are progressing at a rate that is, at the very least, slightly above average. There are still one hundred and fifty six days before you are to arrive and during that lengthy expanse of time there will be ample opportunity for you to continue to practice that which is not presently familiar to you.

Jim, what is “chicken parm?” I have found references to “chicken parmesan” in Earth recipe books, but did not think it wise to assume that this is the full name of the “chicken parm” with which you have decorated your abdomen. Needless to say, this behavior is not included in any lessons on Vulcan etiquette.

In the evening, before my meditation and optimal resting time, when I am still cogitating multiple problems simultaneously, I acknowledge that more than one subject primarily involving you come to mind. For example, your tendency to steal that which you do not need to steal—but also your “hot chocolate” and your contemplation of my words, which are not, I fully recognize, strictly flirtatious, despite my allusions to intimate subjects.

I do think about those as well.

Goodnight, Jim.”

FROM: Lady Amanda Grayson of Vulcan
TO: Prince James Tiberius Kirk I
SUBJECT: You are most welcome.
STARDATE: 2250.102

Prince James,

What a pleasure it is to hear from you. I certainly hadn’t expected a communication, but the surprise was a delightful one. I find I am yet more grateful that you have chosen to write to me even after hearing the selection of Vulcan music, which is, among other things, an acquired taste. But if your fortitude is such that your intentions have not been swayed, then it is clear the conclusion of this matter will prove satisfactory to all involved.

No—satisfactory is a Vulcan word, neither encouraging or discouraging. It is the logical choice, but it lacks the emphasis I would prefer to convey.

Though the catalyst for the arrangements was Spock’s intervention, it is true that I assisted in whatever, small ways I was able, such as offering to lend my voice to my husband’s ear, and listening to my son’s points as he began to structure his presented argument. I was most gratified to realize, during the proceedings of the latter experience, that it was perhaps—if I may be so bold as to express this private opinion—more than pure logic which compelled my son Spock to speak.

My son’s position has never been an easy one, though I do not suggest he has not weathered the
difficulties without complaint. Perhaps it is the strength of his character; perhaps it is that he simply knows no other way. His place on Vulcan has always been that of an outsider, yet when we traveled to Earth in his youth, the same proved true there, in his other home. The other Vulcan children who studied with him were not like him and though they would not dare to harm him—the commonplace schoolyard tussles which are a constant, it seems, no matter what planet you find yourself on—due to his status, their silence was in some ways more cruel than a bloody nose or a split lip. For a time he had one companion of his own age, with whom he engaged in theoretical conversations and studies, but when she was engaged to be married to a young Vulcan by the name of Stonn and Spock’s duties demanded more of his time, they naturally, logically, went their separate ways.

As such, it has been a concern of mine that the human half of my son, which does not often see the light, has gone unacknowledged for too long. If he was lonely, I could not know; if he yearned for companionship, he would not say it. And I, as his mother—you must excuse me—likely worried for him, maybe even too much.

Yet in the past few months, as gradual as it has been, I have noticed a change in the young man I watch so closely. I may not have a keen Vulcan mind for facts and data, but I am no less capable of marking when this change began and tracing its origins back to his correspondence with you, Prince James. It is my belief—though it would be best if we kept this theory strictly between us—that in you, Spock has found his first, true friend.

I could not have hoped for a better outcome. It seems to me that it must take a special sort of stranger to speak to a part of a person that is so important, but has passed its years in silence for so very long. With that in mind, how could I have sat idly by while an extraordinary person who has already done so much quiet good never came to my house, so that I could offer my personal thanks?

Indeed, Prince James, I also believe that it is I who should be thanking you. But all that will have to wait for such a time as those thanks may be given.

I look forward to seeing you at the end of this year—and, though I am certain he will not say it, my son is eager for it, too.

My warm regards to your mother, Queen Winona, and to your brother, Prince Sam. Live long and prosper.

Lady Amanda Grayson

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: Oh.
STARDATE: 2250.102
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey, Spock.

You were right, it's chicken parm. See, it's a dish that incorporates lean proteins and carbs as well as a crapload of calories with the cheese and the other stuff. I don't actually know everything that goes into it but Bones approved it on my intake list so I'm taking advantage while I can. Messy as all hell though. Don't try to eat it and listen to lectures on etiquette at the same time. I definitely
wouldn't recommend that.

Of course, you wouldn't eat it at all since it's chicken. Do you guys have cheese there? Pasta? Pasta sauce? Probably not. I haven't been getting many lessons on Vulcan anatomy, but it's my understanding you process stuff differently than a human body would anyway. So it makes sense you wouldn't have the same food.

Jesus, I sound about five years old.

Sometimes you make me feel that way, though. Like I'm in first grade giving a report on the principle crops of Vulcan and their important cultural landmarks. I guess you probably don't have grades over there, but trust me when I say I feel like my level of education currently matches what you guys learn at around age six. Then again, it's not like you're marrying me because I'm some kind of Vulcan scholar.

Technically, you're marrying me because you have to. But... I don't know. It's not gonna be the worst thing in the world, is it, Spock?

That was a rhetorical question. You can feel free not to answer it. I already know it's not the worst thing in the world.

... To answer your question, yeah I've done my Bones impression for Bones. He wasn't too impressed. I'll tell him your thoughts on my regional accent, I'm sure he'll be downright tickled that you took his side instead of mine. I've never been to Tennessee or Geor-gi-a so I couldn't say for myself. I just parrot back what I hear and boy do I hear a lot of it. The guy weighs me every day. Spock. That kind of thing takes a toll on your vanity. It takes a toll on my vanity, anyway.

My vanity hurts.

As always, I'm open to clearing up any of your confusion about my life of crime. I wasn't actually stealing them in the sense that I was taking proprietary ownership over the things. I just wanted to drive 'em, and I wasn't allowed so... I took them. In my defense, joyriding in a car is way safer than doing it on a bike.

That's some more Bones wisdom for you, but I'm not gonna try the accent again.

Alluding to intimate subjects is the definition of flirtatious, Spock, you sly minx. Don't pretend like you don't know. Or, alternatively, if Vulcans don't know about flirting, does that mean that I can do it with you right out in public and no one will know what's going on?

I kinda like that.

We'll talk soon, all right?

Tell your mom I hope she's doing well, and thanks for her letter.

...

...Hugs and kisses...

Jim."
FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: I merely stated a fact. If it was flattering, then you have yourself to thank.

STARDATE: 2250.103
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

My mother had alluded yesterday to your communication with her and her intention to reply to you, though she would not divulge the specifics. That is understandable and I will not pry into the matter of your privacy or into hers. I trust that you will understand that, as you are both human, it may be appealing for you simply to accept sentimental interpretations as the truth when they are merely one facet or analysis thereof. My mother is an intelligent woman and her efforts as an ambassador in their own right are not to be discounted, but she is also a product of her race and tends toward emotionalism when it is hardly required.

According to my mother and other popular references in historical literature and accounts, it is commonly expected that a human married couple will have difficulties regarding mothers-in-law. Both our mothers are human, but it would appear from this development that you will not have any difficulty regarding mine, since she anticipates that the two of you will “get along well” according to the precedent you have established.

As I said before, my mother is on the whole exemplary of her race.

Yet before there is the chance for this general conception about mothers-in-law to be proven accurate once again, I will no longer speak of yours to be, save to inform you that she was “happy” to hear from you and equally “happy” to respond. She “cannot wait” until you are here on Vulcan and will likely benefit from your presence as another human within the household. When this comes to pass I will likewise refrain from questioning either of you as to your conversational topics. You have already stated that privacy is an element of life you do not currently enjoy and are also “looking forward” to enjoying it when you are here. Knowing this, I cannot consciously compromise that for you by my behavior.

There is, after all, a difference between scientific inquiry and idle curiosity. I engage in the former.

I must also suggest that vanity, not being a physical part of your person, cannot hurt. Perhaps it may be injured or wounded, but as far as actual pain is concerned, I trust you will not offer these descriptions of your well-being to any doctors on Vulcan. Leonard H. McCoy may be accustomed to your colorful turns of phrase but he is as far from a Vulcan personality as any human I have encountered or even read about. As such, I certainly would not engage in the act of tickling him. I do not believe, given my knowledge of the man in question, that he would appreciate the assault on his person, and as his behavior cannot be predicted at the best of times, the result would be not dissimilar to attempting the same with a le-matya.

Neither act would be advisable.

...It is also likely that you are once again utilizing sarcasm as a means to foster good humor between us. Know that it is not necessary. I already find your companionship satisfactory without any additional efforts on your part.

It is precisely your natural ability to color your conversation that suggests my inability to do the same will not provide the entertainment or innuendo as you feel you have offered. You make simple mention of considering that which we will do to one another—or with one another—when we are
together, but for me any mention of the same would be far from simple.

That does not—or should not—imply that I am not also considering it.

Goodnight, Jim.”

---

FROM: JTK  
TO: STS  
SUBJECT: Well, thanks me.  
STARDATE: 2250.103  
SECURE CHANNEL

"Oh my god, please never talk to me about your tickling Bones again. I don't think I'll ever get that picture out of my head.

I don't even think he is ticklish. No one I know is. It's like a curse or something. I just so happen to be ticklish, but I'm not gonna tell you where. Gotta leave a few things for you to discover on our wedding night.

Speaking of which, did we ever talk about that? Like, the actual wedding. We've spent so much time talking about it like it's a foregone conclusion that I never got around to asking about the particulars. I'm sure there's someone here I could ask, but it's late now... Most of the staff's asleep. So -- I figure I'll do what I always do when I have questions no one can answer and fire them your way, Spock.

Do you know anything about the ceremony? If we're doing it on Vulcan or Earth, whether it's supposed to be Vulcan or human-style. And are we having it before I visit you or after... Because at first I was thinking this visit'd be a getting-to-know-you type thing, but the more we talk the more I feel like I know you already. And then I start to seriously doubt my self control when we're finally alone together. I mean, I don't want to violate any treaties or Vulcan traditions but I'm gonna tell you frankly, I don't know how I'm gonna keep my hands off you once I'm on Vulcan.

...

I've never really given it much thought until now. Don't get me wrong -- I've given a LOT of thought to getting my hands on you, but the official order of things, the way this whole arrangement's supposed to shake down... A year on Vulcan, a year on Earth, then the rest of our lives to do whatever. I've never considered the details. It always just seemed like a done deal, so I never had to plan what went into it.

Do you have any preferences? I'm sure we won't actually get to contribute anything -- the ceremony itself seems like something the bureaucratic types will wanna swarm all over, and I'd rather sacrifice that than any other part of our lives together. Get it over with. But I figured I'd ask all the same. I'm willing to give negotiations a shot if there's anything specific you're looking for.

Besides me, of course.

I liked your joke about the le-matya. Look at you, learning humor. I better step it up or you're gonna outstrip me. Vulcan etiquette's still going at a snail's pace. I'm gonna go out on a limb and say it's probably not my strength. Which is ironic considering how much I've been chowing down to keep my strength up.
If I get fat I'm gonna grow a beard, OK. How do you feel about that?

Hugs and kisses.

Jim.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

I am as cold as Vulcan blood today. You guys keep me warm!

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: Fascinating.
STARDATE: 2250.104
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

As yet, the details are not complete and the plans are still, to my understanding, in the development stage. When they have been completed we will both be informed and fully briefed on the roles we will be expected to fill and the ceremonies we will be expected to attend. The time that remains will be devoted to committing to memory every step and practicing our rituals until we can perform them without error. All I can say now with any certainty is that it will not be private and will likely honor the traditions of both our worlds and cultures as a prime example of true compromise. Since we will be examples, there will be many eyes—Vulcan, human, Federation and non-Federation races—upon us.

It is my supposition that we will follow Vulcan ritual on Vulcan, then travel to Earth, where we will be joined in a human matrimonial ceremony for your people to witness. At this time, from what I have learned of the paparazzi, many photographic images will be taken and will appear on live news networks and online news bulletins for many days. Therefore it is in our best interest to maintain an exterior worthy of two planets that will not reflect poorly on either of our persons, abilities, or associations.

This is only a supposition. However, I have based it upon extensive general knowledge that suggests my supposition will prove accurate in time.

You are also likely correct in your supposition that we will have little input in the course of these proceedings. The marriage ceremonies will be traditional; this is, obviously, not in question. It is therefore not unwise of Doctor McCoy to prepare you physically for the trials you will undergo on Vulcan, beginning with the marriage ceremony, as it will undoubtedly last for the better part of a day and night, and will demand physical fortitude from you that will only be amplified by the temperature of the planet and the composition of its atmosphere, to which you are unaccustomed.

Of course, there will be rigorous training exercises for you prior in atmospheric simulation pods; if there are not, then it is the negligence of the Vulcan attaches currently in attendance on Earth. Vulcans are not negligent. I suspect the training will begin shortly. And, due to your Starfleet entrance examination results, you should prove adequately suited to the challenge.

My preferences are irrelevant. To allow myself to indulge in the act of imagining what I would prefer would be a waste of energies. But I would not mind listening to you indulge in that act. You are equally suited to indulgences as to physical aptitude tests.
After the ceremonies, our preferences will become...less irrelevant. Though after the Vulcan ceremony, it is improbable that you will be eager for demanding physical activities. Perhaps at this point, spooning would prove the wisest course of action, so as not to place overwhelming strain on your person.

You will not get fat, Jim. There is no need to contemplate the growth of facial hair that will prove uncomfortable on Vulcan.

...Ex. Oh. Vee.

Good night, Jim." 

FROM: JTK
TO: STS
SUBJECT: You're not so bad yourself.
STARDATE: 2250.104
SECURE CHANNEL

"Your confidence in my physical appearance is both noted and appreciated, Spock. I always figured Vulcans didn't care about that kind of thing but you've brought it up enough that I have to assume you not only care what I look like but you're downright attracted to me. Needless to say, I wasn't expecting much ego-stroking when I heard I was going to marry a Vulcan, but I think that half human part of you is more prominent than you thought. At least when it comes to certain things. You should trust your instincts, Spock. I can only speak to what I've seen, but what I've seen is pretty great.

I'm attaching a pic Chapel snapped of me making my way through lunch on Bones' program. Now you've seen chicken parm, if not live and in the flesh then a reasonable approximation. Also I seem to remember saying I'd send you more pictures before I got put on this stupid diet so here. This counts, even though she didn't warn me she was taking it and the flash makes it look like I'm undergoing demonic possession.

I'm only commenting because I know how you feel about my eyes, and they're not their usual shade of blue here. I'll work on fixing that in the next shot.

...That's me being a little facetious, in case you hadn't already figured it out.

Our wedding sounds like it's gonna be boring as hell on the Earth side of things. Strenuous will be a change from that, at least. Although jesus, Spock, you made it sound like I'd be wrestling le-matyra or something, not standing around for eleven hours or however long it lasts. I think as long as I'm not moving I should be OK.

I'm supposed to start atmospheric pressure chamber training tomorrow, now that Bones has had a couple weeks to get some food into me. He says he doesn't want me sweating it all out prematurely, but I'm more concerned with the thin air than the heat, if I'm being honest. It was better when I thought I was just gonna be sweating, but sweating and gasping and heaving for breath aren't gonna do much for my image on Vulcan. I still don't know how you guys wear so many clothes. If ever a culture was gonna adapt to wearing loincloths and togas, you'd think it'd be you guys.

You'd look good in either of those, Spock. You've got good shoulders. And good other stuff, I'm sure. Just haven't seen it yet.
Anyway, it might be a good idea to get some advance training on managing my breath capacity and stuff. I can think of a few strenuous activities I'd like to take part in on Vulcan, and it's gonna kill the mood if I can't even breathe.

...

You really wanna spoon me on our honeymoon, Spock?

All right, just for that, I'll tell you what I'd like. We jet off to some distant planetoid, neutral ground, just you and me, not one of those prepackaged, over-sanitized resort planets, but something warm and sandy, maybe with the ocean. A good binary sunset. Then we exchange rings, or whatever you guys do -- I know Vulcan fingers are sensitive so I can't imagine you wanting to wear something like that all the time -- and just... Look up at the sky. Until it gets dark and all the stars come out. Then -- you pick one. Whichever one you want, and that's where we'll go next.

That's what I'd do, if it was up to me.

Oh, and you gotta hold hands when you stargaze. Earth rules.

Duly noted that you wouldn't like me with a beard.

Have a good day, Spock.

Hugs and kisses.

Jim."

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth
SUBJECT: I do not endeavor to be bad.
STARDATE: 2250.105
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

Earth rules on stargazing vary from the “rules” of stargazing on Vulcan. No hand-holding is required and I have engaged in what may be deemed as the act on numerous occasions in the past without company with whom to commit to hand-holding, much less the act of hand-holding itself. As compromise is our prime objective, should we be called upon to stargaze together in the future, I will allow Earth rules to take precedent over the lack of rules set down on Vulcan. Hand-holding will be a mandatory element of the experience from hereon out. I will also refrain from the act until such a time as you have arrived in order to adhere to the new rules as they have been agreed upon.

The act of imagining, without intention to act upon what has been imagined, or with full disclosure that action will not be possible—as in following the elements of a definitive plan—remains, in my mind, extraneous. You have created, from your imagination, a not unappealing scenario of what we “would” do if we “could” do it, while being fully aware—as are we both—that we cannot and will not. While it creates a distinct picture it is little more than a shared fiction. With this practice, rather than the acceptance of and adherence to new and previously foreign rules, I am less familiar. The very ideology behind such forays into the obviously fictional is alien to me.
And yet it, too, is not unpleasant. Were it to be possible—but of course, it is not.

It is sensible and judicious to begin atmospheric training as early as possible in order to allow your body the requisite period of time to begin its adaptations to a planet that will, to your physicality, be largely inhospitable. Given enough time to adapt, you will not perceive the heat to be as unforgiving as it is likely to seem at first. My mother is capable of wearing the appropriate attire—heavy robes and scarves—for the wife of Sarek and does so without complaint or perspiration. It is with this demand in mind that meditation may once again prove constructive, even valuable, to you. To regulate your breathing and maintain a general state of calm will assist you in preventing inner, emotional turmoil from exacerbating your perception of the heat and your inability to breathe in the relatively thin air.

Yet these are topics upon which the instructors from Vulcan are equally capable of informing you.

I recognize that it would be equally in the spirit of compromise for me to speak with the obvious romanticism with which you are so comfortable. Yet it is true that Vulcans do not wear rings due to the sensitivity of our fingers and the importance of our hands in touch telepathy. Also I cannot help but recognize, though I will not frustrate you with an extensive list of my findings as you have no doubt already come to the same conclusions yourself, that a remote and untamed planet such as the one you have described would provide a multitude of dangers that will not be “romantic” in the slightest should we be faced with even one of them.

Therefore as a proposed offer I will wear the provided ring on a chain around my neck so as to avoid the complications wearing it in its designated place, on my finger, would present. I do intend to “spoon” on the night after our Vulcan ceremony as I find it prudent to have a definitive plan in place for that which has not yet been personally practiced. If you have any additions to this proposal that are viable, then I would hear them and include them in the outline for this event.

You should not allow Nurse Chapel to take any visual references of you via photograph again. You are far more aesthetically appealing than her ability to capture your appearance suggests.

Good night, Jim. Ex, oh, vee.”

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: You could be a bad little Vulcan if you tried, I bet.
STARDATE: 2250.105
SECURE CHANNEL

"Hey... Spock...

Whoa.

Jesus, that sounds -- awful. Gimme a sec.”

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: Let's try that again.
STARDATE: 2250.105
SECURE CHANNEL
Spock,

Sorry about the earlier recording. I didn't mean to send it but my fingers are basically running on autopilot at the moment and I hit confirm without thinking.

Anyway, I'm not recording anything tonight because I'm trying to practice my breathing. That, and I'm wheezing like a sick sehlat right now, so I probably wouldn't sound all that great anyway. Part of which you probably heard for yourself.

The Vulcan attaches let slip that I should've gotten started on this stuff way back, when Sam's arrival knocked me off the radar, so I've been trying to catch up. Spending extra hours in the pressure chambers, that sort of thing. I figure the sooner I get used to it the better I'll do, but I wasn't expecting the difference to be so -- intense. Thin air alone does a number on the human brain and lungs, but the heat is a real burn on top of it. I don't think I'm prone to altitude sickness or anything like that, but I've had some near-misses when it comes to fainting spells.

I'm glad I'm getting this out of the way before I get there. I can't imagine what kind of impression I'd be giving about human constitutions if I got to Vulcan and collapsed dead on the runway.

Dead there is a descriptor attached to the act of falling, not a condition I plan to take on anytime soon.

I've never really given thought to a wedding ceremony, considering I wasn't planning on getting hitched at all until ours was decided and after that I figured there'd be ministers of flowers and whatnot to make all the choices for us, so that was just... A touch of inspiration, I guess. I'm glad you liked it. As much as anyone can appreciate total sentimental overload.

Your mom's my hero, you should tell her that. Since she's setting such a good example for me and all, I don't have any option but to try and make her happy by following in her lead. No headscarves, though. Obviously, because you think I have such a nice head and all.

I had a whole bunch of suggestions before I started to get an idea of what standing around in the Vulcan climate is gonna do to my stamina. Three hours was about all I could take and I know that's only a fraction of the traditional ceremony. But there's a lot to be said for the power of positive thinking, and even more to be said for the power of positively wanting to get into your pants on our wedding night, so we'll see how it goes. I can be very stubborn when I want. Just ask Bones. Don't actually ask Bones though because I don't want him involved. He's already cursed me out plenty for overstaying my welcome in the atmospheric chambr, but like i said i've got catching uplp

FROM: j
TO: s
SUBJECT: oops.
STARDATE: 2250.106
SECURE CHANNEL

fell asleep i think. or possibly passed out. sorry. hit some stuff with my face on the way down.

i'll pass on your comments to chapel re: her photography skills.

have a good day, spock.

i'm all right.
FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Do not over-exert yourself.  
STARDATE: 2250.106  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Once again I find that my customary greeting is challenged by your very behavior, which has proven contrary to the sentiment of peace as well as long life. If Doctor McCoy has not yet informed you that spending extra hours in the simulation chamber over a shorter period of time is not comparable to spending fewer hours over a longer period—which I suspect he may have, given that he is forthright with his opinions and undaunted when it comes to sharing them—then allow me to be the first to inform you of this fact.

You cannot hope to achieve a similar effect by concentrating your efforts in such a fashion, at least as far as this pursuit is concerned. You may do permanent damage to your system and if that alone does not perturb you, consider Doctor McCoy’s reaction, and you will be better chastised for your misplaced enthusiasm.

If I must contact him again regarding your health, then I will not hesitate to do so.

The Council is well aware that you may have physical limitations and would not require of you more than you are able to give. Stubbornness best serves the stubborn when it is spent less liberally than you seem content to call upon it at the slightest provocation. There will be nothing to prove, nor will any in my service or on the planning committee demand that which would bring you harm or make you ill. All that will be required is you, in a single piece, without permanent damage done to your brain, your lungs, and your heart; the rest will be amended as those around us see fit.

The truth, Jim, is that your efforts will not garner praise or flattery—not on Vulcan. You could commit yourself with your customary zeal and determination to the task until your lungs ache and your vision blurs, until you are able to stand beside any Vulcan and endure without flinching even once, but you will always be human to them. A Vulcan does not approve of a job well done or a role well played because that it should be well done or well played is only logical. That is the purpose of committing oneself to any task and achieving one’s intention is not worthy of remark; it is simply expected.

Yet they will watch. They will observe. They will see and they will evaluate. That is the way.

It is in some ways admirable that you exhibit such determination but I believe it preferable that you should not suffer outright. Obstacles are one thing, but those that are self-erected and if compounded become self-inflicted wounds are quite another.

Also, as the ceremony will involve traditional garb, I will not be wearing “pants” for you to “get into” on the night of our Vulcan wedding. I will be wearing robes. Perhaps that will prove less difficult for “getting into” by which I assume you mean “taking off”. Should it still prove too
difficult I would be able to assist you in that task, at the very least.

I write to you rather than record as, given what I know of your personality, I do not believe you would be content to type to me, nor do you wish for me to hear you “wheezing”, and therefore this shift in medium will allow you to maintain a sense of pride that I assure you, by this point, is wholly unnecessary.

Good night, Jim.

XOV,

Spock.

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: You love it.
STARDATE: 2250.106
SECURE CHANNEL

"All right, you asked for it by bringing my pride into this thing. You think it's unnecessary? Fine. Recordings away, here we go. Right now I can type about as good as I talk -- and at least if I fall asleep, it'll shut down after awhile.

Jesus, Spock, you paint a bleak picture of the Vulcan lifestyle there. You fight and fight to live up to their expectations and then they don't even tell you when you've done a good job? That's harsh. Thanks for giving me the heads up but oh my god, Spock.

I'm so tired. You gotta... You gotta be nice to humans every once in awhile, you know. We're like dogs, we like getting pats on the head, treats, that kinda thing. Don't quote me on that. I'm just tired. Did I say that already?

...

Something tells me I'm gonna regret sending this thing.

But we're kind of in a routine now, you and me. I'm not saying you'd miss it if I skipped a day, but I think you'd miss it, Spock.

Guess I did say it.

I'm not fainting all over the place anymore. I quit toughing it out past the preset times, since Bones threatened to bust in and carry me out himself. I told him that there was no way I was letting anyone carry me around in their arms without the express approval of my fiance, and I didn't think you were gonna approve it.

Vulcan still feels like the bowels of hell but I guess the idea is that so long as I don't feel like that once I'm actually there I'll be all right.

Stresses me out a little that you think I'm not even going to be able to get you out of those robes. I think you're vastly underestimating my dexterity here. Either that or there's something you're not telling me about this ceremony. Mud wrestling. Poison drinking. Did you say you're not going to be wearing pants?
Am I not going to be wearing pants?

I'm getting excited about this wedding, Spock. Of course, that could have something to do with the heatstroke.

...I'm kidding, of course.

You can hear me so I'm not wheezing. In fact I just blew you a kiss. I know you said you didn't care for that expression once, but I'm doing it anyway. I'm real stubborn that way.

Hugs and kisses, Spock. Have a good day.

Jim.”
Chapter Summary

The last of the letters. (For now, at least.) Stay tuned for Sunday when true minds meet.

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: Define “it”  
STARDATE: 2250.107  
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

I warn you of the Vulcan lifestyle because there is more to its landscape than simply its deserts, its heat, its lack of moons, its atmospheric composition, and its dangerous fauna. What may appear logical to its natives may appear equally illogical to you if you are not prepared to face it.

There were times during my childhood when it appeared illogical even to me. However, I was young and lacked the context necessary to understand the wisdom behind a silence.

Is it true that we should strive to our highest potential in order to gain the accolades of others, or should we apply ourselves fully to every task because it is the logical thing to do? To rely on the promise of praise as incentive to succeed would be to equate the results of that success with the attention it would garner.

That is the Vulcan perspective.

The human perspective is different. Your words alone about treats make that abundantly clear.

But then, by your own admission, you are tired.

...Very well. Your efforts are admirable, Jim, if on occasion misguided in their application. There are not many who would be able to do all that you have done, nor would they have given themselves over to the tasks so completely. That being said, there are times when that sense of completion may do more harm than good. I would advise reconsidering your strategies and tactical applications in order to better achieve your goals in the future.

That was complimentary while maintaining its honesty. Have I been sufficiently “nice” for your needs, given the extent to which you are pushing yourself? I cannot pat you on the head, considering the distance between us, nor can I send you treats without risk of violating Doctor McCoy’s dietary constraints. I would not cross the doctor. ...Again.

He may also rest assured that there will be no poison, nor will there be mud-wrestling. I need not remind you that, as Vulcan is a desert planet, mud would not be in abundance, nor would it be included in any of our rituals. If I have implied that you would not be prepared to undress me yourself, that was not my intent. I suggested merely that it might be a task we could do...together.
FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: My behavior.
STARDATE: 2250.107
SECURE CHANNEL

“Oh yeah, that's the stuff right there. That felt good, didn't it, Spock? You wanted to get all that out of your system, I can tell. And I liked hearing it. I think that'll last me a long while. I'm gonna save this recording for a rainy day.

Not a literal rainy day. That's an expression. Means I'm gonna hold onto it for when I need to hear something good again.

Don't get me wrong, I save all your recordings. But I don't replay them all the time. I might if I had the time, but I'm so busy sweating out my brains in atmospheric training chambers these days that I don't actually get around to listening to hours of taped content. We're up to hours now, did you know that? Probably. You're someone who knows things. The facts, the details. It's intimidating as hell, but attractive. Think that might have something to do with how you said I was drawn to things that present a challenge.

I get this feeling like you're going to be a big challenge, Spock. I look forward to seeing whether I'm up to it.

I think we would've gotten along as kids. You sound like a real firecracker. Something tells me that's part of why we connect so well now. You're a little bit of a rebel. Even if you don't know it, I can tell. I like that about you.

Anyway, it's probably a good thing we didn't know each other as kids because I would've beat the snot out of those Vulcan punks who were giving you a hard time. Not that you need me to, since it sounds like you did all right on your own. Still, it would've lengthened my odds on being a suitable match for a Vulcan prince by a long shot. Throwing punches isn't very regal. I've heard, anyway.

So I've heard, anyway.

I'll tell Bones you're on his side, AGAIN. I think it'll make him feel better about this whole thing. To tell you the truth, Spock, I think he's been way more nervous about my acclimation to Vulcan and its culture than I ever get.

Then again, I have a secret weapon up my sleeve. Hard to get uptight when I know I've got an expert Vulcan tutor on call.

Not that I think of you as a tutor, but it sure doesn't hurt.

Probably for the best you're not here in person, though. I think I might get distracted if I had to look at you and listen to all those boring etiquette tips at the same time. I'd listen, but my mind would definitely start to... Wander.
So you're gonna help me undress you, huh, Spock? Sounds like the beginning of a good wedding night to me.

Have a good day.

I find it hard to believe you accepting hugs and kisses as often as I say it, but just in case -- hugs and kisses.

Jim.”

---

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: That would be a curious choice of locations in which to place my affections.  
STARDATE: 2250.108  
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

I would not anticipate or expect that you would listen multiple times to any of these recordings, as you are likely busy with your duties and to waste time on repetition would be to their detriment. I have attempted to make all my communications clear and concise so that repeat listening would not prove mandatory in order for thorough comprehension. If I have failed in these attempts I will endeavor to edit myself better in the future so that I do not waste your attention when it is being called elsewhere.

You are correct that I know how many hours, minutes, and seconds we have devoted to our recordings over the past one-hundred and four days. If you seek to know the exact duration I can inform you of the statistics I have gathered so far.

Know also that I am not on Doctor McCoy’s “side” and that interpretation of my show of solidarity is a misinterpretation of my position. The “side” I am on, Jim, is wholly yours, and if that includes aligning myself with your physician then it speaks well of said physician, as well as suggesting that his position is on your side as well. His duties are to remain vigilant in matters of your health and if I support him it is in support of you, rather than an act made against you.

Given your frustration at my perceived betrayal of the solidarity and trust we have built during our communications, I will allow that to inform my reaction to your suggestion that I am a “firecracker” and will not take offense to what would otherwise be an insult. As for being a rebel, I will assure you, I am not. Now that you are aware I was not insulting you by “siding” with Doctor McCoy, perhaps you will be inclined to rescind that insult.

If my presence would provide such an overt distraction then it is for the best that I did not attend Earth with the latest Vulcan delegation. Distractions at this time could prove disastrous. It was a fundamental element of my training to focus on various external stimuli simultaneously but as you have not received this training, our distance at this time remains ideal.

When we meet, we will not be allowed privacy—not initially—either.

When we have achieved that privacy you hold in such high esteem, your anticipation—if unchecked —may prove equally disastrous. Maintain realistic expectations in order to avoid disappointment.
The act of undressing is merely the act of undressing. If you require assistance I will provide it.

Though perhaps your presence and participation in that which would otherwise be routine will have an unpredictable effect so that it becomes more than it once was.

Good night, Jim. I will not deny what you have offered via your now-familiar farewell.

And ex, oh, vee."

FROM: Jim  
TO: Spock  
SUBJECT: Are you worried these are gonna go to a different James Tiberius Kirk not of Earth?  
STARDATE: 2250.108  
SECURE CHANNEL  
"Hey, Spock.

I never meant to insult you. If I did, I take it back. Obviously. I wouldn't say anything that you'd take offense to on purpose. I thought it was kind of a compliment, but if it's not then forget I ever said anything. Or do the Vulcan version of that, which is understanding I didn't mean it, I guess.

I did mean it, just not how it sounded.

I meant it in the way where you're flattered and not insulted, but then I guess Vulcans don't get flattered either.

There's gotta be a part of all this that appeals to the human side of you though, Spock. I tend to forget about it myself since it comes up so rarely. But you shouldn't act like it doesn't exist. You're gonna give yourself a complex that way. Which is different from being a complex person, don't get me wrong. I like that you're complicated. I don't think you should try and synthesize yourself down to your most basic self just because it's -- I don't know. Not easier. You don't go for easy. More palatable maybe.

I'm interested in getting to know both sides of you, that's all I mean. And I hope you don't think that's an insult.

You're the one who noticed, but I'm still trying to get on your good side. It would go against my prime directive to start offending you all over the place now.

...  

Usually I get that kind of thing out of the way right up front.

Anyway, it's fine. I get that you were only trying to look out for me. I don't do so well with other people doing that, but then I'm not so good at it myself either. So I guess I'm not gonna hold it against you. I could hold other stuff against you, but I wouldn't want to go getting my hopes up. Again.

I don't think I'm being particularly hopeful when I say that we'll have a lot more fun undressing than you're anticipating.

Trust me.
...And maybe I'll find a way to get us some of that privacy you seem to think will be in such short supply.

All I'm saying is that if there had been physical hugs and kisses for the number of times I've said it then we'd already be more than a little familiar with each other. If you know what I'm saying.

Hugs and kisses anyway though.

Jim.”

FROM: Spock of Vulcan  
TO: James Tiberius Kirk of Earth  
SUBJECT: I do not understand.  
STARDATE: 2250.109  
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

Anticipation and imagination appear to—for lack of a better phrase—go hand in hand. Perhaps that explains the difficulty I tend to have with both. A similar difficulty for a similar indulgence.

You must understand that it was not merely a preference during my childhood that I silenced any potential of human instinct within me, should it have threatened to surface. It was human instinct which caused me to respond to the obvious taunts of my peers—which were logical, and would have been more easily disproven by a calm, dispassionate silence than an ultimately Pyrrhic assault. I gained nothing when I succumbed to those passions. Neither did they gain anything.

A human weakness.

...So I thought.

But you are not incorrect when you suggest that the matter is more complex than a simple, hierarchical valuation, which would place one heritage above the other, lines starkly drawn between the two halves.

The choice as it was made—the choice as I made it—to adhere to the Vulcan side of myself was done for many reasons, and they were, I assure you, only logical. As I was living on Vulcan, being raised among Vulcans, and given the irrefutable truth of my father’s position, my duties were obvious to me. That “human nature” would have provided an obstacle was also obvious.

Though I have not known many humans and all my observations are based upon what I have learned through my studies, know that I have studied humanity extensively and my findings are not, as a whole, negative. My mother has given me cause to regard her actions, choices, composure and intellect in high esteem. The abilities of any individual, based upon their qualities, are all that is necessary to surpass general descriptors of race or standing. Every individual must be appraised on their own merits, rather than upon prejudices.

What I know...is not in question, though knowledge itself is in constant question. Even now it is peculiarly difficult to speak of myself and I am also ninety-eight-point-zero-five-seven-three percent certain that I would have better served us both with a topic that more closely resembles those we have already addressed. For example, our robes. And undressing, divesting ourselves of
them. And other intimate physical actions best experienced in the company of another living and consensual adult organism with a tangible body.

I would not have spoken in this fashion at all if you were on any other side of mine than one which can generally be interpreted as positive—or, in plainer terms, “good.”

Goodnight, Jim.

Ex, oh, vee.”

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: You can just address these to Jim.
STARDATE: 2250.109
SECURE CHANNEL

“Hey, Spock,

You don't have to feel like I'm only entertained by the dirty stuff, Spock. You know. The naughty parts of our letters. I know that I come across as single-minded, probably because it's easy for me to get caught up in the things that immediately attract my interest. I've got a short attention span and I have to admit the long distance has made me antsy when it comes to matters of -- let's call it romantic intimacy. But that doesn't mean I don't appreciate the other stuff.

I like hearing about your childhood, even if it makes me crazy. I wish I could go back in time and just smack every one of those kids in the head for you. Not that you'd like it. But it pisses me off thinking about you as a kid there all by yourself without a buddy or anything. Mitchell might be a shit now but he was a good friend growing up. And Sam before he left. Hell, even Bones calms down about my allergies long enough to have a good time with me sometimes. I can't imagine going through everything alone.

I admire that about you.

So I guess I wouldn't change it.

No, I still might. I don't like the idea of you being in pain, Spock, even if it made you into someone great. It's not something I'm good at, sacrificing one for the other. Doesn't seem like a fair compromise.

...

I guess what I'm saying is that I want you to be happy. Not all the time, I'm not looking to hold you emotionally hostage or anything like that. Even humans with all their emotional baggage aren't in a good mood all the time. But I'd like it if I could make you happy.

Sometimes I think I do.

I wish I could blame the contents of this letter on a brain-scrambling session in the atmospheric chamber, but I've started writing you before I head in, so that I can go right to sleep and pass out without embarrassing myself too much beforehand. It's not getting any easier, but I've stopped passing out and getting woken up by Bones jabbing oxygen compounds into my leg, so I guess I'm
making progress. I was kidding myself if I thought I was gonna get to escape to Vulcan without bringing him along though.

I think he should meet I-Chaya. That'll be a fun introduction.

... Follow-up, I think we should practice undressing each other as many times as possible before the actual ceremony. Maybe if I drill the routine enough times I can log it away in muscle memory and I won't have to worry about fatigue impairing my performance, if you know what I mean.

Hugs and kisses, Spock.

I'm not particular as to where those kisses land.

Jim.”

FROM: Spock  
TO: Jim  
SUBJECT: I have complied with your request.  
STARDATE: 2250.110  
SECURE CHANNEL

“Jim, peace and long life.

Your commitment has been noted. It will provide its own rewards when you have a higher statistical likelihood of not collapsing even once during the marriage ceremony.

However, as your Doctor McCoy has provided his own method of assistance in the form of oxygen compound hypodermic injections, I do not believe it would be untoward or overly generous to offer my additional assistance when I am able.

Should you, at the time of our Vulcan marriage ceremony, anticipate that you are on the verge of collapse—and your honesty will be essential, matters of pride and stubbornness set aside for the greater good—we may establish a private means of communicating that fact beforehand, so that I will be able to lend my support. If Doctor McCoy accompanies you to Vulcan as your medical assistant, a potentiality that is not unwise given your multitude of physical ailments and propensity for behavior that incurs physical danger, then he may also supply me with oxygen compound hypodermics, a number of which to be determined at his discretion, along with a lesson on how to administer them most effectively based on my preparatory studies of the task and his firsthand experience.

Or I may offer my own physical support. Should you find it necessary to lean on me, as we will be standing in close proximity for the majority of the ritual, you have my express permission to do so.

I understand that support is one of the many important points of agreement in any marriage, whether the individuals are Vulcan, human, half of each, or otherwise. Even at such a time before we are joined in marriage, it is my intention to provide that support. As such, I will encourage practice of any sort. Your dedication to a state of full preparation is, as already mentioned, noted and supported.

You have already provided support in return. There is no need to question yourself as to whether or not you have performed these duties sufficiently. It would seem that these provisions are
instinctive—natural—to your person. Perhaps it is that definition of “human” which is most complimentary.

Jim.

...I have thought, due to the nature of our recent conversation, about the task of undressing you. In order to ready myself to the best of my abilities I have studied the garments we will be wearing and have determined the most efficient means of their removal. Will efficiency be appreciated, or will postponement of the desired state in order to heighten the promise of its achievement be preferred?

When I have set my mind to the pursuit of purposeful knowledge in the past, that “lonely” state—which may have once been painful—has proved less so over time. The same has proven true when I have set my mind to thoughts of you.

I trust this is all too human. Sarek would not approve. My mother, however, might not disapprove.

Good night, Jim. Ex, oh, vee.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

A marriage ceremony and a wedding night.

Chapter Notes

CHECK OUT THIS AMAZING ART DONE BY LOARTS/LOARTS-ART ON TUMBLR !!!!!!!!!!!!
Updating schedule will now change to once every three days. On the plus side, the chapters will now definitely be longer.
Twelve hours in, and Jim still remembers Spock’s last message.

Which is good. It’s a good thing. If he didn’t remember the letter, he’d think the person he thought he knew isn’t also the person standing next to him. That the person he thought he knew could’ve been the product of wishful thinking.

_Spock’s last message._ They’re actually lighting torches. Because it’s already hot, and they’re Vulcans, and they’re logically making it even hotter. Jim’s fingers twitch, the air drying his sweat as soon as it beads on his temple and on the back of his neck, especially in the hollow at the base of his spine.

Spock’s last message. He signed off the same as always.

_I will see you—literally—tomorrow. Good night, Jim. Ex, oh, vee._

Like the letters had nothing to do with each other. Jim could hear the commas in his pauses. These little gaps he thought about bridging practically every hour on the hour—more generally, all the time.

There are none of those pauses in the desert, on the sand, bare feet on each burning grain until Jim imagines he can count them. One, two, skip to a hundred, skip to three hundred, can’t feel my big toe, or my heel, seven hundred, _stop lighting torches._

Twelve hours in. Less than an hour of standing in place after too many hours of walking an old path between sandy red mountains and shimmering orange sunlight, the air undulating, water and cold San Francisco bay breezes and sheeting rain and motorcycles a distant memory. And Spock’s last message, Spock’s voice betraying no nervousness, replaced by the ascetic silhouette at Jim’s side, the dignified hand gesture forming the V with long, pale fingers.

Jim thought, at the time, getting red-hot under the collar for more reasons than just the heat, _I’ve talked dirty about those fingers_, and realized too late he’d stuck his tongue out to the corner of his mouth. Like a dog trying to breathe by panting.

Twelve hours in and Jim’s the only one who knows about dirty talking and Spock’s fingers—Spock’s hands currently tucked into the sleeves of his robes—because Spock’s profile belongs to a stranger, even if Spock’s voice belongs to Jim.

And Spock’s hands.

Hand.

Technically.

In marriage.

But that’s an Earth thing.

He’s trying not to think about that. _Earth things._ It seems selfish, even self-serving, to travel back there in the middle of a Vulcan ceremony. Like he’s asserting his own traditions over the new ones he’s supposed to be embracing.

He remembers his directive. He’s the bridge between two worlds. A diplomatic envoy. He’s probably dying of dehydration and acute heat prostration. Pretty soon he’s not gonna be able to
assert control over his body against Vulcan gravity, let alone against remembering, fondly, the simplicity and relatively forgiving elemental compositions of Earth traditions.

Vulcans can say whatever they want about humans but they know how to throw a party. And their torches are mostly electric instead of giant bonfires, flames radiating orange heat that seeps into Jim’s skin. They slick his body with sweat under his heavy robes and it stiffens as it dries, leaving him itchy all over.

Salty too, probably.

_Vulcans don’t like too much seasoning on their food._

Jim’s not thinking about Spock tasting him. Definitely not. Probably. He’s too lightheaded for thinking, but not too lightheaded for sneaking looks at the dappled shadows cast over Spock’s profile in the torchlight.

The first gong reverberates through his body, from the soles of his feet, pulsing through his knees, his gut, his lungs. It’s followed by a series of chimes, sounding like the firelight looks.

Spock doesn’t react, doesn’t even twitch. He holds his ground, still and unflinching as stone, like every other Vulcan standing witness.

Maybe Jim’s hearing things. Auditory hallucinations.

Well, it wouldn’t be the first time. He’s starting to wonder whether he imagined that fondness in Spock’s voice, dozens of recordings he saved over the course of months and listened to in the early mornings, hiding his PADD and his head under a pillow to block out the sunlight.

If they could just talk to each other, then he’d know for sure.

But in twelve hours, they’ve barely spoken two words.

Jim’s spent longer than twelve hours dreaming of the secrets they could share under a moonless sky. None of them involved a desert lit up with fire, countless Vulcans in a lot less clothing than Jim had to put on, banging ceremonial gongs and shaking what looks like a set of cymbals strung together on an abacus.

He thinks he should write to Spock and ask him what that’s called. Except that he doesn’t need to sit down at a PADD and fire off a message to Spock because Spock’s right next to him. Closer than ever. Except for the parade of Vulcans and their tiny cymbals, it’s downright cozy.

Honestly, Jim misses the letters.

At least when they couldn’t see each other he never had to worry about making eye contact.

When he writes home, he’ll say it was fine. Nothing to worry about. No fainting, none that he can remember, and Bones would know if he had. Did the family, all of Earth proud. Without the training, Sam would never be able to say that. Firelight on the cymbals; the rumbling of the gongs pulsing through the sand, since after all there’s no deep, buried veins of water to claim that right. The stars he studied on his PADD are right there overhead, but the black sky muddies with curls of rising smoke from the bonfires and the incense.

The noise stops, but it’s like watching a distant star explode. It takes time for the truth to travel, and by the point it finally reaches Jim’s ears, they’re still ringing on their own. He squints but he stops himself from swaying.
It’s then—as brief as the whisper of a cool night wind—that Jim feels the side of Spock’s hand brushing against his.

An ancient Vulcan with the craziest hair mounts a pedestal of rough-hewn sandrock and holds up both hands.

Twelve hours in, and just like that, they’re actually done.

*

In the silence, Jim’s private quarters, overlooking the desert with the bonfires dying one by one, Bones hands him an electrolyte stabilizing drink in a wrinkly pack and it tastes like blueberry pie but also like gasoline. Jim chokes it back greedily despite its shortcomings, wheezing when it’s nothing but an empty curl of silver packaging, liquids squeezed dry.

The familiar pinch of a hypo stuck in his lower leg barely brings a flinch, probably because his limbs are way too tired for basic reflexes.

‘Congratulations,’ Bones says. ‘Although I still don’t know if this looks like a wedding, or like a damn funeral.’

Jim manages a grin for Bones’ sake and executes a soggy thumbs up so he won’t worry. Not any more than he usually does, anyway. The oxygen goes straight to his brain without passing go. His fingertips are tingling. Jim stretches the muscles in his face, testing his limits, but everything seems to be working. The stuff he can’t test yet—the stuff he can’t test with Bones—is just gonna have to wait until the last second. He’ll save it for when it counts. For when Spock shows up.

When Spock shows up.

‘As your primary health care physician, your stubbornness,’ Bones adds, like he’s the touch telepath finally coming home to a planet of his peers, ‘I’ve gotta advise you against any strenuous activities tonight.’

‘And as my friend?’ Jim slurs.

‘Who says we’re friends?’ Bones gives him a look that doubles as warning. It’s his seriously, kid, don’t try anything stupid look.

Jim doesn’t need to touch to be a telepath. He can tell what Bones is thinking loud and clear from across the room—maybe even across the galaxy.

‘Come on, Bones.’ Jim’s whole body’s one big ache, which is an improvement from the permeating numbness he started suffering around hour thirteen—provisional time not factored into the ceremony; the thirteenth hour was what it took for the procession to get Jim back to the safety of his quarters, where he could collapse onto the edge of a hard bed without making a political statement about weak human stock not being up for the challenges of the landscape. ‘It’s my wedding night.’

‘You can say it with whatever inflection you like,’ Bones says, ‘but it still doesn’t pull more oxygen into the goddamn atmosphere, and last I checked that’s what your muscles need to function, Jim. Same as everybody else.’

‘Well, now you’re just being mean.’

Jim’s on his back. He doesn’t remember lying down but it’s a position he can handle. His arms
protest the strain it takes to get up on his elbows and his head feels about as dense as he told Spock it was once, too heavy to keep up.

So long as that’s the only thing he has trouble keeping up tonight, Jim won’t complain. He grins, knowing it’ll drive Bones crazy. And the crazier he gets, the sooner Bones’ll leave.

Jim’s gonna miss the oxygen hypos, but he’s not looking to enact some kind of voyeuristic threesome just so he can breathe properly through his wedding night.

*Wedding night.*

‘I’ll be horizontal for most of it,’ he adds.

Bones pulls a face like Jim told him they’ll be eating *gagh* the whole trip instead of typical Vulcan fare. At least he’s packing up, rolling his medical kit away.

‘At least I can trust that mean-eyed fiancé—no, *husband* of yours—not to get swept up in the moment.’

‘He’s gonna get lost in my eyes,’ Jim says.

‘I got gongs ringing in my ears, kid.’ Bones shudders. ‘I don’t need your nonsense on top of it.’

‘Maybe you should leave me one of those supplements before you go.’ Jim wiggles his eyebrows, making them dance like sluggish caterpillars, one after the other.

‘Maybe you should follow medical advice.’

The door chimes, just once. It’s electronic, not an echo of the cymbals in the desert, but Jim feels a trace of that fiery heat over his skin all the same.

‘Guess that’s my cue to get lost,’ Bones says. ‘If you pull something, don’t call. If you’re suffocating, don’t *not* call. Enough oxygen in your gray matter to handle that?’

‘You’re really confusing,’ Jim tells him.

He sits up just as he realizes what Bones leaving actually means. Bones going. Bones already gone. Bones out of the picture—only Jim remaining. Bones was the last stanchion of human illogical sentimentality between Jim and the main doors, the metaphorical PADD screen that could’ve stood guard—but that’s a little *too* much navel-gazing when Jim is half-horizontal.

He turns the lurch into a last-ditch lounge, resting his full weight on a numb elbow. The main doors to his royal chambers slide open and Spock’s nothing but a shadow waiting in the doorframe, tall and lean, hard shoulders uninviting, face hidden by the dim backlighting.

Because of Vulcan eyesight. Their eyes are sensitive to bright lights and Jim spent a week—maybe more, but he had to stop counting after day seven—picturing Spock doing the Earth-tour with him wearing a pair of designer black sunglasses.

Jim swallows and wonders if Spock can see that: the flush on his throat, every blink and swipe of his lips with his tongue in the dark, the way his chest rises and falls too noticeably, but it’s overriding his vanity. No place for pride in the desert.

‘I wasn’t talking to myself,’ Jim says. With a thousand different ways to say hello in every language he knows, even Vulcan, that’s what he chooses. He doesn’t even let the silence linger,
heavy with promise and maybe a sliver, a streak, of repressed Vulcan desire. ‘Bones was here. Now he’s not. I was talking to him. Mostly telling him I’m all right and he needed to accept that on my wedding night.’

Spock doesn’t move but his robes do, the slightest shift, the bottom hem trailing over the floor. Jim’s throat tightens into a dry knot and the last thing he needs is to discover he’s allergic to his fiancé.

His husband.

It’s not a when anymore; it’s a now situation and Spock isn’t saying anything to bring the present forward into their shared future. The brush of Spock’s fingers could’ve been an accident.

But Vulcan’s don’t do accidents.


‘That,’ Spock replies, so Jim finally knows it’s him, ‘would be an unusual greeting to offer in this particular set of circumstances.’

‘Oh?’ Even Jim’s eyebrows feel heavy; he shouldn’t have wasted what was left of his expressive wiggling on Bones. ‘Then what is a customary greeting?’

It takes concentration and effort—neither of them traits Jim likes to show on a good day—to lift his hand, spreading shaky fingers down the center to form the v he’s typed countless times before.

All that practice means he doesn’t screw up, but he can’t hold it for long, either.

Spock raises one eyebrow like it’s as simple for him as breathing. Maybe it is. Breathing’s not so simple for Jim right now, so he can’t compare. Spock’s Vulcan half must’ve given him lungs of steel.

His human half has yet to reveal itself. And Jim’s looking, studying the symmetry of Spock’s features for some glimmer of recognition in his dark eyes, shrouded under heavy brows.

He can afford to catch his breath. But he might as well be surrounded by the torches again, greedy fires sucking all the scant oxygen out of the thin air.

‘As I have never been in this situation before, I can offer only speculative counsel,’ Spock replies.

Because of course he does. Even in speech, Jim can hear him crossing his t’s, dotting his i’s, always speaking in complete sentences.

‘Yeah.’ Jim leans back. He’s not lying down. He should be getting up, but the sudden rush of blood to his extremities is definitely gonna make him pass out if he tries.

If Spock would only come over.

If Jim could only breathe, he’d make him.

But he was in the middle saying something. The oxygen’s not getting to his brain the way it used to and Jim’s starting to remember why Bones liked jabbing the hypo closer to the cranium, even if Jim’s neck was starting to get sore and bruise-y.
‘You guys are big on the ceremonial prep but not so much with the morning after. The night after. Our night.’

Their wedding night.

Eventually, thinking that phrase enough, writing it, living it, Jim’ll start believing it the way the hazy smoke and deep-throated Vulcan chanting was too—for lack of a better word—alien to convince him of.

When Spock doesn’t say anything, Jim knows he’s gonna have to take charge of the situation, but that means taking charge of himself on a molecular level.

His muscles will have to deal.

‘Get in here.’ Jim sits up, just not all at once. ‘Or don’t—but you’re making me nervous standing there with the door open like we’re expecting guests. I’m not up for company right now, Spock, I don’t know if you’ve noticed.’

‘Your condition is apparent,’ Spock says.

But he steps inside. The door hisses shut behind him. Jim’s lungs might as well be caught in the grooves, the particulars of the sensation something he can’t explain. Not to Spock.

Sure, it feels like my vital organs were just trapped in a dilithium mining accident. Lungs punctured. Heart squished. No chance of survival. Seconds left to live. And the thing is, Spock, I seriously like it.

Except like’s not the right word.

Jim pats the bed next to him, and if it’s awkward, it’s awkward.

It’s gonna be awkward.

At least Spock doesn’t hesitate. He does something else instead, something Jim doesn’t have a name for yet, including a barely-noticeable nod of the head, long legs folding under heavy robes. Jim starts to sweat just looking at all that thick fabric and also just thinking about the cool skin hidden underneath it.

The gravitational center of the bed shifts with Spock’s weight. That’s physics, Jim’s favorite kind. The physical. He steals a sideways glance Gaila taught him the exact triangulation of; he’s positive it’d work on any other green-blooded organism with a pulse, a heartbeat. Spock accepts it, acknowledges it, observes it with the clinical impassivity of a scientist enlarging an atypical sample and Jim doesn’t want to think about what kind of sample he most closely resembles.

‘Your temperature appears to be elevated,’ Spock says.

Jim doesn’t think about the lack of communication, the silence, the stupid buds of hope that kept blooming and dying and blooming on the long trip from San Francisco to Vulcan, the same growth that refused to die under Vulcan’s scathing sun and Spock’s equally scorching formality. Impersonal. Implacable. Sometimes when Jim’s thinking about Spock he’s reminded of a nightmare he had as a kid: that he was trapped inside a dictionary, running from definition to definition, being sucked into and trapped under the weight of all the meanings of all the words.

‘So you’re saying I’m hot?’ Jim asks.
Spock pauses. ‘Did Doctor McCoy administer the requisite treatment for the demands of the ceremony you have just endured?’

‘Yeah—yeah, Spock. Never met a hypo he didn’t like. I can show you the injection site. Did you just call me hot or not?’

‘You already know that I do not find it productive to repeat myself.’

If Jim closes his eyes, two things are gonna happen. One: he won’t be able to open them again. Two: it’ll be like being at home, fresh out of the atmospheric training chamber, listening to one of Spock’s recorded messages almost, almost giving in to emotion, almost saying something nice, all the almosts building inside Jim’s gut, only to be silenced with the same old goodnight.

Jim doesn’t close his eyes. He groans.

‘Do you require further medical attention?’ It could be a trick of the light—or lack thereof—but Jim chooses to interpret Spock’s response as a hair too quick.

Jim shifts his hand and just like that they touch, his smallest knuckle brushing Spock’s pinky finger. He’s no Vulcan, but he feels the answering tension in Spock’s frame when he stiffens, posture hard under the soft folds of his robes.

They can’t be as soft as they look.

Jim’s touching Spock before he can help himself, reaching out to gather results for his hypothesis. Spock’s gotta like it; he’s all about research. The fabric buckles easily under Jim’s fingers, a dense, deft weave that’s lighter than Jim expected. It’s voluminous enough to hide the shape of Spock’s body, but Jim knows it’s under there somewhere. Somewhere close.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘That’s more like it.’ Jim’s fingers push their way under an artful drape, brushing a clasp and a leather tie.

‘You have not yet answered my question.’

‘I’m ship-shape,’ Jim says. The words slur together, too many s’s held in place by sharp p’s. He hasn’t eaten anything that’d make his tongue swell, but his fine motor skills were the first thing to go when it came to retaining vital functions. ‘Fit for duty. Ready and willing.’

‘You are delirious,’ Spock observes.

‘We’re married,’ Jim replies.

If there was a PADD between them, he could imagine Spock looking fond and indulgent instead of impassive and still. But there’s no technology, no careful distance to provide a buffer between Jim and his hurt pride. He tugs at the leather cord instead, pulling the knot loose and slipping it free of the clasp.

‘Jim.’ Spock’s hand closes over his wrist, against his sleeve. There’s no skin on skin contact; Jim can feel the throb of his pulse under Spock’s fingers, his tendons twitching when he flexes the joint.

Yeah, it’s awkward. By Earth standards, this would barely qualify as a bad date, let alone a honeymoon. But there’s no human alive who’d choose Vulcan as a newlywed destination. A lot of
sand doesn’t make the desert any more of a beach.

‘Spock,’ Jim says, ‘I’m not dying.’

Not exactly poetry, even to pointed Vulcan ears. And not his best seduction tactic by a long shot. Spock’s eyebrow quirks into a sharp arch. He hasn’t pulled his hand away and he hasn’t let go of Jim’s wrist.

‘I am relieved to hear it,’ Spock says, ‘as that condition would cause a considerable amount of potential tension between our worlds.’

Jim cocks his head to one side. It’s more of a loll than a come-on, but it has the intended effect. ‘Seriously?’

‘It would be a loss of significant, general concern.’

‘Spock.’

Spock’s pauses—Jim can’t measure them. There’s bound to be something special about each one but there’s no translation; Spock never gave Jim a dictionary of Vulcan-to-human subtleties to help him acclimatize, the Vulcan substitute for slang. Just a handful of milliseconds to work with.

Jim tells himself he likes his odds.

‘Spock,’ he repeats.

Even though he already knows Spock doesn’t find it productive to repeat himself.

He already knows plenty, in fact: how Spock says goodnight; when and where Spock chooses to give a personal topic a wide berth; that Spock needs to script his less-formal correspondence like it’s a state address. It’s the scripting part Jim’s oxygen-deprived brain hangs on. You can script a speech, but you can’t plan every contingency for even a simple dialogue. And when you throw action into the mix, well, no wonder Spock’s shoulders are stiff, his posture like brittle sandstone.

‘...Jim,’ Spock replies.

It’s a start. Jim thumbs the leather cord, rolling it against a lighter, thinner layer of whatever it is Spock is wearing underneath his robes. The weave is soft and Jim’s fingers are close enough to the skin that the inclination of Spock’s chin tilting toward him is equal parts question and encouragement.

Or Jim could just be reading too much into too little—reading, as always, between Spock’s lines.

‘I’m pretty sure you said I was hot. Let’s, let’s go back to that.’ He can’t find any wrinkles. Somehow, he’s not surprised. He creates a few, rolling the shirt between his thumb and forefinger, then pretends like he’s helping out by smoothing it down again. He waits for Spock to shiver; Spock tenses without the release that makes the tension worth it, that makes it feel good.

‘If your temperature remains elevated in the morning, it will be necessary to contact Doctor McCoy,’ Spock says.

Jim focuses on the stuff that is sexy. Spock’s deep voice. Spock’s cool body. Spock still gripping Jim’s wrist, not pulling him closer, not pushing him off. Spock’s knees under the folds of his robes bumping Jim’s knees in his lighter robes. Not to mention all the promises they made each other and the relative stillness they’ve encountered now.
It’s supposed to be easy, just breathing, learning to breathe together; for the anticipation, the possibilities, the chances they’re gonna have, it should be easy.

Jim’d make a joke about it being hard, about being hard, but then he’d spend more breath than he has left explaining why it’s a joke in the first place, and by then, there’s no recapturing the moment.

‘Jim,’ Spock says, almost without warning, ‘if your intentions are to initiate coitus on this night, I cannot condone it. The physical stress would be too great and the risk to your health equally so. Fornication shall have to be postponed until such a time as you are physically able.’

‘Oh my god.’ Jim breathes. It doesn’t do anything for his lungs. ‘Say coitus again, Spock.’

‘I believe I have already expressed my thoughts on the value of repetition,’ Spock says.

It’s a mouthful of words, none of them even close to what Jim’s looking for. Which makes sense, since this scenario is miles away from what he envisioned—the wedding night that started to come together in his mind after he and Spock really started getting to know each other. It’s different, too, from what he first pictured, years back, when he was too tired to keep his mind from wandering to a distant future in which he might, possibly, settle down with the right Orion.

The stiff, self-conscious details ground him in reality. Normally, ‘reality’ isn’t necessarily a good thing, but since Jim’s head feels like it’s about to balloon up and drift off into the thin atmosphere without him, he figures he’ll take all the grounding he can get.

Spock’s holding him, but he’s not holding him down.

Jim reaches up this time, touching his first three fingers to the side of Spock’s throat. Spock’s pulse jumps but he doesn’t swallow. His Adam’s apple holds steady, still as a ship with no forward momentum. The external inertia dampeners are still in effect.

Jim just has to figure out the right combination of touches that’ll disengage the failsafes.

‘Look,’ he says. Spock widens his eyes a hair’s breadth, like he thought that was a literal command. Jim’s lips twitch, but he manages to keep from laughing. ‘All I’m saying is, there’s no reason to set down ground rules for something that hasn’t even happened yet.’

‘It is not going to happen,’ Spock clarifies.

‘I’ve heard that before,’ Jim says. It’s not worth it to make the joke, but his brain to mouth filter’s on the fritz. ‘...Just, uh, never from my husband.’

Spock’s skin twitches under his fingers, muscles and tendons responding where he won’t—or can’t. Jim likes to imagine it’s Spock’s human half taking over, the half that remembers all the things Jim wrote about Spock’s hands and his mouth. Getting his tongue around those fingers, tip slicking the delicate spaces between.

Jim’s sweating again.

He didn’t think he had the water to lose.

Spock’s nostrils flare and Jim tries to remember whether Vulcans have heightened sense of smell on top of everything else. If it’s really going to be that unfair for the rest of their lives together.

‘There are—ways to achieve the intimacy you are seeking without exerting your system past the
point of reasonable recovery,’ Spock says.

‘Is that— is that your version of talking dirty, Spock?’

Jim watches Spock process the question before answering. ‘It is not. ...Not by your definition.’

_DIRTY talk. (n.) Something I’ll be doing plenty of in the future, this doesn’t actually have anything to do with cleanliness or the literal definition of dirty. It’s innuendo—you know what innuendo is, right, Spock? It’s saying one thing but meaning another. Sometimes it’s in the way you say it; sometimes it has to do with wordplay, puns, whatever. Ask me for more examples. Seriously. Ask me for them.

Even though Jim wrote all that down, Spock never asked.

Maybe Jim should’ve added a please at the end, but even here, even now, he doesn’t think he has to beg.

‘That’s the thing about dirty talk, though,’ Jim says. ‘It doesn’t have any strict parameters. If you wanted to read a definition to me out loud and you were thinking about me at the same time, that’d fall under the general umbrella of talking dirty. Technically. It’s more about the intent, the meaning. And participation.’ Jim takes a deep breath. ‘I’d give a lesson right now, but I’m pretty sure your planet’s atmosphere is trying to crush my lungs.’

Anybody else’d give a sentimental response, something like concern—or worse, like worry. Jim tilts his focus and lifts his eyes and sees Spock monitoring, clinical as ever, before he raises his hand to Jim’s chest, waiting in the thin air between them.

Jim’s breath catches.

And he thought he was having trouble breathing before.

‘S’okay, Spock.’ Jim inclines his chin toward the general chest area—Bones would be proud of him, passing the tried and true touch your chin to your chest test with flying colors. Spock remains where he is and as far as foreplay goes, Jim’s crazy for it. Crazy about it. Also being driven crazy by it, but that’s the best kind of crazy there is. He might pass out before he feels Spock’s fingers on him—which is the thrill of the challenge right there. ‘I mean, I’m practically throwing myself at you and you’re just gonna... You gonna leave me hanging?’

‘Leave you hanging.’ Spock’s eyes deepen with recognition. ‘I do not intend to leave you hanging, Jim. But I cannot encourage you to incur activities that will harm your person.’

‘I’m gonna lie down now,’ Jim says, seconds before it happens mostly of its own accord, ‘so what you do next—make me wonder if you really want this or show me we’re on the same page here—I guess that’s up to you.’

The bed’s hard but Jim doesn’t mind. He’ll take anything, so long as he’s horizontal. The ceiling above is simple, uncomplicated, nothing like his life, which is the opposite. Time passes, agonizingly slowly, Jim’s heartbeat erratic when it quickens with hopeful anticipation, then slows from lack of oxygen, then quickens again. Can’t teach that particular organ anything.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘Yeah?’

‘I was uncertain whether or not you were still conscious.’
‘Still conscious, Spock.’

‘If you intend to remain horizontal and should you have no objections, I will join you.’

‘Join me horizontally?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Join me in our wedding bed?’

‘I have already confirmed—’

‘I’m savoring the moment,’ Jim says. ‘It’s a... It’s a... Nngh.’

‘I did not catch that last remark,’ Spock says, with just a whisper of human colloquial flair. Jim might be delirious, half-conscious and oxygen-deprived, but he knows what he heard.

Nothing wrong with his ears, although they don’t look like anyone else’s on Vulcan and Bones hasn’t checked them in a while.

‘Nngh,’ Jim repeats. He draws out the consonants, pushing his face into the pillow.

What passes for a pillow on Vulcan, anyway. He’s pretty sure Earth representatives had to pull some strings to get him anything soft and comfortable. Judging from what he’s seen so far, he’s half-expecting Spock to tell them this is a one-time deal for their wedding and the rest of the time it’s traditional to sleep on hot rocks in the middle of the mountains.

The bed doesn’t creak, but Jim feels the mattress dip behind his knees where they’re bent, Spock’s weight settling behind him, Spock’s chest at his back. It’s not too much exertion for Jim to wiggle back against him, closing the narrow gap Spock’s discretion chose to leave.

He can already tell he’s going to have to be the one to make the leap. He knew that much from their communications.

But Spock wrote first.

It’s those details Jim keeps hanging on, the inconsistencies in Spock’s Vulcan logic. Jim’s chest swells under another breath and he feels something heavy slide around his ribs. Spock’s arm nudges under Jim’s at the crook of his elbow, hand curling against his side.

Jim watches them in the dim light: short nails and long, elegant fingers tucked against his clothes. There’s nothing about Spock that’s delicate, but somehow, in comparison, Jim feels supersized and clumsy, like he’s got oven mitts for hands, a motorcycle helmet for a head.

It’s heavy enough.

‘Jim.’ Spock’s breath against the nape of his neck is warmer than his skin.

Even put in the position of little spoon, Jim’s aware of his bulk, the extra mass Bones said he’d sweat off within two weeks.

It’s been twelve hours and he doesn’t feel any lighter. Just damp.

‘Yeah, Spock. That’s...not how I expected to make you say my name, but, it’ll do. For now.’

‘You find this reiteration to be pleasing?’ Spock asks. The question stirs all the tiny, golden hairs
at the back of Jim's neck, making them stand on end.

‘Repetition.’ Jim’s not at dictionary definition levels but despite the heaviness of his limbs, the dull, dead weight of his body, his brain is still going, his heart still pumping. ‘It’s not so bad, when you do it right. For the right reasons. To establish, uh, rhythm.’

The tingling at the back of Jim’s neck is the good kind, not the call-Bones kind. Jim closes his eyes—or lets them close, not fighting the impulses, the instincts.

‘In this instance, ‘routine’ may be considered a synonym,’ Spock says.

‘Uh-huh.’ Memory sparks and flares, then quiets with the bonfires outside the window in the dark distance, guttering when they burn down to the sand. It doesn’t offer anything; it doesn’t keep the fires burning. Jim’s brain can’t keep the internal fires burning because there’s not enough fuel. ‘You like routine—right, Spock?’

‘To establish a routine that maximizes individual efficiency is logical.’

‘But it’s not logical to spoon on a planet as hot as Vulcan.’

‘The essence of compromise,’ Spock begins.

He stops when Jim lifts his fingers to his bottom lip, kissing the top knuckles. Spock shifts. Jim grins into a yawn, hot breath slurring, sleepily, against Spock’s fingertips. ‘More where that came from,’ Jim promises.

When he tells this story later—if he ever finds someone to tell it to—it won’t involve losing consciousness between lazy kisses on the back of Spock’s hand, one with the sand and the night, a married man.

*
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Jim becomes engorged.

Chapter Notes

Oops posting early today so that I won't be posting super late. Your comments keep me warm! No Spock POV just yet. He is maintaining a mysterious distance for the time being. hm...

When Jim opens his eyes, he’s alone in the bed. It’s him, a pillow that’s only rumpled on the part he’s been lying on, and the crushing weight on his chest keeping him company.

He takes a few, steadying breaths and the sensation eases, lifting as he reorients himself.

Window. Curtains fluttering in the hot breeze. Austere walls; tapestries; a table with a platter of his old friend the sash-savas and a pot of tea. The familiar smell of the brew is cut by the less-familiar backdrop: sunlight scouring sand and Jim’s own, extremely abundant sweat, legs tangled in the blankets where he must’ve half-kicked them off in the night, due to a latent instinct for self-preservation he never knew he had.

He can’t wait to tell Bones. Leaving out the part where he passed out in Spock’s arms and probably drooled on his hands.

Actually, scratch that. Better not talk to Bones for a while.

After a few false starts, Jim manages to gain enough momentum to roll onto his stomach from his back. Hot air hits the nape of his neck, but at least it’s fresh; it doesn’t cool Jim’s skin but it dries the sweat. He wraps his arms around the pillow and squashes his face into it until he can see white starbursts on the backs of his eyelids, stretching until he can wiggle all of his toes.

‘Ah.’ The voice behind him is the same voice as the one Spock shared in the night, but the Vulcan sunlight makes it a little more real, and Jim’s position makes him a little more embarrassed. ‘Are these mandatory calisthenics of...some kind?’

Jim’s lips purse of their own volition. He contemplates his options. Smothering himself on his pillow wouldn’t take much effort. He’s halfway there already.

Suffocated his first night on Vulcan is embarrassing as far as royal obituaries go, but Jim can’t decide if it’s worse than turning over and facing Spock the night after their wedding.

Turning over and facing Spock after waking up fully clothed the night after their wedding.

...While engaged in his own version of a morning workout that’s really nothing more than a last-ditch effort at tricking his limbs into thinking they’re getting enough oxygen to move.
No paparazzi, Jim reminds himself. The only people who are gonna have an exclusive pass to this moment are him and his husband. Not that it matters, since Spock’s the one he’s looking to impress in the first place, but the relative privacy is supposed to be a relief.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

There’s at least one good thing that came out of last night. Jim breathes in and out, dragging his head off the pillow. He thought he was gonna have to answer to James Tiberius Kirk of Earth for another year or so until he could convince Spock to unclench—and despite the reputation he has on Earth, his head isn’t so big that he needs formality in the bedroom.

There’s bright sunlight streaming in through the open window. Jim flinches away from it on instinct before he remembers he doesn’t have to look out for photographers.

‘Yeah, Spock?’

‘I thought perhaps you had been rendered unconscious a second time,’ Spock admits.

‘If I was, it wouldn’t be a very good calisthenics program,’ Jim says.

It’s not pillow talk, but Jim’s head isn’t on his pillow anymore. They’ve moved on, transcended to something different altogether. Spock said something about taking a long bath. Jim can’t conceive of a temperature warmer than this one, but he could stand to flake off the salt-sweats that’ve dried to his skin over the course of the night.

‘…As the purpose of a calisthenics program is to promote good health, I must concede to your point.’

‘Was that a joke?’ Jim finally, finally manages to reorient himself enough that he can find Spock in the room.

Yeah. There he is.

He’s silhouetted by the early dawn light, standing as stiff as one of the torches planted in the midnight sand. His hands are folded behind his back, hair straight and impossibly neat, not to mention impossibly soft-looking even to Jim’s bleary eyes.

If he’s gotten up and bathed already, that’s it as far as Jim’s concerned. The wedding’s off.

But it’s too late for that. The wrinkled ceremonial robes he’s slept in are proof enough of that. No returns. No turning back now. After the fit he threw when it looked like he wasn’t going to be heading to Vulcan after all—a reaction that was part stubbornness, part something else nobler and less predictable—he wouldn’t be able to sell the idea to himself, much less to anyone else.

And there’s Spock’s queen mother to consider, not to mention his royal father, with eyes that, as far as Jim’s concerned, might be turned up to the setting one higher than stun.

Not enough to kill; just enough to incapacitate. And terrify. Can’t forget terrify.

Jim attempts a grin with half of his face half-numb from a pinched nerve somewhere in his neck. ‘You took a bath without me, huh?’

Without the numbness, it still wouldn’t work to get Spock flustered. But at least Jim has the excuse, if not a soft bed, to fall back on when Spock remains, inevitably, unmoved.
'I could not be certain of when you would naturally awaken. Without knowing how your schedule would be affected by the stresses of a new environment and the difficulties of Vulcan’s atmosphere, there was no way to determine how long a period of rest you would require.'

'You could’ve stuck around—you could’ve even woke me up,’ Jim says.

'It was apparent rest was required to facilitate the natural functions of your body.’

Jim licks the corner of his mouth. ‘The _natural functions of my body._’

Spock pauses. ‘Another example of your utilization of tonally altered repetition to invoke a romantic response?’

‘Yeah, but you’re not supposed to point it out _every time_, Spock, or it’ll ruin the effect,’ Jim says, raking his fingers through his hair. He can feel it pointing in multiple directions, messy and sweat-stiff, while Spock’s standing in front of him, picture perfect, a little too cool—while at the same time pulling off _a little too hot_. Jim knows only what he doesn’t know, that he isn’t sure if messy, flirty blondes are even Spock’s type. If Spock even has a type. If Spock would be happier typing. The light of day sneaking in past the drawn curtains make some things too obvious while obscuring the rest and Jim needs to brush his teeth before he thinks about kissing Spock at all. ‘Not to mention how you’re _supposed_ to tell your husband when you’re getting undressed.’

'I was not aware that was a requirement. It was in none of the informational briefings,’

‘I’m _pretty_ sure it’s in there, Spock.’

‘It was not.’

‘You sure you didn’t miss it in the fine print?’

‘I am certain.’

‘Maybe,’ Jim says, heaving himself forward to lie on his stomach, weight braced on his elbows, chin braced on his palms, ‘you weren’t reading between the lines. You took your first bath of our marriage without me and now I’m sweaty and you’re not and that’s just—I mean, Spock, it’s unfair.’

Spock opens his mouth halfway. Jim catches a pink sliver of that tongue he saw once before in Spock’s lone, completely unexpected selfie. It’s still the background image on Jim’s personal PADD, the one he keeps locked with three separate encryption keys he drummed up himself. Only that little genius kid Chekov’s been able to get around them and Jim changed his wallpaper to a picture of Gaila for the purposes of that test, just so no one’s privacy would be invaded.

He believes in a system of rewards for above-standard efforts, or even basic effort.

Now that’s a belief that’s not shared by Vulcans as a race.

‘If you judge that I have treated you unjustly, I must assure you that it was not my intent.’

Jim tugs open a potentially dehydration-incurred split in his lip when he grins. Not top kissing form, not by a long shot, but it’s still his breath he’s worried about. Judging by the raspy, dry quality of his tongue, his mouth could qualify as a Federation-class weapon right about now.

He’s not proud of it.
Spock hasn’t caught onto his tactical distraction yet, so maybe he can be proud of that instead.

‘Well... Maybe you should make it up to me.’

It’s a reasonable suggestion as far as Jim’s concerned. Checks and balances. Weight and counterweight. Spock went off and did something on his own that they should’ve done together and the only decent thing to do is rectify it as a couple.

Spock cocks his head to one side, shadows traveling over the angles of his face. Either he’s stepped closer or Jim’s center of gravity is shifting again, orbit decaying, pulled them together. It’s impossible to tell from the bed. He’s got Spock’s attention, though, and getting a Vulcan's attention before getting out of bed in the morning feels like an accomplishment. Something Jim can strike off his to-do list.

Don’t faint in public: Check.

Don’t bore your new husband right away: Check.

‘If you have a suggestion,’ Spock says, ‘I am willing to hear it.’

‘That’s not what you said last night,’ Jim replies.

He’s good at thinking on his feet. Or not thinking on his feet. Thinking *not* on his feet. A line appears between Spock’s perfectly-manicured eyebrows, drawing them together with a furrow directly in between.

‘If you are harboring resentment over our mutual handling of last night's intimacy, then I would have you express it outright rather than refer to it obliquely without clarification,’ he says.

‘Believe me, if there’s resentment, then it’s only toward myself, Spock.’ Jim tests out sitting and sways sideways onto one elbow. ‘Tell you what: you carry me to the bathroom, and we'll call it even.’

‘Are you being facetious?’ Spock asks.

Jim stretches his legs, affecting the lounging position he couldn't manage the night before. He smiles more slowly, casting a long, blue look in Spock's direction. There's nothing in the literature about Vulcan flirting, but Jim knows he's got a heart in there. He should be able to make it beat faster, given enough practice, even if it’s beating where Jim’s liver would be. 'Why don’t you pick me up and see?’

‘Though I am half-Vulcan, my strength is comparable to that of my fully Vulcan peers.’ Spock doesn’t back that statement with a flexing of his muscles—not that Jim’d be able to see them under his robes, but it’s something he would have done. The differences stretch like the long shadows in the space between them. Jim wills his eyes to be bluer, his look to reach farther. He focuses on the wrinkle between Spock’s eyebrows and hangs his hopes on that hint of an expression. ‘If it was your intention to confirm this fact for yourself—’

‘Huh? No. No, Spock, it was my intention to get physical,’ Jim says. If Bones was here, he’d be outright smiling for the first time in months. In fact, Jim can’t remember the last time he’s seen the worry lines under Bones’ eyes rearrange themselves into an old-fashioned grin at Jim’s expense. ‘It was my intention to get you over here. Have your arms around me. Make it to the bath without keeling over halfway there and being even more embarrassed about my performance so far. Not that I get embarrassed,’ Jim adds. ‘But despite what some people may think, I do have standards. Just not where everybody looks, so that’s why they get confused.’
It’s a lot to put out there; Gaila would say there’s no poetry in it at all, no suggestion. Jim’s still wearing his sweaty under-robes, lighter than the ceremonial outfit that tried, almost successfully, to kill him, but he might as well be naked when he puts his cards on the table.

Even worse is the part where Spock doesn’t move.

At all.

Or respond.

It lasts for what feels like a lifetime, although that might be the oxygen deprivation stretching and swelling Jim’s perception of time itself. He tries not to blink until his vision blurs and he has to, and it’s that exact moment that the change occurs, the shift in Spock’s impetus he’s been waiting for.

Spock steps forward. He crosses that distance simply, formally, with crisp steps and no fanfare, none of the busy, ancient ceremonial overdrive of the night before. But Jim knows the fire is there.

Spock leans closer. ‘What position would provide the most comfort?’

‘Huh,’ Jim says again. ‘I didn’t think about that. Why don’t we just try ‘em all?’

‘That would prove far too time-consuming to be a viable means of decision by elimination.’

Spock’s close enough that Jim can touch him—the side of his cheek, the sharp angle of his jaw, the tiny slip of bare skin at his throat that isn’t covered by a high collar, or even the fabric of the collar itself, which would offer another textural sensation entirely, the promise of skin hidden beneath, the frustration of not being able to feel it. But Jim remembers what he read about Vulcans and touching. He might not be Spock, but when he reads something, he doesn’t tend to forget it.

Instead, Jim looks at the parts of Spock he’d touch if touching was more simple. He follows the side of Spock’s cheek to the sharp angle of his jaw and into the shadows below, circling the slip of bare skin at his throat that isn’t covered by a high collar.

‘Jim,’ Spock reminds him.

‘Shh,’ Jim says. ‘I’m looking at you.’

Spock waits an appropriate amount of time. ‘For what purpose?’ he asks.

‘No purpose,’ Jim replies. ‘Just looking.’

Spock hesitates. Jim’s starting to wonder if that’s the Vulcan way of being polite, taking a moment before blurring out the next blunt truth.

‘…Have you found what you are looking for?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ Jim admits.

But he likes what he sees.

Anyone else would’ve laughed at him by now, with an impression of his wobbling limbs and his watery muscles, slurring their words through fake swollen lips. Gaila would’ve come up with a poetic description of his condition on the spot; Uhura would’ve known seventeen different ways in seventeen different dialects to call him limp noodle. Mitchell would’ve—well, that doesn’t matter now.
Maybe none of it does.

Jim slings his arm across Spock’s shoulders, fitting the curved muscle under his palm before digging his fingers in. Spock’s shirt’s softer than last night’s robes: a thick, textured knit that’s gray with threads of black and silver. Like Spock, the details are only visible when you get close enough.

‘Are you prepared to relocate?’ Spock asks.

He doesn’t point out that Jim’s outright staring, just he takes the attention at face value. He’s nothing like anyone Jim's ever met before. In some ways, he's nothing like the guy Jim imagined writing letters to, either.


‘Yeah, Spock,’ Jim says. ‘I’m ready.’

There’s only one way to find out if that’s actually true. Jim feels the surface of the planet tilt underneath him as Spock pulls him off the bed, one strong arm under his back and the other braced under his knees. Jim’s head lolls against his chest; it’s a safe place to land, more reliable than a pillow and softer than anything else Vulcan has to offer.

This hold’s enough to make Jim feel like the bride he never was—the bride he never wanted to be. If he didn’t know any better, he’d assume Spock’s been doing some reading on traditional Earth nuptial practices. But there’s nothing in the archives about carrying your husband over the threshold from the bedroom to the bathroom.

If there’s any tradition here, it’s one they’re making up all on their own.

Jim can get behind that.

When his vision clears, he can appreciate the transition from one room to the next. The bathroom’s almost bigger than Jim’s sleeping quarters, done up in tasteful desert neutrals. There’s a wide, low tub set into a dais near an open window, and a separate stall for showering without water. Apparently Vulcans have a thing for the color of sand—tans and beiges, with coppery accents marking the faucets and other hardware.

‘Are you conscious, Jim?’ Spock asks.

‘Define conscious,’ Jim replies.

He can feel Spock’s chest swell as he takes the breath he needs to do exactly that.

‘I’m conscious,’ Jim says quickly.

‘Indeed. That much is apparent from your swift response.’

‘You were right,’ Jim adds. ‘You’re strong.’

‘I would not lie. Especially not to exaggerate my capabilities.’

‘Seriously?’ Jim tips his head back. From this angle, he can see the underside of Spock’s chin, the shape of his jaw, and the bottom half of his pointed ear. He can’t see that point, just the dark line of his hair above it. ‘’Cause on Earth, humans...invented lying for that purpose. Probably. It’s not documented or anything, but it’s the primary use.’
‘Indeed,’ Spock repeats. ‘Yet it is not a human trait my mother saw the need to impart. In fact, whenever possible, her teachings also advised against it.’

Jim clears his throat, hoping the gust of his warm breath against Spock’s earlobe might be distraction enough from the topic of his mom while he’s holding Jim in his arms, against his chest. ‘Well, maybe she just doesn’t have anything to lie about.’ Still talking about Spock’s mom. Jim shifts and Spock compensates for the redistribution of his weight. It’s hot. Literally; metaphorically. Literally because daylight’s already upon them and the bathroom’s full of steam, the cool tub Jim was looking forward to a basin of heated stones instead. And metaphorically because it’s Spock; his posture’s perfect even with Jim’s weight pulling him down.

Jim’s grinning by the time Spock sets him down on a stone seat by the wall. He has to kneel to do it and, even if it’s only for a half-second, it reminds Jim of being home. Of Earth-traditions; of the idea of romance he used to think was universal, only to learn it’s not shared past his home planet.

He tries to arch a brow meaningfully. He settles for cocking his whole head to the side while Spock continues to observe him.

‘Now you’re looking,’ Jim says.

‘I had inferred it was an action that required reciprocation.’

‘You didn’t want me to feel lonely, huh?’

‘That,’ Spock informs him, ‘is not what I said.’

It’s torture, and not the good kind. Jim enjoys a little adversity now and then but he’s starting to think that he’d have more luck flirting with one of the stones in the tub. He turns to check it out—not as attractive as Spock, but it won’t be as obvious when he strikes out, and who’s the rock going to tell? Heat creeps over Jim’s throat, around to the back of his neck, sweat beading on his skin. He swipes at it tiredly.

Vulcans don’t sweat.

He’s three steps behind at the outset and that’s just genetics.

The race is on—once he can stand on his legs.

‘I will leave you to it,’ Spock says.

‘Hey—wait,’ Jim says. ‘What if I’m on my own and I slip? Lose consciousness? Drown in the bathtub? It could happen. Listening to Bones, you get surprised it doesn’t happen all the time.’

‘Are you suggesting I consult your physician in this matter?’ Spock asks.

There’s no tone, no hint of humor in his voice. It’s the same bland, deep, expressionless tenor Jim used to fall asleep listening to. Weird, he thought—but soothing. With anyone else, the description would be an insult, but Jim has plenty of excitement in his life already. There’s no shortage of things that shoot a pulse of adrenaline through his system.

If his brief bout with meditation is anything to go by, there’s not much out there that can settle Jim Kirk down.

Here he is, though. Settled. And it’s got nothing to do with the hot rocks. Mildly attractive rocks.
He’s pretty sure Spock just cracked a joke.

‘I’m saying Bones talks too much.’ Jim tests his abdominal muscles, sitting up in a slow stretch that makes him feel like he’s about eighty instead of eighteen. ‘But sometimes he knows what he’s talking about.’

Spock gives him that look that makes Jim feel like he might’ve got confused on who’s the brains of the operation. Either that, or Spock’s so smart that he’s vibrating on an entirely different frequency. He wouldn’t mind getting in on that. The vibrating.

He starts to undress instead. It doesn’t take him long to find the catches in his robes. Of all the details that stick in his head from the night before, Jim remembers undoing Spock’s ceremonial garb, the same way to peel off his own. Jim tries not to think about where the fabric sticks to his skin, pulling away with a rasp where sweat’s dried it stiff to his shoulders and back. The cloth falls free after a few ungraceful tugs, leaving him naked from the waist up.

Spock hasn’t budged, but the quality of his expression’s changed. Now he’s watching Jim like an anomaly on a terminal screen, a light that shouldn’t be blinking, a ship’s siren triggered by nothing.

It’s not positive feedback, but it’s not indifference.

Jim can work with that. Being noticed. Being seen. He shrugs his shoulders in the dry air. They’re bigger than they used to be. He has Bones to thank for that, if nothing else.

‘I hit my head a lot, Spock. I think it’s your responsibility as my husband to stick around and help me avoid cranial trauma.’

‘You continue to describe the duties of a chief medical officer,’ Spock says. ‘It is possible the disorientation you seek to avoid has already occurred.’

Joke number two. Jim’s keeping count.

‘Caring about each other. Looking after each other. I couldn’t translate all the Vulcan, but the human version of our vows say love, honor, protect, sickness, health...’ Jim ticks them off on his fingers. ‘...head trauma...’

‘Head trauma is not referenced specifically,’ Spock replies, ‘but it is not an undue assumption to suggest it falls under the category of sickness.’

Jim thinks about Spock going over human wedding ceremony rituals in his chambers at night, alone, while listening to one of Jim’s messages at the same time. He can picture it more clearly now that he’s got an idea of Spock in motion—or lack of motion, as the case may be. Mostly it’s the latter. He’s got the posture down, the bearing of a prince. He’s even better at it than Sam is on public outings, waving to the crowd instead of making faces or slouching or pulling at his collar so it stops throttling him.

‘Do you intend to bathe?’ Spock asks.

Jim’s working on it. ‘Just waiting.’

‘The opportunity has already presented itself.’

‘Waiting,’ Jim explains, ‘for my husband to say something about my physique.’ He gestures loosely to his shoulders, his chest, his abdominals. ‘I single-handedly—single stomachly?—destroyed the chicken population of Earth to get this body. It wasn’t easy. I’ve still got
nightmares.’

‘The chicken parm,’ Spock says.

Jim really wants to kiss him.

It comes out of nowhere—practically nowhere—hitting him like dizziness, like the Vulcan noonday sun. *Chicken parm* in that serious voice, on that serious mouth. *Parm*. It’s a funny word.

‘My pronunciation was correct,’ Spock adds.

‘Yeah, yeah. I know. It’s just—cultural exchange can be pretty sexy.’

‘...An unusual descriptor.’

‘What can I say? I’m an unusual guy.’

‘Given the specificity of your personal colloquial dictionary, that much was already obvious.’

Jim chuckles. It echoes through the steam, against the stone walls. He curls his knuckles against the muscle groups below his navel and hooks his thumb under the fabric of his robes, giving Spock a second before he tugs them apart.

Spock doesn’t look away.

He doesn’t look down, specifically, either; he’s not curious because curiosity must’ve killed the Vulcan at some point in their passionate past. Jim can’t will him to want to steal a peek. He takes it personally, but only a little.

It’s not the sexy strip game Jim pictured. Taking off his clothes in front of Spock, undressing with Spock, being naked for Spock but also with Spock—the lazy fantasies he harbored between waking and sleeping, in the moments before he drifted off, still listening to Spock’s recorded voice. If Spock spoke now, maybe that’d help set him at ease.

‘Yeah,’ he says instead, croaking on the word. ‘Keep watching. Don’t wanna take your eyes off—take ‘em off me for a second. I might slip and fall in that second; you never know. Unusual, unpredictable...’

Jim stands with a slight wobble. The robes pool at his ankles. The steam rises, clouding around his flushed cheeks. He’s got underwear on but that’s the easy part; he turns and braces one palm on the wall and inches the elastic down off his ass.

Vulcan or not, if Spock’s watching, he has to be feeling *something*.

Jim’s sure feeling something. An assortment of things. The slight tug of elastic over his skin; the mark where it pressed in too tight over his hips all through the night; the steam hitting the sensitive skin between his thighs and higher.

It’s an accomplishment beyond balancing on his own two feet that he manages not to check over his shoulder to see if Spock’s paying attention, but also the right kind of attention. Jim steps out of his clothes and steps into the bath, biting down on the inside of his cheek to keep from letting out a yelp when the hot water closes over his calves. Going from hot to hotter shouldn’t be that notable a transition, but Jim’s perceptive in all the ways that do him no favors.

He can’t tell whether it’s him or Spock who relinquishes a breath, but the uncertainty lets him
know his husband’s still in the room. Jim swirls his hand through the clear water, curls of steam lapping up around his hips and chest as he sinks in. He closes his eyes before the temptation to turn around and check out whether Spock’s checking him out becomes too much to resist.

Jim’s got no clue where all this iron willpower’s come from all of a sudden but as far as he’s concerned, it can stick around. Maybe eating every chicken on the West Coast while simultaneously decimating the spinach farms in the surrounding area has something to do with it.

There’s iron in spinach, right?

Sure. That’s how that works.

‘You could always join me.’ Jim blinks, his eyelashes clinging together with the damp in the air, beaded with perspiration.

Spock shifts; Jim can hear it now that he’s listening with both ears, a rasp of fabric on fabric, too soft and subtle to be a fidget.

‘You have not forgotten your observation that I have already partaken in the act of cleansing myself,’ Spock says, ‘as it was this realization which prompted your desire to be brought here yourself.’

‘Well, you don’t have to make it sound like you carried me in like a sack of potatoes.’ Jim stretches his arms over the edge of the tub, pulling them out of the water. He knows from experience and gathered intelligence that it makes for a good view. He’s got good shoulders. A handsome trapezius.

‘I do not understand the reference,’ Spock admits.

‘I’d tell you to look it up, but I know you’d go and do it,’ Jim says.

It’s easier to talk to the wall than Spock, which should say something about the state of his marriage.

He stares down at his body under the water instead of making faces he’d rather show Spock but hasn’t figured out how. His arms and legs are hazy and unexpectedly pale, rippling with every movement, no matter how slight. It’s all or nothing, same as it’s always been. His hair’s sticky, his neck stiff, and he knows what happens next.

He takes the plunge.

He always takes the plunge.

It’s burningly hot and he’s not exactly prepared for it, temperature probably high enough to scald not just the sweat but also the top layer of skin off his body, but there’s something soothing about the comforting sear. Once he gets accustomed to it, once his internal temperature catches up to regulate what’s happening to him externally, Jim’s nowhere unfamiliar, just holding his breath under the surface of the water, all the discomfort stripped off with last night’s sweat.

His hair floats around his ears. The hiss and muted sizzle of the hot stones below are distant but very real. He holds his breath for as long as he can and then longer before he bursts up again, gasping for air, hair sheeting water down his face and into his eyes.

Another test for his lungs. They haven’t collapsed yet.
He scrubs the water off his face with his bare hands, then leans back against the edge of the tub. He’s resisted long enough, but this time, he can’t help himself, chin pressed to his shoulder as he blinks droplets of water off his lashes to look at Spock. To get a good look at him.

He’s unruffled. His hair isn’t anything other than glossy and neat, even with the steam. He’s got incredible eyes and the flush on his skin might be a trick of Jim’s brain, the result of nothing more real than wishful thinking. It takes Jim a moment to realize he might be uncomfortable, but it doesn’t take him any time at all to know that Spock would never bring it up, would never acknowledge it. That he’ll weather any discomfort for the sake of—what’s he always on about?—diplomatic integrity.

Jim wants him to be comfortable, but that might take a while.

‘Hey,’ he says.

‘Is a greeting customary at this time?’ Spock replies.

‘You think I bathe with people enough to know the protocol?’

‘The Orion, Gaila,’ Spock reminds him, ‘who did not prefer to be confined by clothing...’

‘We talked poetry, Spock; we didn’t take baths together.’

‘Understood.’ Spock pauses. ‘Hello, Jim.’

Jim tips his cheek to the side. ‘You sure you don’t wanna join me in here?’ he asks. ‘I know, I know, you already bathed and you hate repetition but I’m thinking it wouldn’t be the same. ‘Cause I’d be there. It’d be more...recreational.’

‘We will bathe together tomorrow,’ Spock offers. It makes a little thrill of torchlight shudder down Jim’s spine. And he thought it couldn’t get any hotter. ‘In order to observe the proper ritual, I will wait for you.’

‘So this time you’re just gonna stare at me while I’m naked and you’re not?’ Again, Jim can’t help himself. ‘Pretty kinky, Spock.’

‘I do not understand the reference,’ Spock says.

Jim doesn’t sigh, but he breathes out in a rush of air that disturbs the steam.

‘I really should’ve updated that dictionary.’

Spock’s gaze turns distant, like he’s consulting that big computer brain of his.

‘A kink is a twist or curl in a material such as rope,’ he says. ‘Or a muscular stiffness. Are your muscles stiff, Jim?’

Jim drops one shoulder, turning in the water to give his neck a break from looking at Spock.

It’s the question of a lifetime, more life-affirming than even do you take this man.

Are his muscles stiff?

Humans don’t have to adhere to the strict Vulcan traditions of honesty. And it wouldn’t be so out of line to stretch the truth just this once. After all, he’s suffered. He lived through the ceremony and didn’t fall down. He didn’t offend any of the Vulcan dignitaries sent to greet him or any of the
helpful servants sent to move him into his quarters. He deserves this.

He needs it.

‘Yeah.’ The word doesn’t even stick in Jim’s throat. ‘You wanna— Maybe you could come here and give them a rub, Spock.’

He wiggles his shoulders in what he hopes is inviting behavior and not some kind of obscure Vulcan insult. He’s just starting to turn back when Spock’s shadow falls over him, stiff outline distorted and rippling across the water’s clouded surface. Strong hands grip the nape of Jim’s neck at the junction intersecting his shoulder. He went straight for the trapezius, just like Jim thought. His best feature. Pure Vulcan catnip.

He’s less proud of the groan that slips out of his mouth at the sudden attention. His head falls forward, posture made limp and pliant by Spock’s strong fingers and the hot water cradling him from the chest down. Jim sucks in a breath, letting his eyes slip shut.

They flick open with his next breath.

‘You’re not gonna do that Vulcan nerve pinch thing, are you?’

Spock’s fingers pause, stopping in the middle of digging into a knot of stiff tension. Those knots are what kept Jim standing during the ceremony, but there’s no harm in undoing them now, one by one. He won’t be standing that long again for a long time. Forever, if he can help it.

‘Rendering you unconscious in the water would be highly counterproductive,’ Spock says. ‘Have I given you any reason for you to anticipate such an attack?’

‘You’re a mysterious guy, Spock. I, uh, I was just wondering.’

‘A peculiar fantasy to experience.’

Jim almost snorts, managing to save it at the last second so it comes out as a rasping chuckle instead. It almost works; it almost sounds like Jim’s heart isn’t hammering a way out of his chest past his ribs. ‘Believe me, my fantasies are not...’ He trails off, seeing his face rippling in the water, and the dark spot behind and to the left that has to be Spock. Spock, giving him a backrub. Jim, ruining it by bringing up Vulcan nerve pinches. Considering his poor performance the night before, this kind of scenario is sexier than he deserves. ‘My fantasies don’t have much to do with Vulcan nerve pinches.’ He licks his damp lips, face hidden from Spock, but it doesn’t matter. There’s a new heat traveling over his skin. Spock’s fingers are sensitive enough that they’ll pick up on the fever and all Jim can hope for is that it has an effect on Spock, too. That he does more than pick up on it. That he gets a little warmer, if only for a little while. ‘...I could tell you about ‘em, though.’

‘About your fantasies,’ Spock confirms.

Jim nods. Spock finds a knot and presses against it with ruthless efficiency. It hurts like hell—but the pain only lasts a mind-splitting second before it fades, a dull ache around the site of the relaxed muscle.

‘Damn,’ Jim says. ‘That—that was a good thing, Spock. A good damn. Don’t stop.’

Spock doesn’t stop. Jim’s skin itches, tingles to feel his breath, but the distance Spock keeps is just enough that it doesn’t ghost against the nape of Jim’s neck.
‘You wanna hear about my fantasies?’ Jim adds.

‘I do not yet know what the purpose of your vocalizing what may prove to be nothing but imaginative diversions without basis in reality,’ Spock replies. ‘Yet, in the interest of bettering our understanding of one another, neither would I discourage you from speaking on any subject.’

‘You wanna hear about my fantasies,’ Jim says.

Another white-hot burst of pain and the following throb of relief leaves Jim’s head spinning. If he didn’t know better, he’d think Spock did that on purpose.

‘No shame in that. I wouldn’t mind hearing about your fantasies sometime, too.’ Jim wiggles deeper, enough that Spock’s hands have to dip into the water to keep rubbing his shoulders. It’s hot in there and Spock likes the heat—as much as a Vulcan likes anything. Spock stops touching him long enough to roll up his sleeves; then, Spock’s hands are on him again, working down Jim’s spine. ‘Actually, come to think of it, I’ve got a fantasy that’s pretty much exactly like what’s happening right now.’

‘It is not a fantastical scenario,’ Spock points out.

Jim’s waiting for his snort this time, diverting it into warm chuckle territory. He pushes back against Spock’s hands, which are pushing into his back. ‘You sure about that, Spock? ‘Cause I’m in a hot tub with my husband who’s giving me the best backrub of my entire life.’

‘There are several apocrypha in that statement,’ Spock observes. ‘I am not with you in the tub. In addition, I would classify my actions as applying localized pressured to key points along your back and spinal column. While there is rubbing involved in the act, to dilute it to a single element of the procedure would not be strictly accurate.’

‘Hmm,’ Jim says. Non-verbal agreement.

His eyes fall shut of their own volition, a Pavlovian response to the sound of Spock going off on one of his long-winded tangents.

His hands are as smooth as his voice; his touch goes just as deep. They don’t slip in the water, though the heat slicks his touch over Jim’s muscles, skin against skin, rough points of contact where Spock finds a sore spot and digs his knuckles in to loosen it. Jim bites his lip to keep from groaning out loud. Privacy’s a big thing on Vulcan, but he’s got a feeling that has something to do with the aural sensitivity of its people.

Being able to hear when your neighbor coughs from the next room over makes everyone more conscious of their noise output.

Jim’s already a noticeable human presence in a Vulcan palace. He doesn’t need anyone hearing him yelling in pleasure over Spock’s talented hands in the bathroom the morning after.

Now that’s something to take into consideration for when they finally manage to do more than fall asleep together in bed. Jim might have to smother himself with his pillow after all.

Jim shifts his hips at the thought, wriggling from side to side. Spock’s hands travel downward as a result, running low against the bunching muscles at the small of Jim’s back. The unexpected touch makes Jim’s skin pulse hot below the water level. When he first got in, the heat numbed him from the waist down, but that’s starting to wear off. His body has yet to adapt to the oxygen levels, but that hasn’t done anything to inhibit the bloodflow to his extremities.
In my fantasies,’ Jim says, stirring the air with the suddenness of his voice. It echoes sharply off the stone walls. Spock’s hands don’t falter. ‘Are you listening, Spock? In my fantasies, since you asked, your hands go a lot lower.’

‘I did not ask,’ Spock says. ‘…The muscle groupings in the area you reference are not a typical source of tension for most humans.’

‘That’s what you think.’

‘That is not the tension with which you currently require assistance.’

‘And that’s not exactly true, either.’ It’s tension; Jim doesn’t necessarily require assistance, but he wouldn’t kick it out of the tub, either. ‘I mean, I could assist myself—I assisted myself plenty before I got here—but now that I am here, it doesn’t make sense to ignore the facts.’

‘The facts,’ Spock repeats.

‘That two pairs of hands are better than one.’ Jim’s heartrate spikes again, sudden and incredible. He’s lucky Bones is somewhere else, that he doesn’t have the heightened Vulcan sense of hearing, because even a basic scan would give him ideas about hypos and sedatives for the greater good of Jim’s brain not exploding from oxygen deprivation. ‘That I’ve been thinking about your hands ever since you told me how sensitive they are.’ Like the hands in question, Spock elbow-deep in the private bathwater, Jim can only go lower. ‘That I asked myself, is it just fingertips they can read emotions out of, sense what’s going on under the surface of the skin, or can they do that anywhere on the body? And what does that feel like? It’s gotta feel incredible. It’s gotta…’

The surface of the water splashes against Jim’s armpits, up over his shoulders, as he searches for Spock’s fingers. He finds them, elbow bumping the tub behind him, guiding them around from the back of his body to the front. Over the bone of his hip. Along the tightened muscles of his stomach. And lower, below the navel.

Spock has to lean forward to reach. His lips skim the back of Jim’s neck; his breath skims the hair there, the echo of a shiver Jim didn’t get to feel, not completely, the night before.

In some ways, he almost likes that feeling more than the long, slim fingers on his body.

But only almost.

Because they feel pretty great.

‘The thing…’ Jim’s voice hitches on a snare in his throat. ‘The thing about imagining something is—it’s not about getting it right. It’s about wanting something, or thinking you want it, and trying to figure out how it’s gonna be, so that when you do get to experience it and it’s nothing like you planned, you know...how much better it really is.’

‘That,’ Spock says simply, ‘is illogical.’

‘Yeah. Completely.’ Jim guides Spock’s fingers into the crook between his hip and his thigh, feeling every second, every centimeter. He wonders if Spock feels it that way too; if the water dilutes the transference, or if it amplifies it; if he ever, even in those late-night fantasies, managed to picture something this good. He had some good scenarios, definitely, but he wasn’t lying when he put it into words, another definition for Spock to learn.

The side of Spock’s forefinger brushes the side of Jim’s dick and he hisses with the stones and the steam. He wouldn’t mind turning into steam. He’s already rock hard. It’s such a bad pun that he
does snort, without being able to save it in time, the most embarrassing laugh in the history of
laughs.

Spock doesn’t say anything, although Jim gets the impression of feeling him thinking.

‘Your reactions,’ Spock says at last, ‘are incongruous.’

‘God, Spock.’ Jim’s proud of his voice for not shaking. He’s found a lot of things to be proud of in
the hours since he opened his eyes on Vulcan, but that’s what happens when expectations start out
at rock bottom. On the ground floor, there’s nowhere to go but up. ‘You think you could stop
treating me like you’re a documentarian and just live in the moment?’

Spock’s fingers hesitate, something that doesn’t give Jim pause because his hips are already
hitching in crooked desperation after them, after more contact. The momentum hasn’t stopped as
far as he’s concerned, even if he has to chase down Spock’s hands himself.

‘Your suggestion that I am existing in a moment beyond this one implies a temporal complication
where none exists.’

Jim lets his head tip back, feeling Spock’s mouth slide from the nape of his neck to the slope of his
shoulder in surprise. Maybe he’s just trying to get out of the way.

‘All I’m saying…’ Jim arches his back, nudging his cock against Spock’s fingers with an insistence
he’d be ashamed of if he hadn’t spontaneously evolved past that sensation a long while back. Jim’s
heard every slight in the books when it comes to human evolution, but they’re adaptable if nothing
else. ‘All I’m saying, Spock, is that you’re talking like I’m a test subject.’

‘Your penis is engorged and yet you are laughing,’ Spock says. ‘There is nothing in my research to
suggest this is a typical reaction.’

‘Oh my god.’ Jim’s precious oxygen leaves his lungs in a helpless wheeze, muscles tensing as
Spock’s fingers trail curiously over the head of his cock under the hot water. ‘Don’t say engorged.’

‘It is the correct terminology,’ Spock says.

‘Right, but—again—’ Jim’s voice fails him as he feels the telltale drag of blunt nails over delicate
skin. ‘—you’re assuming precision’s the way to go here. And I’m not saying it’s not, precision’s
really, really good in some areas, but you’re making it tough—no, actually, make that impossible
to get in the mood.’

Spock’s nostrils flare against the side of Jim’s ear. There’s a tickle on his skin when he sucks in a
breath.

‘That particular claim is unsubstantiated by your physical condition,’ Spock says. ‘Jim, you are
clearly aroused.’

The statement makes Jim’s cock throb with its own heartbeat, twitching to match the rush of blood
through his chest. It was true before, but hearing Spock’s confirmation spoken aloud rips away any
chance Jim had of building up a real pretense. Nothing to do now but to throw himself into the act.

‘Now we’re talking,’ Jim says.

‘We have been talking for several minutes,’ Spock replies.

‘You weren’t precise there.’ Jim rests his wet head on Spock’s shoulders—proof that for next time,
intangible as next time currently is, they’ll have to both be naked if Spock wants to avoid getting his robes all wet. The rest of Jim is limp and hard by random turns, the full illogic of the human body laid bare—literally—for Spock’s hands to explore. If he wants to. If he feels the need. If it’s logical for him to do so. Even if Jim is a test subject in theory, that’s fine. Tests can be sexy. ‘Just, just something I noticed. Several. Imprecise.’

‘You advised against precision,’ Spock reminds him. It’s a fortunate accident that Spock’s mouth is pressed behind the shell of Jim’s ear. ‘However, for the sake of specificity, I have been keeping track of the exact amount of time that has transpired during which we have been engaged in dialogue.’

Jim groans—frustration, partly; amusement, a little but definite bit; arousal, engorgement, whatever it is Spock wants to call it, a hundred percent. He bucks his hips and Spock’s fingers don’t miss a beat, attuned to the throbbing of blood along the shaft, the little shivers of the thin, sensitive skin around the slit at the head. When Spock’s thumb rests there, probably—probably measuring the exact length, committing durability and sensitivity calculations to memory, dividing the sum of Jim’s reproductive parts to solve for X marks the g-spot, Jim whimpers, legs spreading.

‘Can you feel that?’ he asks.

‘I am currently feeling that,’ Spock replies. ‘Have you lost sensation—’

‘I meant, can you feel it, Spock.’

Spock’s lips brush over Jim’s skin; the pause is what Jim needs to hear, just like Spock’s fingers are what he needs to feel. It just wouldn’t feel right if there wasn’t some kind of reciprocity.

‘‘Cause you have permission,’ Jim adds, rambling through the curl of non-Vulcan heat pulsing through his gut, ‘to feel it, Spock. To feel it. What’s mine is yours—that’s, that’s gonna be in the vows, our ceremony on Earth. Definitely a part of the marriage deal. I could tell you how good it feels, but it just, it wouldn’t be the same.’

Spock’s silence is terrifying. Jim searches for his fingers in the water but shies away at the knuckles, not wanting to interrupt, or get in the way, or share too much all at once with an inadvertent, unexpected offering of all that turmoil, the questions he has alongside the sheer, mindless pleasure. He knows his dick’s not thinking. It never does, contrary to the claims that sometimes, it does all the thinking for him. Spock can read that if he wants to, every last shudder and throb, every last twitch and pulse, that particular way of relinquishing control.

Jim curls his fingers over the back of Spock’s hand instead, keeping the pads pressed against his own palm.

‘Feel that?’ he repeats.

He’s gonna need a bath after his bath, a bath because of his bath. It’s a little disorder on the most orderly planet in the world, but who’s keeping track?

Spock, probably.

Definitely. For the sake of specificity.

‘I do,’ Spock replies.

‘Yeah.’ Jim groans. ‘Shit. Yeah, ‘course you do. That,’ he adds, Spock retracing an earlier path with the side of his thumb. He doesn’t seem like the teasing type, but it teases the slit all the same,
and the idea of sharing that sensation is terrifying, too.

‘That.’ The same word vibrates deeper on Spock’s tongue. He has that kind of voice: low and deliberate, like Bones’ baritone but with none of his rough, frenetic edges. Don’t think about Bones. Jim bites his tongue, fighting to keep his hands still. ‘Is this another example of your favored form of repetition?’

‘Yeah.’ Jim breathes the word out like an affirmation of more than just Spock’s question. ‘That’s it, Spock.’

He’s trying not to interfere, but the weight of his hands and the subtle roll of his hips keep Spock’s touch from drifting too far away. It’s not being held down the way Jim likes best, but there’s less open, floating space in the water between his cock and Spock’s hands, and that’s as much as he can ask for.

Right now, anyway. He’s working on it. Working on Spock. Jim knows touch telepathy isn’t like reading minds, but he can’t help but wonder how much of what he’s feeling gets transferred through the thin skin of his erection, the sensitive pads of Spock’s fingers shivering a trace along a vein.

‘On the subject of repetition, I have found that you favor my name above all other choices.’

Spock’s still talking like a textbook, but the subject is Jim, and Jim can ignore a little stilted dialogue for the greater good. More than that, he’s never been immune to focused attention. Even Gaila and her poetry lessons held a certain allure: the way she’d look at him over that book like Jim was a tricky metaphor in a sonnet, not a clever rhyme but a deeper, resonant allusion.

Spock’s fingers curl around Jim’s cock, offering a preliminary squeeze. Jim’s throat closes over, making him groan. His heel slips on the slick surface of the tub below him, making him slam back against the wall. The stone edge catches him across his shoulders; it’s too soon to tell whether that’s gonna bruise. He wouldn’t care even if it did, because the sudden snap and furl of heat between his thighs when Spock finally wraps a hand around him and strokes pushes all his pain receptors straight to the back of his mind. They might as well not even be there.

‘I like saying your name,’ Jim groans.

‘That much is evident,’ Spock replies. When his mouth moves, it’s against Jim’s ear. He didn’t realize he’s come that close again, that he’s found a way to make it sustainable. ‘I would suggest that within the current frame of reference, there are other things you...like.’

‘Uh huh.’ Jim forgets about catching his breath. If he passes out, then he passes out. Spock’s there, he’s smart, and he’ll pull Jim above water before he has a chance to drown. In a way, that’s romance, but it’s the explanation that all the dictionaries in the galaxy can’t define. It’s trust—a physical form, but no less real than the documents they signed, the wax seals they stamped, the vows they exchanged on the sand. They don’t need words; Jim’s got more than Spock’s words. He’s got his hands. Spock’s hands have him, for the sake of specificity, and they’re getting the hang of repetition pretty fast, rolling through tight, thoughtful squeezes that Jim can thrust into. ‘You—You keeping track?’

‘I am able,’ Spock says, ‘to maintain focus on multiple subjects simultaneously.’

Jim’s laugh never makes it past his lips. He’s not sure if he should be thrilled or, honestly, a little offended. He settles for turned on, still, completely, surrounded by the hot water and Spock’s hot grip. When he thinks about Spock’s fingers, that’s almost enough to make him smash his shoulder
again—either that or come, which’d mean making the kind of mess Vulcan isn’t used to. Not even the half-human part.

He bangs his shoulder.

Definitely gonna bruise.

Jim laughs.

‘I was not joking,’ Spock says.

‘I know.’ Jim drags it out. Ohhh. Like a malfunctioning transport shuttle, he reins it back in. All he’s gotta do is land. ‘—oh. Laughter’s good, though—’ Oh. ‘—for intimacy.’

‘I will keep that in mind,’ Spock tells him.

Jim knows he will. I know. His mouth frames the repetition while his hips repeat, repeat, repeat—and if Spock can read his skin then every inch is more, not enough, too much. Direct insight. Jim’s not a handful of communications; he’s every frequency on full, broadcasting the heat and the final, irrational seconds before he finally gets his wedding night.

Their wedding night.

Technically, he’s getting it the morning after, but Jim doesn’t care. He’s almost positive he loses consciousness for a moment there—thanks to general oxygen deprivation, which actually isn’t too bad; in fact, some people actually try to simulate it for the reasons Jim’s experiencing. Jelly legs, flushed skin, water beading his eyelashes once more, and his neck sweaty again, Spock’s lips pressed to that sweat.

‘Yeah,’ Jim says, to prove he’s conscious. Also technically. The barest minimum of cognitive processes.

‘Jim.’ Spock adjusts the angle of his grip. Jim would tell him not to let go, not yet, but that’s a little too vulnerable, enough to make his cheeks flush hotter, as hot as his chest.

‘M’alive.’ Jim takes stock, slower than usual, fingers ticking a random rhythm against Spock’s wrist. ‘...Might need you to sponge me down, though. Pretty illogical, huh?’ It’s all coming back to him now. He’s got this. He’s in control. ‘Getting a guy dirty while he’s trying to get clean. You know, you’re a little illogical yourself, Spock.’

Jim nearly misses the tickle of Spock’s lips. His mouth must be doing something—but from this angle, Jim can’t tell what.

‘There is no need to be insulting,’ Spock says at last.

‘You think that’s an insult?’ Jim’s fingers trace over the lumpy bones in Spock’s wrist. Ulna and radial. There’s probably Vulcan words for both of them, things he didn’t memorize because he never thought he’d need them. He’s not training to be an expert in Vulcan anatomy; he only needs to know enough to be a diplomat in the streets and a memorable husband between the sheets. As far as he’s concerned—as far as he’s inferred, from Spock’s cryptic and infuriatingly basic statements about Vulcan erogenous zones—that doesn’t have anything to do with the bones in his wrist. ‘Then how come you say it to me so often?’

Spock breathes out, the closest Jim’s heard him come to clearing his throat like he’s got something uncomfortable caught in it.
‘To term a human’s actions as illogical is merely a factual observation. You are not logical beings.’

‘Starting to see where the insulting part comes in.’ Jim’s too relaxed to let it burrow beneath his skin. Agitation sloughs off him like drops of water hitting the hot stones, evaporating into steam in the humid air.

Spock’s fingers shift along Jim’s cock where it’s softening under the water, oversensitive tissue and nerve endings tingling with the last, lingering effects of one hell of an oxygen-deprived orgasm. Jim gets why that’s a thing. He doesn’t hold Spock in place, but he feels the tug of longing when he loses their connection. He’s gonna have to live with it.

They can’t be touching all the time.

Can they?

It seems like something Jim should be able to work on, though—as an ambassador to the people. Sam never would’ve had the information to go for it, but Sam’s single on Earth while Jim gets felt up by a Vulcan prince in his morning bath.

There’s no question as to who got the better deal. For once it’s not even a contest.

‘I would not seek to cause you intentional offense,’ Spock says.

As if that was ever in question.

Jim tips his head back. It’s not quite far enough that he can get a proper look at Spock, but it’s not a bad angle either. In his field of vision there’s about a quarter of Spock’s chin and a long stretch of neck, green-tinged throat bobbing when he swallows. For the first time, Jim allows for the possibility that Spock’s just as nervous as he is. Either way, he likes the view.

‘It’s the unintentional offense I gotta watch for, huh?’

‘A Vulcan does not act unintentionally.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Jim sinks lower, Spock’s grip loosening. He’s letting go. Jim doesn’t want him to, but, logically, he’s gonna have to get out of the bath sometime, and if Spock doesn’t make the first move, Jim’ll be content to sit there and prune for eternity. ‘A Vulcan gives a pretty spectacular hand-job, though.’

‘I have done my research,’ Spock replies.

He stands, giving Jim just enough time to crane his neck and see him smooth out a rumple in the front of his formalwear. There are a few damp speckles where Jim splashed him, the only remaining signs that they’ve done anything out of the ordinary, anything to precipitate a new, shared routine. Other than that, there’s nothing, not even a wrinkle or a flyaway hair. Jim wonders what it’ll take to get him messy. He’s lucky he’s still working on remembering how to breathe, otherwise Spock’d be taking a second bath, clothes still on, when Jim dragged him down with a splash.

‘You’re gonna have to tell me about that sometime—show me the sites, the databanks you consulted, let me give you some hands on pointers with a live model,’ Jim begins, trying to locate his spine where it might’ve melted in order to straighten. Just so he can see if Spock’s face betrays anything that the rest of him doesn’t.

But Spock’s not looking at him anymore.
‘I will leave you to the conclusion of your business here,’ he says. ‘I have matters of my own to attend to. As we are now unified by marriage, it falls to us to take our meals together. I will rejoin you at an appropriate hour for our shared lunch.’

Jim’s equilibrium is worse off than it was after thirteen hours of standing on the hot sands. ‘Uh, sure. Sure, Spock; it’s a date.’

Most people do things the other way around. Date first. Touch after. Get married if the other two things work out. It’s probably the illogical order they’re going in that colors the back of Spock’s neck, between his hairline and his high collar, flushing the faintest, shadowy green on his way out.

*
Chapter Summary

I-Chaya. And laps. This chapter got too long.

‘Spare me the details,’ Bones says, the moment he sees Jim’s face.

‘Come on,’ Jim replies. ‘What details?’

Bones checks on his vitals and doesn’t spit or snarl or spontaneously burst into flames, so Jim has to assume that what happened in the bath was actually good for his health. If Spock was anybody else, Jim could tell him it’s doctor’s orders to exercise regularly in the naked sense, and they’d have a laugh about it. A laugh that’d end in kissing.

Which they still haven’t done. Not fingers to fingers; not mouth to mouth.

Backwards and upside-down. If Spock wanted the standard human experience, he’s not getting it from Jim. And he doesn’t know enough about it to know what he’s missing out on, where Jim’s plans went out the window to shrivel up under the Vulcan sun.

‘You know what details. Gimme your symptoms, tell me if you’ve had trouble breathing lately, have any blank spots in your memory that last longer than usual and aren’t a botched excuse for sneaking out, fine—but what happens between two consenting, wedded adults when one of those wedded adults is you, Jim? There’s no damn cure for that.’

‘Hey,’ Jim says. ‘Aren’t you even a little bit happy for me?’

He doesn’t lean away when Bones brings one of his instruments close, doesn’t even protest when Bones gets that instrument on his face. It’s a round circle of cold steel breaking through his haze of warm, post-coital bliss, which he chose not to wash off in the bath.

Except, as Spock would be quick to point out, no actual coitus took place. Almost coitus. Coitus approachus. Jim snorts and Bones lurches away like he thinks he’s about to cough something up.

Not this time. The air’s too dry for anything to get backed up in Jim’s system.

He raises his eyebrows, giving Bones the old puppy eyes. They don’t work as well as they used to, back in the day when Jim was too little and adorable to refuse. But they’re still big and blue and Bones is an old sap even on his worst days. It’s a terminal condition.

Jim abuses it recklessly, but it’s not personal. After spending all night and a good part of the morning with someone who’s looked at him with all the warmth humans reserve for a paramecium on a science slide, Jim’s relishing the chance to get an expression out of someone. Anyone.

Only one person who can give him what he’s looking for.

Bones doesn’t disappoint. He tsks his tongue against the roof of his mouth, letting it fall open. Then he crosses his arms, like he’s trying to put some distance between himself and Jim’s pointed silence.
‘Am I supposed to be happy for a blessed event that’s brought you to a planet that, by all calculations and medical evidence, is trying to kill you on a regular basis?’

‘Yeah, Bones.’ Jim leans forward, bracing his elbow on his knee. He rubs a hand through his hair, massaging his scalp down to the back of his neck. It doesn’t match up to Spock’s touch. ‘You’re supposed to say congratulations.’

‘And you were supposed to answer my questions,’ Bones says. ‘Don’t think I’m gonna let those hangdog eyes distract me from my professional duty.’

‘I think professional duty is a redundancy,’ Jim replies.

Side effect of hanging out on Vulcan with Vulcans.

The truth is: he can’t remember a time since stepping off the shuttle when he hasn’t had trouble breathing. The hypos are helpful, but what he’d prefer is not having to rely on them forever. But Bones doesn’t believe in toughing it out. It’s not a medical term—not one in his book, anyway.

‘No memory lapses.’ Jim takes in a deep breath, just to prove he’s all right. ‘Believe me—I remember everything perfectly. I can recite it if you wanna test me. Get some of those details you were talking about.’

‘You so much as try, and I’ll have you out cold quicker’n you can say Moon Over Rigel Seven.’

‘Pretty sure that’s treason, Bones.’ Jim rolls out his shoulder and he flinches before he can catch himself. Bones’ eyebrow suggests he’d better take off his shirt and Jim sighs. ‘Okay, you’ve got it, Doctor Professional Duty. But you’re not gonna thank yourself for insisting when I tell you how I got this particular injury.’

Jim tugs his Vulcan sweater off over his head before Bones can reply. The bright side is, it’s not as itchy as it looks, but it’s still a sweater, and Jim’s wondering if it’s logical to torture yourself this much in the name of self-control. His shoulder twinges, a bruise he wishes he could be the first to see—and, if not him, then Spock.

Although the sight might discourage him from getting hands-on in the future. He’s weird like that. Unpredictable, for somebody who really, really likes the predictability of definitions and facts.

Those don’t change. Skin does. Jim turns around to show Bones the damage and he feels the cooling agent a second later, Bones working as fast as he mutters.

The bruise is collateral, not exactly unpleasant. Jim got it because he was careless and he was careless because he was feeling really, really good. When you look at a thing that way, you can be grateful for the sore reminder of moaning your brains out.

‘You get more bruises like that, Jim,’ Bones says finally, giving him a clap on the shoulder as an okay, ‘and it’s only gonna confirm my suspicions.’

‘That I’m royalty on the streets, a Klingon in the sheets?’ Jim disappears into the stranglehold of his sweater, feeling his hair do something static-crazy when his head makes it all the way through the tight collar.

‘That you don’t have a damn clue what you’re doing, and you sure as hell aren’t doing it right.’ Bones’ eyebrow is up and something in the corner of his mouth is twitching. Jim hasn’t seen one in a while, except for in the mirror, but it might be the creaky remains of a long-buried grin. ‘You write your experiences down in a diary if you need to, Jim, but I’m a doctor, Prince Jim, not a
marriage counselor or, God help me, a relationship consultant.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim agrees, ‘but you are a friend. Even if you do like stabbing me more than most of my other friends.’

‘I wouldn’t say more than. That’s a generous estimate about those other friends of yours.’ Bones returns to his kit, packing up the samples he took. ‘And here’s an idea, your royal pain-in-the-ass-ness: try engaging in the act on a bed sometime.’

‘Doctor’s orders?’ Jim asks.

‘Friendly advice,’ Bones replies. ‘Not a wall, not a floor, not a—whatever those ceremonial stone chairs are supposed to be, murder on the sciatic nerve included—and you’d think a logical people would be able to invent something soft to put your ass on when you sit—but something with pillows.’

‘Vulcan beds don’t have pillows.’ Jim gives in to gravity and flops where he sits, leaning his weight on his elbow.

‘And Vulcan air doesn’t have enough oxygen for your lungs,’ Bones retorts. ‘You start pointing out everything that’s messed-up on this backwards planet and I’ll be here all day. Not that I’m implying anything treasonous about your royal company, but a married man like you—well, I’d think you have better things to do with your time than harass an old country doctor.’

‘When I quote that back to Spock,’ Jim says, ‘and I will, Bones, do you want me to tell him you’re an old country doctor, or an old country doctor?’

‘Is there a difference?’ Bones asks. Jim can see it the minute he realizes his mistake, the horror sweeping over his darkened features like shadows stretching over the craggy desert cliffs outside Jim’s windows. ‘Never mind. Don’t tell me. I never asked. Think I’ll avoid the surround-sound Vulcan experience for as long as I can.’

‘Good luck with that, Bones,’ Jim says. ‘Because you’re kinda surrounded on all sides.’

‘Don’t remind me.’ Bones shivers theatrically, sticking the final hypo into his kit. ‘I tell you one thing: that Lady Amanda Grayson’s a goddamn saint.’

This time, Jim doesn’t bother pointing out the inherent contradiction in goddamn saint. If Bones is right about anything—and he is, more often than Jim’s willing to admit—it’s that they could get stuck doing this all day. And Jim has a lunch date. A date to eat lunch.

With his husband.

Jim shrugs with one shoulder, shaking off the tingling excitement that’s set into his skin. It’s easier to feel these things when he’s not being numbed by boiling water—and that just figures, since the one person he’d wanna feel them with has currently vanished.

If he told Jim the details of what he had to get done today, Jim’s already forgotten them.

Knowing him—and Jim doesn't yet, not as well as he wants—he’s probably drafted three treaties and settled a land dispute between the Tellarites and the Andorians, even after he got a late start due to Jim’s distractions.

Jim turns his attention to the problem at hand, cupping the side of his head to keep it from lolling to one side.
'You crushing on my mother-in-law, Bones? Do I have to worry about you causing intergalactic incident?'

'Watch it,' Bones says. 'You’re talking to the man who controls your medication.'

'What happened to professional duty?' Jim asks.

He knows he’s won when Bones growls like the recording of I-Chaya Spock sent him—while being careful to note of course that I-Chaya is of a gentle temperament, only growling when his primal instincts are awakened and he imagines himself, erroneously, to be on the hunt.

Primal instincts.

Jim’s on the hunt for some of those, himself. Bones rolls his eyes and rolls out the stiff muscle in his clenched jaw at the same time. Vulcans aren’t the only ones with simultaneous capabilities.

'Try not to kill yourself before dinner, would you?' Bones adds. 'You know, you’re not the only one this atmosphere’s trying to assassinate. You’re just the only casualty they’ll report back home.'

If Bones is moved by the prospect of young love, he doesn’t show it. He’s off to study Jim’s platelets on slides in private while Jim gets studied like a platelet on a slide in semi-private. Not the romance he ever pictured for himself when he was riding free along the coast, cold San Francisco air whipping wet around his face—but then again, it’s hard to picture cold and wet on Vulcan anyway.

Alone—for the time being, in a rare moment of directionless peace—Jim reaches for his PADD before he remembers there isn’t going to be a message from Spock waiting for him on it.

He should probably send something back to his mom. And Sam, although Sam’s busy with his own stuff. Planning his next great escape. Or who he can get married to that’ll be even more outrageous than a half-Vulcan.

Dear Mom, Jim pictures himself writing. Guess what? I didn’t embarrass all of Earth on my first day and night in Vulcan so you can tell everyone to unclench. Bones thinks the weather’s trying to kill me but Bones thinks everything’s trying to kill me. What’s it like where there’s oxygen? I already forget. Also, in case you were wondering, which you probably weren’t, this crazy deal you made without even consulting me actually worked out, sort of. My husband’s pretty weird. He blushes green. Tell Sam I said thanks for screwing up worse than I did for once.

Yeah; it’d never fly. He’s got Dear Mom Highness but the rest is either too formal or too informal. Hard to write to family and treat them like family when they’re also royalty—even harder with the empty space between them. Mourning a lost father while respecting a king and his kingdom.

Jim wishes he could still feel the pinch of the bruise on his shoulder, something to ground him. When he rolls over onto his stomach for a better official communication home writing angle, hanging off the edge of the bed with his PADD on the floor, he’s lost the thread of what he wanted to say.

Maybe he doesn’t want to say anything.

But there’s not much else to do. The usual Vulcan lessons won’t stick in the heat; Bones isn’t there to pass the time. There’s a loneliness in the room that’s heavier, more stifling than the atmosphere. And there’s no shot of oxygen that’ll chase that feeling out.

The itchiness at Jim’s fingertips isn’t an unfamiliar sensation. It’s the same itch that drove him to
head out for nowhere in particular, riding too fast the whole way. The tabloids ate it up. *Restless Royal Joy-Rides Again.*

It’s not bad, as far as press nicknames go. Catchy; alliterative.

He should’ve had it put on a t-shirt or started a band: *Jim Kirk and the Restless Royals.* Maybe he could’ve gotten Mitchell to play drums before they went their separate ways. But from what Jim’s heard of Vulcan music, he wouldn’t be much of a hit, not here. They aren’t big on melody—just rhythm. Bone-shattering, skull-pounding rhythm that goes on and on in the same monotone until Jim’s sure he’s being shaken apart on a molecular level.

Only that didn’t happen. Molecules intact, Jim’s officially married and he survived the official ceremony. It should feel like a rite of passage, but instead it sits restless under his skin like one of the fevers Bones is always watching out for.

He’s sure sweating it out.

Jim hoists himself to his feet in a slow, calculated movement that he’d never make with an audience. On Earth there’s always a camera, always a servant or an interested party waiting around to get a quote for a fluff piece. Of all the differences and difficulties Vulcan’s brought him, he’s most grateful for that one. It’s lonely, but no one’s watching over his shoulder as he shuffles forward like a wheezing ninety year old, making his way to the outer balcony.

The sun hits him full force the second he passes through the curtains, sending Jim right back into his room for his royal shades. They’re specially-made, tinted glass engineered to block out UVA and UVB and all the other stuff that’s making Jim’s eyes sting and tear up. The last thing he needs is to meet Spock with salt-tracks streaming down his cheeks.

Not exactly a romantic look post-honeymoon.

He can just hear Spock now, telling him: *Your eyes are secreting a saline fluid.*

He laughs it off, all of him secreting saline fluids lately, then stops in his tracks to keep from toppling forward over a giant mound of fur.

‘Whoa,’ Jim says.

There’s an unexpected visitor sleeping slumped across his deck. His big, furry body’s stretched out to block the stairway cut into the rock, which makes a narrow path from the higher elevation of Jim’s quarters to the desert below.

What was it Spock said about waking the primal instincts in sehltats again?

‘Hey, boy.’ Jim crouches, moving slow, and stretches one hand toward the animal’s massive, bearlike head.

*Reckless Royal Eaten By Grizzly.* The headline flashes in front of his face clear as an emergency bulletin on a PADD.

But the sehlat’s head snaps up in recognition, eyes warm, broken canine friendly. He knows the sound of Jim’s voice from dozens of recordings, some of them made expressly for him, and instead of baring his teeth, he watches Jim lazily, paws folded under his chin like an old dog.

An old, *big* dog.
‘You wanna come to lunch?’ It shouldn’t be easier to talk to I-Chaya than his own husband, but here he is. Chatting with a sehlat. ‘Get some nice meat substitutes?’

I-Chaya blinks at him and Jim settles against a stone stanchion at the balcony’s edge, one knee up, making use of the shade. He lets I-Chaya sniff him, get used to the scents that he couldn’t exactly send along with his voice, before he tests the top of his nose for particular sensitivity.

Spock was right about the drool. I-Chaya’s eyes are fond but squinty.

‘Yeah,’ Jim says. ‘I feel you, buddy. Out here in that fur coat. You’re a trooper. Bones says Lady Amanda’s the saint, but you’re right up there. Bet you look at all these Vulcans and wonder why they put layers on at all, huh?’

I-Chaya doesn’t have an answer. Obviously. But he does butt his wet nose against the flat of Jim’s palm, pushing his face in an obvious plea for more pets.

Jim obliges. It’s simple. I-Chaya asks and Jim delivers, physically, ruffling the bristly whiskers over the flat of I-Chaya’s nose and a sweet spot on the crest of his brow, wrinkling the skin beneath the fur and smoothing it out in a steady rhythm. I-Chaya rests his chin on Jim’s bent knee and before he knows it, there’s a spot of drool on the fabric, drying almost as quickly as it appears.

Kinda poetic.

Jim tips his head back. ‘Guess we oughta wait for Spock for lunch, anyway. Think he’ll be happy we’re getting along?’

I-Chaya drools.

‘Yeah,’ Jim says again. ‘I know. He’ll notice but it’s not like it’ll make a difference either way. It’s probably...whatever. Irrelevant.’

I-Chaya doesn’t get on him for a lack of specificity and that’s okay, too. Jim tests his ears; I-Chaya doesn’t complain or bristle. There’s a thick line of muscle and fat around I-Chaya’s neck and broad shoulders and Jim wiggles his knuckles against it.

‘Thanks for listening,’ he adds.

A slight breeze stirs the curtains. When the shadow behind them remains to clear its throat lightly, Jim wonders how long Spock’s been standing there listening to him talk to the family pet and if that’s grounds for a Vulcan divorce.

Eavesdropping should definitely be considered illogical—even if it’s been the logical solution to Jim’s problems on numerous occasions in the past.

‘Conversing with I-Chaya serves no purpose,’ Spock says.

‘The same could be said of a lot of people I’ve had to talk to.’ At least with the sunglasses on Jim doesn’t have to squint up at Spock to see him, hands folded out of sight behind his back. ‘But I still talk to them, and they’re not even half as good company.’

‘The point remains that I-Chaya cannot understand your words, nor can he offer any addition to the conversation you have initiated with him. He is not an ideal partner for dialogue.’

‘Worried we’re talking about you, huh?’
That was at no point of any concern.’ Spock’s stiff shoulders probably have nothing to do with the implication that Jim’d gang up on him with a sehlat. ‘Naturally that conversation, too, would be one-sided, and likely far from illuminating.’

’’Cause we were,’ Jim says. ‘Talking about you.’

‘You were talking about me to I-Chaya.’

Now Spock’s getting the hang of repetition.

Jim likes it. At least, he can’t do anything about the big, dopey grin that spreads across his face at the idea of Spock being the one at a loss for once. Maybe he needs to give Bones a little more credit for whatever’s in those hypos—or maybe Jim’s just finally talked Spock down to his level. Either way, for the moment, they’re both in the weeds.

Figuratively speaking, of course. There’s no such things as weeds on Vulcan. Jim’s barely glimpsed so much as a cactus, let alone things that aren’t supposed to grow in the ground.

‘It was a very illuminating conversation,’ Jim adds.

Spock looks up toward the arch of the window above him, drawing in a breath. On anyone else that expression would look like rolling his eyes, but Jim has yet to see a sassy Vulcan. Maybe he’s catching a glimpse of his first. Maybe he’s inspired the first.

‘You are of course, speaking facetiously.’

‘Not in front of I-Chaya,’ Jim says. He straightens, getting on one knee before slowly standing. I-Chaya stays as still as a rock beneath his hand, earning himself a scratch behind the ears for his trouble. Smart. ‘Good dog.’

‘I-Chaya is not a dog,’ Spock says.

His eyes are back on Jim, watching closely, as if he’s trying to memorize the situation so he can dissect and present the facts. They aren’t on a starship. There’s no admiral to make recommendations to, no official analysis to present. Jim can’t imagine the ways in which he’s being broken down and put back together, the things Spock’s deciding about him every time Jim moves like a senior citizen instead of a young man.

‘Good boy, then.’ Jim shifts his hand to rub under I-Chaya’s furry chin where his whiskers are gray on brown. ‘Good senior citizen. Good sehlat. You wanna get some lunch with me and my hubby?’

Jim shifts his balance quickly—an ungraceful slope that makes it look like he’s toppling over—and catches himself on the curtain. Spock doesn’t move to brace him, but his brows draw sharply down, shifting his expression from distant to watchful.

It’s attentive. Jim’ll take it.

‘Animals—even those under domesticated care—are not permitted within the dining hall,’ he says. ‘I-Chaya is already aware of these parameters.’

‘Uh huh.’ Jim waits, watching the tension in Spock’s mouth. There’s more coming. He’s still trying to spit it out.

‘…I do not believe there was any mention of hubby in your colloquial dictionary.’
‘Huh. Must’ve been an oversight.’ Jim smooths out the curtains, rich, thick fabric over the softer, gauzier material that flutters in the barest of breezes. He’d rather be touching Spock, but this way, at least, his hands don’t feel so empty. ‘Husband’s what it stands for. Sort of what it sounds like. Easy.’

‘It merely ‘sort of’ sounds like husband, that is true.’ Spock sniffs. ‘I will not forget it as you did while compiling the dictionary.’

‘Maybe I figured working on some of this stuff together might be more fun than having it all out there before we even got a chance to meet,’ Jim says. Something’s nagging at the back of his mind, something he needs to sift through gritty heat like sand to pull to the surface. ‘Are we having lunch in a dining hall?’

‘A brief public appearance would not be unwise,’ Spock replies.

‘Huh.’ Jim tugs at a slip of light fabric. It slips like liquid silver past his fingers, soft as a shiver. ‘Here I thought maybe we could eat alone. Just the two of us. I-Chaya, too, since you already made the point that he can’t gossip or understand what people are talking about.’

‘Your expressed interest in privacy has already been noted.’ Spock watches Jim’s hands—but it’s little more than a glance. Still, it makes Jim shiver under the heat. Illogical, but completely accurate. With sensitive fingertips like a Vulcan’s, Jim can’t imagine that Spock wouldn’t just touch things: soft things, rough things, leather and bark and pitted stone and sand. But this is Spock. Spock doesn’t just touch things. He needs a little encouragement, someone to suggest it would not be unwise. ‘If you would prefer to eat alone together, that is easily arranged.’

Easily arranged, Jim’s brain repeats. Like their deal, only there’s been nothing easy about that.

Jim wipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. ‘Something cold to drink might not be unwise, either,’ he adds, twisting another slim, soft twirl of fabric around his knuckles.

Spock looks at that, too. It could be part of his research—or it could be personal. Jim lets the fabric slip free between his fore and index-finger.

I-Chaya yawns.

Spock swallows.

‘Hey,’ Jim begins, his voice gritty for reasons other than the desert, the atmosphere, the sunlight, the countless grains of sand he had to’ve swallowed in open-mouthed sleep.

‘You are hungry,’ Spock says.

That’s true, but there’s more than one kind of hunger. And that’s not something you can put down in a dictionary.

‘You wanna go out, we can go out.’ Jim lets it go—the curtain, but also something else. For now. ‘Anywhere in mind? You looking to show me off?’

‘That is not a Vulcan indulgence.’

‘Indulgence isn’t a Vulcan indulgence, Spock.’

‘A tautology, and therefore true.’ Spock waits for Jim to walk inside and follows; I-Chaya trots behind, lumbering steps punctuated by a snuffle that Jim couldn’t agree with more. ‘Perhaps it
would be less taxing to remain here for the time being.’

Jim isn’t sure which option is more daunting: face all of Vulcan on his second day there, or face Spock alone after his first morning. Either way, facing both eventually is his only option. When he puts it that way, he prefers facing this Vulcan.

He’s not sure whether he’ll regret that decision but it feels right for now. Spock’s scrutiny over that of the masses. And Jim’s not sure he can manage conscious upright posture at the same time as table manners. It might be one or the other—and there’s a chance Spock might find it charming if Jim ends up facedown in his synthesized protein substitute.

He’s not willing to take the gamble that a roomful of Vulcan servants and dignitaries might feel the same way.

‘I have researched the appropriate recipes and programmed the replicator for the Earth delicacies for which you expressed preference in your letters.’ Spock crosses to the wall beside Jim’s desk—what could double as a dining table, a flat slab of polished obsidian. ‘It is my understanding that there is little tradition applied to lunch on Earth, but as you failed to attend breakfast, perhaps you would prefer lighter fare.’

He presses his fingers against a smooth patch above a decorative stone molding; it retracts into the wall and reveals a silver control panel with an open space for replicated meals.

‘That your way of telling me I can’t have a hamburger for my first meal on Vulcan, Spock?’

Jim watches, marveling at the secrets his own room’s been hiding from him. It’s humbling to think about how little he’s paid attention to his surroundings. Last night, his quarters could’ve been a bed in the middle of the desert cliffs for all he cared what was in them. Even now he’s looking at the furniture and classifying it by what he can lean on and what he can’t.

Any Vulcan aesthetic appreciation is lost on him. But that might’ve been true even if he was operating at full capacity.

‘You should see my room back home,’ he adds, before Spock can answer his first question. ‘Bones put the replicator on lockdown for my diet. I could’ve used one of those hidden bad boys.’

Spock’s brow wrinkles. His fingers are on the buttons but his eyes are still on Jim. It’s not entirely fair for him to act this way—he knows that. He gets that. Jim could stand to be plenty more direct. But standing’s not his strong suit right now, and he’d rather not be direct when he can coax Spock into playing along with him.

‘The replicator functions adequately,’ Spock says. ‘There is no reason to refer to it as bad.’

‘In that case: yeah, Spock.’ Jim never thought he’d sit down to his first meal on Vulcan with the help of a support-sehlat, but it’s the kind of surprise he can live with. ‘I think I want a hamburger.’

‘As it is your first meal, and as you did not eat breakfast, a concession for a heavier nutritional offering is not out of the question.’ Spock’s fingers move quickly over the buttons, giving Jim another thrill—although it’s brief, swiftly replaced by anticipation for the hamburger.

That’s no offense to Spock and Spock’s fingers. It’s only that it’s been forever; it feels like forever, anyway. And that’s the kind of forever that usually counts.

Jim leans forward, elbows on the table. Spock brings him the hamburger on a tray and sets it down, neatly, with a salad for himself across the way.
‘Bones tell you to make a good impression on me about the merits of a salad?’ Jim asks, still savoring the last few moments before he digs in. Those are the best ones—that, and immediately after everything’s gone and he’s licking the last bit of sauce off his fingertips, when it’s too soon to miss what he’s already consumed. ‘Eat all the salad you can in front of your new husband, see if you can rub some of your good habits off on him, that kind of thing? I know how the two of you love talking about me.’

‘This is my preferred afternoon meal.’ Spock sits crisply, stiffly; Jim can tell he’s never leaned on anything a day in his life. Lounging is out of the question.

Jim nods at one familiar piece of the equation. The *sash-savas* is in there, cut into quarters, and Jim’s mouth puckers with half-fond remembrance. ‘I’d know those little acid bombs anywhere. You can really eat those without burning the inside of your mouth off?’

‘As that has not yet come to pass,’ Spock replies, ‘it is safe to assume that it is not a concern.’

There’s so much to work on, so much to finesse. Jim settles for eating his hamburger two-handed—because there’s no way he’s going to give Spock the wrong idea about how hamburgers should be eaten. Being proper with a hamburger, using utensils, is a crime against nature. It’s illogical, that’s what it is, and Jim knows how Spock feels about logic.

Now if he could be as certain about how Spock feels about him.

The good news is, Jim knows how he feels about the hamburger. It’s got that faint replicator tang—he knows it isn’t the real deal, but it’s close enough for the time being that he’ll take it. Replicators never get the succulence, the juiciness of a meal quite right; in this case, it’s probably for the best that Jim isn’t dripping all over the table while Spock eats in silence.

He does that efficiently, too. Without savoring a single bite. Not surprising. Maybe he doesn’t like the *sash-savas* after all. Maybe he rationally eats it because it provides the required nutrients.

Jim licks his thumb, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth and the edge of his finger pressed against his bottom lip when he happens to catch Spock’s eye.

‘Does it meet with your expectations?’ Spock asks.

‘You gotta make it sound so foreboding?’ Jim remembers he should swallow before speaking just a beat too late.

Not to mention that he’s doing that thing Bones hates—answering a question with a question—but there’s no getting around the way Spock asked to begin with. Most people would’ve sounded hopeful, a little unsure of themselves. Spock practically made his lunch here, with the replicator’s help, and they *are* newlyweds. This is the stage where they’re supposed to try and lavishly please one another before the magic dies.

Though when Jim reviews the things he’s done so far to please Spock—not passed out in the desert at midnight; haltingly undressed him in the dark before falling asleep after—he’s coming up with red on his side of the column.

Spock’s done way more. Maybe he’s aware of it; maybe he’s not looking to impress Jim right now because he thinks he’s been impressive enough with that stunt in the bath. From what Jim’s learned, Vulcans don’t exploit the odds in their favor. There’s not much logic in capitalizing on a trend of victory.

Jim sure as hell would’ve been using it to *his* advantage.
And now he’s sitting here at the lunch table in his quarters thinking about getting his fingers on Spock’s Vulcan dick.

*That’s* probably why it was the best idea to stay in.

‘I was inquiring after your enjoyment of the meal,’ Spock says. ‘In my research of common topics with regard to human small dialogue, the discussion of activities as well as current events is always relevant. As the most recent current event in Vulcan bulletins has been our nuptials and you attended the ceremony, I presumed a different area of discussion might be more appropriate.’

Jim’s head throbs, just once, a warning of many headaches to come in his oxygen-starved brain. Eventually his body’s gonna adjust to the atmosphere. He keeps telling himself that, but it doesn’t mean the transition’s not a bitch.

He finds a stray piece of ground meat with his tongue and nudges it loose from between a gap in his upper back molars.

‘It’s great, Spock.’ Jim stretches his legs out under the table. The tension in Spock’s shoulders relaxes for a split-second, then jerk straight across, back tight as a bowstring as Jim’s boot taps his own. ‘I love your cooking.’

‘There was no cooking involved,’ Spock reminds him.

‘Huh.’ Jim lifts a cloth napkin to his mouth, wiping the grease from his lips. ‘We could get something cooking, if you wanted. Since we’re staying in and all.’

Spock glances to I-Chaya, but I-Chaya’s on Jim’s side for the moment. Or on his own side. The point is, I-Chaya’s sleeping, and Jim’s testing the waters by touching Spock’s calf with the side of his boot. I-Chaya doesn’t notice; I-Chaya’s snoring.

Jim waits for something else to flare to life—heat in Spock’s cheeks; a flush on his neck; anything. But Spock’s got himself under control. Whatever effect Jim has on him, it’s not something Jim can see.

‘The suggested amount of physical exertion would not be advisable.’ Spock sounds more like a doctor than Jim’s actual doctor. ‘It would place a strain upon your system, and the likelihood of that strain causing future, avoidable difficulties is eighty-six point three percent.’

‘Only eighty-six point three?’ Jim shrugs. ‘That’s better odds than I usually get. And a little less specific than you usually get, Spock. Something distracting you?’

‘Your foot,’ Spock replies simply, ‘is on my leg.’

‘Yeah. It’s a human thing. You ever heard of footsie, Spock?’

‘It would seem there are many eventualities for which I am unprepared.’ It’s then that Spock’s focus shifts, lingering over Jim’s shoulder, in a neutral space that gives as much as it takes—that is to say, nothing at all.

‘That such a bad thing?’ Jim wants to lean forward, but he doesn’t want to move his foot. It’s a point of proof or pride or—most likely—passion. He wants to show he can commit himself to something, that he can follow through. That there’s more to him than teasing and writhing in a hot tub while Spock does all the hard work. ‘We can figure it out together.’

‘That would require your lack of prior information—a lack of information which you do not have.’
‘Okay,’ Jim says. ‘Okay, that’s fair. Except I don’t have any Vulcan information. Just the stuff I studied. And even that, like you said... *Shrouded in secrecy.*

‘As private matters should remain.’

‘You made me lunch,’ Jim tries to explain. ‘Got me lunch. Brought me lunch. And then there’s this morning. Which was...’ Jim can’t find the right word; knowing how important the right word is for Spock makes everything feel like it falls short. ‘I mean, it was *really...*’

‘Many skills require example and practice.’ Jim really wishes he was that spot on the wall Spock’s staring at. ‘Though the Vulcan intellect is capable of absorbing information at an accelerated rate, that is an intellectual, not a physical, pursuit.’

‘So you’re good at everything,’ Jim says. ‘I’m totally not surprised, by the way. I was expecting it.’

Spock swallows. Jim watches his throat bob just under the collar and it makes him swallow, too.

‘I do not understand,’ Spock says. ‘I had inferred from your inability to choose a suitable descriptor that the experience was not one that approached your expectations. Anticipation is illogical; it is a factor in breeding disappointment.’

Jim blinks. ‘Spock—’

‘The circumstances, too, were not ideal. However, I will not act without proper forethought again.’

‘*Spock,*’ Jim says.

‘In the future,’ Spock continues.

Jim reaches across the table. It’s rash; it’s bold; it’s stupid, probably. It might not be good, but it’s the right thing to do.

He grabs Spock’s hand.

‘*Spock,*’ Jim says again.

If Spock had fur, it’d be easier to see where he bristles like a cat. As it stands, Jim has to infer from the atmosphere and his posture, the way Spock’s arm tightens from shoulder to wrist, carrying that fine strain through his back and down his spine. Jim almost regrets it, but Spock’s not tugging his hand away just yet. His fingers are still under Jim’s, not limp but cool and still in some feign at passive resistance.

That’s all right. It’s not *great,* but Jim’s past dealing in ideals for the moment. His reality’s far from the best thing it could be right now but it’s still his to manage.

He can make it work.

If they can’t communicate the old fashioned way then they’ll have to try something new. Jim’s not thinking anything particular in Spock’s direction, but the emotional transference should be enough to go by.

It’s *something,* anyway.

And, knowing Spock, he’ll be able to make better sense of it than Jim.
Then again, given the evidence of what he’s seen today alone, there might be nobody at the helm of this relationship.

Spock curls his fingers in toward his own palm, pushing his knuckles against the underside of Jim’s hand. He’s defensive. Jim tries to understand.

‘Were you not there?’ he asks. He can back up his feelings with words—the least he can do to make up for barreling into Spock with his emotions. ‘I mean, I know you were there, Spock, believe me. I’m still reeling from how there you were. But I mean—mentally, did you check out or something? Because it was… Really good, Spock. Really good.’

Spock’s fingers twitch; Jim feels the tug of a thumbnail against the soft web of skin between his thumb and forefinger. Not pushing him off, but not pulling him closer either.

‘Your inability to apply a suitable adjective suggests otherwise.’ Spock’s voice is distant but calm, like he’s working on centering himself far away from the tumult of Jim’s honeymoon feelings.

It was kind of a low blow to corner him like that, but Jim’s not exactly at his best. Any bad decisions he makes in the first seventy-two hours or so he’s chalking up to poor adjustment to his new environment.

‘Pretty sure I used multiple adjectives there, actually.’ Jim fits his fingers in between the bumps of Spock’s knuckles. ‘Really good. Spock. The meaning can’t be that different between Earth and Vulcan.’

‘Really is an adverb,’ Spock replies.

Jim groans.

‘You also expelled sounds similar to that which you have just now expressed,’ Spock adds. ‘In my understanding, it is a noise which connotes frustration.’

‘I was groaning, you mean.’

‘Considerably.’

‘Well—yeah, Spock, I was. You had your hands on me and the—are you not hearing me when I say it was really good? I don’t fake that stuff, anyway. Flirting, maybe. But here’s the thing, Spock: human males can’t actually fake an orgasm.’ Jim gives Spock’s knuckles a tentative rub. One of Spock’s eyebrows lifts. He’s not staring at the wall or the window anymore; he’s looking down at their hands instead. That’s progress. Slow and steady, which isn’t the way Jim’s used to winning the race. ‘First of all, that happened. Second of all, if anyone should be worried about how things went down, it should be me.’

‘I fail to see how—’

‘Because,’ Jim continues, ‘of the two of us, I was the one who got off; you were the one who got me off. And then you left before I could return the favor. Not that you did it because you were looking for payback; I get that. That’s not—I wouldn’t imply that. But that’s kinda how it works. A little quid pro quo. Or a lot quid pro quo, if you’re good at it. Which I think we could be.’ Jim takes a deep breath. ‘Really good.’

‘Further repetition is no longer necessary,’ Spock says. ‘I will not mistrust the statement or require emphasis on its veracity any further.’
'Good, ‘cause it’s stopped sounding like words. Really good.’ Jim chances a grin; it doesn’t get a response in the form of a smile but there’s no way Spock missed it. ‘Your hands, Spock. They got me. They totally got me.’

‘The intention was not to ‘get you’,’ Spock replies. ‘...But I will take the compliment under advisement.’

‘Well, I’d like to get you sometime.’ Jim still has Spock’s hand in his. He rubs that spot between his knuckles again and sees Spock’s posture shift, still stiff, but it’s a different kind of defensive. Jim recognizes that, and he has good reason to.

It’s human.

‘I made a lot of promises, too,’ he adds. ‘About the things I wanted to do with you. To you. And the things we could do together. And then you go ahead and you bust out your moves in the middle of my bath and I swear, Spock, I’m not gonna lie back and let you do all the work in this relationship.’

‘You were not lying at that point.’ Spock watches, very closely, as Jim traces every hill and valley of his knuckles. ‘Yet as the expression is colloquial I will not correct that point.’

‘Thanks,’ Jim says.

He means it.

Spock inclines his head to the side—a private battle, Jim decides, between his knowledge of the proper response and his calculated conclusion that gratitude isn’t relevant or necessary.

‘But,’ Jim continues, ‘I’m not a touch telepath or anything, and it’s not like you make it easy to guess what’s going on inside your head. I was just thinking maybe—I mean, on Earth, it’s kind of a tradition to kiss each other after you’re married. And we haven’t done that yet. And, I get it, mouth to mouth’s gonna challenge my already compromised respiratory system, but that’s not the only way Vulcans can kiss, right?’

Spock’s teeth click when they come together. Jim hears it, a clean connection that means he hasn’t pinched a piece of his lip or the corner of his tongue like anyone else. Jim wonders if it feels the same on Vulcan as it does on Earth, or whether Vulcans evolved to have those heightened nerve endings in their fingers because they don’t exist in their mouths.

It’s a depressing thought. Jim doesn’t want to go there. Not that he’s so set on the idea of a traditional make-out session, but he’d hate to think Spock might not be getting the full experience if they went a little more human sometimes in their explorations.

For now, it couldn’t hurt to learn the Vulcan basics.

Jim pulls his hand back instead, giving himself the necessary distance to draw the pads of his fingers between Spock’s where they separate.

Spock’s mouth opens again, just slightly. It’s not gaping like the paparazzi shot of Jim at one of Sam’s homecoming speeches—Younger Kirk Catches Flies At Prince Sam’s Reception Gala—but there’s a definite slackness of musculature there that Jim hasn’t seen yet.

It occurs to him in a flash of inspiration that he might’ve missed it earlier—because there were things he sacrificed for the privacy of their romp in the bathtub, and one of those was getting to see Spock’s face while he was getting Jim off. He’s had to chalk a lot up to imagination; while
they were writing letters it didn’t seem to matter so much, but now that they’re together—*married* together—it seems like a waste not to eat up every second of Spock that he can before the honeymoon’s over.

The honey-no-moon on Vulcan.

‘C’mere,’ Jim says. ‘Not literally, because if you get any closer I’m not sure I’m gonna be able to keep it strictly to hands touching hands here, but just…’

He presses his thumb to Spock’s palm for leverage and turns his hand over, tracing pale skin along the roots of his fingers, stopping to circle over the raised section that marks his index finger. There’s no telltale flush of green in Spock’s cheeks and he’s nowhere near as warm as Jim, but he’s watching Jim with the same lidded appreciation I-Chaya gave him while he was scratching a good spot under his chin.

Jim probably shouldn’t compare his husband to his favorite old pet out loud. He’ll keep that one to himself, alongside the satisfaction that comes with it.

‘We were right to requisition privacy for this luncheon,’ Spock says, and Jim’s not sure by now whether it would *actually* kill him to drop a compliment, but he’s starting to wonder whether this isn’t all some elaborate scheme set up to assassinate the second prince of Earth.

Because he’s pretty sure he’s gonna die if Spock starts talking about the weather next instead of Jim’s dexterous aptitude.

‘Because you’re gonna need privacy?’

‘We are both in need of it.’ Spock swallows again. Jim measures every movement he makes, no matter how small. ‘To touch each other in this fashion in public would not be appropriate.’

‘So I’m being inappropriate,’ Jim says. He knew that. His thumb follows the mound at the heel of Spock’s palm, tracing it around to the base where it connects with his wrist, then comes full circle back to the center. ‘Even…naughty.’

‘I would not suggest punishment for this behavior,’ Spock replies. ‘The term naughty—’

‘Spock.’ Jim rubs the bottom of Spock’s index finger, from the inside ridge of one knuckle to the next, up and down, pushing his fingers apart a little wider each time. ‘Remember the colloquial dictionary?’

‘Naughty,’ Spock repeats. There it is. A brief, gone-to-soon crack in the wall, a glimpse of firelight in the desert sands. Because that’s exactly what Spock’s like; Jim’s not gonna miss out on the perfect comparison, not after so many poetry lessons with Gaila. ‘You utilized that particular word in order to imply sexual innuendo and denote flirtatious intentions.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘It has been noted.’ Spock regards the spread of his fingers, coaxed by Jim’s fingers, along the warm, flat tabletop with eyes so dark Jim can’t picture any kind of light inside of them. The fire is that deep. Jim moves up a knuckle, the skin thin and sensitive, little veins even greener than they ever appear on human hands. ‘I will not commit the same mistake of connotation in the future.’

‘Uh-huh,’ Jim says again. His thumbnail’s short and blunt, the perfect shift in textures as he drags it along the side of Spock’s ring-finger, rounding over the domed tip on his way back down the other side. He doesn’t feel it—not to the same extent that Spock has to be feeling it—but that
doesn’t mean he can’t appreciate the moment for what it is: total exploration; giving ten, maybe a hundred times more than he’s taking; the same illicit thrill of waiting for somebody to unwrap the perfect gift coupled with the physical knot of hard heat that comes with being turned on.

The best of both worlds, you might say.

Like so many times in the past, Jim thinks: Don’t forget to tell Spock about that comparison.

‘The point remains,’ Spock says quietly, ‘that you cannot be appreciating the same stimuli as you are affording me with this choice of actions.’

‘Yeah, maybe. Not the same. It doesn’t have to be the same. Besides,’ Jim adds, ‘the reverse was true this morning. Turnabout’s fair play.’

‘You believe that I was unable to share the sensations as you experienced them in the bath when my hands were at the site of your physical arousal?’ Spock asks.

It’s Jim’s turn to swallow. He nearly chokes. ‘Uh,’ he says. ‘Oh. Huh. Yeah. Hrm.’ He clears his throat. The choking could still happen. The choking is always on the verge of happening. ‘I was actually, yeah. Wondering about that. Huh.’

‘Vulcan telepathy is based around transference through touch.’ It’s familiar, but the words sound better coming out of Spock’s mouth than the hushed recitation mode from Jim’s terminal. ‘The sensations you experienced during this morning’s activities were quite...obvious.’

‘Well,’ Jim says, ‘I guess I’d rather be obvious than inscrutable.’

Like he’s ever had a choice. Jim wasn’t exactly born with the discerning gene. He stands out in a crowd. It was either embrace that or learn to live with it, and he’s always been better at the proactive than the reactive.

His fingers light on either side of Spock’s ring finger, moving over the band of bare skin that’d have a ring if they wore them. Those’ll come with the human ceremony too—and even then Spock’s won’t be on his hand.

In a weird way, that’s kinda hot.

The only thing that’s gonna touch that part of Spock is Jim. He can live with that.

‘I was starting to worry for a while there, Spock.’ Jim has to keep talking, mostly so he won’t have to think about Spock saying site of your physical arousal, stirring an appropriate response from the site in question. ‘Thought we might have to file for irreconcilable differences.’

Spock blinks, slow and imprecise. It’s the first time Jim’s seen him do anything without his usual, razor-sharp exactitude. If not the first, then definitely the most noticeable. It settles between Jim’s legs with a wisp of unnatural heat—this morning’s bath was proof that he can get warmer than the atmosphere should allow for.

‘You imagined there would be conflict between us?’ Spock asks once he’s found his voice.

‘What? No.’ Spock’s not the only one getting distracted, so Jim figures he’s gotta be doing something right. ‘I was just joking around… You know, because I’m so obvious; you’re so mysterious… Get it?’

Put like that, it doesn’t sound like there’s much to get, but Jim’s not gonna be the guy who admits
‘You are distracting us both from the purpose of my question,’ Spock says.

‘Okay, fine. I’m getting something out of this, Spock.’ Jim threads their fingers together, lacing his—shorter and thicker—through Spock’s, which are longer and more delicate. Jim’s never given much thought to the different parts of his hands before now, every bone and joint, but this action has him noticing all kinds of things: his second knuckle that’s thicker than the others on his index fingers and the fine golden hair that stands out against his skin even more when he’s rocking his very first, very faint Vulcan sunburn. ‘Trust me.’

‘Trust is an innate part of a flourishing relationship,’ Spock replies.

‘So do you trust me?’

‘We had already established trust as one of the primary foundations of our communications.’

Jim pauses. There’s something else, another important thread to follow up on. ‘You think this is a flourishing relationship?’

Yeah, that’s it. **Flourishing.** Jim mouths around the words after he’s said them, heavier than the air, round and important and, frankly, uncharacteristic. Granted, it still sounds like diplomatic double-speak, which is Spock’s specialty, but it’s also a key to unlocking their mutual success.

Some of Spock’s internal ambassador is rubbing off on Jim—part of the connection that Jim can’t quantify, the pathways it chooses ones he can’t trace. Who knows what’s passing between them even now.

Jim rests his palm over Spock’s palm, his forefinger against the pulse at Spock’s wrist. Spock’s fingertips, in turn, brush that same spot, a half-inch lower, on the underside of Jim’s arm.

‘The intended, mutual success of our union,’ Spock begins, and Jim laughs, sudden enough to startle even himself. ‘That was not humor in any variety of which I have been made aware.’

‘No, it’s—look, Spock, there’s all kinds of laughter, too, just like there’s all kinds of humor.’ Jim realizes after he’s started that he’s begun to caress Spock’s wrist: curling his knuckles against it, following parallel lines over Spock’s palm and down, down along his fingers to the tips, then back, holding his hand, giving it a thoughtful, experimental squeeze. ‘Like the kind that happens when you just—when you don’t know how to react, so it comes out of nowhere. And you can **definitely** laugh when you’re pissed off, too—though it’s probably not a good idea to laugh in any of your aide’s faces when they tell you something that you don’t wanna hear about all the reasons why everybody agrees you might not be the best candidate for Vulcan marriage arrangements.’ Jim’s mouth twists and Spock’s mirrors the expression in the faintest twitch of shadows on his jaw—some lingering remnant of that old bitterness spoiling the good mood. Jim shoves it down, aside, wherever it can go so it doesn’t get in the way. He won’t let it in. Not today. ‘And there’s laughing because you’re surprised. Not to mention how there’s **all** kinds of laughing ’cause you’re happy. All kinds of happiness. ...Jeez, Spock, you can stop me any time. Never made out with somebody while talking this much before.’

Jim can tell Spock remembers the definition of ‘made out’ without needing a refresher. ‘Myriad sources of positive emotions,’ he says instead. ‘I see.’

‘Are you—’ Jim licks his lips, which are dry. This is why humans kiss with their mouths—so they don’t ever feel the need to keep the conversation afloat at the same time. But, by Spock’s own
insistence, he can focus on multiple input simultaneously. It’s Jim who’s having a problem with that. ‘—happy, Spock?’

The length of the pause lets Jim know that the question has a time and a place and neither are in the here and now. It’s too soon, or too early in the day, or whatever—he’s not gonna get the answer he’s looking for.

He rarely does.

‘Never mind,’ Jim says. ‘It was a stupid question.’

Spock brings his attention to their hands, thumb curving against Jim’s. It’s a light touch, but it’s more than enough to inspire a private little shiver.

‘Is that a yes?’ Jim can’t keep from digging himself deeper. If he could just shut his mouth, maybe that’d help matters, but he can’t deal with the potential silence now that he’s thinking about what Spock’s not saying.

‘Vulcans do not categorize their emotions in such obvious terms.’ Spock’s thumb is cool against Jim’s, thumbnail dragging lightly over Jim’s knuckle where the skin’s thinnest.

‘Of course they don’t,’ Jim says.

It’s the logical reply.

Happy and sad have nothing to do with the status quo, the natural order of things. You don’t have to think about whether you’re happy or sad to accomplish great diplomatic feats or write treaties or make shows of support to other struggling Federation planets. But it’s kind of an important part of basic human relationships. Jim doesn’t want Spock to think of their marriage as a political pursuit.

For someone as direct as he’s always liked to think he is, Jim’s having a tough time spitting that one out.

‘What is the purpose of your question?’

Jim’s eyebrows are the ones that hike up this time, creasing his forehead in a way that he’s seen mirrored back in a hundred unflattering photos, both static and short-frame looping video. It’s not his best look. If Spock read the newsreels even recreationally, he might not’ve worked with Jim to get out of marrying Sam.

He did, though.

That’s a thing that happened.

‘Huh?’ Jim traces over the big tendon in Spock’s wrist. Spock’s pulse doesn’t even have the decency to leap under his touch. Mostly he just looks stiff, though the way his fingers twitch inward toward his palm is the kind of involuntary response Jim can get behind.

He hasn’t pulled his legs out of range from under the table either.

‘Is it customary among humans to discuss one’s emotions while engaged in romantic pursuits?’ Spock tries again.

‘No.’ Jim’s reply is a little too quick, kicking his boot against the side of Spock’s. ‘No, no—Definitely not. Our mouths are usually a little too busy.’
‘So this aberration in method can be attributed to your adapting to Vulcan standards,’ Spock says.

‘Well…yeah, I guess,’ Jim says. Aberration is not a sexy word. ‘But—let’s look at it logically, Spock. If you weren’t happy, I could change things up. If you were—well, I’d know I was doing something right.’

‘Then your inquiry is based around your performance rather than my emotional response to our actions,’ Spock says.

Jim thinks about crawling under the table, whether that would start an interplanetary incident and how that’s just plain depressing, considering the kinds of things he could get up to with the lower half of Spock’s body.

‘Even I know better than to ask how I’m doing,’ Jim says, instead. ‘I’m not that obvious.’

‘You are not that obvious,’ Spock agrees.

‘Compared to some people? You’ve gotta be—’ Not kidding; Vulcan’s don’t kid. ‘Compared to some people, I’m an open book.’

‘If you would prefer to engage your mouth in other pursuits, I would not refuse you my compliance.’

Jim’s fingers are the ones to twitch. It’s a logical offering, sure, but the way it comes out and the moment Spock chooses still manage to be a surprise. Maybe that’s because logic is illogical when you’re dealing with the physical. Confusion isn’t supposed to be this exciting but here they are; here Jim is.

‘You asking me to kiss you like a human, Spock?’ Jim asks.

‘I was not asking,’ Spock replies. ‘I was stating that if it were your preference, as you have already been called upon to adapt, that I would offer to do the same for the sake of compromise.’

Jim tells himself Spock might feel differently after he’s been kissed like a human. Not likely, but possible. Always possible. You never know until you’ve tried. It’s when you stop trying that you stop hoping and it’s way too early for that.

‘That was not the reply you had desired.’ Spock’s parted lips; Spock’s smooth, unmussed hair; Spock’s bare throat under his high collar—Jim focuses on the elements of their equation that don’t have to do with compromise. ‘Yet as it was the truth, I could not—’

‘You couldn’t lie to me; I know. I wouldn’t want that, anyway. Some people,’ Jim adds, ‘humans, I guess, in my experience—sometimes they only want to hear what they want to hear, instead of what they should hear. You’re saying you’re fine with kissing me ‘cause it’s the diplomatic thing to do. That’s—hey, Spock, that’s a start.’

Gaila would have a few choice words to share about the lack of romance, but not everything can be naked poetry romps while staring at the sun from Venus. Humans are from Earth, Vulcans are from Vulcan.

Jim stands; he doesn’t let go of Spock’s hand. The table’s small enough that Jim can walk around it to stand at Spock’s side while keeping their fingers looped together, a more intimate touch than their conversation suggests. Jim’s knee bumps Spock’s side and he chuckles as he apologizes.

‘Kinda being an ambassador right now, when you think about it,’ he says. ‘Ambassador of Human
Kissing Practices from Earth to Vulcan.’

‘Such a position does not currently exist.’

Jim rests his free hand on the woven fabric at Spock’s shoulder, feeling his way along the fibers, up Spock’s throat. ‘Sounds like an oversight to me.’

Kissing Ambassador. Jim’s gotta make this one good, gotta make it count. No pressure or anything; no big deal. It’s just the double weight of representing his entire planet and making a good first impression on his husband so it won’t be a compromise for them to kiss in the future.

‘I’ll be honest with you,’ Jim adds, shuffling between Spock and the table, leaning back against the edge with his thighs before sliding his weight onto Spock’s lap. Jim’s heart isn’t thanking him for the excess strain, but he improvises the best when he’s light-headed anyway. ‘If it’s a bad one, I mean. Not that I won’t do my best, but if it’s not my best—I’ll tell you.’

‘In order to maintain the established trust between us, an honest assessment would be appreciated,’ Spock confirms.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jim says. ‘I’ll give you something to appreciate, Spock.’

It’s not the first or even the last thing anyone dreams of hearing before a kiss, but Jim’s more interested in the reality of his situation than any fantasy he could come up with.

Jim runs his tongue over his teeth, catching the tip on one sharp incisor. Then he leans in, touching the fingers of his free hand to Spock’s throat to tilt his head up. The angle’s still not quite right when they come together, Spock’s lower lip hitting Jim’s chin, and Jim’s upper lip landing against the hollow between Spock’s nose and mouth. There’s a rasp when Jim’s stubble catches against Spock’s skin; things got busy in the bath, and he didn’t get a chance to shave this morning.

Jim grabs the back of Spock’s chair to keep from spilling over backward, kneeling on either side of his thighs. He realigns their mouths, settling his hand on the nape of Spock’s neck to hold him steady.

His hair’s soft where it’s longer, but prickly underneath where it’s shaved short close to his skin. Jim coaxes his lips to part with a suggestive pressure from his tongue.

He’ll say this about Spock—he’s open to ideas.

It’s thrilling in the same way too much responsibility always is. Spock’s letting him do what he wants because he trusts Jim to give him an honest cross-section of what a human-style kiss looks like. He’s given Jim full control—free reign of the situation and free reign of himself.

It’s way too much, but Spock doesn’t need to know that if Jim plays catch-up quickly enough.

He squeezes Spock’s hips with his legs for balance, giving his fingers an equal, echoing squeeze where their hands are still entwined. It’s weird to have his focus split between two points of concentration; Jim’s kissed while doing things with his hands before, but never while teaching one form of kissing and learning another one.

Spock’s not the type to make sounds, encouraging or otherwise. He commits himself to the kiss with the same quiet observation Jim imagined he’d have while reading the colloquial dictionary or studying common human mating rituals.

But that was something he had to do before they were together. Jim nips the corner of his mouth
and pulls back, just enough to get a look at him.

He’s breathing hard; Spock looks nonplussed.

‘This is a joint activity, you know. Team participation. You can try something—anything. Whatever you want.’

‘You suggest improvisation.’ Spock’s forehead furrows right above the nose and between his sharply angled brows. Not exactly the face Jim was going for, but he’s not out of tricks yet.

‘Yeah—sure. I mean, unless whatever you want involves leaving the room and not coming back for a few days.’

‘I do not see why you would expect such an irrational reaction.’

‘You don’t, huh?’ Jim wishes he could show Spock his face right now—or that showing it to him would mean the same thing to a Vulcan as it would to a human. He sure looks like somebody who’s ready for exactly that kind of irrational reaction by human standards. ‘That’s good to know. Kissing doesn’t chase you out. But it was touch and go for a second there.’

‘At no point were matters so uncertain.’

Jim grins crookedly, taking in the faint green flush around Spock’s lips where Jim’s stubble’s irritated the skin. Green razor burn. That’s different. Jim expected him to be smooth from the pictures but there’s texture to him, too; it’s just that unlike Jim, he didn’t lose track of his regular morning routine and actually remembered shaving.

‘You wanna try that again?’ Jim asks.

‘Extemporaneous acts of imaginative experimentation are not a Vulcan trait,’ Spock replies.

Jim resettles, his hips skirting the danger-zone but not landing on Spock’s, not yet. He has to keep it above the waist to keep it about the kissing. Maybe Spock can focus on multiple stimuli at once; Jim can, too, with some stimuli. Just not this particular kind. ‘But research—you like research, right?’

‘Research is a logical pursuit,’ Spock says.

‘All I’m saying is—this counts as research.’ Sexy research, but Jim holds off on the many definitions of sexy for the time being. ‘Research my mouth. Research your own mouth, while you’re at it. Research long and hard and deep.’

‘You are stretching the appropriate application of that word rather liberally, Jim.’

Jim shuts his eyes and takes a deep enough breath to fill his lungs completely. His cheeks are hot; so are the insides of his thighs. Spock’s frustrating, most of it the good kind, some of it the literal kind. He likes it. He thinks. Mostly. He’d like it more if he could make some progress, if the question of this being something Spock doesn’t want or Jim being someone he doesn’t what it with wasn’t so heavy on his mind.

Something touches the side of Jim’s face, cool as a night breeze and just as brief. Jim opens one eye to see Spock pulling his fingers back from Jim’s jaw.

‘That was good,’ Jim says, probably too quickly. ‘Improvisation. I didn’t know you could— But you can.’
‘My resources suggest innumerable erogenous sites on the human body,’ Spock replies. ‘They are also indistinct variables, dependent on the individual. A general guide to the most common is not...specific.’

‘O...kay.’ Jim blinks. He wants that touch again—instinct despite the odds, even inspired, over so soon Jim could barely appreciate it. ‘I’m pretty sensitive all over, Spock. You could touch me anywhere and I’d like it.’ Jim swallows. ‘A lot.’

‘You are exaggerating,’ Spock says, like it’s an obvious joke that Jim hasn’t let him in on.

‘Why don’t you try me out and see?’ Jim leans closer—easy to pass it off for an attempt at alluring when it’s more of a woozy sway brought on by lightheadedness. His heart’s starting to feel the strain of all this extracurricular action, but it’s not like Jim needs to be standing.

He’d sacrifice basic motor function to keep on with his kissing lessons. No contest.

Even if right now it feels more like a phaser showdown at high noon, Spock’s eyes locked with Jim’s.

It’s not a surprise when Jim blinks first. It is a surprise when Spock takes the shot, touching his ring and middle fingers to Jim’s jaw, a cool caress almost like a kiss on its own terms. Jim’s eyes flutter shut and Spock’s touch shifts along Jim’s carotid, thumb tracing the thick square of his jaw.

‘Spock…’ Jim’s movement coaxes Spock’s hand closer to his mouth. The pad of his thumb rests against the corner, right where Jim’s lips come together.

‘I am doing as you suggested,’ Spock says. ‘Is the effect what you had desired?’

A wisp of vertigo pulses in Jim’s gut, pulling his center of gravity low and making him dizzy. This time, he’s sure it’s Spock’s fault.

‘Are you asking if I’m happy?’ Jim leans in to tip their foreheads together. It’s bracing, and it feels good. ‘Because—and I say this as someone whose lungs are being squeezed by an invisible atmospheric hand right now—yeah, Spock. I’m happy. You’re doing good.’

His thighs are trembling from the effort of keeping himself out of Spock’s lap. If Jim’s told Bones once, he’s told Bones a dozen times—he’s heavy. All that added bulk and muscle isn’t easy to keep upright under the added stress of unexpected exertion. And, Jim figures, since they didn’t get going on their wedding night he can factor in some extra fooling around the next day.

No one’s gonna know. Even I-Chaya’s trundled out—thankfully, since Jim doesn’t want to traumatize his new step-sehlat by climbing all over his master first thing. His breathing stutters when Spock’s hand moves lower, fingers plucking at the loose weave of his cowl-necked sweater.

‘Perhaps this experiment would be better-served if there were a larger surface area for me to conduct testing,’ he says.

God, Jim’s gonna pass out, but for the right reasons this time.

‘Are you asking me to take my shirt off?’ he asks.

He just wants to be clear.

‘I was suggesting for your shirt to be removed,’ Spock replies. He makes it sound—not clinical, but straightforward. Not easy, but obvious. It’s hot, literally and metaphorically. Jim’s starting to
wonder if that combination is pure Spock. ‘The method or means by which it would be removed was not stated and therefore remained unclear.’

‘God,’ Jim says. Spock’s brow raises, felt where their foreheads rest together. ‘You wanna take my shirt off?’

‘As I did not specify, I believe it is only...logical that you should decide that method of removal for yourself.’

Jim lifts his arms, fingers tingling. He has to pull away for Spock to pull his sweater off and once it’s gone, it’s a naked relief, Jim in his loose cotton undershirt dappled with sweat. It sticks to the center of his spine, the dip of his chest, the air-filled swell of his belly.

‘Vulcans don’t sweat,’ Jim says hoarsely.

Spock takes the time to fold Jim’s sweater. Jim takes the time to remember when to breathe out after breathing in. Then, Spock touches the fabric, pinching it between thumb and forefinger, drawing it away from Jim’s skin, knuckles curled against the damp cotton.

‘Humans sweat, though,’ Jim adds. His voice sounds like sand-scoured stone. His legs feel about that cumbersome. ‘Sweat a lot on hot planets. Gonna be a lot of sweating. I don’t know if I should apologize or if that’s, uh—not...’

Spock returns to Jim’s throat, cool fingers spanning Jim’s pulse. Jim leans his jaw against the touch and slowly, blessedly, the dizziness of the heat ebbs.

It’s gotta be something to do with Spock’s magic fingers, but Jim’s not complaining. There’s not much inside his brain for Spock to read in the thought department, anyway. Jim’s thinking somewhere other than with his gray matter, and Spock’s already touched that part of his anatomy, too. No need to be self-conscious. He’s not even naked.

He was naked before.

‘I’m gonna sit in your lap,’ Jim says. Warning Spock’s only fair before he drops, hips to hips, hard as hell against Spock’s belly.

The best kind of gravity—only he manages not to say that the moment it comes to mind.

Spock steadies him with a hand at the small of Jim’s back. ‘M good,’ Jim says, searching for Spock’s fingers, holding his hand again. He remembers to rub the web between Spock’s thumb and his palm, a spot Spock liked before, and Spock answers by realigning their forefingers, tip to tip. ‘Is that—’ Jim gulps too loudly. ‘Are we—’

‘A sign of intimacy,’ Spock replies. He can sound clinical all he wants; there’s a depth to his voice that wasn’t there before and Jim knows what it means. Spock adds his index-finger and Jim straightens his own against it. They hold it there. It’s weird. Not bad, just different. Spock blinks and it lasts more than a second and Jim fires his own shot this time, kissing Spock full on the mouth, tongue against his teeth.

This time, Spock’s tongue meets Jim’s. Finger to finger; lips to lips. Jim’s dick twitches. He moans into Spock’s mouth.

Spock pulls away like he thinks Jim’s in pain and Jim pushes him back into the chair, following him with a hunger the replicated hamburger didn’t exactly manage to stir. There’s nothing mannerly about it, no etiquette or diplomacy in the kiss. Jim’s had it with trying to pussyfoot
around a perfectly good husband. Yeah, being polite’s gotten him this far, but they aren’t writing messages back and forth anymore. Someone has to take charge of the situation.

Spock’s trusting Jim to teach him a thing or two. He’s not going to get anywhere—or learn anything—by politely feeling his way around the act.

Jim’s not sure why he ever thought he could approach things from that angle anyway. It’s not his style. He’s always had to burn out before he could learn how to lean into a turn. The same principles should probably also apply to kissing his husband.

He won’t wind up with the same injuries from a mishap here the way he might from a hoverbike crash, but it’s not so different.

Success is stimulated by equal parts self confidence and the thrill of belief. If Spock’s not going to provide them with that, then it’s Jim’s turn to step up to the plate.

The fingers of his free hand skirt Spock’s hair, threading through the silky threads before twisting his grip and giving a short, sharp tug to tilt his head up. It’s a rougher mirror of what he did before, but the repetition should give Spock a context clue as to what he’s after. The fingers against Jim’s slip to one side, sliding between them to squeeze his hand tight, pressing it to his. Together, palm to palm.

‘That’s it,’ Jim murmurs. The words come out slurred where his lips drag against Spock’s mouth. He thinks about stubble burn on Vulcan skin again, feels an answering throb between his legs where his dick’s pinned up against Spock’s abdomen. ‘Don’t think about it so much. S’t the improvisational part of the lesson.’

‘That much,’ Spock stops for a breath and to make room for Jim’s mouth over his own, ‘is evident.’

There’s nothing at all in the archives about Vulcans being sassy as hell, so Jim has to wonder whether that’s a species-wide secret or if he just landed a gem in the form of his husband. He swipes his tongue over Spock’s again just to let him know how much he’s into it. Making out. Hamburgers for lunch. Kissing Spock in his lap while the wilted remains of his salad go by the wayside.

Jim’s not sure, but he might’ve just started a new afternoon tradition.

*
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Jim and Amanda.

Chapter Notes

Art for the previous chapter by Pixiepunch:
And art for Spock's tongue by Loarts:
Go check them both out on tumblr! They are awesome!

*

They make it to the bed at some point. At least, Jim thinks they do. Because that’s where he rolls over and opens his eyes to the realization that, one, he might’ve passed out during the proceedings, ruining diplomatic relations between Vulcan and Earth forever—and, two, a wedding night can happen during the day if you try hard enough and believe in yourself.

Jim grins and rolls over, reaching after every empty space with full recognition of the potential that one of those spaces might not be empty at all.

One of those empty spaces might be Spock.

All he finds are a pillow, a fistful of bed linens, and plenty of mutinous Vulcan air. When he gropes along the edge of the bed, warm breath skirts over the back of his hand, and before he can panic—are there monsters under Vulcan beds, or is that too illogical for them?—a big, wet tongue starts licking his fingers.

Not Spock’s big, wet tongue, unfortunately.

Though it does give Jim a couple of ideas for next time.

‘I-Chaya—’ Jim clears his throat and manages to scratch I-Chaya’s nose while he finds his voice. ‘Hey there, boy. You wanna tell me where Spock is? Don’t tell me things got so crazy I was kissing you, too.’
I-Chaya pants. *I-Chaya cannot answer you,* Spock’d say.

Jim presses his lips together. They’re chapped, but there’s a bottle of an electrolyte boosting soft drink on the bedside table. Jim fumbles for it; the cap’s already been unscrewed so he won’t have to struggle getting it off. He drinks, deeply and greedily, until his throat doesn’t feel like there’s half a sehlat’s worth of fur stuck in there.

It’s one of the brands they have back on earth. Jim never expressed a preference, but whoever got it for him off the replicator was thoughtful enough to choose something he had a shot at being familiar with. When Jim checks the label on the back, it says it’s made in San Francisco.

And there’s more to that kind of choice than logic.

There has to be.

Rejuvenated—just like the label on the bottle promises—Jim stands and attempts some of the respiratory strengthening exercises Bones taught him a few months ago that still look too stupid to do ‘em in front of anybody else. I-Chaya watches—‘Yeah, buddy,’ Jim says, ‘I know, I look like an idiot, but that’s human beings for you, right?’—and doesn’t comment, which is as much a relief as Spock’s absence is a disappointment.

Jim’s polishing off the last few gulps of his sports drink when his PADD—thoughtfully moved to the bedside table and propped up against lamp—flashes.

It’s an old routine, but still one that makes Jim grin. He grabs it and settles onto his back to read Spock’s latest, but it’s not a message from Spock.

It’s from Lady Amanda Grayson.

She wants to know how Jim’s doing.

*Holed up in my private quarters all day. Didn’t have the energy for anything last night, but this morning your only son got me off in the bathtub and this afternoon I kissed him so many times I finally lost count, and I’m really sorry. I am so, so sorry.*

The honest response, in this case, isn’t the way to go. Jim settles for something neutral: *Alive, Lady Amanda, but am I supposed to feel like I’m carrying I-Chaya around on my back?*

Jim puts down the PADD, letting it knock against the plastic of his empty sports drink bottle. He’s in the midst of wondering whether it’s too soon for another bath—or if they have showers here, the kind that don’t waste water on a desert planet, and in the event that they do, whether he can program it to run cold—when the screen flashes again.

*If you’re only suffering under the weight of one old sehlat, I’d say you’re managing marvelously, James.*

Jim wrinkles his nose at the moniker, privately calculating how long it’s appropriate to wait before he can ask his mother-in-law to call him Jim.

*I thought you might care to join me for an early supper. Spock and his father are in deliberations with the Vulcan High Council, and in my experience such meetings last hours past the time you think they should.*

Jim blinks. The electrolyte drink in his stomach settles and makes him burp at the same time.
Great. Yeah. This’ll work out just fine. His mother-in-law—human queen consort of the Vulcans—wants to have dinner alone with Prince James Kirk, currently lying in bed after his afternoon nap, burping and getting his fingers licked.

That’s not a great headline. Even if Jim’s the only one reading the newsreel about himself these days.

Vulcan’s lack of media frenzy is something he could get used to. Maybe he’ll retire here when he’s no longer young and spry enough to evade the paparazzi.

The idea of being old on Vulcan when he hasn’t even hit his twenties is jarring. If he’s got a sehlat on his back now, he can’t imagine what it’ll feel like in thirty years or so.

Also, thirty years is about how long it’s taken him to craft a response to Lady Amanda. Jim’s hand hovers over the screen, mind working to come up with a polite way to say he’s in no way prepared for that kind of commitment.

Sounds great, his fingers land clumsily on the keys, picking out all the wrong ones. See you in twenty minutes.

It’s not enough time for a shower, but it’s just enough to shave and wash his face, in that order. Jim spares a moment to wonder whether he shouldn’t call in Bones to make sure he doesn’t slit his throat by accident while trying to do away with a little stubble—but if he lets Bones in he’s gonna have to tell him about his family date, and Jim’s only prepared to go in there with a clear mind, no gosh-darneds or cornfeds gumming up the works.

His PADD’s flashing again when he makes it back to the bedroom, making it all the way across the room without having to stop to lean on anything.

That sounds lovely, dear.

He has about seven minutes to get there.

One thing Jim learned when he was young—younger, anyway; he’s not old yet, no matter how slowly he’s moving—is that not all palaces look the same. They generally look as different as possible; royal aesthetics are as varied as the races that built them. But all palaces do happen to feel the same. Tall ceilings, long hallways, large doors that could lead anywhere, echoing footsteps—they follow a formula, and the royal compound on Vulcan is no different.

It’s Jim’s first real chance to explore, but seven minutes means it’s not a real chance after all. This is one meeting he doesn’t want to be fashionably late for; Lady Amanda’s the only other human in the place aside from Jim’s retinue and Bones, and the latter doesn’t count because he’s too honest, while the former doesn’t count because it’s never honest enough.

Besides, once you’ve seen one palace room, you’ve basically seen them all. Jim can picture the tall windows, the sandy stone hallways, the fluttering curtains, the solemn statues and the bleakly beautiful furniture in varying shades of rusted red and obsidian—logical in terms of functionality, but with an extra, austere something that suggests Vulcans aren’t necessarily always as logical as they’d like to believe. If they were all logic all the time then why would they bother with rich textiles and velvety throws or the flash of brocade?

Jim gets lost somewhere around a right turn that should’ve been a left and doubles back at double speed, taking the corners fast. He doesn’t crash into anyone. Most of the residents must be at the meeting; Jim’s retinue is being kept out of sight and out of mind; and that leaves him, a
functionless house husband. Or something like that.

Diplomacy’s weird. Possibly even crazy.

Jim pauses in front of the door his PADD’s telling him opens into Lady Amanda’s chambers to catch his breath. He’s still wheezing when the door opens silently, and Jim manages a surprised squeak.

‘Lady Amanda.’ Nice save. Jim straightens, then executes a hasty bow. ‘It’s an honor to meet you.’

‘I didn’t mean to startle you—I only thought you might like something cool to drink first thing,’ she replies. ‘Prince James Tiberius, it’s such a pleasure to have you. Come now; there’s no need for bowing, at least not when no one’s looking, is there?’

Jim straightens gratefully, the pinching pain in his side already fading. It’s a better angle for taking Lady Amanda in—he saw her during the ceremony, standing beside Sarek, holding a candle between her hands, but the ceremony itself is blurry now, the queen consort a shadowy mystery in Jim’s swimming vision. Here, she’s shorter than Jim thought she’d be, with scarves wrapped neatly around her head, and Jim’s heart sinks.

He thought she’d be on his side about the weather—and about the clothes.

Obviously she’s had more time to adapt. Jim’s sweating at the idea of a scarf, much less wearing more than one.

Her hands are gloved; she’s holding a glass of clear water.

‘Thank you, Lady Amanda,’ Jim says quickly. He isn’t sure how long he’s been standing there in silence staring at her. ‘That’s really—yum.’

Another fantastic first impression.

Lady Amanda watches him just a beat too long, a glimmer of Spock in her gaze. Jim has to wonder whether that’s an inherited trait or if it’s something she picked up from Vulcans during her long years on Vulcan. Try as he might, Jim can’t see himself learning the Vulcan scrutinizer through pure osmosis. It’s even less likely than him adopting all the scarves.

She holds the water up toward him, so that it’d be rude and now also stupid if he didn’t take it.

‘Admittedly it was a long time ago, but I still remember craving nothing so much as cold water during my first few weeks on Vulcan. Those electrolyte drinks replenish you in all sorts of necessary ways, I’ve no doubt—but, well, I’ve found they leave a certain taste behind.’

‘Right at the back of your tongue, right?’ Jim takes the glass in both hands and takes a sip, reminding himself not to guzzle and spill all down the front of his shirt in front of his mother in law. It’s too late to remember not to bring up his tongue. That ship’s already sailed.

‘A little salty but a little sharp, too,’ Lady Amanda agrees. She folds her hands in front of her in the absence of the glass to hold, watching Jim drink. ‘It was always ever-so-faintly metallic.’

Jim rubs the tongue in question against the roof of his mouth, enjoying the clean, fresh taste of nothing in his mouth for once.

‘It’s not great,’ he says, before realizing it might sound like he’s talking about the water. ‘That taste, I mean. This is great.’
Great—a word that can’t be applied to his socializing skills on Vulcan.

‘You’re doing well for yourself,’ Lady Amanda adds. ‘I remember during my bonding ceremony with Sarek—and this is a well-kept secret, but—I must’ve blacked out at least three separate times.’

She says it like it’s nothing, like it wasn’t the shame of Earth and all its people. Jim takes another gulp of water, watching her for any sign that she’s messing with him. Spock would never give himself away, but Lady Amanda’s human. Jim likes to think he was good at reading his own species, once upon a time.

‘Oh! But you must be tired of standing.’ Lady Amanda gestures him to one end of a long rectangular table, not built for two, but not so stretched out that it makes them look pathetic for eating alone.

The family palace in San Francisco had a place like that. Jim started taking all his meals in his room as a form of non-violent protest.

Most of the time, he ate there alone. Mom joined him once in a while, but somehow the rarity of that special occasion made the moments when she was there about as bitter as sash-savas.

This is different. Obviously. Lady Amanda’s got tall windows and fluttering curtains but she also has dried flowers in simple vases, brittle branches arranged artfully in bowls. There’s even a shelving system on one wall with books and small figures, carvings, a flute, a teacup and saucer, and a snow globe.

‘I got that in San Francisco, in fact.’ Lady Amanda lifts the globe and gives it a gentle shake. The idea of snow is so foreign on Vulcan that Jim has to down some water to keep from snorting. ‘When I was studying foreign policy at Starfleet. Shall we?’

Lady Amanda guides Jim to a seat—the same hard-backed fare as the rest of Vulcan’s offered so far, but this one has a cushion, a throw blanket draped over the top. Jim sets his water down and settles in, trying not to wiggle happily, but if it happens, it happens.

‘Just a few illogical touches here and there,’ Lady Amanda leans close to say, her smile as brief as one of the shadows from the curtains flickering over the balcony floor. ‘I’m sure my husband doesn’t appreciate them, but it would also be illogical to question a human’s sense of nostalgia when Vulcans are so certain they have no frame of reference with which to address the point.’

Wow, Jim thinks.

And also: Awesome.

And also, will he ever learn to be that smooth with a Vulcan husband?

He clears his throat instead of vocalizing any of the inside stuff—a lifetime of etiquette lessons and, despite popular opinion, some of them managed to stick—and Lady Amanda leans back, uncovering a tray of familiar foods, no sash-savas in sight.

‘Oh my God,’ Jim says, before he can stop himself. ‘You made sandwiches.’

‘In my opinion, a more logical food than Vulcans give them credit for. I hope you don’t mind that I made them myself—an old human weakness of mine, I’m afraid, but I thought lighter fare is preferable for the first few weeks on Vulcan. Anything to make you feel less heavy than a sehlat on your back, don’t you think?’
Jim remembers to swallow and tuck his napkin into his collar before he answers with sticky fingers and a full mouth. ‘The food you get from a replicator—it’s not the same.’

‘There’s no functional difference to it, of course. But you’re right. There’s always something about it.’

‘Made in a computer. You can always tell. Particles taste like a program.’ Jim blinks and realizes he’s polished off the first sandwich without noticing, while Lady Amanda is still pouring herself a cup of tea. Jim wipes his fingers off on his napkin and gulps.

‘Please,’ Lady Amanda says, ‘no formality here. The breath of fresh air is as refreshing as the first glass of cold water I had after I was married.’

‘Might teach me to rely on some dangerously bad habits that way. So I’m told.’

Lady Amanda smiles. It’s a private expression, touched with long-suffering in the wrinkles around her dark eyes.

‘That sounds very much like my son.’ Lady Amanda picks up her first sandwich, taking a bite from the corner.

‘Does it?’ Jim holds off on reaching for a second, hydrating himself carefully in slow, even swallows of water. ‘Funny—I can’t seem to manage that while he’s around.’

Lady Amanda chews, swallows, and wipes her mouth with an embroidered cloth napkin. It’s embroidered in simple colors, an earthy green on white, but it’s more detailed than anything Jim’s seen on Vulcan to date. There are more quiet touches of home in this room than in Jim’s own quarters.

Maybe he should’ve brought more things to decorate with, but one year didn’t sound like so long when he was back on Earth and aching to be with the Spock he’d come to know through their written and spoken communications.

He definitely didn’t pack enough.

‘My son can be rather hard on himself,’ Lady Amanda says. ‘I’m afraid those exacting standards often extend to those around him.’

‘Yeah, no kidding,’ Jim says, before he can stop himself.

Maybe he should’ve been quicker on the jump with that second sandwich. There are worse things than having his mouth occupied.

But now’s definitely not the time to go thinking about the last meal he had on Vulcan, at a much smaller table than this, going so far as to sit two to one seat.

‘What I mean is...uh, he’s difficult,’ Jim clarifies. Helpfully. Lady Amanda Grayson invited him to dinner and he’s repaying her by calling her son a pain in the ass. Classic Earth manners. He’s a true ambassador for his people. ‘But I’m—I’m good with difficult, you know? Makes it all the more rewarding when you finally break through.’

‘I believe I do know,’ Lady Amanda says, calmly beaming Jim out of his sinking ship. ‘Spock, like Vulcan, can on occasion demand the cultivation of a second wind.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Jim replies.
‘You have no idea, is what he thinks, but he keeps it to himself because the details of his second wind with Spock wouldn’t be polite dinner conversation with anyone, let alone the woman who gave birth to him.

‘You’re looking a little red, dear,’ Lady Amanda adds, while Jim tries to figure out when he reached for and ate another sandwich. He’s got the crumbs on his plate to prove it. Thankfully they aren’t on his shirt. ‘Perhaps you’d better have some more water.’

Jim obliges—admitting, privately, that Bones is right, and he does need someone around to remind him of the basics, like to drink when he’s thirsty and breathe when he’s breathless. The water brings him back to himself, enough to use the napkin and clear his throat and attempt to provide the one thing he knows Lady Amanda can’t possibly have enough of.

Honest, human conversation.

‘You said you were at Starfleet,’ Jim begins, in between evenly-paced sips of water. ‘I didn’t know that. Always wanted to attend, myself, but... Plans changed, I guess. Or... It was never really a possibility.’

‘I was a diplomat’s daughter.’ Lady Amanda stirs her tea with a tiny wooden spoon Jim can’t take seriously. ‘I’d intended to follow in my mother’s footsteps—and in a way, I suppose I did. Sarek was visiting on a mission of good-will, and I had top marks in all my courses—which meant I was one of the graduate students assigned to the Vulcan delegation.’

Jim’s mouth is open; it has been for a while. He shuts it with a click. ‘I didn’t know it’d happened like that, either,’ he admits.

Lady Amanda smiles over the rim of her teacup. ‘Did you imagine it would be somewhat more logical?’

Jim laughs, an honest, bright bark that doesn’t even make him wince. ‘You’d think it would be, that’s all.’

‘Well, in a way, I’m sure it was,’ Lady Amanda says. ‘Our personalities were mutually agreeable; we were of similar minds about many foreign policies; our conversation was... ‘Not unpleasant.’ In human terms, I’d say we got along, but I’m almost entirely sure now that expression means very little on Vulcan. We were well-suited to one another. And it certainly improved Vulcan and Earth relations. I can’t say I regret any of it.’

‘Even though it’s...’ Jim should’ve prepared himself better for the question he wants to ask, or come up with a way to ask it that isn’t insulting. He doesn’t mean it as a bad thing. Vulcan’s just so Vulcan. Jim’s there for a year; Lady Amanda’s there for life, barring the occasional envoy attendance or good-will mission. Jim glances around the room, from tall window to low couch to the shelves and the snow globe, fake snow long since settled. ‘Hot,’ he settles on finally.

‘I thought I’d go out of my mind while I was pregnant,’ Lady Amanda admits. ‘After that ordeal, everything seemed quite comfortable by comparison.’

‘Huh.’

‘Hm?’

‘Nothing. It’s just not exactly a strategy I can work with.’

‘Well...’ Lady Amanda pauses. ‘You could always spend a day actually carrying a sehlat around
with you. I’m sure the experience would be almost comparable.’

‘I’d do it,’ Jim says. ‘I-Chaya’s looking pretty long in the tooth; maybe he wouldn’t mind getting the royal treatment for a while. You know, if I wanted to cause an intergalactic incident. Vulcans Shocked By Human Prince’s Illogical Sehlat Obsession; Prince James Tiberius Kirk Sent Home In Disgrace; Lonely Sehlat Left Wondering Where It All Went Wrong.’

‘That was quite imaginative, James.’

‘I’ve been in a lot of tabloids,’ Jim replies.

‘Oh, I can imagine,’ Lady Amanda says. ‘I was in a few myself—years and years ago, of course, but I had a friend on Earth who used to send me the juiciest ones. There are a few things that are less…heavy here. Perhaps the scrutiny is as severe, but there are different ways of showing it. And none of them involve a camera.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Jim says, and lifts his glass of water.

Jim’s proud of himself when he’s able to clink their glasses together without his hand shaking. He’s not sure how long he can go on enjoying these little physical victories before they stop meaning anything, but for now they’re enough of a novelty that he can appreciate them.

‘I believe your royal physician would be relieved if you did,’ Lady Amanda says, while Jim takes another swallow of water. He doesn’t spit it out—he can’t waste the precious hydration—but he feels like doing a double-take anyway.

‘You didn’t— You talked to Bones?’ Jim’s not exactly proud when his voice comes out a whole octave higher than it’s supposed to, but that’s another thing he can blame on the atmosphere. Pressure changes. Dry air. It constricts the vocal cords. It’s when he remembers a few of the other things Bones told him that he finds it easier to breathe again. ‘He says you’re a saint, you know.’

‘Does he?’ Lady Amanda’s face has taken on a distinctly familiar expression, like butter wouldn’t melt—though it’s tough to imagine anything that doesn’t melt on Vulcan. And Jim hasn’t glimpsed real butter since he touched down. ‘My, that’s a high compliment coming from such an excitable gentleman.’

‘Oh, excitable’s not the word I’d use,’ Jim says.

Lady Amanda’s eyes sparkle, ruining her expressionless mask. ‘I’ve had a few more years than you to practice my diplomatic remarks.’

‘Now, see, I don’t think that’s fair.’ Jim contemplates a third sandwich, weighing it against the unsettled feeling in his gut. ‘I bring along someone who can spill all my deepest, darkest secrets—both medical and personal, mind—and here I am married to king of the blank slates. Sorry—the prince of the blank slates.’

One good, old-fashioned meal from Earth later and he’s already spilling his guts to the first person who’ll listen. Jim never would’ve guessed his loyalty could be bought for the price of a couple sandwiches and a few glasses of cold water, but he’s never been in such dire straits. Vulcan’s made him into a new man. A married man. A thirsty man.

‘Well, if you’ve finished your dinner, let’s see if there’s something we can do about that.’ She pushes her chair back from the table, gesturing for Jim to do the same. ‘Since Spock is only a prince yet.’
Jim should probably offer to clear the table, do something useful. But his vision blurs when he stands—and that’s how he finds himself sitting on one of the low couches near the window next to Lady Amanda Grayson, who’s clutching a tablet of stored photographs while she directs servants to pack up the leftover sandwiches and store them in Jim’s temporary quarters.

‘We haven’t worked out the permanent arrangements yet.’ Lady Amanda leans close, as if betraying a confession. ‘We weren’t sure whether you’d prefer having your own space for a while yet, but we all wanted to make sure that you felt comfortable.’

‘It’s fine,’ Jim replies. It’s not perfect, but it’s a balance of not-too-eager and not-too-disinterested. ‘If you wanted to make the arrangements for us to stay together, or... Whatever that might be. It’d be fine. We get along pretty well. That idea you had about writing each other—it was a good one. It worked out pretty well. I know I’ve thanked you before, but... Thank you, Lady Amanda. Again.’

‘No need. Gratitude in the face of the logical is, of course, one of the first things you should unburden yourself from laboring under while on Vulcan.’ Lady Amanda’s eyes are sparkling again; they might’ve been sparkling all along. It’s like how the stars are always there—you only see them when you aren’t distracted by other brightness, when they aren’t hidden by a closer sun. Lady Amanda touches the back of Jim’s forearm, giving it a gentle squeeze, before she settles the tablet between them. ‘I had thought it might help. Then again, James, you’re the one who made it such a good idea.’

‘So we work well together.’ Jim’s cheeks heat up; that’s one plus to the elevated temperatures. Blame all flushing and blushing on the weather. ‘Is what you’re saying.’

‘How diplomatic of you,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘Now, let’s see... I’ve always wanted to have someone I could share these memories with.’

‘Baby photos aren’t popular on Vulcan?’ Jim has to chew that one over. All he can picture is Spock’s adult head on a baby’s body and that’s not right. ‘...What are baby Vulcans even like, anyway?’

‘They’re very much like human babies—I hope that doesn’t disappoint you.’ Lady Amanda brings up the first image: Spock, impossibly round-cheeked but with the same serious eyes, green around the nose and ears and especially the cheeks, as though he might’ve been caught in the middle of a cry. ‘They get hurt; they get hungry; they get happy and scared... In fact, they have so very much emotion, and although they learn from a very early age to control that emotion, there is a short period of time when they are, wholly and completely, themselves.’

‘So...’ Jim has to hope this isn’t a diplomatic faux-pas. ‘He kept you up all night, is what you’re saying?’

‘As though he doesn’t now?’ Lady Amanda’s face softens. ‘But I didn’t mind it. It was, after all, something I could do for him, at least for a time. And in a way, it was easier. If I held him, I believe he could feel just how much I loved him.’

Jim shivers, despite the heat. The sun’s on the verge of setting, it’s true, but that and the night’s oncoming breeze isn’t the source of the little thrill that bolts through him. He can’t even imagine what that’s like—what it was like, for the woman sitting next to him and for the man he married.

‘I guess I figured they were all born...the way they are now,’ Jim says, then clears his throat. ‘Not an insult. Just stating the facts.’
‘No one here would fault you for doing that, James.’

‘Good to know.’ Jim chances a grin, one that doesn’t disappear into the darkness of remote, observant, endless Vulcan eyes. ‘Maybe I won’t get into as much trouble here as I used to. ...Not that I got into trouble all the time. Just...some of the time. And some of that wasn’t even all my fault. ...Some of it was, though.’

‘I would expect nothing less from a bored young man in your position,’ Lady Amanda says. ‘All that freedom—and a certain lack of freedom at the same time, I’d imagine. Always in the public eye...’

‘Recipe for disaster, huh?’ Jim says.

‘Don’t forget, I spent some time at Starfleet,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘I know the sort of personalities it attracts.’

‘Spock told you I was interested in Starfleet?’ Jim asks.

‘It might have come up once or twice in passing.’ The picture on Lady Amanda’s screen flashes to something else: Spock sleeping with a corner of a lumpy blue blanket in his mouth. His tiny hands are fisted up near his face, each fat finger rooted in a pale-green knuckle. ‘During that business with Prince George Samuel, we discussed many possible futures for the pair of you.’

Jim still gets knots in his stomach from the memory. So that answers that question—whether he’s over it or not. The answer’s decidedly not. Hot, prickling helplessness spreads over his skin like goosebumps.

They got through it, he reminds himself. There’s no need to go back. Sam’s at home doing whatever it is firstborn sons do when they have to adjust to their actual duties instead of roaming the galaxy with years of choices and free will to their name.

Jim always thought he was jealous of Sam’s autonomy, but in the end, he’s the one who won out.

‘Here he is teething.’ Lady Amanda taps the screen with one of her gloved nails. Jim’s relieved not to be the one carrying the whole conversation, a novelty he should probably appreciate while he can. ‘He didn’t fuss—not so much as you’d think—but he chewed on everything he could get into his mouth.’

‘No,’ Jim says. ‘Like a puppy?’

‘Or like a sehlat,’ Lady Amanda agrees. ‘Though I would never compare my son to a household pet—not even one as venerable and intelligent as ours.’ She shoots Jim a sidelong glance, smiling crookedly. ‘I-Chaya’s never been much for gnawing on his surroundings.’

‘So how did he break that front tooth?’

‘An interesting story, if you’d like to hear—’

The door to the dining room hisses open, and Jim glances up on reflex—but it’s nothing more than a couple of servants sent in to clean up now that dinner’s been cleared away. It’s rude to feel disappointed. It’s not like Lady Amanda didn’t warn him about those Vulcan High Council meetings running late—and it’s not like he shouldn’t get used to the lifestyle now while he’s still got plenty of distractions to blow through.

‘He was defending Spock, you know,’ Lady Amanda continues. ‘That’s how he chipped that front
tooth of his. Of course, it wouldn’t be kind to him to spoil him, but I do give him a pet now and
then to let him know I’m still grateful.’

Jim settles in, one picture passing into the next in front of him—with Spock growing older before
his eyes, the softness of a baby’s open face and unguarded eyes hardening into something more
guarded, the most serious toddler Jim’s ever seen. Of course, there’s no illogical awkward period
like Jim remembers suffering through, and the pictures begin to capture moments fewer and farther
between, the differences in a boy more and more marked as the time lapses lengthen. Jim can only
imagine that’s because of Lady Amanda respecting her son’s customs, only insisting on following
hers on special occasions.

First days of school; the observation of birthdays; a graduation; a few unfamiliar ceremonies.

The best part of it, Jim decides, is Spock’s school uniform—high-collared, long and black—and
the stiff way he stands in it, something that doesn’t fade or even change over the years. The robes
get longer, as does Spock’s face, but Spock himself stands in exactly the same way in each of the
pictures.

Jim isn’t sure how long he’s been taking up Lady Amanda’s time or listening to her stories—tame
anecdotes about Spock’s aptitude for learning, brief mentions of the trouble he seemed to have
with other Vulcans his own age—when he realizes he’s yawning, stifling the sound against the
back of his hand in a hot puff of breath.

‘Oh, dear.’ Lady Amanda yawns a second later. ‘It’s catching, isn’t it? And here I am, talking your
ears off, not taking into consideration everything you’ve been through.’

Jim grins at the expression. Lady Amanda’s been on Vulcan for years, longer than Jim’s been
alive, but she’s still as human as anyone. ‘What? No, Lady Amanda, not at all. Seriously. This is
the kind of thing Spock wouldn’t exactly talk to me about, but it’s important to know it about
somebody you’re married to, right?’

‘I’m sure all that will come with time,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘Most of the best things do.’

‘He was pretty cute,’ Jim adds. ‘You wouldn’t think a baby chewing on a blanket would grow up to
be—’

The door hisses open again. Jim’s mid-stretch of a sore shoulder muscle when he glances up,
expecting a servant and finding Spock instead.

‘Sarek will arrive shortly,’ Spock says simply. ‘All infants, no matter their race, behave in a
fashion that is not necessarily recognizable as that of their adult counterparts.’

Jim’s throat is tight; he lurches to his feet, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘Hey, Spock. Yeah. I
remember you had some choice words for how I looked when I was a baby, too.’

‘Oh, yes—your first meeting.’ Lady Amanda rises with enough grace to make Jim want to die by
sash-savas overload. ‘Spock, I’m not sure if you remember it entirely... You were so perplexed. I’d
never seen you so uncertain of a thing before.’

‘I drooled. So people tell me,’ Jim adds, not meeting Spock’s eyes.

‘Your ability to converse companionably with one another upon first introduction is worthy of
positive mention,’ Spock says. There it is; the headache’s on its way back. ‘I trust you found
multiple topics to discuss other than my previous appearances.’
‘Oh, we struggled along,’ Lady Amanda says.

‘Wasn’t as hard as you’d think,’ Jim adds, backing her up.

Now that they’ve established their cover story—that Jim wasn’t here just to get details on Spock’s early life and the things he wasn’t around for, all the things he missed without knowing he was missing them—they can present a united front. It’s basic strategy one-oh-one.

Jim would know a Starfleet graduate any day.

He forgot to ask whether she dropped out to marry Sarek. It doesn’t seem very logical, but then, neither did their courtship. He’s got some follow-up questions when it comes to that history. For another time—when the product of their union isn’t standing in the room looking like treason’s being committed right under his prominent nose.

Or maybe that’s just Jim’s overactive imagination. It’s the only part of him that hasn’t been hampered or slowed down by Vulcan’s arid climate and it’s the thing he needs least when confronted by Spock’s stoic refusal to join a conversation like a human being.

Maybe that has something to with how he’s only half one, Jim thinks, but files the idea away as uncharitable. Definitely a little too pro-Earth and it’s not the truth of how Jim feels. How he feels when he isn’t sweaty and uncertain as a baseline.

‘I did not suggest that it would be difficult,’ Spock says, ‘only that it is admirable that the two of you have established communication so quickly.’

‘Well, we do have a lot of common ground.’ Jim digs his fingers into the sore muscle of his shoulder. He can feel Spock watching him, weighing his curiosity against the value of keeping his words to himself. ‘It’s not just you.’

‘Are you hungry, dear?’ Lady Amanda’s wiped the screen of the tablet blank, setting it away on a nearby side table. ‘I know it’s late…’

‘Indeed, Mother, that is a factually correct statement.’ Spock affects half a bow, giving Jim a whole new level of stiff body language to appreciate. Next they’ll be shaking hands. Or not, given the Vulcan finger situation. ‘When I recognized that Jim had not retired to his quarters as would be prudent for a human of his size and stamina, I sought his presence elsewhere. I am gratified to see that you were able to make your own arrangements.’

‘Hey now.’ Jim has to remember he’s got his mother-in-law in the room. ‘My size and stamina are just fine.’

‘I believe it was the human element he was referring to, dear,’ Lady Amanda says.

Jim can’t do anything about the grin that spreads over his features when she drops the dear.

Yeah. That’ll make Spock wonder just how close they’ve gotten tonight and what kinds of stories she might’ve spilled.

‘We had fun,’ Jim adds, bolstered by the show of solidarity.

‘Fun,’ Spock repeats.

‘It really was a pleasant change.’ Lady Amanda’s smile reminds Jim of the scarves she’s wearing. He can’t say why, exactly, just that it does. It’s the way it drapes, the way she wears it rather than
letting it wear her. And it makes him sad, itchy under the skin, when he realizes she’s smiling differently with Spock than she did when it was just the two of them.

Then again, all noble families hold something back with each other. Jim remembers watching vids of normal brothers playing and wondering if that could’ve been him and Sam if things were different.

A lot of things could’ve been. Dad, even, might still be alive.

Jim digs his fingers into a sore spot to ground him. ‘But I’ve probably overstayed my welcome by now,’ he says. ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right? Thank you for your hospitality, Lady Amanda.’ Jim bows too, less stiffly than Spock. At least he can pull that off better than a local. ‘If the two of you want to catch up, I can always see myself out.’

‘I’m sure that won’t be necessary,’ Lady Amanda glances to Spock, her hands folded neatly in front of her. If she wants to give Spock a hug, a kiss on the cheek, some small, reassuring touch from mother to son, she doesn’t show it. That’s a brave thing, a Starfleet thing, in its own way. ’As you said, your father will be here soon enough—and the two of you are on your honeymoon. I couldn’t interrupt that. Not in all good conscience.’

‘Once again, the etymology of that phrase has no application here, on a planet with neither honey nor a moon to speak of,’ Spock says.

Lady Amanda meets Jim’s eyes. Jim smiles for both of them.

‘Perhaps,’ Lady Amanda adds, ‘Prince James Tiberius might wish to see your quarters, Spock. I know that he hasn’t been settled anywhere more permanent—and that can have a certain toll on a traveler, knowing they’re in a stop-over, not really getting the chance to unpack and settle in.’

When Spock meets Jim’s eyes, it has a different effect. Jim’s smile hardens into a grin, so out of place in the serene dining room that he drops it altogether so it won’t shrivel and die.

‘Might be nice,’ Jim agrees. ‘It’s a human thing, actually. Seeing a friend’s room when you’re spending time together—it happens all the time.’

‘In the interest of exploring human practices,’ Spock says, ‘I would be amenable to this plan, if Jim has not been strained by the events of the day, or advised to follow another course of action by his consulting medical officer.’

‘Negative on both counts. Give me some credit.’ Jim bows again, briefer, less formal, but still paying attention to the rules. He’s a prince consort; Lady Amanda’s a queen. Not to mention she deserves respect for reasons that have nothing to do with titles and position. ‘If you’ll have me, Lady Amanda... I’d be honored to do this again sometime.’

‘But of course,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘We shall have to do this quite regularly.’

‘Mother.’ Spock nods, then draws away.

Jim’s at the door when he realizes Spock didn’t meet his eyes in there, either.

*
They’re silent all the way to Spock’s room, down a stone hallway that lacks the tall, arched windows Jim’s grown used to—because Vulcan architecture’s built around function as opposed to form. Big windows near the royal quarters would be a major security risk, Jim has to assume. Jim’s own rooms were pretty open by comparison, but then, he’s never heard of Vulcan assassination for succession or Vulcan coups in general. Wanting power that isn’t yours must not be very logical.

Apparently, neither is making small talk with your husband when you’re taking him back to your room.

‘So, teething, huh,’ Jim says. ‘That’s a nightmare.’

Spock spares him a look when they round a corner, using the shift in their alignment to his advantage. It gives Jim something to watch other than the tense lines of Spock’s back where he’s holding his shoulders rigidly. Jim’s got to wonder whether that’s genetic or if it’s a learned trait. It has to make him uncomfortable, if it doesn’t come naturally.

Jim bares his teeth at Spock, demonstrating what he’s talking about.

‘Hell of a design, right? We need ’em—don’t get any say in that—but they have to grow right up through your gums. It’s ridiculous. Didn’t realize it happened to Vulcans too.’

‘I was not yet at an age where I understood the need to mitigate my emotions,’ Spock replies. ‘I don’t know if you can call them emotions at that age, Spock.’ Jim hurries to draw even with him, encouraged by the reply.

Apparently it doesn’t matter what kind of terrible line Jim tosses out as an opener. As long as it starts a discussion, he’s grateful for it.

‘Infants are nothing but emotion,’ Spock contradicts. ‘They are strong, decisive feelings with no higher thoughts to guide them. This was a lesson I learned firsthand upon our first meeting, when—as you witnessed in the recorded image—you were placed in my arms against my wishes.’

‘Jesus, tell me how you really feel, Spock.’ Jim wishes he had pockets. That’s what Vulcan fashion needs: some good, honest pockets amidst all the folds and scarves and ponchos and robes. For such a logical race, they don’t have a handle on how to dress for maximum comfort.

Spock pauses in front of a set of double doors, black with simple carvings around the lintel. He inputs a sequence of numbers on another hidden panel, unlocking a dark room.

‘That is precisely what I am doing, Jim.’

‘Sure, I believe you,’ Jim says.
Vulcan honesty spares no feelings, but it never quite expressing the feelings behind the honesty. It’s a double-edged blade, like one of the ceremonial Vulcan staff-axes. The *Lirpa*. Jim did his reading. Plenty of it.

On the nights he didn’t fall asleep touching himself to Spock’s voice, he fell asleep with foreign Vulcan syllables swirling in his head and dreamed of being on those hot Vulcan sands, holding the *lirpa* in his shaking hands, while Vulcan shadows surrounded him to the shivering of bells and the bellowing of gongs.

‘There is no reason to doubt me,’ Spock replies.

He steps aside and gestures for Jim to enter first. Jim accepts, passing close enough that their sleeves almost brush. The potentiality is more tangible than the actuality, another Vulcan contradiction that makes Jim’s tongue feel too big in his mouth, his throat too tight for the air he needs to keep breathing.

For a brief moment, he’s in the dark confines of a room scented with foreign incense, warm and unknown. Then, Spock activates the pale, dim lighting system and shuts the door, and the mystery isn’t banished—it’s exchanged for something new.

Spock’s room.

It’s exciting.

Jim loves Lady Amanda, for one thing. He’s her biggest fan, even bigger than Bones, maybe as big as Spock.

But, like most things on Vulcan have turned out, it’s not what Jim was expecting. It’s the same basic architecture, the same principles, the same general pieces. Hard chairs; low tables; flat bed; curtains.

There’s also a shelving system like the one Lady Amanda has, and carvings, sculptures, geodes, a collection of what can only be called *trinkets*, along with books and tech models, scientific advancements Spock probably made when he was five years old, when Jim was still drooling and cooing and learning how to use a toilet.

And there’s a tall stone statue in one corner; there’s what looks like a harp by the bed; there’s a small blanket at the foot of the bed made of a dark, velvety fabric, brocaded with gold thread.

There’s a snowglobe, the same kind as Lady Amanda’s. There are little glimpses, glints and glimmers, of something that isn’t strictly Vulcan—all neatly arranged, no mess and no clothes on the floor, not a single thing out of place—but might even be thought of as distinctly human.

‘Nice room,’ Jim says.

It’s so much more than that. It’s *Spock’s room*, and the answers to some of Jim’s biggest questions are hidden in the tiniest of details. It’ll take time and some exploring, but Jim has something to work with here.

‘The snowglobe’s pretty cool,’ Jim adds. ‘You like that stuff? If I’d known, I would’ve brought one for you from home.’

‘It was a gift from my mother.’ Spock sounds noncommittal; Jim knows better than to assume the
logical explanation is the only factor at work. ‘A curiosity. It is a simple thing to keep it displayed in order to avoid the disruption of her emotions.’

‘That’s thoughtful of you.’

‘...Thoughtful is what I endeavor to be.’ Spock pauses. ‘Was your commentary on the snowglobe an attempt at humor in comparing snow, which is always cold, to that which is ‘cool’ as a form of wordplay?’

Jim almost wishes he would’ve kept it to himself. He can’t be sure, but he feels like it was better before Spock caught onto things so easily and just ignored his weirdness outright.

All of this having to explain himself stuff is getting uncomfortable. Though it’s still not as uncomfortable as explaining he’s not that clever.

‘Actually...that was just a lucky accident.’ Jim rubs his neck at the sore junction where it meets his shoulder. He can’t work out what’s getting to him: whether it’s the hard beds or the lack of oxygen not just to his lungs but his muscles, but something’s got him bent out of sorts. Nothing serious, though; nothing a little recreational activity couldn’t straighten out. ‘I’m not exactly thinking in terms of witty snowglobe banter.’

‘A fortuitous coincidence, then.’ Spock folds his hands in the small of his back. He’s watching Jim examine his room, taking in the surroundings built up over the years he’s spent living there. ‘Your honesty is uncharacteristic of your species.’

Jim blinks, distracted from wondering how soft that blanket at the end of Spock’s bed is and whether he’d be remiss to head on over there and curl up on it like a shaved sehlat.

‘Huh?’ he asks. ‘Is this another one of those things where you insult me but I’m not supposed to take it seriously?’

Spock raises an eyebrow. Just one. Jim’s been practicing that look ever since he caught a rare media snapshot of Spock on a visit to another Federation planet making the exact same face. So far he hasn’t managed to duplicate it, just created a few deeper wrinkles on his forehead, and at one point made Bones think he was suffering a stroke.

‘Cleverness is a trait prized by many species,’ Spock says. ‘It would have been very simple to allow me to believe your remark had been intentional.’

Oh, Jim thinks.

‘Oh.’ He shrugs, making the knotted joints in his shoulders twinge. Whatever’s going on there, he’s hoping it isn’t permanent. Maybe he passed out, fell out of Spock’s lap and hit the table. But no—if that’d happened he would’ve woken up in Bones’ hands and not alone. ‘Well, I guess I’m thinking I just might have enough natural charm that I won’t be stuck relying on accidental puns to win you over.’

Spock’s brow creases, his mouth slack with brief uncertainty. ‘Your back is troubling you.’

It’s not exactly the reassurance Jim was angling for. He should’ve added something about fishing for compliments in that dictionary he made. Then again, maybe he should’ve drummed together a behavioral manual—about the needs and desires certain humans want met every now and then, instead of the words they use.

‘It’s nothing,’ Jim says, officially ruining his honest streak.
‘You would not lie about the accidental wordplay in order to appear more clever than you had intended,’ Spock replies, ‘yet you would lie about the pain you are experiencing in order to appear more stoic? A curious distinction.’

‘You know, before we got married, you used to say I was fascinating.’ Jim angles for the bed, bumping his shin against the blanket. The fabric, as far as he can tell, is soft as butter. ‘Did we really run out of romance that fast?’

Spock’s expression, a quizzical almost-tilt of his chin, no actual confusion present but the suggestion that Jim himself is a confusing individual, says it all. Jim’s pushing it. Not just himself, but Spock, them, this—everything.

‘Considering how strong Vulcans are, is it such a surprise a comparatively weak, puny human would wanna seem stronger?’ Jim manages to pull off the eyebrow lift by moving his entire head along with the muscle in his brow, but that only makes the pain in his shoulder worse.

‘The choice is unexpected,’ Spock says. ‘That is all.’

‘I think I’m allergic to the beds you guys have here,’ Jim continues. ‘Back on earth, beds are usual soft. When you lie on them, they’re comfortable. And there are plenty of pillows to put your head on, too—those are also soft. Weird, right? But it’s what I’m used to. Being comfy when I’m sleeping.’

‘The accommodations have not been acceptable?’

‘Not officially. Officially? They’re great. I’m great. And my back’s great, too.’

‘Then this conversation...’ Spock’s pauses have weight to them. Jim’s chest tightens to know their measurements, their meanings, to have a dictionary of his own, with definitions that span the course of mere milliseconds. ‘It is unofficial.’

Jim glances around in a wide circle, hiding a wince. ‘We’re alone together, Spock. We’re newlyweds. We’re in your room. This where you grew up?’ Spock nods. ‘That’s what I thought. It’s personal, then. Even if it is...functional. It can be both. I’d say it’s about as unofficial as you can get.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Spock replies.

It takes Jim a moment—man, he’s off his game—to realize Spock is talking about the other stuff they’ve done. Unofficially. Jim’s grin comes out of nowhere and he doesn’t try to stop it, because they’re both on the same page as far as privacy’s concerned. It’s not a smile Jim has to worry about Vulcan big-wigs seeing and judging. It’s a smile for Spock alone.

‘That was innuendo, Spock,’ Jim says. ‘That was really good innuendo.’

‘I cannot falsify the facts and suggest that the innuendo was not intentional.’ Spock stiffens, despite what Jim can only call a moment of triumph.

‘OK, OK,’ Jim says. ‘Pretend I didn’t bring it up and make it awkward.’

‘Pretense—’ Spock begins.

‘Can I sit on your bed, Spock?’ Jim asks.

The unexpectedness of the question takes Spock by surprise, enough that he shifts course with Jim
and leaves the unfinished topic behind. ‘If you wish to do so, I would not have reason to stop you.’

‘Yes’d do, you know.’ Jim lowers himself to the mattress, destroying his hope that it might be a little softer, based on the half-human part of Spock wanting a half-comfortable bed. He doesn’t make concessions; Jim shouldn’t have to remind himself of that. In a way, it’s admirable. And at least the blanket’s soft under Jim’s palm as he runs his thumb along the gold threads. ‘Vulcan script?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Not that I can read it, but... It sure looks nice.’

‘My mother, the Lady Amanda, made it for me when I was younger.’

‘After you drooled all over your blue blanket, huh?’ Jim grins again. ‘That was a joke, Spock.’

‘It did not fit the parameters of humor as I understand them,’ Spock says.

Jim pokes his tongue between his teeth, thinking about how all there is waiting for him in his room is a tray full of sandwiches in cold storage and, maybe, if he’s lucky, a friendly old sehlat. He should probably start being more careful with his words, unless he wants to spend the night alone with cold-cut substitute and fresh white bread.

Then again, he has yet to cross the line with Spock. They almost seem to thrive on offending each other more than dancing around with careful, polite statements. That’s their version of honesty—the Vulcan version, blunt enough to bruise but not so sharp that it breaks skin.

There’s a crazy part of Jim that wants to pick up the corner of Spock’s bedspread and stick it in his mouth just to see if he can make him laugh. But he’s pretty sure he’d have to explain why it’s funny again and that’d be impossible with a mouth full of blanket.

Not to mention he’d ruin the velvet.

Half of diplomatic relations comes in knowing how to communicate in the first place. It’s the little things. Jim’s paid attention.

‘My sense of humor’s hit and miss,’ Jim says. It’s a small sacrifice to make, given the circumstances. It’s easier for him to take the blame than for Spock to think there’s something wrong with his understanding of human habits. It’s not his fault he married one with occasionally defective programming or one too many knocks to the head. ‘I’m not the best representative to learn from.’

‘I have noted a certain eccentricity present in your retinue,’ Spock admits. ‘However, those two statements are incongruous. While the first one may hold merit, the second is demonstrably untrue.’

There it is again: a shiver of restless heat that crawls up Jim’s spine like le-matya poison. What he’s imagined it’s like, anyway. Jim can’t think of anything Spock could be talking about other than their two encounters, in Jim’s bath and again at his dining room table.

Two encounters and two seemingly innocuous comments laced with innuendo. Jim likes those odds. He must be doing something right.

He is sitting on Spock’s bed, after all. He’s finally here, in the place where Spock read his messages or listened to the sound of his voice recorded from hundreds of light years away. It’s an
intimacy Jim hadn’t considered before, not with Spock’s fingers wrapped around his dick or his own thighs wrapped around Spock’s hips.

‘Well…’ Jim leans back, bracing his weight on both hands. The tension makes his back ache. He’s never thought about how much work it takes to look casual. ‘I wouldn’t give me all the credit. You’re a very apt pupil.’

‘Then I did not lead you astray with my prior suggestion that I would prove to be one.’

‘No, Spock. You didn’t lead me astray.’ Finally, Jim meets Spock’s eyes, dark and deep and thoughtful—thinking about Jim, he hopes, because the way they look right now is something Jim could get used to. Especially if it’s something he’s inspiring. ‘If anything, I’m the one leading you astray.’

‘You have, to this point, been the one who is leading,’ Spock concedes. ‘However, given a brief period of familiarizing myself with the necessary framework for applied study and my preparatory familiarization with human anatomy, that need not be the case in perpetuity.’

Jim’s never been this turned on by the word perpetuity before.

‘Spock,’ he begins.

‘Yet it is also clear that further activities which will place a strain on parts of your anatomy that are already exhibiting signs of the same is something I cannot condone, much less encourage or take part in.’ There goes that perpetuity boner. ‘Turn around, Jim.’

Gone, but not forgotten. ‘Huh?’ Jim asks.

‘I believe that the best possible angle for administering a proper back massage to your person would be the following: you upon your stomach, while I am free to work upon your back.’

Jim’s throat is way too tight. ‘Uh,’ he says. ‘Oh. Yeah. That’s a good one.’ Spock’s going to climb on him. ‘I’ll just, uh— Good thinking, Spock. Not calling Bones. That’s—good. Really—yeah.’

‘The doctor should be reserved for those threats to your health with which I cannot assist you. Otherwise, I believe it is uncustomary to add a third individual to the regular honeymoon pursuits.’

Jim turns, read to bury his burning face against a pillow and give himself over to Spock’s hands. ‘I thought this wasn’t a honeymoon, Spock.’

‘In name, it is not,’ Spock replies. ‘However, on a technicality—that is, we have been married, and you have certainly traveled a great distance—I believe that some of that tradition may yet apply.’

Spock’s brain is sexy, too. Not a surprise, but still nice to be reminded. Jim drops to the hard bed—suddenly not such a pain, either, given the support it provides, and the friction it could provide—pulling up a pillow for his chin.

Not being able to see Spock behind him or hear him moving is one of those pleasant uncertainties that occupy the same space as a freefall or a too-tight turn or a wild gamble. When the odds are against you, the payoff’s always better. Not that the game Jim’s best at was ever poker. Despite himself, it was chess all the way. Poker was Sam’s deal.

The bed shifts. Jim hears the slide of Spock’s robes against the velvet throw. Gravity changes, rearranges, the pit of Jim’s stomach tightening. When Spock settles, kneeling to the right side of Jim’s hips, his knee rests against Jim’s upper thigh.
‘Spock,’ Jim says again, voice muffled against the pillow.

‘...Jim.’

‘This is really hot,’ Jim says.

‘If you wish to shed a layer in order to be more comfortable—’

‘Come on, Spock, you have to know what I mean. It was like, the second thing in that dictionary I gave you.’

‘It was the third,’ Spock replies. ‘I did not wish to assume that was your meaning. I required confirmation. ...This view of your physicality is not unpleasant, though I would not suggest my temperature is significantly elevated at present.’

‘Ouch,’ Jim says.

There’s a quiet sound of fabric on skin as Spock pulls his hands back. They weren’t even touching and Jim’s already messed up.

‘I have not yet begun to apply pressure,’ Spock says.

Great. Because the last thing Jim needs on top of everything is for Spock to think he’s sensitive in all the ways that don’t have to do with below-the-waist action.

‘No, I mean my feelings.’ Jim turns his head to one side so he isn’t slurring all his words into his pillow. ‘You could at least pretend like I make you hot. Some of the time.’

Spock exhales. He sounds frustrated, but his hands are on Jim before Jim can sit up to verify the details for himself.

‘You are conflating two separate meanings—meanings that you yourself have only just pointed out.’ Spock’s palms settle over Jim’s shoulder-blades, fingers digging into the meatier muscle groups just above them. ‘Therefore your misunderstanding must be deliberate.’

‘Oh, must it?’ Jim asks.

Spock pushes him into the bed with the force of his hands alone. Jim doubts it’s intentional, but the timing’s suspicious.

‘You would be better served keeping your head aligned so as not to create new points of tension.’

‘That your way of telling me to shut up, Spock?’

‘Your voice does not easily escape attention,’ Spock replies. ‘A pillow covering your mouth will make little difference.’

Well, that’s one way of talking nasty to a guy once you’ve got him face-down in bed, Jim thinks. But he follows orders anyway, turning his face back into Spock’s pillow after a few seconds of stubborn resistance. He’s got nothing to gain by being deliberately ornery, and he’s pretty sure he needs a moment alone with his thoughts here.

Chiefly, that Spock thinks he’s hot. That he gets Spock hot.

That is what he said, buried amidst the crack about Jim’s neck and the part where he said Jim was being deliberately obtuse. With Vulcans you have to really dig for the compliments, then
brush the sand off them so they sparkle.

Spock’s hands travel from Jim’s shoulders to his back proper, knuckles digging into a sore spot next to Jim’s spine, slowly working out the hard shape of his muscle into something more pliant and warm.

‘It would not be logical for you to impede your own comfort by making my task any more difficult than it needs to be.’

Jim groans, the sound muffled in the pillow.

There’s no way of knowing, of course, if that gets to Spock the way it’d get to Jim if their positions were reversed. The idea of making Spock groan is enough to get Jim wiggly—which in turn makes Spock steady him, a hand at Jim’s side, between his ribs and his hip.

As far as correction’s go, it feels nice enough that Jim might have to act out—illogically impeding his own comfort by making Spock’s task more difficult—again. And again.

It could be more complicated than a physical touch and a physical reaction. Spock’s fingers are sensitive, after all, and Jim’s back is carrying the stress of travel, the tension of unfamiliar furniture, the anxieties of his duties, the pressure on him to perform more than just adequately. To prove he really is the better choice; to give those tabloids something decent to talk about for a change. Or at least something positive.

It’s not enough just to get by, is the thing. He’s going to be the best possible representative and the best possible husband.

Once he stops moaning into a pillow while Spock kneads the knots from the center of his spine out along the ribs. It’s methodical, precise, and strong. It might be an ancient Vulcan massage technique; Jim really hopes that’s what it is. It’s not rough, not exactly, but there’s the promise of roughness in there somewhere, well-hidden but not totally absent, and Jim doesn’t miss it. When he closes his eyes, it’s enough to trick him into thinking that his other senses are heightened, that he can feel more—even if it’s only because he’s focusing more fully on the pulses of heat caused by Spock’s fingertips.

No distractions. Nothing but the heat of his own breath trapped against his face.

But it’s possible that Spock’s not enjoying it, and that he’s not enjoying it because of the clenched muscles he’s working with directly, whatever worries they’re carrying. If he can feel all that.

Jim’s still not sure how that works.

And Spock’s still not the most forthcoming about his secret Vulcan things.

And that’s definitely the kind of thinking that makes Jim less, not more, relaxed.

‘You are quiet,’ Spock says.

Jim tenses, then relaxes. Spock’s knuckles are in the small of his back between his hips, rolling directly against his spine, and Jim’s pressing into the bed while arching into Spock’s hands. Anyone else would talk about anything else, but Spock’s...too Spock for that.

‘Thought you didn’t...want me to talk...Spock.’

‘I had not implied I disliked your conversation.’
Jim chuckles weakly, breathlessly. ‘Don’t wanna get distracted, I guess. Not that I can’t...focus on multiple things at once, myself,’ he adds. ‘Just, sometimes...’s’nice to focus on only one.’

Spock’s silence is less illuminating than ever, but his hands are incredible. It’s a shot in the dark, but Jim lets the pleasure swell and settle, floating free-form through his muscles. If Spock can feel even a quarter of that, lazy and spoiled and satisfied and still seeking more, then he can’t be having a *bad* time, anyway.

It’s a new experience for Jim: trying to be on his best behavior in someone else’s bedroom. It’s not that he minds Spock knowing he’s got less-than-pure thoughts about him, but the subconscious is a tricky place. There’s no telling what’s gonna float to the surface once he lets his guard down. Jim doesn’t have any control over *that*, just like Spock doesn’t have much control over what filters in through their shared connection.

It doesn’t help that Jim keeps noticing his surroundings for the first time. He’s got his face buried in Spock’s pillow—maybe the same pillow he sleeps on every night, the same pillow he bunched up under his straight back to read his PADD night after night. Jim breathes in, but there’s not much of a distinctive smell. In the absence of sweat glands, there’s no strong identifier that recalls Spock immediately to Jim’s mind. Just simple stuff: the light tang of soap and shampoo; the same dry, sun-baked scent that seeps into Jim’s clothes here, wind sweeping it in off the desert.

It’s not familiar and it’s not quite Spock, but it’s part of Jim’s life on Vulcan.

At least, for the next year it is.

Jim pushes the pillow down toward his chest, wriggling up in the same breath to give himself something to brace against. His thigh bumps the blunt shape of Spock’s knee bone, reminding him of how close they are. He didn’t need much of a hint with the way Spock’s hands frame the small of his back.

On Jim, it’s not exactly small. But Spock’s got big hands for a Vulcan.

Jim’s trip into his lap that afternoon didn’t resolve the question of whether he’s got anything else big for a Vulcan. *Now that* seems like an oversight—but it’s always easier to note these things once they’ve already happened, and also when he’s lying horizontally, without having to split his focus between his performance and the effort it takes to keep his body upright.

‘You’re good at this.’ Jim tucks the pillow under his chin. The ballast makes his voice vibrate strangely in his throat. ‘Backrubs. Did you study those too?’

‘There are many interconnected fields of applied study when it comes to the physical contact shared by humans in their intimate moments,’ Spock says. The swiftness of his response suggests he’s enjoying the prospect of a good conversation, even if he doesn’t know that’s what he wanted.

Maybe Jim’s back isn’t the distraction he always dreamt it would be after Bones put him on that special diet.

Maybe slightly chunky blonds aren’t Spock’s type. But that’s proven untrue on at least a couple occasions now.

‘You make learning pretty sexy,’ Jim says. ‘Anyone ever tell you that before?’

‘No. They have not.’

‘Well, good. That just means I’m the first.’
‘That is not the only category in which you may claim that distinction.’

It takes Jim longer to piece that together than he’s proud of, but when it hits him, he can feel his gut warming, a flush spreading from his chest to his belly to his thighs. It’s for the best he didn’t undress; that leaves the smallest hint of a mystery, enough to give Spock the sense that he’s warm underneath his clothes like a present to unwrap.

‘First husband,’ Jim suggests.

Spock sweeps the heel of his palm up the length of Jim’s spine, resting it on the nape of his neck. The other remains at his hips; Jim realizes he’s gauging the angle of the vertebrae, whether or not they’re straight, before he continues. ‘That is both factually correct and obvious.’

‘First...human you’ve given a backrub to,’ Jim adds, with a shift of his hips for emphasis.

‘Therefore, I am unable to determine whether or not you are uncharacteristically unstill for a human in your position, or if you are all plagued with the reflex.’

‘First blonde,’ Jim says. God, what he wouldn’t give to see Spock’s face now—although it might be blank as ever, with only a faint spot of green high on each cheek, and sometimes knowing is worse than agonizing, endless guessing after all. ‘First human prince. First lapdance. ...Kinda.’

‘When you were in my lap,’ Spock reminds him, ‘you did not dance.’

‘No. Well— Geez, Spock, it was the spirit of the thing. I was in your lap and there was... A metaphorical dance happened. It takes two to tango.’

‘I am aware of the tango,’ Spock says. ‘At no point did we engage in any of the steps required.’

Another thing Jim didn’t put in the dictionary. He lets his breath out and with it, Spock finds a pressure point and releases that pressure without warning. Jim stiffens, groans, and ends up whimpering. He hopes it’s sexier than it sounds in his head, ears ringing, body limp—save for his hands fisted in the sheets, the huffs of breath making his chest tremble and his throat hum.

‘You sure I’m the first human you’ve given a backrub to?’ Jim asks, when his voice isn’t threatening to rasp or crack or worse, shake.

‘Though I had not directly confirmed this assumption to be true, I will do so now.’

‘You’re gonna have to teach me how to study sometime, Spock. I just realized I must’ve been doing it wrong all these because it never got me this good at anything.’ Not a strict truth, but it’s close enough that Jim doesn’t feel like he’s lying. Just lying down. After a first, botched attempt, he manages to gain enough momentum to roll over onto his back, Spock lifting his hands out of the way. They’re still in the air over Jim’s body—over his abdomen, to be precise; he knows how much Spock likes that—but with the shift in position, he’s not eager to make fresh, spontaneous contact.

‘The rate of relaxation in your muscles cannot have been affected so quickly,’ Spock says. ‘Is there some vital part of the proceedings that I have failed to address?’

There’s a distinct, dry absence of sarcasm in his tone, which can only mean he’s being the Vulcan version of sarcastic: so subtle that it stands out all the more as soon as you know what to look for.

Jim might not be a scholar on Spock’s level, but he knows what to look for. When it comes to
learning about the Vulcan side of things, he figures that’s worth at least some extra credit.

‘Yeah, well, I’m feeling a lot better already,’ Jim says. ‘You know how these things are. One second you’re ready to keel over, but a little attention on the right joints and you’re fighting fit again.’

He gives a horizontal shimmy that’s meant to draw Spock’s eye. They’re already looking at each other, so he can’t be sure if it has the intended effect.

Spock’s mouth twitches to one side, though it’s impossible to tell whether he’s averting a smile or a frown. That’s something Jim hasn’t had enough practice observing yet. It’s more of a live and in person detail, not the sort of thing it’s possible to learn in advance.

‘You persist in honesty where none is conventionally necessary, and yet you persist in maintaining a level of deception about your physical condition when honesty is to your benefit.’

That’s not a question, so Jim doesn’t have to answer it. Instead, he tugs up the hem of his shirt, baring his stomach inch by hot inch. There’s no welcoming kiss of cold air to help tamp down the fire building under his skin, but that doesn’t mean there’s no relief to be found in peeling out of his heavy clothes. And as long as Spock’s looking, he might as well put on a show.

‘I was just thinking you might want to touch me somewhere else for a change of pace, Spock.’

It sounds reasonable when he says it, wide blue eyes fixed on Spock’s face. He can’t imagine that look will work on his husband the way it works on Bones—even that depends on the weather—but it’s still worth a shot. He lets his gaze slip from Spock’s face to his hands, still hovering in the space between them.

It’s not like Spock to be indecisive. He wants to touch Jim. He just hasn’t worked his way up to it yet.

That’s where having a mouthy human as a partner comes in handy.

‘I could be more specific,’ Jim adds. ‘I know you’re into specifics, Spock.’

‘As I prefer clarity in all forms of communication, I likewise prefer specificity in all reference.’ It’s impressive how Spock keeps his cool, especially with that high collar buttoned to the top.

‘Okay,’ Jim says. He points—not necessarily specific, but it zones in on a narrower area just below the navel, before the trail of hair darkens and widens. ‘Unless you want me to lie here wallowing in uncertainty.’

Spock’s eyebrow does the thing. Jim likes it as much as he wants to make the muscle memory forget itself somehow, someday. He’s still working on a way. ‘On what topic are you experiencing this uncertainty?’

‘Whether or not you want to touch me.’ Jim inches the hem of his shirt higher, hips lifting, resting his thigh against Spock’s side.

Spock remains where he kneels, pristine and proper, but Jim thinks he can see Spock’s hands betray the finest of tremors.

‘Ah,’ Spock says. ‘The desire is not in question.’

He’s got good timing. It could be beginner’s luck; it could be he’s secretly a natural. Either way,
the seconds pass until Jim’s brain threatens to over-think everything, until his body’s on the verge of acting out, when Spock’s fingertips alight on Jim’s skin.

‘This was the area, as per your suggestion,’ Spock says.

Jim’s eyelids flutter. The depth of his voice has that hint of intimacy, of promise, that Jim used to replay sections of his recordings just to hear. And he touched himself then, thinking about Spock touching him now. Time accordions around on itself; Jim shivers and sighs. Spock’s touch is feather light, a curious companion to the deep, muscle-probing strokes he offered on Jim’s other side. They’ve turned a corner; it just doesn’t have a name. Jim can’t move the way he wants to after Spock’s forefinger, just the tip exploring the planes of muscle section by section.

Another anatomy lesson. This one’s personalized.

‘You’re thinking about the muscle groups, aren’t you?’ Jim asks.

‘I need not remind you, Jim,’ Spock replies, ‘that I am capable of entertaining multiple topics simultaneously.’

‘So I’m right. That’s what you’re—ah—saying.’

Spock’s moving so slowly that it’s gotta be some form of Vulcan sexual torture. His blunt nail segments Jim in halves, then quarters, a collection of aching parts that shouldn’t be so sexy because they’re also addressed so clinically. But Spock’s a contradiction. Jim shouldn’t be as surprised as he is by the discovery.

Spock shouldn’t be as fascinated as he is by a selection of muscle groups he already knows by heart, either. Or by the dusting of hair trailing low under Jim’s navel.

‘You do not require confirmation of a correct assessment when the truth is clear,’ Spock says.

‘That’s—’ Jim swallows, back arching off the bed. ‘—a generous estimation of my good nature, Spock. If I didn’t know better, I’d call it sweet.’

‘My estimations are not commonly considered to be generous, Jim.’

‘Brutal honesty, huh? No wonder you’re so good at this.’ Eventually, if Jim keeps delivering compliments without fanfare, Spock might pick up on the skill and work it into his repertoire.

‘I was not aware that we were engaging in a topic which could be classified as praiseworthy.’

‘Well, I like what you’re doing,’ Jim says. He digs in his heels, lifting his hips to get his abdomen against Spock’s hand, shifting his touch from left to right. ‘Does that fit your needs better?’

‘My needs were not in question,’ Spock points out. ‘Merely the accuracy of the situation.’

‘Maybe you should be thinking a little more about your needs and a little less about the situational accuracy.’ Jim slides up onto his elbows, the better to watch Spock’s progress. ‘Or a lot less about how specific I’m being with my words.’

‘It was my impression that your needs were the ones currently being addressed.’ There’s no glimmer of humor in Spock’s eyes but something about the way they tighten at the corners reminds Jim of Lady Amanda when she smiled without moving her mouth, winking at him without batting her lashes.
The added context is useful. Jim doesn’t like to think that he’d use Lady Amanda as a key to decoding her son, but Jim’s got such limited advantages on Vulcan that he’s willing to take any leg up he can get.

Which is why he’s shamelessly angling for more contact when they started the day on a similar note. There’s no light outside save for what’s cast by the stars and the planet itself is dry as a bone, but if this is Jim’s honeymoon, then he’s planning on taking advantage of it.

Somebody has to.

And if Spock’s teasing him, he’s about to learn that Jim’s more than up to the challenge.

Case in point: Jim shifts his balance to one elbow, reaching out with his free hand to palm Spock’s knee. Spock’s leggings are lighter than the tunic he wears over them, a fine, delicate weave that feels like it’s snagging on the calluses of Jim’s fingers. Jim shouldn’t even have those, but he came by them honestly, earned the old-fashioned way by tinkering his hoverbike to perfection in his spare moments between lessons and supplemental etiquette and near-obsessive Vulcan research.

Spock’s leg tenses. Jim doesn’t bother trying to think of the name for the big muscle that tightens up under his touch. It’s not exactly encouraging to feel like he’s being tolerated reluctantly at every turn, but again: Jim and his challenges.

The easy path’s always left him cold. He can’t say for certain Spock would’ve caught his attention as quickly as he did if he hadn’t made Jim want to bang his head into a wall until it stopped hurting altogether.

‘Hey.’ Jim stills, fingers hovering. ‘Am I pushing my luck here?’ No; that’s not what he meant. Not exactly. Specificity’s hard as hell when you’re hard as hell, but Jim buckles down. He’s trying so hard his brain’s gonna pop eventually. ‘That’s not—I don’t wanna do things, keep doing things, if I’m going against your code. Your personal code. About what you’re comfortable with. Also what you enjoy.’

Establishing the parameters. That sounds like a mature, responsible, adult thing to do, not to mention entirely diplomatic. Jim hates it for that reason, but it’s with grudging acceptance that he respects the necessity.

Vulcans. Once every seven years. Mating cycle. Pon farr. Jim might not know the details; he might have Spock’s assurance that the event isn’t the only time Vulcans get biblical—or precepts of Surak funky—with each other; he might want to see Spock with his tunic off more than he wants Spock to touch his dick again. But what he doesn’t know is all the complicated stuff in-between.

What he doesn’t want is for Spock to feel like he has to do something. What he has is this fussy little need to make sure Spock wants it. This. Him.

In more than a logical way.

‘I had informed you already, to the best of my abilities, that a Vulcan does not indulge in emotionalism with the same freedom to which humans are accustomed. It is not natural.’ Emotionalism, Jim thinks. Like that has anything to do with the way Spock’s hands on his bare stomach made Jim feel a hell of a lot like spiraling out of control on a two-wheeler. ‘I do not find this experimentation unpleasant.’

‘When I touched you—’

‘I braced myself.’ Spock pauses, visibly, possibly to consider the implications of a rational, benign
Jim lets him anticipate it. He doesn’t wait too long; he doesn’t move too fast. When he rests his palm on Spock’s knee, his fingers on Spock’s thigh, the muscle twitches again and Jim recognizes it as a response, a reply, to an unvocalized question. Another kind of conversation they’re having.

God, it’s hot. Jim’s heart is pounding double-time and he’s just touching Spock’s upper thigh, not even bare skin to bare skin.

‘You know, bracing yourself is usually what you do before something bad happens,’ Jim says, just as a point of interest—something for Spock to test his mind against so he’s not focused solely on what Jim’s doing with his hands.

With anyone else, that’s exactly what Jim would want. Complete and total focus. But Spock takes a certain careful subtlety. It’s better to give him a few different directions to regard at once, which should distract him from honing in too much on any one thing.

Jim probably shouldn’t be thinking about his husband in the same terms as a Starfleet training program but he’s used to throwing himself against the toughest ones, where a little creative thinking goes a long way.

If he can reassure himself that the hours he spent on those simulations didn’t go to waste, that there’s somewhere else he can apply them, then maybe it’s like he got what he needed out of Starfleet anyway.

‘It is an act of preparation with no hidden connotations of judgment as you seem to believe.’ Despite the odds, Spock’s hand might actually be distracted by Jim’s sudden attention. His fingers stroke, back and forth, across the taut skin below Jim’s hipbone with no discernible purpose.

But Jim’s not complaining. The true kind of anticipation, the kind he’s most into, is when he’s got no clue what’s coming. He makes quick connections, so it’s tough to surprise him outright, but Spock’s never once been predictable when it comes to their sex life. Or any other aspect they’ve
come to share, for that matter.

‘You’re making a face, though,’ Jim says.

‘A face,’ Spock repeats.

‘Yeah, a face.’

Jim runs his hand further up Spock’s clothed thigh, digging his nail in along the fine seam and tracing its shape all the way up Spock’s leg. The shirts Vulcans wear are thicker, tougher to work with, but the leggings are thin enough that Jim would be able to feel body heady coming off of Spock if he were a hot kinda guy.

Temperature-wise.

He imitates the face for Spock’s edification: wrinkling his nose theatrically, pulling his lip up over his teeth in a curl of disgust, squinting his eyes in Spock’s direction as he wiggles his head back and forth.

Spock’s hand ceases its restless motion just above the waist of Jim’s pants. It’s maddening, but Jim probably deserves it. He curves his fingers against Spock’s inseam, neither pulling back nor pushing ahead.

‘That is not an expression I have ever seen on my face,’ Spock says. ‘Nor on the face of any Vulcan, for that matter.’

His tone implies that’s not one he’s ever seen on a human either, but Jim doesn’t mind. He likes being the first.

‘Maybe I took a few artistic liberties.’

‘Ah. Yes. I recall the artistic liberties you have taken before. This tendency is not restricted to your digital artwork.’

‘What I was trying to do,’ Jim says, so close to huffy that he’s almost laughing, ‘is express how it comes across when you’re trying to get a rise out of somebody and they don’t react at all.’

‘So the recreation was not intended to be literally accurate.’

‘Just trying to express myself.’

Spock’s thumb curves along Jim’s hip; his fingers splay outward from the palm, five points of contact, two of them on Jim’s bare skin. ‘Jim,’ he says. ‘I am capable of sensing not just physical warmth but what can only be termed a cacophony of emotional heat through your skin alone. If I show no outward signs of the effect this has on me, that is because I have never before been called upon to experience this effect. I would prefer to experience it completely.’

If Spock was getting emotional heat before, the one-two punch of that admission—not subtle, not coy, intimately honest—is bound to give him twice as much. Jim squirms at the thought.

‘You’re not meditating or anything like that, are you?’ It’s deflection. Spock’s gonna have to learn about that human trait sooner or later: how often it works against an individual’s desires, despite their better judgment, beyond their control. Especially when most of their blood flow has been diverted from the brain to somewhere below the belt.
‘If this is what you believe meditation to resemble,’ Spock replies, ‘then it is little wonder you did not have much success with the practice while approaching it on your own.’

‘Spock.’

Spock’s eyes answer for him. Jim.

The shiver at the base of Jim’s spine grounds him, breathless without being winded.

‘You gonna be too cold if I take off your shirt?’ Jim asks. ‘If the answer’s yes, I’m gonna promise to keep you warm anyway.’

‘I had wondered when—or if—we would engage in more common sexual practices involving the nudity of both parties instead of neither, or simply one,’ Spock admits.

Like Jim’s cheek and stomach weren’t flushed pink enough before. ‘Guess I’m not giving you the best common examples, huh?’

‘It is possible you have taken certain pedagogical liberties.’

Pedagogical. Spock’s the only individual in any galaxy, Jim is positive, who could take that word and make it sexy. ‘Yeah. I totally have. And now I’m gonna take your shirt.’

‘It would be more efficient if I were to undress myself,’ Spock says, then displays a moment of uncharacteristic hesitation. ‘Perhaps the objective of the exercise is to attune ourselves to one another’s movements by engaging in the act of undressing one another.’

‘That works,’ Jim replies. ‘Or watching you get undressed in front of me right now after that backrub you just gave me and I’ll probably come before you’re back in the bed.’ Honesty is the Vulcan way. And the way Spock’s eyes widen marginally when Jim says come makes the choice of honesty more than worth it.

‘Honestly, Spock,’ Jim continues, picking up more conversational slack, ‘I need the practice on Vulcan clothes anyway. Getting out of them, getting into them. Seems like the kind of thing the prince consort of Vulcan should know.’

‘You are fabricating reasons for something to which I have already agreed,’ Spock points out.

‘Yeah, that’s me all over.’ Jim sits up slowly, trying to keep the blood from rushing too quickly out of his brain. ‘I like to make things difficult.’

When he reaches for Spock, it’s as much to keep himself from slumping over as it is to go for his shirt. There aren’t any stiff clasps or hidden buttons, little snaps that make hidden seams down the back of his sweater or tight laces to make Jim’s fingers feel clumsy as Petrokian blood sausage. It’s just a pullover, which makes Jim’s whole speech about learning how to get into his clothes seem superfluous at best.

Trust Spock to show him up even when he isn’t trying. Jim’s into it, but still.

‘That much has been made self-evident,’ Spock says.

Even face-to-face, Jim gripping soft handfuls of his shirt, Spock doesn’t quite seem fazed. It’s not the first time Jim’s wondered how far he’ll have to go to get a decent reaction out of him. For now, he’s happy enough to exist in the experimentation phase, pulling Spock’s tunic up to get his hands under it, warm skin against cool. Cool, but never clammy. It’s an important distinction to make.
'You know, dogs don’t sweat,' Jim says, while his fingers trace the shape of Spock’s ribs. There’s no taking the words back now that they’re out there. Spock’s eyelids lower, then lift all at once, trying to parse the comparison.

‘Dogs,’ Spock repeats.

Jim wonders if that’s for his benefit or if he just does it without thinking now—if that’s an imprint he left without meaning to.

Now that he’s committed to the topic—now that Spock’s responded instead of leaving it up to chance if he’s even listening—Jim can’t act like he didn’t say anything to begin with. That’s the problem when it comes to Vulcans. Their hearing’s so good it’s impossible to play the you heard me wrong game.

‘Yep.’ Jim spreads his fingers in the hollows between Spock’s ribs, tugging his shirt up to free his chest, lifting his hands to rub light, exploratory circles over his nipples. ‘That’s why they pant, you know.’

He demonstrates for all of three seconds before thinking better of it.

‘Vulcans do not pant, Jim.’

‘No kidding.’ No kidding ever. Jim regroups, refocuses. Spock’s a lot hairier than he expected, for one, dark and thick on his chest and—yeah, below the navel. Jim lets that sink in, sitting up at Spock’s kneeling side, tracing the outline of the unfamiliar patterns.

They won’t be unfamiliar for long.

Jim commits them to memory. His forefinger follows one wing nearly to the collarbone before it curves inward, a narrowing triangle down the lean center of Spock’s abdomen. The muscles beneath it are slim and hard and flat, shadows flushed a faint, pale green, and he couldn’t be more different from Jim physically if he wasn’t even a fraction human.

It’s crazy, considering all the differences among humans alone, that they ever managed to see past their own stuff to get close to aliens. But Spock’s proof of that; they’re proof of it together.

Now that’s poetry.

Spock clears his throat.

Jim lifts his gaze from Spock’s chest to his face. ‘You’re not gonna tell me your eyes are up here, are you?’

‘I would not point out so obvious a fact of physiology.’ Spock pauses. ‘You had stopped speaking. That is not usual. The likelihood of the catalyst for this uncharacteristic silence involving some manner of displeasure or disappointment was statistically high.’

‘You’re hairy,’ Jim explains. ‘And it was a surprise, I guess, and I like surprises. And I like this surprise in particular. And when I talk I say stuff about dogs and panting Vulcans so the likelihood of sounding crazy is statistically higher.’

‘Ah.’ Spock’s hand waits in the space between their chests, Jim’s rising and falling with the hurry of eager anticipation, before he touches the smooth groove beneath Jim’s throat. ‘Then it is in keeping with ’your type’?”
‘One of. Yeah.’ Jim scoots closer. ‘I’m not complaining.’

‘I had not engaged in a similar activity.’

‘So I’m your type too, huh, Spock?’

Spock touches Jim’s nipple and Jim thinks about dying, about building a time machine to go back in time and make sure he drowned in that morning’s hot bath. He grins at the same time. If all the illogical impulses coursing through his body haven’t caused Spock’s brain to short-circuit yet then they really have a chance of making this work.

‘I am not complaining,’ Spock repeats.

‘Cool.’ _Hot_. Jim’s grin only gets bigger. ‘But I’m gonna start complaining if you don’t lie down so I can take off your pants.’

He tips forward to lean Spock back, the heels of his palms braced against the mattress. He feels like kissing Spock’s chest so he does, hair tickling his lips and chin. Spock can think he’s illogical all he wants—basically everything the body ever wants is a combination of the illogical with the downright insane—as long as he likes it deep down. Even if he never admits it. Jim rests his cheek there over Spock’s chest and has a moment of panic before he remembers that’s not where the heart beats.

It’s lower.

So Jim slides lower.

He’s at Spock’s side when he hears it, an unexpected rhythm that tightens Jim’s gut.

He recognizes the sound, even if it takes him a second to place it. The position’s all wrong, but the heavy rhythm is so familiar that he’d know it in his sleep. An even, slow beat thumps with the flow of green blood through Spock’s body.

It could be going a little more quickly for Jim’s taste, but he’s not about to complain right away.

‘Hey, Spock.’ Jim settles his hands on Spock’s hips, drumming his fingers in a light imitation, until he has to stop so he can listen again.

‘Jim,’ Spock acknowledges.

When he speaks, Jim feels his muscles tense, voice reverberating against blood and bone. It’s different from hearing it in the air, more intimate somehow. Jim’s mouth drags against Spock’s side, lips working to form words. He’s not quite there yet.

‘…I can hear your heartbeat.’

It sounds anticlimactic—or worse, obvious. Any second now Spock’s gonna say something about how _demonstrable_ that is, how Jim’s insistence on narrating what he’s doing is unfathomable, especially considering how the only person who can hear him is also present to observe the same phenomena. But it’s not as if they don’t need help in the communication department. The way Jim sees it, it’s his dignity or their clarity.

Spock’s breathing swells beneath him. Jim can’t feel it when Spock swallows, but it’s a soft, wet sound somewhere above Jim’s head.
‘In your studies on Vulcan anatomy, you must surely have encountered our cardiac placement.’

‘Yeah, I did.’ Jim turns his mouth against Spock’s side, kissing the curve of the spot where his kidney would be if he was just a little more human. ‘But reading about something and *hearing* it out loud are two different things, Spock.’

‘That much is obvious,’ Spock agrees.

Jim gives him an experimental push with both hands and Spock looks down like he’s a sehlat who just jumped up on the table. From what he’s heard of I-Chaya’s behavior, he’s way too well-trained for that kind of stunt. That leaves Jim on his own, making reckless plays for attention because he never learned any better.

‘Lie down,’ he says, translating his movements.

Spock surveys Jim, then the bed at his side, measuring both Jim’s words and the space he has to stretch out in. It looks to Jim like he’s actually thinking about following orders and that’s pretty hot.

But not as hot as Spock shifting to spread himself backward on the bed, getting around Jim to make room for himself. It’s more than worth the brief break in contact between them to see Spock on his back, somehow still braced stiffly on his elbows.

Jim has to wonder whether looks that uncomfortable when he sleeps or if it’s just a look that manifests when Jim’s around.

Jim grins again—although grins as a currency of reassurance might not be instinctive for Spock. They’ll work that out. They’ll work it all out. Right now, all Jim has to concentrate working on is getting Spock out of his leggings or whatever they are; there’s bound to be a word for it but the only word Jim cares about is off. He hooks his fingers in the waistband and lowers it.

True to form, Spock picks up on the action and responds the way any good student should. He lifts his hips and Jim gets the leggings to his knees before he can kneel between Spock’s legs, rolling the fabric back until it’s pulled tight around Spock’s ankles.

‘I am not fully undressed,’ Spock informs him.

‘I’m not fully patient,’ Jim replies.

Spock’s thighs are bare, his stomach, his chest, his arms. He’s long and lithe and Jim doesn’t have the adjectives for it. He’s not Jim’s, that’s for sure, but he’s *with* Jim. Also, he’s hard, the fabric of his underwear tented around an obvious erection, with even a faint spot of dampness that Jim recognizes. He recognizes the shape itself, too, with a brief sigh that combines relief and excitement and something that bubbles like a laugh in his chest but doesn’t escape from his throat.

Jim could take it off with the same amount of pleasant struggle as the leggings gave him, but he doesn’t. He braces his hands on Spock’s shoulders and bows to kiss his belly instead, a scant inch below the navel, hot breath shivering the thick clutch of rough hair. Spock’s muscles respond; Spock himself doesn’t. Jim mouths from bare skin to a simple cotton blend, shaping Spock’s dick with his tongue through his underwear.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

Because it’s illogical, Jim figures. Because it’s a random assortment of actions that should be awkward and uncomfortable instead of hot and thrilling. But here they are, Jim’s palms on Spock’s
hips, Jim’s mouth on Spock’s dick, with damp cotton in between them, and if it is awkward, it’s the kind that doesn’t matter. No bumping, no thumping.

Jim nudges the head of Spock’s dick with his nose, encouraging Spock to move if he wants. Spock doesn’t. Jim moves for him, an up and down and up again. ‘Spock,’ he replies, muffled, but hopefully Spock will pick up on the intent.

Nothing—but Spock’s muscles tell a different story. Jim can feel them twitch and jump and shudder. When he draws his teeth along the cotton weave to cause a little friction Spock grips the back of Jim’s head, sudden and unwarned. Jim shuts his eyes, breathing it in, until Spock’s tight fingers ease and release. Like there’s no in between to work with. Like it’s everything or nothing.

Jim’s scalp tingles.

‘Spock,’ Jim tries again, letting the name hum within the hollow of his open mouth. A little vibration couldn’t hurt. Spock tenses again and Jim knows it has to feel good—maybe better than Spock’s ever felt before. That idea’s terrifying. Amazing. He chuckles and gasps at the same time, his own dick pretty damn hard, bottom lip pushing lower down, searching for other points of familiarity. Of contrast. But mostly of sensitivity.

‘I’m gonna just…’

Jim doesn’t gesture, but he nods at Spock’s erection, bumping the bridge of his nose against the damp head of his cock. This’d be better without the barrier surrounding them, with nothing to separate Jim’s tongue from Spock’s skin.

He wants to know what Spock tastes like—not the clean cotton of his shorts but what’s just beneath them. He doesn’t sweat, but there are other notable secretions, things Jim’s keen on making himself familiar with. He’s learning a lot more about Vulcan anatomy than ever existed in the archives, for one thing. No doubt all this stuff falls under the heavily encrypted and extremely private section, if anyone ever bothered to write them down in the first place.

Jim’s not sure whether he’s jealous of all the information Spock’s had at his disposal or if he’s grateful for the unlimited surprises that wait in store.

Spock doesn’t agree, not exactly—at least, he doesn’t acknowledge Jim in words—but he inclines his head like a nod, which is confirmation enough for Jim. There’s a chance it could’ve been a muscular twitch, but Jim’ll take that too. All’s fair in love and war, even if the lines between the two get blurred sometimes with how hard Jim has to work in order to get any results out of Spock.

It’s worth it. Something about the effort-to-reward ratio always seems to balance out in Jim’s favor.

Spock rolls his hips, digging his heels in and nearly brushing Jim’s face before Jim pulls away for long enough to tug his shorts down. He gets as far as Spock’s knees before he’s stopped by simple physics—and not being able to move any further away without taking his eyes off Spock’s dick, flushed dark green at the tip and shadowed by that same color all the way down, heat pooling like a blush between his thighs.

Jim doesn’t know he’s holding his breath until he gasps, the sound stuck in the back of his throat.

Spock’s knees start to turn in toward each other. Jim has to move quick to combat that impulse, to keep him from shying away like he’s only just figured out he’s on display and doesn’t want to be. It’d be easy for Jim to screw up, let the moment stagnate. Instead, he leans in to press a kiss to the head of Spock’s cock, swiping his tongue against the slit at the top, relieved there’re some things
they have in common below the belt after all.

He takes his hands from Spock’s shorts, lets them run up the insides of his thighs. Spock’s hairy everywhere, which shouldn’t come as a surprise, but it’s an illicit reminder that keeps thrilling Jim from his head to his toes.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘Kinda busy,’ Jim murmurs, drawing his tongue in a long, messy swipe up the shaft of Spock’s dick.

From this angle, Spock can’t see his face—which is a relief, to be honest, with Jim’s eyes half-open and his forehead furrowed, wearing a look of concentration he doesn’t want to see reflected by Spock’s curious expression. He’s studying. He knows what he gets like when he’s studying something. Spock’s not the only one who can apply himself like a grade A nerd, and Jim’s had more than enough experience with the same. Sometimes—not all the time, but on certain subjects—he’s been known to geek out.

This doesn’t, technically, qualify as ‘geeking out’. It’s his husband; it’s his husband’s body. Somebody somewhere must’ve figured Jim was ready for a commitment like this one and Spock’s lean thighs, the dark hair between them, the long shaft of his dick and the familiar, rounded head are a welcome sight, Jim huffing warm air against the thin skin just to watch it flush really green.

God, it gets really, really green.

Jim’s eyes widen, mouth crooked, lips parted. He swipes his tongue over the bottom lip.

‘Jim,’ Spock repeats.

There’s something about the sound of his voice—something that’s strong enough to pull Jim’s focus away from his dick, from all the things he wants to do to it and maybe, yeah, with it. Jim looks up, squinting, hair tousled in front, hoping it’s the sexy kind of disheveled and not any of the other kinds. This time, the odds are against him. ‘Huh?’ he asks, because at least that’s communicating.

Spock’s lucky Jim was able to form that much in the way of verbal acknowledgment.

Spock’s face is tight, closed-off, distant. It’s the Spock Jim would think Spock was all the time if the only Spock he ever got the chance to know was the guy standing next to him in the desert, fire hidden within cold, dark stone. He isn’t looking at Jim—it’s more that he’s looking through Jim, past him, not only to a place where Jim isn’t but a time without him, too.

The heat goes out of Jim’s chest. It drains from his belly. The tightness in his lungs reminds him it’s always been there and he scrambles to sit up.

‘Something wrong?’

Something’s wrong. Or Jim’s done something wrong. Wrong is the right word to use. Jim pushes his sweaty hair off his forehead, wanting to lean closer, knowing he should pull back.

Spock doesn’t answer—because Vulcans don’t lie. Something’s wrong; Spock’s not talking, not saying what it is; and Jim’s face is hot for reasons that don’t have to do with what he’s looking at, what he can do, burning up because of something he already did.

‘Hey,’ Jim begins. Spock’s still quiet and somebody’s gotta bust them out of their frozen silence.
‘Just tell me—’

‘I intend to meditate,’ Spock replies. Jim drops back onto his heels like the sound of somebody’s emotionless voice can have the same, physical effect as a door slamming in your face. It sure as hell feels like it does.

To seal the deal, Spock dresses in swift, nearly mechanical motions, without once meeting Jim’s eyes or even looking in the same galaxy as Jim’s face. Jim could help him. He reaches out to try and Spock catches him at the wrist, holding him back, no words exchanged. No words necessary.

‘Hey—’ Jim tries again, because he can’t stop trying, because that’d mean admitting he’s screwed up and doesn’t know how to fix it. There’s no way he’s there yet.

Soon, maybe. But not now.

Spock’s fingers tighten around his wrist. It’s not an affectionate squeeze. He’s not the type. But Jim scoots forward on the bed anyway, like he’s being beckoned.

Just goes to show him his instincts are all off. Spock lets go like Jim’s a ceremonial iron left too long in the fire. His eyes find Jim’s face, but there’s no hint in there of what he’s feeling. They’re dark and deep, but almost deliberately emotionless.

Jim would make a crack about inviting a mask of Surak into the bedroom but the words stick in his throat. The dry air’s getting to him again; all of Vulcan’s conspiring to make Jim feel like a foreign body about to be expelled by a hostile environment.

The environment that just turned unexpectedly hostile.

It’d be one thing if he knew what he’d done.

‘My meditation chamber is adjacent to this room,’ Spock says, already on his way out the door. ‘You need not leave if you are suitably comfortable.’

*Comfortable.* Jim’s mouth is open, not on a snappy retort but because he can’t remember how to close the damn thing.

Sure.

He’s hard in Spock’s bed, half-naked, all-thwarted. There was a Vulcan cock in his mouth and now the Vulcan it belonged to is bolting. He thought they were getting somewhere.

Obviously, he thought wrong.

He lies down on his back as the door hisses shut, breathing hard. The weight of the atmosphere settles in like a heavy sehlat on his chest. For a while there he forgot about it entirely. But now that he’s alone, without Spock’s sensitive skin under his mouth and hands, burning green where Jim’s doing the right thing, there’s not much else to focus on.

Maybe he just tricked himself into thinking he was getting better the same way he tricked himself into believing he could be some kind of Vulcan sex expert.

It’s not like he can look things up to discover his mistakes, considering the dearth of information on Vulcan sexual preferences in the first place. And if he leaves now, he’s gonna have to go through the whole song and dance of pulling on his shirt, stumbling out of Spock’s room and through the halls until he finds his own, impermanent quarters again.
The idea of being alone there comes up just *slightly* worse than the idea of being alone in Spock’s bedroom, blankets rumpled under his body with the promise of things they never got around to doing.

Jim should really brush his teeth, wash his face. Get up and take a long, cold sonic shower to do something about the throbbing between his legs. Instead, he rolls over onto his side and curls his knees up toward his chest.

Sleeping right in the middle of someone else’s bed isn’t the best revenge, but it’s exactly as juvenile as Jim currently feels.

*
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Jim and Amanda bond.

Chapter Notes

ART FROM THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER by the incredible leaps-of-illogic on tumblr!

And art from the chapter BEFORE the previous chapter by the magnificent loarts (loarts-art) on tumblr!
See you guys after Christmas!

Never go to sleep angry—advice Jim’s given to himself and ignored countless times.

When you go to sleep angry, you dream angry. A tangle of sweat and a frustrated grunt are the remnants of those angry dreams, which chased Jim through long, hot stretches of desert and forced him into taking sharp corners. Hoverbike spinning out of control beneath him; a crash in a sand-dune leaving him disoriented and immobilized; a le-matya looming overhead, not accurate or to scale, but the perfect size for an out-of-control nightmare.
There’s no Spock in the morning, either. Jim thinks about hacking a PADD or a console to send him a message but when he settles in at Spock’s desk he realizes he doesn’t know what he’d say.

An apology for something he doesn’t understand? A request to know what the hell happened? A reminder that they’re married now and marriage involves not just the kind of honesty that keeps you from lying outright, but has you say all the things you’re not saying, while you’re at it?

Jim’s no authority on the matter. After all, he’s been married as long as Spock has. And he still feels sick after a glass of water, a few round-trip paces in front of the door to Spock’s meditation chamber or whatever it is.

Eventually, the events of last night get caught up in the eddies of Jim’s bad dreams. It’d be great if he could lie to himself and say the stuff that actually happened is a part of the stuff that didn’t, but he’s as bad at lying to himself as he’s good at lying to everyone else.

He leaves Spock’s private quarters and he doesn’t leave a note.

He knows it’s petty, immature, not very nice—and he knows that fighting miscommunication with more miscommunication, or a complete lack of communication, won’t solve a damn thing. But he’s picked up on all the slack so far and that’s not fair, either.

‘Well, well,’ Bones says, waiting for him inside his temporary quarters. ‘I was all ready to think married life might actually suit you—not to mention take you off my hands for a while—but that just goes to show you: never diagnose a man when he’s not around.’

‘Save it,’ Jim says, and heads into the sonic.

The cold blast does nothing for his mood. Neither do the tests Bones subjects him to when he comes out again, the beeping of one obnoxious scanner making his headache worse exponentially. And, checking the updates to his schedule, the promise of a tour of the grounds with Lady Amanda is a gift and a curse. Hours of walking with the nicest person around, making small talk, looking her in the eye and not letting on to the fact that Jim somehow ruined things with her infuriatingly private son—if Jim can make it through that then they should send him to negotiate with the Tellarites next.

‘You wanna talk about it before you cause an incident making that face at a Vulcan?’ Bones asks while Jim dresses, already sweating into his fresh clothes.

‘Thought you didn’t want the down and dirty details, Bones.’ Jim struggles with a sweater and then decides to screw that. A light cotton undershirt is more than enough for him.

It’s not like he’s actively committed to trying to impress anyone. Lady Amanda’s bound to understand, and being on his best behavior got Jim left alone in his husband’s room on what was officially one of their honeymoon nights. So the hell with the sweater, and the hell with Bones looking at him like he’s been learning a trick or two from the Vulcans about x-ray vision.

Jim’s shoulders slump under the weight of nothing more substantial than his own knotted-up insides.

‘I’m not looking to get the marital exclusive, mind you.’ Bones makes a face like he’s swallowed raw sash-savas the wrong way, hitting his taste buds with a mouthful of sour citric acid. ‘Unlike the damned media sponsors contacting me every damn hour of the day, asking if I’d like to comment on Prince James Tiberius’ recent union and if we’re comfortable calling you the Vixen of Vulcan. How’d they even get this contact, that’s what I’d like to know. Wasting valuable time and
Jim groans, but it’s for show. Right now, even the idea of being a headline’s more appealing than being prince consort of Vulcan. At least he understands the ins and outs of what a reporter wants from him, the image they’re trying to cultivate from Earth’s second son. *Reckless Royal Jim Kirk.*

Here, he’s functionally clueless.

‘Sorry to break it to you, Bones, but the entire problem’s a marital exclusive.’

It sucks to admit. Part of Jim wishes he’d put on the sweater, if only to have a cowl neck to hide his face in.

He actually thought he was adapting. Apparently one dinner with Lady Amanda wasn’t enough to pick up her talent for blending in. And it’s not exactly the kind of thing he can bring up with her to get her insight and advice—considering the intimate nature of the circumstances.

Bones is all he has if he wants to open up about this. Jim can pretend like he’s not interested all he wants, but the truth is, he’s better off getting it out than letting it stew. Otherwise it might explode at a less-opportune moment, with a less-willing sounding board.

It’s hard to look like a crazed, ranting loon in front of Bones of all people.

‘Great,’ Bones said. ‘I had a feeling you were gonna make me regret all that emotional generosity.’

Jim smiles wide, not showing his teeth. ‘I tried to warn you.’

‘What’d you do?’ Bones asks. He gets a distant look in his eyes, then shakes it off. ‘Never mind. I don’t think I wanna know.’

‘You assume it’s *me,*’ Jim says.

‘No,’ Bones says. ‘But if I blame *him* you’ll bite my head off.’

‘I wouldn’t—’ Okay, Bones has a point. ‘—bite your head off, anyway.’

‘Nearly had my head over the damn diet, and *that* was for your own good, too, might I point out.’

‘I was having chicken related nightmares, Bones. I dreamed I showed up on Vulcan and my husband-to-be was a chicken breast.’ Which might’ve been better than the alternative, now that Jim’s seen the alternative.

Some of that must show on his face, because Bones settles in for the long haul, one arm on his knee, as sensitive as Bones ever gets. ‘And I take it you wish he was that uncomplicated now you’re actually here, is that it?’

‘I like him, all right?’ Jim sighs, but it feels better once it’s out there. It’s not as though he can tell the guy in question; telling someone else is all he’s got. ‘I like him.’

‘And considering you also like highjacking hoverbikes and giving your CMO an ulcer the size of a Venusian colony, I’m supposed to infer from that statement it’s bad for you like every other thing you take a liking to?’

‘That’s why I like you, Bones.’ Jim claps him on the shoulder, not hard enough to give him a jolt. ‘You don’t pull your punches.’
‘And the thanks I get is playing marriage counselor to a prince.’ Bones’ eyebrows pinch together, a familiar wrinkle in the middle that’s all Jim’s ever known of home. It’s deep and cranky and a sight for sore eyes, enough that Jim’s smiling when he sinks down on the ottoman in front of Bones’ chair. ‘And that’s if I get any thanks at all. So you like him. Is that so bad?’

‘You haven’t met him, Bones,’ Jim says.

‘But I have emailed the green-blooded—’ Bones stops himself before things get too treasonous. ‘You know the rest.’

‘Green-blooded cold-hearted pointy-eared hobgoblin, right?’ Jim ticks each one off on his fingers, only to realize he’s missing one. ‘Devil-looking. Damn it, I always forget that one.’

‘Just picture him in red instead of green and it’ll come to you,’ Bones replies.

Jim rubs his face with his palms, wiping the sweat off his forehead and pushing his hair out of his eyes at the same time. ‘I knew he was gonna be different,’ Jim says, without looking up. ‘I knew that. Believe me, I had all the warning in the world and I chose this. I wanted... It wasn’t just to be stubborn.’

‘Sure,’ Bones says. ‘Not just.’

‘C’mon, Bones.’

‘Not just,’ Bones repeats, but it has a different meaning the second time around.

‘Yeah.’ Jim shakes his head. ‘Well, that’s a part of it, maybe. But it’s—I can do some good here, and I thought... He’s not all cold-blooded, Bones.’

‘He’s an alien, Jim. Or did you forget that?’

‘Sure—but he’s half-human, too. It’s just that the alien bits win out more often than not and I thought we were getting somewhere, but—’ The timer goes off on Jim’s PADD, a warning that if he doesn’t hightail it out of his own pity party now, he’s going to be late for a tour of the Vulcan royal grounds.

‘Saved by the bell,’ Bones says. ‘Try not to dehydrate in record time, will you?’

‘Catch you when I get back,’ Jim replies. ‘That’s...a promise, not a threat. Mostly.’

Bones salutes with one finger, face companionably irritable.

‘You’re my best Bones,’ Jim says, because it’s the truth, but also because he’s feeling jumpy now that he started spilling only to be interrupted preemptively.

He’s red in the cheeks by the time he makes it to the courtyard, breathing hard and shielding his eyes from the sun. It’s enough added visual information that it should distract from any kind of face he might’ve been making—like the one that tipped Bones off, for example. Trouble in Vulcan paradise.

Lady Amanda’s not Jim’s own queen mother, but she’s got instincts as shrewd as a Vulcan’s where it counts. Jim’s not looking to get scrutinized when he’s all too conscious of the problem.

It turns out I’m terrible at Vulcan blowjobs and I think your son’s too polite to tell me.

It turns out I’m terrible and I think your son’s too polite to tell me.
It turns out everything’s terrible.

‘Prince James.’ Lady Amanda’s standing in the shade of a great red rock, the desert breezes stirring the scarves around her head. She’s holding a parasol to shield her from the sun and she hands it to Jim when he gets close enough, so he can hold it over both their heads. One of the long, unending files that blur together under the heading Social Etiquette in Jim’s required reading said something about the taller of two people taking the umbrella. He’s guessing that’s a document Lady Amanda was briefed on too. ‘You’re very punctual.’

‘One of my better qualities,’ Jim says.

It sits under his skin—any mention of his good qualities—since that comes with the implication of there being bad qualities too. And it’s driving him crazy not knowing which one of them drove Spock out of the room.

Not talking to Lady Amanda about it just makes him all the more aware of the problem.

She puts her hand on his arm where it’s crooked.

‘I find it hard to believe anyone would put punctuality high on a list of your traits,’ she says. ‘Of course, I don’t mean that as an insult. It’s only that you’ve displayed so many other commendable qualities—patience chief among them.’

Jim manages, finally, to raise an eyebrow, shooting her a glance without turning his head. There’s no telling from her expression what she could be thinking, whether she’s talked to Spock since the incident or—worse, somehow—if Spock spoke to her.

She’s had too much practice in dealing with Vulcans her whole adult life. As a lowly human, Jim’s got no shot at reading her face.

‘I thought we’d start with the cultivated rock gardens,’ Lady Amanda continues, like she didn’t just drop a sly bomb into their conversation.

Maybe she doesn’t know she did it.

But again—practice in Vulcan subtleties. Lady Amanda’s had years of it. Spock’s lifetime. More. The chances of her missing something Jim’s picked up on are lower than low. Jim can’t calculate the odds to the hundredth of a decimal point, but he knows enough to know how unlikely it is.

He covers her hand with his. At least, with another human, he doesn’t have to worry about overstepping his bounds—or the dangers inherent in touch telepathy.

‘Rock garden,’ he says. ‘That sounds...lovely, Lady Amanda.’

‘It can be,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘If you’re in the right mood for it, that is.’

‘The right mood?’ Jim follows where she leads, grateful for the relative cool of the parasol’s shade coupled with the gentleness of her voice. In the absence of a cool breeze, it’s all he has. He’ll take it, since it’s better than nothing.

‘They can be...severe, I suppose. When one is expecting an Earth garden—something lush, alive, thriving. Something that needs to be tended, where removing the weeds are a certain part of the joy.’ Lady Amanda guides Jim around the corner of that tall, striated rock; it’s only then that he realizes it’s part of a garden wall. On the other side, the garden itself is far from simple: neat and self-contained, breathtaking in its own, quiet way. Raked sand; abstract stone carvings dotting the
landscape; dry, twisted, leafless trees, only one of them bearing stubborn fruit. Jim recognizes the sash-savas and his lips pucker preemptively. ‘It takes some getting used to,’ Lady Amanda adds softly. ‘But it has its own beauty, too. It is harsh, perhaps, and there’s no shade to sit in under the sun, but at night, when the lanterns are lit... There’s no finer place from which you can watch the stars.’

‘I’ll have to see for myself sometime,’ Jim replies.

‘Careful, Prince James.’

Jim skids to a halt before tripping over a low, flat stone, a hollow carved into the center to form an empty basin. The parasol wobbles. Lady Amanda holds her ground, keeping Jim on his feet with only one hand in the crook of his elbow.

‘Once,’ she says, while Jim tugs at his collar to regain equilibrium, ‘I bit into a sash-savas fruit at dinner and managed to squirt its juice directly into Sarek’s eye.’

‘Oh my God.’ Jim’s response is out before he can think about etiquette. ‘Seriously? Not that I’d accuse you of lying, Lady Amanda, it’s just... What was that even like?’

‘He was very stoic, as I’m sure you can imagine.’ The shadowy hints of a smile tease the corners of Lady Amanda’s mouth. ‘I was certain he’d have to react, and as you can imagine, I kept apologizing, while he insisted no apologies were necessary—that my intent was not to blind him, and it was my intent that mattered—but of course, it wasn’t my intent that had his eye watering.’

‘Oh my God,’ Jim says again.

‘In any case, it wasn’t the end of everything, as I suspected for some time it might be.’ Lady Amanda draws away to kneel beside one of the brittle trees, drawing her fingers through the sand at its roots. ‘I came out here, night after night, thinking about that mistake, and my own embarrassment, and how many stars there were above me, and how little it mattered.’

Jim swallows. ‘I guess it was only...logical to forgive you.’

‘Or,’ Lady Amanda replies, ‘it was only logical that there was nothing to forgive.’

She straightens and takes Jim’s arm again, gloved fingers smelling of sun-baked sand. ‘Shall we tour the royal buildings next, Prince James?’

‘I’m yours to lead, Lady Amanda,’ Jim says.

He prides himself on being an agreeable guest, even if he can’t call himself a capable Vulcan lover. He didn’t do anything as bad as squirting citric acid into Spock’s eye, but the way Spock reacted, he might as well have. Jim forgot to ask whether Sarek got up and left the table after Lady Amanda made her little faux-pas, and he doesn’t want to let on by asking too many questions at once.

If she already knows, then that’s one thing—but Jim’s not going to be the one to bring it to her attention.

He wouldn’t even talk about his husband troubles with his own mother, let alone somebody else’s. Lady Amanda just has a way of making him forget how little they really know each other. There’s probably a name for that, something to do with her being the only human on a planet full of emotionally-constipated aliens. Jim’s starved for attention. It’s Stockholm Mother Syndrome.

‘Now, I’m no expert on Vulcan architecture.’ Lady Amanda squeezes Jim’s arm, the same kind of
careless, human tactile attention he’s been desperate to avoid exhibiting—or exhibiting the need for—around Spock. Maybe she’s been missing out too. He can’t guess and he doesn’t know her well enough yet to assume. ‘I don’t want you to go quoting me on these things. But this is my home. I like to think I’ve picked up a few things.’

‘When you aren’t working out subtle ways of blinding your husband, of course,’ Jim says.

Lady Amanda’s eyes crinkle at the corners. ‘Oh, of course. I’m indebted to Sarek’s discretion in the matter. I’m sure that if word had gotten out about my little assault, there would have been questions about my intentions toward the Vulcan people.’

‘Must’ve been fun, trying to navigate a tricky political situation and your marriage,’ Jim says.

That one might cut too close to the truth.

He catches Lady Amanda looking at him sidelong, while they step under a tall archway that separates the outer gardens from the inner. Here, there’s a doorway leading them into a narrow corridor: open walls on one side, lined with small, stone benches for viewing the smooth carvings that sit within the four walls.

‘As you can see, these are the sheltered gardens, for viewing when sandstorms blow in off the desert.’ Whether Lady Amanda has a question about Jim’s statement or not, she’s hiding it in the remainder of their tour. ‘The covered hall leads to a sunroom, which I’m told is ideal for embroidery. Unfortunately, I’ve never had the fingers for all that detail work.’

‘What does a Vulcan do if they prick their finger on a needle, anyway?’ Jim’s gotta hope their privacy is trustworthy and that Vulcan walls don’t have Vulcan ears. ‘I tried a search to answer the question on my own, but apparently none of the databanks has that information open for public access. Or princely access, apparently.’

‘I suppose they endure it the way most Vulcans endure that which must be weathered,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘If my husband was capable of maintaining his composure despite an eyeful of blinding sash-savas—if any Vulcan is capable of finding logic in the violence of a nearly endless desert—then I can’t imagine the pain would be anything other than bearable.’

‘So it’s only the telepathic stuff that gets to them—that’s what you’re saying.’

‘When it does, I am told it can be severe. I’ve never seen the effects for myself. Of course, I hope I never will.’

Jim whistles, a dry sound with a rasp to let him know he’ll be needing rehydration eventually. Lady Amanda doesn’t comment on it, but she does take him out of the gardens, informing Jim on points of architectural interest or views of particularly stunning scope along their way.

Their brief sojourn in the area adjacent to the central buildings housing the infamous Vulcan Science Academy involves sash-savas tea, too hot at first to make any sense, but when Jim’s finished with his cup, he does feel cooler—if only by comparison.

‘Spock was accepted there, you know,’ Lady Amanda murmurs, leaving the stony complex behind, the sun lower in the sky, enough to force Jim to adjust his parasol grip. ‘Just like his half-brother, Sybok. He studied so much harder than I always thought was necessary—though I doubt he would have listened to my counsel in the matter.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim agrees. ‘He’s a genius.’
It doesn’t come out sounding bitter or resentful. That has to mean something, tickling the back of Jim’s throat like the dusty sand caught on his tongue.

‘So he is.’ Lady Amanda’s expression doesn’t falter or even flicker. That has to mean something, too. Jim wants to ask her if she ever gets a Spock-related tickle in her throat—one that threatens sometimes to full-on choke her—but there’s no diplomatic way of doing that. There’s no human way of doing that, either, not without plenty of embarrassment. Jim needs to ration that carefully for future, inevitable diplomatic incidents. ‘Ah—do you recall the layout of the royal compound we sent you to familiarize yourself with your surroundings?’

‘Might’ve taken me longer than a Vulcan,’ Jim says, ‘but I got it memorized. Public separated from private. Some things are the same no matter what planet you’re on.’

‘A wise assessment,’ Lady Amanda replies, ‘and one to remind yourself of as often as possible.’

It’s sundown by the time Jim’s been given the tour of the royal library and the public infobanks, the debate hall and the reception hall and other austere rooms that blend together in sandy tones with the occasional, unexpected pop of ceremonial pomp, some obsidian statue or burnished curtain standing out as unexpectedly illogical, all things considered.

He still hasn’t worked out a peaceful, diplomatic way of asking Lady Amanda if there’s a primer for her son, some kind of universal translator they’ve neglected to provide him on landing. It’s not good manners on either planet to imply somebody’s impossible to figure out. Sure, another Vulcan might take it as a compliment, but Lady Amanda and Jim are on the same page. He doesn’t want to offend maybe his last friend in the first family of Vulcan.

His hopes darken as the skies do. The idea of another night with Spock like the one he just had is enough to fill him with dread. He’d rather be committed to Bones’ tender mercies, sucking down nutrition packs and listening to them crinkle under his fingers while Bones rants about the dry air and the dry people, making himself blue in the face.

‘My,’ Lady Amanda says. They’ve lowered the parasol along with the setting of the two suns. The sky’s stained with warm pinks and oranges, stained purple at the edges like fingers touched with hypothermia. ‘It’s later than I thought. You’ve soldiered on very well, Prince James. Patient, as I thought.’

‘Maybe I’m just looking for a distraction,’ Jim says. ‘Avoiding my responsibilities before I’ve got any real ones to settle down with, you know. Human stuff.’

It’s a miscalculation, one he realizes only after he’s said it. That’s usually how these things work. Jim never spots the flaw until it’s in his rearview. His reflexes are off on Vulcan, but he can’t act like sticking his foot in his mouth is an ability he spontaneously generated after leaving Earth.

Apparently it’s not something he could leave behind there, either.

‘You must be in dire need if you’re turning to me for company,’ Lady Amanda says, but her eyes are doing that thing again, tightening at the corners like she’s trying not to smile. ‘But then, I found it highly suspect that my son should want to cloister himself within the High Council again today when he might be spending time with his new husband.’

All of a sudden, Jim feels like maybe he was trying too hard to keep a secret that was already obvious to both of them.

He clears his throat, then swallows. As much as he’s not looking forward to stopping in to see
Bones, he’s gonna have to swing by before the evening’s passed. He’s done more walking today than he thought he’d ever be capable of on Vulcan after that hell of a marriage ceremony.

‘Maybe he was trying to get away from all the sweating,’ Jim says.

‘If that is his intention, I’ll have to speak with him about it,’ Lady Amanda replies. ‘That’s hardly very conjugally minded, now is it? No; I can’t imagine he’d be quite so illogical.’

‘Let’s, uh... Maybe head back to the gardens,’ Jim suggests.

Airing out personal matters under the open sky is a better option than doing the same somewhere an aide or a servant might be just around an unexplored corner. Besides, Lady Amanda mentioned the view of the stars at night—and, as Jim settles at last on one of the low stone benches, tilting his chin up to stare at the sky, he can see she was right. There’s nothing in the way, no pollution in the atmosphere, and not a cloud in sight to obscure the unfamiliar constellations.

Well, maybe not totally unfamiliar. Jim broadcast them holographically on his ceiling at night after coming up with the program himself, just to get used to the stars he’d be seeing from Vulcan.

But a program’s a program, obvious in its replication. The real thing is always better. And more complicated. And better because it’s more complicated.

Jim sighs, waiting for one of the shivery evening breezes to remind his skin what comfort almost, sort of, nearly feels like. The sweat’s beginning to evaporate from the back of his neck, at least, as the torches are lit in the outdoor sconces, distant, flickering biers lighting pathways between fine Vulcan houses.

It’s incredible. It’s as far away from Earth as Jim can imagine. There’s nobody lurking behind the nearest statue with a digital camera and a PADD for instant upload. He shouldn’t feel like his collar is choking him—and he definitely shouldn’t mention that symptom to Bones later.

‘I’d talk about it,’ Jim says, only opening one eye, ‘but you’re his mother.’

‘That is true.’

‘And I’m his husband.’ The possibility of turning Lady Amanda against him—of giving her reason to believe that Jim’s against her son—is nearer than ever. ‘Which—I’m not complaining about that. I like him. I really like him.’

‘I can’t tell you it gets any easier,’ Lady Amanda murmurs. ‘And I appreciate your discretion, Prince James. Not to mention your sense of the appropriate.’

‘Now that’s a compliment I’ve never been given before.’

‘Vulcan doesn’t necessarily change people. Sometimes, it brings out hidden qualities.’

‘Like how much a human can sweat before he’s found in the morning pruned up like a raisin? Because the media back home’d have a field day with that one.’

‘We’ll have to make sure you stay properly hydrated, then.’ Lady Amanda rearranges her scarves. ‘I would tell you he likes you, too, Prince James, but that would seem a little too close to cheating. Besides, I’m not the person you need to hear that from, now am I?’

‘That’s not—’
Lady Amanda inclines her head just enough to remind Jim of the Vulcan eyebrow thing.

‘—it’s not that I wouldn’t believe you, anyway,’ Jim corrects himself. ‘I’ll figure something out.’

‘I have no doubt you will,’ Lady Amanda replies. When she stands, she offers Jim her hand. ‘Shall we have something to eat together again, Prince James?’

‘We’d better,’ Jim says. ‘Or my CMO will be arrested for treason after he skins me alive.’

*
The passage of time isn’t as agonizing as Jim imagined it might be at first. Spock meditates—he meditates a lot—and Jim quits waiting up for him. He sleeps in fitful, sweaty bursts, tossing in his sheets and waking alone every time; he visits Bones when his insides start acting up, and he takes more solitary meals with Lady Amanda than he probably should.

Jim can’t feel that useless when he’s being somebody’s company. At first, he assumed she was taking pity on him, but apparently Sarek is exactly as busy as he seems. Jim doesn’t know how she stands it, but every time he starts to bring it up, he can’t help wondering whether it’s his own future he’s staring into.

Then he chickens out of asking, because if this is what it’s gonna be like for him as prince consort of Vulcan, he’d rather not go into it with the advance knowledge.

At least the surprise is something to look forward to.

He knew what he was getting into. At least, he thought he did. Spock was as thick-headed as a Klingon when it came to Jim’s flirtations, but after a while he caught on. He seemed determined to learn, at least. That ferocious curiosity of his kept Jim’s hair standing on end, not to mention a few other parts of him standing at attention.

It wasn’t just his imagination.

There are only a few possibilities as to where things veered off course and Jim doesn’t like any of them.

The one that comes up most often is that Spock isn’t attracted to him after all. Things that work long distance don’t always have the same impact face-to-face. A guy can be into an idea or a concept or a sexy voice but not want that same someone’s slobbery mouth all over his dick.

But that can’t be true, because Jim was pretty careful to give Spock access to more than a few unflattering paparazzi shots just to give him a generous estimate of what he’d be getting himself into. There was never a point where he seemed turned off.

Except that there’s still a difference between pictures and the live, in-person experience. Jim should’ve been sending videos the whole time. Maybe his face does a weird, twitchy thing when he talks.

He keeps those thoughts to himself through the metallic tang of the energy drinks, through the meals with Lady Amanda, and through the confidences not shared with Bones. Jim can’t do anything about the way his chest seizes up when Spock steps into a room, not anymore than he can stop Spock’s eyes from sliding off him once they’ve found him, like he’s realized Jim’s not what he was looking for after all.

After two days, just when Jim’s starting to feel like things can’t get worse, he finds Sarek sharing
breakfast with Lady Amanda in the dining hall.

‘Oh, Prince James,’ Lady Amanda says. ‘We were just talking about you.’

Never good, Jim thinks. He doesn't have to be telepathic to know that.

He doesn’t have to be telepathic to remember how to bow, either, and it’s a small, personal triumph when he isn’t hit with a wave of dizziness at the shift in his position. It’s progress, the kind he can measure. ‘Your highness.’

When he returns to an upright position, he does his best not to search for the similarities to Spock hidden in his father’s face. It’s not like he’d be able to find the key to unlocking Spock’s distance in Sarek’s features; a similar rise of a Vulcan eyebrow won’t explain the complications of disappointment and desire Jim’s been living with.

‘No need for such formality.’ Sarek’s voice is exactly the kind that all dignitaries and leaders of state should possess. The ones that aren’t second sons and supposed to be relatable, that is. It’s strong, powerful, and barren as the desert.

‘That’s...kind of you, your highness.’ Jim suddenly understands why everyone on Vulcan goes around with their hands clasped behind their backs or hidden in the fall of their sleeves—it’s to hide them when they tremble under Sarek’s unflinching gaze. ‘I’ll leave the two of you to your breakfast together.’

‘You are in the habit of taking your meals with my wife,’ Sarek says.

It’s not a question.

‘I explained that on Earth, it isn’t always the case that one has the pleasure of getting along so well with their in-laws, royalty or otherwise,’ Lady Amanda adds. ‘We happen to be lucky in that regard.’

‘And I have explained that what appears to be luck, in this instance, is merely a matter of probability. Given the variables, that probability is not particularly difficult to calculate.’

Okay, Jim thinks. As difficult as it was to communicate with Spock, this is definitely worse.

‘No matter the reason,’ Lady Amanda continues, ‘I remain grateful.’

‘And I wouldn’t want to do anything to compromise that gratitude,’ Jim replies. ‘Which is exactly why I’ll take my leave now, before I wear out my welcome.’

‘That is not a Vulcan concept.’ It’s just Jim’s luck that Sarek isn’t paying attention to his breakfast any longer, the full brunt of his focus resting squarely on Jim. And Sarek thinks luck doesn’t exist. Jim’s living proof that it does. ‘Although my wife has expressed its meaning to me in the past. However, as you were the topic of our discussion before your arrival, that arrival is...fortuitous.’

Fortuitous is a synonym for lucky.

Jim doesn’t push his by bringing that up.

‘The main topic of discussion during the High Council’s meeting yesterday was, apparently, a matter of a potential delegation to be sent on a good-will mission to tour the Romulan System.’ Lady Amanda pats the chair beside her; with no way left to excuse himself, Jim has to step forward and take the offered seat.
‘My son Spock put forward his eligibility for such a delegation,’ Sarek says. ‘Upon consideration and careful review, it became obvious the most logical conclusion would be to acknowledge that eligibility and accept his proposal.’

‘It wouldn’t be a honeymoon—not technically.’ Lady Amanda doesn’t take Jim’s hand—obviously not in front of her husband—but she does lean just a fraction of an inch closer. ‘But it would be just the sign of a unified front that the Federation would like best to put forward, if the two of you were to embark upon such a mission.’

Jim gets what she’s doing for him.

At least, the implication’s there.

A change might do them both some good: shake up their routines; give Spock a chance to open up. Given how the last two days have gone, Jim’s not holding his breath, but the prospect of visiting their Romulan neighbors is still somehow more daunting than spending time with Spock.

It’s the little things that keep Jim going.

And he can’t deny that the chance to escape Vulcan’s atmosphere is pretty tempting. Being back in the controlled environment of a starship, having breathable air and a temperature that doesn’t make him sweat through every last layer after walking from one end of a hallway to the other—it almost sounds like a dream. Jim knows he should tough it out on Vulcan, but the truth is, if he can cut a chunk out of his year-long sentence on the planet, he can’t see a reason why he shouldn’t leap at the chance.

It’s Spock he was getting himself ready for all this time, not an unwelcoming, unforgiving desert planet. It’s not the oppressive atmosphere he came here to impress.

‘Oh,’ Jim says.

There’s a tickle in his throat, but he can’t clear it with Sarek looking straight at him.

‘Does your lack of immediate declination or acceptance indicate that you require more time to process the terms of the provisional mission?’ Sarek asks.

‘No,’ Jim says. ‘I mean—yeah. I want to do it. I’ll do it. That sounds great.’

Very eloquent.

So much for showing off his speechifying skills in front of his in-laws and making a case for how great he’ll be with the Romulans. They’re definitely gonna want to ship him off on a goodwill assignment after that little display. Maybe he can uh and um his way through talks on Romulus and beyond while he’s at it.

The saving grace is, Spock isn’t around to see in advance how much Jim’s gonna let him down. That can be a surprise, along with the apparent Vulcan distaste for blowjobs.

Don’t think about blowjobs in front of Spock’s parents.

Lady Amanda smiles. She doesn’t take Sarek’s hand either, but she looks in his direction, leaning sideways as if she might touch their shoulders together, but veering off at the last minute.

‘You see? I told you—their thoughts are of a similar bent even when they are not together. A suitable match.’
Jim wonders whether Lady Amanda’s ever messed up as bad as he has or if she’s ever wished for a less complicated husband. Probably not. He might be projecting, but he’s spent enough time with his mother-in-law that it’s safe to assume he knows her, if not his husband.

Probably because he’s spent more time with her than he has with his husband.

That thought alone is enough to make him want to drown himself in the porridge-looking stuff in Sarek’s bowl. He refrains. As always, his proudest moments are the ones only he gets to know about.

‘A suitable match,’ Jim agrees, remembering too late the Vulcan disapproval of unnecessary repetition. ‘I’ll go talk things over with my suitable match right now, then, and leave the two of you to your breakfast.’

‘Of course, Prince James.’ Lady Amanda nods with more warmth than Sarek. Jim stands, doesn’t trip over his own feet, and successfully pulls off a second bow, all without passing out.

He’s getting acclimatized to Vulcan. Spending time off-planet is going to jack that up, undo all the progress he’s made. That makes another challenge he’s courting. Maybe if he’s fainting and Spock has to catch him all the time, he might squeeze some pity out of him at last.

It’s a long shot, but if Spock’s back in his chambers and isn’t expecting Jim to turn up, he might be able to catch him off-guard, or at least on whatever kind of guard he keeps when he thinks he’s alone. If Jim had his PADD, he’d send Spock a message, like old times. Hey, Spock. What are you wearing?

As frustrating as the long-distance stuff was, at least it was understandably frustrating.

Jim tugs at the hem of his shirt, letting air pass between the cotton and his skin. It’s not the coolest of breezes, but it’s enough to tickle the sweat on his belly. Then, he enters the security clearance code and his fingerprints at the door and steps inside.

At first glance, it looks like the room’s empty, but that’s only because Jim’s looking in the wrong places. It’s not empty at all; Spock’s not by the desk or the bed or heading in to meditate but standing by the window, changing out of his council robes and into the sweater Jim remembers running his fingers against—and under.

Jim watches, throat tight, chest tighter, as Spock’s head disappears into the fabric, his bare back and the furrow of his spine facing the door, muscles tightening under the fall of graceful shadows. His fingertips appear past the hems of his sleeves and Jim manages to swallow, a noise loud enough that Spock turns to look straight at him once the sweater’s on.

‘Hey,’ Jim says.

Spock nods.

‘I was just...’ Jim reminds himself this is where he lives—for the time being—and he has as much right to be here staring at Spock while he’s half naked as Spock has a right to be half naked and ignoring Jim at the same time. ‘Wanted to talk to you, actually. About this Romulan good-will mission we’re going on.’

There are a few traces of Sarek in Spock when his eyebrow raises and not enough of Lady Amanda for Jim to feel remotely comfortable. ‘We?’ he asks.

It occurs to Jim that this might’ve been Spock’s play at putting distance between them, his chance
to get away. That lump in his throat is only getting bigger. There’s no way that’s happening. ‘A united front,’ Jim says. ‘We’re married now. Husband and husband. And I don’t know the specifics of the ceremony we went through in the desert, but if you go off without me, it’s gonna look pretty bad to anyone following along back home.’

‘I had not volunteered you to accompany me as I would not presume to know what your choice in the matter would be.’ Spock makes it all sound so reasonable. ‘I take it my mother must have informed you, after Sarek informed her of my departure.’

‘Our departure,’ Jim says.

‘Neither of us has departed yet,’ Spock says. His version of a concession, no doubt.

‘Right.’

Jim can acknowledge that. Working in the name of peace is what he needs to set his mind toward. He read somewhere that it’s impossible to go into negotiations with an ego. Jim always figured it’d be impossible to strip him of his, but if he wants to make this work with Spock, then he’s willing to strip himself of a whole lot more than that.

He only wishes that was a solution to this particular problem.

‘…But when there is a departure, we’re gonna be going together. You and me, winning over the Romulans. Shaking hands and kissing babies. Well, I guess you wouldn’t want to do either of those things. That’s human politics. I don’t know much about how you do things in the Alpha Quadrant, but I think I can handle a goodwill mission.’

Spock’s shoulders hitch upward, a minute gesture that Jim only spots because he’s watched him so closely. They lower in the same breath.

‘I have observed that you are given to speaking in more decisive terms when you are convinced of your suitability for certain positions.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim says. ‘But I’ve been given reason to believe my confidence in certain positions might’ve been a little misplaced.’

There’s no immediate reply. Spock doesn’t leap to defend himself or to correct Jim’s assumptions. Instead, he blinks like he can’t understand the source of the outburst—or worse, like he doesn’t recognize it as an outburst at all.

Jim’s starting to rethink some of the enthusiasm he poured into chasing after the most difficult thing he could set his sights on. He wrestled this life away from Sam, but at what cost?

Now’s probably not the time to start feeling sorry for himself. Romulans can smell self-pity a mile away—and it still has to be better than constantly sweating through his clothes.

‘You are agitated.’

A normal person would sit on the bed or at least offer Jim a seat. But Spock’s more comfortable standing; it probably doesn’t even occur to him that Jim might not feel the same way.

Apparently there are a few things that haven’t occurred to Spock. Like how Jim might be feeling on edge after their fooling around got cut voluntarily short. If he was thinking about it, he would’ve followed up on Jim’s lead. Instead, he’s just ignoring it.
Not ignoring Jim—which would’ve made it easier to get angry—but the situation altogether.

It’s enough to make a guy feel like he’s losing his mind.

Desert hallucinations. Are those a thing?

‘You know how it is.’ Jim shrugs, one shoulder coming up slower than the other. ‘Everyone gets nervous when they travel.’

‘Your use of the word ‘everyone’ is a generalization that requires narrower specifications. Perhaps you refer to all humans—yet that, too, cannot be unequivocally true.’

Something pinches Jim’s temple. It could be a Spock-related twitch or tic. At the same time, the frustrating conversation he’s been starved for all this time—the conversation only Spock can provide—is finally his again. This is what he was missing. ‘Okay, Spock. Okay. It was a generalization.’ Jim sits on the edge of the bed without being invited, shoving back and kicking up his feet. Spock watches him with that cool outsider’s gaze. ‘It’s our first mission together. Maybe I’m just looking forward to it. It’s not like I think it’s going to be easy.’

‘You have already expressed in previous communications your preference for a presented challenge,’ Spock says.

Jim has to look away. He chooses the ceiling, then the view out the window, the same desert mountains he’s stared at for sleepless hours and seen again, a distorted reflection of the truth, in troubled sleep. ‘Don’t worry, Spock. It’s not like I think you chose to put your name into the mix for my sake or anything.’

‘I submitted my candidacy because it was logical.’

‘Sure. Logical. Well, it’s only logical for me to come along for the ride.’

Spock nods at that.

‘Not to mention,’ Jim continues, ‘it’d be pretty inappropriate for newlyweds to have to split up so soon after they get married.’

‘Should our duties require our physical separation, I had assumed we would continue our communications as we operated prior to our meeting.’

Of course. Spock wants to put a screen between them again.

Jim can give him that.

He rolls over, reaching for the PADD he left on the bedside table, listening to Vulcan pronunciation before finally passing out in a dif-tor heh smusma daze last night. The last message from Spock is still there, staring up at him like an accusation. Remember when things were still the promise of touching each other and not the truth of blowing your shot?

Jim flops back against the pillows while Spock observes him with a clinical curiosity.

*Hey*, Jim writes.

On Spock’s desk, his PADD flashes.

‘Jim,’ Spock says, ‘as we are more than capable of conversing traditionally—’
‘I don’t know—it seemed to me like you were missing the old days.’ Jim wiggles the PADD, letting some of his restless energy out however he can. ‘Figured I’d indulge you. Since we are husbands.’

‘It was not my intent to exhibit typical human signs of nostalgia.’

*Pick up your PADD*, Jim types.

Spock’s PADD flashes again.

‘Meanwhile, you can indulge me,’ Jim says, and nods toward Spock’s desk.

Jim can practically hear the rusty hinges grinding, like clenched molars in the night, as Spock accepts the necessity of playing along despite what logic dictates. He lifts his PADD in both hands, the light from the screen playing across his face.

Jim always wanted to know what he looked like in these moments. Turns out it’s the same as he always looks, even though there were things Spock wrote, things he recorded, that used to make Jim melt.

*Jim, I need not inform you that this is highly unusual.*

*Sure. You need not. How are you, Spock?*

Spock looks up from his screen. ‘Jim, you are capable of seeing for yourself—’

*You’re being stubborn, Spock. Stubborn’s a human trait.*

Spock’s jaw locks up in the reflected glow of the PADD. The sight shouldn’t give Jim as much satisfaction as it does, but this is what he’s been reduced to: scrabbling for any kind of sign that he’s able to reach his own husband, even if it is through a screen.

Because he sure as hell hasn’t done a good job of reaching him man to man.

Jim’s PADD flashes. *I cannot participate in this.*

Jim scoffs, letting Spock hear it. They’ve already gotten intimate, so now they’re about to get real intimate. Let Spock see what it was like for Jim on the other side of the screen all those months.

*You’re already participating, Spock.*

Spock lifts his head to look at Jim. This time, Jim keeps his face down, concentrating on the screen in front of him. He said it himself: stubbornness is a human trait. Who better to demonstrate that than the human-est of all the humanoids currently on Vulcan?

*Very well, Jim. I am well. Today, the Vulcan High Council suggested that, as prince of the first family of Vulcan, it would be seen as a great gesture if I were to accompany the goodwill tour of the Alpha Quadrant. I could find no fault with their assessment and thus I agreed to their terms.*

*Uh huh*, Jim types. *Romulans are crazy.*

Spock makes a noise in the back of his throat, small and potentially exasperated. He doesn’t look up at Jim this time, but rather sits back against the desk, stretching his long legs out ahead of him.

*You claim you wish to join me and yet you employ dialogue which I know to be offensive. This is a contradiction in terms.*
Jim kicks back on Spock’s bed, wiggling his shoulders against all those soft pillows he can’t possibly use or enjoy. He wouldn’t be so stiff all the time if he did.

*I’m a contradictory person.*

*That much is evident.*

Jim grins, a flash of a smile he can’t quite hide under the edge of his PADD. He’s not sure what he thinks he’s got to smile about. By all means this should feel like a setback, the final phaser-shot on a lost cause: they’re officially going backwards in their relationship, devolving instead of evolving.

But Jim can’t be anything but tickled that Spock’s playing along with him. That has to mean something.

He hasn’t felt this close to him since blowjobus interruptus. And if *that’s* not something that leaves him feeling messed up, then he’s officially a lost cause.

*Sure. I’m the contradictory one. You ever hear of the popular human phrase ‘takes one to know one’?*

*You had not included it in your dictionary of colloquialisms.*

*I should’ve.*

*It would seem your implications are that I am equally contradictory.*

*Maybe. Just not about the Romulans.* Jim lifts his eyes over the edge of his PADD, staring at Spock from across the room. It’s only a single chamber; the distance is negligible, barely more than a fraction of a hiccup compared to the lightyears Jim traveled from Earth to Vulcan. But it’s all relative—and it seems as insurmountable as if they were in separate bedrooms on separate worlds at separate hours.

Jim bites his bottom lip. Some people find that move attractive but Spock can’t even see it from this angle.

*About what have I proven contradictory, Jim?*

*Come on, Spock. Use that huge, amazing, superior brain of yours. I bet you can figure it out.*

For the first time—a blink and you’ll miss it moment—Jim sees Spock hesitate, a pause just obvious enough that the triumph should be less bitter than it is. Congratulations, James Tiberius Kirk. Managing to make your own husband stop to think about you for more than a cursory acknowledgement of your presence—what a grand achievement.

*You yourself have given voice to matters of perspective. What may appear self-evident to you is not necessarily the same to me.*

*Sure. That makes sense.* Jim bites down harder on his bottom lip, a long pause that’d torture anybody else. Spock simply waits, as patient as a Vulcan. Also as hot as Vulcan. Jim would be able to formulate his argument better on any other planet but this one. *So let’s put it into diplomatic terms. You like those, right? You ever feel like you’re getting somewhere with, I don’t know, the Tellarites, and then suddenly, in the middle of talks, all that progress you made, they just shut down and walk out and don’t tell you why?*

*Tellarites are notoriously capricious.*

You’re the Tellarites, Spock. In this metaphor.

The analogy is hardly an accurate one.


Spock’s pause is torture for Jim. He doesn’t have that Vulcan stoicism to weather it the same way.

If this is a parallel with which you have been experiencing frustration, Jim, you had only to broach
the matter with me.

You didn’t exactly make it easy for me, Spock. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of
times I’ve had a chance to see you alone the past two days, much less speak to you. Jim waits for
Spock to read that one, then raises one hand. Three fingers. Spock won’t be able to take issue with
his calculations because Jim was being overly generous. Rounding up.

There were matters of state; it was my duty to attend them.

I waited up for you, Spock.

I had not requested that you make that sacrifice.

It’s not a sacrifice. It’s not supposed to be a sacrifice. Jim rakes his fingers through his hair. It
shouldn’t come as any surprise that he’s getting nowhere.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

Uh-uh. We’re doing this.

‘Jim, you claim a desire for closer communication, and yet you persist in pursuing a method that
places considerable distance between us.’

Sucks when you don’t understand where someone’s coming from and it’s impossible to get them to
explain themselves, right?

Jim’s pushing it now, but he’s never been satisfied with stopping at just enough. He always has to
cross the line, go one step further than strictly necessary. He thought it was a trait that’d help him
overcome Spock’s reticence. He’s still not entirely convinced he was wrong, although Spock
seems bent on persuading him.

He can’t be doing it on purpose, but knowing that doesn’t make it better.

Spock shifts his index finger along the edge of his PADD. It’s the Vulcan version of a fidget. Jim
should feel all warm and tingly knowing he’s gotten under Spock’s skin like that, but between
Spock running away with Jim’s head between his legs and his lukewarm reception to the
announcement of the little trip they’ll be taking together, Jim’s not in a position to be proud of
much.

You are being deliberately obtuse.

Who says it’s deliberate?
I have inferred as much based on past observation of your demonstrable intuition and forethought.

Only Spock would think to drop a compliment like that smack in the middle of an argument. Maybe he’s so Vulcan he doesn’t realize that they’re arguing. Or maybe that has something to do with the fact that Jim hasn’t made up his mind whether they’re reconciling or not.

Choosing to make it up to me by engaging in a little sweet-talking, huh?

My speech cannot be characterized as saccharine or possessed of any other taste. In addition, it cannot be said that we are talking, as you have insisted we abide by the parameters of text-based communications.

It’s an expression, Spock.

That is an explanation you present with increasing frequency.

I can’t help it if it’s true.

It is a wonder humans learn to communicate with one another at all, if so many of their phrasings have no explanation other than simple tradition.

Jim shifts, covering a yawn with the PADD in his hand.

Well, we’re pretty wonderful as a race.

You are speaking facetiously.

Careful, Spock—you’re on your way to a diplomatic incident yourself there.

Spock crosses his legs at the ankle, then straightens himself out again, like he didn’t mean to get so relaxed. Jim has to wonder if it’s his presence that has him on edge or if this is what Spock’s always like when he’s alone.

It was not my intent to insult.

It sure came across as one.

It was never my intent to insult.

I know Surak’s big on intent, Spock, but intent’s not all that matters. Not all the time.

Even when it is clearly stated and uncompromisingly expressed, providing the necessary clarification to elucidate matters and eliminate confusion?

Even then. Jim steals another glance. He shouldn’t have to do that with his own husband, but here he is. Spock’s profile is handsome, obscure; his fingers are slim on the frame of his PADD. Jim was sitting in his lap three days ago. Jim turned him on that night—there were certain, inarguable indicators that it really happened. He swallows, his throat like a desert. That must make his ribcage the mountains, and his heart a mutinous le-matya lurking in the valleys below.

Though it was never my intent to insult, I have insulted you. You have taken personal offense not only at my suggestion that humanity as a race is ‘pretty wonderful’ but also at my actions when you were in my bed.

Jim’s glad for the PADD between them for once. This way, Spock won’t see his cheeks flushing with a combination of frustration, misery, and embarrassment. No kidding. See? I told you that
you’d figure it out if you thought it through.

I had attempted to give you your ‘space’ as suggested in the various human relationship guides I consulted, having consulted them to determine what the best course of action would be when one has been unable to achieve sexual release with a spouse.

Jim almost drops the PADD. His mouth’s definitely hanging open. What the paps wouldn’t give to have a picture of him like this. That’s one small point in Vulcan’s favor. Jim can be baffled by his husband without seeing it in the next hour’s headlines. Seriously, Spock?

I am not joking. I have not yet grasped the subtleties involved in the application of human humor.

You didn’t exactly look like somebody unable to achieve sexual release back then. Just saying. I had firsthand evidence.

You have misunderstood the situation.

Care to enlighten me, or should we spend the entire Romulan trip not talking to each other?

That would not be preferable.

Jim waits for more to come. It doesn’t. ‘Spock. Come on.’

Spock lifts his head. ‘Are we speaking at last, Jim?’

‘Shit.’ No. We’re not. Something tells me you’re not gonna put this into words anyway. Are you telling me I didn’t do anything wrong back then?

You were not the one whose actions that night could be considered erroneous.

Well up until you practically left burn marks in the floor getting the hell away from me I didn’t think the word ‘erroneous’ even once!!!

It was my understanding that I should not force my presence or conversation upon you while you were yet disappointed by my inability to participate.

Jim chokes back a groan. SPOCK. WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED

I could not, Jim. There is no need to over-use capitalization for the sake of emphasis. However, if it is representing anger, I cannot instruct you how to feel.

Not anger. F R U S T R A T I O N ! ! ! !

As your typing has now become erratic, would it not be prudent to shift the means of our communication to speech?

you’re avoiding the question.

Jim doesn’t have to write in caps. He can change the whole thing around if he has to, get small instead. He’s not about to do it for Spock’s satisfaction but he’s not above messing around with him either. It’s not a very charitable way to go about things.

Fortunately, he never listed that among any of his other prominent assets.

Spock doesn’t move. The simple act of doing nothing has never been quite so infuriating on its own.
Jim promised himself he wouldn’t hold his breath over anything Spock-related since their last encounter, and here he is breaking his own word. At least he’s not looking at him.

Nothing happened.

are you for real spock

Is your lack of proper capitalization an overreaction to my earlier comment on your erratic typing?

you think i’m that petty wait no don’t answer that answer my first question if you’re actually gonna answer any of my questions at any point

Jim’s all too aware that he’s treading on thin ice. He’s in no position to make demands, that’s for sure. It’s not like he can threaten to throw Spock out of his own room if he fails to comply. And if he leaves, then he’s going to be shooting all his hard work in the foot—the foot he finally got in the door.

Jim might not be discerning about his phaser fire but he likes to pretend he’s grown out of self-sabotage.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

Jim taps the PADD screen, though this time it’s a near thing that keeps him from glancing up—responding to Spock’s question. Spock returns to his typing after the briefest hint of a reaction; with anyone else, they’d be asking Jim to stop being a pain in the ass.

Nothing happened, Jim, because I could not allow anything to happen.

That’s more like it, although Jim can’t say it’s the answer he was looking for.

You’re gonna have to elaborate on that one for me, Spock.

In the beginning of our correspondence, you inquired after my intentions toward the Vulcan lifestyle. While I informed you that I did not intend to undergo the Rite of Kolinahr, I have nonetheless committed myself to embracing the ideals which any Vulcan would hold in high regard. Therefore, I could not allow such a release of emotions as the one which you sought to provoke in me.

‘Jesus, Spock.’

Jim bites his lip, but he can’t pull the words out of the dry air and swallow them back into his mouth.

‘I had already made those intentions of mine clear to you. I did not realize I would need to refer you to our correspondence once again.’

‘Yeah, well, unlike some people, I don’t have everything memorized.’ Jim sucks in a breath, heart hammering. ‘We talked about the— I mean, you never said you weren’t gonna—’

‘I could not postulate. I had no examples to consult. I had intended to wait until such a time as evidence was provided. I found that it proved, in the moment, impracticable,’ Spock says. He stares out the window instead of looking at Jim; it wouldn’t be so bad if Jim could wager a guess at what, exactly, Spock sees out there. It’s bound to be something different from what Jim sees when he stares at the desert in the morning, getting his eyes used to all that sunlight all over again. If he
could just figure it out—if Spock could just show him a damn hint, take his hand, give him a break—but it’s not gonna happen. Even if it did, it wouldn’t be the same as Jim understanding on his own. ‘I could not. If you find the arrangements as they are untenable—’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘—I do not intend to have you go without that which is natural to you.’ Spock pauses; the next word doesn’t come easily, not that Jim enjoys seeing him struggle. Not like this. ‘Pleasurable to you, even. I would not deny you that. The time that we spent together when you were in the bath was not unpleasant for me. Likewise, you made your position on that experience obvious.’

‘That’s not how it’s supposed to work, Spock,’ Jim says. ‘Not that I’ve been married before or anything, but you can’t just have a thing be one-sided like that.’ Can they? Jim’s not as sure as he should be, definitely not sure enough to make the case to Spock and have him buy it.

‘As I have already said, if you find the arrangements—’

‘What’ll happen then, Spock? We get a Vulcan divorce? That’s what’s untenable.’

‘Then we must endeavor to reconcile our differences,’ Spock replies.

Jim snorts. ‘Diplomatically, right? Like real diplomats.’

‘I am sorry, Jim.’ Spock’s still staring at a distant, dusty outcropping of rocks. ‘Do not scoff at diplomacy as a whole in response to a failure of mine.’

‘I didn’t say you’d failed, either,’ Jim mutters. Suddenly he’s arguing for Spock instead of with him—or arguing with Spock on behalf of the Spock that doesn’t seem to get a voice in any argument Spock’s ever had before. ‘You weren’t comfortable. That’s what you’re saying. You couldn’t— It wasn’t what you felt comfortable with.’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘In my manner of speaking?’ Spock nods stiffly. ‘Okay. Okay, that’s...something. I can— We can work with that.’

Spock turns at last, meeting Jim’s eyes. There’s something sad about them—not that Spock would appreciate the description—and just like that, Jim’s anger twists in his gut to something else. Something sadder, winded, even a little lost, but extra determined for it. If that’s a Vulcan debate trick, then Jim has to give up on any chance of coming out on top in the future. ‘Are you certain of that, Jim?’

‘No.’ Stupid Vulcan honesty. ‘I’m not. But it’s not like we— Hey, Spock, nothing’s certain.’

Spock bristles. ‘There are scientific theorems—’

‘Screw ‘em,’ Jim says.

‘One does not simply dismiss the collected works of prominent—’

‘Screw science,’ Jim says. He draws out the syllables, mouthing the words big enough that Spock can see them while leaning toward him on the bed, letting the PADD slide between his stomach and his knees.

Spock’s eyebrow goes up. It’s familiar, as friendly as a wave from someone with his strict Vulcan
principles.

‘Are you being deliberately provocative in an attempt to stimulate further dialogue?’

Jim wiggles his own eyebrows, buoyed by a levity he doesn’t actually feel. He’s not sure what he just agreed to. It wasn’t a sexless marriage—if it was just that, then they’d have a lot more to discuss, but at least Jim would understand it better.

Spock’s unexpected insistence that they should have some kind of weird, one-sided relationship is way more offensive than not having one at all. Jim doesn’t want to be accommodated.

He doesn’t want to be the kind of exception someone makes because they have to.

‘I don’t know, Spock,’ Jim says. ‘At least I’d be stimulating something.’

Spock sets his PADD on the desk behind him. He doesn’t cross his arms; instead, he rests his hand on either side of his hips where he’s braced against the desk.

‘You are displeased.’

‘I’m not thrilled,’ Jim admits. ‘But I’m not bailing out, either.’

He’s still here. He doesn’t know whether that’s something Spock noticed for himself or if it’s something that needed pointing out, but either way it’s a statement in its own right. Jim comes from a long line of people who storm out when they feel like they aren’t getting their due.

That and people like Sam, who cut and ran at the first sight of responsibility.

Jim’s his own man. And, like Bones keeps reminding him, he asked for this.

He made his bed and now he has to lie in it.

Right now he’s lying in Spock’s bed.

It’s a very confusing metaphor.

‘I have a suggestion,’ Spock says. Then he waits, like he’s holding out for Jim to give him permission to continue.

‘Shoot, Spock.’

‘I propose that we continue to share one another’s company during this period of uncertainty.’

‘Is that your way of asking me to stay the night with you? ’Cause it could use some work.’

Jim takes his boots off the bed, brushing the stray grains of sand off Spock’s woven blankets. Now that there’s room for more in his head than his own anger, he’s thinking he might’ve done some disagreeable things himself.

It’s more confusing than he thought it could be—and he prepared himself for the worst. At least, he thought he did. None of those worst-case scenarios ever saw him butting heads with this particular problem, with a husband who didn’t want to feel anything.

They shared plenty. They should be able to share everything. Jim’s head hurts; his back hurts more. His heart doesn’t, but only because he doesn’t have the resources to spare. And it’s not like he can accept a backrub when there’s nothing he can give in return, when the scales are
unbalanced, when he feels like he has to be keeping track.

Equality. Understanding. Spock wants him around—but Spock doesn’t want him too close. Jim can’t live at arm’s length and he can’t live with the idea of taking without giving. Sooner or later—and most likely sooner—it’ll come to a boiling point.

‘A united front,’ Jim says finally, after the silence has gone on for too long. ‘That’s what you’re asking for, huh? Because anything else would look bad in front of the Romulans. Or because you miss sleeping in your own bed after I...took over it without even asking.’

‘Jim,’ Spock replies.

Jim huffs, wishing the sound it made wasn’t so close to one of Bones’ grunts. ‘Yeah?’

‘You did not have to ask.’

There it is. Something inexplicably, unequivocally romantic, a kind of tenderness that Jim would pull close against his chest and hold all night if he could. ‘Apparently I did,’ Jim says. ‘Just...not about the bed thing.’

He puts his socked feet up on the mattress, an arm behind his head. Spock’s there across the room, stiff in all the wrong ways. It’s too early in the day to feel this tired.

‘Fine, Spock. We’ll work on it. When we’re not working on the Romulans.’ He throws one leg over the other. ‘So what’ve we got on our schedules for this goodwill mission to the Alpha Quadrant, anyway?’

*
As it turns out—not as much of a surprise for Spock as it is a point of interest for Jim—personal problems don’t seem nearly as important in the face of potentially offending an important Romulan. For the next forty-eight hours, Jim’s too busy for self-pity or self-reflection, suffering through the worst of Bones’ pre-trip inoculations and their side effects while brushing up on Romulan politics, history, and social practices. By the time his fingertips stop tingling and his fever’s down and he stops blacking out, he’s got the politics and history down.

The social practices may take a little extra time.

He gets one more meal with Lady Amanda, now that he doesn’t look like a walking specimen, a case file of dangerous medical reactions trotted out to a new round of cadets in Starfleet Academy. ‘I would’ve come sooner, but I’m pretty sure you would’ve lost your appetite after one look at me,’ Jim tells her, settling down to one of her home-made sandwiches.

‘Was it really that bad?’ Lady Amanda asks, the familiar sparkle in her eye reminding Jim how much he missed it. An oasis in the desert.

Jim bites hungrily into his sandwich, remembering to chew and swallow before he replies. ‘Uh-uh. It was definitely worse. Just ask Bones. I’m sure he’d love to tell you all about it. ...On second thought, don’t ask Bones.’

‘Your Doctor McCoy is to be commended,’ Lady Amanda says.

‘Don’t let him hear you say that,’ Jim replies. ‘It'll go to his head. Very dangerous.’

‘Well, we wouldn’t want to alter the shape of such a fine head.’

Lady Amanda smiles with her mouth this time, letting Jim see it. He can’t tell if that’s for his benefit or if it’s something he’s brought out in her, something that’ll earn her a few impassive looks of Vulcan disapproval. He shouldn’t cherish the idea of being a bad influence on Spock’s mother, but from what he’s seen, there’s no one on Vulcan who couldn’t use an injection of emotional release.

That’s a touchy subject with him these days. It’s almost lucky that Jim’s been out of his head with vaccine after-effects; it's given him less of a chance to brood on the topic he and Spock are both avoiding.

‘Uh oh,’ Jim says. ‘Don’t tell me you’re a fan.’

‘He does lend a certain color to the daily proceedings around here,’ Lady Amanda says. ‘I imagine he’ll be part of the retinue you plan to take on your way to Romulus?’

‘If it were up to me, there wouldn’t be any retinue,’ Jim replies.
That’s closer to a real honeymoon: just him and Spock and lightyears of space all around them. But there’s the crew to fly the ship, and delegates to continue drilling them on their diplomatic training on-board, handlers to whisk Spock and Jim from one engagement to the next, a personal chef to program specialized royal favorites into the replicator. By the time he’s taken all the necessities into account, what’s one ornery doctor?

Besides, it’d hurt Bones’ feelings if Jim relied on some other doctor to keep him fighting fit out in the recesses of space.

‘I do hope this was a...timely suggestion.’ Lady Amanda takes a sip of her sash-savas tea, the cup held small, delicate, in the palm of her hand. ‘I wouldn’t want to disturb you as you’re only just settling into the routine of things here on Vulcan. And I know how a young relationship requires a certain amount of attention to flourish...’

‘Hey, no.’ Jim waves a hand. He’s enjoying full use of his motor control, the ability to make aimless gestures without being brought up short by thefailings of his own body under a too-thin atmosphere and fever in his blood. ‘Don’t worry about it. I’m ready to get out there, fight the good fight. Or I guess talk the good talk. I think it might do Spock some good to have something to besides hide at the High Council all day.’

‘You know, Prince James,’ Lady Amanda replies, ‘that’s almost exactly what I said when I heard about it all.’

‘Let’s hope we’re both right, then.’

‘Human minds think alike,’ Lady Amanda agrees.

Jim leaves her not so much in high spirits as in jangling ones; there’s a spring in his step, except it’s the kind of directionless energy that isn’t looking forward to any one thing in particular but rather a more general, overwhelming abundance of things.

‘Can’t believe this is the kind of deep space madness I signed myself up for,’ Bones says, starting in on Jim the second he walks through the door. Jim notes a small, personal bag on the floor—the side of Bones that travels light—and a massive medical kit on the table beside it, practically overflowing with supplies that make Jim’s tongue swell just by looking at them. He swipes the backs of his teeth and swallows, without swollen tonsils to obstruct the process, while he still can.

‘Come on, Bones.’ Jim claps him on the shoulder, almost surprised when there’s no static shock from his anxious touch alone. ‘You know if it wasn’t this, you’d be a doctor-without-borders somewhere, only Chapel between you and the rioting locals.’

‘Who says they’d be rioting? They’d be thanking their local deities that someone with my expertise was sent to save them all.’ Bones guides Jim over to help him with the fastenings on the kit; when Jim moves to sit on the top to get the damn thing shut it’s worth it for the near-explosion on Bones’ face. ‘Are you out of your royal mind? There’s delicate equipment in there that won’t be too concerned about whether or not it’s a princely ass that’s crushing them to smithereens!’

It’s the little things that remind Jim he actually enjoys space travel.

It’s the big things that no amount of space travel can keep him away from.

Spock’s waiting at the transport shuttle—manned by Vulcans, staffed by Vulcans, surrounded by Vulcans. Jim’s got a sweater with a hooded cowl to cover his round ears and his blonde hair but there’s not much that can be done about the color of his eyes, or the way his fingers fumble on the
The ta’al.

Jim keeps to himself, every inch the consort somebody—cough, Gary Mitchell, cough—said he was gonna be. Like another over-stuffed suitcase, mumbling his way through farewells, taking comfort in the knowledge that Bones is sweating it out with him. Better to sweat together than to sweat alone.

There’s plenty different between an Earth envoy departing and a Vulcan one. Jim thinks he catches Lady Amanda by Sarek’s side lifting a gloved hand in an old-fashioned, human wave, but other than that, they actually leave on time, right as dusk begins to overtake the desert. The shuttle docks in the hangar; Jim watches from the observation deck as Vulcan becomes nothing but an angry red spot in the distance. The air on the ship is filtered, cool, better suited to Vulcan needs than human, but still better for human needs than Vulcan.

Jim breathes easy for the first time since leaving Vulcan. It’s such a relief he refuses to tell himself he’s undoing months of hard work.

All that time in the pressurization chambers doesn’t count unless he can hold his marriage together, anyway. Spock’s what matters, not Jim’s ability to breathe his impossible atmosphere.

He takes himself on a tour of the habitat level of the ship, giving his provisional escort the slip and taking a turn onto the nearest turbolift the first chance he gets. He doesn’t dare hit up the bridge, but he explores the cargo bay and engineering, skulking through the busy guts of the ship while the Vulcan workers give him the stinkeye.

They’re all too Vulcan to say anything, which is the first time Jim’s been able to appreciate that particular trait. He keeps his hood up, his chin down. Even if he doesn’t have to worry about the media reporting on more Reckless Royal behavior out here in the Alpha Quadrant, Jim can’t be sure of what’ll be waiting for them on their stops around the galaxy.

It’s entirely possible that not all planets will embrace the Vulcan moratorium on celebrity news media.

Their situation’s still chiefly a political one. The Federation might have reason to keep everyone informed of their progress, so Jim had better get used to watching himself again.

That shouldn’t be a problem. All he has to do is pretend Spock’s over his shoulder, watching with that disapproving air of his.

Despite all the time Jim spends with his mind on his elusive husband, thinking about him doesn’t conjure him out of the depths. By the time he reaches the medical bay—ripe with the sounds of Bones complaining about the sparseness of the accommodations, the Vulcan language labels on everything, and anything else that’s unlucky enough to be seen by him—Jim’s starting to wonder whether he’s going to have to hack the security lock on Spock’s door just to catch a glimpse of him once during the voyage.

So Jim’s thinking about Spock, Spock’s probably not thinking about Jim—but that doesn’t mean nobody’s thinking about him.

His security team’s a mix of sour-faced Vulcans and harried-looking humans; Jim meets them all in a rush when he gets off the turbolift to head for his quarters. There they are: descending on him
at once like they’ve decided the best thing for Jim’s safety is to bundle him up and stuff him in an airlock

‘Hi there’ Jim says. ‘Warm welcome, guys. Uh, at ease.’

‘You were not within your quarters.’ A Vulcan woman with Spock’s exact haircut makes her way to the forefront. ‘It is unwise to evade our surveillance.’

‘I wasn’t evading,’ Jim replies. You can always catch a Vulcan on a technicality, and it’s not evasion that was on Jim’s mind. ‘I was exploring. Is that, uh, not in the Vulcan marriage contract? No exploring for human husbands?’

The Vulcan blinks. She doesn’t have Spock’s sense of humor—something Jim didn’t even think existed until he realized what the alternative was. ‘There is no contract of the sort to which you have alluded—a fact of which you should already be aware.’

‘Yeah, that was a...’ Jim waves his hand before he remembers all the tricky Vulcan hand stuff that might mean bringing attention to his fingers is rude, lewd, or at least easily misconstrued. The good news is, he’s primed and ready to be the picture of good Romulan behavior. ‘Never mind. I’m here now. You’ve got me. And for the record, if I did want to evade your surveillance, you wouldn’t. Have me, I mean.’ He stuffs his hands into the pockets on his sweater. ‘So, now that you do, what can I do for you?’

If Jim knows his Vulcans, then this one’s about to tell him it’s not what he can do for them but what they’re supposed to do for him that’s in question.

Only she doesn’t get the chance. The general alarm sounds an instant before she opens her mouth to continue wearing Jim down to the bone with logic.

‘I’m no expert, but I’m pretty sure that’s not supposed to be happening,’ Jim says, glancing up toward the nearest flashing light. He studied this protocol back when Gary was doing a course in general security and Jim didn’t have much to do but educate himself—one of the few things he’s done with practical foresight.

Whatever he knows, his aides know it better. They surround him like a single unit, forming a living shield Jim can’t stop them from settling into, immediately moving him toward an unknown, presumably safer, destination. According to Jim’s self-conducted studies, that destination is likely a safety zone or an emergency evacuation pod, depending on what trouble the bridge is seeing.

‘This way, Prince James Tiberius Kirk,’ the Vulcan woman tells him, hurrying him back onto the turbolift. The door in front of them slides shut and they ascend.

Three seconds in and the entire thing rocks, lights flickering off, then on, then off for longer—then back on, to a dimmer setting this time. The blaring of the alarm intensifies, none of it feeling real. Jim wonders who Bones is grabbing by the front of their uniform and cursing at. He wonders when the fight-or-flight instinct is going to kick in. And, above all that, a part of all that, he wonders about Spock, and where he is, and if it’d seem more normal if Jim was looking at him. Unruffled; undisturbed; unaffected.

The turbolift doors shudder open; that answers Jim’s last question. Spock is on the other side with his own efficient retinue of guards, which open their numbers to let Jim in, to stand by Spock’s side.

Jim thinks about saying hey, but it’s not the time for that. He thinks about taking Spock’s hand, but
there are too many Vulcans around. Besides, they’re already moving, heading toward—yeah, those’d be the evac pods.

Could be this alert is more serious than Jim thought.

‘Don’t suppose there’s a chance we’re all overreacting to, I don’t know, a simple warp core malfunction?’

Spock’s eyes find Jim’s in the chaos. They’re standing close enough to touch, although Spock’s got plenty of self-control to keep something like that from happening.

‘A warp core malfunction would merit considerable reaction,’ he says.

At this range, the difference between Spock and the Vulcans on their security team is almost palpable. Jim’s not so far gone as to imagine he was lucky to land the only guy in all of Vulcan who’s willing to humor him, but it casts Spock’s particular brand of reticence in a new light. He’s too surprised by the reply to think up a snappy retort—and he doesn’t want to risk not being heard over the blare of the alarm sirens, the march of Vulcan boots surrounding Spock and Jim on all sides.

‘We’re heading toward the evac pods.’ Jim lowers his voice, leaning closer.

The woman who confronted him in the hall breaks ahead of the rest, punching a code into the security console to open the hatch door.

The interior of the evac ship’s small, like a closet built for two. Instead of clothes, it’s equipped with seating and survival supplies, and a miniature viewing screen set in front of the strangest set of bridge controls Jim’s ever seen.

‘Wait a second.’ He turns back as Vulcan security shoves him in—logically, though, making sure Jim ducks so he doesn’t slam his head into the cross-beam. ‘Who’s flying this thing?’

‘The ship’s autopilot is programmed to take the most efficient route to a secured location,’ the security officer replies.

‘Autopilot.’ Jim stumbles as Spock’s pushed in behind him, creating a moment of unintended physical contact between them.

It’s the most inelegant thing Jim’s seen Spock do, so it makes sense it’s his fault.

‘In the event of an unplanned departure in an area of space neither of us is familiar with, autopilot is the most logical choice,’ Spock says.

In the distance, Jim can still hear warnings going off, clipped, cool announcements about yellow alert and all senior officers to the bridge.

It’s like every simulation Jim’s ever been a part of for Starfleet, except that he’s never simulated his way onto an escape pod in the middle of an emergency. Abandoning ship goes against every instinct he has in a holodeck, to say nothing of the real world.

‘What about the rest of you?’ Jim asks.

It’s not hard to miss that this is a ship built for two.

‘Their orders are to keep us safe,’ Spock replies, as the security officer in front of them programs
the vessel door shut from outside. ‘No matter the cost, our safety is their priority.’

‘Hey, no, that’s not—’ Jim throws himself at the door, searching the inner control panel for anything that he can use to override the auto-eject countdown. There’s nothing. He doesn’t have the authority, none of the override codes, not to mention the experience with the specifics of a Vulcan ship. ‘Bones is still on there! Hey—hey! Let me outta here!’

Slamming his fist on the porthole window and pounding until his hand goes numb isn’t the most logical choice of action, although it might be the most humiliating. None of that matters, not with Bones in danger and Jim already in an evac shuttle.

Sure, he gets it. He’s the prince. Everyone’s supposed to protect him. But Bones is Bones, and the only reason he’s here in the first place is because of Jim. His allergies. His medical emergencies. The desperate look in his eyes when he told Bones he was shipping out to visit the Romulans and not to worry about him out there in the Alpha Quadrant, touching flowers without thinking about foreign pollen, eating the local food without asking for an ingredient list first.

‘Jim,’ Spock says behind him, calm as ever. Too damn calm, as far as Jim’s concerned.

‘I can’t leave him behind,’ Jim snaps back, still pounding. Seven. Six. Five. ‘Not him—not everybody else—! Maybe it’s easy for you because it seems logical, but Bones is my friend, Spock, and I can’t—’

Spock’s hand closes onto Jim’s shoulder, the first real physical contact Spock’s initiated since the day after their wedding. Jim knows the strength in that hand. He knows what Spock’s capable of. Spock could easily do the nerve-pinch thing Jim’s been so curious about for years and deal with Jim later, but instead he simply exerts his superior strength, pulling Jim away from the door as the evac pod breaks free from the main ship.

‘Brace yourself,’ Spock says.

Jim doesn’t. It’s part stubbornness, part anger, part fear. When the vessel jolts with sudden acceleration, Jim flies forward against the bridge controls, bracing himself with one hand—still tingling from his assault on the door.

Spock doesn’t stumble or lose his footing, not this time. The viewing screen sparks to light, the computer’s voice calmly informing them: ‘Time to safe destination—three hours and fifty two minutes.’

Jim takes a moment to breathe; once he’s breathing, he can familiarize himself with the bridge controls. The layout’s backwards, but Jim thinks he recognizes the viewfinder commands at least, plugging in the coordinates to focus on the ship they’ve just abandoned.

Jim’s stomach tightens, his blood cold for the first time since he set foot on Vulcan.

In a matter of seconds, it’s surrounded by Klingon Warbirds coming out of cloak one by one. Jim counts four before the first one fires on them and the escape pod rocks to the side, flinging Jim back against Spock’s chest. Jim shouts. The sky is bright with silent fire.

‘Emergency Evacuation Protocol initiated,’ the computer informs them.

Spock tightens his hold on Jim’s waist.

They hit warp hard.
Jim finds the bathroom first, in a show of cold sweat and nausea that’d make Bones proud. If Bones was around. If Bones is even still alive.

It’s about the size of a public stall on the Starfleet campus: small and cramped; sealed in on all sides without even enough room for Jim to fall to his knees and curl up around the toilet bowl like a pro. He doesn’t remember fighting free of Spock’s hold, stumbling away to get some much-needed privacy.

The air temperature’s tightly controlled but Jim’s sweating through his clothes anyway. He’s giving new meaning to the name *sweater* for that particular garment.

He doesn’t leave after the wave of nausea passes. He’s not hiding from Spock, not technically; he just can’t seem to stop shaking. He’d prefer to be on his own until it dies down, pressing his hands to the cool metal surrounding the rudimentary sink and gripping tight to hold himself up.

He doesn’t think about the odds of one Federation-grade starship against four Klingon Warbirds. He doesn’t think about the faces of his security team or the number of people it takes to run a ship like that. There’s no telling now whether the Romulan invitation for negotiation was just the bait dangling off the end of a hook, presented to lure them out, or if the Klingons saw a chance and took it. If there’s a security leak somewhere. If any of that even matters now.

Jim’s sure the Romulans wouldn’t ally themselves with the Klingons, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t above taking advantage of one another’s movements, using what they learn from monitored communications for personal gain.

He doesn’t know how long it’s been when he hears a knock at the door. Somewhere under *three hours and fifty-two minutes*, he figures.

‘What is it, Spock?’

‘I am curious to understand whether you are experiencing a psychosomatic reaction to the absence of your doctor.’

Naturally. For one, crazy second there Jim allowed himself to imagine Spock was coming to say something comforting.

He hauls himself off the sink, punching the controls with the side of his fist to get the door open. It hisses to one side and Spock’s standing right there, face to Jim’s face. For someone so private, he’s disregarded his usual attention to personal space.

Things must be worse than Jim thought.

‘Klingons don’t take hostages, you know.’ Those are the first words out of Jim’s mouth, the concern that’s been crawling around his belly like *gagh* resurfacing. ‘It’s not their style. Not honorable. They fight to the death. Preferably not theirs.’

‘There is no sense in concerning yourself with potential outcomes.’ Spock steps to one side when Jim gets closer, allowing him to pass rather than letting their bodies come together. ‘We will ascertain what facts we can once we have landed.’

Suddenly, all the imaginary headlines Jim’s been cooking up seem pretty tame compared to the latest news.
‘Four against one, though.’ Spock’s right, of course: there’s no point in repeating the facts when they’re so far away from them. But from what Jim’s seen of humanity, eighteen whole years of living and breathing the worst and best of it, pointlessness is what they do best. ‘I mean, you’re the one who loves calculating odds, right? Jesus.’ Jim pushes himself clear, holding himself upright, despite wanting to sag against a wall, let his knees buckle. It happened when his dad died, but he stayed upright then, too. To this day, he can’t explain to himself where that strength came from or why. He doesn’t know if it’s commendable or just plain desperate—the idea that while everything crumbles around him, he’s only got himself to blame if he falls too.

Maybe it isn’t an honorable quality. Maybe it’s more stubbornness. Bitter human pride.

‘I would recite the odds,’ Spock says, ‘but based on past experience, the odds of that being appreciated in this moment are even lower.’

Jim snorts, a dry chuckle. ‘Jesus. You’re right.’

‘If you are experiencing physical ailments that require further medical attention—’

‘Don’t,’ Jim says. ‘Don’t bring that up right now, all right?’

‘Your Doctor McCoy accompanied you on this mission in order to serve Earth’s royal family and fulfill his obligations to you. You can no more fault yourself for this fact than you can fault Vulcan for lacking a moon, or a hungry le-matya for killing a weaker animal.’

‘I thought I said not to bring it up.’

‘My counsel,’ Spock explains, ‘is simply that.’

‘I already know all of that, anyway.’ Jim doesn’t trust himself to turn around, which is why he forces himself to do it anyway. If they’re gonna be married—and they are married—then Spock has to see the uglier moments, too, especially the ruder ones. The truth is more than just being honest with somebody. It’s being naked in so many ways, foregoing the pretense. It’s a leap of faith without an evac shuttle on hand to bail out of a compromised ship. At least, that’s what Jim thinks it is. It’s not like he’s an expert. He doesn’t know what his own face looks like right now. ‘I know that, Spock. But Bones hates space, for one thing. And for another, right now, it’s my friend I’m worried about. Not my doctor.’

‘Then what you know and what you are feeling are not in concordance with one another.’

When Spock puts it like that, it sounds like a dictionary definition, not like a feeling. Jim shrugs. ‘Yeah. Something like that.’

‘That is a state of internal conflict with which I am not unfamiliar,’ Spock replies.

‘Oh,’ Jim says, momentarily winded.

‘Time to destination: one hour and forty-five minutes.’

The difference between Spock’s intonation and the computer’s isn’t negligible. It’s real. Every uncharitable thought Jim’s had is thrown into sharp relief at the moment and what Jim wants, what he really wants, is a husband he can hold close in a moment like this one. It’s not about solidarity. It’s about togetherness.

But that’s not the husband he has. Not the clinical voice of an emotionless program; not a hand-holder, either.
'Never been a fan of autopilot,' Jim says, looking away.

'Given what I know of your personality, this information does not surprise me.'

Spock knows that much about him, then. It should be a comfort.

It is, but not enough of one.

'I guess your people probably thought if I was at the helm, I’d’ve turned the ship back around.’
The way Jim says it, it’s not a question.

Spock watches him, close and careful. No one could ever accuse Jim’s husband of being lax in concentration. His focus is never up for consideration—it’s just knowing what to pay attention to that’s his problem.

‘The implementation of an autopilot program is standard procedure on all royal Vulcan vessels,’ Spock says. ‘Given the potential variables necessary to factor in for any one starship evacuation, it is only logical to utilize certain assets.’

‘You saying even Vulcans don’t think clearly when your ships get attacked?’

‘What I am saying is what I have said,’ Spock clarifies. ‘Standard protocol does not exist as a personal slight against your character.’

It’s much better. Everything’s completely obvious.

Jim sits in one of the nearby shuttle seats. It’s either that or fall on his ass, and he’s not looking to be that honest in front of Spock. It’s too much too soon. One of them’s gotta fight to keep the mystery alive.

There was a time when he would’ve dreamt of just this scenario: a ship big enough for Jim and Spock, just the two of them alone in space, barreling toward an unknown, remote location.

Maybe somewhere like Risa, with tropical beaches and rainforest backdrops. Mosquitoes the size of hoverbikes.

Bones’d hate it.

Spock’s right; Jim needs to stop thinking. That’s a task that should come easily to him, being human and all, but he’s got a talent for dwelling.

‘If you are experiencing dizziness, it would be best to remain stationary to ward off any accompanying syncope,’ Spock says.

‘Do me a favor and don’t doctor me, Spock,’ Jim replies. ‘I know how to take care of myself.’

‘That was not the topic under discussion,’ Spock says.

It’s not exactly a ringing endorsement, but Jim’s long past the point where he can keep looking to Spock for reassuring words.

At least if he were flying this thing, he could feel marginally in control of his life. But they’re at the mercy of a pre-ordained, computerized flight path, with nothing to do but think the whole way there about what they’re flying from and, when they’re sick of that, what they might be flying toward.
‘…Can we send transmissions with this thing?’ Jim messes with the control panels, leaning under the main desk, getting a better lay of the land before he pops up again. ‘Looks like a transmission went through when we were jettisoned. Must’ve been standard protocol, right? Let home base know we made it out, at least. The question is whether or not it’ll draw the wrong attention if we send one of our own next.’

Spock steps closer, standing by the viewfinder. ‘Though I have never before been in this particular situation, I know from simulation drills that once the evacuation shuttle lands in the nearest Federation-allied or neutral territory, we will be able, through provided means, to establish a line of communication with the Vulcan High Council, as well as with the Federation, should the equipment on the shuttle not be damaged during the events of the escape process.’

Jim steadies himself against the straightforward description. Sometimes, that talent of Spock’s for reciting details without a hint of sentiment comes in handy. Jim’s not flying the ship but he’s not completely anchorless.

In fact, his behavior so far hasn’t been Starfleet worthy. Not by a long shot. If Admiral Pike were grading him on this performance, he’d fail the practical.

‘OK. Well, that’s...something. Once we establish communications, we can find out what happened to the main ship, too.’

‘Until that point, all conjecture will be without purpose or merit,’ Spock agrees.

‘I’m gonna check on our equipment, take inventory.’ Jim stands, new strength in his legs. ‘You feel like memorizing all of our assets while I take stock, Spock?’

‘It is not a matter what I feel like doing, but what must be done,’ Spock replies.

He comes with Jim, anyway, so Jim knows he’s made the right choice.

A careful assessment of their rations, supplies—phasers, medical kits, communicators, one of those old-school tricorders Jim used to play with as a kid—as well as all their makeshift habitat kits later, and Jim almost misses the computer countdown saying they’ve got forty-five minutes to their destination, his sweater sleeves rolled up to the elbow, having managed a little memorization of his own. He knows where everything is, and he nabs himself a phaser while he’s at it. It fits into his palm, the heat of his hand warming the cool metal against his skin.

‘Computer,’ Spock says, drawing away without warning, ‘what is our present location and the location of our destination?’

‘Alpha Quadrant, currently in the Argolis Cluster. Destination: unnamed M-class planet, the site of potential colonization efforts by the Federation.’

‘Inhabitants?’

‘Minimal or unknown.’

‘It’s almost like an old-fashioned human honeymoon,’ Jim says, forcing a grin. Once it settles on his face, it doesn’t threaten to slip. ‘Except for the part with the Klingons.’

Spock turns to Jim, momentarily at a loss for words. If he doesn’t know about human coping mechanisms, using inappropriate humor in messed up situations, then he will soon. He’s a quick study, after all, and in this, Jim’s an excellent teacher. No chance of him sparking any pesky, unwanted desires in Spock with bad jokes.
‘…You are referring to a vacation taken with the purpose of cultivating romantic interest,’ Spock says.

‘Actually, I think you’re supposed to celebrate the romantic interest that’s already there,’ Jim replies. ‘Traditionally speaking, anyway. Lucky neither of us is all that traditional.’

Spock raises an eyebrow, arms folded behind his back.

Jim waits for that to feel like a lie, but it never comes. Spock might be buttoned-down, strict to the point of infuriating and as dry as the desert sometimes, but he’s not exactly by-the-book. At least, not by Vulcan standards. It’s important to be grateful for the little things, especially while aboard a ship rocketing toward unnamed M-class planet, population minimal or unknown.

Jim had better start working out how to get along with his husband, because it sounds like they’re all the company they’re gonna get for a while.

‘This is fitting, really.’ Jim fidgets with his sleeves where they’re rolled, pushing them down over his elbow and then back up again. ‘Goes with how the rest of our marriage has been shaking down.’

‘Shaking down,’ Spock repeats.

‘It’s an expression.’ The words come out like a reflex. Jim tests himself to see if he can do better than relying on rote phrase. ‘I don’t know exactly where it comes from. There’s no actual shaking involved.’

There was a time when he would’ve offered to do some shaking for Spock, demonstrate the lap-dancing skills he’s built up in his own mind.

But the mood’s not right. Besides, now that he knows he’d be chasing after something Spock’s not even sure he wants, it’s a moot point anyway.

It’s not the distraction either of them needs right now.

‘It is true that, beyond our bonding ceremony, the circumstances of our marriage have been unusual,’ Spock says. ‘But aside from the precedent set by my mother and father, there have been few examples to follow when it comes to the parameters of our particular relationship.’

‘Believe me, Spock.’ Jim sits down, rubbing his eyes until they creak. ‘Most interspecies marriages don’t work out this way.’

‘We are not most people,’ Spock says. ‘It is our privilege and our responsibility to set an example for both our peoples based on our actions.’

It’s a variation on the same speech Jim’s heard before from his mother and various other well-meaning sources, trying to intervene on Jim’s behalf after the latest hoverbike scandal or public Orion nudity exposé. He can’t expect his life to be like other people’s—he can’t hold himself to the same standards.

All he wanted was a little excitement and now that’s come at him sideways too.

‘That’s your explanation for why things are turning out so weird? We’re not like other people?’

‘You cannot judge our circumstances based on general standards as they do not and will never apply to us,’ Spock replies. ‘To do so would be detrimental to our understanding of what
constitutes satisfaction; therefore, such expectations would only lead to disappointment.’

‘I’d rather not set myself up for disappointment, thanks.’ The white starbursts on the backs of Jim’s eyelids fade, leaving him with a cramped escape shuttle and his husband. ‘And I’d rather not assume disappointment is the number one result of all anticipation.’

‘So far, I have not been disappointed,’ Spock says.

‘Thirty-five minutes until landing,’ the computer adds, cutting off Jim’s chance for a clever reply, or even an honest one.

Thirty-five minutes to mull over Spock’s latest semi-compliment, then. Jim turns back to the main controls and Spock takes position near the viewfinder. When Jim steals a sideways glance, it’s only to see the same Spock as ever: a handsome profile, unflinching posture, and cheekbones that aren’t logical.

It’s gonna be a long half hour.

*
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

The definition of a honeymoon.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR you guys really made my 2013 and here's hoping I can write as much Spirk fic in 2014 as I did in 2013...!

‘Brace for impact,’ the computer says, about three seconds too late.

Brace for impact. Jim could’ve told the computer that—and did, in fact, not that it was listening, speaking mostly for Spock’s edification, a whole minute before they broke through the planet’s atmosphere. That was also a minute before their shuttles autopilot guided them into the rockiest landing since Jim was on that Venusian colony engineering an emergency brake system on a malfunctioning mining vessel.

There’s the screech of metal dragged along rock, paneling stripped and torn; Jim doesn’t have to be on the outside to know that the hull’s been shredded. He manages to black out for most of the noise, but when he comes to, he sees from the tension on Spock’s face that Spock wasn’t as lucky.

If you can even call that luck.

Vulcans have sensitive hearing, Jim reminds himself dizzily, while Spock crouches over him and Jim blinks to clear his swimming vision.

‘How long’ve I been out?’ Jim asks, everything still and dark, the computer still warning them to brace for impact that’s already come.

‘Thirteen point seven two seconds,’ Spock replies.

Jim whistles. ‘That was some landing. Another reason why autopilot’s a crapshoot on a good day.’

Spock’s expression settles into a calm veneer once again, save for the eyebrow he raises in question—or in challenge.

‘Look, I could’ve landed this ship ten times better than autopilot did,’ Jim explains. ‘And I wouldn’t be telling you to brace for impact long after impact already found us. Not to mention there wouldn’t be an impact to brace for in the first place—computer, shut up.’

‘—impact,’ the computer concludes. ‘Maximum power conservation is currently in effect.‘

There’s a final hiss; the lights dim to darkness, only the faint glow of the control panels illuminating the main pod. Jim struggles into an upright position, rubbing a bruise on the back of his neck and heading toward the exit: the only light currently at full-power.
‘Let’s see what we’re dealing with,’ Jim says, and presses his palm to the exit controls.

The hatch opens. Sunlight floods the darkened shuttle. Jim shields his eyes with one arm while they adjust, a cool breeze rifling through his hair and whispering over his skin.

It’s no Risa.

There are no endless turquoise shoals dotted with private islands, no long white beaches, no promising coconut beverages waiting to be consumed. The surrounding area could be classified most closely as a rainforest: tall trees grow thick and lush, their green leaves glittering with moisture. It’s impossible to see through them, to tell whether they’re landlocked or if the’ve crashed into a peninsula. There are no telltale life-forms around to judge by, either, no birds wheeling overhead or fat jungle bugs buzzing through the air.

It’s no Risa—but it’s also as far from Vulcan as far as atmosphere’s concerned.

It looks like there’s nothing for miles, only Jim’s run enough Starfleet simulations to know that just because he’s not seeing something doesn’t mean it isn’t there. They’ll need to be watchful, doubly-so because of how quiet everything seems.

The air’s humid but not overly warm—the polar opposite of the dry, desert heat Jim’s been acclimatizing himself to.

Spock’s gonna hate that. He’s not gonna say as much, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be true.

Jim’s about as wrapped up in married life as Gary kept saying he would be, considering where his first thoughts always lead him: to Spock’s reaction, how things are bound to affect him first. He worries about himself a distant second—if those worries occur to him at all.

It’s not Jim’s fault, though. He’s spent the better part of a year trying to anticipate Spock’s needs and desires. It’s only natural that he’d get into the habit and forget how to get out of it again.

‘Damage to the main power conduit is negligible, but it will require repair before we are able to attempt communications to the High Council and the Federation,’ Spock says.

‘Are you kidding me?’ Jim turns back from the open hatch, finding the husband in question where he’s bent over the main control console. ‘Spock—poke your head out and take a look at this for a second. You’re missing the view.’

‘The view is irrelevant.’ Still, Spock turns to look at him, which is more than Jim can say he hoped for. ‘…Did you hear what I said?’

‘Yeah, I heard it. Another point against autopilot, by the way.’

Jim puts his back to the view, squinting into the darkened interior of their ship. He’s gonna have to go outside to survey the damage a hull breach might’ve done, see if there’s anything he can do out there to reroute what they’ve lost in power. Spock’s not wrong. Getting up communications should be their number one priority. The sooner they have a working comm system, the sooner they can report the whole situation to their higher-ups.

He told himself he wasn’t holding out much hope, but that was before when he had nothing—no visible problems to throw himself against.

This is different. A broken escape vessel is in Jim’s wheelhouse.
Everything he wasn’t supposed to learn in the Starfleet courses he wasn’t technically taking comes flooding back to him. Pike was right when he once told Jim that either you’re the type to remember all the details in the heat of the moment or you’re not—and sometimes those qualities don’t show themselves in a practical. Sometimes the only way to know is to be there and find out and hope you don’t get anyone else killed.

But Jim’s got it, a flood of adrenaline that starts in his heart and jumpstarts his brain. He knows what to do first, how to proceed based on the concept of triage. No matter what, they need a workable shelter for the night; that’s top priority, since there’s no way of knowing how long the comm repairs will take. Jim moves past Spock to the interior of the main pod and hauls the supplies door open, going straight for the weather-ready tarpaulins and shelter kit, standard issue.

It won’t be a Vulcan palace, but it will be big enough for two.

‘Jim,’ Spock says, as Jim steps over the threshold, putting his boot down on solid ground. Mud squelches beneath the sole of his foot but there’s firmer soil just underneath.

‘Gotta find high ground, for one thing,’ Jim replies over his shoulder, ‘and it’s gotta have cover. A good view of the shuttle crash, but far enough away that we don’t have all our eggs in one basket. We’ll work on the comm system during what’s left of daylight, but in case we can’t fix it right away, we’ll need the shelter once its dark.’

Spock nods. ‘Your studies of Starfleet protocol have proven invaluable.’

‘Always knew they would.’ Jim scans the horizon—thick forestation on one side; a river of some kind in the distance, which they’ll test for drinkable water when they can; behind them, a lazy slope turns steeper, hills winding upward into grassy mountains. ‘Not that I had this particular scenario in mind.’ He flashes a grin that’s more raw energy than it is good cheer, determination over pleasure. ‘High ground, right?’

‘That would be wise.’

‘Are we sticking together, or are you gonna work on the comm system?’

Spock considers, briefly, the most logical course of action, computing the odds. ‘Though it would be more efficient to devote ourselves to separate tasks, it would not be wise to remain separate in an unknown locale. Therefore I will survey the surrounding environs with a tricorder while you begin on our temporary shelter.’

‘I’d give you the thumbs up,’ Jim says, ‘but my arms are kinda full.’

He trusts Spock will follow as he breaks away from the shuttle.

Spock does.

By the time they find a likely outcropping, the humidity has Jim panting, another sweater all but ruined. ‘What’s the tricorder say about mosquitoes?’ he asks, dropping the kit to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

Spock consults. ‘None found nearby, Jim.’

‘Good.’ Jim grabs his sweater at the bottom hem and pulls it off, using it to scrub down his throat and the back of his neck while he’s at it.

His undershirt follows fifteen minutes later—Spock’s keeping track, of course—with the basic
frame of their tent already secured.

‘Jim,’ Spock says, as Jim’s unfolding the tarp.

‘Yeah, Spock?’

‘I must inform you that, based on my calculations, the current arrangement of the pylons cannot be structurally sound.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

Vulcans and their lack of humor aside, Spock’s kidding. He has to be. There’s no way they’ve been marooned alone on a jungle world and the first thing Spock can think of to do is stand in back critiquing Jim’s shelter-making abilities, of all things.

‘There is no reason for me to be speaking in jest.’ Spock tucks the tricorder away, crossing to duck under the skeleton structure Jim’s set up in order to start rearranging the stakes. ‘With a few adjustments, it should be reliably stable.’

Jim tries rephrasing the question. ‘Are you serious right now?’

‘I believe that we have already addressed my sincerity with regards to the topic at hand.’ Spock doesn’t even look up, too busy consulting and rearranging Jim’s setup, only lifting his head every now and then to measure the layout, not to meet Jim’s eyes.

Jim shifts his tarp to one arm, brushing the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

‘So I’ll just stand here and wait until you’ve finished course-correcting, then.’

‘That would be advisable,’ Spock agrees.

‘And I suppose I’m supposed to pretend like I’m not offended either,’ Jim adds.

That much gets Spock’s attention. He stops, holding one of the stakes against his palm like a walking stick.

‘Are my actions offensive?’

Jim checks the sun against the horizon, then the position of their crash below. They’re ideally situated and there’s still no signs of other humanoid life. He can’t tell if that’s luck trying to make up for how their voyage started, or if that’s nothing more than wishful thinking.

Besides, any ambient luck in the galaxy should save its help for the people they left behind on that ship. Spock and Jim can take care of themselves. They have stakes and a tarp and everything.

He’ll say this for their landing spot: there’s not a Klingon in sight.

‘You mean, is it offensive to go around fixing everything I’ve been doing for the past twenty minutes?’ Jim asks.

‘Fifteen,’ Spock corrects him. ‘And thirty three—’

‘Fifteen minutes.’ Jim shakes out the tarp, checking its measurements against the new shape Spock’s creating on the ground.

‘I am making necessary adjustments based on our mutual needs,’ Spock says. ‘This is the most
basic definition of a partnership, which our marriage is at its foundation.’

Jim blinks.

‘So you’re telling me that right now you’re working on our relationship?’

Spock watches him at last, dark eyes inscrutable under the sharply-drawn lines of his brows. Then he holds out his hands, a gesture that looks positively indecent until Jim realizes he’s reaching for the tarp.

‘The structure will now hold.’

Jim considers, briefly, the possibility of handling the tarp on his own, spiting himself to prove a point to no one, least of all Spock and certainly not himself. But the only way to prove a point now is to give Spock two corners of the tarp and keep two corners for himself, which Jim does—only he’s stubborn enough to make sure their fingertips brush together during the hand-off.

This time, Spock’s the one who blinks.

He doesn’t color. If he did, Jim’d know it was the humidity in the air, not anything to do with him.

‘Thanks,’ Jim says, swallowing down all potential retorts.

Despite the word threatening to stick in his throat, it feels good once it’s out. Jim’s grin is less brittle this time, heading to the other side of the stakes before securing the tarp in place. The structure, as Spock said it would, holds. There isn’t a single wobble. Jim steps back to survey the product of their work and shrugs, nodding, more satisfied than he thought he’d be.

‘Not bad for two princes, right?’

‘Our status in our respective societies should not have a significant impact on our ability to act sensibly and effectively in a moment of shared crisis.’ Spock pauses. ‘However, it is adequate.’

Jim sighs and rolls his eyes, making a grab for his undershirt on his way back to the shuttle. If he can’t manage to impress Spock with his technical and mechanical know-how, then he’ll have to concede defeat.

‘You check out the comm system, see what’s doing there,’ Jim suggests. ‘I’m gonna see if that autopilot landing we had ruined this baby for flying again.’

Spock tilts his head to one side. ‘Jim, referring to a vessel as an infant—’

‘—is something plenty of mechanics do, and not just human ones,’ Jim says. ‘Get on that comm system, Spock. I’ll race you.’

Jim leaves him with that, circling the vessel to check for surface-level damage first. When he comes back to the hatch, Spock’s already inside, and Jim gets down on his knees, mud squelching around his calves as he settles in to inspect a nasty hull breach where the paneling looks worse than it actually is. The outer layer’s been stripped, but it hasn’t been completely sheared. After some digging, mud under Jim’s nails, he locates the main breach site, which is barely bigger than his thumb.

Jim rises with another squelch, leaning his palm against the top of the hatch to lean inside. ‘Toss me out one of those sealant kits and a phaser, would you?’
‘To throw such equipment carelessly would not be wise.’ A moment later, Spock steps out of the shadows, supplies in hand. ‘Jim, you are covered in mud.’

‘Yeah, well, it’s muddy out there, in case you hadn’t noticed. It’s not like I’m rolling around in it for fun. Humans don’t do that,’ Jim adds. ‘Just for reference.’

‘I am aware that it is not a common practice,’ Spock replies. ‘Here are the phaser and sealant kit you requested.’

Jim doesn’t touch Spock’s hands with his this time. They come away clean, thanks to Jim’s care. ‘Thanks again.’

‘There is no need to mention it.’

In the end it’s the mud, not the damage caused by their landing, that causes the most trouble. Jim can’t get the sealant to cool properly in the damp; he’s pretty sure he’s got mud inside his nose.

Jim contemplates asking whether Spock could pull a Vulcan feat of strength and haul their ship out of the mud, but he doesn’t want to drag him away from the comm repairs. Establishing a link to the galaxy outside trumps having a working vehicle; there’s always the chance the Federation will send a pick-up crew, but they can’t do that if they don’t know the location of the crash site.

Anyway, Jim figures there’s got to be something in marriage etiquette about not treating your husband like a towing craft. They wouldn’t need to pull the whole ship, though. Just roll her a little onto one side, at least, so Jim could dry out the mud in the sun, crack it off the damaged hull, and start on the repairs for real.

‘How’s it going in there?’ Jim wipes his muddy hands on his muddy thighs.

There’s no reply, which gives Jim the reason he’s looking for to drag himself away from his own work and check in on Spock’s. He pokes his head into the open hatch, squinting into the shadowy depths of their escape shuttle.

Spock’s on his back, head and shoulders hidden under the piloting control console. Jim can see his torso framed through his bent legs. He’s not the type to straighten up fast and smack his forehead, but just in case, Jim knocks on the side of the wall like it’s a doorway.

‘Hello? Anybody home?’

Spock digs his boot-heels into the shuttle floor, dragging his way out from the maintenance panel he must’ve pried open with his bare hands. He sits up on one elbow, letting his left leg slide down. There’s a black smudge across the bridge of his nose and his hair’s all mussed—at least, as mussed as Jim’s ever seen it, with a few stray strands out of place over his forehead.

‘Have you been able to locate the damage done to the port nacelle?’ Spock asks. ‘Repairs would be accomplished with a much higher level of success if I had the appropriate power levels to siphon.’

‘I’m sorry, I stop to check in on you, and all you have to say is that I’m impeding your progress?’

‘There is no need to apologize.’

‘No, Spock, that wasn’t—no.’ Jim climbs inside the shuttle, rooting around under one of the seat compartments for the prepackaged emergency rations he took stock of earlier. ‘I wasn’t actually apologizing.’
‘I see.’ Spock says. He’s still watching Jim rip into the rations, though he makes no move to help himself to the same. ‘Human sarcasm.’

Jim gestures with the torn wrapper and what’s left of the protein bar. Not for long it’s not. Nothing like hunger to make a simple protein taste like a five star meal, while most five star meals Jim’s had were so uncomfortable he couldn’t enjoy what he was eating. ‘Now you’re getting the hang of it. Hungry?’

‘I do not require nourishment at this time.’ Spock pauses before elaborating, ‘My repairs do not appear to be as physically demanding as those with which you have concerned yourself.’

It’s a concession, an acknowledgment. Jim manages to finish chewing before he speaks again. ‘No kidding. Anyway, my professional opinion is, there’s too much mud gunking up the hull, messing with the sealant, so it’s either gotta get cold here at night—cold enough to dry that stuff up so I can chip it off—or we’re gonna have to move the shuttle. What do you think, Spock? Can the two of us manage it if we put our backs into it?’

‘As I am uncertain of the specifics of your capabilities in that area, I cannot calculate the likelihood with any accuracy.’

‘So make your best guess. For the sake of crew morale.’ Jim contemplates a second protein bar but practicing restraint is something he didn’t leave behind on Vulcan. It’s still keeping him company, along with Spock’s nearly-quizzical look.

‘We are not a crew, Jim.’

‘Might as well be, though. Morale’s a tricky thing,’ Jim adds, ‘and it’s not easy. So I’ve heard.’

‘At the Starfleet Academy lessons you were instructed on multiple occasions not to attend.’

‘Shows what those instructors knew. S’come in pretty handy so far.’ Jim flexes his fingers, noting a few scrapes on the backs of his knuckles. ‘I’m betting we can pull it off.’

‘It will be necessary to restore power in order to test the comm system,’ Spock replies. ‘Therefore, we will soon be able to test...’ Spock takes a moment. Jim watches him from under lowered eyelids, knowing he can’t hide a damn thing and making the play anyway. There’s something Spock’s searching for; Jim’s not a part of it but he feels it, wanting to be, thinking he could be. He also he thinks he ate that protein too fast, chunks of it lodged in his chest, stuck there and giving him some kind of heartburn. He rubs at his ribs with his knuckles, unable to blink and miss the moment before it passes. ‘...your wager,’ Spock finishes finally.

‘I’ll bet you a protein we can,’ Jim says, already on his feet.

‘I do not bet, Jim.’

‘Think of it like cultural exchange.’ Jim isn’t used to hesitation, so he wipes his palm off on the back of his thigh and holds out his hand to help Spock out.

When Spock takes it, long fingers gripping Jim’s, Jim realizes it’s not heartburn that’s messing with him. It’s something else, a Spock-related symptom.

‘Didn’t know if you’d take it,’ Jim says, effectively ruining the understated pleasure of the experience. Spock releases him and Jim can see the streak of mud he’s left on Spock’s thumb. ‘Sorry ‘bout that. It’s dirty out there. Gonna get down and...dirty in it.’
Wow. He’s managed to make rolling around in the mud sound as weird and gross as it actually is.

Spock raises his eyebrows, like he isn’t familiar with the term but the way Jim puts it, it doesn’t sound particularly appealing. It’s a look Jim got a lot on Vulcan. It’s good to know there’s no shortage of those building up anytime soon.

For the first time since they landed, Jim’s got a feeling like things might actually work out right.

Of all the people to crash land with, he’s lucky he has his husband. Spock knows what he’s doing in areas Jim doesn’t—they can make up for each other’s lacking expertise. It stings to think of Bones alone in space somewhere, but Jim knows if it’d been the two of them, they might not’ve been able to accomplish the same quick work he’s done with Spock here.

Nothing works as a motivator quite like the stupid urge to prove himself and impress his husband.

He’s outside with Spock, the pair of them standing shoulder-to-shoulder to survey the damage, when Jim feels the first drop of moisture on his head.

He scowls, looking up for the offending bird. But there’s still no wildlife overhead, nothing passing through the low, thickening clouds. Spock watches Jim watch the skies, then returns his attention to the shuttle in front of them.

‘Jim, I find it likely that you will incur not insignificant injury should we attempt to move the ship before we have ascertained a proper way of pivoting the bulk of the weight.’

‘That your way of saying you don’t think I can take the heat, Spock?’

‘On the contrary, the weather here has proven notably cool,’ Spock says.

The mud squelches under their boots as they wander—or as Jim wanders and Spock surveys—weighing their options, all while fresh, fat droplets from above fall in quicker succession, pattering Jim on the head and shoulders. They’re raining thick and heavy before he’s had time to pull away from the mud surrounding the shuttle, a rainstorm that cropped up too suddenly for him to realize what was happening.

They're encountering the rain in rainforest.

His instincts are all messed up. After being on Vulcan for so long, Jim might’ve forgotten what real shifts in weather looks like.

‘It is my assessment that the inclement weather will make transportation of the vehicle momentarily impossible,’ Spock says.

‘Or, if we leave it here, it could sink deeper into the mud and then we'll never get it out,’ Jim counters. He’s soaked through to the bone in a matter of seconds—at least they got that shelter up, and he’s already out of his shirt, the sweater left high and dry back at the shelter site. This is halfway to a shower, which Jim was gonna need after all this rolling around in the dirt anyway. ‘Can we really take that risk?’

‘I had calculated that risk in my initial assessment.’

‘The least you could do is give me the odds, then.’

‘The probability of injury incurred in an attempt to move the vehicle given the current situational factors is sixty three point one five two percent,’ Spock replies. ‘The probability of the vehicle
The crack of thunder stops the impromptu—and hardly romantic—statistics review for which Jim only has himself, and rigorous Vulcan educational training, to blame. The clouds are less gray than black, and the distant strike of wicked, sleek lightning plunges through the forest trees with a muted splitting of bark.

‘Holy shit,’ Jim says, the rain sheeting down on them, turning the mud to watery sludge around their feet, Jim already sinking in to his ankles.

‘The odds are now—’ Spock begins, but Jim’s got the picture.

Even Gary, who kept having points on his personal record docked for stubborn refusal to alter his original plans when he liked them enough, would know that now’s the time to get to high ground and out of the downpour for as long as the storm is this heavy.

Jim grips Spock by the sleeve, already heading back toward the hills. If they’re lucky, the rain will wash most of the mud away and down toward the river, leaving them a window of opportunity just afterward to get at the malfunctioning port nacelle and the hull breach.

But that’s only if they’re lucky.

Slipping and sliding on his way uphill to the shelter, Jim know better than ever that luck is a variable. Luck is like mud—there’s plenty of it, but for some reason it keeps tripping Jim up. Luck is like rain in the rainforest—all over the place, but it’s not as though you can catch it or keep it or use it for anything. It’s a raw, natural phenomenon. It’s a pain in the ass.

Winded but out of the rain at last, Jim pauses to catch his breath with his hands on his knees, hair dripping onto the ground between his feet. The pinch of his formal boots suggest blisters are soon to follow but for a brief, shining moment, it’s all worth it to see Spock wet, lashes beaded with rainwater, dark hair slick on his forehead and parted around his damp ears.

‘C’mon, Spock, you’re soaked.’ Jim straightens and steps toward him, then remembers something. ‘You want a dry sweater? I just so happen to know where I can find one.’

‘If you are referencing the sweater you removed earlier, I cannot accept your offer.’

‘Then I guess nobody’s gonna wear it. Seems like a waste to me.’ Jim wrings out his undershirt, using it to towel down most of the excess moisture from his hair, then works on tugging his boots off, followed by his sopping, dirty socks. The air’s cool but moist enough that—at least until the sun goes down—it’s not unpleasantly cold. If anything, it’s refreshing.

Of course there’s the shuttle and the comm system to worry about; refreshing isn’t high on their list of priorities. Jim grins anyway.

For crew morale. Even if they’re not, as Spock was so kind to point out, actually a crew.

‘You know, some people find the rain romantic,’ Jim says, because he’s nailed the art of thinking up the stupidest thing he can say and then blurring it out. He’s first in his class. Number one in running his mouth. ‘You, me, a torrential downpour…’

Spock’s expression is bleak where he’s standing, still lingering by the entrance to the shelter. It’s cozier inside than Jim pictured when he was hammering stakes into the ground and throwing a tarp over the resulting shape; Spock even secured the edges and brought in those shiny emergency
blankets that look about as comfortable and snuggly as a sheet of aluminum foil. It’s hardly a bedroom, but the space is small and the sound of rain outside’s settled into a pleasant rattling overhead, like the muted memory of the Vulcan ceremonial drums.

‘I fail to see how an excess of extra damp added to an atmosphere that is already decidedly unpleasant can be considered conducive to affection.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jim says.

Shot down again.

He can recover, though. He’s resilient. Crash and rebuild. And after all that bragging he did about the landing he could’ve pulled off in place of the autopilot, he figures he’d better put his money where his mouth is.

Spock holds his arms, one hand clasping the other wrist, behind his back as always, but Jim catches a glimpse of tension in his hands, knuckles pulled white like he’s trying to keep himself from shaking.

That’s interesting. Purely from an anthropological standpoint.

It definitely bears investigation.

Jim straightens, rubbing a hand through his wet hair, flicking droplets onto the ground. He abandons his pile of wet clothes, stretching out the muscles in his back made sore from scrabbling around the shuttle all evening. Once that’s done, he moves to stand next to his husband. Spock’s dripping wet, stiff-backed; the only indication he’s even aware of his condition is the water plopping from his bangs into his eyelashes, making him blink in a rapid rhythm.

A sudden thought occurs to Jim.

‘You’re not cold—are you, Spock?’

Spock presses his lips together, eyebrows drawn tight enough to form a crease in his forehead, giving Jim one of his looks. The effect’s cut in half by his inability to make eye contact.

‘As I have said, the climate is not optimal.’

‘I don’t know.’ Jim ducks away, finding that sweater he tossed off back when the jungle was still hot enough he didn’t need it. It’s still not particularly cool, at least by human standards. He lifts it over his head like a towel and quickly rubs it through Spock’s hair before Spock’s Vulcan instincts can predict his next move and before Spock can stop him. ‘I think it’s refreshing.’

‘Refreshing.’

‘Getting a hang of my old repetition lesson?’ Jim drapes the sweater over the back of Spock’s neck, still holding on with both hands. ‘Took you long enough.’

‘I merely sought clarification for your definition of that which provides refreshment.’ Spock glances toward the break in the tarp, the sheeting rain forming a near-solid, wet wall just outside. ‘Perhaps you suffered mild cranial trauma during the landing. You were unconscious for a period of time long enough to suggest a concussion is not out of the question.’

‘Look at it this way,’ Jim says, more generous now that they’re close and Spock hasn’t moved to place more distance between them again, ‘we’ve got a shelter from the storm; we’re not alone out
here, because we have each other; and we’re alive, which is a lot more than those klingons wanted us to be.’ When Spock offers nothing in reply, Jim sighs on a chuckle. ‘It’s an old human tradition, Spock. It’s called accentuating the positive.’

‘Considering the cynicism espoused in so much of Earth’s history and literature, I find that tradition uncharacteristic.’

‘You don’t think all of humanity’s that bad, do you?’ Jim asks. ‘Because if you do, we might have a problem.’

‘I shall consider this tradition in full when I am able to research it more thoroughly.’ Spock finally allows his gaze to travel to Jim’s hands, fisted in handfuls of fabric, looped around the back of Spock’s neck. They’re so close that maybe Spock can feel the heat of exertion and adrenaline, of being alive despite the odds, of working so damn well together, radiating off Jim’s body. Maybe that’s why Spock hasn’t chosen to keep Jim at the usual arm’s length. Or maybe he’s trying not to piss Jim off again, considering how important it is they keep working well together. ‘You have employed your dry sweater in a way that has rendered it temporarily unwearable.’

‘You looked cold.’

‘My body temperature is not a concern.’

‘Maybe not your concern.’ Jim wouldn’t be able to let go if he wanted to—and he’s not entirely sure he wants to. ‘But it is mine.’

‘Your body temperature remains acceptable,’ Spock says, an observation instead of a question.

‘You noticed, huh?’ Jim offers a grin. ‘You did notice.’

‘I would not allow statistics of our present condition to go unnoticed, Jim.’

‘Except I’m not a statistic, Spock. Or a collection of statistics.’ Jim takes a deep breath. It’s time to take the plunge. ‘Remember that time we talked about cuddling in San Francisco when the nights were cold?’

‘Neither would I allow topics of conversation we have engaged in to slip my mind.’

‘OK.’ *Okay.* Jim keeps breathing, heavy air rich with oxygen, at least. Delicious, breathable oxygen. ‘That’s—touching. I think. I’m gonna say it is. Anyway, we’re not in San Francisco at the moment, obviously, but it is raining and for all we know, the night might get cold.’

‘You suggest that we should embrace to maintain acceptable body temperatures through shared body heat.’

‘I suggest that we should embrace,’ Jim says. ‘Partly for the body temperature thing. Partly because I’ve been thinking about it for months and we’ve gotta—I mean, we have to figure it all out sometime.’

Spock’s looking at him, damp and inscrutable. He hasn’t moved away; even if Jim’s holding him in place, he’s more than strong enough to put a little distance between them if he wanted to. When he does take his eyes off Jim, it’s to glance around the tent, taking stock of their shared assets.

It doesn’t amount to much.

‘You spoke of many things that do not currently apply to our situation,’ Spock says. ‘I believe in
your messages you detailed a bed, or some other acceptably comfortable piece of furniture upon which we might both lie.’

Jim’s grin widens; he tugs the separate edges of the sweater to pull Spock in close. The difference in height between them is negligible, but Jim rocks up onto the balls of his blistered feet, toes pinched at the ends of his fancy boots. When he leans in to kiss Spock—human style, the better to avoid over-stimulating his Vulcan senses—all he can think is that he didn’t shave this morning and it’s starting to show.

Spock proves his dedication to adversity by not flinching away the second Jim’s stubble rasps against his cheek. Their lips catch, damp and slippery with rain water, and then they’re kissing, Jim’s fingers tightening on the sweater. He’s being such a good Vulcan husband, not even trying to get his hands all over Spock, much less asking for Spock’s hands all over him.

Jim’s not looking to cultivate a repeat performance of what happened when he aborted that blowjob.

‘Jim,’ Spock says, but it’s muffled between their mouths.

His shoulders twitch under Jim’s hands. His own hands are still locked behind his back.

It’s not much, but it’s not unacceptable. Cold water drips from Spock’s bangs into the wells of Jim’s closed eyes, making his face scrunch up like there’s a paparazzi camera somewhere just waiting to go off with a flash. But there’s nothing like that here. They’re surrounded by trees, with only the black clouds overhead and endless gray rain chasing them. They’ve never been this alone, not in their respective palaces and not on Vulcan.

At some point, they’re gonna have to go back outside and check they’re not in danger of eroding straight off the side of the cliff. Right now, Jim’s tongue is warm in Spock’s cool mouth, swiping over the clean line of his teeth. He shifts one of his hands from the end of the sweater to Spock’s shoulder, lightly following the angle of his arm to press his thumb into the crook of his elbow.

Slowly but surely he pulls Spock’s arm forward, tugging at the edge of his wet sleeve to find his cold wrist beneath it, the fleshy heel of his hand.

Finally, Spock shivers.

If there’s a dictionary of shivers out there—currently untranslated, the kind you can only build for yourself—then Jim’s positive this isn’t a bad one.

He’s positive that the things Spock feels aren’t bad things to feel, either. He’s positive more than ever that Spock does feel them. He’s positive that he can’t make that decision for Spock; he’s almost positive that Spock doesn’t know how to make the right decision when it comes to that stuff; he’s definitely positive that it’s still not anyone else’s decision to make.

Marriage is hard.

So is Jim.

He swallows, angling his hips away instead of closer. This time, he isn’t going to demand something that Spock’s not ready to give. Jim wants more than to hold hands but he has to navigate the space between his perspective on hand-holding and Spock’s perspective, something that can’t be done with autopilot on. It’s gonna take some personal attention, some finessing.

Some caressing. Jim rubs the pulse at Spock’s wrist with his thumb before he traces the curve of
Spock’s palm toward the center. He shivers too, and Spock expresses a non-verbal noise of concern.

Jim, Jim can practically hear him asking, *is your body temperature currently below the optimal range for human comfort?*

‘M’warm, Spock,’ Jim tells him, against the corner of his mouth. ‘Sometimes humans shiver when they’re warm. Weird, isn’t it?’

‘I would say that it is, at least, a misleading choice,’ Spock replies.

Jim chuckles again, slipping his fingers between Spock’s, remembering that Spock enjoys a little rub here: the rough tug of callused skin against smooth; a slow—but increasing—speed when Jim draws his fingers up along the insides of Spock’s, back down again; a little, circling, seemingly idle rub. It’s safe to say he never thought about hands like this; equally safe that the thrill he gets is from imagining the thrill Spock gets, the possibility of a thrill he might be giving. And if that isn’t the generous spirit of diplomatic exchange, Jim doesn’t know what is.

Marriage is wild, too, like the quickening of Jim’s pulse.

‘Perhaps, the blankets,’ Spock begins.

Jim clears his throat and pulls away—without letting go of Spock’s hand. Three steps forward and two steps back, not the other way around.

There’s a corner of their shelter that looks like every other corner of their shelter, but it’s the one with the silver-y blankets stacked next to it, so now it’s their corner. They sort of sit together, a few awkward bumps and tugs and one ungraceful wobble, and when Jim reaches around Spock for the blanket he feels Spock turn his face inward toward Jim’s temple, the intake of breath that suggests Spock’s smelling his hair.

Jim’s chest swells. His heart’s making a racket even his human ears can hear; it has to sound like Vulcan drums to Spock. He surges forward anyway, wrapping the blanket around Spock’s shoulders. His arms follow, his chest to Spock’s chest, his mouth on the bottom curve of Spock’s ear.

Spock allows it. He more than allows it. After a pause that almost causes Jim’s lungs to collapse—metaphorically speaking, but somehow it doesn’t feel any less literally dangerous—his hands come up to the small of Jim’s back. There’s a reason for it: Spock’s tucking the corners of the blanket around them both. He holds them there, the knuckle of one thumb brushing the base of Jim’s spine where—and he’s checked—there’s a definite hip-related dimple.

Jim didn’t realize how much he was craving this. Even when he didn’t have it, the absence pretended it was natural. Now he knows how unnatural it was.

In some ways, this is the honeymoon he always wanted. If he could ignore the details of how they got here, the reality of their situation and how the chances of a rescue shrink the longer the rain keeps up, increasing the risk of a mudslide, then it’s almost like the vacation Jim’s been longing for. The air’s damp and clean-smelling; it fills Jim’s lungs easily, making his chest swell with relief and anticipation both.

His luck’s been coming at him sideways for a long, long time. He gets the things he wants, but only in a backhanded way.

He wanted Spock, but their marriage is nothing like he pictured.
He wanted some alone time—well, now they’ve got it.

Maybe Jim should’ve been a little more specific about the parameters, but there’s no way to go back and change that now.

Having his mouth occupied makes him less likely to say something stupid and ruin the moment. He’s pretty sure he tried to explain that particular phenomenon to Spock once already, but it’s something you can’t understand unless you’ve been predisposed to saying dumb things your whole life.

Spock might look at it like a crutch, but Jim’s just being realistic. Sometimes he needs an extra helping hand.

Right now, that’s Spock’s hand resting on the small of his back.

It’s poetic, in a way. Or it would be if Jim could allow himself to believe it was happening on purpose instead of for perfectly logical reasons: Spock providing warmth where it’s needed because he’s not prey to the same distractions that overcame Jim.

If it were up to Jim, they’d’ve been kissing in the rain next to the shuttlecraft.

There is something to be said for Spock’s focus. It’s just that it’s not one of those qualities Jim’s allowed himself to appreciate in the moment.

The blanket crinkles around them every time Jim moves, shifting around their bodies where Spock’s holding him close. That and the rain outside blend together to make a soothing backdrop of white noise; the external chill in Jim’s skin thaws where Spock’s holding him close, but it’s not enough somehow. He wants to know Spock’s feeling it too, that there’s something he can do to reach him beyond getting under his skin with his words.

When it comes right down to it, he’s envious of Spock and his touch telepathy. It’s a shortcut into a world Jim’s only feeling his way around the edges of, fingers curling against the nape of Spock’s neck to warm him in return, right where a sliver of cool skin’s exposed.

They’ve pretty much mastered verbal sparring but Jim’s still sorting out the physical end of things. It’s not something he ever thought he’d have to work at.

He’s supposed to be a natural.

Hell, he is a natural.

A late bloomer—Sam was teasing him for years while Jim was buried in history books and Sam was flirting with anything that had a pair of legs and humanoid anatomy—but he got there and made up for lost time. With Spock, he has to start from scratch. Back at the beginning, remembering all at once how awkward the beginning was.

Jim chuckles. Spock’s entire body registers the faint tension of hesitation. Jim rubs the side of his throat and Spock tilts away from it but also toward it at the same time, that kind of contradiction Jim doesn’t have to be an expert in Vulcan to read. He knows what it means.

He knows what Spock wants.

It’s just Spock who needs to catch up for a change.

‘S’nothing,’ Jim mumbles, still nipping at Spock’s lips. ‘Just...glad you’re into this. You are into
Jim knows he put that phrase in the dictionary, one of the few useful pieces of slang he didn’t forget.

‘Jim,’ Spock replies simply, ‘it is not that I do not find you physically attractive.’

Jim shouldn’t encourage Spock when he offers up a terrible line like that one but he can’t help it—his knees buckle and he manages to pull Spock closer, hips bumping hips, a frozen second in which Jim isn’t sure if that’ll be enough to snap Spock out of it.

It isn’t. Nothing happens. Spock’s grip tightens, if anything, to keep Jim from slipping or toppling over or whatever it is he looks like he’s threatening to do, whatever it is Spock interprets as a bad thing when it’s anything but.

‘Same,’ Jim manages. He doesn’t correct Spock’s game because his game isn’t so hot right now either. ‘I mean— It is not that I do not find you physically attractive, too.’

Spock must be able to sense the humor in there, the teasing, without sensing why it’s chosen that sensible, logical phrase to focus on. Jim kisses him. Spock kisses Jim back. The questions and the answers are in the kiss. *Why are you laughing at me and No, Spock, I’m laughing with you, come on.* Jim guides Spock’s hand lower until it’s on his ass and guides it into a rub. A squeeze.

Can asses transmit emotions? Jim has no clue. He’ll have to ask Spock sometime. He can’t stop kissing Spock long enough to ask at the moment. He really hopes Spock isn’t reading his ass; if it’s half as stupid as his brain, then Spock’s never gonna respect his keen intellect and thirst for knowledge.

But he’s definitely respecting Jim’s ass.

‘You feel good?’ Jim asks.

He needs to know, and he can’t read it off Spock’s skin. He can’t read it off Spock’s ass, either, returning the exploration, lean muscles clenched beneath his palms.

Spock nods, his nose brushing Jim’s upper lip.

‘Good,’ Jim says hoarsely. ‘That’s *good*, Spock. That’s *good*, right?’

Spock’s free hand rises to cup Jim’s face. He holds it, gentle but strong, and the canting roll of Jim’s hips slows to stillness. Something important’s happening, more than the sum of their bodies’ hungry little needs.

‘You would do well to apply some of the confidence I have witnessed you display in the past regarding the minute details of your life in reference to our relationship,’ Spock says.

‘Uh.’ Jim breathes out right into Spock’s face.

Protein breath. Not his best rejoinder, but the bloodflow to his brain’s currently limited.

Maybe that’s why Spock has such a problem with that release of emotions. It clouds his perfectly logical way of thinking.

‘You have demonstrated that you are a man of conviction,’ Spock says. ‘I merely sought to draw attention to the fact that you do not display the same certainty with regards to our courtship.’
‘Our courtship,’ Jim repeats.

Spock’s pinky fingers slip under the line of his jaw, at the very corners where it hinges, fingertips lightly stroking his stubbly throat. He’s never seen Spock do anything by accident, so Jim’s gotta assume that was deliberate.

‘Yes, Jim,’ Spock says. The dazed, clueless look on Jim’s face isn’t just from all the kissing. It takes Spock a second to clue in. ‘I shall rephrase. Your insecurities are unwarranted.’

Jim can’t be sure, but that sounds like an improvised Vulcan way of saying things are gonna be all right. If Jim wanted to go further—and really read too much into it—he could even guess that Spock’s telling him he likes him. That he’s all right with all of this; more than that, he wants Jim about as much as Jim wants him, and the differences that have been tripping them up are more cultural than they are personal.

That Spock’s just as interested in getting past them as Jim wants him to be.

Maybe he should or could be more sensitive to the Vulcan way of things, but Jim’s pretty sure he’s gone above and beyond the call of duty where that’s concerned. He’s been an exemplary husband, which doesn’t mean anybody owes him anything. He could stand to shake up his expectations for himself once in awhile.

He’s doing all right. Probably.

Jim settles his hands on Spock’s chest, palms over the broad, flat shape of his pectorals. He’s not as filled out as Jim coming off of Bones’ special exercise regimen, but the slender shape of him’s somehow more intimidating for how understated it is. He’s not Starfleet buff and he could still lift Jim clean off the ground and throw him if he wanted to.

That’s sexy.

Unfortunately, it’s also the kind of thing that doesn’t translate from human-to-Vulcan when Jim tries to say it out loud.

‘Does your aesthetic appreciation indicate that you are taking my counsel to heart?’ Spock asks.

Jim has to give him credit—he’s doing a great job of holding up his end of the conversation, enough so that he might not see the necessity for kissing mouth to mouth to avoid awkward make-out chats.

Jim swallows and chuckles. ‘Yeah, Spock. I guess it does. And I guess I took some general things personally and made some personal things general, all right? I know that now. But in my defense—not that I’m trying to excuse my bad behavior, just explain it—I think I was suffering from oxygen deprivation to my brain. Which is usually functional. Beyond functional. I believe the phrase a certain instructor once used to describe me was ‘Too smart for his own good’, so make of that what you will.’

‘It does not come as a surprise that this would be someone’s assessment of your intelligence.’

‘That’s something you might have to acknowledge you’re dealing with, too.’ Jim swallows, reaching up with more fumbling clumsiness than he intended to cover Spock’s hand on his face. His fingers are shorter, his palm wider, everything about him less deliberate but not necessarily less certain. At least, Jim has to tell himself that. His hand’s warm. Spock’s hand is pretty warm, too.

Spock’s lips purse with words that aren’t spoken. Jim would kiss them from his mouth if he
thought that’d be the same as waiting for them to come on their own terms.

It wouldn’t be.

Jim waits.

‘Though no Vulcan instructor would have reason to describe a student with such a phrase, I trust that you meant the comparison as a compliment?’ Spock asks finally.

‘A point of reference. Of similarity.’ Jim tilts his face against Spock’s palm, where the green blood and the lifelines are pressed to his skin. ‘You trying to read my thoughts, Spock?’

That makes Spock hesitate. ‘In time, and given your full understanding and agreement, I would seek to initiate a full bond between us that would make our thoughts known to each other.’ He pauses again. Jim’s heart is a mudslide. He sucks at poetry. ‘However in this instance I believed that I was fulfilling the brief of a gesture that is employed amongst humans as a romantic overture.’

‘So you’re just...cupping my face.’

‘An act that, to my understanding, often accompanies kissing.’

‘Let me just...’ Jim swipes his bottom lip while he gathers his thoughts. He thinks Spock might actually be watching the path taken by his tongue before it disappears again. ‘You know you don’t have to do any of that stuff if it’s just to make me comfortable or less of a jerk sometimes. You do know that, right?’ Yeah, this is why mouths should stick to kissing when they can. But it’s important and Jim’s determined and Spock’s hand is so damn warm on Jim’s cheek that thinking’s impossible in the face of doing the right thing. ‘Because, I mean, I thought you made it pretty clear that you were gonna be doing the whole...Vulcan abstinence thing.’

Spock clears his throat. Jim can’t tell if he’s blushing or if it’s a trick of the shadows, cast unpredictably by the rainclouds.

‘I will admit that I had difficulty expressing my meaning at that time,’ Spock says. ‘It was not my lack of desire that caused me to end our physical exercise. It was the opposite.’

‘Oh my God,’ Jim replies. ‘I turn you on, Spock.’

Spock’s dark eyes unfocus, briefer than a wink.

‘Sorry,’ Jim continues quickly. ‘That was—wow, really not romantic. Totally obtuse. Extremely obnoxious.’

He can barely bite down on his next question, which is whether that makes a difference to the rest of Spock’s convictions. He doesn’t want to come across like some kind of sex-crazed maniac, his mind only good for one thing. But it’s hard not to dwell on the topic when Spock’s leaning back to make room for Jim in his lap, like he has half a mind to let Jim use him like a lounge chair.

In the absence of any other real furniture in the place, it’ll do.

‘I did not know that was in question,’ Spock says. ‘I had assumed from our communications, both in person and long distance, that my attraction was evident. If it were not... Assume that I would not have found it so difficult to adhere to the Vulcan principles to which you are now referring. I cannot strictly call it abstinence, as we have already engaged in acts which resulted in your climax.’

‘Wow,’ Jim repeats. ‘Nothing takes the mystery out of it like hearing that right out loud.’
He cradles the back of Spock’s head to reel him in for a kiss before Spock can take offense to the latest dumb thing to fall out of Jim’s mouth. His pulse is outmatching the drum of the rain outside; he’s not interested in debating the strictures of denial and self-discipline, the exact definition of Vulcan celibacy as it applies to interspecies relationships.

The truth is, he’s not so sure he wants to know the rules. If things are still malleable, then Jim can pretend like he can still work out an exception. Spock might be stubborn but Jim’s reset the parameters of tests before. He thinks maybe—maybe—he can get around his difficult husband.

Especially when Spock’s demonstrated an obvious willingness to work with him.

Enthusiasm’s half the battle. If that’s not a proverb already, then Jim just coined it.

He spreads his thighs, shimmying onto his knees to straddled Spock’s lap proper. When Spock stiffens Jim draws back, holding a finger over his mouth.

It’s more intimate a gesture than Jim intended it to be. He’s getting carried away with himself.

‘Don’t worry—this is purely a body heat scenario. I’ll be sharing mine, trying to keep you comfortable. Like a big, beefy blanket.’ Jim cringes, wrinkling his nose. ‘OK, maybe not that. In fact—forget that. But the point is: I’m not trying to make a move. Despite how much humans might talk and think about it, I don’t really have much control over that part of my anatomy.’

Spock’s silence indicates something like: how functionally inadequate or what an inefficient and untrustworthy design. Well, he has no idea, not having to deal with it himself.

Jim rests his cheek against Spock’s shoulder, face tilted toward his throat. His breath gets trapped against Spock’s skin, warming both of them in brief, rhythmic bursts. ‘Believe me, Spock, I know how much it sucks, and I don’t have a clue why we evolved that way. But at least we don’t have tentacles. Not that I have anything against species with tentacles. I just wouldn’t want ‘em myself.’

‘Jim,’ Spock replies, ‘would you prefer it if I were to kiss you again now?’

‘To stop me from babbling, I mean?’

‘It appeared that you were on the verge of such unpredictable action. Having determined from your past commentary that you are not necessarily proud of or made comfortable by it—’

‘Nah, Spock,’ Jim says. ‘Actually, it’s fine. We’re communicating, right? Like...’ Jim swallows, letting his lips brush the side of Spock’s neck when he speaks, just under the hard line of his jaw. ‘Like old times. Feels good. I like it.’

‘It is not without its benefits.’

Not without its benefits. Jim sighs, but he thinks he gets it. It’s Spock’s way of saying he likes it, too. ‘Uh-huh.’

‘I await your repetition of my statement to so-called humorous effect,’ Spock says.

‘It is not without its benefits,’ Jim obliges, rubbing the spot where Spock’s jaw meets the lobe of his ear with his nose. ‘It’s OK, Spock. You say things in a complicated way ‘cause you’re a complicated guy.’ Jim tightens his thighs with a pointed squeeze—over as soon as it has a chance to start. ‘I’m not complaining. Just pointing it out.’

‘That, too, is not without its benefits,’ Spock replies.
Jim finds his mouth again, kissing him through a grin. He even feels the hinted tip of Spock’s tongue, barely noticeable unless you’re actively looking for it, testing the distance between their mouths, between their teeth. Spock’s hair is wet under Jim’s fingertips and Jim resists—momentarily—the urge to muss it up once and for all, to get an idea of what it’d look like.

“You know...” Jim breaks the kiss in order to talk this time instead of kissing to avoid talking. ‘This whole scenario really is the human definition of romance.’

‘Ah,’ Spock says. ‘Human definitions.’

“You’re not a fan?”

‘I cannot ignore the extenuating circumstances.’

Jim feels a twist of uncertainty, the same feeling he tried to stake into the ground while setting up their tent. ‘That’s another human thing, then. Doing your damn best to ignore the extenuating circumstances. At least when there’s nothing you can do about ‘em. It’s not just about out of sight, out of mind.’

‘Indeed,’ Spock replies.

The rain falls. Jim talks about nothing at all. And Spock listens, which is just about everything Jim didn’t know to ask for.

*
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Lizards? Lizards.

Chapter Notes

Amazing art inspired by the previous chapter:

By YESIAMSPOCK on tumblr!
Spock judges the period of heavy rainfall to last five hours and twenty seven minutes and fourteen seconds—rounding up, as always—when it finally stops, the last few splutters of weakened thunder long rolled off into the distance, over the treetops.

The shelter creaks around them, stakes settling under the weight of the collected rain overhead. Jim didn’t design the thing with hydrodynamics in mind. He should probably get up to check on things, but he’s dropped into a hazy kind of stupor with his head pillowed against Spock’s chest while Spock might just be meditating on what it means to be a chair, and he’d have to leave all that behind if he got to his feet.

Spock’s breathing is oddly soothing, in and out, deep and even. It’s something Jim can replicate, but he’s never been able to get to the step beyond: the quiet mind that comes with the relaxed body.
He’s a champion at staring into space, but somehow that doesn’t seem like the storied Vulcan self-reflection technique they’ve written into their traditions.

Jim sighs, ready to let his eyes flutter shut. Another few minutes—or fifteen—like this couldn’t hurt.

There’s a rumbling outside and the shelter shudders again, pale tarp shivering around them like a leaf in a sudden breeze. Jim tries to recall whether there’s anything on this planet about earthquakes, then remembers he didn’t get a full Starfleet mission brief.

This isn’t a Starfleet simulation.

Spock’s eyes snap open. Jim can feel the change in his body language before looking at him. That’s a kind of being in sync, although it’s not what he imagined when he first thought about getting to know his husband.

‘The excess rain has destabilized the landscape.’ Spock’s arms release their hold on Jim and he sits up, the silvery blanket crinkling around them. ‘We will be required to make adjustments to the structural integrity of the shelter.’

‘Guess your design wasn’t so perfect after all.’ Jim straightens, hiding a grin against his knuckles as he pops the vertebrae in his lower back one by one. He ignores the disapproving look on Spock’s face at the sound. There’s something tickling at the back of his head, like a dream he can’t remember or the name of a planet that’s right on the tip of his tongue. ‘The shuttle—’

Jim scrambles to his feet, nearly tripping over the blanket in his rush. It’s right around now that he’s wishing he laid out his wet socks and boots neatly to dry instead of leaving them in a tangled-up pile at the corner furthest from when they made their little make-shift nest. Only there’s no time for anything but regrets.

He runs out in his bare feet, the ground cold and damp, mud squishing between his toes. It’s totally romantic.

Even more romantic is the sight of the shuttle sliding silver along the crumbling ground and disappearing through the tree-line over a ravine.

‘Shit,’ Jim says, breaking a streak of avoiding the word entirely so it doesn’t accidentally slip out in front of his royal in-laws. ‘No, no no—’

He’s off and running before he can think of the partnership angle, of waiting for Spock and his superior strength for hauling unstable shuttlecrafts out of giant ditches, any of the strategies that a good Starfleet cadet would come up with naturally before they took off running. But Jim’s not a good Starfleet cadet. He’s not a Starfleet cadet at all. He might’ve been a great one; he’ll never know.

He can only do what he’s capable of.

He can run really fast.

And he doesn’t fall flat on his face after slipping down the slope in the dangerous mud-slicks, so that’s something.

If Spock follows, then Spock follows. Jim can hear only his heartbeat between his ears, his own too-loud footsteps. His feet pound the dirt with wet slaps as the terrain beneath shifts and oozes, rolling ever downward; by the time he crests the sudden drop of the ravine, he’s breathless and
wheezing and covered in mud, but it could be worse.

He could be belly-side up like their only means of escape, hull facing the dissipating clouds, supplies scattered along the ground with a few silvery glints winking up at Jim under the re-emerging sun.

‘Seriously?’ Jim doesn’t know whether to direct that question to the sky or to the ground. The clouds are already on their way, unmoved by the suffering of an interloper on the planet below them; the mud is sluggish, still shifting and sloshing, but at least there isn’t much farther for the shuttle to fall.

Still, and not to get all Spock on the situation, the probability of the repairs Spock was doing to the comm systems being totally screwed is high enough already without needing to round the number up.

‘Seriously,’ Jim confirms, if only for himself. Saying it makes it real. Then, he takes a deep breath and takes the plunge, lowering himself off the precipice, hand over precarious hand until his feet hit the ground. Calling it solid would be more generous than Jim’s mood allows for, given the circumstances.

He’s up to his knees already and still only halfway to the shuttle’s final resting place—potentially not so final, considering the continued gurgling of the terrain’s uppermost layer. As long as there are no more quick, steep drops, and the river isn’t too close, they won’t have to worry about the shuttle running away from them.

It’s obvious this vessel’s not going anywhere far.

Jim grabs for a medical kit half-buried in the mud beside him, managing to fish out a protein bar and something that looks dangerously like a very important, very broken piece of machinery. He cuts his hand on a strip of stray steel and ignores the stinging until it starts to fade.

His first search and rescue mission. Not a single protein will be lost under his command.

‘Jim.’ Spock’s behind him; Jim can hear the squelching. If he was in any other kind of mood, he’d turn around to see if Spock can navigate the mud with more grace, or if it’s the grand equalizer between them. But he’s busy fishing for another disappearing protein, fighting a losing battle with insensate ooze.

‘Help me fish for supplies,’ Jim says, tossing one of the protein packets over his shoulder. ‘Unless you want to stay there and count our assets.’

‘That would be a very generous overstatement of the task at hand,’ Spock says. ‘I believe I can put my time to better use, but I will have to move quickly.’

He moves past Jim with a decisive ease that proves, no, he doesn’t get bogged down in the mud, stepping around to the far side of the shuttle where the open hatch-door has rolled half onto the ground. It doesn’t bode well for ease of getting back inside, let alone running repairs on the ship’s comms. But Spock bends at the waist and disappears inside the hull of their escape ship like a much smaller man.

Jim watches him go. He almost misses a protein as it oozes past.

‘Spock—’ The ship doesn’t look like it’s in danger of rolling any more, but the ground’s unsteady. Jim knows from his earlier attempts that he couldn’t budge that shuttle if he needed to—not even if his husband got himself sealed inside.
He doesn’t want their last words to each other to be some nonsense about protein packs.

Okay. It’s possible he’s overreacting.

‘Several of the internal processors have been damaged.’ Spock’s voice echoes from within the shuttle. ‘I am going to attempt to extract the necessary equipment so that we can continue making repairs.’ He sounds small and tinny, faraway, like a recording of himself.

It should be familiar. It just makes Jim’s stomach twist.

The distance is far from vast between them; it’s not like Spock is unreachable. But he can’t see what he’s doing and Jim’s never dealt well with uncertainty. He keeps up his work on their supplies, taking a cue from Spock and reaching into a torn hull panel to harvest some of the power cells that haven’t yet been touched by the mud.

If they’re careful and clever, they can manage this. Jim’s never been the former, but the latter comes naturally.

‘You all right in there, Spock?’ he asks, sticking the supplies he can’t carry on a flat strip of metal that makes a decent tray-slash-shelf.

‘I do not suffer from any form of claustrophobia and thus am able to maintain a clear head while prioritizing the retrieval of supplies.’

Jim mouths his own words back at him, skirting the edge of the shuttle after storing his gathered provisions to one side. He’s trying to get a better look at the hatch door, to see whether he can help Spock lever any equipment up and out.

‘Well, good for you,’ Jim says. ‘That’s not what I asked.’

There’s a pause, not too long for Jim to worry, just long enough for him to get curious.

‘I am all right in here, Jim,’ Spock replies at last, in the stilted tone of accurate repetition. Jim’s grin in response is as crooked as their luck, or the balanced angle of the shuttle.

‘Hand me out some stuff,’ Jim adds. ‘We can get something efficient going here, anyway.’

Spock obliges, passing items up through the hatch and out. Jim’s muddy fingers grip Spock’s tight each time to make sure his hold on delicate pieces of equipment is secure and Spock doesn’t mention it—whatever he feels when Jim’s fingertips brush the sides of his hands or streak mud over his knuckles. When Spock’s head finally emerges above the hatch, the stack of salvage is more than enough for both of them to haul back up the slope, not to mention how difficult it’s gonna be transporting it over the ravine.

Jim pauses to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. ‘I’d say I could use another rainstorm to get cleaned off again, but I don’t want this entire planet to revert to a mud state.’

‘That is highly unlikely, considering the multiplicity of a planet’s core composition—’ Spock begins.

‘Spock,’ Jim says, ‘the point is, it’s a lot of mud.’

Spock glances around them, then allows his gaze to return to Jim, sweeping him raw with a single look from head to knee. It’d be head to toe, a complete once-over, if most of Jim’s legs from his calf down are completely submerged. Jim tries to straighten up, to look competent, messily
handsome, possibly irresistible, but instead he feels soggy and dirty and smelly, more like a swamp thing than a sexy husband.

‘We have done all we can at the present time,’ Spock informs him. ‘It may be possible to triangulate atmospheric shifts in order to predict future weather patterns. I will attempt this upon our return to shelter.’

‘Easier said than done,’ Jim replies. When he winks, his eyelid gets stuck briefly due to a mud situation in his eye. ‘Fortunately for both of us, that happens to be my specialty.’

Whether or not Spock believes him, Jim is the first to clamber up onto the ravine, Spock once again lifting armfuls of supplies to him while Jim hides his grunts and groans. With their salvage on higher ground, Jim reaches down to take Spock’s hands, and Spock observes him once again, this time with what might be a hint of skepticism.

‘I believe I will be capable of transporting myself above the ravine, Jim.’

‘Probably, yeah.’ Definitely. ‘Humor me anyway.’

Spock lifts one hand. Jim clasps it tight.

It lacks finesse, but when Spock lands partially in Jim’s lap, Jim’s honestly smiling. Muddy, sore, bleeding for reasons he can’t remember, but happy in a reckless way, because Spock hasn’t let go of his hand.

‘You know what I’m thinking, Spock?’ Jim asks, voice hoarse for Spock related reasons rather than from exertion. ‘What I’m feeling?’

‘I would not violate your privacy in such a fashion,’ Spock replies. ‘I am certain to avoid an excess of emotional transference. There is no cause for concern.’

‘I’m not concerned.’ Jim needs to rephrase that. ‘About you reading what I’m putting out right now, anyway. There’s other stuff that concerns me. I hate mud. I never knew that about myself before. This has been an eye-opening experience.’

‘The mud is merely a natural product of the environment,’ Spock says. ‘It does not merit your hatred.’

‘Yeah?’ Jim finds himself longing for some of the distant Vulcan heat to dry the mud on his skin. It’d come off in flakes instead of clinging to him like a wet, filthy second skin. Some people pack the stuff onto their skin as a beauty regimen. Jim’s pretty sure that doesn’t translate into Vulcan ideals and if he told Spock about it, Spock’s eyebrow would rise too high to track. ‘I’m not so sure about that, Spock. Tell me if you’re still feeling the same way after you’ve been finding mud for weeks in places you didn’t know you had. Crevices.’

Spock gives Jim a bemused look. At least, it’s on its way to being bemused. There’s a spark of curiosity in those dark eyes.

Jim’s never given enough thought to all the shades of brown in the world. There’s mud on one end of the spectrum, but there’s Spock’s eyes at another, Amanda’s scarves, the dark rocks set in the decorative Vulcan sand gardens.

That weird feeling in his stomach had better be mudsickness, not homesickness. He doesn’t need more places to miss.
‘I find it unlikely that there are any areas of my body with which I am not familiar,’ Spock says. ‘In addition, it would be simple enough to calculate the odds of where mud is likeliest to collect and thereby avoid missing its presence in the first place.’

‘Maybe I’ll just have to bring you into the sonic shower with me, then,’ Jim says. ‘Since you find it so easy. Once we have a shower, that is. If—when we have a shower again.’

Spock eyes their supplies, talking a mental survey of what they’ve got. There’s mud freckling his pale cheeks, bigger dots like an Alpha Quadrant constellation under his left eye. Jim could reach out and touch it, threaten to wipe it away, if he wouldn’t just leave him dirtier afterward.

They keep ending up in one another’s laps. Life’s funny that way.

‘It would not be a sensible use of resources to construct a cleansing apparatus,’ Spock says finally. That’s the conclusion he’s come to. Like he thought Jim was asking him to build him his very own jungle shower.

‘So what you’re saying is, we’ve got to stay filthy for a while longer.’ Jim scratches the back of his neck, coming away with mud under his nails. ‘For the good of the mission.’

‘I would not term our current predicament as the result of any mission,’ Spock says. ‘However, if it encourages you to think of this as a Federation exercise, then I cannot see the harm in encouraging such a practice.’

‘You think I’m that delicate?’

‘I was under the impression that it was a condition of your human romantic traditions to attend to the comfort of your partner.’

Jim levers himself onto his elbows with a squelch. ‘You’re a pretty good husband, Spock,’ he says.

That’s another shade of brown to consider: the color that shifts and changes beneath the outermost layer, little flecks of colorless warmth that somehow change the hue of Spock’s eyes entirely. Jim reaches out despite himself, with the least dirty part of his hand—the heel of his palm—and brushes the mud constellation off Spock’s skin in gratitude.

Spock doesn’t even blink.

‘C’mon, that shouldn’t surprise you.’ Jim hates to do it, but he pulls himself free of Spock’s weight, limp arms protesting as he grabs an armful of salvage. It’s now or never, and there’s no way he’s going down this soon. ‘You studied hard enough, right? Don’t try to tell me you were unprepared.’

Spock rises, showing no signs of tiring. It’s infuriating, but it lights a spark under Jim’s ass all the same—giving him a challenge to live up to, an impossible standard to throw himself against. So what if he keeps falling short? He’s used to that, a little piece of home he can take with him until he manages, finally, to prove it wrong. ‘There are numerous methods of study required for a thorough topical mastery. Having prepared myself to the best of my ability, there remained variables even I had to admit would be unpredictable.’

‘Yeah, that’s me. Unpredictable. Although a better way of putting it is spontaneous. On Earth, people tend to like that kind of thing.’ Jim glances over his shoulder to find Spock’s eyes fixed ahead instead of a stolen look. He almost misses a step. ‘They even ask for it in a partner.’
‘Fascinating,’ Spock says.

‘You’re not all about spontaneity, huh, Spock?’

‘If you are attempting to interpret the meaning of my words as insulting to you in some way,’ Spock replies, placing his load of equipment on dry ground beneath the tarp at last, ‘then I will not be able to comply with your wishes and interpret those qualities which are fundamental to your personality as somehow undesirable.’

Jim groans, pretending it’s equal parts frustration and weariness when inside, the weariness might be winning out. He flexes his hands, noticing the scrape on his knuckles all over again, shaking out the sting. ‘You’re a good husband,’ he amends, ‘but you’re not so great when it comes to paying somebody a compliment.’

Spock’s already begun to sort the rescued items into sections by functionality while Jim stands behind him, admiring the way he works about as much as he admires the shape of Spock’s shoulders and the dark fall of his hair over the pale nape of his neck. Jim’s neck is muddy. So is the not-so-dark fall of his hair. And Spock’s got their proteins separate from their weapons separate from communications material and power sources.

Jim has to ask himself if the real shame in this scenario is Spock never making it to Starfleet, not him.

‘Like what you think of my body,’ Jim adds, searching for any physical reaction. ‘Or my eyes. Or my hands or... Well, my spontaneity’s out of the question, but you get the idea.’

‘Shall I speak to the juiciness of your posterior?’ Spock asks.

Jim chokes on nothing. ‘Oh my God. You really don’t forget anything.’

‘The message in question was a particularly memorable one,’ Spock says. ‘I had never been addressed in such a manner previous to our correspondence.’

‘Well, I would hope not,’ Jim says. ‘Otherwise I’d have some Vulcan butt to kick.’

‘You are at least consistent in your fixation on the humanoid posterior,’ Spock replies. ‘Is it necessary for me to inform you that your jealousy, while metaphorical in nature, is nonetheless misplaced?’

‘It never hurts to say it again,’ Jim points out.

‘Of course.’ Spock lifts a phaser to inspect it. There’s mud in the barrel—Jim can see it plugging up all kinds of necessary conduits. ‘Your appreciation for a fact repeated has not gone unnoticed.’

When he lifts his eyes to Jim, his expression contracts sharply, mouth quirking as if taking him into consideration for the first time. He keeps the phaser pointed to the ground, a detail Jim’s immeasurably grateful for. Right now it’s easy to imagine them both as Federation-approved members of Starfleet, Spock in deep blues that wouldn’t bring out his eyes and Jim in that yellow uniform that doesn’t do anyone any favors.

The uniforms don’t leave much to the imagination. It’d make him look chunky. Vulcan clothes, with their soft folds, are a lot more forgiving.

Hell to get mud out of them, though.
Perhaps you would benefit from a trip to the river.

Jim looks down at his chest. He’s still bare from the waist down, coated in brown, wet earth like it’s body paint. ‘I’m more mud than man, huh?’

‘That is not what I said.’ Spock tilts his head, eyes flicking over Jim’s torso in a look that mimics Jim’s earlier examination. It’s kind of hot, even if Spock’s probably just checking Jim out to gauge how much hosing down it’s going to take to get him all sweet-smelling again. ‘We will require fresh water. You may gauge, at the same time as bathing, whether the water from the nearby river is safe to drink, or whether it will require purification.’

He searches in a pile of scientific equipment Jim didn’t bother to classify yet, coming up with an old-fashioned tricorder, along with other Starfleet-issue medical supplies Jim hasn’t seen employed in years. He has a basic understanding of what molecular structures to look for—strains of bacteria that’d flay them from the insides out, for example—studying over Bones’ shoulder when avoiding some duty of state or even basic familial responsibilities. Spock’s right that they’re gonna need water. Man or Vulcan—neither of them can live on field rations alone.

‘You sure you can trust me with such a vital task?’ Jim asks. He slings the tricorder over one shoulder, packing a couple test vials and other materials into a satchel Spock loads him down with. ‘I do have my head up my ass. Practically.’

That’s kind of what Spock said.

‘I will busy myself with the restructuring of our shelter.’ Spock watches Jim for a beat longer than he needs to. ‘I trust in your abilities, Jim.’

‘Goodbye kiss,’ Jim replies. He taps himself one-fingered on his bottom lip, careful not to get any mud on there and ruin his chances. ‘It’s traditional. Yeah, even if the goodbye is only meant to be a brief one. Humans are sentimental—I mean, you know that already, and I’m gonna do my best not to be in front of other Vulcans to keep from embarrassing you, but right now... Seems like a waste of an opportunity if we didn’t.’

Spock straightens, taking a step forward. Jim’s throat tightens up. Maybe it’s really that simple. Maybe all Jim has to do is say what he wants, what he needs, what he’s looking for, and they can start from an honest place. No games. No caution. A little, healthy embarrassment to keep things from getting too easy—but he’s never thought about telling somebody the truth, not in this context. It’s so vulnerable.

But Spock’s kissing him, so the vulnerability turns into something sexy and Jim leans into Spock’s chest before he remembers not to get Spock dirty. There are other ways to instigate intimacy, like Spock’s tongue making the first move this time, the tip on Jim’s bottom lip—exactly where Jim tapped it as a suggestion. So precise. So weird.

So not surprising that Spock’s learning to be a great kisser.

When Spock steps back, Jim takes a moment to catch his breath by tracing his lip with his own tongue, following the same path Spock took. ‘Toss me that phaser, while you’re at it—the one that’s jammed up with all that mud. I’ll see what I can do about fixing it up for use. We might need it to warm some rocks tonight, after all.’

‘I had imagined,’ Spock says simply, ‘that we would keep one another warm in the fashion you had once suggested.’
‘Oh.’ Jim’s throat threatens to close on the word, sending it out like a squeak. He clears what’s lodged in there, taking a step back, flashing Spock a smile. ‘Oh. Yeah. That too. And I probably don’t need the phaser if I run into any native life forms; I’ll just take ‘em out with my bare hands.’ Jim holds them up, wide palms and short fingers, wiggling them and hoping that’s not lewd so much as it is enticing, even promiscuous.

Spock gives him the phaser, anyway.

‘I could do it with my bare hands,’ Jim adds. ‘Whatever, uh, it might turn out to be.’ He backs his way out from under the tarp, turning just in time to slip his way back down the slope.

Leaving Spock behind sucks, but it’s the promise of getting back to him he’s looking forward to. Once nightfall comes and the air cools the mud into hardening, he might even be able to make it back to their shelter looking like he bathed in the first place.

Jim gauges the angle of the sun over the treetops as he walks, figuring he’s got a good half hour before it dips below the horizon line, and pats the hull of the shuttle on his way past it. The tricorder thumps against his hipbone with every other step. It’s eerily quiet, but once the sound of rushing water becomes audible, the place could be Risa.

Or at least Risa’s muddy, uncultured cousin.

There’s still not a beach to be seen. Not a Risan to be seen, either, which is more the pity given how some of them look. Jim’s not exactly lusting after bathing beauties in sarongs these days but that doesn’t mean he can’t appreciate a nice view every now and then. It’s good for the soul, keeps up morale, and god knows they could use a little of that on this planet.

More morale, less mud. It makes for a catchy slogan.

The river, when he comes to it, isn’t what he expected. It’s fat and tinted green from the reflections of the trees along the water’s edge, winding lazily through the forest floor. About a quarter mile from Jim, it’s frothing white around exposed rocks, picking up speed as it drops a level. It’s not enough for a waterfall but it’d be more than enough to batter Jim up real good if he stumbled over it.

He’s gotten the knack of gauging what can injure him and what won’t, based on Bones’ expostulations.

And Bones would really hate this place.

That’s what Jim’s telling himself to keep from thinking about how much more Bones would hate a Klingon prison camp or wherever he is right now. Somewhere without Jim to keep him positive.

He’s not taking water samples on an unnamed Class M planet, that’s for sure. Jim squints, crouching down in the damp grass to fiddle with the tricorder, taking a sampling vial and preparing to run the necessary tests.

The water’s cool, running clear over his hands and into the miniature beaker. That’s doesn’t necessarily mean it won’t try to poison them, but it’s a start. Jim’s not about to stick more than a hand inside before he’s cleared the river for parasites, both visible and microscopic. The last thing he needs is to dive under headfirst to wash off some dirt and come out covered in sucking Aldebaran mud leeches.

Jim closes his eyes, fitting the beaker into the tricorder to let the scan run. He checks to make sure the lights are all flashing in the correct sequence before letting his eyes slip shut, breathing in the
scent of cool damp and wet leaves.

In the distant, something rustles.

‘Spock?’

Jim stands, straightening out of his crouch before his legs start to cramp too badly. The tricorder’s still going.

‘You finish early or did you decide I couldn’t be trusted with our water supply after all?’

There’s no answer. There’s another whisper of something solid against the leaves, but this one comes from across the river. Jim puts his hand on his phaser before he remembers he hasn’t cleaned it out yet.

Jim’s hands don’t shake. He doesn’t have enough time to register surprise at that, too much of a fight-or-flight kind of adrenaline to register pleasure, but he takes notice of it. His hands are steady on the phaser, movements slow and deliberate, nothing too quick to draw excess attention. No sudden movements. He just needs to get some of the mud out of the system and he has to do it slowly.

The tricorder scan beeps its conclusions. Jim glances down briefly, while scraping cool, wet mud out of a clogged groove, to note that the water’s not poisonous, and there are no flesh-eating bacteria to be found. He nudges the tricorder farther from the river’s edge, water sparkling beneath the slowly setting sun.

The bushes on the far bank on the river shift and shiver, more centrally located than if they were stirred by a simple, lazy breeze. He thinks he sees a hint of green—or it could be some of the sweat mixed with mud getting in his eyes, a trick of the light playing over the jeweled leaves.

How much mud could there possibly be in one simple phaser? Jim claws gobs of it loose from around the phaser settings, finally managing to pry it toward stun.

For all he knows, there could be a fluffy bunny or a delicious bird or even a simple, non-poisonous, adorable frog hopping from bush-branch to bush-branch over there. It’s not necessary to expect the worst—but it is a part of the Starfleet training he happens to know by heart to anticipate it and be prepared for it.

Jim takes a deep breath.

The phaser’s system is still jammed.

He turns it over against his palm, searching for something he must’ve missed. It could be internal damage—which would require taking the weapon apart completely, and that might not be the wisest move. Still, what other option does he have?

Jim finds the catch, breaking the phaser apart into its main components, glancing up now and then to track the rustling movement on the other side of the river’s bank.

*Fluffy bunny. Come on, fluffy bunny.*

In his peripheral vision, Jim spots another streak of incongruous green, standing out between the bluer tones of the vegetation, half shadow and half too-quick to focus on. That doesn’t exactly inspire confidence in the fluffy bunny prayer.
Jim’s still hoping for the fluffy bunny.

Sweat drips down the side of his face, cold and clammy. He feels it trickle along his throat as he finds a muddy plug stuck to the interior of the phaser barrel, breaking it loose in two smaller chunks. A slight breeze does register on his skin, just enough to cool the heat of urgency, as he begins to reassemble the phaser, just like Gary taught him to years ago.

He’s doing this.

He can do this.

The phaser’s in two pieces instead of approximately seventeen when Jim raises his eyes to the far bank, just in time to connect a particular sight to the sound of cracking branches and tearing leaves: a single, reptilian hand slicing through the underbrush, followed by what has to be the galaxy’s largest lizard bursting loose as quickly as a phaser beam.

To his credit, Jim doesn’t drop the two pieces of the phaser. He’s clutching them tight, one in each hand, at the moment of impact, the lizard surging against his chest, water flying everywhere, Jim’s ribs definitely cracking.

Jim tries to remember whether any of the Starfleet simulation modules had a run where you have to put together a phaser while being thrown around by giant, man-eating death lizards. Probably not. The thing’s only in two pieces—he just has to slam tab B into slot A—but Jim can barely suck air into his lungs. He’s half-underwater, struggling to get to his feet when the lizard barrels into him again from the side, knocking Jim onto his back. Pain sparks in his spine and between his ribs, where he lands against the rocks at the bottom of the river. It’s shallower than he thought. Also, not poisonous.

He keeps the phaser above water.

Good, this is—good. He’s surveying the landscape, just like he told Spock he would. He’s learned the depth of the water; the contents are processed somewhere in the tricorder he dropped on the bank. He’s discovered a brand new, aggressive species currently splashing toward him. He’s practically a science officer.

It’s tough struggling to his feet with the separate parts of the phaser still in his hands, but he manages, slamming his elbows to the wet rocks and hauling himself up by his forearms. The lizard’s tail swipes through the surface of the river. Jim can’t gauge it accurately when it’s on all fours, but it looks almost seven feet long—tail not included. Its scales are bright green with a stripe of purple down its back. That’s as much as Jim manages to gather for his own edification before he throws himself to one side, mindful of the drop-off to his back.

The terrain’s too rocky for him to manage a complete roll. The nearest cluster of slick stones catch his shoulder instead, socket jolting. It’s a sprain at worst, not pulled all the way out of place. It doesn’t hang when he stands, which Bones always says is a blessed sign.

The lizard pounces on the spot where Jim was standing bare moments ago.

‘Hey.’ Jim coughs, wiping mud and water from his face. He struggles to put the phaser together, waiting for the telltale click. If the circuitry’s gotten too damp it won’t fire anyway, but there’s only one way to find out. Starfleet officers aren’t supposed to shoot first and ask questions later.

Jim’s no officer, but he doesn’t know what princes do in these situations. Call for a bodyguard, probably.
‘Hey there, boy.’ The lizard lifts its head from the river, water sloughing off its scales. ‘You... I probably smell like food to you, huh? You guys eat mud?’

There’s a rustling in the trees now, through the thick shrubbery that’s growing near the drop-off.

Jim has two options as to what that noise heralds, both of them equally unpleasant.

One: that the lizard has friends nearby, allies, reinforcements, hungry pals looking for their share mud-flavored meat, converging on his location to outnumber him and tear him to tender, bite-sized pieces. It’ll serve them right when they get an irresistible craving for chicken parm after they suck all that flavor out of his cracked bones.

The second option might be worse: that Spock’s too-keen sense of hearing and his overly-logical devotion to duty mean he’s on his way to Jim’s aid, and this lizard is huge, and Jim has to do something before Spock has a chance of joining him and getting hurt too.

For all he’s tried to explain to Spock that marriage is a partnership, about trusting each other to look after each other, about standing together against whatever comes their way—the idea of letting anyone else, especially Spock, face this animal down is worse than whatever Jim imagines its teeth will feel like on his flesh, how much strength it has to have behind its snarling jaws. There’s not enough time to measure that impulse or explain those instincts, much less determine if their motivation is noble or selfish. It’s self-sacrificing, that’s for sure.

‘Hey! Hey, I’m waiting!’ Jim waves his arms over his head, using the extra motion to draw the lizard’s attention away from the new source of noise and try to piece the phaser together again at the same time. The mechanism refuses to catch; Jim doesn’t think his hands are shaking but they’ve gotta be. He knows he took the phaser apart the right way.

The lizard turns, facing him down from little more than ten feet away. Jim squints, locking eyes with it, drawing himself up to his full height—and refusing to admit phaser defeat. The next time he tries could mean success—or the time after that; the time after that. His fingers are numb; he wishes his back and shoulder were, too.

This is gonna make one hell of a story for later. Jim has to keep telling himself that, anything to steady him where he stands. The lizard’s tail flicks from right to left and a long, black tongue snake out between its teeth, licking its lizard lips at the promise of its next meal. Jim can see its muscles bunching, tensing, building up for a sudden, swift pounce.

Shows what Gary knew about the adventures Jim had in store for him.

Jim grins recklessly, finding the steadiness he was searching for.

‘Yeah,’ he says, still fumbling with the two halves of the weapon he could really use right about now, ‘that’s right. Look how delicious and meaty I am. I’ve been in training. You’re gonna love it.’

There’s too much mud, too much water. His fingers slip on the metal and he nearly drops both pieces. It’s all the distraction that the lizard needs to take advantage of; Jim sees the shadow rising with barely enough time for his breath to catch before the lizard’s on top of him, claws sinking into his shoulders as it drags him down.

But despite the pain—and the fear; there’s plenty of that, colder and far deeper than the river water runs, almost peacefully blinding—Jim still hears the telltale snap of metal slotting perfectly into metal.

The phaser’s whole again.
Jim fires.

The lizard stiffens, but it’s too big to be fully stunned. It shakes its head like a confused puppy, blinking unfocused eyes. Jim fires again, maybe on purpose, maybe because his finger’s spasm and he’s desperate. He’ll never really know.

The lizard shudders, stumbling over its own numbed front and doing a powerful somersault that sends it crashing straight into Jim again.

Yeah. He probably should’ve thought that one through.

Spock would’ve seen it coming. Jim’s physics always suffers when it comes to calculating the exact forward momentum of an opponent.

They both go over the lip of the river; it’s a short drop, like Jim thought, though the impact’s hell with the unconscious body of a giant reptile on top of him. They land with a splash, the water closing over Jim’s head before he can brace himself and gasp for air. The collision sends another shooting pain through his cracked ribs and knocks the remaining air from his lungs; for a second, it’s like Jim’s the one who was on the other end of the phaser, lying on his back and staring up at the dappled forest canopy.

It’s almost peaceful.

Or it would be, without the sleeping lizard grunts and the rush of the river in Jim’s ears, not to mention the big, slick rocks digging into Jim’s back and the blood trickling down his cheek.

He thinks that’s blood. Could be mud. Or hell, more water.

If there’s another lizard out there, he’s gonna die. For all he knows, this is a hunting technique—let the first guy get stunned, then come eat the prey out from under his unconscious body. Jim’s been the victim of a cunning lizard trap.

He might’ve hit his head on the way down. He should probably look into that if he ever manages to get out of his little predicament, which hinges on if he ever manages to get up again.

Maybe he should’ve called for Spock after all.

The phaser’s still in Jim’s hand. If he could wriggle it out from under the lizard, then he could defend himself against anything else that might be out there. He’s amazed that he got it working in the first place.

That’d be something to brag about. He’d put it in his captain’s log—if he had one.

There’s a thump from the high ground, the creak of something pushing through the branches, whispers of a body against leaves.

‘Is that your lizard buddy?’ Jim squints, squirming under the massive, scaly weight pinning him in place to try and work the phaser free. ‘You think he’s coming to find out what happened to you—maybe finish me off? Get revenge? A free meal?’

It’s impossible to hear anything over the river water splashing all around him. The first lizard didn’t make much of a sound before it jumped him, after all.

‘What you guys really need is some sort of hunting call.’ Water sloshes into his open mouth and he chokes on it, getting it out before he swallows it into his lungs. It’s not the smartest move to keep
talking, but that’s what’s keeping Jim in the moment. Remembering who you are isn’t easy when you’re half-drowning under a sleeping lizard.

They should put that in the Starfleet training pamphlets.

‘I don’t know what it’d sound like,’ Jim continues, the leafy greenage high overhead swaying either in the wind or due to Jim’s vision swimming while the rest of him can’t, ‘but I mean, you gotta— gotta give other species a fighting chance, at least. You guys are out here in the middle of nowhere, so I guess you don’t know the rules, but that’s fair. You’re bigger, stronger, you’ve got the claws, and I’ve got—’

The lizard moves.

Jim feels the jolt of adrenaline race through a body that’s too tired out to sustain the impulses beyond a helpless twitching. The lizard’s moving, which means it’s regaining consciousness, and even the sunlight is darkening.

Jim doesn’t even have the energy to brace himself for a new round of impact. He doesn’t want to close his eyes.

The shadow above him lifts. The weight off Jim’s chest feels so damn good in comparison to broken and bruised ribs being crushed he could almost cry. He wheezes instead, lungs shouting for more air. And still, the lizard doesn’t attack.

In place of a redoubled effort, there’s a splash downriver; Jim registers it, followed by speckles of river foam on the side of his face, beading on his lashes. He squints. Maybe he stunned the brains out of the lizard or it decided it was beat and ran away, which seems totally implausible, but hope’s a tenacious thing.

Or—and this becomes apparent when a new shadow overhead coheres into a familiar shape—it’s because the lizard never regained consciousness at all and Spock, with his super Vulcan strength, bodily lifted it off Jim and possibly tossed it to the side.

‘Damn,’ Jim says. His voice cracks. He clears his throat. ‘I mean, hey. Tell me you saw at least some of the action. Water’s not poisonous, by the way.’ To prove the point, Jim spits out a mouthful and winces as a split in his lip opens further. ‘Giant lizards. Who knew?’

Spock accepts the barrage of idle chatter without comment—or expression—kneeling at Jim’s side in the water. Jim focuses everything on his face and the color of his eyes, the new shadows buried beneath the familiar ones, Jim squinting up into his face as Spock touches the side of Jim’s jaw.

‘You should see the other guy,’ Jim adds. ‘...the other lizard. I fixed the phaser. What’re you doing, Spock? I feel tingly.’

‘I am attempting to alleviate some of the pain,’ Spock replies simply, ‘so that I may transport you without demanding you endure excess discomfort.’ He pauses, briefly, and Jim has time to locate the source of the tingly feeling. Not a hypo, but Spock’s fingertips. There’s something soothing behind his touch that washes over Jim like the opposite of an icy cold river. ‘Had we initiated our bond earlier, this would not have happened.’

‘Uh-uh. No way. I was protecting the shelter. Defending my husband. This is gonna look so good for Vulcan-Human relations.’

‘You are delirious.’
Spock bends lower, settling his hands on either side of Jim’s chest to lift him from under his arms. He hoists him onto his feet easier than he hoisted the lizard—which wasn’t a le matya, but Spock’s got some experience dealing with venomous reptiles from his home world.

Jim hopes that thing wasn’t poisonous. It didn’t bite him, but you never know. He could’ve gotten scratched under the surface of the water where his skin’s already numb from the cold.

‘Me?’ Jim asks. ‘Why—just because I did something politically sound for once?’

‘Because you believe that your actions have anything to do with the political arena.’

Spock lets Jim lean into him. It’s not a decision so much as a controlled slump that never quite coalesces into a faint. He doesn’t feel faint. It’s just the difference between lying down and standing is a shift in equilibrium he’s not prepared for, blood swooping cross-wise through his body where it started to pool on one side. He still can’t tell where he’s bleeding and what’s rivulets of water running over his face and down his neck.

He’s hoping most of that is from the river. Spock would’ve said something if Jim was hemorrhaging all over the forest floor. He sways and grabs Spock’s shoulder. Meanwhile, his husband’s still got a tight grip on his chest, keeping him steady while Jim does his best impression of a stunned reptile.

‘I’m very ticklish,’ Jim says. ‘Did you know that?’

‘You had not mentioned it in our correspondence.’ Spock shifts his hold on Jim anyway, settling one of Jim’s floppy arms around his steady, stiff shoulders. ‘Nor did it come up as a result of our conversations on Vulcan.’

‘That’s because it’s the kind of thing you’re supposed find out on your own,’ Jim says. ‘Tactile, hands-on observation.’

‘I will take your word for it,’ Spock replies.

Jim’s legs are clumsy underneath him, knees wobbling like a baby sehlat’s. The pain in his ribs comes back when he starts to move, redoubling as he sucks in a broken breath of air. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. If the atmosphere’s finally working in his favor, then the fauna’s actively trying to murder him.

Jim’s entire torso feels like one big bruise, feet slipping and squelching in the mud as Spock guides him out of the river and onto the bank, moving them—painfully slowly and just plain painfully—to higher ground.

‘Wait—’ Jim tugs at Spock’s shirt, hauling him to a sudden stop. ‘The tricorder… I dropped it. We’d better make sure I haven’t contaminated our water supply.’

‘I will retrieve the tricorder.’ Spock braces Jim against a large rock and Jim watches him survey the surrounding area, noting the moment he pinpoints the tricorder’s location. He does as he says, looping its strap over one shoulder so the tricorder itself rests on the opposite hip. After briefly conferring with the information it presents, he returns to Jim’s side.

‘You’re good at this, too,’ Jim tells him. Because apparently despite knowing how unlikely it is he’ll receive reciprocal complimentary offerings, he’s still determined to give Spock all the credit his Vulcan upbringing never did. Eventually it’ll have to wear him down. Nobody dislikes being told they’re great, not even Vulcans. Not when it’s more than impersonal flattery. ‘You could’ve been a science officer in Starfleet, you know. First Vulcan to join up. They don’t know what
they’re missing.’

Spock touches Jim’s feverishly warm cheek with his cool fingertips. It’s a relief; Jim leans into it, then into Spock’s chest.

‘If I were to carry you the rest of the way to shelter after a quick scan of our surroundings to ascertain whether or not there are any other reptiles present, would it in some way impact negatively upon your sense of self-pride?’ Spock asks.

Jim’s train of thought struggles to keep up with what Spock’s trying to say. ‘Nah,’ he says finally. ‘My pride’s solid as a rock—and I should know. That lizard thing taught me just how solid some rocks can be. If you wanna carry me over the threshold of our magical jungle tent, go right ahead.’

He tries to grin. Spock’s lack of any reciprocal expression could mean nothing, or it could mean Jim’s abysmal failure.

What was it Bones once told him?

*It looks worse when you smile.*

Jim misses him, briefly but acutely, before he shoves those unproductive thoughts down and distracts himself with Spock instead: the play of hard and soft in his profile as he scans for other nearby hostiles; the sun finally disappearing overhead; the darkness that turns his face into a canvas of shadows, enough to make Jim’s heart ache more than his fractured bones and countless bruises.

‘Spock,’ Jim says. He doesn’t recognize the sound of voice when he says it, hoarse and deep. It’s enough to make Spock look up, swift, momentarily rife with concern, before the emotion passes like an illusion. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to—I just wanted to say your name. That’s all. I’m fine. I mean, I’m not worse.’ Jim swallows. Vulcans aren’t the only ones who know how to choke down a feeling and repress the hell out of it. ‘Nah, I’m fine.’

‘There are no life form readings within an appropriately safe radius,’ Spock replies. ‘I will now commence your transportation.’

Jim helps in the small, mostly useless ways he can, wrapping his arms around Spock’s shoulders and hiding a wince as Spock jostles him into a lift. He’s strong all right, and there’s something sexy about it—something Jim can appreciate in an out-of-body way, at the very least.

‘If I’m too heavy, you can blame Bones.’ Jim tucks his words and his mouth and his face against Spock’s throat. ‘He’s the one who put me on that diet.’

‘You are clearly no heavier than the hostile reptile, Jim.’

‘Yeah, hey—you picked that thing up too like it didn’t weigh a thing. That’s impressive. That’s hot.’

‘The removal of an unknown and dangerous life form was not an inherently attractive act.’

‘Says who? Logic, right? Pfft.’ Jim hopes that tickles Spock’s skin, just a little.

‘If you are attempting to distract me, may I point out the illogic in attempting to distract me while I am currently bearing the responsibility for your trajectory as well as my own.’

‘Hey, it’s not my fault you’re having trouble focusing,’ Jim says, in spite of the part where that’s
exactly what Spock said. ‘I’m just trying to be entertaining.’

‘There is no need to offer diversion.’ Spock readjusts his grip, stepping over the fallen trunk of some long-dead tree. It’s a little embarrassing to feel like a training doll in Spock’s arms, but it’d be even worse to stumble and bring himself down based on nothing but his own stupid pride. ‘I do not require stimulation beyond the task at hand.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Jim wiggles his eyebrows, ignoring how the motion tugs at the scrapes on his face. ‘You find carrying me particularly stimulating, Spock?’

‘That is not what I said.’

‘No, it’s just what I inferred.’

Jim’s proud of himself, in some ways, for keeping up the banter. That must mean he’s doing all right, that he didn’t hit his head too hard on the rocks. It was his torso that took the brunt of the damage, though he can’t remember if that lizard ever connected with his chin.

It’d be a shame if it did. It’s always been a great chin.

‘You should refrain from speaking unnecessarily,’ Spock says. ‘Until I am able to medically assess your condition, we do not know what damage it may cause.’

He turns them to shoulder aside some branches, keeping them from smacking Jim full in the face. For someone so dense, he’s being incredibly attentive. It figures Jim would have to get beat up by some unnamed species of reptile just to get a little consideration.

‘You can’t tell from your fingers?’ Jim asks, forgetting what Spock just told him.

That’s OK. He’s not the boss of Jim. He’s just Jim’s husband.

He squints when they step out of the forest, passing the clearing they made where the shuttle crash-landed, all those shorn-off trunks and branches buried in the mud. Spock doesn’t get bogged down in it the same way Jim would. There’s barely a wobble. Jim’s impressed, possibly concussed.

Still, he’s quiet after Spock suggests it, tuning out to listen to the throbbing pulse in his head, the faint rhythm where it beats from his chest. His elbow’s slipped between their bodies, trapped somewhere close to Spock’s heart. Jim never read what made Vulcans evolve that way, whether it’s a desert thing or some other inclination. Jim twists his hand to rest against it.

It’s the least he can do. At the moment, it’s also the most.

Spock gets him into the shelter without even huffing once during the ascent and lays him down in the corner they’ve designated as the bed. From the inside, Jim can see where Spock’s restructured the pylons, setting them up so the roof’s slanted instead of flat.

His husband’s a genius. And not bad as a doctor, either.

Even if Bones would never recognize his methods as valid.

Jim watches as Spock gathers medical kits and supplies, his eyes fixed on every motion. ‘I’m good,’ he says, although Spock doesn’t check on him over his shoulder. ‘Still conscious. Using you as my point of reference. Something to think about. God, Spock, sometimes it’s like I can’t stop thinking about you. Must be why I build up so damn much inside my own head that I...’ Jim hisses over a wince. ‘Wouldn’t have it any other way, though. I’m not complaining. I’m trying to give
you a real compliment you can’t just brush aside as unnecessary, or— or—’

Spock settles in at Jim’s side on his knees, laying out his findings in perfect order. Jim reaches after him, not bothering to fight the strangest urge to comfort Spock—which is the height of his illogic, if anything. Trying to give reassurance to someone who doesn’t need or want it, when he’s the one who’s injured.

Vulcans are probably right about humans. Total weirdoes as a whole.

‘Do not trouble yourself.’ Spock takes Jim’s hand without a pause—that’s progress, or Jim’s finally annoyed him enough to stop caring about the usual touch-telepathy protocol—and lowers it to the ground. After that, his cool, gentle fingers brush the side of Jim’s cheek, along the bone of his jaw to his temple. ‘Sleep, Jim,’ he says.

And Jim sleeps.

*
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Establishing contact.

Chapter Notes

RAPLATPLAT at tumblr drew this loveliness inspired by the last chapter:
Hope everyone is keeping warm. IT IS FREEZING HERE.

Even before—when waking up meant a messy, warm, king-sized bed with plenty of pillows, early afternoon sunlight filtering in through the curtains, the promise of breakfast and a sonic shower
and sneaking out to talk to his friends in Starfleet about what they learned in training that morning—Jim’s never liked the experience. It’s too much of a disappointment, as a general rule, to go from the free-form relaxation of dreams to the structure of waking life. Eventually, after an hour or two of preparation, Jim forgets that disappointment, finding some way to make his own kind of fun. The trouble is, it doesn’t last.

He hoped, and couldn’t stop hoping, and still hopes, that all that would change with somebody to wake up next to.

If Spock would ever deign to wait for him to wake up before leaving.

Jim stretches, then immediately regrets it. This isn’t a king-sized bed; he’s not on a bed at all. And even if he was, his ribs feel funny, more like splintered toothpicks than actual bone. The surface beneath him is solid and unforgiving and Jim hurts in a thousand different places.

‘Oof,’ he croaks.

A shadow beside him stirs in the absolute darkness. Jim knows it’s Spock before he has any reason to know it’s him and despite the throbbing pain in his elbow, he reaches after that shadow until his hand is gripping fabric.

‘It is presently oh three hundred,’ Spock says softly. Jim wouldn’t say it’s gentle, but it’s considerate. ‘I have made significant progress on a comm system while you rested. You have been unconscious for a little over thirty hours.’ There’s a pause, maybe for Jim to process that information, maybe not. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Could be awesomer,’ Jim replies.

‘Awesomer,’ Spock repeats. He sits back on his heels; Jim can practically see him slotting the word into its proper context in his head. ‘This is an inappropriate conjugation of the word awesome.’

‘I can conjugate all kinds of things inappropriately, Spock.’ Jim tries to sit up, then immediately regrets it when all the sitting-up parts of him stop working simultaneously. ‘I’m—oof—talented that way.’

‘Once again, Jim, I must caution you against needless movement.’

There’s a foil blanket folded under Jim’s head like a crinkly pillow. He settles back down onto it with more care than he took sitting up. When he pushes his hand against his ribs to test their structural integrity like he’s a rickety shelter Spock grips his wrist, dragging him away.

It’s the kind of deliberate contact Jim’s talked himself out of ever expecting from his husband. He must be doing worse than he thought. Either that, or he’s finally discovered someone who’s a more fastidious doctor than Bones, the medical terror of San Francisco.

That seems like a disloyal thought. Jim’s lost track of how long they’ve been crashed here but he can’t feel sorry for himself when he doesn’t know what happened to that entire crew. Here he is enjoying delusions of a honeymoon—albeit one plagued by treacherous mud and deadly lizards—and they’ve been stuck outside of the Klingon attack loop.

Jim’s still not sure what the Klingons could’ve been planning. Both he and Spock are second sons, valued as hostages but not much when it comes to the destabilization of Federation power. That was Jim’s dad—King George was a loss on a galactic level, the ripples of it felt more deeply than Jim’s personal, private hurt. After him, there’s still Jim’s mom and Sam. And Jim would think they’d want to take out Sarek before worrying about Spock.
Maybe they just saw a royal Vulcan ship and shot without thinking.

If that’s the case, he really doesn’t want to think about the chances of those left on board. Nothing seems bleaker than coming up against a bunch of disappointed Klingons.

Spock releases his wrist. Jim squeezes his eyes tight; when they start to water, he can blame it on the pressure.

‘You said you’re making headway on the comm system?’

Spock settles on his knees at Jim’s side. It’s a welcome sight, Jim’s eyes adjusting to the dark.

‘Absent any expected interruptions, I was able to work at a much quicker pace than my previous efforts.’

‘Without me around to distract you, you mean,’ Jim translates.

‘That is what I said,’ Spock replies.

Jim decides to be the bigger man and ignore the slight. ‘But you haven’t made contact yet.’

‘I will require a stronger signal, as well as additional battery power, in order to reach the nearest Federation outpost.’

‘You could always hook the port nacelles up to the comm system. That is, if we can jumpstart ‘em into working again.’

Jim can’t see Spock’s face clearly in the darkness, but he’s positive Spock’s eyebrow just shot up.

‘You speak as though you are currently fit for such a procedure.’

‘I’ve got a good doctor.’ Jim almost winces. ‘Two good doctors, actually. One good doctor who isn’t here; one good husband who is.’

‘You are not currently fit for such a procedure,’ Spock clarifies.

‘Doesn’t matter, does it? I’ve gotta be,’ Jim replies.

Spock’s silence lingers. Jim wants his hand again but despite the situation, he reminds himself that he could be asking for too much. It’s about mutual compromise, not Jim taking a mile when he’s offered an inch. He holds still instead of reaching out to hold Spock’s fingers.

‘Nevertheless,’ Spock continues at last, ‘as I am aware that leaving you alone in your present state would be negligent, the matter of the port nacelles will have to wait until such a time as you are capable of defending yourself during my brief absence. Do you require nourishment, Jim?’

Jim’s stomach rumbles. He’s surprised that it remembers how, and also that the sudden churning doesn’t agitate any bruises or bone fractures. ‘Uh,’ Jim says.

‘Proper sustenance is necessary to promote a human body’s internal repairs.’ Spock stands—Jim hates that immediate absence, and hates how young and small he feels in the moment of hating it—but at least it doesn’t last. Spock’s back soon enough, Jim spotting his motions as a shadow against darker shadows, a crinkle of silver foil when Spock retrieves a protein and peels off the packaging.

Jim chews around a split lip and a stiff jaw, finally allowing the protein to soften in his mouth before he attempts to chew it again. It’s not easy, but it’s easier, and those are the concessions you have to make in situations like these. Presumably. Situations like these aren’t even in Starfleet
‘Thanks for bandaging me up,’ Jim says, not sure how long the only sound in the shelter has been his jaw working overtime. ‘And watching over me. Seriously—thirty hours, Spock?’

‘It was the amount of time I deemed optimal to your recovery.’

‘Wait, you mean—I was sleeping ‘cause you put me under?’

‘Had you regained consciousness, your recognition of your body’s pain would have proved detrimental to your body’s ability to heal itself. Absent the benefits of a Vulcan healing trance, a proper period of true rest was...’ Spock pauses and Jim recognizes the pause as one of those communicative cornerstones, a turning point, a deliberate choice made to eschew the integrity of language for the ease of a colloquial expression. ‘...the next best thing.’

‘Even though the real next best thing would be a Federation grade hospital and Bones fussing like a mother hen.’

‘Indeed. However, as neither of those conditions can be met here, I chose both diagnosis and prescription.’

‘Cool,’ Jim says. ‘Well, like I said... Thanks. Kind of. I mean, it’s weird, and I could’ve been entertaining you this whole time, and—Jesus, Spock, thirty hours. I would’ve gone stir crazy.’

‘I have never been agitated by stirring,’ Spock replies. ‘Or by a lack thereof.’

‘That’s not—’ Jim stops himself before he can get the words out properly. ‘There’s no actual stirring involved, Spock.’

‘I had surmised as much.’

Jim scrapes dry protein particles off the roof of his mouth where they’ve stuck, hard and tacky while he sucks on the pieces. It’s uncomfortable and unappetizing, but he’s alive. That’s more than he can say for sure about anyone else who was a member of their flight party. It’s the little things he should be grateful for.

He should probably keep that in mind.

‘Any of those lizard things come around to finish me off while I was out?’ Jim asks. He swallows, picking protein hunks out of his teeth with the tip of his tongue.

‘I have not observed any resurgence of predatory life near our campsite,’ Spock says. ‘It is possible that they were discouraged from approaching by the impact site of our shuttle.’

‘Yeah, nothing warns me off like the smell of mud and sizzling conduits.’ Jim sits up slowly on one elbow this time. The sharp pain in his side makes it tough to breathe, but he’s had trouble breathing before. That’s practically an area of expertise for him these days. He needs something to work through, and he’s never going to make it to the nacelles for repair if he can’t drag himself into a sitting position first. ‘You think we damaged their habitat?’

‘I think it is impossible to make a proper surveillance of the impact we have had on this particular planet without the appropriate scientific equipment,’ Spock says.

‘You think we should name it?’ As soon as Jim stops feeling like he’s been shot in the side, he eases up onto his second elbow, staring up at the slant of the adjusted tarp ceiling.
'The planet?' Spock asks. ‘Or the species of lizard that you discovered through chance encounter?’

‘Both,’ Jim says. ‘Why not? We can call ’em Tiberians.’

‘You wish to name a hostile creature after your paternal grandfather?’

‘Well, what would you call them?’

‘I had not considered naming hostile creatures a high priority, Jim.’ Spock watches him like a hawk, evidently intent on keeping Jim from overreaching his physical limits too soon. He has good doctoring instincts. If Jim didn’t know better, he’d think Bones had been coaching him in private. ‘It would be prudent for you to finish your field rations before attempting any further physical activity.’

‘The comm system’s not gonna repair itself,’ Jim says. ‘As romantic as it’s been here on Spockeria Five, I think I’d better get working.’

‘Spockeria Five.’

‘Well, I got to name the lizards. It’s only fair you get something out of the bargain, too.’

‘The lizards,’ Spock says, ‘have not been named.’

‘Yeah, they have. Look at it this way, Spock.’ Jim’s still talking, not interrupted by wheezing. It turns out a little distraction’s good for the wounded body. ‘If you see one coming or I catch sight of one nearby, instead of being vague and crying danger—which could honestly mean anything—or wasting time shouting about giant lizards, all we have to do is warn each other with Tiberians. Makes sense, right?’

‘Admittedly, that plan is not without merit.’ Spock watches without offering to assist as Jim settles his palms on his knees, bending them until he’s cross-legged and decently upright. ‘However, should we manage to establish contact with the nearest Federation outpost, I will not be announcing our communications to them as being sent from Spockeria Five.’

‘You totally could. It’d be awesome.’

Jim leans closer, close enough to see Spock’s eyebrow rise. ‘Perhaps,’ Spock says. ‘However, I can think of innumerable scenarios that would be...awesomer.’

Jim blinks. He knows what’s about to happen; he knows what a mistake it’s going to be. The laugh that’s coming is gonna hurt like hell. But Spock just made a joke and it’s Jim’s duty not as his husband but as somebody who’s looking to be his friend to laugh at it—to laugh with him.

He has to give some positive feedback. Anything else would undo months of conversation, every other encouragement Jim ever offered.

That’s how Jim knows he’s spent too much time on Vulcan, with Vulcans. Because now he’s analyzing the reasons why he shouldn’t laugh before he does.

It comes out split second later, making his ribs twinge, his whole abdomen aching. It turns into an oof and a grunt almost immediately, choked snorts caught between wincing gasps. ‘I’m fine, ‘m fine,’ Jim protests, eyes pricking with tears of pain and relief, Spock’s disapproval—a Vulcan form of concern, Jim decides—written plainly on his face. ‘It’s good. Laughter. Best medicine. Ancient human phrase. That was the best thing for me, I—ouch—I swear.’
‘It does not appear to have been anything other than detrimental to your health,’ Spock says.

‘It’s all internal. Can’t judge a book by its cover, Spock.’ Jim does his best to breathe in brief, satisfying breaths, not too deep, just enough to regulate his laughter to a less violent chuckle. ‘Seriously, Spock. You can look it up sometime. Laughter’s what I needed—what I need.’

‘At times,’ Spock points out, ‘you are not the best judge of what you need.’

‘You made a joke, Spock. That’s cause for celebration.’ Jim claps Spock on the shoulder, then uses that point of contact as leverage to hoist himself onto his feet. He sways, but he knows somehow he isn’t going to fall, knees wobbly but holding steady.

Well, they don’t buckle, anyway.

‘Jim—’

‘We don’t have much of a choice, Spock. I’m not gonna waste more time on beauty sleep. Thirty hours, all right? That’s thirty hours we could’ve used fixing up the comm system, getting the word out to the Federation—providing information on the vessel that attacked ours. I can’t do anything about those thirty hours, but the next thirty? That’s on me.’

Jim braces himself—against the pain, but also against Spock’s inevitable disagreement.

Instead, Spock rises. ‘Very well.’

Well. That’s his toughest critic out of the way. Next up Jim just has to convince his ribs who’s the boss of them. It’s him, for the record. His body, his rules. Which means he should be able to force them to abide by his will.

Right now, it’s his will to sap the energy from a couple redundant nacelles to power Spock’s efforts with the comm system. Normally it’d be a mistake to cannibalize ship parts for one of the smaller functions, but they’re banking on getting another rescue vessel to carry their sorry butts off of Spockeria Five. Jim’s pretty sure their shuttle’s down for the count; it’s designed for quick, efficient emergency escapes to the nearest hospitable worlds, not return trips.

Durable it isn’t, which they proved in the crash. Right now, it’s mostly good for spare parts, which means Jim doesn’t have to think in terms of triage.

Under other circumstances, this would be his idea of heaven: his very own ship to take apart and build into something else. It’s a hobby that doesn’t get much traction in the royal sphere, probably because it isn’t fitting for a prince to be covered in machine oil and fusion burns from an engine that backfires more consistently than it hums.

His mom had to forbid him from tinkering at the palace after he used an Andorian tablecloth to wipe up the leakage from a coolant malfunction. So it was a gift from some ambassador he never heard of. If Jim gave someone a present, he wouldn’t expect to see it brought out on the table every time he came to visit, but apparently the founding members of the Federation felt differently.

If Queen Winona had thought quickly, she could’ve passed it off as human expressionism, a renaissance of an old art form. But Jim was too old for finger-painting by then and his parents were never too big on covering up for his errors so much as hammering him into the right shape for the mold he was born to fit.

He always figured they were doing him a favor, that he’d be grateful someday.
Mostly he is.

It’s that foundation that gives him the stubbornness he needs in order to stay on his feet, one hand on his side like he can hold his ribs in place to keep them from splintering.

Spock’s watching him. If he’s tired—thirty damn hours of keeping watch—he doesn’t look it. But even Vulcans have to meditate every now and then.

Jim remembers that much from his designated reading.

‘Do not attempt to reach the crash site on your own,’ Spock says. ‘I have taken the liberty of organizing the materials you will need nearby the shelter.’

‘You looking out for me, Spock?’ Jim asks.

‘In the event that another rainfall should ensue, I thought it wise to place sensitive materials near effective cover,’ Spock says.

‘Good thinking. You deserve a promotion. Senior Husband Officer, I’m thinking.’ Jim flashes a smile—it’s tight around the edges, but it’s real. ‘Lead the way, SHO.’

They must be making progress, because instead of Spock telling him there’s no such official position, he steps out in front of Jim and out under the clear, pre-dawn sky. No clouds in sight. That’s a promising sign. If there are no clouds, there won’t be any more of that rain, reducing their chance of death by drowning by some percent Spock could calculate better than Jim.

He’ll ask him about it later.

For now, he wants to ask Spock about how he managed to get those nacelles out of the hull of the shuttle, and why he didn’t wait for a time when Jim could watch him tearing the shell apart piece by piece.

Because that’s the kind of thing you need to see happen for yourself.

‘You’re just full of surprises, Spock.’ Jim leans against the rocks to lower himself into a crouch next to the goods, assessing the damage to the merchandise. One of them’s cracked beyond repair, but there are two that look unharmed, ready to be jumpstarted into functionality by a little trick Jim likes to call using whatever you can in order to hotwire a nacelle. He cracks his knuckles, his hands the only part of his anatomy that aren’t bruised and battered into stiff, swollen approximations of their former, functional selves. ‘Okay, so... Any chance we have some extra phasers?’

‘Four of them. However, it would be unwise to leave ourselves with fewer than three.’

‘Yeah, considering the rate I’ve been going through ‘em, right?’ If Jim doesn’t chuckle about it then he’ll see that lizard again, and he figures he’ll be seeing enough of it in his nightmares for years to come. Might as well keep it out of his head while he can. ‘I’ll try to take better care of the next one I’m issued. Wouldn’t wanna be a drain on supplies. I figure it’ll only take the power from one to get this up and running—and I’m not saying it’s gonna be pretty, either. I’m just saying it’s gonna work. And that’s what matters, right?’

‘Your skills of improvisation and imagination are appreciated at this juncture,’ Spock replies. He hands Jim a phaser. Again, their fingers brush at the tips and the knuckles, the barest contact of skin to skin giving Jim a sweet, warm shiver when he thinks about it in terms of the bigger picture. Whatever that is. The two of them; how they fit together.
His equilibrium shifts, pitching and swaying. He waits for his vision to clean, then waves Spock to the other side.

‘Okay. You got the comm device all set up on your end?’

‘It awaits only the necessary power for a successful transmission.’

‘Then I’m gonna heat this baby up.’ Spock blinks and Jim still has the energy to marvel at that. It gives him hope, backwards and strange as hope can sometimes seem. ‘I mean I’m gonna get it working, Spock. A distress call first, I’m figuring—and if we have the power for some real-time contact, I’ll...let you do the talking.’

‘That would indeed be sensible,’ Spock says.

Jim puts his head down.

Power conversion’s one of the basics of field training. Knowing how to shift a necessary charge from one part of the ship to another’s one thing in engineering terms, but all away teams have to know how to utilize their charges to manage their resources in case they get stranded.

‘Shouldn’t be too hard,’ Jim says. He’s trying to encourage himself, but he says it loud enough for Spock to hear.

Just in case he’s looking for a little reassurance himself.

Lucky for Jim—lucky for them both, really—he just assembled a phaser under strenuous conditions. Disassembling one on his knees with only Spock to impress seems marginally less intimidating.

Only marginally.

Jim slots the phaser open piece by piece, separating the barrel from the inner power chamber, scooting over to get near to Spock’s comm system repairs to find a link-up. He should be wearing gloves for this. At the very least, he should be wearing his wayward shirt.

If only the Earth paparazzi could see him now.

_Reckless royal loses clothes; mind._

If he hadn’t stuck it out with all his weird hobbies, pursuing the knowledge for an impossible career in Starfleet, taking apart and repairing the spare vehicles in the palace garage after the royal mechanic closed up shop for the night, Jim would be effectively useless right now. All that training in Federation etiquette both at home and abroad prepared him for a very specific kind of life, but it’s not the one he’s leading.

Jim’s embarrassed to think about all his princely training amounts to when it comes to coupling a phaser’s power source to a comm system being held together with Vulcan pride and not much else. They’d be stuck here. Indefinitely. They’d be _marooned_ on Spockeria Five and Jim would be wondering why nobody was picking big, leafy branches from the nearby trees to fan him.

If Sam was right about anything, it was that there was a whole world outside of their own royal sphere, and they owed it to themselves to get to know it a little better.

He knows he must be delirious if he’s attributing anything of value to Sam’s intuition. He’s the one who ran all the way out to the ass-end of the galaxy and then called it gaining perspective on the
universe.

Right on the sentiment and wrong on the execution. That’s Sam all over.

Or it was. Jim didn’t have time to get to know the new him before he was being shipped off to Vulcan.

He likes to think he did things differently. That he left, but he didn’t run away.

‘So, where’d you learn how to repair a starship comm system anyway, Spock? Was that part of your basic training at the Academy?’

‘There are variable definitions of the phrase ‘a well-rounded education’ from race to race,’ Spock replies. ‘Though it was not statistically likely, given my intended vocation, that I would have need of this particular set of knowledge-based skills, there was nevertheless a percentage—no matter how small—that it would at some point in the future prove useful, or even invaluable.’

‘And it has,’ Jim says.

Spock nods.

Jim would press the issue further, or mention his own adherence to that mode of thinking—although he had to go after it alone, rather than in one of those Vulcan kid brain-training pods with plenty of other brain-bots doing the same thing just next door—but the inner power chamber burns his fingers, reminding him that you can chat while you’re kissing finger-to-finger, but conducting idle conversation during haphazard, self-taught mechanical operations is less advisable.

‘M good,’ Jim says, sucking one singed fingertip. ‘S’all good. That means it’s working.’

‘There must be another, less injurious method of determining the success of your modifications.’

Jim shrugs, one shouldered, waiting for the nacelle to light up while he heats it with a little extra photon boost. ‘It’s nothing. A little reminder I’m still alive.’

‘Once again, there are other, less violent methods.’ Spock pauses. ‘For what reason do you require such a reminder in the first place?’

‘Must be a human thing.’ Jim bite his bottom lip, willing the nacelle to power up. ‘I don’t know if I can explain it. I’ll try when we’re not—you know. Busy with the stuff. Not that I can’t concentrate on multiple tasks simultaneously, just—ow!’ The nacelle sputters to life and the second shock to Jim’s fingertips dims in the face of actual triumph, Spock’s comm system lighting up.

It’s online.

Jim leans back on his ankles, rubbing his stinging fingertips to his creaky ribs, so he can watch Spock work. The long, green-tinged fingers Jim can’t touch without forethought move quickly over a PADD, sending out what Jim recognizes as a basic distress signal. Location—encrypted—followed by identity—also encrypted. Jim adjusts the angle of the phaser power chamber, hands steady. Seeing Spock in his element is something else—offering a thrill Jim can’t be sure Spock felt in reverse watching him hack together a suitable battery.

Still, they performed two operations that came together to make a beautiful distress call, one that should get them off Spockeria Five and somewhere there’s a real bed. Even a merciless Vulcan bed would be better than nothing but hard ground and a crumpled up heat blanket for a pillow.
I-Chaya’s out there worrying about Spock. Amanda’s out there worrying about him.

And together, they can put an end to that worry.

Jim realizes he’s smiling fondly a split second before the phaser overheats and the nacelle snaps with too much energy to contain, a sudden surge of power that blows it out in a single pop. Jim grabs Spock to pull him back from the control pad before the shock travels through to his fingers—more sensitive than Jim’s; all the more reason to protect them—and then, darkness overtakes them.

‘Ah,’ Spock says.

‘Bound to happen eventually,’ Jim replies. ‘The nacelles were damaged by the crash. You got out a good signal though, right?’

‘Its usefulness remains to be seen.’

‘Well, sure,’ Jim says. ‘I know that.’

It’s the kind of thing that works better with a constant pulse, keeping a low-grade signal going for as long as they’re there. It’d be easier to trace a consistent distress beacon, but there’s something to be said for hard and fast. Grabbing someone’s attention and shouting in their ear. Jim can only hope that the right people were in scanning range.

‘You were demonstrating optimism,’ Spock replies.

‘I’ve got a chest full of broken ribs, it hurts to breathe, and I lost one of our phasers in a lizard-related assault,’ Jim says. ‘So excuse me if I’m feeling in need of a little optimism.’

‘Do not allow your condition to impair your judgment,’ Spock says. ‘Your work was admirable. I have not yet calculated the odds of our retrieval based upon the length of time the signal was transmitted; however, it seems likely that it will be a matter of days before we have any manner of reply. That is, if one is forthcoming.’

Jim nods. The clouds are starting to clear around the planet’s sun. Only one of those, so far. He hasn’t been outside at night yet to look for a moon.

‘Is that supposed to be a pep talk?’

‘You are uncomfortable,’ Spock observes. ‘You would be better served by returning to a horizontal position now that your work is completed.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim says. ‘We’re sure done here.’

‘I would not put it that way,’ Spock replies.

For once, Jim doesn’t have the energy to argue back against any potential grammatical corrections. Anyway, Spock’s right.

He has a feeling he’s gonna have to get used to that being the case more often than not.

*
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Bondus interruptus.

There’s a moon on Spockeria Five, but it’s small and yellow, like the unbroken yolk of an egg. It comes out after the sky’s been dark for three hours, stars obscured behind a heavy cloud cover.

Jim can’t be sure of the time, but Spock’s been keeping close track for them, noting the days by some impossible solar calendar that Jim helped him with, calibrated for a single sun.

It’s been two days since they set up the signal. Two days of Spock healing Jim’s ribs, monitoring the rate of his bone density as his insides knit themselves back together. Two days of sleeping on the ground in shifts, of Jim complaining about how Spock’s watch is three times as long as Jim’s, and of nothing being done about it.

Jim keeps slamming his head against it anyway. At breakfast, at dinner. At random intervals in between to keep Spock on his toes.

At least the lizards don’t bother their camp. Despite apparently feeling real territorial about that river, the high ground’s another story. Jim wakes in the night and imagines he hears them slithering through the trees, but it’s almost always the wind rifling the branches and nothing else.

They go for water in pairs at Jim’s insistence, although remembering the way Spock tossed the one that landed on Jim makes him think he’s more of a hindrance than help.

‘The thing is,’ Jim explains during the first round of bathing together, stripping down to nothing on the bank of the river and wishing he was a little more tan and a little less purple and lumpy in spots, ‘some people might consider this romantic, too. Bathing in front of each other under the open sky... Just remember, you know, the water’s cold. And that has an effect on...stuff.’

‘Romantic potential aside, it is a tactical act designed to avoid future confrontation with the reptiles who might not hesitate before attacking a single individual,’ Spock replies.

Jim turns around, holding up his arms in a shrug. He’d dive into the water if it wasn’t so shallow; instead, he’s content splashing around to bathe, looking up at Spock to think, hard, in his direction, about how he feels regarding the upcoming switch of their positions. Spock meets his eyes for a long, incredible moment, then looks away, like it’s perfectly natural.

But Jim thinks he might’ve finally won his very first staring contest.

He comes out dripping wet, water sloughing down his chest and thighs, shaking his hair dry, keeping one hand on his hip for balance. ‘Your turn,’ he murmurs, cold lips and hot breath close to Spock’s cheek as he passes him. ‘And I promise I’ll keep watch on the surrounding environs just as closely as I’ll be keeping watch on you.’

‘If you are distracted and unable to perform your duties—’ Spock begins.

Jim waves him on, only slightly favoring his left side. ‘Oh, I’ll do my duty, Spock. But if you think
I’m not looking at you, then I’ve gotta tell you—there’s no way that’s happening. Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly...'

Spock lifts his sweater by the hem. Jim trails off, throat suddenly tight.

Apparently Spock’s not looking for a lesson in more pointless Earth proverbs about things animals do and how humans seek comparisons in order to understand their less noble urges.

Jim should remember when the last time he saw Spock undress was, but the days on Spockeria Five have blurred together—so muddied now that he forgets when Spockeria Five stopped making him laugh. Unlike Jim, Spock’s mostly unchanged, if leaner than Jim recalls. His skin is pale with that faint flush of green in key spots—the shadowy insides of his thighs; the small of his back; his belly—and there’s that dark, thick hair on his chest and stomach that makes Jim feel hungry for more than simple meals of hard proteins fresh out of their vacuum-sealed wrappers.

Jim gulps, forcing himself to scan the trees before he returns to his study of how Spock washes—efficiently, of course, in logical order from his feet to his hair—and every bead of cold river water that forms on his skin before it rolls free.

He’s got one of the blankets held up for Spock when he steps out, wrapping it around his shoulders.

‘I kept watch,’ he says against the shell of Spock’s ear.

That becomes a tradition. One bath a day, Jim swatting away stinging bugs that itch like hell—but at least they don’t cause fever or flesh rot, and according to Spock, whose blood doesn’t appeal to them, Jim should be grateful.

He scratches the spots between Jim’s shoulder blades that Jim can’t reach, so Jim doesn’t feel the need to argue his case quite as vehemently. And he wouldn’t give up bathing together, one after the other, for anything. A little discomfort is worth the sight of Spock under the sun, never turning to meet Jim’s eyes, although he has to know how closely, how intensely, Jim’s watching.

It’s not the kind of thing you feel telepathically, but it’s instinctive. A basic nature all mammalian humanoids have right down to their core. Jim knows Spock can feel his eyes.

It’s just a matter of getting Spock to admit it.

Just because Jim’s less focused on the other stuff doesn’t mean he’s gonna give up on pushing at Spock and his feelings. He might be able to make some compromises in certain areas, but not when it comes to this. If Spock’s not gonna let himself lose control in the bedroom then he’d better at least maintain some level of emotional intimacy.

Otherwise Jim’s gonna have to resign himself to having a personal relationship with the bugs on Spockeria Five.

And he doesn’t want to be here forever.

Eventually, they’re gonna run out of field rations. That’s what he keeps telling himself whenever the privacy starts to seem more alluring than the same comforts that used to suffocate him.

It’s kind of a big deal, though. Jim hasn’t been alone—really alone, without a retinue of servants, bodyguards and well-meaning minders, even Bones scanning him for allergic reactions—for this long since he was born.

Of course there were the brief trips he made on his own, hours of unchaperoned, unauthorized
Hoverbike jaunts through San Francisco and along the California coast, and the one time he managed to sneak onto a Luna convoy, then called Bones from the moon just to see what it would do to his blood pressure, but those were always moments, parts of a greater, monitored whole.

They were breaks. They didn’t last.

He’s never had the freedom of the wide-open sky before. It might be crowded with rainclouds sometimes, and there might be giant lizards—Tiberians, that is—lurking at the edges, but as far as Jim’s concerned, this place belongs to him and Spock.

It’s not like he isn’t used to humid conditions. It rained all the time in San Francisco, and the night sky wasn’t half as clear.

When the sun goes down and the evening bugs come out, Jim and Spock sit near the mouth of their constructed shelter, Spock’s fingers rubbing Jim’s insect bites through the loose material of his turtleneck sweater. So long as there’s a barrier between them Jim can fool himself into thinking they’re not getting into any trouble.

At least, what Spock would consider trouble.

‘I gotta be honest, I don’t know any of these constellations,’ Jim says. He’s focused more on the feel of Spock’s hand on the nape of his neck than burning gas lightyears away. ‘If you were hoping this was gonna be one of those fact-finding missions where we distract ourselves and learn things about our environment, then I’m telling you now... It’s a bust.’

‘I do not understand the purpose of stargazing if it is not to triangulate our position in the galaxy,’ Spock admits.

‘Even if we did, we’ve got no one to relay it to.’

‘Another attempt to transmit a distress signal may be possible, but only as a last resort. Until the proper amount of time has passed, it will not be necessary.’

‘So until we get to that point, we might as well look at the stars because they’re there, not because of triangulating positions. Right?’ Jim scoots closer, taking it inch by inch, one day at a time. Spock allows it, which is another step in the right direction, and hey, even Jim’s bruises are starting to heal. It’s slow going; sometimes Jim forgets himself, reaching for something too far away or bending over too quickly and remembering his limitations all too unpleasantly, but there’s an emphasis on the going. Progress is officially being made, both internal and external. Jim’s elbow bumps Spock’s chest, just a gentle tap. When he leans the rest of his weight against that spot, Spock braces himself like a straight-backed chair. It can’t be comfortable for him. But he doesn’t complain, and Jim doesn’t mind sharing body heat. ‘We could name them too, you know.’

‘The likelihood of the stars we are able to observe not yet being named is twenty seven to one.’

‘No decimal points?’ Jim settles his head against Spock’s shoulder, then twists to look at Spock’s face. He always seems to come at Spock from a dramatic angle. From straight on, Spock doesn’t betray a thing, but from just below and to the left, Jim can pinpoint brief shadows and hints of hidden emotion, stuff that Spock might not know about, stuff that Jim might be the right person to discover. And name. Like stars. ‘Are you slipping, Spock?’

‘It is curious,’ Spock replies, ‘that you would refer to those same decimal points whenever I offer them as points of humorous remark, yet when I do not offer them, you refer to their absence with the same interest.’
‘Curious, huh?’ Jim wriggles in place, waiting—probably to no avail—for Spock to buckle and relax. He doesn’t, but his hand is on Jim’s thigh, and Jim notices. ‘Don’t you mean fascinating?’

‘Fascinating,’ Spock repeats.

Jim kisses his jaw. Spock’s eyes shut to accept the contact and Jim can hear, can feel, him swallow, the bob of his throat, the deceptive steadiness of his pulse. ‘You used to think I was fascinating, anyway,’ Jim says, words slurred on Spock’s skin. ‘Don’t tell me the honeymoon’s already over. Just because you’ve seen me at my most unconscious doesn’t mean there’s no mystery left.’

‘The parameters of your understanding of what defines a mystery continue to elude me,’ Spock replies.

Jim can’t help himself. ‘So...you’re saying it’s mysterious?’

‘However,’ Spock continues, and Jim will be the first to admit, he’s sexy when he’s unstoppable, ‘I can assure you, if unpredictability, surprise, and ambiguity are the elements of the mysterious, then you are not without mystery.’

Jim kisses him again, over the Vulcan pulse. ‘Okay. Thanks. I think. The way you say things, I can’t tell if you’re complimenting me, or lamenting my weirdness.’

‘That which forms our differences may be that which makes us great,’ Spock says. ‘You said something to that effect to me in a recording.’

‘Spock,’ Jim says.

‘Jim.’

‘Tell me about bonding.’ It’s impulsive, but when are they going to find a better opportunity? Jim in Spock’s arms; both of them under the same stars, bathed in the same faintly yellow moonlight.

‘Although you have not provided the necessary clarification, I am logically bound to assume that you are referring to the practice of Vulcan telepathic bonding,’ Spock says.

‘No, Spock, I want you to talk to me about molecular bonding.’ Jim leans his head back against Spock’s shoulder, wriggling for no other purpose than to make himself comfortable. He was comfortable before, but sometimes he likes to remind himself that his ribs aren’t gonna start screaming in protest whenever, however he moves. ‘That was a joke, by the way. I meant the first thing. You assumed correctly.’

Spock shifts, making himself a more accommodating piece of furniture for Jim. Either that, or he’s demonstrating a very un-Vulcanlike urge to fidget in response to an uncomfortable line of questioning.

It’s bound to the be the former.

‘It is a mating ritual, as you may have already suspected, given the nature of your request and that you waited until there was an established atmosphere of substantial intimacy before raising your interest.’

Jim can think of a couple forms of intimacy that would raise more than just his interest, but he’s keeping that to himself for now. He’s not letting Spock out of answering him that easily.

‘So…’
Spock sighs. He’s learned exasperation quickly under Jim’s tutelage, who always suspected he’d be a natural at something.

‘An uncommonly known fact is that it is possible to initiate a bond with someone who is not of Vulcan descent,’ Spock says. ‘However, since the effect is the same as if one’s mate were Vulcan themselves, it is not a process to be undertaken lightly.’

Jim yawns, tugging Spock’s arms more comfortably around his body. The stars above them are too many to name, scattered into foreign patterns all over the vast black sky. Here and there, ragged clouds crowd into the scenery, but they don’t block out much. There’s always the threat of rain, but it’s a cool, dry night for Spockeria Five.

‘So you’re saying…what? I’d go through pon farr, too?’

‘Yes,’ Spock says. He doesn’t hesitate. The bluntness comforting, in its own way. ‘The effects of the mind meld would create a telepathic link between…the individuals in question. It is a bond of considerable strength, and the effects of pon farr are overwhelming even to those who are taught to expect it. Even if we did not desire to share it, the choice would be removed from our hands. ...To speak figuratively.’

‘That’s not like you, Spock.’ Jim tilts his head to look at him, grinning in the half-light of the stars above them, the glow of an electric torch from inside the shelter. ‘Figuratively speaking.’

‘Generally,’ Spock agrees, ‘I am more prone to speaking of figures.’

This time, when Jim laughs at the unexpected joke—the rare, legendary Vulcan pun; suddenly Jim feels like he might be the luckiest guy in the quadrant—he doesn’t have to wince, although it’d be wise to warn Spock that puns might incur that effect in others. Especially the good ones.

‘You know who loves puns?’ Jim touches Spock’s knuckles with his fingertips, thumbing over the ridges. ‘Bones. If you get the chance, you should communicate with Bones only in puns. Nothing but ‘em. It’ll help to establish camaraderie between the two of you, which is important, ‘cause he’s in charge of my health, and that’s something you two have in common. He especially loves it when you turn disease names into—no, I can’t do it. I can’t lead you astray. If you do it for anyone, you should do it for me. Bones hates it.’

‘That is in better keeping with the details of Doctor McCoy’s personality of which I am aware.’

‘He complains about it, yeah, but deep down, it gives him something to be miserable about that isn’t a matter of life and death. So in a way, you’d be doing him a favor.’ Staring at the stars and talking about Bones—it’s a bad idea on multiple levels. One, he’s gonna give Spock the wrong idea about pillow talk, and two, he worries about Bones enough in his dreams. He doesn’t have to bring that worry into his waking life. It’d bad for his health, working against everything that Bones stands for. ‘Hey, weren’t we talking about bonding?’

‘The conversational detour was one which you initiated,’ Spock points out.

‘I wanted to encourage this joke thing you’ve been working on,’ Jim replies. ‘Yeah, that’s right. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. It was a pun, Spock. I love it. I love it.’

Spock clears his throat and Jim feels the resultant echo in his chest, pressed to Jim’s shoulders. He swallows.

Somehow, a conversation about dumb jokes turned into something as intimate as one about Vulcan mild melds, about initiating a bond that’d last them their whole lives.
‘Was your inquiry into the topic an indication of personal interest?’ Spock asks.

Another sign of progress—Spock carrying the weight of the conversation now and then, not leaving the majority of that duty to Jim alone.

‘What other kind of interest is there?’ Jim sighs, hating the lack of honesty in that reply about as much as he hates the idea of how to answer the question honestly in the first place. ‘No, that was—Pretend I didn’t say that. I know there are other kinds of interest, I was just...being an idiot. I was talking about a personal interest, yeah, Spock. An us interest. Something we could maybe do if that was... Well, something to think about, at least.’

‘Indeed,’ Spock says. ‘I have thought about it.’

Jim’s eyes widen. He’s staring at the stars, but he’s seeing Spock, totally surrounded by him—and warmed by him, too.

‘Seriously?’

‘Jim, at what point will you cease to ask for clarification when none is necessary?’

‘Busted,’ Jim says. ‘It’s just a big deal. It’s a big step. You’ve got one hell of a poker face, not letting on to that kind of thinking.’

‘It is no talent,’ Spock replies, ‘merely a fact of my Vulcan heritage.’

Jim’s not the only one who knows how to bullshit.

‘I wouldn’t mind going through pon farr with you,’ he continues, attempting a chuckle. ‘I mean, if you’re gonna have to, wouldn’t that be better?’

‘Better is not an accurate term for the situation that would result from our bonding,’ Spock says. ‘I would deem it fraught, perhaps. Complicated. Uncomfortable.’

‘You’re assuming I couldn’t handle it.’

It’s not a question. Jim doesn’t have to guess what Spock’s thinking because he can hear it in his tone because he’s been teaching himself to read the absent inflections. Spock might adhere to a strict Vulcan monotone most of the time, but he slips up. Jim knows how to wait for those moments now. He’s learning patience in one way or another.

Mom would be so proud.

‘No.’ Spock shakes his head; Jim can feel the bobbing motion behind him, not enough to dislodge him from where he’s resting comfortably, what he’s come to think of as his spot. That’s another human trait, one Jim’s not sure if he can take credit for or not. If they ever get back to Lady Amanda, he’ll have to ask her if Spock was big on shaking his head no before Jim showed up. ‘I am merely appraising the logistics of such a suggestion, using my superior knowledge of pon farr. As you cannot knowingly commit to the burden, it is foolish to assume that it would be better. Your convictions are based on generous conjecture at best and pride at worst.’

‘Maybe I’m just confident in my ability to handle uncontrollable arousal,’ Jim says. ‘Did you ever think of that?’

‘That is an oversimplification of the terms, possible due to your limited human understanding,’ Spock replies.
Jim yawns, stretching his legs out along the ground. The grass is cold but not damp. It’s not so muddy up by their shelter anyway.

‘If you’re trying to get out of bonding with me, you just have to say so.’

‘Once again, I will remind you that you are the one who raised this topic for discussion,’ Spock points out.

‘I was curious, that’s all,’ Jim says. ‘We’re married, but we’re not—you know. Bonded. And we haven’t done the Earth thing yet, either.’

‘You are considering the validity of our relationship beyond the bounds of our respective diplomatic positions.’

The way Spock says it, calm and blank, it’s almost a comfort. There’s no judgment there, just the plain and unyielding facts. If Jim suffers from Spock’s lack of emotional intuition, then it’s only fair to admit that he benefits from it every now and then too.

It wouldn’t be so bad to confess he’s having doubts. But that isn’t what he’s saying.

‘I’d be into it,’ Jim says. ‘That’s all.’

‘You were concerned at first that our infrequent contact would lead to a telepathic link.’ The back of Jim’s neck itches; Spock remains still when he squirms to rub against his shoulder. ‘Given this evidence I am forced to conclude that a more permanent link would be to your detriment.’

‘That was then, Spock. This is now. Like you said, if we had a link, there’d be pros, not just cons.’ Jim holds up his hand, ticking off a list for the plus side one by one. ‘For starters, neither of us would ever have to fight off a giant lizard alone. That’s important for a lasting, strong relationship. Not being killed by giant lizards.’

‘Do you predict that there will be many large reptiles in our future?’ Spock asks.

When Jim shrugs, the weave of Spock’s sweater only serves to tickle the back of his neck further. He wrinkles his nose, willing the itch to stop and making it worse. ‘Better safe than sorry. Reptiles, felines, canines, whatever. If we’re gonna travel—separately or together—then it’ll come in handy in plenty of other ways. Knowing each other’s thoughts during peace talks; always being on the same wavelength; never having to miss each other when I’m one place and you’re another; never stepping on each other’s toes when we’re dancing... Also, no more messing up ‘cause of mixed signals.’

‘Mixed signals,’ Spock repeats.

‘It happens all the time with humans. And Vulcans too, I’m guessing. And any other race with a heart.’ Jim reaches behind himself to find Spock’s side and the spot below his ribs where his heart is, large and unguarded. He feels Spock’s skin react even if Spock’s face doesn’t so much as twitch. After that, it’s only a matter of seconds before Jim sneaks his fingers underneath the hem and touches Spock without anything between them. ‘Saying one thing, meaning another...’

‘Vulcans do not lie,’ Spock begins.

‘It’s not lying. It’s not being able to tell the truth. There’s a huge difference.’ Jim follows the lines of Spock’s ribs, counting the spaces in between them. He has to twist and it’s not comfortable for his own ribs, but it’s a concession he’s willing to make in order to have his cheek on Spock’s chest and his hand on Spock’s body. ‘Sometimes you want to tell the truth, and your brain knows it’d
help, and sure, it seems like it should be easy, but there’s something inside of you—some stubborn huge part of you—that won’t let you do it. That wants somebody to figure it out on their own. Or telepathically.’

‘That is a highly contradictory combination of desires,’ Spock says, like it’s not painfully obvious to anyone who’s ever experienced that conflict, but there’s a pause at the end that makes Jim wonder if Spock hasn’t felt that way, too.

‘Yeah.’ Jim sighs, closing his eyes, buried in the shadows held in Spock’s arms. Just like him. Just another shadow held in those arms. ‘That’s the point, I guess. All I know is, having some kind of half-assed diplomatic marriage that doesn’t give you what you need isn’t what I want.’

‘Clarify. Is that what you believe we have?’

‘Yes. No. Maybe—I don’t know. Contradictory combination of desires, right here.’ Jim’s at the top-most rib, his arm all the way up Spock’s shirt. ‘Anyway, never mind. I really loved your joke, Spock. That’s all. And I love that you made it.’

‘That was not the clarification I had hoped to receive,’ Spock admits.

‘Well,’ Jim says, ‘life’s not always what you expect, Spock.’

He traces the shape of Spock’s rib cage, too high to feel his beating heart. It’s not as strange a sensation as Jim might’ve expected. It’s normal for Spock, so it’s normal for him. He can feel smooth skin where it tightens as Spock’s muscles contract under Jim’s touch.

‘It seems to me that you have consistently gone out of your way to prove that particular axiom,’ Spock says.

His eyelids flutter in the clouded starlight, face and shoulders silhouetted by the electric torch from inside their shelter. This wasn’t the honeymoon Jim dreamed up and even now he wouldn’t call it a vacation. But they’re together, and that counts for a whole lot more than Jim ever would’ve thought.

For a while there, being around Spock was lonelier than Vulcan itself, endless vistas of sandy cliffs and deserts swept by hot winds, its people sucked dry of all their emotions. Basically, anyway. The thought might not be entirely generous or accurate, but neither of those terms describes a teenager in his first month on Vulcan anyway.

Jim shifts his hand, cupping Spock’s side under his arm. He’s slender in a way that belies all of his taut musculature. Jim hasn’t seen a demonstration of his strength since he took down that lizard—or, more accurately, took up. He literally threw that thing multiple feet away.

It was hot. Jim’s got some primal human weirdness in him but he doesn’t think he can be blamed for that particular kink. Even Gary would have to admit the usefulness of having a husband who can throw dangerous reptilian predators around like humans throw softballs.

Except that Gary would never admit something like that, which is why he doesn’t have a cool Vulcan prince for a husband.

His loss, as far as Jim’s concerned.

‘I like to keep you on your toes,’ Jim says. ‘Not literally, Spock. If you get up right now, I’m gonna be pissed.’
Spock breathes in, chest rising under Jim’s hand. Jim’s thumb drifts down, catching the ridge of a raised nipple with his nail.

‘I would find it difficult to rise with you resting on me.’

‘Is that a fat joke?’ Jim’s ribs give an uncomfortable twinge. If he had any more meat packed on them, it’d only make the experience that much more uncomfortable. ‘You keep it up and I’m gonna start having self esteem issues.’

Spock fixes him with a look, heated and sharp. This close, it’s impossible to miss the little details, the warm shades of not-mud flecking his irises.

‘It is my understanding that your self-esteem is, as of yet, vastly out of proportion to your girth.’

Jim’s normally quicker on his own feet, speaking of which, but it’s late and the moon’s big and the stars are out and the bugs have sucked his brain power away with his blood. It takes him longer than it should to weigh the balance of what Spock just said and determine it’s a compliment, not an insult. By the time that happens, Jim can’t grin all goofy and relaxed the way he wants, because it’s all about timing, and he’s missed the beat.

‘I’ve gotta read more Vulcan poetry,’ Jim says. ‘Or any Vulcan poetry, for that matter. Might give me an insight into how Vulcans say your eyes are like twin moons kissing over Risa or whatever it is you guys say when you get emotional.’

‘Jim,’ Spock replies.

‘Spock, you don’t have to say it.’ Jim flicks Spock’s nipple and Spock’s arms tighten in response. Now that’s a simple equation: Jim’s gut heats up, his dick gets hard, and all Spock needs to do is be Spock for it to happen. He swallows. ‘I gotcha. I parsed it. Translation successful. Broadcast received. But—tell me if I’ve got this wrong—in order for us to do this, you want to do it right. Go all the way. Bond and...bond.’ Jim twists so that his erection can bump, briefly, into Spock’s thigh. His cheeks are hot; it’s a good thing blushes are felt, not seen, in the reflection of pale moonlight.

‘That is correct,’ Spock says at last.

It’s getting more and more difficult to swallow. The way Jim reacts to Spock bears a few uncomfortable similarities to the way he reacts to an unknown inoculation, except in this case, Jim’s not allergic. He’s all too susceptible, with elevated heart rate and blood pressure and something that feels like a fever, but he doesn’t want an easy cure, or even a difficult, complicated one.

‘Jesus, Spock.’ Jim gives up on the relaxation of pretending Spock’s the next best thing to an armchair and resettles fully in his lap, knees on either side of Spock’s thighs in the thick grass and night-hardened dirt. ‘That’s what I want. You and the—okay, it’s stuff I don’t understand, sure, and it’s not something that’ll come naturally to me, but I want it, and I want to make you feel so fucking good that there aren’t any words to describe it, not even close.’

Jim has to stop to breathe—and stopping’s a mistake, since it gives him time to think back over the stuff he’s saying and how stupid it sounds in general, much less to a guy who’s all about dictionaries and definitions. That breath was a terrible mistake. He’s lost the thread of what he was saying, if not the conviction that he needs to say it.

Getting married first and realizing you love somebody after is backwards for a reason.

Then, Spock cups Jim’s face in both hands and Jim forgets how to breathe, lungs constricting,
hoping he looks wide-eyed and breathless and not like a fish gasping for air. The truth is likely a combination of both.

‘Do you think I do not wish it?’ Spock’s voice is a shade Jim’s never heard before, as black as the distant treetops, with that secret, quiet power of an undertow.

*Whoa,* Jim thinks.

By the scantest margin of luck and human decency he manages not to blurt it out loud. He mouths the word anyway, like a fish gasping for breath.

*Whoa.*

Spock’s kind of into this. Jim wouldn’t have come at it specifically with that intent—he learned the hard way where it gets him to make a play for Spock by appealing to his baser instincts—but there’s something to be said for somersaulting backwards into it.

Spock’s into him. Like—*into* into. Jim was just wrapping his head around the idea of *him* coming at things backward, but the idea of Spock doing *anything* out of order makes him feel like he’s cracked his head against those river rocks again. Dizzy, disoriented and downright dumb. Also drowning.

‘I thought…’ Jim trails off, squeezing his thighs around Spock’s hips. It lifts him in place but brings them together at the same time. It’s a kind of paradox. They’ve got themselves a paradoxical marriage. ‘I don’t know, Spock. Blame it on my lack of telepathic qualities, but you’re kinda hard to read sometimes.’

Spock’s hands shift along Jim’s face, fingers carding along the blunt, square shape of Jim’s sideburns. For someone who’s spent a lifetime warding off physical contact, he is, surprisingly, a natural.

That figures.

‘This is something you have expressed in the past,’ Spock says. ‘Taking your noted insecurities into account, I would seek to make things clear.’

‘Hang on,’ Jim says, ‘my noted *what*?’

One of Spock’s hands leaves his face, finding Jim’s near his hip and twisting their fingers together, rubbing his thumb along the callused ridge forming against the side of Jim’s index finger. He’s getting *calluses.* The palace beautician would have fits. No need to bring that up right now, though. Jim doesn’t need to go admitting he’s got people on staff to make him look photo-ready at a moment’s notice.

He’s just distracted enough by the first move that he’s not ready for it when Spock kisses him—*really* goes for it, human style. He catches Jim with his mouth open, but that seems like part of it, part of Spock’s nefarious plan. Jim tilts their heads to try and nudge himself into a more favorable angle, catching the tip of his nose against the rough skin of Spock’s cheek.

He can’t believe he never thought about Vulcans in terms of shaving before. The idea of Spock with a beard pops into his head and nearly ruins the hard-on Jim’s working evenly against Spock’s hips through their pants.

The seam of his fly’s making for a sincerely uncomfortable friction.
Spock’s remaining hand on Jim’s face shifts into a familiar pattern, fingers split between his temple and the high line of one cheekbone.

‘Uh,’ Jim murmurs, their mouths close together. ‘Is this the— Spock, there’s literally no information about Vulcan ceremonies out there for public consumption, so maybe you could walk me through it, or...’

The tips of Spock’s fingers aren’t callused, but they are warm: that special brand of contradiction that allows them to be cool in the center but radiating heat. The impossibility fits them, or at least with all the other pieces that don’t fit.

Jim touches Spock’s face in return—and what he lacks in knowledge he makes up for in intensity.

It pops into his head that the reason he hates the idea of an escape shuttle, for his own personal use, is because it implies there’s a way to be born out of going down with your ship. Jim can’t compartmentalize like that. If he’s flying, then he’s flying, no looking down, no emergency protocol. It’s all or nothing. And Spock’s the same way, whether he knows it or not.

Spock kisses him again, while Jim cants into him, panting. He doesn’t brace himself or tense up, already soft and eager and pliant against the sudden show of human affection from the most unexpected source possible, and the one he’s been craving it from the most.

There’s playing hard to get, and then there’s the Vulcan improvement of that talent into a veritable art form. But this—this is it. Spock’s pulse and Jim’s pulse, Spock telling Jim something that Jim, momentarily, can’t parse: ‘Our minds are one.’

Don’t think anything stupid, Jim thinks. Like that. That was a stupid thing to think. That’s like when somebody says don’t look down, because of course you’re gonna look down the second they say look down, what else would you do? The power of suggestion. Stop thinking. Don’t think at all. You’re good at that.

God, he hopes that it doesn’t mean every bored tangent or idle fantasy will be written on his grey matter, plain as day. And how do feelings translate, anyway? The stuff that’s not thinking, that’s knowing and wanting and needing? Will every frustration be broadcast—every moment of arousal?

As if he wasn’t turned on enough dealing with himself, the idea of letting Spock in on the experience is a kind of closeness that Jim can’t say he’s ever had.

‘Your thoughts to my thoughts,’ Spock continues, although to be fair, it’s also Jim’s tongue to his tongue, and Jim’s dick to Spock’s stomach, and Jim’s thighs to Spock’s thighs, and Spock’s big hands, his long, lean fingers that match the long, lean rest of him, to Jim’s face. Jim’s lips part under Spock pushing all the way inside him, reminding him of all the nights he was alone hoping Spock would kiss him like their mouths were fucking. It knots in the base of his spine, a brief bloom of panic, the anxiety of want.

Spock’s going to be inside him.

And not like that.

Deeper, even. Way deeper.

Holy shit.

Jim wants to face it eye to eye, but there’s a cool rush of white sound and his eyes fall shut. There’s nobody else on Spockeria Five, the kind of privacy even Jim couldn’t fathom to dream about, and
they’re doing this. They are *so* doing this.

Is there supposed to be bright light?

He squints, peeking his eyes open the barest slit. He’s not sure whether that’s allowed in a bonding experience, but if he’s quick about it, he should be all right. He’s just taking a second for reconnaissance. If this is one of those *head into the light* scenarios, then Jim’s really got to talk to Spock about his prep work because that’s not the kind of thing you can just spring on a human. They spook easy.

But the bright beam swings across Spock’s face, which is itself is contorted in brief, blind confusion.

So that rules out the possibility that it’s something Jim’s seeing in his head, spawned by the link they’re supposed to be developing.

No, it’s coming from the sound of approaching footfalls as they climb the steep approach to Spock and Jim’s makeshift shelter.

‘Jim.’ Spock’s hand tightens against his face.

‘Shit,’ Jim says, right in the middle of their bonding.

Because those beams are searchlights. Because someone’s *finally* followed the wayward signal Jim managed to short out days ago, and they have their very own rescue party tramping toward them. For a moment, he considers the possibility that it’s not a rescue party—that it’s Klingons arriving to finish them off. But then there’s the sound of tricorders beeping like birdsong, little whistles that would be like music to Jim’s ears at *any other time* than the present.

‘Prince James?’ someone calls out. ‘Your Highness? Prince Spock?’

Jim doesn’t take the time to see whether they’re Vulcan or human and he doesn’t bother to compensate for his broken ribs when he throws himself out of Spock’s lap, landing on his side with an uncomfortable heat still built up between his legs. It’ll dissipate in time. Given the right circumstances.

Spock breathes in, short and steady. When he speaks, his voice is the same.

‘We are here. My counterpart, Prince James, may require some minor medical assistance, but we are both well and undamaged.’

Hell, he doesn’t even blink, much less reveal a tremor of frustrated, aborted arousal. Jim’s caught between obvious jealousy and being plain grateful he’s got someone to take the fall and keep him from embarrassing himself in situations like these.

Not that he’s planning on getting into another situation like this.

‘What he said!’ Jim’s voice switches octaves midsentence. ‘I’m—we’re good! We’re over here!’

The team’s in Starfleet uniforms: brisk, reassuring, color-coded; four red and two blue. They filter up onto the hill and range around them in formation, checking the surrounding landscape for potential threats.

One of them reaches for their communicator, radioing in to—Jim counts—three other search parties that they’ve found their targets. Spock’s shirt is still rumpled where Jim’s hand was shoved
under it and Jim’s lying next to him on his side, curled up into the fetal position to try and avoid anyone’s sharp eyes catching onto his boner problem.

He thinks about the least sexy things he possibly can to solve it before a medical team tries to check him out and everybody gets an eyeful.


Bones’ hypos.

Bones.

Jim’s on his feet at once, staggering toward the nearest officer: a short woman with broader shoulders than his, currently giving their temporary shelter what Jim has to assume is a positive appraisal. ‘Steady there, your highness,’ she begins, but Jim waves her off, using the gesture to hide his grimace.

‘At ease or—whatever. What happened to the ship we were on before we were jettisoned? What happened to its passengers, its crew?’

There’s a hand at the small of Jim’s back, Spock’s hand, which Jim would recognize from anywhere. It’s the smallest of touches and too dark for anyone else to see it happen, but Jim knows it’s there.

‘You’ve been out of communication this entire time.’ The officer whistles, shaking her head, then remembers herself and stands at straighter attention. ‘We will debrief you once we have seen to your health, sir. Your highness.’

Jim bites back a groan, if only because it’d suggest he needs closer medical attention. ‘I need to know if there were any fatalities,’ he says. ‘I don’t wanna pull the that’s an order card but if you make me, I’ll do it, even if it’ll make both of us unhappy.’

‘Fourteen casualties,’ the officer replies, ‘and three fatalities.’ Jim’s stomach executes a twist and roll he only wishes he was fit enough to pull off. ‘The ship was attacked by a rogue faction of Klingon warbirds, then rescued by another rogue faction of Klingon warbirds.’

That’d explain the number of ships Jim saw. His sigh of relief is a somber one—because it could be worse; because ‘it could be worse’ is no kind of comfort for those that were lost out there.

‘Doctor Leonard McCoy—was his name on the list?’ Jim gestures toward the officer’s PADD. ‘Lemme just—I’ll look, you probably don’t remember, just—thanks. For that. I mean, for not making me...make it official.’ The PADD in hand, Jim immediately pulls up the data he needs, reading so fast he has to go back and check again.

‘His name is not listed among those injured or lost during the altercation,’ Spock says, confirming what Jim already knew.

He’s nothing like the half-stranger who was kissing Jim moments ago, but there’s something just as reassuring about Spock saying Bones isn’t dead as there is about Spock holding Jim close, saying he wants him. Jim has to remind himself to breathe, which is exactly the kind of thing Bones would threaten to smack him in the back of the head for, and the idea that Bones can still stick him like his favorite pincushion makes Jim turn away to laugh, eyes stinging.
He hands the PADD back with a mumbled thank you, and sits when and where a blue shirt tells him to. Boner gone. Bones alive. Spock standing nearby, sending out multiple communications, taking care of business while Jim’s ribs get scanned.

He manages to keep from passing out until they’re escorted to the beam-out point, but it’s a narrow victory. Something about his molecular restructuring—between the planet’s surface to the starship above—takes him at the knees, and he’s out in Spock’s arms before they can even escort him to a proper med bay.

At least there’s no sign of Bones. He’d never let Jim into another transporter again.

*
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

If only debriefing meant taking off your briefs.

Jim wakes and sleeps in fits and bursts, tossing in the starship’s med bay. His injuries aren’t bad, but now that they’re back in protective custody, he gets it. They’re over-protective. Everyone around him has their orders not to take any chances. He might not be the only prince of Earth any longer, but he’s the only one anchoring their political ties with Vulcan. They already lost him, so they’re being a little zealous about putting him back into fighting fit condition. He can’t blame them for that.

It’s what Bones would do. With a whole lot more yelling, which Jim kinda misses now that he’s got the peace and quiet.

Every now and then he tests the feeble connection he felt starting up between himself and Spock back on their planet. Good old Spockeria Five. But he’s alone in his head, no whisper of that second heartbeat, those other thoughts and feelings sliding against his own like water beating a swift path around even the biggest rocks in the river.

In his more lucid moments, Jim has to wonder how much that Starfleet crew heard before they came up on them. The bond’s a Vulcan thing, so it’s naturally quiet—no gongs or jangling chimes, even. Jim felt it, every intimate breath expended and shared, so he knows what to be self-conscious over, but to the others it was probably nothing.

That’s his story and he’s sticking to it.

The ship that rescued them, he learns, is the *USS Farragut*, with a full complement of officers. They were the nearest Federation vessel to Jim and Spock’s signal when it bounced off the planet, so they got roped in by the Federation to pick them up. It’s not an officially-sanctioned royal vessel, which means there are no diplomats on board, no etiquette experts, no quietly-intimidating Vulcan officials. It’s just Starfleet security and medical teams, watching over Jim—and Spock, presumably, wherever he is.

Attending debriefings, no doubt. Jim can assume that’s why he hasn’t been in to visit. Someone’s gonna have to give a record of their findings and experiences, and apparently Jim’s been too down for the count to offer his own version of events.

Which is a shame, because the idea of Spock debriefing without him is downright offensive.

He’ll get the story of the Tiberians all wrong, for one thing. He won’t give it the necessary dramatic flourish that’ll make both their peoples look good. And it’d be such a good story, too: the brave human prince struggling against the odds, boldly engaged in combat with an enemy that dwarfed him—and Spock’s arrival to lend his aid, the Vulcan who stood at the human’s side. Only together were they able to defeat the enemy. Only together were they able to set up shelter and survive. Only together—as an example for both their planets—they achieved something greater than they would have accomplished alone.
Spock won’t embellish. Spock won’t use metaphors. Spock’ll probably make it sound like Jim spent most of his time sleeping off his injuries and slowing him down and ruining his attempts for outside contact, and Jim has nightmares about returning home while Sam laughs helplessly and Gary sends him every tabloid alert about his failure to represent his entire race.

At last, Jim hauls himself out of his observation bed and gets himself something to eat in the nearby replicator. He’s snacking when the medical officers show up to scan his stats and make sure he hasn’t worsened any pre-existing condition, only this time, Jim knows they won’t be displeased with their results. His ribs feel like bone again, not hardened clay ready to shatter at the slightest impact, and none of the bruises that plagued him during his stay on Spockeria Five remain.

He gets a clean bill of health at last—and a communication from his mom where he gets the chance to prove it.

Her face flickers, briefly, into view on the screen before him. Her clear eyes show that momentary worry that never lasts, almost immediately replaced with a diplomatic smoke-screen.

She’d have a great time on Vulcan, where she could learn how to cut the period of lowered emotional defenses to a fraction of its current length.

That’s not fair.

Jim knows she must’ve been worried about him.

‘Hey, queen mother,’ Jim says, refusing to sound as weary as he feels. It’s to reassure her as much as it is to prove he can to himself. ‘I’m even in one piece, so nobody has to wear black. I bet they’re sick of it lately, anyway.’

‘Jim.’ Winona Kirk leans forward, a shift that wouldn’t be noticeable to anyone who doesn’t know her as well as Jim does. He grins for her benefit. It’s not her fault he feels so distant. Nothing’s her fault, really. She’s a good mother, a good queen. She has a lot more to worry about than one alliance with difficult Vulcans, or one giant lizard threatening her. She’s got the whole Klingon empire to deal with, and the Romulans, and Sam, who’s as much trouble as both. ‘I’m so relieved to hear from you. Of course, we never gave up hope that we would.’

‘Neither did we. I would’ve called or written you or something, but, uh... Excuses, excuses, right?’ Jim manages to chuckle. ‘Sorry, though. If I worried you.’

Not that it was his fault.

But that’s the thing about human apologies. They’re not necessarily about intent, but about result. They’re about the things that happened, not the things that were supposed to.

‘And the two of you...’ Mom pauses. ‘I have learned from reports that the two of you acted admirably.’

Jim blinks. ‘The two of us?’

‘Indeed. Your husband enumerated your acts of valor during a time of great duress.’

‘Oh.’ Jim’s voice cracks. ‘Well, yeah. You know Vulcans can’t lie, right?’

‘That is the rumor,’ Mom says.

She bows her head, either in quiet acknowledgement or to hide the amusement in her eyes. If she’s
enjoying Jim’s joke, then she doesn’t let on. She’s good that way. Dad was the natural diplomat, but she’s followed suit with a flawless ease that had to come naturally. Jim always figured Sam got their easygoing likeability directly, before it skipped him over.

Only during his less charitable moments, though.

‘I’m…relieved to hear that the two of you have been working together so effectively,’ Mom adds.

‘Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?’ Jim asks. There’s no venom in it; it’s just been awhile since he got a chance to talk to someone who wasn’t a Vulcan or Lady Amanda. The difference it makes when he’s not trying to put on a good first impression while simultaneously balking against the pressure is freeing.

‘Well…’ Mom meets the visual head-on, smiling with her eyes. ‘You aren’t exactly easy to get along with, dear.’

It’s harsh, but not necessarily unfair. No one knows him like his mom does, for better or for worse. In Jim’s experience, it’s usually been worse.

‘And neither are Vulcans,’ Jim prompts.

‘Those are your words, not mine.’ Mom tucks a piece of hair back from her face. Without her crown, it’s always slipping. ‘Can’t I give you a compliment without assigning blame to either party?’

‘You could,’ Jim says. ‘It’d be a lot less fun that way.’

That gets her to crack, a genuine grin that’s wider than anything Jim managed to stir out of Lady Amanda while taking his meals with her. It’s lopsided and it doesn’t quite fit on her face—and it’s just like Jim’s smile when it surges up out of nowhere. Mom manages to make it look less deranged, though. She’s had more years to practice.

‘At least I know you’re feeling better,’ she says. ‘You’re that much more agreeable if you’re in a condition requiring sedation.’

Jim picks at his replicated meal, scowling at the weird tang that follows the taste of the vegetables he’s eating. That’s what he gets for ordering carrot sticks, anyway. He should’ve gone with the cheeseburger. ‘Uh huh, and what’s that say about how you raised me?’

‘That we bought you up with a healthy curiosity for the world around you,’ Mom says. The connection blurs for a second and Jim blinks to make sure the trouble isn’t his eyes losing focus. ‘Speaking of health: I thought it would please you to learn that Doctor McCoy has been in touch with his staff onsite at the palace. I believe the term Nurse Chapel used was safe and sound and mad as hell.’

Jim’s grin might be deranged looking, but at least it’s honest. ‘Yeah, sounds like Bones. I bet the Klingons took him captive, realized their mistake, and by the time they found a place to drop him off again, he’d managed to make the lot of them surrender.’

The idea that something that simple could be possible brings a lump to Jim’s throat. He blames the carrots, sliding his plate away.

‘Maybe you’re not that far off.’ Mom’s face soberes. ‘It’s true that the trouble with the Klingons only grows more complicated as their factions fracture, rather than less.’
'Yeah, but if they’re that divided, what they gain in unpredictability, we gain in their lack of central organization.’ Jim waits, however childishly, for some approval of the wisdom inherent in his statement, and notes when Mom’s face softens again.

‘It’s true. But lives have been lost, and will continue to be in danger, until such a time as we can broker a real peace. Not to mention the worry both royal families of Earth and Vulcan were just given by your disappearance.’

Jim shrugs, one-shouldered. The trouble with approval is half in the long, hard haul of gaining it and half in what the hell you’re supposed to do with it once it’s yours. ‘We did okay. The planet we were stranded on was practically tropical. I mean, if anybody asks, I’m gonna say it’s the closest thing to a private honeymoon somebody in my position is going to get. No cameras going off outside the window. ...Of course, there weren’t any windows, but you get the idea.’

‘The reports I received said you had been injured, but that you were to make a swift recovery. I can trust strange doctors not to lie to me to protect my feelings.’

‘Bones never lies,’ Jim says. ‘He shouts and says stuff that’s incomprehensible. It’s different.’

‘It’s a pain in my royal ass,’ Mom replies. ‘But I take your point. Well-argued, Jim. I truly am glad to see you looking so well.’

Jim rubs the back of his neck, turning away to say the next thing. ‘Yeah. It’s good to see you too, Mom. I was gonna—’ Mom clears her throat. ‘I was going to write to you about the wedding and everything, too. I meant to. It’s just that I knew it’d be important to make it all official, and that’d mean researching all the weird Vulcan stuff that we got into, without saying something that might offend somebody on Vulcan, so...

‘So you used that very convenient excuse not to write to me, after all.’ Mom pauses. ‘No, Jim. I could have written you, as well. But I suppose my hope was that you would be having the adventure you’ve always wanted. Don’t look so surprised—you were hardly subtle about it.’

‘Mom,’ Jim says.

There’s a brief, polite knock on Jim’s door.

‘Don’t let me keep you,’ Mom says.

‘No, it’s cool, I’ll just be a sec.’ Jim leans back in his chair. ‘Who is it?’

The pause from the hall lets Jim know who it is before he even speaks. ‘Prince James,’ Spock says, all formality, like they weren’t just living like cavemen in the wilds of an uncolonized planet.

Well, Jim was living like a caveman. In order to live like a cave-Vulcan, Spock would’ve had to get a lot more violent and passionate. At least, if the texts Jim managed to get a peek at on Vulcan were accurate. They might’ve gotten a head start on the latter, if it hadn’t been for the timely appearance of the Starfleet rescue team.

‘Come in,’ Jim calls, before turning back to the screen. He lifts his eyebrows, not sure what call to make and he might, just might, be waiting for his Mom to decide for him. ‘It’s Spock. His Highness, my husband.’

He doesn’t realize that he was secretly hoping for her to sign off until he sees her expression brighten instead.
She wants to say hi.

That’s only because she hasn’t talked to him since he was a toddler. She doesn’t know what a drag it’s gonna be this time for the first billion conversations, until she finally gets him to trust her.

The door hisses open and Jim spins in his chair, waving Spock over. Spock’s eyes slide from Jim to the illuminated personal terminal, complete with the image of Queen Winona Kirk waiting on the subspace channel. When Spock spots her, his posture stiffens further, hands tucked in the small of his back.

Jim didn’t think it was even possible for Spock to have a more formal look. Maybe it happened during the wedding ceremony, but Jim was barely conscious throughout, let alone familiar enough with Spock’s body language to note those kinds of subtle differences.

‘Your Majesty.’ Spock moves forward, but only to put himself within view of the frame so he can bow. ‘Greetings and good health. I was not informed Prince James was engaged in private communication.’

Through Jim’s own personal translation of his husband’s speech, that sounds like a knock on him, like Spock thinks he should’ve said something rather than letting him in.

Well, tough. Let him feel uncomfortable for a change. He might as well get a sneak peek of what’s waiting in his future when they switch things up and touch down on Earth.

‘That’s quite all right, Prince Spock.’ Mom doesn’t grin, but her face lights up, tight around the eyes like she’s having trouble keeping it back. It’s gratifying to see the Spock-ness of it all wash over a Kirk that isn’t Jim for a change. ‘I’ve been studying your reports quite thoroughly, as you can imagine. I was just telling Jim how grateful I am that the two of you managed to cope with such trying circumstances.’

‘Actually, I think you implied I was one of the trying circumstances,’ Jim says.

Someone’s gotta keep the family honest.

‘If that implication was one inadvertently inferred in my reports,’ Spock begins, ‘then I assure you, Queen Winona and Prince James, that was never my intent.’

‘No, I mean she implied I was one of the trying circumstances,’ Jim says.

Mom can’t say exactly what she’s thinking—because I know you had to be; because I’ve been on long trips to new places with you, Jim, and I know what that’s like—but she nods, dignified, always like a stranger to Jim in these moments. A stranger he knows really, really well. ‘Not at all, Prince Spock. Rather, I was impressed by your restraint where the subject was concerned.’

‘I regret to say that I require clarification as to the nature of this restraint,’ Spock says.

Jim gives Mom a look, but Mom doesn’t mirror it. Jim’s eyes scream but Mom’s face is nearly Vulcan blank. ‘My son has a reputation of being a handful. While not all reputations are fairly earned, I will admit there are at times a grain or two of truth to those rumors.’

‘She’s saying I’m wild,’ Jim translates. ‘That I’m rebellious. That I rage against the status quo.’

‘He likes to drive things very, very fast, mostly. I trust he didn’t have the opportunity during that unfortunate period in which you were stranded in the Alpha Quadrant.’
‘There was a lizard,’ Jim mutters. ‘And it was huge. Like, massive. The size of a small house.’

‘It was three point four percent larger than the average, full-grown le-matya of Vulcan,’ Spock says. Then, unfathomably, he bows again. ‘I must express my sincere regret that I did not intervene prior to the harm that the hostile life form caused your son, Prince James.’

‘I shot it with a phaser,’ Jim reminds him. ‘A phaser which I fixed while it was attacking me. I was totally fine. I had it. Spock pitched in and helped out at the very end—not that I’m not grateful—but I was doing fine on my own.’

‘There is no need for formal apology, Prince Spock.’ Mom nods, briefly, but her meaning’s clear enough. ‘It is my understanding that you behaved admirably and commendably—both of you. As far as the potential outcomes for such an eventuality are concerned, the two of you acquitted yourselves quite well.’

‘Such praise is appreciated but by no means compulsory,’ Spock says. ‘We did only as was necessary for survival.’

‘Indeed,’ Mom replies. ‘But some are less capable than others. The two of you were capable. Jim,’ she adds, then slips from being just Mom to Queen Winona in the blink of an eye. ‘We will be in further communication once the two of you are back on Vulcan. In the meantime, I must ready my address to our people regarding your whereabouts, and the actions we must take in order to ensure the Allied Federation remains safe against the Klingon threat.’

‘It was good to hear from you,’ Jim tells her, voice small.

‘I anticipate a future meeting to be conducted in person, Prince Spock.’ Mom pauses. ‘You have grown.’

‘Your Majesty.’ Spock bows and Mom cuts the transmission and Jim oozes into his chair, staring accusatorially at the abandoned plate of carrots while he waits for Spock to say something.

Spock doesn’t.

He does, however, clear his throat.

‘Something stuck in there?’ Jim asks. ‘Need a lozenge?’

‘I was not aware that you were conducting a private conversation with your mother, the queen,’ Spock replies. ‘I should not have interrupted.’

‘Spock, seriously, it’s fine. You did me a favor, honestly. Took some of the heat off me.’

‘It did not appear to me as though there was any heat to the conversation,’ Spock says. ‘While I am aware that you must be speaking metaphorically, there was no visible sign of distress or other notable agitation on Queen Winona’s face.’

‘She hides it well,’ Jim says. ‘Almost as well as a Vulcan.’

‘On the contrary,’ Spock replies, ‘I have been trained to observe such details of expression in humans for the purposes of expedient negotiations. Had these feelings been present, I would have been aware of them.’

‘Huh,’ Jim says, instead of what he wants to say, which is: that’s creepy.
’Is your attempt to characterize the conversation as something other than pleasant indicative of a desire to keep its true nature private?’ Spock asks.

’No.’ Jim turns the chair with one boot on the ground, spinning himself slowly in place until he can get a good look at Spock. ‘We were just—I don’t know, Spock. We were just talking. About the usual stuff. Federation politics. The Klingon Empire. My terrible personality.’

Spock doesn’t speak up immediately in protest, which Jim should’ve been expecting. There’s a small part of him that’s always willing to hope. He likes to think of it as one of his better qualities but really it probably just means he’s too stubborn to learn his lesson.

’You could have said that you were otherwise occupied before I entered.’

’Well, you could’ve told me you were gonna say all that nice stuff in your report.’ Jim spins himself around again until he can put his boots up on the table next to his discarded tray of carrots.

Spock frowns. Jim can see it out of the corner of his eye, the shadow of Spock’s brow twitching together. With the manufactured distance between them now, it’s hard to believe Jim was ever in his lap, rubbing against him while Spock opened his mind and connected them as one.

If they’d gone through with it, would he be feeling as awkward as he is right now?

Probably not.

’Nice is not an appropriate characterization of my official statement,’ Spock says. Jim leans his head to one side, watching him closely. ‘The report was an accurate portrayal of the events as they took place.’

’Did you tell them about Spockeria Five?’

Spock’s pause tells Jim all he needs to know.

’Since neither of us has the authority to append our names to discovered worlds, without following official protocol, I elected to leave it out.’

’Uh huh,’ Jim says. ‘I’m guessing that means you left out Tiberians too. I thought Vulcans didn’t lie.’

’At no point did I lie, Jim. Neither did I elaborate upon the truth. I recounted the facts of the events as they occurred and they reflected favorably on us both through no embellishment of my imagination.’

Jim groans, tipping his head against the back of his chair. ‘Fine. I guess I’ll just have to be the one who makes it sound exciting for all the news networks back home. It’ll keep them from making up rumors about how my marriage is in trouble already for a while, at least.’

’The devotion of certain subsets of Earth’s press to slander and falsehoods is concerning,’ Spock says.

’And the real kicker is, that’s not even their greatest fault.’ Now it’s Jim’s turn to pause. ‘You really told ‘em I did good, huh? You didn’t include your scathing critique of my limited shelter-building abilities?’

’You may read the report for yourself at any point you desire,’ Spock replies. ‘If you find it lacking in any way, you are more than welcome to correct my statement, should it be proven that
my memory of the events has failed me.’

‘What’re the odds of *that* happening?’

‘Three thousand and twenty-two to one.’

‘Rounding up?’

‘Rounding down.’

Jim groans again, kicking out of his chair and heading over the replicator. ‘Hot chocolate, but not too hot. One degree lower, Celsius, than the temperature it’d need to be to burn the top layer of my tongue off.’

‘Repeat your request,’ the computer replies.

‘Hot chocolate, not scalding hot chocolate,’ Jim says.

The computer doesn’t ask for clarification this time.

With the warm mug in both hands, he turns to find Spock watching him again—or still watching him; Jim isn’t sure if Spock stopped at any point. Jim drinks without testing the temperature with a sip first. It’s decent. Spock’s staring at him. They’re rescued and this has officially been the strangest, most incredible, most confusing week of Jim’s life, which hasn’t been a bad thing necessarily. It’s just left him feeling mixed up.

‘Thanks for making the report, anyway,’ Jim says, stopping himself before he adds something about how he’s failed to pull his own weight. Again. ‘I’ll, uh, yeah—I’ll check it out when I get the chance. You’re gonna be on the cover of every digital popular culture magazine for the next few months, though. If you want, I can leak a photograph you like so you don’t end up plastered all over the place with your tongue sticking out like *some* people.’

Spock’s still not talking. Jim burns his throat on another gulp of hot chocolate. He tilts his head to one side to see if Spock’s eyes will follow the motion; instead, unexpectedly, Spock strides across the room, his fingertips cool on the back of Jim’s neck, fingers threading through his hair, kissing Jim’s mouth.

Yeah, he’s learning. He’s officially the master. Jim pushes on the balls of his feet to lean up into the kiss, lips parting under Spock’s.

One brief swipe of Spock’s tongue against Jim’s teeth later, Spock pulls back, eyes faintly unfocused.

‘The Vulcan reaction to the human confection known as chocolate is not one I wish to experience at this time,’ he says.

‘Wait,’ Jim replies. ‘What?’

Spock raises his eyebrows, expression relaxing into a comfortable blankness, like he’s reciting something for a PADD reference program. A program for children, no less. It’s a look Jim’s gotten used to, so he doesn’t take offense.

Much.

‘The effects of Earth chocolate on a Vulcan digestive system would be comparable to that of any
number of intoxicating depressants, such as alcohol, on an average human.’

‘What?’ That seems to be all Jim’s capable of these days. Repeating himself. His fingers, steady around the swollen curve of the mug’s bottom, are starting to burn. That’s a far-off concern, though, and way less vital than the conversation taking place. He doesn’t wanna make any sudden movements that might spook Spock out of sharing. ‘Wait—’ There’s that repetition again. ‘You’re telling me Vulcans get drunk off of chocolate?’

‘Certain components in its makeup have an adverse biochemical effect on our nervous system,’ Spock says. ‘While the results are not perfectly analogous, it is similar enough that I am comfortable making the comparison in order to better your understanding of the situation.’

That, in Jim’s book, translates to the same thing.

‘That’s a yes, right?’ Jim slowly adjusts his hold on the mug in his hands, taking another careful sip. Spock follows the trajectory of the hot chocolate. ‘Just checking. I know how much you enjoy being clear.’

Spock’s still standing close enough to kiss, but apparently Jim’s holding onto the equivalent of Vulcan catnip. It’s not exactly discouraging to know what he’s holding onto, but now’s not the best time to try and talk his husband into getting drunk by kissing him again.

Jim’s already on shaky ground with the Starfleet team that rescued him. He should probably be thinking about setting an example for Earth and how anything embarrassing he does now just reflects badly on Vulcan too. He’s got two homes to embarrass instead of one.

If the talk with Mom was good for anything, it was reminding Jim how much everyone’s hopes are riding on him to hold their union together. The last thing the Federation needs is for two of its founding members to have tension in the face of the threat from the Klingon Empire.

His relationship with Spock is steadier than it could be, but Jim doesn’t think he’d take kindly to being mortified in a starship med bay. Those are tactics that would’ve worked on Spockeria Five, not back in the real world.

All things considered, Jim would take the lizards.

‘I’ll keep it in mind,’ Jim says finally. ‘For a honeymoon, maybe. A real one. You seriously never had hot chocolate when you were a kid?’

It’s one of the memories Jim would share with someone special—with Spock—if sharing memories was simple, because it’s one of the few memories that’s actually his. All his. A chilly winter; Jim young enough that he still literally looked up to Sam; and Mom and Dad together in the same room like a normal family on one of those precious nights they locked the world, the galaxy, somewhere outside their door. Jim got to stay up late; it was the only time of day they had the best chance to avoid being interrupted by business of state calling Dad away. Jim was so determined to make it through to the end of a movie, but even with way too much hot chocolate inside him, enough sugar to kill a full-grown le-matya, he never made it. And Sam never let him live it down. And there’s no point of comparison Jim can give Spock because he doesn’t have a parallel.

Because chocolate makes Spock drunk.

If they were bond-mates, then Spock would know all of that, plus every other private, lonely, uncharitable moment Jim’s ever had. The great stuff—there’s definitely some of that—and all the
not-so-great stuff, too. It’s enough to make the hot chocolate form a hard, cold lump between Jim’s throat and his stomach.

He wants it.

He also doesn’t want it.

He also has to wonder if he’s the one who needs to worry about being able to handle the pon farr, or if Spock needs to worry about being able to handle the flow of constant, illogical emotions.

They did all right by themselves. They did better than all right. But they’re not by themselves anymore, and they can’t forget the factor brought by everyone else. Two kingdoms. Two cultures. Two planets.

Two people.

‘I did not,’ Spock replies.

‘Hey,’ Jim begins.

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘Yeah.’ Jim chuckles, a chocolatey sound, not necessarily in the good way. ‘I could get some mouth wash, if you wanted to kiss me again and not get tipsy. And, you know, when they do ask me for my account of what happened to us, I won’t even have to exaggerate or get imaginative when it comes to saying what a great job you did, yourself.’

‘We acted as was required of us. There is no need for praise.’

‘There is, though. There is, Spock.’ Jim sets the mug down, fingers so warm that he knows exactly what he needs to do with them.

Not what he needs to do with himself, but what he wants to do, what he should do, with his hot hands.

He holds them both out. If Spock takes ‘em, then he takes ‘em.

Spock takes them.

Jim can’t sense Spock’s emotions, can’t read his mind, but he does feel the answering heat in Spock’s cool fingertips—cool to the touch, but hiding fire underneath. Jim loops his fingers with Spock’s, half kissing, half embracing, and rubs Spock’s knuckles with his thumb, a gesture that’s as much about giving Spock contact as it is a ritual for Jim at this point.

‘We’re still gonna do the bonding thing, right?’ Jim’s voice sounds tinny in comparison to the intensity of Spock’s grip. ‘Cause I’m still down if you are.’

Spock hesitates. It’s only for a split-second, but Jim notices it because he’s trained himself to notice everything about Spock. It’s self-defense as much as it is anything else: a survival instinct Jim tacked onto his careful regimen of Vulcan atmospheric training and all that sash-savas tea he brewed early on.

‘I will have to consult with my father,’ Spock says.

‘Oh boy.’ Jim tightens his fingers around Spock’s where they’ve gotten tangled. It’s enough of a tactile distraction to keep him from getting a look on his face. ‘Don’t tell me you’re having second
thoughts.’

It’s easier if the words come out of Jim’s mouth first, rather than if he has to wait to hear them from anyone else.

Spock doesn’t protest at the added tension of Jim’s hold. As signs go, it could be worse.

‘That is not what I said.’

‘All right, well, I inferred. So sue me.’ Jim shifts his weight from right to left, trying to work out whether there’s any angle of existence that makes him look taller than Spock. ‘Don’t actually—That’s another expression, Spock. I guess you bring them out in me. From me? It’s a complicated concept. The point is: you suddenly deciding you need to ask Sarek if this is a good idea doesn’t exactly make me feel great about the whole thing.’

Because, naturally, it implies that Spock doesn’t feel great about the whole thing. Jim can’t be the only optimist in the room when it comes to their relationship.

At least, he’d prefer it if he wasn’t. If he’s giving up the easy comfort of hot chocolate then he’s gonna need something to take its place in the interim.

‘I have already informed you that the Vulcan mating bond is not one to be undertaken lightly.’ When Spock blinks, it’s thoughtful, long lashes batting in one slow beat rather than the flutter anyone else in their right mind would take advantage of with the same anatomy. ‘You persist in making this a personal matter, rather than a logical one.’

‘Because it’s our marriage, Spock.’ Jim relaxes his hold and Spock’s fingers flex between Jim’s, stretching to hold his hands. ‘If that’s not personal, then I don’t know what is.’

‘Rather, there is no personal slight intended,’ Spock says. ‘My father’s commitment to my human mother is a precedent that has given him experience in this particular area. It would be prudent to seek his counsel with regards to the potential disadvantages.’

‘Potential disadvantages, huh? That’s kind of a negative way of looking at it, don’t you think?’ Jim asks.

‘I am already well aware of the positive aspects,’ Spock says.

Jim supposes, maybe, there are perks to being obvious after all.

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Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

A brief interlude with Bones.

Chapter Notes

A BEAUTIFUL piece by kuuttamo on tumblr to go with chapter 33!
When they arrive on Vulcan and the atmosphere hits Jim like a vengeful fist to the gut, he doesn’t have it in him to groan or grimace or even think about indulging in either.
First of all, Sarek and Lady Amanda have personally come to meet them, along with a retinue of stern-faced Vulcan bodyguards that don’t look like their facial muscles have ever known how to smile. The nearby mountains are more emotive than this group. In fact, Jim wants to ask Spock if they’re statues, or—wait, did that one blink?—but they have no way of communicating silently.

But there’s another matter to take care of first, and it’s one that takes precedent.

Because there’s Bones standing on the hot sands, sweating and scowling Jim’s way, as familiar as home, and Jim breaks rank before his princely instincts and every good impression he might’ve managed to make kick in to stop him. So what if the Vulcan nobility raises an eyebrow an extra centimeter; so what if, deep down, their logical core is scandalized by Jim’s emotional behavior.

Bones is alive, and there was a period of time when Jim had to actively work to believe in that, rather than accept it as a constant. If not universal, then certainly for his universe, small as it feels, large as it secretly is.

His feet hit the hot sand, little dust clouds left in his wake as he sprints forward, nearly colliding with Bones’ chest, wrapping his arms around Bones’ shoulders.

‘You’re a prince, Jim, not a bat out of hell,’ Bones mutters, but he pats Jim on the back between his shoulder blades all the same. ‘Said you’d be in need of a physical—and it’s not like I’d trust just anyone with your health, either. Pain in my—’ Bones clears his throat, remembering the sharp Vulcan ears all around him; when Jim steps back, he can see there’s something bright in Bones’ eyes past the squinting wrinkles at the corners.

Bones would blame the sting of the sand, but Jim knows better.

It’s enough to soften the blow of countless pairs of stern, dark Vulcan eyes fixed on him—polite on the outside, judgmental on the inside.

Jim takes a step backward and manages to bow for Lady Amanda and Sarek—mostly for Lady Amanda, he tells himself—breathing more easily this second time than he did the first. Maybe absence makes the lungs, not the heart, grow fonder.

‘My apologies, your majesties,’ he says, without the forethought he usually needs to hate how close to second nature etiquette is for him now. As knowledge banks go, he’d rather have other data memorized. ‘Forgive my unsightly display. Doctor Leonard McCoy has been in the employ of my family as my personal medical officer for many years now. My relief that he is unharmed after the unfortunate events of the recent attack momentarily overwhelmed me, and I’m afraid I behaved most inappropriately.’

Jim lifts his eyes. Amanda’s sparkle with more than just the early morning sunlight.

‘Perhaps, Prince James Tiberius, you would benefit from medical consultation at this time,’ Sarek says.

It’s almost a kindness—the opportunity to get some alone time with Bones, in the relative cool of the indoors.

There’s not much anyone can do about the atmosphere, but Bones’ medical quarters are calibrated for comfort, human and Vulcan. Jim shoots an apologetic, sweaty look Spock’s way, but he’s already engaged in talking with his parents, filling in the oxygen-starved blank Jim’s leaving behind.

Jim’s said a lot about Vulcans in the past, but they know how to engineer a quiet escape.
It’s only years of training in etiquette and unfavorable environments that keeps Jim from falling to his knees and kissing the floor when they cross the threshold to Bones’s improvised sick bay. Deprived of his natural first response, Jim reaches up and slaps Bones on the back, right between his shoulder blades. The obvious scowl that spreads over Bones’ features is music to Jim’s ears. His eyes. He’s already a little delirious from the transition; he misses that Federation starship and its environmental controls.

“Well, don’t just stand there with your mouth open, gawping like a sloe-eyed calf at planting season. You know the drill.” Bones already has his tricorder out, ready and waiting.

“Missed you too, Bones.”

Jim sighs around a grin; it sounds more like a wheeze. The effort it takes him just to tug his shirt off over his head is more than he’s willing to expend. But he does it because Bones is alive, and because it means he gets to hop up on the examining table instead of standing on his own two feet.

It’s a relief to sit. Jim drums his boots against the back of the table, settling his hands on either side of his thighs. When Bones gets close to beep and blip over the healed side of Jim’s rib cage, it’s as good a chance as any to check his doctor over for any signs of damage.

“Eyes back in your head, Your Majesty.” Bones sticks something on the side of Jim’s face, above his cheek and beneath his temple. “I’m not the one getting a physical here.”

Busted.

Jim licks his lips where they’re already starting to chap.

“I was just trying to see if you got into any scrapes with the Klingons while I was gone,” he says. ‘Heard you got pretty chummy with a rebel faction while I was off being shipwrecked. Some guys have all the luck.’

‘Spoken like a man who’s never tasted bloodwine and gagh.’ Bones says the word like he’s spitting.

Maybe he is. For a second, it’s unclear.

“I’m sorry,” Jim says, ‘could you repeat that? I think you had something in your throat.’

‘Gagh,’ Bones says.

It’s as good as I missed you too, Jim.

“Well, I fought lizards. Giant ones. Not the tiny, cute ones you can catch by ponds or whatever. I mean like... Have you met I-Chaya?”

Bones steadies Jim with one hand on his shoulder to keep him from wiggling. The more things change, the more Jim is determined to stay the same. ‘What’s an I-Chaya? Don’t answer that,’ Bones says. ‘Say ah instead. And stop moving.’

‘Ah.’ Jim tilts his head back. ‘They were the size of horses, then. The lizards. Not I-Chaya; I-Chaya’s a bear.’

‘Of course you did. You would. Bet you weren’t even one hour out of my sight before you started picking fights with horse-sized lizards. Bet you ate the first fruit you found, too.’
‘Hey,’ Jim says, shutting his eyes to the friendly hum of Bones’ medical tricorder, ‘it’s not like I’m the one who started it. I was covered in mud, minding my own business, just trying to bathe in the river, and it slammed into me. Multiple times. It was aggressive. It was awesome.’ Bones lifts an eyebrow. Jim seems to be encouraging that reaction all over the place lately. ‘Okay, so it wasn’t awesome. But it wasn’t so bad, either. I didn’t have much time to be scared. Mostly I was dizzy.’

‘Skull’s still in one piece.’ Bones tuts in the back of his throat. Gagh, Jim thinks. ‘You’re just lucky the damn bone’s so thick up there.’

‘Or giant lizards aren’t what they’re cracked up to be. Did you seriously have bloodwine with Klingon rebels?’

‘That’s what they tell me.’ Bones puts the tricorder away; he always looks crankiest when Jim’s the picture of health, something he explained to Jim once as being the dread of expectancy. When Jim’s sick, at least Bones knows what the problem is. When he’s healthy, the danger and disease lurking in Jim’s future is like a guillotine blade of anticipation. He knows it’s coming, but not when or where or, heavens to Betsy, what. ‘The stuff burns. It’s like swallowing the whole damn Vulcan desert. Put your shirt back on.’

Jim complyes, arms wobbling, hair messy, taking a deep, relaxing breath of the sterilized air. ‘What’d you do to win their respect? Slap them across the face and shout ‘em down over the state of their medical bay?’

‘Klingons don’t have medical bays, Jim.’ Bones shudders and Jim tries to emote sympathy, which used to be easier before it got Vulcaned out of him. ‘And that’s just the start of it.’

‘Should’ve known you couldn’t be taken down by a couple of Klingon warbirds, anyway.’

‘Wish I could have the same faith in your survival skills.’

‘I built a shelter. I wrestled a giant lizard.’

Bones’ face twists in companionable distress, grumpy enough that Jim has to laugh, and the laugh trails off, and Jim’s silence follows. He doesn’t know how to break it. Bones folds his arms, then unfolds them, clapping Jim on the shoulder. It’s simple, human contact, which comes at a premium these days. Jim covers Bones’ hand with his own.

‘Nobody but your husband for company.’ Bones shakes his head. ‘No wonder you’re starved for the milk of human kindness.’

‘It wasn’t all bad, Bones.’

‘Better than being pulverized by a giant lizard? Some standards.’

‘I’m pretty sure I love him, Bones.’

‘Who—the lizard?’

‘Yeah—but I’m talking about the one I married.’

Jim glances at Bones to see whether he’s laughing. There’s a flicker of something on his face that isn’t outright hostility. It passes in the blink of an eye, where the curdled shape of his mouth softens and the deep wrinkles in his forehead even out to something less pronounced. It’s not a friendly expression but on Bones, it’s as good as a grin.
Jim’s starting to wonder about this pattern he’s established when it comes to the people he’s close to. It doesn’t say very flattering things about his sanity.

One too many blows to the head.

‘Frankly, I can’t say I’m surprised.’ Only Bones would manage to make a pronouncement of love sound like an unfortunate medical diagnosis. ‘Though it’s my medical duty to inform you that you might’ve been better off with the real lizards.’

‘You don’t really mean that.’ Jim squeezes Bones’ hand. His healing hands.

The idea that they could’ve been in danger for any length of time, that there could’ve been Klingons breaking them off and using them for toothpicks or other Klingon war trophies, made Jim’s blood run cold. Now that they’re back on Vulcan, it’s difficult to imagine anything cold at all.

‘I could mean that.’ Bones squeezes Jim’s shoulder, healthy muscle and bone before letting go. ‘I read the reports, same as anybody else. Spock might never have broken any of your ribs, but this damned desert’s as near to a deal-breaker as anything I’ve encountered.’

‘That’s just because you aren’t a trained diplomat,’ Jim says. ‘Or a romantic.’

‘I’m a doctor,’ Bones agrees, ‘not an idiot.’

Jim hops down off the examining table, regretting it when the sudden motion makes him briefly dizzy. Of all the things he imagined longingly while marooned on Spockeria Five, the thin air on Vulcan wasn’t one of them. Even the environmental controls can’t compensate entirely.

‘You know, if you’re not careful, I’m gonna start to think you’re jealous,’ Jim says. ‘I got to have all these adventures and you got bloodwine and worms.’

‘Serpent worms,’ Bones says. ‘I’m told there’s a difference.’

‘Probably only if you’re eating them.’ Jim leers, wiggling his tongue from between his teeth like a wayward nightcrawler.

‘I can’t believe anyone married you.’ Bones turns away, before Jim can ruin spaghetti and countless other flexible delicacies for him.

‘He had to,’ Jim says. ‘It was arranged.’

‘There was a point in there, though, where he had to work for it, just like everybody else.’ With Bones’ back to Jim, he can’t read the twitches of his eye bags or the twisting corner of his mouth to determine if Bones is serious or messing with him or passing down ancient McCoy family wisdom. Also, Jim thinks he might be having an allergic reaction to the L-word. ‘Could’ve wound up married to your older brother, after all.’

Jim clears his throat, dislodging the lump formed by saying things he can’t take back. Definitely an allergic reaction. ‘Vulcans, right? Stubborn as the desert. Even more unforgiving.’

‘That what you think, Jim?’ Bones asks.

‘No,’ Jim replies. ‘Yes. Sometimes. Mostly, I try not to.’

‘Always suspected that might be the case.’
Jim slings one arm around Bones’ shoulders, leaning over him to watch him update Jim’s charts. It’s official. He survived. Mom doesn’t have to lose two people in her family in one year and Bones is in one piece and Jim loves Spock. There’s no pretty sure about it. Jim gulps. ‘Come on, Bones. I fought a giant lizard just to make it back to you, and this is the welcome I get?’

‘I ate living worms,’ Bones says. ‘They wriggled in my mouth. You think a man can ever be the same after something like that?’

‘I heard even the Klingons don’t actually like gagh. Apparently they just enjoy the death throes happening in their mouths.’

Bones shudders. Jim sympathizes. They have a moment that Jim doesn’t know what to do with, so he pulls away, clapping Bones one last time on the back.

‘You survived; the worms didn’t. All’s right with the galaxy,’ Jim says.

Bones snorts. ‘Your definition of right—if only I could heal that little disease of the mind. But perspective’s a hell of a thing to change.’

‘You really think Spock still likes me?’ Jim wheels away to pick up a hypo; Bones doesn’t snatch it out of his hands immediately, which has to mean he missed Jim as much as Jim missed him. ‘Or...likes me at all. It’s seriously hard to tell with him. Sometimes he looks at me like I’m something on his boot—’

‘Only sometimes?’ Bones asks. ‘Seems like you get better than most to me.’

—but he didn’t let the giant lizard kill me, either, so that has to mean something.

‘You sure like to make everything complicated, Jim. And that’s my official opinion. My professional opinion, even.’

‘Got anything to cure it?’

‘Uh-uh. That kind of condition is one a man suffers from his entire life. It’s called pigheadedness. And plain bad taste.’ Bones finally swoops in, sweeping the hypo away. ‘You’ve got it something awful, haven’t you?’

‘Maybe just a little awful,’ Jim replies. ‘I mean, loving my own husband—it could be worse.’

‘Your Vulcan husband.’

‘Half Vulcan.’

‘Good luck, Jim,’ Bones tells him. ‘You’re definitely gonna need it.’

‘The wonders of modern medicine at your fingertips, and all you’ve got for me is good luck?’ Jim swings himself up onto the exam bed again, flopping onto his back. ‘So when’re my diplomatic conferences scheduled?’

‘One hour,’ Bones says. ‘I’ve got a salad and some replicated chicken breasts for you. Keep your energy up. Brain food. Try not to make any puns this time, would you?’

‘Hah,’ Jim replies, and tucks in.

*
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

A longer chapter this time.

Chapter Notes

Pixiepunch @ tumblr, whose prince-y designs inspired this fic, drew an amazingly gorgeous prince-y piece of the boys in their finery!

An hour and seventeen minutes later, and Jim’s made it through the conference without providing Earth press with any unfortunate soundbytes. After that, there’s planning for an accelerated schedule, which has Spock and Jim on a protected, escorted transport to Earth so they can finalize the human half of their marriage ceremony, and Jim nobly resists the urge to crack a joke about maybe getting marooned on someplace nice, like Risa, this time.

Spock and pleasure planets don’t mix, not even in Jim’s head. It’s hard to imagine him sacked out on a beach somewhere, listening to the waves roll in and out. He could meditate, but not with all
the other sunbathers running around and drinking fruity cocktails, playing games up and down the shoreline.

Still, it’s a nicer diversion than imagining them ambushed by Klingons again, ejected out another emergency escape shuttle Jim’s never had to think about.

Jim thinks about it during the flight home. He thinks about it pointedly, determinedly, almost meditatively, while Spock himself meditates for real, so chances are he’s not thinking about anything.

Maybe they’re both suffering from the after-effects of their first Klingon ambush.

But there’s a worse ambush waiting for them when they step off their ship into the most prominent of San Francisco’s intergalactic docking bays. Jim scarcely gets a chance to fill his lungs with the stale, metallic, fully oxygenated air before the flashes start going off, camera and data recording devices lighting up in a mad dash of a contest to be the first to get a shot of Prince James of Earth and his Vulcan husband.

The sudden bright lights make Spock pause on the landing. Jim’s standing close enough that he can feel the tension return to Spock’s muscles, fighting to keep from squinting or worse, covering his eyes.

Jim acts quickly—figuring it’ll be worth a headline or two of its own when he takes Spock’s hand and tugs him close, throwing the length of his formal cape over both their heads.

‘Come on, keep down—’

‘I will not argue with such sound counsel,’ Spock replies.

If their reception alone didn’t unsettle Jim, Spock finding nothing to argue with him about would do the trick.

Jim probably should’ve eyeballed the transition from their ship to the car better, because walking the gauntlet from the landing pad to their waiting vehicle with both their heads covered presents something of a problem. Jim doesn’t trip, at least. He keeps his eyes on his boots, tall and shiny and black as they adjust their gaits to a single pace.

Jim knows he’s made the right call when Spock’s too bewildered to even protest being manhandled all along the promenade. He’s uncharacteristically despite having ample opportunity to critique Jim’s methods, but his grip on Jim’s arm is tight while they stumble together toward their royal escort.

He all but throws Spock into the car first, following close after, then slamming the door controls behind their bodyguards. Shouts are still echoing from beyond the glass, half-familiar by now, but focused on a different subject matter: Prince James, Prince James, one with the Vulcan heir! Your Royal Highness! Flash us those ears, don’t be shy!

Jim groans, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. Spock’s still tangled up in his cape. A gentleman would free him first thing but Jim's too busy being weighted down with embarrassment for his species as a whole. Can't move. Too heavy.

He groans again, louder, and with more feeling. He feels his cape rustle, high, princely collar tickling the side of his throat, though when he cracks an eye open, Spock’s sitting completely still and ramrod straight, all his walls up after that onslaught against his personal space.
The bodyguards are separated from them by tinted Plexiglas. They’re just shadows in the back of the care. It’s what passes for privacy on Earth, the closest thing they’ll get to being alone.

Loneliness, though—that’s another story.

‘You sound unwell,’ Spock says. ‘Should we alert Doctor McCoy that his services may be required?’

‘Nah, Spock, it’s nothing unique. Actually, humanity as a whole is infected,’ Jim replies. ‘Infected by gossip. And celebrity worship. Weird, right? Also embarrassing. They’ll say favorable stuff about you, though. I mean, most of ‘em will. Some of them won’t, but they’re assholes and you gotta tune that out. You probably know that already. It’s all bullshit anyway. Except if they say you’re hot. That’d be true.’

‘I recall many of the headlines you forwarded me regarding their coverage of your person as a singular topic of interest.’ Spock pauses. His face is a calm mask that Jim can’t fathom, much less penetrate. He wishes he could cultivate that kind of blank neutrality but he’s the guy who’ll pull up shots of himself on his pad with one squinty eye and his tongue sticking out the other side of his mouth. He’s doing it now, even. He retracts his tongue. ‘I cannot recall a single grain of truth in any of the aforementioned articles, if they can be accurately referred to as such.’

‘Well, I did spill that Klingon dish on my shirt that one time. That one was totally true. The Klingons loved it, though. Their laughter sounds like battle cries, but that’s just... Yeah. Klingons.’ Jim forces a grin that doesn’t shatter, held together by will and a prayer. For a split second, the conversation almost feels easy, like they’re discussing things PADD to PADD. Like the old days. ‘But everything else is just sensationalism. I figure it’s ‘cause most people don’t want to think too much about the stuff that frightens them, like the Klingons who won’t sit down to dinners or peace talks. Who’d rather shoot all our starships out of the sky and kidnap our doctors. So they read puff pieces on how their prince can’t keep his tongue in his head.’

‘Hm,’ Spock says.

It’s only one syllable, but it carries with it an entire planet of judgment.

Jim groans a third time, then waves his hand when Spock’s intake of breath suggests he’s going to ask about his health again.

‘Might as well pull off the bandage,’ he says, tugging out his PADD. ‘Used to check if you’d sent anything during rides like this one, but, uh...’

He flips through the latest hits: already a collection of speculative pieces and one-liners about whether or not the marriage is in trouble; too many shots to count of Jim’s cape; one blurry profile of Spock, cheekbones high and faintly green, ears definitely pointy, which has over thirteen hundred views already.

‘Common consensus is, they like the ears,’ Jim says.

‘Hm,’ Spock says again, then, even less informatively, ‘ah.’

‘But they think that all that time on Vulcan might’ve fried my brain.’ Jim slides down the heated seat of the car, leaning his neck where his back should be. It’s hell on his posture, but he doesn’t feel up to sitting straight either. ‘That’s not new. If I hadn’t just been offworld, they’d have some other excuse. My diet or some secret hoverbike crash or the stress from Sam’s arrival. My dad’s funeral.’
'Is the nature of all such publications purely speculative?' Spock asks. 'It seems inaccurate to refer to this as reporting.'

'The definition of news can get...broad.' When Jim’s finished with rubbing his eyes, he moves straight to his temples, moving the pads of his fingers in slow, concentric circles. 'Like I said—it’s escapism. The closest you can get to fiction without having made-up characters.'

'I see,' Spock says.

He doesn’t approve. Jim can’t exactly blame him.

He’s getting one of his old headaches. Back in the day, Bones used to run all kinds of tests on him, eliminating caffeine and taking stock of the barometric pressure in the air, trying to source a cause where there was none to be found. It’s just his head, the familiar pain brought on by nothing more than simple existence.

What Bones refers to as undue stress is something Jim calls the human condition.

'We’re gonna try and keep them out of our wedding,’ he adds, fingers dragging over the screen of his PADD to refresh the news cycle. ‘Security’s tight, but as you’ve seen with the Gaila thing, it doesn’t always discourage the guys with the wide angle lenses.’

Spock’s answer to that is silence, leaving Jim nothing but the view to keep him company.

They’re zipping past skyscrapers now, the tinted windows not quite dark enough to hide the cloudy San Francisco sky. Jim can see the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance, the bay stretching out wide and blue-gray, dotted with sailing vessels and passenger ships out for a day cruise.

'Since our Earth ceremony would not include any unclothed Orion females, perhaps there would be less interest in photographs of the event.’

Jim’s head throbs and his cape’s choking him, but he turns away from the window to tip his shoulder into Spock’s. They’re both wearing enough layers that it can’t count as improper contact. At least, not if Jim doesn’t stick around too long.

'Was that a joke, Spock? Because I’m sure she’d attend naked if I asked. That’s the beauty of friendship for you.’

'You speak of the habit of your ‘news’ people imposing upon your private life as though you judge it to be unpleasant, yet you suggest a course of action that would only encourage them to impose further.’

God, Jim wants to put his head on Spock’s shoulder. It wouldn’t exactly be cozy; Spock’s bony, angular, but that doesn’t mean he can’t be a little soft, too, and solid, which is better than comfortable sometimes. Instead, Jim puffs out a breath and slips lower in his seat. ‘You’re gonna have to get used to my contradictory nature one of these days, Spock.’

'Perhaps, given time and the ability to mature, you will instead progress beyond the point of such contradictions, rendering the need for my adjustment no longer relevant.’

'Did you just call me immature?’ According to the PADD braced against his thighs, that’s exactly what he is. *Prince James’ Cape Caper* jumps out at him in particular. He tilts it to the side for Spock to give the latest bulletin a once-over.

'Your action was sensible, given the circumstances. That they fail to see the logic in your behavior
suggests they are the illogical ones in this instance and not you, Jim.’

‘Now you’re the contradictory one,’ Jim says, cheeks getting warm, the back of his neck prickling hot under the collar. ‘Calling me immature, then saying I’m logical. If you’re not careful, I’m gonna get whiplash.’

‘You will only suffer from such a malady if the driver of this vehicle is careless enough to involve us in a motor accident. Given that this is a royal vehicle, the likelihood that a vetted driver would be so reckless is...’ Spock pauses. ‘Minimal.’

‘Minimal, huh? Aren’t you usually more specific?’

Spock doesn’t turn to look at Jim, so he doesn’t have the chance to see Jim looking long and hard at him. ‘Once again, I will remind you that my specificity has in the past been the source of amusement and subsequently exasperation for you.’

‘Yeah, but that’s never stopped you before,’ Jim says. ‘You’re not nervous about being here on Earth, are you?’

‘I have prepared myself for the upcoming ceremonies to the best of my abilities. I have thoroughly researched and studied all Earth customs, particularly those that relate to marriage and royalty. As I am unable to affect any outcome beyond my own preparatory efforts and thoughtful behavior, engaging in speculation, anticipation, or any manner of worry would be utterly meaningless.’

‘Jesus,’ Jim says. He digs one knuckle into his left temple. ‘Fine; forget I asked. I’m nervous, by the way, and thanks for asking. And this is my planet. Sort of. Not like I own it, but...it’s home.’

‘Your head is indeed bothering you, Jim,’ Spock replies.

Talk about a non-sequitur. ‘Shifts in pressure always mess with me. It’s fine. Won’t last.’

Jim’s not expecting Spock’s fingers; he might not ever be able to expect Spock’s fingers. They brush against Jim’s temple and sweep Jim’s clumsy knuckles away at the same time, cool fingertips covering Jim’s pulse. When Spock suggests, with a simple nudge, that Jim turn to face him, Jim turns—and Spock settles both hands on either side of Jim’s face, thumbs on his cheekbones, forefingers resting against Jim’s hairline by his ears.

Jim leans into him without thinking about whether it’s gonna be rude by Vulcan standards or not. They’re not on Vulcan. He deserves to do things his way while he’s here. When in Rome, and all that.

People draw comfort from each other on Earth. If Spock’s been doing his reading, then he’ll know what Jim’s getting at. In all honesty, Jim’s not sure who he’s trying to comfort first—it’s just a general spray, phaser-fire set to scatter in a wide burst over the backseat.

He feels like he should apologize, but he’s not sure what he’d be apologizing for. People in general. The human race. Failing to warn him properly about the paparazzi. Jim kind of figured Spock would’ve inferred from all his horror stories, but there’s hearing about a thing and then there’s living it. Jim’s tried to tell him—actions are different than anything you could read about on a PADD.

‘I meant what I said.’ Jim swallows, clearing his throat. He’s talking to distract himself—to distract them both—from the easy way his body fits against Spock’s in the dark, shared space at the back of the car, without even a leather squeak of the upholstery to destroy the moment. ‘The headache’s
not gonna last. It’ll be over before you know it, and… Then won’t you feel stupid for initiating all this unnecessary contact.’

‘In the time of our acquaintance, both personal and from a distance, have you ever known me to engage in any action which could be termed as unintelligent?’ Spock asks.

‘Uh uh,’ Jim says. ‘You can’t fish for compliments when you’re giving me a massage, that’s just disingenuous.’

Spock’s fingers hesitate against Jim’s scalp, tangled in his hair where it’s longer at the top.

‘My efforts are nothing but genuine in nature.’

Well, shit.

‘I know, I know, Spock,’ Jim says, leaning his head into Spock’s hand like a needy golden retriever. ‘I was just teasing you. It’s the family sense of humor. I’m getting you ready before you have to meet the rest of them.’

Spock raises one eyebrow—just one—a flicker of shadow as their car takes a sharp right around one of the tall buildings lining the main road to the palace.

‘This is your attempt to prepare me in advance for a task which you know might present me with some manner of difficulty?’

‘Yep,’ Jim says. ‘That’s me. I’m a man of the people.’

_Earth’s second son on all Vulcan diet?_ is the next headline on his PADD, followed by a sworn affidavit by a doctor who’s never treated the royal family that Jim’s eyesight could be suffering as a result of his time spent off-world.

The people aren’t very grateful.

‘I’m a man of some people, anyway,’ Jim adds. ‘Not these people. Whoever writes these things are somebody else’s people.’

‘As you said, their concern over news of more serious note has caused them to distract themselves with frivolity and falsehoods. While said concern would be more ideally spent working toward a solution to that which troubles them...’ Spock pauses, no doubt trying to avoid saying something insulting about the human race as a whole.

‘We’re not always ideal,’ Jim says for him. ‘It’s fine. You can say it. I know that. If you wanna accept the best of a group, you have to acknowledge the worst, too. And figure out if the worst is really all that bad, or if it’s more understandable than you went in thinking.’

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

Jim prepares himself for the worst, this time. ‘Yeah?’

‘That was an insightful statement.’ Spock cards his fingers through the hair at Jim’s temples and Jim keens after it, an honest reaction, one his desire to hide is outweighed by his desire to go for it because he wants it so bad. He’ll have time to regret it later; for the moment, the shadows of the buildings they pass filter over their bodies, broken with brief flashes of grainy light, and Spock just gave Jim a hell of a compliment.
‘You think so?’

‘I would not express a statement if I was not committed to its veracity.’

‘I’m committed to your veracity, Spock.’

‘...That appears to be an illogical response. Is it another example of your establishment of repetitive patterns in small dialogue?’

‘Small talk, Spock.’ Jim’s grin is loose, his headache fading. So what if he’s squinty in the one picture that’s getting the most hits; so what if the theories range from a rare corneal disease brought about by sand to an injury suffered while marooned on an unnamed planet. Spock thinks he made an insightful statement—which means, logically, Spock knows he can make insightful statements, even if he doesn’t always choose to. ‘It’s small talk. I guess I used up all my insight on the thing I said earlier.’

‘I do not believe that insight is that easily depleted,’ Spock says. He’s cradling the back of Jim’s head.

Jim thinks about kissing him. He must think about it too hard, since Spock draws back—or that could be because they’ve rolled into the palace garage, between the rows of dad’s infamous collection of antique automobiles from the early twentieth century, all of them hidden under ghostly white tarps.

They should be black. Jim’s thought that more than once. They should still be in mourning; they should be in mourning forever. Without King George, nobody drives them anymore, and they never get to feel the asphalt under their tires or the rumble of their polluting engines. They don’t get to live—as much as an antique automobile can, anyway.

The driver cuts the engine and Spock pulls away, once again straight-backed, rigid and solemn. Jim knows the secret in his fingers, how warm they can get.

‘No paparazzi on this end, at least,’ Jim says. One of his bodyguards—Hendorff, Jim remembers, a big guy with even bigger hands—opens the door on Jim’s side and Jim doesn’t bother with straightening his jacket or his cape as he steps out.

Spock, on the other hand, smooths down invisible wrinkles on his front, which Jim watches too closely, thinking about the body underneath.

He’s gotta watch himself, he thinks, digging in deep like internal emphasis might help the reminder stick. If he’s not careful, he’s gonna wind up getting caught out, making the wrong face at the wrong time and looking at the wrong person while he does it.

The things that seem sneaky to him because they’re just a split second could be preserved forever by a well-timed camera flash. The paparazzi aren’t around here and now, kept out by the tall metalwork gates, but that doesn’t mean Jim shouldn’t get into the habit of being on his guard for when they are.

Spock deserves the kind of discretion only a man on his guard can offer. That’s Jim’s responsibility. One of a few, considering the big deal he made building this up in his head about how this is his turf.

He points his eyes to the front, letting Hendorff take the lead down the palace walk and into the main atrium. The servants waiting there all break into polite applause; Jim can hear the hesitance in Spock’s footfalls. It’s not the kind of emotional display they’d ever run across on Vulcan, and
usually his people aren’t quite so demonstrative, either—but they were stranded for a while on Spockeria Five.

Jim doesn’t like to think about what the emotional tone at the palace must’ve been with everyone waiting to hear the boom lowered on Prince James so soon after losing his dad.

In some ways, it was easier to return to Vulcan first. Everyone there was somber in their acknowledgment, no more triumphant than if nothing had gone wrong on their journey. And Jim doesn’t need the encouragement—his feelings are volatile enough on their own without seeing the faces of the serving staff who’ve known him his whole life light up with unbridled relief and excitement at seeing him return in one piece.

He’ll have to explain the whole thing to Spock later, who for now has to be having a tough time understanding why the San Francisco palace staff have gathered to assault them by banging their hands together violently.

Does clapping count as masturbation on Vulcan or what?

None of the diplomats ever answered that question when Jim asked.

Jim shrugs, offering Spock his very best crooked grin, which is equal parts apologetic and confused, just to let him know he wasn’t in on this.

At least no one’s hung any CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR IMPENDING NUPTIALS banners, or worse, WELCOME HOME FROM YOUR IMPROMPTU HONEYMOON.

Jim’s not sure they make those, but when your mom’s the queen, it tends to throw conventions to the wind anyway.

Speaking of mom, she’s there, too: standing at the top of the railing, above the wide set of stairs that forms the centerpiece of the room leading up to the palace proper. Sam’s beside her—Prince George Kirk II—wearing a blue cape that sits neatly on his broad shoulders.

He doesn’t look even a little bit strangled by his high collar or the broach—their dad’s broach, the one in all the official portraits—that he’s wearing as a clasp for the cape. That Starfleet insignia, inset with sapphires, nothing at all like the plain standard issue every cadet receives. And Jim used to play with it. He used to think it could mean the same thing, and he was wrong.

It doesn’t.

He also used to love that staircase. Technically, he used to love the banisters, their mahogany always polished to a blinding shine, which made for a friction-free slide from the top of the grand staircase to the very bottom. Jim rode that slide for hours in his pajamas, closing his eyes, pretending he was on a starship. Of course, there were guards waiting for him down there, making sure he wouldn’t crack his head open on the marble floor after he rocketed downward—and once he hit the double digits, that particular pastime was off limits for good.

Forbidden. Too old for that behavior. No more.

Not that Jim didn’t keep at it alone for years, stubbornly, determined to enjoy the free feeling of racing without brakes toward something hard and unforgiving, no failsafes involved. No bodyguards, either.

When he finally hit his head at age thirteen, it didn’t crack open. And that was when he met Leonard McCoy, MD, the closest practicing doctor at the time, who patched him up and gave him
a clean bill of health and spoke to him the way nobody else ever dared.

Luck has a way of turning on its head. Or on Jim’s head.

Jim straightens, then hates how obvious it must be to the people who know him best. If Prince George is one of those people anymore.

Maybe not.

The hallway walk is as endless as ever, a procession instead of a proper homecoming. By the time Jim reaches the bottom step to bow, Spock beside him and doing the same, it feels like a wasted lifetime has passed.

Then, Mom’s hands rest on Jim’s shoulders. ‘Rise, James,’ she says.

It’s official, but it’s a mom thing, too. There are no distinct lines where duty and birthright and family are concerned, not when you’re royalty. Jim understands that, finally, after years of trying to separate the two and making himself miserable in the process. Now he makes himself miserable other ways—but hey, it’s progress.

‘Your Majesty,’ Jim replies. ‘Mom.’ He feels his face soften when he meets her eyes.

‘Welcome home, brother,’ Sam adds.

‘Prince George,’ Jim says.

One day the words have to stop sticking in his throat.

Mom turns Jim around by the shoulders and Spock straightens, acquitting himself admirably—no doubt a thousand times better than Jim was on his first staggering day and night on the ruthless Vulcan sands. The official court photographer captures the moment for an official bulletin; he doesn’t hate Jim, so he might just choose a picture where he looks normal, to quell all the rumors.

‘Come,’ Mom says. ‘You must be tired after all that traveling.’

‘It was a restful journey, Your Majesty,’ Spock replies. ‘Very little was required of us. There is no need to alter any plans on our behalf. It is an honor to meet you again, and under these circumstances.’

Jim tells himself not to look at Sam, then looks at Sam anyway. Sam’s looking at Spock. Jim’s smile turns brittle, jaw hardening like a fossil.

‘Prince Spock,’ Sam says. ‘You might know the answer—what’s an appropriate way to greet someone you’re meeting for the first time, but you feel like you already know?’

‘There is no such greeting in the Vulcan language.’ Spock’s answer comes easily, his hands folded behind his back in a perfect picture of Vulcan calm. ‘We do not acknowledge that two such states of being could coexist simultaneously.’

Well, Jim thinks, at least he’s evenhanded about who he shoots down.

‘That’s the Vulcan way of telling you what you’re suggesting is ridiculous,’ Jim says. Sam hasn’t spent as much time with them as he has. He wouldn’t want him to get the wrong idea—like that Vulcans play hard to get, or that Vulcans play at all.

‘I said no such thing.’ Spock’s a little too quick to respond, in Jim’s opinion.
‘That’s all right, Prince Spock,’ Sam says. They’re carrying on a conversation around him, despite Jim’s best efforts to block every volley. ‘My brother’s always been a pessimist.’

‘Your brother— I’m standing right here.’ Jim would wave his hands over his head, but the royal photographer’s still packing up his equipment and the temptation for him might be too much.

The outtakes are always Mom’s favorite.

‘I’m hoping you won’t think I’m too unconventional if I show you to your quarters, Prince Spock,’ Mom says. Jim wants to hug her. ‘Under normal circumstances, of course, we’d let the servants do it—but I can’t miss a chance to spend some extra time with my youngest son. Who knows when he’ll go running off again?’

It’s only through long hours of practice—waiting and watching and hoping his way through their time together—that Jim knows Spock’s eyes are on him. It’s only then that he realizes he’s pulled ahead, trying to escape like he’s annoyed or tired or some combination of both.

He can’t be sure. But at least Spock’s back to paying more attention to him than his brother.

‘I have observed a certain expediency in his choices and movements,’ Spock admits.

‘Well, you would have,’ Mom agrees. ‘You’ve spent enough time with him to see it for yourself now.

‘She acts calm now, but you should’ve seen her when they first got news of your retrieval,’ Sam adds. It’s a companionable aside, and not entirely addressed to Jim. ‘For a second I thought she was gonna pull rank and insist you be brought here to recuperate.’

‘Fortunately, it didn’t come to that.’ Mom touches Sam’s arm, briefly but pointedly, and Jim could read a hundred meanings in that gesture when all he wants is to read one. ‘Although I can’t say I’m disappointed by the decision to expedite your wedding arrangements.’

‘We’re already Vulcan married,’ Jim says. ‘It’s not that big of a deal.’

‘Not that big of a deal?’ Sam starts them on their climb up the staircase, the opposite of Jim’s favorite way to travel. He prefers to go down; Sam’s the one who takes them up. They leave the downstairs and the bustle of servants behind them when they ascend, hypo-allergenic flower arrangements already being set up; Jim has to assume banners and trellises are going to be next, until the entire palace looks like an elaborate wedding cake. ‘Jim, when have you ever known anyone on this planet not to use anything they can as an excuse to celebrate?’

‘That’s not the best first impression to give a foreign dignitary,’ Jim says. ‘My husband the foreign dignitary.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Sam’s broad shoulders pull out in front, which allows him to look back at Jim and Spock behind him as he leads the way. It makes Jim want to hang back and drag his feet, but he’s a little old for that behavior now. ‘Our people are delighted to have something to celebrate in the first place. They’re happy. They don’t have to think about how worried they are—they can think about what you’re going to wear and what the caterers are going to make instead. As far as a morale boost goes, it’s a beautiful thing.’

Jim looks to Mom, who shrugs the smallest of shrugs.

‘I don’t mean it in a cynical way,’ Sam continues, ‘but as a matter of fact. For a night or two—with heightened security, of course—you’ll be raising the spirits of the entire planet.’
Jim snorts inelegantly.

‘It will be an honor to observe the traditions of Earth in regards to the human marriage ceremony,’ Spock replies. He’s so smooth, and Sam’s the same way. They’re getting along and that’s supposed to be nice. Jim’s supposed to be grateful that after an arranged marriage, his husband can navigate conversation with the royal in-laws. Only the most treacherous part of Jim’s heart wishes that Spock would stop being so diplomatic, because it’s so polite, so deferential, so much more than the sharp truths he levels Jim’s way without a second thought. ‘As Jim observed the Vulcan traditions to the best of his abilities, I will endeavor to do the same.’

‘There won’t be any gongs or bells or bonfires,’ Jim warns him. ‘Just speeches and dancing and toasts, and a lot of cake. And it can’t be chocolate.’

‘I hadn’t dreamed of letting anyone make any of those decisions without first consulting Prince Spock’s tastes.’ Mom’s staying close; after a moment more, she loops her arm around Jim’s waist and he lets her, adjusting his gait so their hips won’t bump as they walk. ‘Of course all the royal planners are just desperate to meet with the two of you and sort it all out, but you’ll have your first evening and night here to get comfortable.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim says. ‘Comfortable.’

Vulcans aren’t big on comfortable.

‘Then, tomorrow, we shall have to give Prince Spock the full tour of the palace—that is, if you would oblige us, Prince Spock,’ Mom continues. Spock nods. ‘There will have to be fittings and other details to decide upon, but as I said, there’s no need to overwhelm you both right away. And here we are at your chambers—so I’ll stop overwhelming you, as well.’

‘Your presence has not been overwhelming.’ Spock gives another small bow, this one more informal than ceremonial. And now Jim’s officially translating his husband’s bows. He can’t even blame it on a lack of oxygen for the brain. It’s just the effect Spock has on him, regardless of the atmosphere. ‘However, your consideration has been noted and appreciated.’

It’s as easy as that for him. What anyone else would agonize over as a brush-off, Spock manages to make sound like a perfectly logical statement. *You’re wrong, but thanks for trying.* It’s not a human talent. Jim admires it, in that distant way where he knows he’d never be able to replicate the effects for himself.

So it’s one of those ‘acknowledging the differences that make them stronger’ moments. When their parents arranged this marriage, they knew what they were doing.

Even though, technically, they didn’t arrange it for Jim.

‘You’re too kind,’ Mom says.

She means it, too. How crazy is that?

Jim realizes they’re lingering in front of the door, all four of them, like some kind of horrible prelude to a family comedy. It’s the kind of thing that would never happen in a Vulcan household, which is probably why he’s so conscious of it now.

Either that, or his family is a lot more badly behaved than he realized. The truth could be a combination of both factors where the Kirks are concerned. Jim’s a wild card in a deck that’s already missing a few notable suits.
‘Are we sharing?’ He blurts it out just to have something to say, and maybe it’ll be enough of a hint to encourage everyone else to get lost.

Mom raises her eyebrow. For a split-second, the sight of it makes Jim’s stomach ache like he’s been transported back to the distant deserts of Vulcan.

‘You are married. Unless you think Spock would be more comfortable in your room, with all the Starfleet recruitment posters.’

Jim shakes his head, making a mental note to get her for that one later. ‘No, no. We’re good. New relationship, new room. I get it.’

‘Besides, you know what the tabloids would say if you were staying in separate quarters.’ Sam winks, a jovial twinkle appearing in his blue eyes. He’s got wrinkles Jim doesn’t remember from when he left. All that responsibility must be getting to him. Briefly, treacherously, he wonders what’s holding him back, what’s keeping him from skipping out on them again after seeing the effect his duties are having on him. Mom might’ve fitted him with a tracker chip. Jim hates that he’s even thinking something like that. ‘We don’t need to give you another reason to wind up as a headline.’

‘Thanks for looking out for me,’ Jim says.

Since they’ve got company, he refrains from the obvious follow-up, which is that Sam’s chosen a hell of an interesting time to finally gain a conscience and remember how to act like a big brother.

He sure didn’t—at least not enough to stay—when Jim asked him the first time.

Jim leans around Spock to open the doors to their shared living space with a flourish that’s only kind of obnoxious, and not obvious enough that anyone can call him out on it. Jim recognizes the wing, opening onto guest quarters reserved only for the highest ranking officials and heads of state. It’s got a massive bed with four posters and a sprawling canopy, not made for jumping on or any other strenuous activity. It has the best view of the bay in the entire palace, but other than that, Jim can’t think of a thing to recommend it. And it has to be as far from Vulcan decorating principles as their tent on Spockeria Five—not that it’ll bother Spock, because Spock always comes prepared. Jim caught him reading up on Earth architecture more than once on their transport, as well as table manners and popular fashion, of all things.

‘After you, Prince Spock.’ Jim clears his throat like he’s announcing Spock’s entrance to a grand party. ‘Our nuptial chambers await.’

Spock turns, the hem of his cape swirling. Its soft fabric brushes Jim’s knuckles like a cool breeze. ‘We would not think of declining to join you for dinner, Your Majesty, Queen Winona,’ he says, with all the practiced formality of a computer recording. ‘For your generous hospitality, I am exceptionally grateful.’

Jim’s mouth twists at the sight of him, fond of the most ridiculous things: the awkward fold of his hands; the stiff line of his shoulders; the curve at the small of his back. When he notices Sam looking his way, he turns the expression into an overzealous yawn, covering it with one palm at the last second to avoid embarrassing Mom too much all at once.

‘Until dinner, then.’ Mom drops her familiar bow, always every bit as commanding as Dad’s used to be, and Spock enters the room through the door Jim’s still holding open for him. Mom catches Jim’s eye and holds his gaze for a long, dark second, to which Jim can only squint and shrug, already on his way inside to follow his husband.
His relationship’s complicated.

There’s a lot he can’t explain to her because he hasn’t explained it to himself yet.

*
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Pluses and minuses.

All the things any human being Jim’s known does to get acquainted with an unfamiliar room—like test the mattress by sitting on it and giving it a thoughtful bounce, or open all the closet doors and peer inside, or check immediately to see how big the bathtub is—doesn’t even blip on Spock’s radar.

That’s fine. Jim does it for him while Spock takes inventory of his belongings, already brought up and neatly arranged by the side of the bed.

Jim sits on the mattress and gives it a thoughtful bounce. He fluffs the pillows, picking a few up, checking the cases. He peers behind the canopy and opens all the drawers in one antique desk and he’s on his way to reacquaint himself with the magnificent soaking tub when Spock clears his throat.

Jim turns. Spock’s observing him; from the look of things, he’s been observing Jim this whole time, only pretending to take stock of his luggage.

‘If you are attempting to secure the room from any potential threats or acts of sabotage, may I remind you, we are no longer in the wild or even passing through Klingon space. I trust Queen Winona and her security staff to have done a thorough job already. Your enthusiasm is not without merit, but I cannot imagine it is necessary.’

‘It’s not like that,’ Jim says. ‘I’m checking things out.’

Spock’s expression clouds.

‘Is that not what I said?’

‘Yeah, but— Not like that.’

Jim leans deliberately forward, slowly and thoughtfully, like he can stretch his spine enough to see the tub from where he’s standing. Of all the things he missed from home while he was away, Vulcan actually had pretty good bathing facilities. He has good memories of his first bath after their wedding ceremony.

If he thinks about it from that perspective, then they’ve got some serious ground to cover. It’s like a challenge. How can Earth live up to the standards already set by Vulcan?

Spock clears his throat again, distracting Jim from his bath-time fantasies, the hot water running over his skin and Spock’s slender fingers slick between his legs.

He’s starting to think Mom made the right call putting them into a new room with fresh surroundings. Jim doesn’t want to have to remember all the sonic showers he took as a kid, listening to the greatest hits from the 21st century and playing with his toy starship models. Water conservation rules back then meant he didn’t have to worry about ruining them in all that moisture.
He’ll have to ask what the policy is on baths these days.

‘Are you waiting for me to request additional clarification?’ Spock asks.

‘Checking things out like observing them,’ Jim says, snapping to attention like an activated holo-program. ‘Getting to know my surroundings. Learning the terrain, the lay of the land. You never know what you’ll bump into in the middle of the night otherwise.’

‘You are making light of the situation,’ Spock observes.

‘Well, yeah,’ Jim says. ‘Because…there is no situation. It’s a room.’

‘And yet you persist in displaying restless behavior, uncharacteristic of someone who has just returned home from a long voyage abroad and should experience the ease and comfort of familiar surroundings.’ Spock’s got a look on his face, like he’s concerned Jim isn’t taking proper care of himself and he’s decided it’s time for a lecture. ‘Indeed, during our transport, you spoke repeatedly and with longing in reference to the nap you would take upon your arrival.’

‘So that’s it,’ Jim says. ‘You’re surprised because I walked right past the bed.’

The truth is, he’s a little surprised too. But Jim’s been thrown off his game by being home again. It’s different getting to know his husband on foreign ground. He didn’t have to worry about the specter of *Reckless Royal* hanging over him waiting to mess up all the goodwill he’s created.

The old Earth saying ‘you can’t go home again’ might have more meaning now that Jim’s actually experienced leaving home. And that means really leaving, not running away for half a day, or taking a tour with family of a colony within his own solar system.

He’s been places. He’s seen things. He’s slept in Spock’s bed and in his arms and the idea that this is his place and his family is about as comforting as it is unsettling.

If he screws up, there’s nobody and nothing else to blame. There’s no desert to point to; there’s no sehlat to hide behind.

Of course, he knows the rules and regulations; he grew up with them. But Spock’s a quick study, dangerously quick, and chances are high he knows all of that stuff better than Jim does by now. He gets along with Sam; he’s perfect with Mom; the paparazzi probably won’t be able to get a single bad shot of him, not that Jim’ll let them come close. The bright flashes and the constant shouting—the invasion of personal space in order to get the best close-up—are the kind of ordeal a reserved Vulcan, even one who’s half-human, should never have to be put through.

Jim realizes he’s clenching his hand into a fist. He relaxes it.

‘You’re the one who promised we’d make an appearance at dinner,’ he says. ‘If I pass out now, it won’t be easy to get me up again, and definitely not in time for a formal dinner.’ He pauses. ‘You wanna see the view of the bay? Best one there is in all of San Francisco.’

‘I am able to see the water and the bridge in question adequately from where I am,’ Spock replies.

The worst part about a statement like that is Jim already saw it coming. He knew what Spock was going to say before he said it. And he still put himself out there to be turned down because the thing about being totally human, not half or any other fraction, is that hope is your greatest asset as well as your biggest downfall.

‘However,’ Spock continues, ‘if you were requesting that we stand together in order to experience the view at a similar vantage point in a facsimile of a ‘shared moment’ then I would not be averse.’

‘That was the least romantic thing anyone has ever said to me,’ Jim says. ‘And Gary told me I was gonna be a Vulcan princess once, so it’s not like you don’t have stiff competition.’

Spock’s mouth tightens. ‘The intent was not to ‘be romantic’ but to avoid potential miscommunication.’

‘It’s fine. You don’t have to be romantic.’

‘It is my understanding that you would appreciate such an atmosphere.’

‘Not if it’s gonna go against your… Whatever.’ Jim waves a hand. ‘I’m glad the view’s accurate. It’d look better with you as a part of it but you’re here, right, and we’re married, so… We’re good.’

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘I’m gonna go explore the bathroom for booby traps,’ Jim adds. ‘You never know how dangerous floral soaps can be if you’re not careful. See, I’m always thinking. I might not look like it, but I am.’

‘Jim,’ Spock repeats.

Jim turns, trying for elegantly unconcerned and managing pretty clumsy. He doesn’t trip over his own feet, but that’s mostly because Spock’s closer than Jim realized, with an arm around Jim’s waist.

‘It is important to take into consideration that the pressure of a familiar surrounding might have unforeseen effects on the understanding we have worked to reach,’ Spock says. His words might not be reassuring, but his arm around Jim’s waist is.

Knowing how Spock feels about casual body-to-body contact puts Jim into an unintentional state of forgiveness. That, and the fact that they’re touching, which means he needs to get a handle on any unfortunate surges of private emotions before Spock can become attuned to them.

That’s something he wouldn’t be able to do if they’d initiated the bond on Spockeria Five. Jim still hasn’t managed to bring himself to ask whether Spock had a chance to speak with Sarek about whether or not the whole thing’s a good idea.

No news in this case is probably bad news. If there’s nothing to talk about, then there’s no new information to introduce. No bond to form.

Jim’s probably overreacting.

Spock’s arm around his waist turns into Spock’s hand on his hip, palm cupping the jut of Jim’s pelvic bone through the fabric of his dress trousers, the thick uniform jacket rumpling under his touch. There’s no fiddly braid or stiff embroidered brocade in that particular spot to get in the way: just fine fabric, more ornate than the stuff they wear on Vulcan.

Jim didn’t miss it.

If Jim doesn’t have time to take a nap then he definitely doesn’t have time for the other thing he’s thinking about. It also involves a bed. But considering how long it takes to get Spock in the mood in the first place, Jim needs to stop that train of thought in its tracks.
‘So…’ The last thing Jim’s in the mood for is a complicated translation of Spock’s thoughts and feelings, but like the atmospheric training modules for his time on Vulcan, it’s important to work at it. ‘You’re saying I’m stressed because being on Earth should be easier than being crashed in uncharted Alpha Quadrant territory with you, but it’s not and the illogic of that’s getting to me. Is that it?’

‘Your analytical skills remain sound,’ Spock says.

That’s a yes in Vulcan.

‘At least you could stun a giant lizard,’ Jim says. ‘You didn’t have to attend royal dinner parties with them.’

‘If I was in error in assuring our presence at tonight’s function,’ Spock says, ‘you have only to inform me.’

‘It’d be easier if you were,’ Jim admits.

If Spock had done something wrong outright, then it’d be easy to take it out on him. It’s not being able to blame him, not in good conscience, that has Jim worked up.

‘Ah.’ Spock doesn’t let go. Jim doesn’t want him to. Reasonably, he knows it has to end, and when it does it’ll be a disappointment, but he kicks that thought out of his head in an attempt to enjoy Spock’s comfort—if that’s what this is—for as long as possible. ‘I am informed that in such times of duress, the correct procedure is to inquire after whether or not you would…’like to talk about it’.

Jim half-snorts into an undignified chuckle. ‘No—yeah, that’s right,’ he adds quickly, so Spock doesn’t have to deal with contradictory feedback. ‘Just one of those things that’d be easier if you knew what I was thinking, right?’ Danger zone. Red alert. Off-limits territory. Jim veers a sharp left. ‘Okay. I’ll talk about it. My brother was supposed to be the one you married, not me; he left for years, then came back, and everybody just accepts that like it never even happened; and if the paparazzi bother you too much, I’m gonna end up hitting one of them. Again. And that’ll be a whole...deal, not something I’ll be proud of, but what gives them the right to invade somebody’s privacy like that? Nothing, that’s what. Maybe we oughta make a rule or a proclamation or something banning the practice, only with humans, telling ’em they can’t do something only makes ’em do it more. And more dangerously. I don’t know.’

‘There is a lot on your mind,’ Spock replies.

‘You make it sound so simple.’

‘It was merely a statement of fact. However, I offered no insight into your internal situation, nor any advice with how to manage it.’

‘You think I should meditate or something,’ Jim says. ‘Don’t you? Just take a few deep breaths and try to stop being angry about stuff that’s negligible. Don’t sweat the small stuff. Save it for what really counts.’

‘Those are your words, not mine.’

‘You’re still holding me,’ Jim adds.

Spock stiffens and Jim snakes both his arms around Spock’s waist, pulling him closer. Not too close. At least, he hopes it’s not.
‘It’s good,’ Jim says. ‘I like it. Sometimes when you can’t offer insight or give advice the next best thing is just being there and listening. Hey, I wouldn’t mind having somebody I trust around to just listen.’

‘I am listening,’ Spock replies.

Jim turns his face against Spock’s collar, nose on his bare throat. It’s not Jim’s room; he doesn’t think of it as home in a more specific sense. They aren’t going to be sleeping on his bed or waking up on his pillows, but it’s theirs for now and Spock hugged him. Spock initiated a hug. Spock’s still hugging him.

‘And I’m not crowding you?’ Jim asks. ‘Just wanna be sure about that.’

‘I am here, and I am listening,’ Spock repeats.

‘Huh.’ Now that Jim thinks about it, he can’t remember all the things he wanted to complain about seconds ago. He loops his fingers together at the small of Spock’s back instead, rubbing the fabric of his coat. ‘Maybe it’s just stress.’

‘Humans are indeed highly susceptible to the strains of that condition.’

‘And Vulcans aren’t? Guess that’s one more thing you guys have under total control.’

‘Though we manage to control it, that is not to say the process is an uncomplicated one.’

‘Yeah, but you manage to control it.’

‘I have not, to date, seen you lose control, Jim.’

Jim’s grin sharpens and he wishes it wouldn’t. ‘Well, just because you haven’t seen it doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened.’

‘The same,’ Spock replies, ‘may also be true of Vulcans.’

Jim gets a narrow shiver in the base of his spine that causes him to wiggle closer. ‘Hey, wait—what about you?’ Spock moves his head inquisitively and Jim anticipates the question before he asks it. ‘I mean about being here. The paparazzi suck and it’s nothing like Vulcan, so you’re not… I mean, you’re not gonna complain, I know it, and you always say personal comfort doesn’t matter, so… I have no idea what I’m asking.’

He doesn’t feel Spock smile, but there’s a tic of his facial muscles. It’s gotta be a reaction to Jim’s babbling, that he’s unable to shut him down.

Jim can still get under Spock’s skin. That’s more than something; it’s the very foundation he built their rapport on.

‘The uncertainty of the question makes it difficult to calculate a proper or accurate response,’ Spock says. ‘If you do not understand the origin of your curiosity, then it would be impossible to know what answer you seek.’

‘That’s deep,’ Jim says. He’s not even making fun of him this time. If Spock wasn’t a prince, he could write for astrological dating advice sites. ‘Maybe I should meditate on it.’

‘That is a joke.’

Spock isn’t restless in Jim’s arms. He’s stiff but not tense; it’s more of an awkward rigidity, like
what Jim used to put on when he didn’t know how to behave at state dinners. It’s not active dislike so much as not wanting to mess up in public.

Jim isn’t public, but it’s progress that Spock cares enough what he thinks about him that it registers in his posture.

It’s a new idea altogether that Spock might think he can screw up. Jim’s pretty sure this whole Earth thing is affecting him more than he’s willing to let on.

‘Yeah, Spock. Most of my efforts at meditating are a joke.’

The teasing tone comes more easily to him than it has in weeks. Even if he’s not in his room, the view’s practically the same as if he was. He can glance over his shoulder and take in that picturesque bridge and the gray-blue ocean he gazed out on while composing his best PADD replies. On the rare occasions when he tried to take Spock’s advice and meditate, he’d listen to the amplified roll of the Pacific Ocean waves, magnified and reverberated through a state of the art holosuite program, converted to audio-only.

And it never worked. Privately, he thinks he’s not cut out for meditation. His brain might be wired the wrong way. Too big and too angry. He can strip down a hoverbike and rebuild it to imaginary specifications, but he can’t make his head shut up for a consistent amount of time.

Even now, with his arms around Spock, he can’t quite settle into the moment without thinking about its roots, where it came from, so he can replicate it in the future.

‘You do yourself a disservice,’ Spock says. ‘However, your strong denial regarding the act of meditation suggests that you have already made up your mind to fail.’

‘Family dinners make me pessimistic,’ Jim replies. He leans his chin on Spock’s steady shoulder, stealing another touch. ‘You’ll see.’

‘If I was not meant to suggest we would attend—’ Spock begins.

‘It’s not like we have the choice. Our first day back, are you kid—’ No, Spock’s never kidding. ‘It’s expected of us. And if it was just me, I might care less how it’d come across, but since you’re here, and you represent Vulcan, it’s about more than what I’d prefer.’

Spock pauses, the same half-beat that suggests deeper thought, if not hesitation. ‘What is it that you would prefer?’

‘That’s the real question.’ Jim huffs, knowing the hot puff of air will tickle Spock’s throat and jaw, his earlobe, his scalp. ‘Easier to know what you don’t wanna do than what you do. Or maybe that’s just a human thing.’

Spock inclines his head to one side—to the side Jim’s taken over—which could be confirmation, or it could be the Vulcan version of cuddling, or it could be nothing more than acknowledgment that Jim is panting all over him and that’s new.

Jim keeps going.

‘Or maybe not. I don’t know. If it was up to me, I’d spend the night in bed watching vids on my PADD and eating popcorn and getting crumbs in the sheets and not thinking about anything except for…where I was. And who I was with. Nothing but us.’

‘As idyllic as the scenario may seem to your tastes, Jim, I know that it is rare that you are not
affected by more serious thoughts.’

Jim sighs. ‘Nah, Spock. That’s just a thing my eyebrows do. It’s not a sign of deep contemplation. I think I hit my forehead on something when I was little and the blunt force trauma made it look that way.’

Spock pulls back, briefly, to observe the part of Jim’s anatomy in question. The way he looks when he’s looking at Jim makes Jim want to do something, anything, to take Spock by surprise. He pulls a face, heavy on the brows, and Spock blinks in response.

‘The way you speak of formal dinner suggests that it will be a highly unpleasant experience,’ Spock says at last. ‘Yet all research I have done on the subject suggests otherwise. Are there secret traditions of which I am unaware?’

‘No. It won’t be a highly unpleasant experience. Honestly, Spock, it’ll be fine. It’ll be stiff and formal and people will ask boring questions and we’ll have to answer them in a boring way and it’ll last forever. I won’t get to say two words to my mom; we won’t get to say anything to each other; Sam’ll be the center of attention, as usual, and he’ll say clever things and I’ll do something, at least one thing, that I’ll regret later. Only I’ll have to pretend I don’t regret saying it for the sake of pride. I’m talking too much. You can’t just say it out loud; it’s a feeling.’

‘Fascinating,’ Spock says.

‘I used to think that was a compliment,’ Jim replies.

‘It is not an insult, or any manner of qualitative judgment.’

‘So I’m not fascinating in a good way.’

‘As I expressly said—’

‘You expressly said not qualitative.’ Jim licks his lips, a quick swipe of his tongue, to wet them—but mostly in the hopes that Spock will see it, and that he’ll be responsive to it. As responsive as Spock gets to anything. He does respond to Jim’s tongue sometimes. ‘Anyway, I’ve never been to one of these dinners as a married man before. Does that change things? What if somebody flirts with you and I spark an incident spilling the entire contents of a gravy bowl into their lap?’

Spock’s eyebrows do a thing Jim’s never seen before, both quirked and gathered at the center, like he’s surprised and confused at the same time. It’s definitely not impressed. Rather, the expression’s closer to if Jim was a sehlat who just learned to talk, or stood up and started walking on his fuzzy hind legs.

‘I am your husband,’ Spock says. ‘Surely everyone in attendance would be aware of that fact.’

‘But you’re also smoking hot,’ Jim points out, because he’s not about to miss a chance to bring that up. ‘It’s tough to miss. Human eyes aren’t that inferior to yours. People drink a lot, they say things they don’t mean, force me to throw a few punches…’

He’s exaggerating, but making up a worst-case scenario is at least giving him something to do with all his anticipatory nerves. If he has a plan for everything that could go wrong, then there’s less chance of him doing something stupid in the moment. It’s when Jim starts to improvise that he usually makes headlines.

There’s always someone who finds it hilarious to sell the story the next day. Now that Spock’s here, Jim has an extra responsibility to keep both their names out of the intergalactic media.
‘I do not understand,’ Spock says. ‘Is it habitual among members of the human upper class to engage in socially inappropriate behavior with one another?’

‘Um, yeah.’ Jim doesn’t know how else to answer that. He can’t avoid such an obvious line. ‘All the time. That’s kind of our deal.’

‘I see.’ Even if Spock understands, which is doubtful, he absolutely doesn’t approve. ‘In that case, I will make certain to avoid proximity to any gravy vessels’

‘So long as we understand each other,’ Jim says.

There’s no avoiding the potential for badly behaved guests or Jim’s equally badly behaved responses, but Spock’s seen straight to the heart of the matter: that he can avoid making the situation worse by staying away from simmering meat sauces.

If that isn’t the foundation for a successful marriage, Jim doesn’t know what is.

*

Another unexpected plus for the Vulcan column comes when Jim—lungs full of fresh Earth air—remembers they’re expected to change for dinner. As in, formal travel outfits don’t double as formal dining wear.

It wouldn’t matter if Jim was alone, but this meal also happens to be Spock’s unofficial introduction to San Francisco’s elite, and Jim doesn’t want to mess things up for him just because he’s feeling bloated and lazy.

After a scant hour devoted to decompressing, going through Earth news and intergalactic reports, biting the inside of his cheek and diving into the latest journalism regarding the Klingon Situation or whatever they’re referring to it as these days, Jim looks up to realize the sun’s lower in the sky and Spock’s been meditating for as long as Jim’s been killing time. There are new messages on Jim’s PADD—some from friends welcoming him back home, telling him they already know he’s busy and they don’t expect him to respond; five from Bones reminding him to spend time in the Vulcan atmospheric simulation chambers so he doesn’t let his lungs atrophy and risk brain damage the next time he’s out there—but the one that matters is the one from Mom, on their private channel.

Don’t be late to dinner, Jim. And I mean that for reasons besides how bad it’ll look on a diplomatic level. I haven’t seen you in weeks, I’m well aware I almost lost you, and I want to spend as much time together as we can, even if that time is spent on one of those formal dinners you hate so much.

Jim stretches, popping open the top fastening on his collar and sliding off the bed, toeing the canopy drapes out of his way. Another stolen glance at Spock results in their eyes meeting and Jim tugs his collar into a wide v, refusing to blink first.

‘Better change for dinner,’ he says.

Then, because he’s back on Earth, and Spock’s with him, and he wants to give Spock the full experience, Jim undoes the rest of the fastenings down his front one by one with his forefinger, shrugging out of his stiff jacket and tossing it aside with his cape.

His trousers come next, leaving him in his undershirt and boxers, socked feet on the carpet. Spock’s eyes linger when Jim turns around; he can feel them on his back.
Okay. He can work with being watched.

He has to bend over to get his formal wear out of his luggage anyway; it’s not his fault if Spock’s still staring at him. When he straightens, he turns, holding up the black in one hand, the blue in the other. ‘Which one?’ he asks.

Spock swallows. ‘My understanding of Earth fashion is that it is arbitrary and swiftly changing, perhaps in near constant flux. Therefore I cannot make an educated suggestion, and Vulcans do not guess.’

So close, but always so far. ‘Okay, neither,’ Jim says, tossing both aside and coming up with the gold he didn’t wear on Vulcan because according to his advisors it’d be considered flashy.

On Earth, flashy’s a good thing. That’s not something Spock has experience with, but he’s different enough, mysterious enough, that it won’t matter. He’ll stand out, so Jim has to do the same.

‘I should also dress myself in proper attire for the upcoming social event,’ Spock says, rising from his kneeling position.

‘You gonna undress in front of me, Spock?’

‘We are bound by marriage. Such an act would not be untoward.’

‘Not be unto— You’re damn right about that. It’d be sexy.’

Spock turns away. His cheekbones are high; so are the faint blushes of green under them. He’s framed in the window, by the view of the Golden Gate Bridge, the lone shadow on what could be a postcard.

Jim’s skin prickles, throat tight like the environmental controls have gone haywire and it’s suddenly too warm and dry in their shared quarters.

All the time they’ve spent together and he still doesn’t know any better than to draw attention to the things Spock would rather slip in unseen. Jim feels like that one blaring ship alarm everyone wishes they could turn off once it detects a cloaked ship.

_Bwee bwee bwee: subtlety detected._

He should’ve gone with the blue dress clothes. It’s an errant thought, fleeting through the back of his mind where it’s buried so deep as to be almost subconscious. Spock would never admit it outright, but it would’ve brought out Jim’s eyes.

Then again, maybe that’s another problem all its own: being too obvious. Black makes him look sallow, but the gold’s a good counterpoint; the primary colors tend to bring out his features better. And he’s officially thinking nonsense to avoid apologizing—but only because he doesn’t yet know what he’d be apologizing for. He’d hate to get it wrong and go into dinner all uncomfortable.

He might be trying to delay the inevitable.

‘Sexy isn’t a bad thing,’ Jim clarifies. Better to start unpacking things at the root cause, even if it’s imagined on his part. ‘It’s just stating a qualitative judgment. Believe me, I know better than to suggest a diversion before a big dinner.’

Spock’s eyes travel up and down the length of Jim’s body. The color of them sends an unwarranted
thrill up Jim’s spine, goosebumps raised like stirred grains of sand along the Vulcan dunes.

‘Your idea of what constitutes a diversion would be considerably time-consuming.’

‘Wow,’ Jim says. ‘If you’re gonna insult my foreplay you could at least cut it out with the bedroom eyes.’

He knows he’s done it before Spock can open his mouth. Nevertheless, Jim doesn’t take advantage of his intuition to head trouble off at the pass.

‘Bedroom eyes?’ Spock looks at Jim’s dress golds, the open hooks of Jim’s shirt as he works them loose one by one, revealing a strip of skin up his sternum. ‘We are in a room with a bed. Has this affected the quality of my vision in some way?’

‘No,’ Jim says. ‘No way. I’m not falling for the adorable misunderstanding routine this time around. I know we’ve gone over bedroom eyes.’

The resulting discussion eats up their twenty minute buffer between should be and definitely need to be getting dressed, and Jim ends up hustling Spock out of the room, fingers tangled in his Vulcan sash while he tries to tie it up at the back.

‘Should the knot be tied incorrectly—’ Spock begins.

‘Nobody’s gonna notice. Play it off like it’s on purpose. You can be whoever you want to be here, Spock; you can be a rebel. It’s just a sash.’ Jim gives it a final yank, briefly indulging in a fantasy where that clumsy gesture single-handedly causes Spock’s traditional Vulcan attire to fall from his body. It doesn’t happen. Spock twists—if barely—to observe Jim’s handiwork for himself, then accepts it as functional, if not optimal.

Jim knows that look.

It’s one of the few things he does know.

‘You look good,’ Jim says. ‘I’m serious. You look too good, even.’

‘There is no more time to change and still arrive punctually at the evening meal,’ Spock replies. ‘However, if you believe it will be vital that I adjust my appearance—’

‘Uh-uh. Come on.’ Jim loops his arm through Spock’s, tugging him closer. ‘Sorry about all the physical proximity stuff. I know you aren’t big on that. But if we walk out there and we’re not attached at the hip, somebody’ll slip a rumor loose to the press that we’re not compatible, or that we’re distant, or that Vulcan-Human relations aren’t as cozy as they could be, and…’

‘That would be less than desirable,’ Spock agrees.

He rests his hand, briefly, on the back of Jim’s, where it lies on Spock’s forearm. Jim can’t counteract the shiver so the least he can do is hope it rockets through Spock’s fingertips and heats his blood.

‘It’s gonna be fine,’ Jim says.

‘I had not anticipated that it would be otherwise.’

‘Maybe I was trying to reassure myself. You ever think of that?’

‘I had not.’ Spock straightens—as if he wasn’t impossibly straight before—as they take their first
married steps together down the hall. ‘In the future I will not commit the same oversight again.’

When Spock says it, Jim actually believes him.

He can’t say the same about anybody else.

Two bodyguards join them at the end of the hall; Jim knows they were keeping their distance to maintain the flimsy illusion of Jim’s mostly fictional privacy. They flank Jim and Spock through the entire west wing of the palace, then fall into place by the door of the grand dining room as Jim scans his hand for the computer to announce their arrival.

He sucks in a breath, filling his otherwise heavy chest with whatever he can to make it lighter.

‘There is much I have yet to learn about human social dining practices,’ Spock murmurs quietly, ‘if they are capable of instilling such anxiety in an individual as brave as you, Jim.’

Hang on. ‘Did you just call me—’

‘Princes James Tiberius Kirk, son of Queen Winona Kirk, younger brother to Heir Apparent, His Highness George Samuel Kirk,’ the computer proclaims through the speakers over the main doorway. ‘And his husband, Prince S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of His Majesty Sarek of Vulcan and Lady Amanda Grayson of Earth.’

So much for useful clarification. There are definitions and detailed genealogies from San Francisco to the Andorian homeworld, but when it comes to decent information about interpersonal relationships, Jim’s always late to the briefing.

The doors swing open, massive mahogany silent as if made of shadows. Jim’s boot-heels click on the marble tiles as everyone rises and claps, politely, for the metaphor and political advantages of Jim and Spock’s union, not its actuality, its humanity, its hopeful glances and awkward touches.

Jim’s seated across from his mom, with Spock next to him and across from Sam. There’s an empty seat at the head of the table that used to be Dad’s, with a Federation flag folded over the back; on Sam’s other side is a visiting Andorian delegate. All down the long table are placards denoting the rest of the seating arrangements, lit in glowing cursive that Jim can’t read from afar so he doesn’t bother to try. Instead of returning to their seats, the guests take advantage of the disruption to refill their drinks, milling around as if to encourage a social situation rather than settle in for the endless diplomatic cross-speak of Jim’s dreaded stiff dinner parties.

Judging from the way everyone’s gathered around them like seagulls flocking a choice seaside dumpster, Jim can guess the reason for the change-up. Everyone’s looking to get in a word with Earth’s newest prince-in-law before they have to start cramming delicacies into their mouths while making polite conversation with whatever yawning stuffed shirt they’re seated near.

‘I warned you that you were gonna be popular, right?’ Jim says.

‘It is too early for anyone to have formed a solid opinion about my character,’ Spock replies.

He looks stupidly handsome in that sash of his.

‘Is it also too early for me to warn you about humans and snap judgments?’

‘Not everyone present is a human,’ Spock notes.

Jim needs a drink, something to do with his hands. He’d have to cross the dining hall to get to the
open bar, and that’d mean abandoning Spock to his fate.

Not for the first time at one of these functions, Jim misses Bones. He’s not royal enough to pass muster with this crowd, which means Jim doesn’t have an excuse to press him into it against his will.

Sam used to say that’s the problem in slumming around with the help, but that was before he ran off to live with the common folk and became a born-again philanthropist. Now, he can’t seem to get enough of perspectives that aren’t his own—Andorian, Tellarite, Vulcan. Half the reason Jim had to fight as hard as he did to get his foot back in the door on that marriage was because he could never tell when Sam was gonna whip out a much-belated desire for cultural exchange.

Like he didn’t have the chance to do that back when Spock was writing to him in the first place.

He missed his shot, Jim reminds himself—like he’s been reminding himself ever since Sam came rocketing back into their lives to assume responsibility and, eventually, the throne.

Speaking of Sam, he’s done something different with his hair tonight. It looks stupid, all blond and swept back, darker than Jim’s but longer, too. For the moment he’s talking to an Orion ambassador, her silver dress clinging to her green skin in all the right places.

Gaila told Jim plenty about the Orion ambassador. He can’t remember her name but he can remember the things that really count like her favorite poetry, food, drink, and color, although the color part’s always easiest with Orions. They like green best and everything that goes with green second best—which is why the silver dress makes sense.

She seems to like the way Sam looks. She’s standing close and Jim knows what that means, since Orion body language is the most honest system of communication there is.

Sam’s handsome, polite chuckle is nothing like the laughter from his childhood. Jim’s never been able to laugh that way. The noise sticks in his throat, makes his lips purse like raw, untreated sash-savas.

‘James,’ Mom says, as Jim passes her with a glass of red wine in one hand.

‘Missed you too,’ Jim replies. He falls into place beside her, helping her to avoid being drawn into a conversation about the fiscal year, a phrase that always makes Jim’s soul wrinkle like a prune.

It’s a good spot in the room, a prime vantage point for making eye contact or not making eye contact, depending, tucked against a column by the window, in the perfect spot for experiencing every benefit of the cooling nighttime breeze. Jim can see Spock all too well, speaking calmly and impressively with one of the Starfleet admirals in attendance, as obviously intelligent from a distance as he is up close. He keeps his hands folded behind his back and there’s something about that Jim can’t get over and might never be able to; it’s reason enough for him to drink and drink deeply, steadying himself against the oncoming flush of heat those familiar epiphanies bring with them.

‘You? Missed my gentle reminders of propriety? Why, the time on Vulcan must have done more for you than I’d ever imagined it could.’ Mom’s eyes twinkle. ‘You do look healthy, though. And, dare I say it, even a little bit happy.’

Jim shrugs, hiding his face behind the rim of his glass. ‘Don’t ask me how it was. It was hot, that’s all I’ve got. And everybody wore sweaters. You really think I look different? Bones had me on this diet—’
'Jim,’ Mom says gently.

Jim straightens. Sam’s broken away from the Orion ambassador and Jim knows where he’s headed before he turns in Spock’s direction. There’s that laugh again, totally inoffensive but also unrecognizable. That’s why Jim doesn’t like it, more than anything. It’s not his brother. The person who left without saying goodbye isn’t his brother, either.

‘Come on,’ Jim says. ‘We should do the… Yeah.’

Mom lets him take her arm without real explanation; they cut through the room because they’re royalty and everything parts around them whenever they move, setting them apart, boxing them in while pretending to give them extra consideration. For once, Jim isn’t hyper-aware of that so much as he is of how close Sam is standing to Spock, not as tall as Spock but taller than Jim, with the long drape of his cape brushing the floor beneath his broad shoulders.

‘It’s very generous of you,’ Sam’s in the middle of saying, ‘to be so forgiving of my poor showing, Prince Spock. I was… going through a bit of a phase at the time. It’s not something I’m proud of, but regardless, it happened. All I can do now is hope to undo some of the damage my selfishness caused.’

‘What are you gonna do?’ Jim intercepts before Spock can reply. Maybe he’s not looking to hear Spock’s reply. ‘Write a bunch of letters retroactively?’

He takes a big gulp of wine to punctuate his contribution to the conversation—and also to stop himself from saying anything else to ruin the perfect comeback. He’s more mindful of these things now that Spock’s in the picture. Talking more isn’t always better.

‘I did consider that,’ Sam says, elegantly volleying Jim’s opening shot. ‘But then I thought my time might be better served making it up to Prince Spock in more productive ways.’

‘Prince George has recommended a tour of the local bay area.’ Spock’s fingers are elegant, even beautiful, on the stem of a fluted champagne glass. Jim has to wonder whether that’s affecting him the same way as chocolate.

That’s another thing he hasn’t had the proper time to research. Even if he could crack into the Vulcan archives, it’s doubtful he’d find any useful information. They’ve taken great pains to avoid anyone learning about their weaknesses, even by accident. Either that, or they’ve just taken that repression instinct into their historical literature as well.

It’s too much pathology to unpack in an evening.

‘We could do that,’ Jim says. ‘I thought you might want to avoid all the fog and boats and salty ocean air spraying into your face, but, you know. To each his own.’

The climate in San Francisco’s damp and chilly at best. Sam wouldn’t know this, but it’s hardly optimal for Vulcan comfort. It’s the kind of thing he thought about in the abstract before, entertaining visions of Spock and him curled together under the same big, wool blanket before reality came knocking.

It’s not exactly romantic to know your husband’s uncomfortable.

‘You say that as though we don’t have a private vessel,’ Sam says. He smiles with just the corner of his mouth, like he’s told himself a silent joke. ‘My brother always did like making things difficult for himself.’
There’s not enough wine in Jim’s glass. At least, he’s reached the bottom of it too soon. He grabs another off a passing tray and doesn’t even have to duck around Mom to do it.

‘Must be a family trait.’

‘You are both very…decisive,’ Mom says.

‘A strong will can be an admirable trait, under the right circumstances,’ Spock replies.

Jim doesn’t need to look at Spock to feel his eyes on him. It’s another compliment—equally unexpected—that makes heat rush to his cheeks. Fortunately, pink and gold don’t clash.

‘I can imagine,’ Sam says. ‘Those circumstances… Might they include being shipwrecked on an unnamed Class M planet in the Alpha Quadrant? I’d love to hear about that sometime.’

‘You mean you didn’t read Spock’s official report?’ Jim holds off on taking another gulp of wine, riding high on the giddy eddies of Spock thinking he has a strong will that can be admirable—if only under the right circumstances. ‘You’re not big on reading things people send you, I guess.’

Mom clears her throat, quietly and politely, but Jim knows it’s her version of telling him he’s on thin ice. That exhalation is more intense than a le-matya’s snarl.

Sam waves a big hand, completely untouchable. Jim hasn’t even made a dent in his for-company-only smile. ‘I was hoping to get the more personalized account. What didn’t make it into the official report.’

‘My report was thorough,’ Spock says.

‘I can speak to that,’ Jim adds. ‘Spock’s incredibly…thorough.’

The brief flicker of curiosity in Sam’s eyes is a small triumph; Jim tucks it into his heart the same way he’d tuck a cloth napkin into his collar while trying to make a statement about how unnecessary table manners really are. ‘You mean you wouldn’t add a single anecdote to his version of events?’

Jim glances Spock’s way, then back to Sam. ‘I stand with my husband’s account. You could even say I stand with my husband. On all things.’

He takes a step closer, the two of them side by side, like Jim imagined it’d be—back before they ever met, when Spock was a collection of hidden meanings and formal sentences, and every paragraph break was an excuse for Jim to read between the lines.

‘You must’ve enjoyed yourself,’ Sam says, nodding to Jim. ‘An adventure like the type you were always trying to invent for yourself—I’m almost surprised you went back with the rescue party instead of naming and colonizing the planet yourself.’

‘Well, I had my duties to return to.’ Jim lifts his glass, toasting to the wedge between them. ‘I knew I couldn’t run off just because I wanted to. Even if the view of the river under the sunset was incredible.’

Sam’s expression flickers again; this time, when Mom clears her throat, Jim doesn’t feel proud. He doesn’t know what he feels.

‘Perhaps we ought to eat,’ Sam says. ‘Here’s something you might not already know about your husband or his family, Prince Spock, but the Kirks tend to get difficult when they get hungry.’
‘I shall not forget the advice, Prince George.’ Spock pauses. ‘Yet I will admit that I have observed corroborating evidence of this phenomenon already.’

Sam laughs at that, too loudly as far as Jim’s concerned. The worst part is that Jim’s supposed to be the one who laughs at Spock’s jokes, subtle as they are. He’s supposed to be the one who notices them, the one who Spock makes them for. It took Jim weeks to get the first hint of humor out of Spock and now Sam swoops in to enjoy the results without having put in the time.

Typical.

Jim’s mood only improves when he realizes Admiral Pike is at the table with the rest of the usual subjects. He’s seated too far away for conversation, but close enough that Jim doesn’t miss the nod Pike offers him in greeting, or the way his eyes wrinkle at the corners like he might be proud of the work Jim did on the unnamed Class M planet.

It’s a breath of fresh air in the stuffy room. Despite the high ceilings and the open windows and the fresh Earth air, it’s impossible not to feel stifled at a royal event. Jim wishes I-Chaya was around to feed surreptitiously under the table, just for something to do.

He never did get that dog he always wanted after Sam took their first one along with him. Dad said it wouldn’t be fair, given the busy schedules they had. They wouldn’t adopt another pet that also required a royal caretaker to come along with him. So there’s no one to feed under the table and Jim has to keep his hands folded in his lap to keep from reaching for Spock’s.

With anyone but a Vulcan, it might just be a slightly inappropriate expression of public affection. But considering Spock’s nature and the sensitivity of his fingers, Jim might as well throw him down amidst the salad courses and shove his tongue into his throat.

It’s a tempting image. Better than the sight of Sam engaging in animated dialog with both the Andorian ambassador and Spock simultaneously; they’re talking about some blockade enacted around the edges of Klingon space. Not exactly the most appetizing topic at the best of times, but even less so for Jim after experiencing an encounter with the Klingons up close and personal in deep space.

He gets that it doesn’t bother Spock the same way so he can’t chalk it up to Sam’s usual insensitivity. Then again, it’s not like Jim’s looking to give him the benefit of the doubt.

They’ve known each other too long for that kind of benevolence.

It’s between the first fish course and a vegetarian, grain-based option—which Jim makes at least a dedicated attempt at poking around in so Spock’s not the only one who’s eating it—that he escapes his assigned seat to move down the long table, claiming a spot closer to Admiral Pike. It’s easy, considering the staggered, repeated trips the guests keep making to visit the dedicated bar.

And no one’s gonna tell a prince to get out of their chair once they come back.

‘Well, well.’ Pike leans back as much as he can in the straight-backed palace chairs, reflective light highlighting the silver in his dark hair. ‘If it isn’t my favorite nonstarter cadet. Hello, your Majesty.’

‘Admiral.’

Jim feels some amount of guilt for abandoning his husband to the wolves, but he’s not doing either of them any favors snapping at Sam like a badly-tempered sehlat every time he opens his mouth. Maybe he needs a break. Or maybe he just wants to talk with someone who’s not gonna treat him
like the only disappointing member of a storied family.

Pike knew his dad way back, so he’s had a pretty good idea of what to expect from Jim over the years.

‘You never could sit in your assigned seating, could you?’ Pike doesn’t smile, but the corners of his eyes do. If only Spock was that expressive. Jim swallows, trying to dislodge a sticky, spiky grain from the vegetarian course that’s still stuck in his throat. Trying is so damn uncomfortable he sometimes wonders why he bothers. ‘They have that at the Academy, you know. Assigned seating. And nobody gets a pass for trying to switch it up.’

‘Even if the company there isn’t better, the conversation has to be,’ Jim replies.

‘I’ve seen you in action, Prince Jim. I know you’d be arguing first chance you got with a tenured professor in a lecture hall. Those aren’t seminars meant for encouraging discussion, by the way.’

‘Yeah, but in a tight situation, sometimes you have to question a bad plan—even if it means talking back to a superior officer.’

‘And that,’ Pike says with a sigh, dabbing the corner of his mouth with his napkin, ‘is a clear sign you’re a prince, not a cadet. Now, don’t look at me like that. It wasn’t even an insult. I’d never presume to say a word against one of the Princes Kirk.’

Jim attempts to wipe the look of pure betrayal off his face. ‘You’d have fun on Vulcan, if you haven’t already been. Never actually saying something against somebody—not as long as you can imply it.’

‘Is that your official opinion on the planet and its people, your Majesty?’

The old instinct to ask—ask, not command, an important distinction—Pike not to call him that rears its stubborn head and Jim shoves it back down. ‘My official opinion is so much more benign. Hot. Beautiful. Unforgiving. Fascinating. The planet and its people. How’s that for a quotable statement?’

‘Better than the not-so-complimentary statements you were making before,’ Pike says. ‘Say something like that in front of the wrong pair of ears and you might cause some interplanetary trouble.’

Again, Jim pulls a face, which only makes Pike’s eyes flash with amusement. ‘You don’t think I’d — I’m careful about the ears around me. Believe me, admiral.’

‘You know I do.’ Pike shakes off the offer of another drink, attention fixed on Jim and Jim alone. Jim almost forgot what that felt like, not to mention how nice it is being certain the guy you’re talking to isn’t simultaneously running complex equations to prove the exact percentage of knucklehead you are. ‘Speaking of that planet—it seems to me things could be worse on that front.’

‘You mean I didn’t expire on the hot sands,’ Jim says.

Pike shrugs, the scarred corner of his mouth twisting. ‘Something like that.’

‘I represented Earth and humanity to the best of my abilities. That’s what all the official reports say, at least. And I never collapsed and I didn’t drool on anybody.’

‘Are you sure you gave ‘em an accurate depiction of humanity with no collapsing or drooling
whatsoever?’

Jim laughs, almost startling himself with the raw, honest sound. Finally, whatever was stuck in his throat breaks free. ‘That’s what I said. I guess I represented the best and brightest.’

And even that might not be good enough. Spock wants it, sure, but he’s not necessarily proud of himself for wanting what he wants.

That much is obvious.

‘And married life,’ Pike adds. ‘How’s that treating you? Off the record.’

‘Gotta be careful about the ears around me,’ Jim reminds him.

Pike leans in closer.

‘If I didn’t know better,’ Jim says, angling toward him with forced casual posture, ‘I’d think one of your Starfleet engineers cooked him up to punish me for pointing out the flaws in the Kobayashi Maru exam.’

Pike snorts.

‘Typical Kirk assumption.’ He pushes some limp green vegetable around on his plate, then takes a swig of his drink instead. ‘You think those fine men and women have nothing better to do than make your life a living hell.’

‘I never said that,’ Jim says. ‘But I think they’d find a way to make room for it. In their off-hours.’

‘Sounds like a challenge to me.’ It’s unclear whether Pike means the Starfleet thing or Jim’s description of Spock. Either would be equally true. ‘Well, you know what I think? Good, that’s what. You could use something to keep yourself occupied. Maybe stop harassing tenured professors…’

‘He talks like a tenured professor,’ Jim confides. ‘Sometimes. Most of the time. …Basically all of the time.’

He sneaks a guilty glance at Spock, but Spock’s turned away from Jim and facing Mom, head inclined with careful consideration for her words. That’s a mildly safer configuration than the one Jim left him in, although that means trading Sam’s polite society laugh for potential embarrassing baby stories.

At least in the dining hall they’re safe from any bare baby butt photos stored on Mom’s PADD.

Jim had a habit of tearing his clothes off as a kid. It’s not a big deal, but there’s an unnatural amount of photographic evidence. Hardly logical behavior, even though it stopped somewhere around the age of four.

‘Lucky for you you’ve got a big brain in there to match your big head,’ Pike says. ‘Something tells me you’ll be all right. Don’t try to pretend you came down here to complain.’

‘I came down here to check up on my favorite admiral,’ Jim resists the urge to reach out and clink his glass to Pike’s. ‘…And to avoid whatever that is you’re not eating. Spinach?’

‘Actually, I think it’s Andorian,’ Pike says. He doesn’t look any more inclined to put it anywhere near his mouth. ‘The Queen’s very good at addressing different dietary preferences. A true
diplomat.'

'Somebody has to be.'

'Now, the way I hear it you’re not giving yourself enough credit.' Pike gestures with his fork, stabbing toward Jim’s chest. ‘You were a regular ambassador to those lizards, if the accuracy of Prince Spock’s report is to be believed.’

‘I stunned one and let it break my ribs,’ Jim says. ‘It wasn’t exactly a mission of peace.’

Pike shrugs.

‘So you’re adaptable. I’d say that’s an important quality to have in an emergency landing. Or a political marriage.’

‘Or a Starfleet captain.’

‘The two occupations might be more similar than you’d think.’

‘How would you know?’ Jim realizes that’s a notch against him as far as potential ambassadorship is concerned. He’s lucky he’s talking to Pike—but then, how lucky talking to Pike makes him feel is exactly why he’s talking to him in the first place. ‘When it’s an arranged marriage, I mean. For the two households. For the Federation.’ Jim does tip his glass in Pike’s direction at that, while Pike gives him a look—no raised eyebrow involved, thankfully—which’d be the exact look Dad would give Jim, if Dad was around to see Jim drinking at formal dinners.

‘I know you better than that, for the record,’ Pike says. ‘If you didn’t like it, you wouldn’t be a part of it. You’d be collapsing and drooling all over Vulcan until they kicked you out and you reveled in your newfound freedom.’

‘You think so?’ Jim asks, grinning crookedly.

Pike levels with him, eye to eye. ‘No, actually. I don’t think so. I know you better than that, too. So, tell me about that lizard of yours. You sure your royal Vulcan husband wasn’t exaggerating when he described its size?’

‘Oh my God, not even a little,’ Jim says. ‘Vulcans don’t exaggerate and Spock never does. He’s half-Vulcan, but he’s more Vulcan than any of the other Vulcans I mean. So yeah, the lizard was that big. You know, I used that phaser training lesson of yours I sat in on to get the one I was fixing together just in time to avoid being lizard lunch.’

‘You don’t say,’ Pike replies.

All non-personal tales of Spockeria Five later and Jim’s actually managed to forget about most of the worries settled on his shoulders, pinned in place with the edges of his formal cape. They’re still there—but when he’s making Pike chuckle, they don’t seem as big or as heavy or nearly as bad as he thought they were. When the polite, muted music starts playing and the dishes are swept neatly away, Jim has to admit that the fancy dinner wasn’t as bad as he expected.

At least, it wasn’t until he turns to see Spock and Sam standing side by side, closer in height and age. A better match; the original one. What was supposed to be but isn’t.

Jim swallows. The snag in his throat is back, not altogether unpleasant, because it’s a complicated feeling—like most of Jim’s feelings regarding his marriage. It’s torture, but it involves the good kind. He only sometimes would prefer to be eaten by lizards than feel the way he feels for Spock
anymore.

Spock fought for him, Jim reminds himself. He chose this. In a manner of speaking.

Then again, he never had the chance to talk to Sam. That charm Sam has, easy and open, managed to win the press over with only a few unfavorable headlines regarding his disappearance; even those quickly faded to *Eldest Prince Returns To Heal Grieving Family* and other sentimental pieces. Everybody likes him. Some days Jim likes him.

And Spock’s standing really close.

‘Guess duty calls,’ Jim says, rising and simultaneously trying to ease out a travel-knot between his shoulders, only managing to make it feel worse.

‘It always does.’ Pike stands just as quickly, nodding his bow instead of making an uncomfortable ceremony of it. ‘Good luck with that—though you usually prefer to make your own luck. Isn’t that right, your majesty?’

Jim says nothing useful or honest in response, a huff and a chuckle to hide how grateful he is for that small vote of confidence. It’s not as though luck works on Vulcans, but Pike doesn’t know that.

‘Better not be talking my husband’s ears off, Sam,’ Jim says, diving straight in without giving himself time to think about how rude he’s probably being. ‘They’re pretty special.’

‘I can see that.’ Sam doesn’t flinch—all that extra diplomacy training must be paying off. ‘Well, it’s about that time, isn’t it?’

‘That time,’ Spock repeats, asking the question without asking, and Jim’s not crazy about that, either. Repetition’s supposed to be their thing.

He didn’t teach Spock about it so he could go around using it with people like Sam.

It calls into question everything he’s ever assumed were their in-jokes: the stuff Jim figured was private between them because they were firsts for him and Spock. He keeps thinking it’s *him* who made the difference, when there’s a chance it was actually just Spock and any human.

Sam never had a chance, but that’s only because he never wrote back.

‘Photo-op time,’ Jim says, stepping in before he’s squeezed out of the conversation entirely. ‘We make a little appearance on the balconies, smile and wave for the cameras, and nobody tries to climb the castle walls or break in through the bathroom windows to get an exclusive. Which totally happened at Sam’s thirteenth birthday. Someone started a rumor that he got a tattoo, and everyone just had to see what it was for themselves.’

‘Was it just a rumor?’ Sam’s eyes are lit with gentle humor, like the relationship he has with Jim’s always been based around adversarial banter and he finds it charming instead of annoying. Like he isn’t dying to get Jim into a headlock and mess up his hair where it’s been brushed artfully back. ‘They could never actually confirm it one way or another.’

‘Keep your clothes on,’ Jim warns.

‘I see,’ Spock says, at just about the worst possible time. It takes Jim a second to realize he’s back on track with the initial conversation, having avoided the obvious derail. He’s pretty great that way. ‘Equal opportunity for all photographers eliminates the need for any unnecessary acts of
desperation.’

‘Exactly.’ Jim takes Spock by the arm, wedging himself as the shorter prince between his brother and his husband. ‘Come on. Don’t smile if you don’t wanna.’

There are two verandas set into the main dining hall, framed by gauzy curtains that twitch with every passing body and Jim has sense memories for the tickle of the curtain fabric that go way back.

Every time one of the big dinners—usually reserved for birthdays or intergalactic holidays—drew to a close, Mom and Dad would go stand on one to get their picture taken, while Jim and Sam would take the second balcony, with Jim waving and struggling to be seen over the sculpted synthetic columns. Someone—one of Mom’s enterprising gardeners—took the opportunity while Jim was gone to plant night-blooming jasmine all over the trellis walls behind the wide-open glass doors.

The cloying scent of it blows in on the wet San Francisco breeze, making Jim’s nostrils itch.

If it’s that overwhelming for Jim, he can’t imagine what kind of onslaught it must be for Spock’s senses.

He turns to check, thinking about settling a hand on the small of Spock’s back as a sign of camaraderie, but Spock doesn’t seem bothered or even present, not in the way Jim wants him to be. He starts for the second veranda, but Sam clears his throat and nods toward the other one, where Mom’s waiting for them.

‘Isn’t that going to be a weight hazard?’ Jim asks. ‘All four of us on the same terrace?’

He chuckles at his own joke, briefly tangled in a billowing curtain before he steps out into the open air. The jasmine’s getting to him more than he thought; it’s a pollen thing, enough to make Jim’s eyes water and his throat tickle with the threat of a sneeze.

Sam takes Dad’s spot on Mom’s other side, then gestures with one big arm for Spock and Jim to stand at his side. Jim wrinkles his nose as the first flashbulb goes off; he turns to glance at Spock for the next few, before finally settling into the stiff, blank offering of royal imperviousness.

On nights like these, he feels like a statue.

‘Not too bright, are they?’ Jim asks Spock, words cast in the direction of his jaw and throat, trying not to move his lips too much.

‘My second eyelid provides any adjustments that would otherwise be necessary,’ Spock replies.

At least Jim was able to get him to break silence—and form—if only for the briefest of moments.

‘Wait—second eyelid?’ Jim asks.

But Spock isn’t about to make the same mistake twice. It’s a miracle he made a mistake even once. Jim inches closer, then slips an arm around Spock’s waist.

When on Vulcan, do as the Vulcans do.

When you’re back on Earth, find the wiggle room and hold on tight.

*
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Fast ride.

It’s nearing midnight by the time the last of the photographers departs and the final straggling guests disperse, with Jim forced to say his goodbyes to each and every one. His jaw aches from grinning, though the sight of Sam’s tireless pleasantries gives him the final push he needs to make it through.

‘Don’t forget,’ Sam calls after him as Jim ascends the stairs, Spock at his side. ‘Tomorrow—the grand tour.’

‘Vulcans do not forget so easily,’ Spock replies.

Sam smiles, more honestly than Jim’s seen him muster in years. His own grin disappears, leaving him with that pain in his back and sore cheek muscles.

In comparison to the crowded dining hall and the jasmine-devoured verandas, their new quarters seem cozy and downright relaxed. Jim flings himself onto the bed, grunting as it hits back on his full stomach. He rolls over onto his side a moment later, cheek resting in the palm of his hand, his elbow bent into the unforgiving mattress.

‘I know what you’re gonna say,’ he says.

Spock remains on his feet, in a half-familiar spot by the open window. ‘That is statistically unlikely.’

‘It wasn’t as bad as I made you think it was gonna be,’ Jim continues. ‘The dinner. I didn’t attack anyone with gravy at all. Disappointed?’

‘That is not an accurate description of my current state.’

Jim feels his hair falling forward over his forehead, tickling his skin as he attempts a seductive once-over. All it succeeds in doing is give Jim the full effect of Spock in the window frame, his skin in the moonlight.

Shit.

The moonlight.

Jim swings his legs over the edge of the bed, wanting to go to him, not knowing how. ‘Enjoying the view?’ he asks instead.

Spock nods, barely visible; the only reason Jim sees it is because he’s watching Spock too closely. ‘Though I do not find ‘moonlight’ to be anything more poetic than the simple reflection, on an orbiting celestial body, of the light emitted from the nearest star, I would be remiss in my duties if I did not commit myself to fully experiencing the sky over the bay at night.’
'It looks good on you,' Jim says quietly. ‘The moonlight, I mean. Poetic or simple reflection or whatever it is.’

‘A curious choice of compliments.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Jim sinks back against the bed again, reaching for his PADD—and not only because he feels the sudden, burning need to hide behind something while maintaining a casual demeanor.

The official pictures aren’t up yet. They’ll run with some fluff pieces in the morning. Even now, in the age of instantaneous information, old traditions hold steady. People like to read their news with coffee after a good night’s sleep, not before they go to bed so they can’t sleep.

Still, there are all sorts of new hits on the keywords Jim’s designated his PADD to monitor: mostly his own name, Kirk stuff, and Spock too, ever since he joined the family. A search for Vulcan that never turns up much of anything new since it’s inevitably something that’s already happened in Jim’s life.

Most of the action’s got Spock’s name highlighted.

It’s enough to drag Jim’s attention away from his profile in the moonlight.

San Francisco Catches Vulcan Blood-Fever!!

Jim scans the article, but there’s no mention of pon farr like he feared. It’s just a well-placed expression for an article about humans getting into Vulcan culture in the wake of their prince’s approaching marriage. Jim wasn’t around for his parents’ marriage, and Sam passed on a ceremony of his own, so it didn’t occur to Jim that his wedding is about to be a major party for all the attending civilians. He explained the concept of celebrity culture to Spock once before, but he never claimed to be an expert, since he’s spent most of his time actively avoiding the press.

At least people are into embracing their new Vulcan prince, although Jim’s not so sure whether enthusiastic affection is more or less appreciated than wary stoicism by Vulcan standards. Jim could’ve stood to feel a little more well-loved on his husband’s planet, but he can easily see the reverse troubling Spock. Too much love. Too many people shoving crying babies in his face for kisses. Too much potential for random acts of affection.

Jim wastes a second or two of scrolling when he accidentally pictures someone hugging Spock without his consent.

This wedding’s gonna be a nightmare. Speaking of which…

Jim’s fingers hesitate over the next headline, uncertain of what it is he’s looking at. A collection of humans in formal dress, their ears pointed and exaggerated. One of them’s toasting the group with a glass of red wine.

Commemorative Wedding Favors; Limited Edition.

‘Oh my god.’

Spock turns from his examination of the moon.

‘Does something trouble you?’

‘Uh.’ Jim’s not sure how to convey the idea, let alone explain the reasoning behind it all.
It’s nothing, honey. Just that someone’s decided to memorialize our marriage by molding fake Vulcan ears out of foam latex and selling them as party favors. No big, really.

Jim needs to get in touch with Mom immediately to make sure nobody actually wears those things to the wedding. He’ll issue a royal proclamation if he has to, a ban on all commemorative wedding merchandise. Enthusiastic acceptance of other cultures aside, there’s embracing differences, and then there’s wearing fake Vulcan ears outside the house.

‘It’s nothing,’ Jim says quickly. He winces when he remembers the no-lying rule and how important it’s been to him to keep up his end of the bargain. It takes effort on his part, but it’s one of those things that allows them to be a little more equal, not counting Spock’s super-strength and other obviously superior qualities. ‘It’s practically nothing, I mean. Look, Spock, humans are enthusiastic when it comes to party favors.’ Spock’s focus doesn’t waver and he doesn’t have to say explain for Jim to hear it loud and clear. ‘What I’m trying to say is that humans do weird stuff, but for the most part, we mean well. That’s what you have to keep in mind. Everybody’s excited about the marriage and they wanna wear foam latex Vulcan ears. See? As close to nothing as you can get without actually being nothing.’

‘If you say that it is a sign of cultural solidarity and respect, then I will believe you, Jim.’

That’s Spock all over. Understanding when Jim least expect it; judgmental when Jim’s desperate for some understanding.

‘I’ll make sure nobody wears ‘em around us, anyway,’ Jim says. ‘Not because they’d be trying to insult you, but because it’d kill me with second hand embarrassment.’

‘I am not aware of the phrase,’ Spock replies.

‘Consider yourself lucky. Even if you don’t believe in luck.’ Jim closes out of the auto-loading album of red-cheeked, laughing human children with pointy Vulcan ears and switches to the next available article. Whatever it is, it can’t be worse.

_A Tale of Three Princes: Prince Spock’s Unexpected Choice. Will He Regret It?_

The pain in Jim’s shoulders spikes. He won’t open that one; nothing good ever comes from tempting fate like that.

_The Prince and the Vulcan: What Really Happened Between Prince George Samuel and Prince Spock?_

‘Okay, seriously?’ Jim asks.

‘I had not said anything,’ Spock replies, ‘and as you do not currently have voice recognition on your PADD activated, I cannot assume that you are speaking into the microphone.’

Jim’s skin itches beneath the surface, the kind of itch he can’t scratch. It’s bad enough that Sam is tall and confident and totally unbothered by the way he abandoned the whole family, but—and this isn’t something Jim ever managed to tell Spock, not in so many words—the whole thing with Spock was what got Jim through all that. When Sam left; when Dad died. Spock was the constant. Spock was the escape.

Spock, on a distant planet, under a different sun, who didn’t know Sam first, and couldn’t compare him to him, and didn’t think about him in contrast to somebody Jim wasn’t. Spock, who analyzed him, yeah, and dissected him, and never let him get away with anything, no matter how clever Jim thought he was being—doing all that on Jim’s terms.
‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘Spock,’ Jim replies.

He’s not expecting to sound that miserable.

‘Something does trouble you,’ Spock says. He steps away from the window and unfolds his hands from behind his back. ‘It is my understanding that the responsibilities of a spouse require the consistent offer of a ‘shoulder’—’

‘No.’ Jim doesn’t sound miserable anymore, just bitter. ‘Don’t do that. Don’t say it’s your understanding of what you’re supposed to do, just do what you want because you want to, and don’t do anything you don’t want because you feel like you have to, all right?’ Spock’s quizzical expression only makes Jim feel worse. ‘Being there for somebody isn’t a requirement.’

Spock’s silent, standing stock-still like Jim hit pause in a hologram simulation. That’s one thing he was never desperate enough to do—cook up a holo program using appearance generators and what he knew of Spock’s personalities from the letters.

At the time, he thought he wouldn’t have been able to look Spock in the eye after indulging in the height of fantasy. Jim didn’t take into consideration how hard it was gonna be to look Spock in the eye at any point in his life.

He probably should’ve seen that one coming. So much for his legendary big-headed brain.

‘It was not my intent to imply obligation on my part,’ Spock says at last. He wrinkles his nose; Jim guesses it’s because of the imprecision of his words. ‘Although the human predisposition to associate obligation with a burden is not one that is shared by the Vulcan people.’

‘Well,’ Jim says, ‘I’m not Vulc. Obviously.’

Obviously.

He could use one of Spock’s incredible backrubs, but all of a sudden he just wants to go to bed. It’s weird, because Jim never feels combative and tired at the same time. The adrenaline makes him jumpy, leaves him spoiling for a fight—or a long ride with his hoverbike between his legs and nothing but the open road ahead of him. If he closes his eyes, he can almost imagine the long, winding coastal path that’s always been his favorite, illuminated by tall, neon lamps speckling the darkness like constellations.

That’s as close to meditation as he’s ever gotten.

Instead he’s sitting in shared quarters with Spock, wishing he was somewhere else.

It’s their first night on Earth. He should at least try to be an engaging host.

It would help, he thinks, if Spock wasn’t so easily turned aside. There’s a sound like he’s clearing his throat—probably an effect of the humidity in the air—and by the time Jim’s opened his eyes he’s retreated to the other end of the room to change out of his dress clothes, sash first. Jim remembers tying the knot in that sash, trailing Spock out into the hall because he couldn’t keep his hands off of him.

He’s been open about his feelings, but he can’t even coax Spock into prying out what’s wrong with him when he isn’t.
Because it’s not natural, not human, to be open about everything. Even if he wanted to, Jim wouldn’t know how to offer up the complex emotional turmoil that’s been stirred by all the Sam headlines as something for Spock to dissect.

He’s only human.

Second best human, according to a rising live poll: Did Prince Spock settle?

Now, Jim’s grateful they never got an answer from Sarek regarding the potential for them to bond. With an open link Spock would be privy to every last uncertainty, every nasty question, every shadow of self-doubt. As it stands, even Jim doesn’t want to be with himself while he’s thinking and feeling like this; needless to say Spock would regret getting the inside scoop.

Jim looks up just in time to see Spock pulling on another one of those soft sweaters. Jim remembers the way they feel under his palms—complicated and uncomplicated at the same time. His throat is dry and his collar too tight, his cape tangled underneath him. He can’t sleep fully dressed, and not just because he doesn’t want to give his royal launderer the extra work ironing out every last wrinkle. He’ll wind up throttling himself with his cape or stabbing himself with a broach. The threats of fancy clothing are very real.

His mouth manages to quirk, however twitchily, at the thought. He stands and shrugs the cape off, draping it over the back of a hardwood chair, where it cuts a fine figure. Every fold and flutter gives it life without him. The chair wears it better.

‘There were times in the past,’ Spock says unexpectedly, startling Jim into turning around, ‘when, after a meeting with my half-brother, Sybok, I found that I required extra meditation in order to maintain an ideally tranquil emotional state.’

‘Really, Spock? You?’

‘Though we were indeed both sons of Sarek, my half-brother’s status as a true Vulcan and what I perceived to be an unlikely rebelliousness of his spirit caused a measure of internal conflict.’ Spock pauses. ‘I sought to understand not just Sybok, but also my own reactions to him. They were not always logical.’

‘Huh.’ Jim isn’t sure of what else to say, but Spock deserves a better response than his half-stunned silence. If Jim didn’t know better, he’d think Spock was trying, in his own way, to relate. ‘Family, right?’

‘Our situations are not similar,’ Spock says. There goes Jim’s relate theory. ‘However, with that very statement in mind, I must acknowledge that I cannot hope to understand what you are currently thinking—or what you are feeling.’

There it is again: empathy. Sympathy, at the very least. Jim’s ribs have never felt more like a cage. He opens the top button on his high collar just so he can breathe and before he knows it he’s taking a step closer.

‘That makes two of us, then. I don’t know what I’m feeling, either. So I’m trying not to think about it.’

Spock’s lips tighten, giving extra thought to his next words—extra consideration, even for him. And he’s usually careful, so Jim knows this has to be important. A sign, he could say. A good one. He needs to stop holding his breath, like an attempt to recreate the atmospheric conditions on Vulcan is really what he needs, on top of everything.
‘Jim,’ Spock says, ‘I am aware of your position on meditation as a less-than-favorable one. I would not presume to suggest that you attempt it when you have made it obvious that you have not found the practice to be of value. As you cannot describe your feelings, if you would allow me to assist you, we may approach them…together.’

Standing in the moonlight, dressed as casually as he gets, offering something so intimate—it’s the most romantic thing Spock could’ve done.

It’s also the most terrifying.

‘It’s stupid,’ Jim says. He could honestly kick himself. ‘No, not you. Not that idea. I mean I’m stupid. I’m being stupid.’

‘I do not believe that you are stupid, Jim.’

‘Sometimes. Right now.’ The idea of Spock seeing every unkind thought swirling in Jim’s head and every needy whisper from his heart makes sweat bead on the side of Jim’s throat. ‘But I’ve got an idea. It’s kind of like meditation.’

‘Kind of,’ Spock repeats.

Jim scrutinizes the repetition for some special inflection in Spock’s voice, a sign that it’s their thing and not a recurring trait to be pulled out whenever he wants clarification on any insubstantial human statement.

He’s no linguistics specialist. He’s gonna have to get Uhura on the case—just as soon as he can convince her she owes him a favor.

‘Yeah, kind of.’ Jim holds out his hand, beckoning Spock so he doesn’t feel like he has to hold it.

‘It’s the closest I’ve ever come, anyway. Come on.’

‘It is late,’ Spock says.

It’s not an outright disagreement.

‘Just think of it like we’re starting our tour of San Francisco early,’ Jim says. ‘Grab a jacket and let’s go.’

He’s out the door and down the hall, not bothering with a second glance for his security detail.

They’re used to it by now.

*

Jim’s hoverbike is stored on the messy side of the royal garage, moonlight slanting in through the high windows to illuminate a graveyard of abandoned projects, left half-finished in favor of reading his latest PADD message from Spock or composing one back.

It’s worlds away from the museum side: comprised of Dad’s classic cars, an old-model sailing vessel that hasn’t been to the harbor in months, and the very first motorcycle Jim ever straddled, with King George Kirk holding him steady when his toddler legs couldn’t reach far enough down to brace his feet.

The garage has always been his place. His and Dad’s. Sam never had much interest in things that could go fast, since all his punishments entailed washing the cars, buffing them dry and waxing
their antique paint finish. Jim could never peg which came first—Sam’s dislike of vehicles or the penalty. It’s a chicken or the egg situation for sure.

‘There are some who would posit that clutter is an outward sign of a disorganized mind,’ Spock says.

He doesn’t specifically include himself in the some, so Jim’s gonna take that as a compliment. Or, at the very least, it’s not an obvious insult.

‘Now you see why I have so much trouble meditating,’ Jim replies. He pulls the protective cover off his bike and tries not to feel like he’s undressing himself in the process. In some ways, he’s way more self conscious about the things he’s put together with his own two hands than his own body. It’s a good body, even despite Bones’ best efforts to stick it full of holes.

That, and Spock can’t blame its poor design on him.

‘That vehicle is intended to bear a single rider,’ Spock says.

‘That’s ‘cause I put it together before I got to know you.’ Jim circles to the other side, watching Spock closely for any sign of disapproval. It’s too much to ask for the opposite. ‘Actually, it’s better this way. You have to get close and that wouldn’t be so bad, would it?’

Spock’s silence doesn’t sting as much as it could.

‘Never mind,’ Jim says. ‘You don’t have to answer that.’

‘It would not be so bad,’ Spock replies. ‘Though the statement ‘so bad’ lacks specific parameters, I believe the spirit of its meaning does not require further specificity.’

‘Right.’ Jim has no clue what he just agreed with. That’s fine, because Spock has no idea what he just agreed to. ‘So hop on.’

‘To hop on would prove a most ungainly method of mounting the vehicle.’

‘Get on.’ Jim swings a leg over and braces the hoverbike between his thighs. After a calculated pause, Spock steps forward and gets on, no hopping involved. His hips bump the small of Jim’s back. He still smells like hot, scoured sands, like Vulcan, with no trace of cloying jasmine to interfere. Jim breathes in deeply, his lungs full of the oxygen they crave and the Spock-things other parts of him crave even more. ‘Okay, now put your arms around my waist,’ Jim says, and Spock follows his instructions neatly, hands clasped not at the small of his back but against Jim’s stomach.

That small difference kicks Jim’s pulse into high gear.

He closes his eyes to savor the moment: Spock’s breath on the back of Jim’s neck; Spock’s thighs settled against Jim’s; the insides of Spock’s knees pressing Jim’s tightly to the metal shell of the hoverbike.

‘Ready?’ Jim asks.

‘For what am I intended to be prepared?’ Spock replies.

‘A romantic bike ride in the moonlight.’ Jim’s mouth twists. That’s what it’ll be for him, anyway. ‘A sight-seeing tour. A meditative experiment in driving way too fast. Some alone-time, just the two of us.’
‘Though I have been informed of your fondness for high-speed travel, I am nevertheless confident that you will not place our lives in danger.’

‘Good,’ Jim says.

He squeezes the clutch and the bike roars to life. With a simple command, the smaller of the garage doors rolls up and Jim punches them straight into maximum velocity, gunning for the open road.

The air whips into a frenzy around their faces, damp and cool, but Jim’s warm enough to keep Spock comfortable. He’s sure of it. Spock’s fingers tighten in the front of Jim’s shirt like holding onto Jim is the only gravity he knows and even if Jim tried to explain this is the closest he’s let anyone come to seeing inside of him is this, right here, the neon lights streaking past their peripheral vision, echoed reflections in the dark water of the bay, he wouldn’t be able to. The words would be torn from his mouth and lost in their wake, left behind, heard by no one.

Jim puts his head down and pushes the hoverbike as fast as it can go, all those modifications he slaved over in his free time finally making sense. Spock trusts him; Jim’s not planning on betraying that trust. When Spock’s grip shifts upward to cover Jim’s ribs, resting over his heart, Jim can’t outrun that.

Potential headlines snap through his mind one by one, too fast for Jim to appreciate what they might be. If they get into a wreck, if they stop at the wrong corner and end up with their faces plastered all over the news, Spock’s hair finally curling up in all that humidity—it’ll be all his fault. Jim and his inability to keep still with his restless feelings.

But Spock didn’t have to come with him. That’s one of those undeniable facts Vulcans like so much, stark reality set like a lighthouse amidst the fog of all that pesky human self-doubt.

It’s a clear night, the moon bright and sickled amidst all the stars Jim knows, all the places he’ll never visit. Not every one of them’s hospitable to human exploration, but they’re all within reach.

To able-bodied people with their very own starship crews, anyway. Ever since Dad’s—the thing that happened with Dad—public opinion of royal space travel’s gone way down. The situation’s too volatile and the royal family too valuable. Sometimes, when Jim thinks about the facts, it seems impossible that he was ever allowed off the Earth to begin with.

He’d better not bring it up in case anyone catches the mistake and wants to try rectifying the error.

The streets are slick, but half the fun of a hoverbike is that it isn’t held accountable to the weather conditions. There’s no friction to go haywire, no wheels to skid out on a sharp turn. Everything’s held above ground by a comfortable anti-grav buffer that keeps all Jim’s vulnerable meat and muscles from touching the concrete.

They’re hovering lower with another body on the bike, but it’s not enough extra weight to create a crash hazard.

Spock rearranges his hold on Jim, thumbs digging into his sternum. He can’t be sure with the wind lashing past and numbing his skin, but there’s a whisper of warm breath tucked against the lobe of his ear.

For once, it’s not followed by a cutting comment. Jim might’ve found the one activity that Spock can’t fault.

Or he might just be speechless with dire concern.
Jim pulls the bike into idling at the top of one of San Francisco’s urban peaks, on a roadside hilltop that hugs the shape of the bay where it bows around the long bridge.

It’s a good view.

If questioned, he’d have to admit he’s showing off. There’s no ochre deserts or carefully cultivated sand gardens; the architecture here is ultimately happenstance, influenced by hundreds of years of cultural inspiration instead of one logical blueprint. He can see where the bulk of Earth’s capital would look cluttered and offensive to Vulcan eyes.

But there’s beauty too. He’s proud of the overall effect.

And there’s the moon; the haze of the clouds lazily crossing the bright slash like a sideways smile. The river’s the color of a blackening bruise and the glitter of lights dancing on the surface are an upside-down sky. It’s everything Vulcan isn’t, down to the clammy air, the condensation threatening to tip the scales toward a half-hearted drizzle.

The clouds don’t break. The hoverbike lowers to touch down and Jim leans back into Spock’s arms, covering Spock’s hands with his. He brushes the ridges of Spock’s knuckles with his thumb, thinking about drawing Spock’s fore- and index-fingers up toward his lips and kissing them.

It’s late enough that all intrepid freelance photographers have probably turned in for the night, hoping to catch some sightseeing candids of the royal tour party in the morning.

Spock’s chest is strong but not rigid, the rhythm of his heartbeat tucked into the small of Jim’s back.

‘Cold?’ Jim asks.

‘The temperature would more accurately be described as cool,’ Spock replies.

‘How do you like the view?’

‘Though I had already familiarized myself with the sights of San Francisco prior to our arrival, there is always a notable difference between observing a photograph taken by another and experiencing a vista for oneself.’

‘That was diplomatic of you.’

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

It makes Jim shiver down the length of his spine. He shifts in place, the hoverbike swaying, his hands tightening where his fingers are threaded through Spock’s.

‘Thanks for coming out with me, anyway,’ Jim says hoarsely. ‘I’ve only ever done this alone—at least, until now.’

‘It is a moment not unlike those you described as desirable in your early communications.’

‘I like to live up to the hype every now and then.’

‘Nevertheless, at this moment, it is clear to me that your emotions are in turmoil.’

‘Huh.’ Jim swallows. ‘I never said the effects of a midnight drive would be exactly the same as meditation. It blows off steam, that’s all.’
That’s one more for the dictionary. Jim can’t help but chuckle when he thinks about making that damn thing, lying on his stomach in bed for too long while running through everything he says in a day that would easily confuse the logical Vulcan mind. It was easier to flirt in the middle of the night, sleepy enough that his filters didn’t stand a chance of stopping him.

This wasn’t what he imagined back then. But what he imagined wasn’t possible in the first place.

‘I’m glad,’ Jim says.

Spock stills. ‘To what are you referring?’

‘This,’ Jim explains, throat still tight with something he can’t gulp away. ‘Us. Getting married. I’m still glad we did it.’

‘The clarification is appreciated.’ It’s a typical Spock answer and Jim tells himself not to take it personally. That’s the problem; it’s so rarely personal. ‘Have you experienced a moonlight epiphany?’

‘Maybe. Something like that. Forget I said anything.’

‘I would not be able to forget what you have said even with a concerted effort to do so,’ Spock says. ‘Therefore, unfortunate as it may be, I cannot comply with your request.’

‘But if you’re not glad,’ Jim continues, gaining speed like a hoverbike cell, ‘if you’re ever… anything other than satisfied with all of this…’

‘Jim,’ Spock says again.

‘I know it might not be logical,’ Jim says, ‘but no matter what, Spock, I want you to be happy. Duties aside; logic aside. It’s possible. It’s more than possible. And you deserve it—hell, everybody does.’

‘At this moment, Jim, I am not unhappy.’

‘Me neither, I guess.’

‘You are glad,’ Spock says. ‘Yet if I have not made you happy, in return, then I must re-evaluate my attempts.’

Jim leans forward with a domino effect of restless energy under his skin, checking the fuel gauge, the accelerator, the clutch where it always sticks on principle before starting up. He’s got both boots braced firmly on the ground, but if he leans back again, he’s gonna feel like he’s hovering anyway.

_I think I’m in love with him, Bones._

Jim’s gonna have to have another talk with his CMO and ask—no, demand—why he didn’t make a move to treat this dangerous condition before it became a terminal case.

‘I don’t think you need to worry,’ Jim says. ‘I mean, not yet anyway.’

‘Clarify.’

Spock’s voice is plain in the quiet of their shared moment under the moonlight. It was plain even above the rumble of the bike’s motors.
Selfishly, stupidly, Jim wishes it could just be the two of them like this more often.

They definitely run into fewer complications this way.

‘You’re better at this than you think.’

Jim can’t stall forever. He takes his fingers off the worn grip of a handlebar, leaning back against Spock’s narrow chest. He’s not as bulky as Jim but he represents a solid support that Jim’s taught himself to rely on.

‘By this,’ Spock says, ‘are you referring to the aforementioned happiness that is cultivated by a romantic partner?’

‘Yeah, Spock.’ Jim moves Spock’s hands from his hips to wrap Spock’s arms around his waist again, keeping them both warm. ‘And I don’t mean that you did a thorough job with your research, either. I think some of it’s natural talent. You’ve got good instincts.’

Spock’s quiet, sensing that Jim isn’t quite done spinning his wheels. He’s got a talent for that too, knowing when to let Jim talk himself into trouble. If Jim keeps going, he can usually talk himself out of it again too. The truth is, he’s anxious to get these things out while there’s no one to interrupt them at it: no Sam to cut in with a witty non-sequitur; no Mom to offer up pictures of Jim’s squishy baby butt.

The crash of the waves is distant against the shores of the bay. It’s probably louder for Spock. Jim clears his throat, wiggling his shoulders simply because he figures it might jolt Spock out of being so coolly contemplative.

He’s kind out pouring his heart out here. The least Spock can do is act uncomfortable about it.

‘See… I don’t know if it’s fair, necessarily, to credit a telepathic species with overly perceptive intuition, but who cares about fair, right? Not me.’

Naturally, Spock won’t deign to respond to that bit of verbal sleight-of-hand, a brief stopgap between more meaningful statements.

That means Jim’s on his own. He’s the one driving; he’s the one behind the dash. Because, on the one hand, Spock trusts him—and because, on the other, knowing he’s trusted might be enough to let Jim trust himself.

For as long as it takes to say what he needs to, anyway. Under the moonlight. Just the two of them. A wild ride and the perfect view, little prickles of rain beginning to speckle the handlebars and making Jim’s hair wilt, the stars dimmed beneath the faint cloud cover as it thickens.

‘And even if you weren’t good at it—which, seriously, you’re better than you think—it wouldn’t matter.’ It can be as easy as breathing, Jim thinks. It’s already as true as breathing, as simple, as important. ‘I’m glad it’s you, Spock.’ It’s you, Spock. ‘Can’t think of anybody else I’d ever want to marry. I can’t think of anybody else, period. I’ve gotta apologize in advance because I know it’s gonna make me do stupid, weird, illogical things that might not make sense and since you’re not in my head you won’t understand ‘em; I won’t blame you for that. I don’t blame you for it.’ Jim touches Spock’s fingers, forcing himself not to squeeze them. Light; he keeps the contact light. Hopeful. And hopefully not too needy. ‘Anyway, you shouldn’t have to be in my head to know what I’m feeling. For humans, that isn’t how it works.’

Jim lifts Spock’s hands in his, kissing the backs. Right first; left second. Right again.
‘Shit,’ he says into Spock’s knuckles. He kisses Spock’s hands again, and again, his wrists and his palms, turning them over, pressing his face and his words into Spock’s hands. Spock can keep them. They’re awful and Spock deserves better. ‘God, I suck at this. I don’t tell people I love them often, Spock. I guess I don’t even know how anybody does it. I don’t know how it’s done.’

‘You are telling me that you love me,’ Spock says.

‘Trying,’ Jim replies. He winces, laughing to stave off panic. ‘Trying to tell you.’

‘I did not wish to assume.’

‘Assume away. I liked you, and then I liked you a lot, and then I thought about not being the one to be with you and it made me wild, and every time I stop to ask myself if you don’t feel the same way I wish that stupid lizard had eaten me, only it didn’t, you saved me from it, and we’re gonna be married in front of everyone on Earth, and it’s bullshit, it’s awful, I don’t care about that, except that it’ll show everybody that we are married and I’m gonna try, Spock. I’m gonna try to make you happy. I’m gonna need some help but I’m gonna do everything, everything I can. Spock, if you don’t kiss me now, I’m never gonna shut up and I’m never gonna be able to live with myself tomorrow morning.’

‘You must turn around, Jim,’ Spock says.

It’s true. Jim has to turn around. He has to face Spock after saying everything he just said. The longer he puts it off the harder it’ll be.

Jim turns around because—like Spock said—he must.

Spock touches Jim’s jaw with two fingers. Jim reaches after them, shockingly steady, resting two fingers over Spock’s. When Spock kisses him, Jim finally closes his eyes.

It’s not a chicken move, something he does because he can’t bear to look Spock in the eyes with the resonance of everything he’s just said between them. It was a good speech, but it wasn’t that good. Not the stuff of legends, not a moment he’s gonna actively revisit. If they’re kissing, then Jim doesn’t have to think about anything other than the damp slide of Spock’s mouth over his own, lower lip catching Jim where there’s a rough hint of stubble he missed close-by on his chin.

There are other factors to take into consideration, of course. Not falling off the bike; not tipping their weight so the bike topples and sends Spock sprawling onto the concrete. They’ve already got a cultural barrier to work around with the different forms of kissing they’re engaging in here. The last thing Jim needs is for Spock to develop any adverse reaction to them getting their mouths all over each other all because Jim got a little too enthusiastic.

Spock’s fingers slide through Jim’s, thin skin stretched over delicate bone. There was nothing in Jim’s archive files about Vulcan bone density, but gripped against his, it feels the same as human.

He likes their differences, but similarities between bodies make it easier for him to know what he’s doing. Jim might’ve had a whole list of experiences Spock didn’t, but none of them would count for much if what worked on a human didn’t also, in key ways, work on Vulcan bodies.

After all, Vulcans buried that pon farr thing so deep Jim practically had to be a super secret Starfleet agent to dig his intel out.

San Francisco Catches Vulcan Blood Fever!! The headline flashes into his head unbidden.

‘Crap,’ Jim mumbles against Spock’s mouth, disturbing the practiced alignment of their mouths.
Spock’s breath stirs against Jim’s face, extra-sensitive where it’s damp now with Vulcan saliva. Their fingers are still gripping each other tight—an appropriate counterbalance to the kiss Jim just ruined by opening his big mouth.

Again.

‘Has there been some error committed on my part?’

‘No, no no no.’ Jim finds the zipper on Spock’s coat and tugs, making room for his free hand underneath, finding Spock’s soft sweater and tangling it in his grip.

It’s not very polite of him to start getting into those layers when he knows how Spock feels about the cold, but it’s not an entirely selfish act. He’s replacing heat with heat, the retention of Spock’s coat covered by the embrace of Jim’s hand on his chest.

‘There’s a lot to think about,’ Jim adds. ‘Which—don’t get me wrong—mostly, I’m thinking about you. But I’m also thinking about the things that can happen here if I’m not careful.’

‘Such as the impact of Earth’s tabloid reporting,’ Spock replies.

They’re getting better at communicating without speaking already. Hope flares under Jim’s collar, flush against his skin.

‘The last thing I wanna do is be a bad influence. It’s one thing proving assholes right about me, but it’s another besmirching your good name.’

‘As far as influences are concerned, my mother Lady Amanda is not the only one who believes that you have been for me, a positive one,’ Spock says.

‘Oh.’ Jim sounds small despite feeling huge—and not in the too-much-chicken-parm definition of the word.

‘I can assure you that no Vulcan will believe any unfounded lies without first being given ample proof.’

‘Oh,’ Jim repeats. He could stand to be a little more Vulcan in that regard. ‘I don’t know, Spock. They do all kinds of things with photographic alterations that look pretty convincing. You should see the stuff the really bad ones pump out. And if they managed to get a shot or two of us making out, that wouldn’t even be lying. I’m doing my best here to stick to the Vulcan way of things. Not embarrass you in front of your entire planet. That’s the plan, at least.’

‘I am appreciative of your concern,’ Spock says. ‘However, as we are currently on Earth, I believe the saying begins: When in Rome… Surely that adage is applicable to every major and minor city, not simply the one that is expressly named.’

Jim’s laughter is the honest kind. It feels good all the way through his body and deeper, the places in his chest that hurt at the worst and best of times, that sometimes threaten to go supernova on him.

‘So you’re trying out cultural sensitivity,’ he says.

‘That is my purpose. It is my duty. However, in this instance, I do not find the task necessarily unpleasant.’

‘And…’ Jim takes a deep breath. There goes that supernova situation, a surge of energy, a rush of
adrenaline, telling him not to ask questions when there are answers he really doesn’t want to hear.

‘…you wouldn’t rather be doing this not-necessarily unpleasant task with somebody else? Like, I don’t know, Sam or someone?’

‘Sam,’ Spock repeats.

‘Or someone,’ Jim replies lamely.

‘Sam,’ Spock says, for the second time.

Jim gives up on or someone. ‘Sam,’ he agrees.

Spock’s eyebrow rises so high it threatens to disappear under the curve of his dark bangs. It’s about to achieve escape velocity. Jim pictures it rocketing off his forehead and flying into the sky and it helps with the stars rumbling in his chest, how ill-equipped he feels for containing everything Spock does to his insides.

‘Explain,’ Spock says at last.

‘No way to explain. It’s a…thing.’

‘A thing.’

‘I mean it’s me, not you. I’ve got some issues where Sam is concerned. Apparently.’

‘Quite obviously.’

‘Well, now, hold on,’ Jim says. ‘Not obviously.’

Spock’s eyebrow makes no sign of lowering.

‘That obviously?’ Jim asks.

‘Would physical reassurance be appropriate at this juncture?’

The question is so unexpected Jim almost forgets to nod. When he remembers, it’s worth it. Spock gathers him close and kisses him hard and there’s passion beneath it, passion and tongue, passion that’s still almost completely untapped.

Jim forgets all his careful machinations, like how to keep the bike up and how to keep from overwhelming Spock with the brute force of his very human, very physical desires. He turns boneless under the kiss, hitching his knee up against Spock’s thigh and wiggling his hand around Spock’s ribcage until it’s splayed between Spock’s shoulder blades to haul him close.

He’s got just enough presence of mind to keep from crawling directly into Spock’s lap, but that doesn’t keep him from sliding against him. He nudges Spock’s leg a little wider with his own, stroking the ridges of his knuckles under his callused fingertips.

Yeah, he could get into the habit of this. A little physical reassurance every now and then.

He hasn’t broached this particular topic with Spock yet, but where Jim’s concerned, physical reassurance is a universal placebo for any trouble.

Bones would hate to hear that, but they’re a long way away from the palace. Jim’s not thinking about his medical requirements.
He’s the one breathing hot against Spock’s face when they break apart, nipping in at the corner of his mouth. There’s barely any stubble to find on Spock’s skin, though whether that’s an innate smoothness or just obsessive attention to detail, Jim has yet to discover. He likes that, as much as it’s become the bane of his existence. There’s always something new between them.

Sure, that makes it nigh impossible to know where he stands, but that’s part of what keeps him from getting bored.

It turns out Spock is incapable of boring him.

‘Sorry.’ Jim swallows, throat thick all of a sudden. His face is cradled against the lean stretch of Spock’s neck, his warm skin to something a few degrees off. One of his arms is trapped inside Spock’s jacket; he didn’t mean to crawl his hungry way inside Spock’s clothes, but here they are. ‘Sorry—bet you didn’t expect to have to coddle me on your homeworld and mine, right?’

‘There is no definition of coddling which would fit my actions up to this point,’ Spock says. Jim can feel his throat work against his cheek, subtle shifts of muscular motion where they touch. ‘Vulcans do not humor, nor do they indulge in the act of favoring their close acquaintances with altered expectations.’

Jim manages to lift his head, but only to lean himself brow-to-brow with Spock. Might as well take advantage of the closeness while it’s being offered. Not to get political, but it’s easier to push the boundaries of territory that’s already been conquered.

At least neither of them’s talking about Sam anymore.

If that’d been the first word out of Spock’s mouth after they kissed, Jim’s pretty sure he’d have driven the bike into the ocean, logic or no.

He’s also pretty sure he wouldn’t have taken Spock with him.

That’s noble of him. He’s growing as a person, not just as a prince.

‘There’s a difference between coddling somebody and making ‘em feel coddled,’ Jim says. He slides free of Spock’s Vulcan body heat regretfully, resettling on the hoverbike to rev the engine. ‘But we can work on that. After we plan the wedding.’

‘On more than one occasion,’ Spock informs him, just before the bike guns into top gear, ‘I have seen my mother and my father with their fingers touching. They have done this publicly during diplomatic tours on planets other than Vulcan. As such, I must conclude that these acts of affection, so long as they do not interfere with accomplishing one’s duties efficiently, are not without their own logical purpose.’

Jim grins into the wind all the way home.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Busted out for lunch.

Chapter Notes

Pixiepunch on tumblr made this gorgeous piece to go with the previous chapter!

Although he falls asleep in Spock’s arms—sprawled over Spock’s chest after tracing little shapes in the dark hair on his belly beneath the navel, Spock’s shirt pushed to his armpits to allow proper study—Jim wakes the way he always has since he got married on Vulcan.

Alone.

But he can hear the bath running nearby, Spock’s clothes neatly folded despite their Jim-related wrinkles on the surface of a chair outside the bathroom door, and the door itself is ajar: the barest of slivers that means the difference between loneliness and companionship.
Jim’s awake and out of bed almost immediately, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his thumb and shedding his clothes piece by piece, letting each lie wherever it falls. His toes hit the cool tiles, beaded with moisture, as steam and heat flush his bare skin the moment he steps inside the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

He locks it.

Spock’s shoulders stiffen; he knows he’s not alone. When Jim slides in next to him, the tub is full enough that the water overflows and Jim hisses.

The water’s not just hot. It’s scalding.

‘The temperature is likely not to your specifications,’ Spock says simply, green flush high on his cheekbones, his hair still stupidly perfect, ‘as I had not been anticipating company.’

‘S’good.’ Jim’s voice is about an octave too high. He forces it to deepen. ‘It’s fine. I’m great. Oh my Go—mm. Nice and hot.’

He’s about to be cooked, boiled alive like a lobster, but this is a matter of pride.

‘Computer,’ Spock says. ‘Lower the temperature of the bath by one point seven degrees Celsius.’

The tub’s jets bubble and Jim slides deeper in, chin touching the surface of the water. He comes back up with his hair dripping and his eyes bright—and his husband next to him, poking Spock’s ankle experimentally with one toe.

‘We must arrive at the appointed meeting place for our discussions of wedding ceremony in twenty-seven minutes, Jim,’ Spock says. ‘Any action taken now that will delay our arrival past that time cannot be taken.’

‘Cannot and should not are two totally different things,’ Jim replies. He takes a deep breath and plunges under completely anyway, as a good-faith effort. He shakes his hair out when he rises, catching Spock with beads of water, dappling his skin like pale freckles.

‘You are behaving like an Earth canine,’ Spock says.

‘Woof,’ Jim agrees.

He grins, sharp and lupine, bathwater dripping from his bangs to his nose. It tickles. He wrinkles his skin to try and disperse his restlessness, keeping his eyes on Spock’s face. He’s never been one to romanticize ceremony—having lived through enough of it to last more than one royal lifetime—but the idea of sitting across from his husband in one of those big, fancy rooms while they discuss wedding plans sends a shiver up his spine.

At least, he thinks it does. The heat’s numbed his body from the neck down. Even with Spock’s command to modify the temperature, the jets feel like a mild tickle as opposed what Jim remembers as a muscle-melting massage force. He’s gonna come out of this pink and covered in bruises and no one’s gonna know it once he’s buttoned up his usual clothes.

He can get behind that. Another secret between him and Spock—depending, of course, on Spock paying attention to Jim’s body long enough to notice something like that.

‘I could howl, you know.’ Jim sets his hands on either side of Spock’s shoulders on the tiled lip of the tub. It’s all square, sharp edges where the Vulcan baths were rounded curves, but the differences don’t matter. It’s the similarities Jim cares about. Like the company. ‘The acoustics are
great in here. I mean, I haven’t tested these specifically, but it’s an Earth bathroom thing.’

‘A human proverb?’ Spock asks.

That green flush on his cheeks is absolutely killing Jim, but Spock’s not wrong. They have a meeting to get to and Jim meant what he said—that he’s not about to ruin Spock’s standing on Earth and make him look irresponsible. Showing up on time’s the first building block in that particular structure.

If Jim keeps reminding himself, it’s bound to stick.

Eventually.

‘No.’ Jim shakes his head, flicking the wet length of his bangs off his forehead. ‘It’s more like common knowledge.’

‘I see.’ Spock blinks, apparently unperturbed by Jim’s lazy closeness, or just really good at interpersonal diplomacy. Jim likes to think it’s the latter and, under the skin, Spock’s burning for him like the desert at noon. ‘Shared understanding with no confirmed basis in reality.’

‘When you say it, it sounds stupid,’ Jim admits. ‘Now why do you suppose that is?’

‘Humans often interpret honest appraisal or lack of affect for insult,’ Spock says. ‘I would seek to avoid such misapprehensions among your people. However, it is my understanding that your preference for our private communications has always been honesty.’

‘It’s more intimate,’ Jim confirms.

‘Thus, you have the answer to the question you posed.’

Spock’s a real clever son of a bitch sometimes. It’s way too much before coffee.

Jim pays him back by being the first out of the bath and taking his time, posing more than is strictly necessary—dripping outrageously on the tiles, drying his hair off first and his body second in slow, rough strokes of terrycloth. Then, he pays Spock back again by standing firmly in place, legs planted wide, only a fluffy, white towel slung around his hips maintaining his decency—not that he has any—while he waits for Spock to get out, too.

It occurs to Jim that Spock might be feeling particularly naked, considering the fact that he is, and vulnerable, and apprehensive. Not that it shows on his face, but it’s possible.

‘On Earth, among humans, people usually see each other with their clothes off plenty of times before they get married,’ Jim offers helpfully.

Spock rises.

The water sloughs off his skin. The shadows of his shadows are faintly green but his lips are pink, his hair pure black, his eyes hidden by true darkness.

Jim’s seen him before in varying states of undress; he’s touched practically every part of Spock’s anatomy in one way or another; he knows what he knows but this is the first time there’s been no half-removed garment in the way, nothing but Spock’s skin and the air between Jim’s eyes and Spock’s body. He steps on the bathmat—naturally, logically—and Jim gets him a towel before Spock can reach for one. Anticipating Spock’s needs. He can do that without a mind-meld. He can do that just by watching and he watches a hell of a lot.
Spock’s shoulders stiffen again when Jim’s knuckles brush them, tucking the towel around his arms. They relax again, as relaxed as Spock ever gets, and he inclines his head toward Jim’s at enough of an angle that a kiss is basically inevitable but also totally inadvisable.

The promise, the potential, the impossibility, all hang in the air, until Spock takes the towel’s corners from Jim’s hands, their fingers catching.

That’s a kiss in its own right.

Jim’ll take it.

‘I’m not wearing anything fancy,’ Jim says, halfway into a loose shirt, leaving damp footprints next to his shed clothing on his way out of the bathroom. ‘Those vests always make me feel like I’m being, I don’t know, squeezed like a tube of toothpaste. No, it’s more like a sausage. And we’ll be wearing all kinds of that stuff at the wedding, so until then, I’m gonna let my skin breathe.’

‘A curious specification,’ Spock replies. He’s wearing a sweater and slate gray slacks and one of those dark, formal robes that make him look a thousand feet tall as the hem trails on the floor at his feet. ‘In what way do you consider yourself similar to ground meat?’

Jim finds his favorite boots—the ones everyone says are too dirty; the ones that feel like two warm hugs for his feet—almost purposefully hidden in a drawer beside the bed and puts them on without sitting, realizing too late that Spock’s watching him hop across the rug. ‘In what way do I consider — Let me count the ways.’

He does count them: down the long hall; out of the west wing and toward the eastern side of the palace; down another long hall, past too many high doors to count, not to mention the stately portraits of dad and mom, separate and together, young George Samuel, and young James Tiberius.

‘And there I am,’ Jim points with his thumb, ‘starting out distinctly sausage-like.’

‘It would seem I must conduct further research on this comestible,’ Spock replies.

‘You get on that.’ Jim scratches the back of his neck where his hair’s still damp. ‘Just do me a favor and don’t put Jim Kirk and sausage into the same search field. I can’t be held responsible for what you’ll turn up and it might make you lose faith in the human race as a whole.’

‘Such a reaction would be highly illogical, given the diverse nature of your people,’ Spock says.

‘True, true.’ Jim nods, taking another look at the picture of himself they’ve paused in front of: young and pink and way too tubby to be sitting for an official visual portrait. ‘I’m just saying, I’m gonna hold you to that. No unauthorized searches.’

‘I find it unlikely that I would knowingly seek out stimulus which you have already forewarned me will be unpleasant.’

‘Hey, I didn’t say unpleasant.’ Jim wiggles his toes in his boots, enjoying the worn-in feel of them. Nothing beats a pair of dress shoes that are a couple years past the point when they should be thrown away. He’d ask Spock what he thinks, metaphysically, of the inherent futility of replacing boots right when they’re finally getting comfortable, but he’ll save that for another late night conversation. Sleepy voices. Spock’s chest hair. Intellectual queries. ‘I just… There are some crazies out there with way too much time and imagination on their hands, all right? Let’s just leave it at that.’

‘Your terms are acceptable,’ Spock says. He folds his hands behind his back, examining the
pictures a little more closely than Jim’s comfortable with. ‘Although I must question the validity of a strategy which first calls for you to draw attention to the thing which you seek to avoid.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim replies, ‘I’m still working out the kinks on that one. And now that I mention it, don’t put *James Kirk* and *kinks* into a search engine, either.’

‘Duly noted,’ Spock says.

It’s not difficult to pry Spock away from the hall of horrors after one or two gentle reminders that they’re on a schedule, but it feels downright eerieto be the responsible one.

He’s not entirely convinced it’s not some kind of test, engineered by Spock and Mom to check Jim’s resolve for the days to come.

If it is, he’s determined to pass.

By his own private calculations they slip in through the double doors of their designated meeting hall no less than thirty seconds early. It’s not enough to be noticeable, but Mom’s bound to know he’s making an effort.

That’s OK. As long as Sam’s not around to run his big mouth and make everything awkward for everyone, Jim can bask in the glow of having met basic expectations for the day.

It’s a glow that quickly fades when he sees the colored swatches of fabric laid out all over the table.

It’s not logical to care so much about color coordination. It’s not even decent. Jim can’t tell the difference between multiple variants on shades of royal purple and if he had a preference when it comes to flowers, it’s not as though he wants to express what it is in front of Spock and explain why he’s drawn toward one floral arrangement over another.

Apparently they could offend certain dignitaries by choosing one type of napkin over another. The seating arrangements are bound to be the source of nightmares both during waking hours and in tortured sleep. Jim suggests, half-heartedly, in the middle of a tense silence, that they make all the centerpieces look like giant lizards, then spends forty minutes doodling the exact shape of the one that attacked him on his PADD despite the rousing disapproval he receives for his contribution.

It’s his magnum opus.

‘We could put the flowers in the lizards,’ he adds. ‘Or on the lizard. We could make crowns and put them on the lizards’ heads. Hold an auction for charity to sell the lizards off after the wedding. Think of all the good we could do with these lizards.’

‘Jim,’ Mom replies.

The royal wedding planner barely manages to conceal murderous napkin rage.

Nobody likes Jim’s lizards. That much is obvious. Spock raises a briefly inquisitive brow before returning to an inundation of ultimately pointless minutiae that utterly humiliates Jim when he thinks about it.

There’s nothing Vulcan about this. Spock has to be dying of boredom. Vulcan tradition is unchanging, eternal—crazy and unpleasant, but it simply is, and there’s relief in that. Jim considers sending Spock a message about Vegas weddings being a thing on Earth, a cultural experience Spock might want to consider. They can be married by an Elvis impersonator and there don’t have
to be any napkins in sight, but when he looks up to try and rescue Spock from certain agony, he finds him sitting next to Mom. Neither of them is looking Jim’s way.

*Help*, Jim thinks.

Help comes, but not in the form Jim ever expected it to take.

‘Help’ is Sam, in new, impeccably polished, boots, throwing open the doors without bothering to knock. He doesn’t have to; he’s heir apparent. Jim gets to his feet, tingling with pins and needles, forgetting for a few curious, elated seconds, that he’s ever been angry at Sam for anything.

He remembers. It feels like shit. Jim turns away toward the window and runs his hand through his hair.

‘I thought I’d throw caution to the wind and rescue you,’ Sam says. ‘You know you’ve been at this for hours? I was beginning to wonder if you’d been abducted by hostiles or drowned in swatches, or if Jim had an allergic reaction to the flower samples.’

Jim can hear Spock stand, the neat slide of his chair on the polished wood and the whispering rustle of his heavy robes.

‘Has it really been that long?’ Jim hides a yawn in the back of his hand. ‘Time’s been flying. Jealous of all the fun we’re having?’

‘Nothing against the institution, but the idea of a fussy wedding in front of millions isn’t exactly my idea of a good time. Not,’ Sam adds, probably for Mom’s benefit, ‘that I won’t commit myself to it fully when my time comes. You can’t tell me you don’t want out of this, Jim.’

If only Sam could have the decency not to know him so well. All that time apart and Sam shouldn’t be the one who understands Jim enough to swoop in at the right moment and break him free.

‘Sam.’ There’s a brittle tone in Mom’s voice that Jim recognizes, though it’s usually leveled his way, whenever she’s trying to keep from saying anything too rude in front of someone not directly in the family. ‘Do you know how difficult it was to get Jim to sit down in the first place?’

‘I have some idea,’ Sam admits. ‘That’s why I’m busting him loose before he hits critical mass.’

‘I think you aren’t giving him enough credit,’ Mom says. ‘He’s *much* more patient now than he was before he left for Vulcan. I think it’s been a good influence.’

‘I think you could stand to talk about him like he’s still in the room,’ Jim says. He’s already standing, shifting his weight from right to left to even out his circulation. He could make a break for it and Mom would never be able to stop him. But Spock doesn’t know his secret eye signals yet. It wouldn’t be very good manners to leave him behind during a jailbreak. ‘Just a suggestion.’

Spock doesn’t have a comment to add, but the expression on his face isn’t contorted by any well-concealed distaste. Rather, he seems almost curious—a scientist’s curiosity, fascinated by this rare chance to observe the Kirks in their natural habitat.

‘That’s funny,’ Sam says. ‘I have an even better suggestion: I’m busting you out for lunch.’

‘It is approaching the designated time for a meal break,’ Spock adds.

Jim’s not looking to ding him for agreeing to Sam’s proposition, but it’s not the best timing either. It’s not Spock’s fault—just Sam’s for constantly knowing the right thing to say at the right time.
It’s a trait that Jim definitely didn’t inherit.

‘Your Majesties.’ The wedding planner’s standing now too. She looks about as gray as one of her favored color schemes—*mist mélange*—and Jim suspects that if she didn’t have her assistants standing behind her, she’d topple over. They’ve really put her through the ringer. ‘I think we have enough to build a reasonable proposal on. Perhaps it would be more productive if we sought to continue our dialogue at another date.’

‘See, you have to think of worker’s rights, too.’ Sam rubs his chin where there’s a shadow of dark beard growing along his jaw and around his mouth.

It should make him look old, but it suits him just like those stupid capes. Sometimes Jim wonders whether their traditional outfits would be any different if he’d been the one born first—if they’d have catered to thicker necks and shorter legs.

Not something he wants to bring up to the royal tailor.

Mom sighs, boxed in at all sides.

‘All right. Consider yourselves royally liberated for the moment.’

Sam bows when he holds the door open—not for Jim’s sake but for Spock’s. Jim makes a face at the back of Sam’s head as he passes.

When Mom clears her throat, Jim has to wonder if she has x-ray vision, or if she’s secretly a Vulcan mind-reader.

Then again, she’s Queen Winona Kirk. She’s both.

‘Unfortunately, we can’t all ride hoverbikes wherever, whenever,’ Sam adds on their way to the garage, showing off his long legs with even longer strides. ‘Whether or not it’s what we’d like.’

‘You’re all about following the rules all of a sudden?’ Jim asks. ‘Who are you?’

Sam pulls the black tarp off one of Dad’s old automobiles: a red convertible Jim and Sam used to help wash, reveling in the chance to get dirty, to wear old clothes and not have to worry about getting them dirty, too. Jim looks away to make a point, not because he has to hide his eyes from anyone who might look too deeply into them.

‘You’re not the only one who’s traveled a little and changed a lot, Jim,’ Sam replies. ‘You want to drive?’

It takes a concerted effort for Jim to keep his jaw from dropping open. He gets it now. Sam’s a changeling, a shapeshifter. An impostor. ‘Uh-uh,’ Jim says, when what he really means is, *What the hell?*

‘And here I thought you’d jump at the chance to get behind the wheel.’ Again, Sam holds open the passenger door for Spock while Jim stares. ‘You always want to drive, Jim. Have you really grown up *that* much since you left for Vulcan? It suits you.’

The compliment rankles but Jim has no ready retort. He slides into the back seat after Spock, then slings an arm around his shoulders after brief deliberation.

*When in Rome*, after all.
Sam adjusts the mirror, rolling down the leather roof. ‘Guards’ll follow us in two cars behind us,’ he explains, ‘but I managed to get us the privacy of not having one of them breathing down our necks. Helps maintain the illusion of freedom.’

‘Knowing that it is merely an illusion should logically destroy the illusion completely,’ Spock says.

‘I take what I can get,’ Sam replies, and grabs the clutch.

It’s a good day for sightseeing: bright sunlight, no threat of rain, only a few hoverbikes racing past them to snap photographs for questionable publications. Jim still hasn’t seen the official family pictures from last night; he still isn’t over Sam’s behavior; he still has his arm slung around Spock’s shoulders. Meanwhile, Sam seems determined to be Earth’s greatest tour guide, pointing out historical landmarks without consulting a PADD.

Luckily for Jim, Vulcans aren’t easily impressed. Sam can be as smart as he wants and still not scratch the surface of Vulcan memorization.

They head over the Golden Gate Bridge, causing a major traffic jam along the way, then drive through the campus at Starfleet Academy, which forces Jim to wave to the students when all he wants to do is sink down in his seat to keep from seeing—or being seen by—anyone he happens to know.

They don’t run into Gary, so Jim must’ve done something right to deserve that turn of good luck. He’ll get a communication from Pike about disturbing the peace and interrupting examinations, for sure, but for once it isn’t even Jim’s fault.

‘Earth’s greatest claim to fame,’ Sam says, elbow leaning out the window, only one hand on the steering wheel. ‘And, if I’m not mistaken, Jim’s favorite place in the galaxy. Or at least, it used to be.’

‘You’re not the only one who’s traveled a little and changed a lot,’ Jim mutters.

‘You know, I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not.’ Sam leans his chin on his hand as he takes a turn, like he’s modeling for front page article of the San Francisco Chronicle about classic cars and classic good looks. Earth’s heir apparent takes a spin in daddy’s Corvette convertible. He looks at Spock in the rearview, just a second too long in Jim’s estimation. ‘Have you found that to be the case too, Spock? Has Prince Jim ever played that trick on you like he does on everyone else?’

‘I have not noted any behavior on Prince James’ part which could be considered inscrutable,’ Spock says. ‘He has always been admirably obvious in our interactions.’

It’s almost funny, because the thing that Sam’s accusing Jim of is what Jim could just as easily attribute to Spock. He’s the one who’s inscrutable—who says things that almost sound like compliments, only on further inspection Jim realizes they can’t possibly be construed as such.

Jim throws another glance back at the Starfleet buildings in the rearview mirror. It’s not longing he’s feeling, not hope or sadness or deep-down spite for anyone who gets to fly their very own starship. He might’ve felt that once, out of petty jealousy or spite or something similar, but maybe Sam’s right.

He’s grown.

It’s an uncomfortable sensation looking into the past but there aren’t any ghosts of opportunity
lurking there like Jim imagined. There’s nothing there but the reflections of chances he never had in the first place.

He doesn’t resent the path he’s taken—after all, it has him rubbing shoulders with Spock—but hearing Sam bring up the way Jim used to be about Starfleet recalls to mind all sorts of uncomfortable memories.

He’s not sure if his younger self would be satisfied with the Jim he’s becoming.

Well, screw his younger self. If memory serves, that guy was kind of an idiot anyway.

‘You can call me Jim, you know.’ Jim turns away from Starfleet HQ, facing forward once again. ‘It’s not like Sam’s company. Or anyone important, even.’

‘Prince George will one day be the ruling monarch of your kingdom,’ Spock says. ‘Is it not reasonable to treat him with the respect such a position deserves?’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ Sam replies, before Jim has a chance to do the same. ‘If we can’t let our guard down with each other then who are we allowed to be laid-back with?’

‘Informality is not one of the precepts for Vulcan codes of behavior,’ Spock says. ‘Neither is it a priority among our interactions.’

‘Of course not,’ Sam says. ‘It’s not a very efficient model.’

‘And it’s not like you worry about being polite all the time, either,’ Jim adds.

Spock turns to look at him at last, brow raised high. Sam catches Jim’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Jim take a moment to enjoy the attention, then reminds himself that not all attention is the good kind.

‘Vulcan compliments are the ones that sound like insults,’ Jim explains. ‘You have to dig deep. Abandon your ego. Accept the scathing truth and come out of the experience a better person. Less affected by silly things like compliments or small talk. You’d hate it, Sam. You wouldn’t last a day over there.’

‘Wouldn’t I?’ Sam asks.

‘Plus there’s the atmospheric training; the dietary restrictions…’ Jim ticks the requirements off on his fingers. ‘The ceremony itself lasted through the afternoon and late, late into the night. It was practically dawn by the time we were finished. So it wasn’t an oversight that you weren’t invited; it was more of an only the strong survive kind of situation.’

‘It was not designed for outworlders,’ Spock says, ‘and therefore it is not surprising that it would prove taxing for them.’

‘Outworlders?’ Jim almost forgets where he is and who he’s talking to, stopping himself at the last second before he goes so far as to feign a mortally wounded heart. ‘Do I still count as an outworlder, Spock? Even when I’m your husband?’

‘Not strictly,’ Spock admits.

Jim grins. Sam snorts, pretending he’s clearing his throat, but Jim knows better. ‘Something you wanna say, Sam? Maybe you need a lozenge? Something to drink?’
‘Oh, you represented Earth and all of humanity at its best to all of Vulcan, Jim—that’s no
exaggeration of what I heard.’ Sam’s tone is too sly for a straightforward compliment. Jim braces
himself for the catch. ‘Say—and if this is too personal a matter to discuss, just let me know and I
promise, I won’t push it—but did the two of you do that bonding thing, mind to mind, thoughts to
thoughts? I remember reading up on that back when I was Prince Spock’s intended.’

‘Well…’ Jim begins.

‘We have not,’ Spock says, ruining any chance Jim has to keep Sam guessing. He can’t help it;
that’s who Spock is. But he could stand to err on the side of lying through omission despite his
Vulcan precepts every now and then, since it’s not technically a lie if you say nothing at all and
drive a big brother crazy in the process. ‘As the bonding is a significant undertaking for a Vulcan
and a human, it requires extra consideration, as well as full understanding of its requirements by
both parties.’

Sam holds up his hand, only the heel resting against the handsome leather on the steering wheel.
‘Right; right. Just forget I said anything.’

‘A Vulcan cannot forget so easily,’ Spock says. ‘However, I see no reason why denying all
memory of your inquiry should be preferable.’

‘How about lunch?’ Sam turns them smoothly into the Mission District, still committed to his role
of the perfect royal tour guide. ‘I know an incredible place—great vegetarian options, too, and it’s
just out of the way enough that it shouldn’t be too awkward, eating with everyone staring at us.
Less of a chance there’ll be pictures of you mid-chew, Jim, and I know how important that is to
you.’

‘Not everyone can fit as much into their mouth at one time as you can,’ Jim replies.

It’s almost fraternal.

But only almost.

*

Jim’s closer to forgiving Sam for every slight and betrayal when the taqueria he takes them to
means Jim gets to watch Spock eating a taco. All of his half-hearted instructions happen in live
action, like a sports commentator watching a particularly devastating game of Parrises Squares.

‘No, no, you gotta— All at once like it’s an envelope.’

‘Fold the tortilla around and cup your hand at the back.’

‘An envelope’s one of those old Earth things from when we still had paper, and you fold it like
that…’

‘No, oh my God, you’re losing all the cheese!’

After the first few minutes, Jim gives up on trying to help. He’s too fascinated by the process—by
Spock’s dogged inability to surrender when he drops a good portion of black beans and lettuce into
the plastic basket that forms his plate. Sam’s tied up at the counter, signing a couple autographs for
the people behind them in line, and Jim would bail him out if he could, but they’re already hiding
in the backseat of the convertible, tinted windows rolled up. If anyone gets their eyes on Spock
there’s no telling whether a pair of foam ears will be far behind.
‘My meal is illogical,’ Spock says at last.

There’s a small shred of pale chopped green lettuce on his shirtfront. Jim wipes the chorizo grease from his fingers before reaching out to flick it away.

‘It’s a taco, Spock.’ It’s all he can do not to choke when he tries to keep from laughing. Spock’s looking at the thing like it’s *gagh*, live and wriggling in front of him.

Personally, that’s a little how Jim feels about vegetarian tacos, too, but he wasn’t about to criticize the Vulcan-friendly option when Sam was thoughtful enough to pick a place where Vulcans could eat to begin with.

Jim didn’t know he’d done all that research. It’s somehow unsettling to discover after the fact of their marriage. Like there was a chance Sam really was ready to hop in and fill Jim’s place in a pinch.

Spock holds the remains his taco at a distance, drooping and half-eaten and honestly forlorn. ‘Its structural integrity is unsound. I cannot consume it.’

‘That’s kind of the point,’ Jim says. ‘Makes it fun to eat.’

Spock raises his eyebrow. ‘I was not aware that meals on Earth required an additional component of entertainment.’

‘Let me guess,’ Jim says, ‘you’re not on board. I’ll be sure and tell Sam.’

‘Tell me what?’

Sam slithers in the driver’s side, nipping the door shut behind him in advance of his lurking fans. Jim sneaks a peek through the window where it’s cracked.

No novelty Vulcan ears. They’re safe. For now.

Jim licks his thumb clean from the last of the sour cream—glancing to Spock to see if he’s watching, giving the same consideration to Jim’s fingers as Jim’s given his. Just because they’re not a natural erogenous zone for humans doesn’t mean Jim can’t appreciate Spock’s reactions and experience a vicarious thrill.

But Spock’s still attempting to fix the structural integrity of his torn tortilla with much the same determined application as he showed while repairing the flaws in Jim’s tarp shelter way back when.

‘Spock thinks tacos are illogical,’ Jim replies.

He lets his thumb linger at the corner of his mouth, waiting for Spock to catch on and realize Jim’s flirting with him.

Or at least, Jim’s trying to.

‘That’s too bad. When I told the place I was getting the vegetarian option for the prince from Vulcan, they went wild. I’m pretty sure they’re about to rename the item *Spocko Taco* on their menu.’

Jim can’t help it. He laughs. A punch of spice hits the back of his throat for his efforts and the laugh turns into a coughing fit, Jim’s eyes tearing up by the time he’s managed to catch his breath.
He regrets it immediately, noticing the look on Sam’s face—an unfamiliar expression, snapping Jim back to their estranged and distant present.

‘Don’t look so proud,’ Jim mutters, reaching for another taco. ‘It’s not like you made the Spocko Taco up.’

Sam shrugs. ‘I might’ve been the one who suggested it.’

‘For what reason have these flat, edible wrapping starches been designed to tear at the slightest exertion of external pressure?’ Spock, thankfully, is too concerned with his meal to get fussy over Spocko. ‘If the intent is to maintain form and contain their fillings, then they have not been designed adequately for their task.’

‘Eat the taco, Spock,’ Jim says.

He leans across the seat to nip an edge of the tortilla in toward the center, stemming the flow of beans and cheese with a simple tuck. His fingertips brush Spock’s knuckles and Spock’s eyes darken, briefly, a sign that Jim gets to him almost as much as a structurally unsatisfying ‘edible wrapping starch’.

Jim’s gonna be calling tortillas that for the rest of his life.

His expression shifts to something way too vulnerable for the moment and he pulls back in order to regain some semblance of self-control.

‘Then you just have to eat it fast, before it springs another leak on you,’ he says. ‘That’s the challenge.’

‘The ‘fun’,’ Spock replies.

Sam chuckles and Jim crosses his arms over his chest against the reverb of the sound. It’s Dad’s chuckle and Jim’s pretty sure the raw salsa in his taco is giving him indigestion.

‘The task is finished,’ Spock says, moments later. The taco is gone; instead of licking his fingers clean, he uses his napkin, because he doesn’t know that tacos in the backseat aren’t for princely etiquette. Jim leans his jaw against the side of his hand, elbow propped against the tinted window, watching him at an angle. ‘I must add that my unfavorable commentary regarding the structure of the taco dish were not intended to suggest the meal was not satisfactory, Prince George Samuel. It was an adequate repast while also providing me with the ability to experience one of the regional foods of Earth. As an ambassador from Vulcan I welcome such cultural exchange.’

Jim burps.

‘Nice,’ Sam says; it’s a reflexive response, given before he realizes he’s letting Spock hang. ‘And don’t worry about it, Spock. Prince Spock. I should’ve warned you about how messy they were—maybe started us off with a knife and fork.’

‘You were attempting to demonstrate the traditional Earth method of consuming the nutrients in question,’ Spock says. ‘I would not desire for you to seek out alternative means of instructing me. I am perfectly capable of adapting.’

‘So I’ve seen.’ Sam’s beard is barely more than a hint of one, definitely not enough to catch food, but he steals a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror anyway, brushing his chin for any stray grated cheese. ‘If I didn’t know any better, I’d ask if the two of you were having some kind of a competition, trying to see who can acclimatize fastest.’
‘A rivalry of that nature is uncharacteristic of our relationship,’ Spock says.

Jim freezes halfway to stealing a pinch of the taco fillings that’ve dropped into Spock’s plate. The cheese and lettuce seemed like a great idea for his indigestion, but now he’s caught between following through and executing a barrel roll out into the restaurant’s al fresco tables and chairs.

It’s nothing he hasn’t heard before, but Spock’s attitude toward privacy has been a sticking point between them. He could barely write to Jim about basic, generalized erogenous zones of all things, and now he’s talking about their marriage, in the open, with a third party.

That seems like a step in the right direction; a step ahead for their relationship. It has to be a step.

But it happens to be made in Sam’s direction, with his older brother eating too many tacos for one person in the front seat.

A rare tactical error on Spock’s part.

‘Aww.’

Jim can feel his insides shriveling at the warm approval in Sam’s voice, skin too tight like he’s been left out to dry in the Vulcan sun. There are wrinkles at the corners of Sam’s eyes that suggest he’s trying hard not to grin—but not hard enough to succeed. He licks the tips of his own fingers one at a time, prolonging the suspense.

He can probably hear Jim’s stomach growling with anxiety. Relatives have a second sense for these things.

‘That’s sweet, Prince Spock,’ Sam says at last. ‘I had no idea my brother had it in him.’

‘I’ve got a lot of stuff in me,’ Jim says. He rubs his belly, just to emphasize.

‘Sausage, primarily,’ Spock agrees, ‘a food group for which he appears to exhibit an unusually high fondness. All ground meats, in fact, provide his preferred source of protein.’

‘Guess it’s too much to hope that you’d be able to make him better socialized and get him to eat his vegetables.’ Sam’s given up on pretending he doesn’t want to grin and lets it break over his face without a hint of shame, new wrinkles at the corners of his eyes that Jim doesn’t recognize.

‘I’m not the one who used to feed broccoli to the dog,’ Jim says.

‘Given my understanding of the canine digestive system, would that not have produced intestinal distress?’ Spock asks.

‘Oh yeah. In fact, one time,’ Sam replies, ‘actually, when a group of Vulcan delegates were visiting and we were eating salads for practically every meal, Linc let one rip in the middle of the dining hall. It was so loud Mom dropped her glass of water—remember that, Jim?’

Jim remembers. He laughed so hard that he cried and he had to be escorted out, along with poor old Linc.

He doesn’t answer. Sam still hasn’t earned the right to bring up old times.

‘Linc,’ Spock repeats, once again proving he does know how to keep a conversation moving, at least when he deems it a worthwhile endeavor.

‘Linc—he was our old dog. Such a good sport, too.’ Sam sighs, finishing off the last bites of his
final taco. ‘His full name was Abraham Lincoln. Jim named him when he was three years old.’

‘A peculiar choice. Was the name chosen in reference to the Abraham Lincoln from Earth’s history?’

‘You might not believe this from the way he behaves sometimes, Prince Spock,’ Sam says, ‘but Jim’s always been a major nerd.’

‘The definition of that word is generally accompanied by negative connotations.’

‘Negative connotations, huh?’ Sam tries again to catch Jim’s eyes, embarrassing him on purpose like that’s in the job description for heir apparent. ‘No, not exactly. I wouldn’t say that. He’d have his nose stuck in some history book or another whenever he could—actually, it was pretty cute. Especially when he had to wear those corrective glasses. You know he’s allergic to retinax?’

‘I am aware of all of Prince James Tiberius’ allergies,’ Spock says.

‘He’s still got a pair for reading, too, but he’s too proud to wear them,’ Sam continues. Unstoppable. Courting danger. Asking for Jim to leap into the front seat and start his very own assassination attempt. ‘You still hiding your glasses in the underwear drawer, Jim?’

‘Keep it up, Sam,’ Jim replies.

Like a Vulcan, Sam takes him literally. ‘And when he was little, he’d walk into the room and recite paragraphs from old history books he’d memorized. It was impossible to have a conversation with him—not that it’s easy to have one with him now, either.’

Sam’s eyes flash, the devious brown-gold he got from Mom.

‘A thirst for knowledge is considered an admirable trait on both Earth and on Vulcan,’ Spock says. ‘It is a point of cultural agreement.’

‘Eat another taco, Sam,’ Jim suggests.

‘I’m giving Prince Spock some valuable insight into your character, Jim. That the way to your heart isn’t just through sausage.’

‘You can take your advice and stuff it,’ Jim says. ‘Maybe you knew me back then, but you don’t know me now.’

It’s sharper than it could be; too sharp. It takes the air out of the conversation all at once but Jim’s too pissed off to feel guilty—not yet. When he has a chance to think about it, he’ll work his way around to feeling like an asshole; at the moment, all he feels like is somebody who doesn’t have a brother.

Only he does. He’s the guy driving the car.

‘Maybe we should head back,’ Sam says.

‘Yeah,’ Jim replies. ‘Some of us have a wedding to plan.’

‘Mmm.’ Sam replies by shoving the last of a bevy of tacos into his mouth, only barely missing devouring the wrapper in the same go.

Unlike Spock, he manages to do it without spilling all over himself, because if Sam’s anything, it’s annoyingly competent, even while driving.
Jim puts his feet up in the space between the two front seats, then reaches to steal Spock’s basket littered with vegetarian fillings.

He can’t tell if the raised eyebrow angled in his direction is a commentary on his theft or his brother-related behavior. Either way, as Sam revs the engines and peels out of the taquería parking lot, Jim knows better than to ask for clarification.

*
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Cultural exchange.

Chapter Notes

AMAZING AMAZING ART from two amazing AMAZING artists for the previous Spocko Taco chapter; the first by littlesmartart on tumblr, the second by shards-of-divinity on tumblr! Art gives me life.
At least Spock’s silence isn’t uncharacteristic. It doesn’t loom over Jim as they file out of the car, gathering up the detritus from lunch because Sam and Jim both made a big deal about the garage being their space back in the day, until Mom finally said if it was theirs then they’d have to clean it too. Even though neither of them discussed it later, Jim suspects they were all equally relieved not to have more people than necessary pawing through Dad’s old cars.

And it’s not weighing on Jim’s mind when Sam excuses himself, citing a Velocity tournament with the visiting delegates from Andoria. He swings an imaginary racket as he goes; Jim refrains from making any backhanded comments about his backhand.

It’s not like he can feel Spock’s eyes boring into the back of his neck—especially when security and Jim’s royal minder-slash-daily planner corner them near the atrium to ask why lunch took the better part of three and a half hours. It comes as something of a reprieve when they’re frog-marched not to another wedding planning session, but a diplomatic summit to discuss security protocols and potential treaty variations.

Jim lets his guard down enough to almost nod off completely during a long-winded speech from one of the Vulcan attachés.

Spock doesn’t kick him under his chair, but the sound of him clearing his throat is enough to jolt Jim’s adrenaline production back into high gear.
He can’t shake the sense that he’s prolonging the inevitable, waiting for the lizard who’s stalking him just out of sight to suddenly appear and tackle him into the river.

When they take a break for the assorted envoys to wet their throats and reassess what’s a realistic expectation for a wedding between one human and one Vulcan, Spock turns to Jim and does the eyebrow thing again.

‘You are agitated.’

‘Attaches make me attach-anxious,’ Jim replies. He attempts a laugh. Spock doesn’t reciprocate and Jim turns the chuckle into a casual cough. ‘Nah, Spock. I’m fine. This close to falling asleep and insulting your finest and brightest, but other than that, today hasn’t been so bad.’

‘If that is indeed the truth,’ Spock says, ‘then for what reason did you eschew the common definitions of polite interaction during the lunch-time tour given by Prince George Samuel?’

Jim blinks. ‘Huh?’

‘Your responses to his attempts to socialize and instigate verbal intercourse with you as one brother to another, rather than a state official to a peer, were hardly reciprocal.’

‘Hardly reciprocal.’ Jim snorts to ease the prickle of frustration under his collar.

‘Repetition without clarification,’ Spock informs him, ‘is not within the purview of our arrangement regarding the former.’

‘Oh my God.’ Jim glances around the room, but as far as privacy goes, they’ve got the place to themselves. Spock’s chosen his moment well—too well; well enough that Jim has no real escape.

‘You really want to have this conversation now?’

‘Is there some reason why its timing should be undesirable?’

‘No. Yes.’ Spock probably won’t think it counts if never is the only desirable timing where the topic of Sam is concerned. ‘We already talked about the Sam stuff, okay? Things are complicated and I don’t really want to talk about it.’

‘Honest, open communication is not merely one of the tenets of the marriage contract, but one of the tenets of our personal relationship, as well.’

Jim stares, but Spock’s gaze is unflinching. He doesn’t stand a chance and blinks first, again, to buy himself some time to think. ‘Fine. Invoke the marriage contract. But that’s sneaky behavior, Spock. That’s hitting below the belt.’

‘I have not applied any physical blow to your person.’

‘Just—stop taking everything so literally for a second,’ Jim says. ‘Did it occur to you that maybe I’m not being, I don’t know, sufficiently fraternal because it’s not like I got the same in return?’

‘Prince George Samuel is your brother.’

‘Sure he is. But he doesn’t always choose to act like it.’

Spock’s forehead pinches in the center, the kind of visible, concentrated thought that Jim would prefer he reserve for matters of colloquial education or sexual innuendo. That it’s about Sam now is fitting, a cherry on top of the stupid Sam sundae. ‘Is your behavior not conducted regardless of
the behavior of others?’ Spock asks finally.

‘He left, Spock. He left without saying goodbye. He took Linc with him and none of us knew if he’d be coming back.’ Jim waits for something to register emotionally on Spock’s face but aside from the shadow on his brow, there’s nothing, no hint of sympathy. That doesn’t necessarily mean anything—that’s the Vulcan way—but it doesn’t mean Jim can be happy about it.

‘Had you considered, subsequent to his return, discussing the matter of and motivations for Prince George Samuel’s departure with him?’

‘Wow,’ Jim says. ‘Did I consider— How about, ‘Did Prince George Samuel consider’?, considering he was the one who left in the first place? If anybody should be trying to clear things up, it’s the guy who walked out on his family. On his people. Hell, he didn’t even walk. He ran.’

‘Then your curiosity and injured feelings regarding his departure are not incentive enough for you to request clarification?’

Jim has to stand, restless energy practically making him vibrate. ‘Seriously, Spock—whose side are you on?’

‘Thinking of the situation in terms of ‘sides’, however clear-cut it may seem, is inhibiting your ability to view the matter as a complete and cohesive whole,’ Spock says.

‘Uh huh.’ Jim flaps an arm like a bird in midflight only more irritated and less graceful. ‘You know, just for the record, that’s technically the wrong answer. Someone asks whose side you’re on, you say your side, baby. Well, that’s if your husband asks you. You always take your husband’s side.’

It’s not as romantic as it sounds—just a little wisdom hammered home by Mom, although it wasn’t counsel she offered to Jim in private so much as the example he watched her live day to day. George Kirk wasn’t someone whose ego would get bruised by disagreement, but it was important in matters of diplomacy for the royal family to present a united front.

Better to get some practice in private so it comes naturally when they’re in public and it counts.

Spock folds his hands in front of him on the table, fore and index fingers pressed lightly together.

‘I do not understand why I would be compelled to address you as one would refer to an infant,’ he says. ‘Furthermore, you suggest a system of false dichotomy. You have created the illusion of a choice, then eliminated any alternative option. This is no different from my initial suggestion.’

‘It is different,’ Jim insists. He’s aware he’s being irrational, but Spock’s the one who wanted to have this discussion here and now. Personally, he would’ve waited for better circumstances—some privacy that was more secure than a temporarily empty room—but he has to trust Spock’s instincts in these things. Jim already snapped at the bait. ‘You have a choice, but you’re supposed to want to take my side, is the thing.’

‘Human communication rituals are needlessly complicated,’ Spock says.

If he’s only getting that now, then Jim’s done a better job communicating than he thought. He can congratulate himself later. Right now he’s got bigger communication problems.

‘Yeah.’ Jim waves that claim off. It’s true, or true enough that he doesn’t feel the need to defend himself against the accusation. ‘I know that things would be easier if we were all honest with each other all the time. But the point is, Spock…’ Jim had a point. He’s getting to it by pacing the same
trapped length of carpeting. ‘The point is: if Sam felt bad about what happened, then he would’ve come to me first. That’s what you do when you screw up. You apologize. You don’t wait for someone to ask you to say sorry. It’s bad manners.’

‘It is my understanding that your appreciation of manners has always been inconsistent at best.’

‘It matters,’ Jim says. ‘This is the one time it really matters. I’m not gonna beg him to treat me the way he should’ve to begin with. It’s on him, okay? You know, there’s a phrase on Earth for that, and it goes like this: the ball’s in his court.’

‘A reference to his game of Velocity?’

‘You know what I’m saying. Synthesize the information.’

‘I know that your emotionalism does not allow you to be objective.’

It’s not an insult, Jim reminds himself. It’s a statement of fact. And yeah, it’s a little judgmental, but that’s because Vulcans are generally oh-so-superior. They’ve earned the right to look down at everyone else through centuries of rigorous training, supreme self-control, having assumed their galactic place as the all-time masters of repression.

Jim takes a deep breath. ‘That’s the point, Spock. I’m human. Of course my emotions are gonna make things subjective. He’s my brother.’

‘You are too intelligent to allow such an obvious and easily-recognized oversight to—’

‘I don’t know what the hell you’re trying to do right now, Spock, but it’s bullshit. You don’t know a damn thing about the situation and this topic… You know what? It’s off the table. End of discussion.’

Jim has to take a second to consider how much of an asshole he sounds like—that the hand he was waving, trying to shake these feelings loose, is trembling with the force of his ‘emotionalism’. At the same time, how is it possible that Spock can be so understanding about the brother situation in one moment, and so completely impersonal at another? It’s like he hasn’t seen the way it gets to Jim. It’s like he can’t understand something so fundamental—like Jim himself is ultimately unfathomable. Just another logic puzzle to be studied and explained, forgetting the major, rogue element that makes him who he is.

His heart.

Which hurts, currently, and not because of the raw onion in his tacos.

Spock still hasn’t said anything. Jim might’ve crossed a line. Never mind that he was pushed toward it and then over; he’s the one who took that final step, who acted like a totalitarian during what should’ve been a civil, if passionate on Jim’s end, conversation between two married adults.

‘I didn’t—’ Jim begins, but that’s when the door opens and the planners return. Jim gulps, barely able to pay attention to the latest details up for painstakingly comprehensive deliberation over the buzzing between his ears.

Sometimes, he’s starting to realize, loving somebody is like actively asking to spend your life as a deflated balloon.

‘Gotta get some fresh air,’ he says finally, making a break for the door during a lull in the conversation. ‘Just… Make Prince Spock happy. That’ll be great. I’m serious. I know you’ll make
all the right decisions. You don’t need me, anyway. Prince Spock has my, uh, right of…veto or
attorney or whatever it is.’

He slams the door behind him—not on purpose. The doorknob slips out of his hands, further proof
that he can’t seem to get a grip. He wants to go for a ride, get his head on straight, but even that’s
out of the question now.

Because it’s something he did with Spock and every turn and rush of speed and familiar sight he
passes are only gonna remind Jim of Spock when, at least for a while, things with Spock are
exactly what Jim’s looking to forget.

He doesn’t wanna think he made a mistake integrating Spock so seamlessly into his life. That he
had a chance to keep everything in the palace from reminding him of Spock and he didn’t take it—
because why would he want to?

Jim makes it all the way back to the double doors of their shared quarters before veering sharply
off, nodding to the stationed security, then following the geometric design of the corridors further
east, down the stairs and toward the windowed hallway to where his old bedroom was.

Is?

There’s only one way to find out.

He’s not running away when he unlocks the door; there’s not even a whisper of dust on the keypad,
which at least suggests someone’s been running regular maintenance. The door hisses open with
that familiar squeak at the end where the door recedes into the wall. It might as well be saying
welcome home, Jim.

Except that it’s not, because it’s only a door. Control panels talk. Doors should, but they don’t.

Jim’s room’s exactly the way he left it: spacious but crowded with possessions. The palace staff
would never leave it messy, but there’s only so much a person can do with all the clutter.

Posters of Starfleet-discovered planetary landscapes; model ships strewn along single shelves; a
dangling scientific 3-D mobile of the constellations of the Alpha Quadrant. When Jim shut off the
lights at night it’d glow and rotate, giving him a chance to memorize the separate shapes without
being too dependent on their location in the sky.

He thought it’d help for Vulcan.

Someone’s gone to the trouble of shutting down all the miniature holo-views of the Vulcan deserts
he had set up all over his desk. The visual screens are still there, but currently, they’re blank and
darkened. His old PADD’s still by the bed—the one he chose to leave on Earth, switching out for a
new one that wasn’t filled with the incriminating evidence of all the conversations he had with
Spock to date.

Jim flops over onto his bed and fights the temptation to pick it up. He’s not looking to relive their
past when it’s their present he’s getting stuck on.

He might feel guilty about evading his responsibilities, but triggering the keypad has undoubtedly
sent a frequency pulse to whoever’s monitoring the security feed that the prince is in the nest or
whatever shorthand they’re using these days. Jim’s not about to spark any palace-wide panic about
having lost the second heir.

Anyway, it’s not like he’s Sam. He’s not in any danger of leaving.
Some of that lingering anger he’s been feeling threatens to bubble to the surface.

Jim’s no stranger to anger in this room. Frustration; misery; despair. Well, he never got all the way to total hopelessness, no matter how many long dinners he had to sit through without falling asleep in his salad plate, and there are memories of joy and excitement caught under the mobile, hidden between the reflective holo-surfaces that used to display the mountain ranges of Vulcan. It’s not all bad.

But anger is the primary emotion that’s stuck between Jim’s ribs at the moment, enough to find him burying his face in his pillow like he’s thirteen again, bursting at the seams, changing and growing and becoming too fast to keep up with himself.

It’s exactly the same position Jim took when Sam left—when he didn’t know whether to grieve or shout, whether to be sad or to be furious. Sam didn’t give him the luxury of a clear-cut answer. He only gave Jim questions, and now, it’s the same deal.

How can he act like nothing’s changed? How can he seriously think that coming back makes everything better? Is he pretending that everything’s normal in order to make things more comfortable for himself, or does he really believe that it is?

And so on and so forth until infinity.

The pillow doesn’t judge, at least.

If Jim feels like a kid again, then he’s pretty sure it’s understandable. He has every right to be a person sometimes, not just a prince. And emotional turmoil is a byproduct of having emotions in the first place; Jim wouldn’t give those emotions up for anything. Not even the meditative calm—supposedly better than the chaotic opposite—that Spock’s achieved.

They’re what define him. They might not be the best or the noblest of feelings but they’re his.

He waits until his breath gets too hot where it’s trapped between his face and the pillowcase, then sits upright again. The visual screens catch the fading daylight from outside Jim’s window, momentarily blinding him, but when the sunspots clear from his eyes, he knows what he has to do. The same thing that saved him from every outburst; the way he’s always calmed the fires inside or whatever they’re called on Vulcan.

It’s not meditation.

It’s even better.

It’s making something.

He still remembers the specs of the holo-view mechanisms, so it doesn’t take long before he’s tinkering with the programs to restructure the views. When he powers up the first screen, it offers the exact images Jim remembers staring at from Spock’s room on Vulcan—from the balcony, specifically.

Only one thing happens to be missing.

‘Computer,’ Jim says, ‘raise the temperature of this room by about…twelve degrees—Celsius—to comply with the current temperature on Vulcan.’

‘Warning: such temperature would make this room—’
‘Basically uninhabitable,’ Jim concludes. ‘Yeah, computer, I know. You ever think that might be what I want?’

‘Please restate your question.’

‘Never mind. Temperature shift confirmed as desirable.’

Jim listens to the air jets, a ripple of immediately unbearable heat hitting his skin, already causing his hair to curl. It’s discomfort, but it’s supposed to be. And there’s a comfortable familiarity to that.

He isn’t expecting the knock on the door quite so soon. Usually he has at least an hour to himself before the bodyguards show up and escort him back to real life, or whatever approximation of it palace life has to offer.

‘The eagle is in the nest,’ Jim calls back. ‘Give me some room to breathe, will you?’

‘Your choice of dialogue does not inspire confidence,’ Spock replies from the other side of the door.

‘Jesus.’ Jim sits up to rub the sweat where it’s beading over his throat and collecting under his collar. Of all the people he wants to see when he’s having some kind of latent emotional breakdown, Spock’s definitely last on the list. Then again, they’re married, so apparently Jim doesn’t get that choice anymore. ‘Come in, Spock. I’m fine.’

It’s not exactly true, but Jim doesn’t know how else to communicate the fluctuations in both temperature and mental sanity that Spock’s about to encounter upon opening the door.

It’s an inverse warning, the only kind he knows how to give.

Spock doesn’t even blink when the door hisses open, squeaking at the final centimeter. He steps through and into the embrace of the artificial warmth Jim’s created in his quarters. Little Vulcan. That’s what they’re gonna call it. Classier than Spockeria V.

Jim thinks about getting up, but he doesn’t have the energy. He might not’ve bothered with adjusting the oxygen content in the atmosphere, but the heat alone is enough to sap the strength from his limbs. He could stand, but the desire to seems to have evaporated.

Fitting, given the heat.

‘You have made some adjustments to the environmental controls of your living space.’ Spock’s hands are folded behind his back, head cocked in Jim’s direction. ‘I trust that these were not the measures you referred to when you wrote to me of your training conditions.’

‘Nah.’ Jim waves a lazy hand, lifting his head so he can prop it up on his knuckles. ‘We’ve got the good stuff in a special lab. Genuine holosuite simulations, atmospheric pods, the whole enchilada.’

‘Enchiladas?’ Spock asks. ‘I fail to see how one of the menu items from our lunchtime excursion has anything to do with our current discussion.’

‘I’m mad at you,’ Jim says. He doesn’t have it in him to explain basic human interactions right now. Or maybe he simply doesn’t want to. ‘Just so you know.’

He’s not above giving details about other current events. He still knows how to communicate. That kind of thing’s supposed to be important in relationships, and considering how he’s been doing
everything in his power to damage theirs as much as possible lately, he should probably start
sneaking in some maintenance too. They’re not outright repairs, but for the time being, they’ll have
to suffice.

Spock sighs. It doesn’t make a sound, but Jim can see it in the slight rise and fall of his shoulders.

‘I am aware of your displeasure,’ he says. ‘I approached you in order to resolve the differences in
understanding we have been experiencing.’

‘What if they can’t be resolved?’ It’s more fatalistic than Jim’s accustomed to being and he frowns
at the way it makes him sound. ‘I mean, what if you understand where I’m coming from but you
still don’t agree with me?’

‘Given the differences in our perspectives, that is a not insignificant possibility.’

‘If it’s all the same to you, Spock, I don’t want to know how not insignificant.’

Spock nods, if barely. He won’t stop staring at Jim and while the attention might be exciting any
other time, Jim can feel the security like a long-range camera lens. Of all the situations to finally
place him under Spock’s microscope.

‘What I’m trying to say is, if you aren’t with me on this…’ Jim turns away, raking his fingers
through his sweat-dampened hair. ‘Then I don’t know. It’s gonna hurt, all right? This is kind of a
big deal.’

‘I have become increasingly aware of the importance this particular subject holds for you, Jim,’
Spock says. ‘It is not simply necessary that I understand your emotions on this matter, but it is my
wish to do so.’

All the anger Jim’s been erecting around himself—hard and impenetrable but, like with so many of
these emotional barriers, brittle as hell and far too susceptible to shattering given the right angle of
impact—collapses around him. Jim’s shoulders sag before he can force them not to and he glances
over the left one at Spock in the doorway.

He’s as unfathomable as ever. He’s remote, but not in the same way the mountains of Vulcan are
remote. In fact, as easily as Jim can picture him with that backdrop—the red peaks and golden
crags glittering, shimmering, hazy as fire—he can just as easily separate Spock from his home so
that he makes real, tangible sense in Jim’s room, under Jim’s mobile of Alpha Quadrant stars.

‘Anyway, I explained it already,’ Jim says. ‘There’s nothing else I can say.’

Of course, there’s plenty more Jim can say—but when the source of his unhappiness is as simple as
my big brother hurt my feelings, it’s too embarrassing to put out there in so many words.

‘May I suggest an alternative?’ Spock asks.

It takes Jim a beat too long, emotions getting in the way of higher brain function, but he likes to
think he catches on quicker than anyone else would, especially anyone else in his position.

‘My mind to your mind?’ Jim replies.

‘A meld would allow me to understand that which you are, for whatever reason, unable to express.
It would also allow me to—for lack of a better word—sympathize, due to my heightened
understanding.’
‘And it doesn’t feel like cheating?’

Spock’s brow rises.

‘Never mind.’ Jim grins, wearily but solidly. He feels it warming the center of his chest already, along with nervous little butterflies, a combination of anticipation and excitement and a good dose of jittery fear. ‘You could always look inside me and realize I’m not worth the time and effort. That I’m a great big emotional human mess. Sure, marriage is based on mutual understanding, but respect’s important, too.’

‘I do not believe a better understanding of that which is so essential a part of your person would do anything other than enhance my respect for you,’ Spock says.

‘Oh,’ Jim replies.

It’s nothing more than a whisper.

‘Jesus, Spock,’ he manages to continue after a necessary pause for recovery. ‘Are you sure Vulcans don’t get romantic?’

It’s not Jim’s finest, but it’s worth it for the expression on Spock’s face: confused but still interested, intrigued despite himself. That’s a trait that works in Jim’s favor. As long as he can manage to stay exciting enough to make up for any trouble he causes, then he’s in a fair position.

‘We do not have the inclination toward romantic diversion.’ Spock sits on the edge of the bed, close to where Jim’s splayed out with his boots on the blankets. ‘Do you prefer the accuracy of such a statement?’

‘I’m not much for accuracy,’ Jim says, but it comes out half-hearted. He’s not sure which idea is the lesser of two evils—that it’s a personal preference, or that it’s impossible for Vulcans to get lovey-dovey. Except when Spock seems willing to change, he can’t get too hung up on it.

‘Indeed; I have noticed multiple factors to indicate the presence of that trait.’

It’s not an agreement designed to flatter or put an end to the contention between them. If Spock’s trying to follow Jim’s point about taking his husband’s side in all things, then he’s got the sentiment right, but the execution’s all wrong.

But Jim has more pressing matters to regret—like messing with the environmental controls—when Spock moves, skirting his legs to settle on his knees somewhere near to Jim’s hip. He reaches for Jim’s face, his fingers arranged into a now-familiar configuration.

Jim doesn’t have the energy to wriggle away. He’s not exactly eager to give Spock a first-hand look into all the resentment swirling around the inside of his head, much less the knot of emotion growing ever larger in his chest, but maybe he’s right. Maybe it’s better than scrambling to keep his dignity by hanging onto their misunderstandings at the same time. He’d have to be one hell of an idiot to favor one over the other.

Spock’s fingers are cool against Jim’s cheek, fitted next to the socket of Jim’s right eye. It’s a comforting counterpoint to the heat flooding his old room. Out of the corner of his vision he can see the edges of his Starfleet posters curling up.

‘Our minds,’ Spock recites, ‘together as one.’

‘If you say so,’ Jim replies.
It's a nervous tic of a comment, not worthy of a response. Spock’s silence seems to imply that they can agree on that much—or he could be overwhelmed by the sudden onset of Jim’s jealous emotions; the glut of hurt; the confusion and frustration that finally coalesced into a vile temper tantrum in the back of Dad’s Corvette.

If anyone can filter through that mess, it’s Spock. And after all Jim’s speeches about what it means to be married, he could stand to trust his thoughts to someone else, see if they can’t do something more with them than he has.

Jim’s shirt’s damp, sticking to his sternum where his sweat pools. At least he doesn’t have to blame that on his nerves.

‘My mind to your mind,’ Spock continues. His voice is low and deep and it echoes through Jim’s bones, humming through his blood. It’s in his marrow, the kind of intimacy even naked bodies can’t achieve without the perfect circumstances. Jim doesn’t know if it’s like kissing, if keeping his eyes open for this is creepy—his vision is blurring anyway, halfway between panic and true relaxation—but he can’t help himself. The only thing to fix at the center of his orbit is the sight of Spock’s face and the pinched wrinkle between his eyebrows, a single furrow that pins Jim in place.

Jim’s lips part and Spock’s follow suit. When Jim breathes, he feels Spock’s chest swell. 

*Your thoughts to my thoughts.* Literally. Jim isn’t sure if Spock actually spoke those words out loud or if they both felt them at the same time. He itches beneath his skin but his limbs are too heavy for him to scratch or shift or wriggle. Every familiar sight slips away from the outermost edges inward; they could be anywhere.

But they’re not anywhere.

They’re here. Jim’s room. The one he’s had for years; four walls that grew up with him.

They’re in a place Jim knows like the back of his hand. It’s his home and, Jim realizes, that’s why Spock’s waited until now to make this happen. He’s bringing them together on Jim’s turf, in a space Jim doesn’t have to question, that he knows can’t possibly betray him.

So it can be comfortable for him. He’s been thinking of Jim all along. And he doesn’t know how to show it; and he’s been right about that fire inside. Vulcans are hot, so much hotter than their planet’s deserts.

Jim drifts even further, beyond heat and sweat. He has to get over his initial, knee-jerk impulse to clutter their connection with witty conversation or intellectual diversions, something to impress, the same kind of posturing he knows he hates whenever he has to put it on for company. It’s not him and it never has been, but as much as he resents its necessity, it’s always been a failsafe. If somebody judges him for the show he puts on then it doesn’t mean as much if they see him for who he really is and that falls short of the mark.

Jesus.

Jim shouldn’t be thinking *that*, but there it is.

He thinks about Sam, too—the Sam he used to know; the Sam he doesn’t know anymore. The morning after Sam left, when Jim woke with the idea that it was nothing but a bad dream. That Sam wasn’t even there with them when Dad died.

Grieving. God, he’d never been so alone.
You are not alone, Jim.

That’s Spock’s voice—sort of. His essence. His warmth, touched by something clear and cool. A river running blue and bright through parched sands. Again, Jesus, it’s embarrassing as hell to think those thoughts and know there’s nothing between them and Spock’s mind. Embarrassing, but kind of wonderful, too.

So Jim’s not alone; that doesn’t mean he hasn’t known loneliness, or the anger loneliness inspires, and the way that anger hardens, edge by edge. In the meld, through the meld, Jim realizes how close to anger every emotion is. He shivers, then groans.

He’s in his room, on his back on his bed. Between his face and the ceiling is Spock’s shadow; on his cheek is Spock’s hand.

‘So.’ Jim’s voice definitely cracks. ‘How’d I do for my first time?’

‘The purpose of a mind meld is not to evaluate one’s worth or performance during the procedure.’ Spock’s fingers are still arranged on Jim’s face but his form is more relaxed, like he’s touching Jim for pleasure, rather than taking a necessary step to repair the chinks in their relationship. It’s a nice sentiment, even if it’s one primarily fabricated in Jim’s head. ‘You are attributing your self-value to a set of standards that simply does not exist.’

‘I’ve been told that’s my thing,’ Jim says. His voice comes out hoarse, like it’s been hours since he last spoke. Or worse, like he accidentally zonked out mid-meld, snoring while being probed. ‘Verified by the royal therapist and everything.’

Spock’s brow twitches; he doesn’t want to encourage Jim by indulging his curiosity, and yet he’s got that look on his face like he needs to correct an erroneous statement.

Jim’s known him long enough now to have some idea of what’s gonna win out.

‘There is no royal therapist listed among the employees of the palace.’

‘Huh.’ Jim breathes out slowly, waiting for his brain to mold itself back into a decent shape. ‘Must’ve been a chatty holosuite program, then.’

He grins. It’d be expecting too much for Spock to grin back, but the stiff lines around his eyes and mouth ease, softening his expression. Now that Jim’s taking a closer look, he can see the strain the mind meld might’ve taken on Spock—unless that’s merely built-up tension from a long day spent in the company of Jim and Sam and their private, if one-sided, feud.

‘You are attempting to use humor in order to deflect the potential implications of having your privacy compromised,’ Spock notes.

In a lot of weird ways, he’s better than any therapist Jim might’ve asked for over the years, either real or imagined.

‘I wouldn’t say compromised.’ Jim takes a chance on reaching up to cover Spock’s fingers with his. Spock’s skin’s a steadying, cool ballast against the oppressive heat in the room. Jim should really fix that, only he’s not sure he’s finished punishing himself yet. ‘Invaded, maybe. Temporarily…enjoyed? At least, I hope you enjoyed it.’

He waits, studying Spock’s features for any sign of dissent.

‘It was…enlightening.’
‘Starts with an e,’ Jim says. ‘I’ll take it.’

‘That is fallacious reasoning.’ Spock shifts his fingers under Jim’s hold, pressing his knuckles to the back of Jim’s hand. ‘The two words have minimal points of commonality, save for sharing the same initial letter in English Standard.’

‘In case you haven’t noticed yet,’ Jim replies, threading their fingers together, ‘which I doubt, because you’re really smart, and also because you were inside my head, I’m all about making connections. Difficult ones, with minimal points of commonality.’

‘Those points of commonality are not necessarily minimal.’ Spock allows the contact; he even returns the grip, although it’s lighter than Jim’s.

Jim has to concede the fact that he might be obsessed with Spock’s hands.

‘Oh yeah? Found something you could relate to in this big, complicated brain of mine?’

‘You continue to employ humor in an attempt to lessen the impact of this moment. Do you not trust me as a confidante?’

Jim sits up immediately, throat tight. The world spins around him, then settles, but it’s a clear reminder: he’s not being careful enough, sensitive enough. He needs to think occasionally before he speaks. No matter how well Spock knows him, Jim’s words are nobody’s fault but his own. ‘No! No, Spock. That’s not it. If there’s anybody I’d trust as a confidante, it’s you. It’s just… You know how Vulcans are a private people?’ Spock nods. ‘Humans are private, too. In their own ways. They can be overly-emotional and constantly expressive and still be hiding the stuff they feel like they need to hide.’

‘In that case, I shall avoid presenting a vocalized analysis of that which you clearly desire to obscure.’

‘But it’s not obscured,’ Jim says. ‘Not anymore. You’ve seen it all.’

He waits—still hopeful despite everything, because that’s who he is. If anything, Spock must’ve seen that aspect of Jim’s personality.

Whether he appreciates it as charming or finds it disturbingly irrational remains to be seen.

Jim’s even hopeful about that, no matter what he knows about the unflinching honesty of the Vulcan intellect. He’s holding his breath—which, given the temperature in the room, he shouldn’t do for too long.

‘Computer,’ Spock says, ‘return the temperature in this room to San Francisco standard.’

‘Are you sure about that?’ Jim asks. Spock nods. ‘Authorization given, computer.’

Immediately the heat begins to ease, although it’ll be a while before Jim stops sweating.

‘Thanks,’ he says.

‘There is no need to thank me for instructing the temperature controls to comply with their regular programming.’ Spock pauses. ‘I have not, as you suggest, seen it all. I would not have sought more information than you had agreed to share. That would have been a violation.’

‘Is it too much to ask if you’re on my side now?’ Jim asks, with a weak chuckle.
Spock brushes Jim’s cheek with the knuckles of his free hands, another cooling touch. ‘I had not understood the depths to which you experience affection for your brother. Therefore I was unable to recognize the impact his departure had on you.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim says.

After all that, possibly the most intense experience of his life, that’s all he can say.

So much for continuing to make good impressions.

‘Huh,’ Jim adds, not improving his presentation any. ‘That’s a start. Thanks for going that extra… Yeah.’

‘At no point was I on any side other than yours,’ Spock says. ‘It was with the intention of improving that side that I made my suggestions. I had hoped to encourage dialogue between you and your brother Prince George Samuel with the belief that it would benefit you, Jim.’

‘Huh,’ Jim says again.

‘Perhaps, after the intensity of the meld, you require rest,’ Spock suggests.

‘And you’ve had a big day of socializing,’ Jim says.

He’s not about to go down easy if it’s just him, but if Spock needs to get some rest too then maybe, just maybe, Jim could see his way toward taking a nap. For the night. A night-nap, otherwise known as sleeping, in bed with his husband in a room they were never meant to share.

Jim didn’t even get a chance to show him around, to ask Spock what he thinks about the posters on the walls or the holo setup in sleep mode strewn all over his desk in exacting positions.

Only he doesn’t have to give Spock a tour of his room because he’s been busy giving Spock a tour of the inside of his head.

Jim waits for the accompanying surge of mortification to well up and die down accordingly. It’s like surfing, in a way. Surfing waves of embarrassment in a sea of humiliation. He’s doing his best to overthrow the natural and all-too-human instinct to hate being so open with someone—anyone—else, if only because it’s so important to him that Spock not get the wrong idea. He wasn’t kidding when he told Spock that humans have their own closely-guarded privacies, but Jim’s hacked into enough archives to know that it’s his turn to give something up. Voluntarily, this time.

His people might be more open than Vulcans as a whole, but that doesn’t mean Jim can sit back and relax on reputation alone, positions other people have earned, not him.

‘I had prepared myself for repeated instances of social interaction upon arriving in San Francisco,’ Spock assures him. ‘Nonetheless, I have observed that you find the preparatory meetings for our eventual nuptial ceremony to be tedious in length and topic. I think the proper phrase would be that they *take a lot out of you.*’

Jim chuckles, knuckles crushed to his mouth to muffle the sound. Spock’s still tucked halfway over his body, not quite lying on him but not sitting up either. Spock doesn’t look like he’s about to slip into a trance, but then he never does. He goes in and out at the drop of a hat.

It’s pretty cool, actually.

Jim’s kind of crazy about him. His husband. Official on one planet and not the other.
Not yet, anyway.

‘We’ve got even more of those tomorrow,’ Jim says. Whether it’s to prepare himself or Spock, he’s not sure.

‘Indeed.’ Spock settles nearer to Jim; Jim can feel Spock’s breath on his cheek when he exhales. ‘Our schedule for the following morning includes seating arrangements, reviewing a list of species which require attendance to the ceremony, a report on Klingon activity in the Alpha Quadrant…’

Jim groans. ‘Stop, please, unless you want me to have nightmares.’

‘Nightmares,’ Spock says. ‘Regarding specific and not particularly challenging duties that you will easily be able to accomplish?’

‘No, nightmares of a giant automated daily planner with your voice chasing me down an endless hallway, and I can’t outrun it, and suddenly I’m trapped in a tangle of celebratory ribbons, where I’m tragically suffocated by centerpieces.’

‘Perhaps,’ Spock says, ‘I should have delved deeper into your mind after all.’

Jim reaches forward to make a play for the front of Spock’s robes, his internal temperature finally somewhere below fatal fever boiling blood cells, which means it’s time for them to be closer. Way closer. The familiar, soft fabric of Spock’s sweater beneath his robes bunches under Jim’s grip and he rubs it to ground himself, to enjoy the woven fibers tickling his thumbprint. They crisscross when Jim rolls his thumb in circles and he can almost imagine himself becoming part of the fabric of Spock’s life. ‘Wait. Was that a joke, Spock?’

‘It was not necessarily a humorous anecdote,’ Spock replies. ‘However, it was not necessarily a suggestion made explicitly in earnest, either.’

‘Then you were being sarcastic.’

‘Sarcasm employed with the intent to amuse is one of the many subsets under the definition of humorous diversions.’

‘I ruined you,’ Jim says. ‘I gave you sarcasm and I messed you up. Your mom’s never going to forgive me.’

Spock moves forward, crowded briefly against Jim’s chest, before their bodies find the right angles to make each other’s elbows matter less, to make the shared warmth and the flat planes and the wiggles and the bumps—all of those Jim’s fault, or what Jim brings to the table—fit. Jim can actually mark the specific moments when something new slides into place, one of Spock’s legs hooked over one of Jim’s, Jim’s palm flat on Spock’s chest, their noses close and their hearts even closer.

‘Ruination is often referenced in poetry where matters of emotion and romance are concerned,’ Spock says. ‘I would not consider myself ruined by an expanded perspective due to your influence.’

‘You definitely ruined me,’ Jim replies, although it has less impact when he’s grinning. ‘Everybody else says I’ve improved since we started getting to know each other, but that’s only one side of the story. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve got all these extra considerations to deal with—the constant questions of whether or not you’ll be proud of me if I do this, if you’ll want to kiss me when I do that… It’s torture.’
‘I sensed a modicum of that conflict within you during the meld,’ Spock admits.

‘Uh-huh.’ Jim’s grin doesn’t even threaten to falter. ‘No matter what else happens, no matter how many illogical earth foods I make you try, and whether or not I’m forced to sit on my brother’s head until he begs for my forgiveness, I’m telling you right now, Spock: it’s worth it.’

He kisses Spock so hard that their teeth clink. From the way Spock holds onto him, he seems to find it not undesirable.

Jim’s breathless when he breaks the kiss, long enough to rub Spock’s nose with his.

‘The Eskimo kiss,’ Spock says, a hitch buried deep in his throat where only Jim can find it.

Jim runs his fingers between Spock’s until his right hand is palm to palm with Spock’s left. ‘The Vulcan kiss.’

‘Ah,’ Spock says. ‘Cultural exchange.’

‘All I’m saying is, if my lessons had been like this, I would’ve never complained about being a diplomat.’

‘You do not complain as often as you suggest,’ Spock says. ‘You are attempting to create the image of a person less driven by their responsibilities than yourself.’

‘Maybe.’ Jim breathes out his concerns in a rush. He is tired, with Spock against him and on top of him, tangled up the way only two people young enough to value proximity over real physical comfort can do. ‘Or maybe I’m just not used to the new me.’

‘I am confident in my first hypothesis.’

‘Somehow I figured you’d say that.’

Jim wouldn’t say Spock’s predictable, but he can trust his reactions enough to let his eyes slip shut in front of him. It’s a different kind of trust than they write about in human poetry and Vulcan chants, but it lets Jim fall asleep wiggling his toes in his most comfortable pair of dress boots, holding Spock in his arms instead of a cold PADD resting on his chest.

*
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Brotherly love.

Chapter Notes

Posting super early today because I have a doctor’s appointment! Better early than late...right?

There’s a commotion the next morning when no one can find them.

Jim was right that the security detail received an update on his whereabouts the moment he entered his old room and began fiddling with the environmental controls. That much panned out. But apparently tactics doesn’t always communicate with the other factions running the palace, specifically the party-planning side of Jim’s life—which means that the poor, long-suffering sap sent to gather the Princes James Tiberius and Spock for their morning engagement was confronted by a door absent of its security detail and the princes who were supposed to be on the other side.

Needless to say, it wasn’t the stuff red alerts are made of—they located Jim before they moving up a shade from yellow—but it manages to set the tone for a day that never dies down.

Planners snap when a simple answer will do; somehow they end up with blue and silver as a complementary color scheme; and the strategic consultant sent over to give projections about local tensions in the Alpha Quadrant near enough to disrupt the Sol System can barely hold onto his PADD.

His hands are shaking.

Jim would say it doesn’t bode well, but he’s not one for omens, considering how often he determines his own fate.

Still, they’re kept so busy immediately following breakfast that Jim barely has time to breathe, let alone say two words to Spock. The idea of making up with Sam’s a distant dream—or nightmare, depending on what mood Jim’s in when the reminder comes.

He has to talk to his brother eventually, preferably before he makes a speech at their wedding, but surely they have time until then.

When Jim collects his PADD from their quarters there’s a message waiting for him from Mom, who’s spent the day locked into negotiating admission for various Federation bigwigs into the wedding.

I think you should make Sam your best man, dear. Since I’ll be walking you down the aisle.

already asked dr mccoy to do the honors and he accepted mom sorry; you know how he is, best
doctor we’ve ever had, totally hasn’t tried to kill me once, so i mean we can’t risk offending him over a slight like that’d be, Jim writes back.

Jim, the following message reads, I am so extremely not amused. You’re not the only one suffering from an onslaught of tedious details and I know you’re old enough now that you’re capable of sympathizing. I’m sure you can use your handsome, large head to imagine how not in the mood I am, especially considering that lovely stunt you pulled last night. You didn’t really ask Leonard McCoy to be your best man—and if you did, lie to me and tell me you didn’t. I love you, Jim, but that’s not to say I don’t hate this.

Jim grins; he can hear Mom’s voice in the tone of her clipped response and he can imagine her excusing herself, however briefly, from the talons of whichever over-zealous planner of the hour is gnawing her ear off—to angrily pound the keyboard on her PADD, all alone in the powder room, grinning fondly while simultaneously grinding her teeth.

That doesn’t solve the Sam problem.

Sam the best man.

Sam the not-so-best brother.

Jim’s PADD flashes again.

It’ll help things, Jim. You love each other. That much is true, and it always will be. Did you know that when he came back, he was the one who argued how important it was to release you from the bond you inherited—that is, until he learned you weren’t necessarily all that desperate to be released? It’s something to think about. Leonard McCoy will certainly be on hand for the ceremony. Talk to Sam. Do this for me. I have been discussing seating arrangements for five solid hours. I still love you.

Jim groans. Spock isn’t close by to ask him how he is—or better, to brush the hair aside from Jim’s temple and gently ease the tension headache out of the base of Jim’s skull, with a businesslike Vulcan touch that Jim can already feel himself coming around to thinking of as tenderness. And it is tender, in a manner of speaking. It’s thoughtful and it’s kind and it’s something Spock would do if he wasn’t currently being fitted for his wedding outfit, leaving Jim to die of curiosity without even a hint as to what the royal tailors are doing with him.

And after Jim was thoughtful enough to send him multiple PADD pictures of his own fitting. Granted, there were more pictures of Jim out of his clothes than in—but Spock could stand to reciprocate in that area, too.

They’ll talk about that when they’re together again.

Wish me luck, Jim writes, sending it off to Spock.

He waits for a response, even though it takes longer than usual. Jim, for what purpose do you require this general statement? You already know my interpretation of ‘luck’ and my skepticism regarding its validity.

I’m going to go talk to Sam, Jim replies. Apparently I need to be the bigger man or something.

You are of more than adequate size.

It’s not the good luck wishes Jim wanted.
It’s better.

Even if it might not be what Spock intended, it’s by far the best ego boost Jim could’ve asked for.

*If you put that in our wedding vows I will be SO happy*

*It occurs to me now that I have inadvertently made reference to that which you find humorous. Edification in this area would be appreciated.*

*you complimented my SIZE*

*Indeed, in reference to your behavior as being admirable, noble, or mature.*

*my SIZE spock my SIZE*

*Are you continuing this conversation past the point of true communication in order to postpone the inevitable confrontation with your brother, Prince George Samuel?*

*ughHHHHHHHHHHHH*

*That reply is unsatisfactory, but I will accept it as factual nonetheless.*

*that’s very big of you. get it? like me. i’m big.*

*I will not continue to indulge this communication knowing that it is preventing you from accomplishing your goals. Know that you have my confidence in this endeavor and, should you require it, you may use it in place of your own.*

*you’re a stubborn pain in the ass you know that spock???

True to his word, Spock sends no follow-up, no clever reply aimed to cut Jim down to size. He kind of misses it, but truth be told, he also admires that Spock’s one of those guys who doesn’t need to get the last word. It implies a kind of personal certainty Jim’s never had.

Or maybe he just likes to talk too much to ever turn down an opportunity for additional conversation.

*you’re the one who’s gonna have to deal with bones when we tell him he can’t be best man*

*he’s gonna be heartbroken*

Spock passes Jim’s test, leaving him alone with his troubles. It’s what Jim expected, but it doesn’t leave him with the distraction he was, admittedly, seeking to incur.

‘Computer…’ He runs a hand through his hair, heaving a sigh. ‘Patch me through to surveillance, would you?’

‘Prince James?’ It’s not Hendorff on duty in tactical control but someone a little less gruff and surly. They actually sound happy to hear from him, so they must be new. ‘What can we do for you? Is everything all right?’

‘Everything’s fine,’ Jim says. *Stand down yellow alert.* ‘I was wondering if you could point me in the direction of my brother.’

‘One moment please.’ There’s a silence that gives Jim the urge to bolt while he still can. ‘Prince George Samuel is utilizing the holosuite in the recreational wing on the third floor.’
'Great.' Jim sighs.

'Your Majesty?'

'No, nothing.' Jim waves a hand, even though there's no one there to see him. He's officially losing it. 'Thanks. You've been very helpful.'

With Jim’s luck, Sam’ll be running some kind of obnoxious race car circuit or windsurfing exercise and Jim’ll get caught choking on ancient fossil fuels or have salt spray in his face while he’s trying to ask Sam to be his best man. Extending an olive branch that should’ve been put forth in the other direction, as far as he’s concerned.

If Mom thinks he can do it then he owes it to her to try, but that doesn’t mean he’s gotta be happy about it.

The staff’s busy enough with preparations that they don’t have time to tail him warily; there’s nobody to spare for the task of *Official Prince James Tiberius Follower So He Doesn’t Do Something Stupid Just A Few Days Before His Own Damn Wedding*. They’re as thankful as Jim is for that, no doubt. He passes a florist on his way up to the third floor, already erecting garlands of hypoallergenic blooms on the banisters, and Jim takes a deep breath, enjoying the mingled scents without busting out in hives.

Blue and silver.

He’s actually starting to get excited about this ceremony.

He’s less excited about the prospect of Sam being by his side, whether or not what Mom wrote about the Spock Debacle—*Despockle*, Jim called it for weeks without it ever catching on—and Sam’s part in it is the truth. Sam plays things as close to the vest as a Vulcan when he wants to; when it comes to his disappearing act, he hasn’t been forthcoming. Unless he suddenly opened up to Mom when Jim was on Vulcan—and wouldn’t that be just like him?—then Jim doesn’t see how this can possibly end in his own satisfaction.

Then again, the wedding isn’t just for him. It’s for two planets. It’s for all of Earth, holding its breath regarding imminent Klingon attacks, finally able to take off their black armbands of mourning and celebrate. No matter how brief the reprieve, it’s something everybody needs.

And Jim’s people—Mom’s people; Sam’s people; *their* people—deserve to turn on their news feeds and see a united front.

It’s the least Jim can do. It’s also the only thing Jim can do, aside from go on a tour of the continents and, if he’s lucky, some nearby Sol System colonies. If he was the captain of a starship, for example, then he’d think of it as one of his duties: keeping up crew morale.

He’s been standing in front of the holosuite door for longer than he should. He’s not pacing, so he can still maintain some self-respect, but he hasn’t knocked.

Mom’s right. He loves Sam; Sam loves him. It doesn’t excuse anything.

It doesn’t have to.

Jim reminds himself: he’s big. Spock thinks so and Spock’s always right, unless it comes to naming planets and lizards. Maybe he doesn’t feel big and once he’s standing in front of Sam he’ll realize how not big he is, but if he doesn’t do this now, he knows he never will.
Jim lifts his hand to rap on the holosuite door, then rolls his eyes at himself. ‘James Tiberius Kirk, autolock override. Let me in; that’s a royal order.’

‘Access granted,’ the door replies.

It opens.

Like most things—Vulcan; Vulcan husbands; arranged marriages; cultural exchange; honeymoons—what’s waiting for Jim isn’t anything close to what Jim was expecting.

It’s familiar, but momentarily so out of left field that Jim can’t resolve that familiarity with any concrete memory. Then the view really hits him and he takes two steps forward before he takes one step back, away from the clear sky and the warm breeze and the waving wheat, golden under the sunlight.

This is Dad’s holosuite program. He designed it himself over ten years ago, but Jim knows every scent on the air, every puffy white cloud in the distance, all the shapes they used to find while lying on their backs in the tall grass. It was the next best thing to a real picnic—technically better, since there was no way Jim’d get stung by a bee, or the rain would ruin their fun, and they didn’t need bodyguards to stand watch. Not inside the holosuite, anyway.

‘Jesus,’ Jim says.

Sam’s easy to spot: a tall, square-shoulded silhouette tucked under the crooked trunk of an old dogwood that Dad had a thing about. He wouldn’t stop fussing with the programming until it bent exactly right, like the one he’d grown up with back at their Iowa country house. The story goes that Granddad Tiberius grew it from a baby cultivated sapling, though for all Jim knows it could be nothing more than that—just a story. Dad was full of them. Now that he’s gone, there’s no way to verify any of it.

That’s Spock’s influence on him—the impulse to seek a solid source for something.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Jim amends.

Sam turns at the sound of his voice and waves him over without so much as a flinch.

There’s no chance to escape. The miles and miles of swaying wheat create an illusion of open sky and freedom where none exists. Jim could run off and get lost in the holo-recreation, but he should’ve thought of that before he opened his big mouth.

It could be worse. Sam could’ve fired up the old barn house they used to stay summers in when Mom lost the coin toss of where to spend their allotted vacation time. Sam must’ve deleted that aspect of the program—so maybe there are things he can’t stand to look at after all.

Only he wasn’t far away when it happened. Jim doesn’t know how that feels, and unlike with Spock, he can’t join minds with Sam and solve that difference of perspectives.

All they’ve got is backwards, primitive conversation to communicate with each other.

It’s the worst.

Still, the sun in Riverside’s less oppressive than it is on Vulcan, and there’s something vaguely hypnotic about the light glinting off the wide fields of crops. Jim sighs, like he can breathe out his attitude in one go, then lopes over to join Sam on his one-man picnic under the dogwood.
He’s got a book in his lap and everything. Jim has to crane his head to catch the title.

‘The Old Man and the Sea.’ He rolls his eyes, sitting cross-legged in the shade. ‘Why not just lock
yourself in a Klingon dungeon simulation? It’d be less torture.’

‘You and Hemingway.’ Sam sits up, tucking his PADD away. ‘I’ve never met anyone so
prejudiced against literature.’

‘I don’t mind literature,’ Jim says, ‘but the impotence metaphors get a little tired after awhile,
don’t you think? Unless you’re finding something in there to relate to…’

Great. Good. He’s off to an excellent start. Mom would be proud.

Prince James Tiberius Kirk’s Guide To Diplomatic Relations: Begin By Insulting Their Virility
And Enjoy The Results.

Actually, he’d do better with Klingons than not, from what he’s read about them.

Jim steals a glance at Sam to find him grinning instead of offended. If that’s his version of
penitence—never getting pissed off at Jim whenever he makes a joke at Sam’s expense—then
nothing’s ever going to be resolved. Sam’ll keep smiling, Jim’ll keep being rude, and they’ll be a
hundred years old and still acting like children.

Maybe there’s more to this theory that Spock and Jim have ruined each other than Jim thought. If
he can’t do things casually, without worrying about the consequences, then he’ll never have fun
again.

‘I can appreciate a good joke,’ Sam says, while Jim’s still pulling at the grass and thinking of
potential overtures that don’t involve punches being thrown. ‘It’s true; he’s obsessed. But Dad used
to enjoy these books. I was trying to figure out why.’

‘Dad would never,’ Jim replies.

‘This might surprise you, Jim,’ Sam says, ‘but Dad wasn’t perfect.’

‘That’s something we all share, then.’ Jim knows how he sounds—sullen, immature—but it’s still
his right.

Mom wanted him to talk to Sam. She never said what, exactly, he was supposed to say in the lead-
up to popping the best man question.

‘You won’t get any argument from me there, Jim.’ Sam leans back against the tree, into a knot in
the bark Jim remembers as providing perfect lumbar support. ‘To what do I owe the honor of your
company?’

‘Mom,’ Jim replies. ‘You owe Mom.’

‘Blunt honesty—something you picked up from your time with Vulcans?’

‘It wouldn’t be the worst thing.’ Jim shoulders Sam out of the way, settling into place. The bark
digs into a sore muscle between Jim’s shoulder blades, the kind of pain that implies relief is on the
way. It’s been a while since he’s come here—years, in fact. The last time he tried to sit in Dad’s
favorite spot, that knot in the bark was at least an inch higher.

‘No,’ Sam agrees. His big arms rest on his knees, his hair messy from the unpredictable breeze. ‘It
could be worse. For example: my only brother could never forgive me for something I didn’t get
the chance to explain to him, and we could spend the rest of our lives being polite in public and
speaking to each other never.’

‘Or my only brother could act like it’s up to everyone else to make things right when he’s the one
who ran away,’ Jim replies.

Sam sighs and Jim searches the sound for any sign of self-pity he can latch onto and shout about.
There’s nothing there.

‘Valid,’ Sam says instead. ‘OK, you know what? Extremely valid. Everybody wants to run away
sometimes; I’m the asshole who actually did it. Does that about sum it up?’

Another notch on the side of things Jim wasn’t expecting. ‘It’s a start. Technically.’

Blunt honesty isn’t all he learned on Vulcan. Embracing technicalities is another skill Sam
wouldn’t know about because Sam wasn’t there—and now that he is, Jim feels his presence like
the absence he had to force himself to accept.

It’s not logical. It’s all too human for that.

‘And I’m sorry,’ Sam says. ‘It was a shitty thing to do. I caved under the pressure. I couldn’t
handle the idea of getting married to a stranger. I screwed up, Jim, but it’s not as though we didn’t
all see it coming in some way or another. There were signs. There were plenty of signs.’

‘So it’s our fault for not stopping you?’

‘That’s not what I said. That’s not what I’m trying to say.’ Sam falls back onto the grass, squinting
up at the sky through the branches above. He looks tired. Jim isn’t in the mood to feel sorry for
him, but that doesn’t mean he can’t notice how Sam looks. ‘Now you know why I kept avoiding
this conversation.’

‘Because you’re a jerk,’ Jim suggests.

Sam makes the shape of a finger-phaser. ‘Bull’s-eye.’

It’s not the answer Jim’s expecting; it forces a course correction midway between where he
expected the conversation to head and where Sam slammed on the brakes. Spock would say the
adversity’s good for him, but Spock’s not here to break the ice with his blunt statements.

That leaves Jim to be honest in his place.

‘No kidding—I’m a jerk too.’ Jim offers the comparison up to the Iowan sun and artificially-
generated wind. ‘I think it’s probably an inherited genetic marker.’

‘Uh huh.’ Sam crosses his arms over his chest, hands tucked under his elbows. His posture’s
tightening up—nowhere near perfect, but he’s closer to being the heir apparent than he was a
moment ago. ‘Mom would be so happy to hear you say that. Flattered, definitely.’

‘She’s gonna be stuck in negotiations for a while,’ Jim says. ‘So I’d say I’m safe, for now. She was
on hour five last we talked.’

Sam whistles, the sound of it clear and sweet in the air. ‘No wonder she turned on you.’

‘Yeah.’ Jim wiggles his back into the tree trunk, stretching out his sore muscles. ‘Well, I should’ve
seen it coming. Where do you think I get my patience for those meetings from?"

‘The difference is, neither of you bails when it counts.’ Sam holds up a hand when Jim starts to protest. Shockingly, even though he doesn’t use it to cover Jim’s mouth, it shuts him up. ‘And before you start, I’m not talking about your little joyrides along the coast. Those are temporary escapes at best. You always came back. That’s the important part of the equation.’

‘You wouldn’t know it to hear the way the royal handlers freak out on you for leaving,’ Jim says. ‘Yeah, the important part’s definitely leaving in the first place.’

Sam rubs his chin. Jim can hear the rough scratch of his growing beard bristling under his hand.

‘You think we’re past the age when we can just throw a few punches then laugh it off in McCoy’s?’

Jim shrugs, one-shouldered. ‘You’ve already taken one too many blows to the head if you think laughing in front of Bones is a good idea. That man has access to all kinds of medical compounds. He could hypospray you full of a vaccine to something that’d have you expanding and balding while your skin sloughs off in big, itchy scales.’

‘Wow.’ Sam blinks. ‘That’s quite an impressive fantasy you’ve got going on in there. Chronic nightmares as an adolescent? Some bed-wetting incidents you wanna discuss?’

‘I want you to be my best man,’ Jim says.

Sam misses a full beat; that’s the only sign that Jim’s taken him by surprise. He can’t help but let it go to his head. ‘You sure you don’t mean you want me to give you away?’

‘Uh-uh. That’s Mom’s job. You wouldn’t deprive her of the only pleasure I’ve given her in years, would you?’

Sam chuckles. ‘Not the only pleasure. Believe it or not, but she happens to be fond of you. Speaks highly of you in front of strangers and everything.’

‘It’s the family curse,’ Jim says. ‘Having to say nice things about each other when people are listening so we don’t cause a planet-wide panic… Remember all the loving, generous things I said about you when you turned up again?’

‘I remember,’ Sam replies. ‘I was touched. You’re not telling me you didn’t mean a word you said about how happy you were to have my royal ass in my royal seat where it royally belonged?’

‘I didn’t mean a word.’ Jim groans to remember it, but he finds a chuckle in him somewhere and doesn’t throttle it before it breaks free. ‘I pitched a fit; Bones threatened me with a sedative… To avoid drooling on live broadcast I choked down my pride and my better instincts and recited the bullshit the speechwriters put down for me. If it hadn’t been for Dad…’

‘Yeah.’ Sam sounds different; Jim can’t put a finger on how, much less why. ‘If it hadn’t been for Dad, right?’

And now Jim can’t look at Sam anymore. He stares at the sky instead, unblinking, straight into the sun. When his eyes burn and water, he can blame the holo light projectors instead of anything more meaningful.

‘I had to get out of here,’ Sam says, quieter now. ‘I always figured, if anyone could understand that, it’d be you.’
‘And you didn’t even write,’ Jim points out. ‘Not even to say *Hey, Jim, don’t worry, I’m alive.*’

‘Of course I didn’t. Because I knew you’d get your egghead friends together and track me down if I did.

‘Exactly. That was the worst.’

‘I’d committed myself to the thing, so I told myself I had to take it all the way. And look where I ended up. Actually, I got as far as Iowa. Saw this place for myself, the real deal. I found out Dad didn’t get the tree right at all. Either that or they planted a new one. Chances are he just didn’t remember it right.’

‘Stuff’s never the way you imagine,’ Jim says. ‘I mean, I had all of Vulcan mapped out on a hologrid—used official topographs and everything—and it still didn’t look a thing like the place I wound up at.’

‘Ugh,’ Sam agrees. ‘All that sand. You know I would’ve passed out like a pathetic prune over there, right?’

‘That’s what I said when you tried to get back in the game. The Vulcan marriage game.’ It’s not a game. ‘Fun game. *If* you can cut it.’

‘They sent the right prince,’ Sam says. ‘That’s for sure.’

‘You don’t have to tell me.’

‘For a while, I thought you might be sticking with it just to show me just how much I’d screwed up.’ Sam untucks his arms and resettles them over his eyes, shielding his face from the sky. ‘I thought you were shooting yourself in the foot. I thought I’d done that, that I’d forced you into that.’

‘You did,’ Jim replies. ‘Well, you could’ve. But it wasn’t so bad. Not the way it turned out.’

‘Is that your way of saying you forgive me?’

‘It’s my way of saying thanks for the Vulcan husband you didn’t want,’ Jim says. Sam thinks it over. ‘I’ll take it.’

‘That’s what I said when I saw him.’ Jim grins, daring Sam not to meet his eye and do the same. Sam looks at Jim from under the shade of his elbow and rolls his eyes instead. It’s close.

‘Somehow I *highly* doubt you were that smooth.’

‘Maybe; maybe not.’ Jim’s only willing to concede the point in favor of their newly-formed peace. ‘But if I wasn’t, then it’s only because my brain was baking in the heat. *Anyone* would’ve frozen under those circumstances.’

‘You’re mixing your metaphors a little there,’ Sam says. He stretches his legs out as a pre-programmed wind shakes the leaves overhead, scattering dappled shadows over their bodies. They should bring Mom back here sometime. It’s not fair to pretend like it doesn’t exist just because it makes them uncomfortable that it does when the man who programmed it doesn’t. ‘Might want to stick with one temperature. Hot *or* cold. Makes for a better story.’
‘Just because we’ve decided not to beat each other’s heads in doesn’t mean I’m looking to get notes on my speeches,’ Jim warns him.

‘Man, I’m gonna have to write a toast.’ Sam’s eyes widen, staring out into the middle distance. Nothing but wheat ahead of them and corn in the distance. ‘I’m gonna have to give you a proper send-off. Here’s to my little brother, disrupting the natural order of things by building a life of his own before me.’

Jim snorts.

‘Put whatever you want in it, just don’t make me complicit. I’m not the one vetting these things. We probably have a whole team in place for content approval.’

‘I’m the heir.’ There’s a touch of self-consciousness to Sam’s smile that’s absent from Jim’s. It makes him look humble, which is what everyone finds so appealing. ‘Don’t I have hiring and firing power for all those people? If anyone tries to censor me—boom—I just bump them down to garbage collection.’

‘Wow.’ Jim lets his head fall back against the trunk of the dogwood. It’s rough and not at all an appropriate pillow, but the discomfort almost suits his mood. ‘Megalomaniacal much? Look out, people of Earth. Prince Sam’s gone mad with power.’

‘I have to have the power before I go mad,’ Sam says. ‘And to get there, we’ve both got to live through your wedding first.’

‘When you put it like that…’

It seems like a natural chance for Jim to get to his feet; he takes the break in conversation while he can, before the pause turns awkward.

This was good. It is good. He doesn’t want to push it.

Anything further and he’s gonna have to explain to Spock why they’re asking Bones to be best man after all that work.

If Spock looks inside of him, he’ll find those kernels of dissatisfaction again—he’ll recognize the tendency to self-sabotage—and Jim doesn’t want to face his preventable failures reflected in Spock’s eyes. He can look ahead, see these things coming, and prepare himself. At the very least, he can duck.

‘Wow,’ he says, not for the first time. ‘I really am getting more mature. I could blame you for that too, except I was way worse than I used to be right after you left.’

Jim nudges Sam’s ankle, toeing him without meaning to hurt him or leave a bruise, or any kind of mark. That’s new.

He’s not expecting Sam to make a grab for his leg and drag him down. Sam’s stuck using the same moves as ever—the old headlock followed by a fearsome hair tousling—and Jim’s learned a few based on watching holovids of Vulcan fighting techniques, then applying his own moves on the Tiberian lizards of Spockeria V. The point is, Sam might be bigger and heavier; he’ll always be those things. But Jim gets him good in the shins and Sam shouts and suddenly they’re rolling down the hill, away from the dogwood, over and over, the breath knocked out of both their lungs. Sam gets the worst of it when Jim lands with both knees in his gut; Jim laughs until Sam lunges after him.
Some clothes get torn. Some jaws get bruised. Some hair is even pulled.

But that’s how it is when it comes to brothers. You do things you’re not proud of and it hurts and sometimes, if you’re lucky, you can leave the holosuite together, wincing and laughing.

*
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Lessons Spock has to learn eventually.

It’s one of those lessons Spock has to learn eventually.

‘The fact that you and your brother Prince George Samuel required medical attention after your meeting suggests that it did not go well,’ Spock says, unable to hold back long enough for Bones to clear out. Jim tries to focus on him through the whirring of a medical tricorder but considering how Bones insists on going for the eyes, it’s not easy. Jim might not have a bruise for the wedding ceremony, a massive shiner that’ll leave reporters guessing about Vulcan tastes in the bedroom, but he’s going to be blind, which isn’t much better. ‘However you appear to be in what is referred to on Earth as a ‘good mood’. These two pieces of evidence are in direct conflict.’

‘In direct conflict—now there’s a way to describe him. In direct conflict with himself; that’s more like it,’ Bones mutters. ‘Think you could tell Prince George Samuel not to hit the face next time, or learn how to duck for a change of pace?’

Little does Bones know that ducking is one of Jim’s recently acquired skills.

Jim grins even wider, barely wining around the split in his lip. It’s already healing. By the time Bones packs up his medical kit and storms off to poke and prod at Sam, Jim’ll be able to kiss Spock.

He plans on it.

Who says he has to wait for the wedding night?

‘Why is it that he’s at his happiest whenever I’m on the brink?’ Bones adds, although Spock has nothing in reply save for an arched eyebrow. ‘Well, I’m sure you’ll be on the receiving end of that conundrum yourself soon enough. There. Just like you didn’t pick a fight with your best man two nights before the big day. But if I get a call one more time before you two princes say I do, I’ll—’

‘You’ll be on your way with hypos at the ready, same as always,’ Jim says.

Even Bones can’t disagree with that.

‘Starting to feel like I’m playing into some kind of devious Pavlovian response pattern here,’ Bones says. ‘Which isn’t great for servant morale, in case you’re keeping track.’

‘You’re not a servant, Bones.’ Jim claps him on the back, getting out some of that excess energy while he can. He wants Spock to know that he’s safe from the kinds of physical outbursts Jim’s been prone to today. ‘You’re practically a member of the family.’

‘Part of this family,’ Bones says, emphasizing the point. ‘Honestly, I’m not sure which is worse.’

Spock’s eyebrow’s doing the thing again when Bones leaves, heading off to treat Sam in the privacy of his own room, so nobody has to worry about the royal brothers starting up with each
other again in the middle of what’s supposed to be medical treatment.

At least it was obvious—on both sides—that the dust-up was friendly. Jim can only imagine the headlines that’d dog him if he’d gotten into it with Sam for real.

*Reckless Royal Assassination Attempt?*

*Prince Spock The Power-Hungry Pretender to the Throne?*

*Beloved But Troubled Prince James Attacks Heir; Mind Control Suspected!*

‘Doctor McCoy’s honesty is a trait more in keeping with my people than yours,’ Spock says, ‘though his emotionalism is more in keeping with Vulcan’s violent past. Nevertheless, it is a wonder that he managed to cultivate such instincts while ensconced in an environment bound to deem them unsuitable.’

‘Yeah, well, that’s Bones for you.’ Jim wrinkles his nose, stretching his face and lips to test the newly-healed skin. ‘He’s what we call a character.’

Some type of lecture’s coming. Jim can practically feel Spock’s curiosity. He hasn’t asked yet—not outright—but he’s dying to know how a simple best man request can turn into a knock-down drag-out fight in the holosuite. Jim doesn’t have the context to do anything but guess, but he can assume that’s not the kind of difficult relationship Spock had with his own brother.

Jim ran all kinds of searches on Sybok and all he wound up with were a couple blurry photographs in which the guy didn’t exactly look like a brawler.

‘Prince George Samuel answered favorably,’ Spock adds. Jim can also feel him scrutinizing Bones’ work, and he figures it’s a lucky thing Bones got out of the room before Spock’s obvious appraisal started another scuffle. ‘Physical violence was not required.’

‘That wasn’t part of the more general procedure, no,’ Jim says. ‘It was—I dunno, Spock. Call it a family thing.’

Then, because he’s been thinking about it since Bones first swept that medical tricorder over his face, Jim puts his hand on Spock’s chest and leans up into him for a real kiss. Call it his reward for all that doing good.

Besides, they could use the practice before sharing a kiss in front of millions. Billions, even. Jim can’t imagine that all of Vulcan will be looking on in voyeuristic intrigue like Earth and other planets occupied primarily by emotional creatures—but Jim’s plan is to make the hair on the Tellarites’ snouts stand on end, give them a little something to appreciate so they might not bother Spock as much in future diplomatic procedures.

The more people who realize the *Reckless Royal* is happy with his new husband, the better. Jim’ll take rumors of indecent behavior and cuddling on shuttles over questions regarding *trouble in paradise* any day.

‘Your thoughts are…’ Spock begins, lips soft against Jim’s.

‘Chaotic?’ Jim suggests. ‘Pre-Surakian violent? Addled? Scrambled?’

‘In a measure of clamor,’ Spock says.

‘If I think really hard about everything we’re gonna do on our wedding night now that we’re on a
planet that isn’t flattening my lungs, will you be able to pick up on that, too?’

Spock’s brows knit together in disapproval, but there’s a green flush on his cheekbones that wasn’t there earlier.

Jim kisses him again, then succumbs to the incessant beeping of new messages on his PADD signaling an inundation of additions to their schedules: public appearances and private conferences; interviews and rehearsal dinners and more fittings than necessary; portrait sittings; personalized holographic invitation motion-capturing.

No wonder Sam was all too happy to let Jim take the heat of this royal duty. And Jim can’t bring himself to be anything but grateful.

It’s a brief but powerful economic boom—all these new jobs spread evenly among florists and tailors and party planners and gardeners and wine choosers and chefs and security guards and who knows what else. That means it’s good for all of Earth, the most good Jim might ever do, even if he only sees Spock in private for momentary, exhausted, hour-long nap periods, his head drooping onto Spock’s shoulder while Spock provides structural support.

‘That’s what he does for me,’ Jim tells the first interviewer, his biggest photo-friendly smile giving his jaw muscle cramps after fifteen minutes of holding the expression non-stop. ‘He provides me with structural support. That’s what he did when we were stranded out there on an unknown planet, fighting for our very survival. I knew then that our union would be a true partnership. Compromise, common ground, and constant support.’

‘Words are starting to lose all meaning,’ Jim adds, whispering against Spock’s pointed ear during a short break for touch-ups. ‘I think I said complumise back there. Did I say complumise? My tongue is definitely too big right now. Where’s Bones?’

‘You did not say complumise,’ Spock replies.

Vulcans can’t lie, so Jim knows it’s true.

He watches himself later, a repeat of the recording, white teeth and giant head and massive eyebrows, shoulder to shoulder with Spock. He only realizes he’s smiling stupidly at the sight when Spock clears his throat, removes his outer robes, and climbs into bed.

Jim spoons him eagerly. ‘Complumise, oh my God, Spock,’ he says to the back of Spock’s head. Spock’s hair doesn’t smell like shampoo or conditioner or anything other than Spock.

‘Sleep,’ Spock says.

In the spirit of compromise—and complumise—Jim complies. He dreams that he shows up naked to the wedding but the dream turns sexy; there’s no time in the morning to be embarrassed or even to ask Spock if he picked up on Jim’s dreams, or whether they’ll be able to do that some day.

More fittings, more meetings, more photo-ops. Jim has an allergic reaction to one of the flower arrangements sent over by a well-meaning Federation member; there’s a damn countdown-to-the-wedding application for PADD downloads; the wedding planners are starting to lose their hair.

Bones inoculates Jim against the latest and greatest epidemics threatening to sweep the colonies; anyone who might be carrying a disease he hasn’t been exposed to gets full medical workups. There are a few last-minute digital articles about Prince James’ worrying immune system, but he skips right past them in the search alert queue. He’s not in the mood for idle speculation, and Spock’s been invaluable on that front, teaching him when and how to ignore his curiosity.
Apparently that’s something else Vulcans don’t experience, a discovery that provides another moment of cultural enrichment between their disparate species. At some point a really canny reporter’s gonna ask Jim what Spock’s getting out of all this and he won’t have an answer for her.

A bad deal. The short end of the stick. An illogical bargain that somehow no one’s figured out yet.

Jim’s not looking to let them figure it out, either.

Jim gets a haircut that’s shorter than he’d like, owing to the supernatural rate of follicle growth he inherited from his dad’s side. Mom always complains that he looked like some species of Appalachian yeti in all their commemorative wedding shots, so Jim’s got some idea she’s behind the sabotage with the royal barber—especially when it turns out Sam’s allowed to keep his beard and Spock’s hair remains untouched down to the millimeter.

They all meet up at the rehearsal dinner, where Sam’s speech clocks in under two minutes, Jim sniffs every one of the seven separate floral arrangements coded blue, silver and white without suffering a reaction, and Spock drinks four flutes of champagne on Jim’s demand that he show him how a real Vulcan metabolism takes liquor.

The wedding cake can’t be chocolate. The musical entertainment can’t be above a certain decibel. They don’t have to worry about the lighting until it comes to flash photography, but it’s a convenient excuse to limit access.

Wedding Planner Alpha has a meltdown and gives over the entire operation to her four subordinates.

Jim’s pretty sure she’s faking so she won’t have to take the fall if the ceremony goes south. She’s nipping out early to go on vacation, to disappear to somewhere they don’t have media coverage of the wedding. They’re probably gonna have to head off-world.

‘Security has been very thorough,’ Spock says. Their final night before the big day. Jim’s been standing on their balcony long enough to start devising escape strategies. ‘You would not make it beyond the second floor.’

He’s right.

As always.

Jim turns his back on the view of the water and the moonlight and focuses on what really matters: Prince Spock, the Vulcan sensation. He seems calm and, knowing him, he’s exactly what he seems. It’s not an act. There’s no popular Vulcan theater, no movie industry. There aren’t any butterflies on Vulcan, so it stands to reason that no Vulcan would ever have butterflies in his stomach, unless a diplomatic situation called on one of them to eat butterflies, not that such a situation exists as far as Jim’s aware.

And his brain’s officially on ramble mode; he’s also officially been staring at Spock for a few beats too long. The pale slant of his cheek to his chin; the dark line of his hair over his forehead; the potentially quizzical wrinkle between his steep eyebrows. All those secrets he’s keeping below the surface. Most importantly, the way he looks different in the moonlight, even if that’s nothing but a trick of Jim’s eyes.

He leans back against the balcony railing, elbows braced on the cool stone.

‘I wasn’t really thinking of running away,’ Jim says. ‘I wouldn’t do that. Seems to me like every time a Kirk prince tries to make a break for it they wind up back in the palace again eventually, so
it’d be… illogical for me to give it a whirl. Plus, I’m looking forward to tomorrow, or at least, tomorrow night.’

‘I recall that you were adamant about following the Earth traditions regarding the wedding night even while on Vulcan, when adherence to those traditions was not within your capability to observe.’

‘Not within my capa—I was completely capable, thanks,’ Jim says. When he reaches up to mess with his hair it’s shorter than he’s anticipating and his fingers are stuck in the air instead of tousling his bangs into a roguish mess. ‘You kept insisting, and I didn’t want my stubbornness to get in the way of setting up a precedent for compromise between us. I was dehydrated and oxygen deprived but I was definitely firing on all cylinders. I was ready and willing and—’

‘Then it is fortunate for the sake of your health that you were equally capable of compromise as you were capable of sexual congress,’ Spock replies.

These moments, uncomplimentary as they might appear from the outside, make Jim feel warm inside—like a torch lit in the desert, but also like a sunbeam from a holosuite program, one shared with the whole family, falling over Jim’s face.

Even in the moonlight, Spock can remind Jim of the sun.

He ducks his head against it, determined not to blush over the small things so Spock thinks the big things—‘You look nice tonight’; ‘Your eyes are so sexy, Jim’; ‘Have you been working out?’—aren’t still important.

When he looks up again, Spock’s looking at him.

‘You wanna join me out here?’ Jim asks. He’s already pushing off the balcony railing and moving forward. ‘Or maybe I could join you in there. You said sexual congress,’ he adds. ‘Say it again. I love it when you talk dirty to me, Spock.’ He does, even if Vulcan dirty is a lot more syllables than human dirty and occasionally requires a thesaurus, or a spit-take.

Spock doesn’t budge an inch, but that’s what Jim was counting on. He looks really good in his simplified Vulcan finery, with those hints and touches that speak of another planet, a different race of people, an entire history of subtly shifted aesthetics. The high collar of his turtleneck is what really gets Jim between the ribs. There’s something about it that teases Jim’s overactive imagination, his need to unwrap things. He’d unwrap Spock if he could, but people don’t work that way.

Neither do Vulcans.

He probably wouldn’t like it even if they were. One of those careful what you wish for scenarios, where what Jim wishes for is all the stuff that he’s too impulsive to know he’d be better off without.

Human desire’s a funny thing. Sometimes Jim wonders whether they aren’t wired all wrong, if evolution messed up somewhere along the way and got its impulses crossed. He can’t think of a logical reason for people to be set up to want the things that aren’t good for them but he can think of twenty examples of that happening off the top of his head.

That’s the kind of thing he should bring up with Spock years from now, once they’ve already exhausted all their more exciting avenues of conversation. He’s not looking to retire into amateur science officer status so soon.
He should be at least thirty first. That’s his general estimate for when he can stop living like a wild child and begin the process of settling down. He’s not Sam, so he can afford to let things slide for a while.

‘There is nothing unclean about my speech save what you have inferred,’ Spock says. He doesn’t look put out but the contrary. It might be a trick of the light, but Jim could swear he’s enjoying this. ‘The Standard language is not as malleable as human nature would suppose it to be.’

‘Well, we like to keep things interesting.’

Spock’s right and he’s wrong. Jim did have a fixation on their wedding night, but it wasn’t about adhering to convention so much as it was a desperate desire to get closer to his husband. They’d been waiting for so long, talking each other up with those letters—and Jim’s never had much in the way of patience. If he were really concerned about traditions, they’d be back to sleeping in separate rooms, but the truth is Jim would bend whatever precepts he can in order to manipulate his way into more time with Spock.

He touches the stiff, interlinked folds of his collar, one piece bent over the other like an ornately arranged cloth napkin.

Jim can’t remember what shape they decided on for the wedding, just that it looks nothing like Spock’s collar and couldn’t have less to do with the pale shift of his skin beneath it when he swallows. There’s a hint of green high on his cheeks that suggests he’s not as immune to Jim’s definition of interesting as he’d prefer.

Jim frames Spock’s throat with his hands, cupping his jaw to tilt their heads together.

It’s not a mind meld but Jim’s approximation thereof—getting close without kissing, tipping their faces together, Spock’s soft bangs sticking to both their foreheads.

‘Then again,’ Jim says into the corner of Spock’s mouth, ‘this is, technically, a wedding night too. The night before the wedding—so, I mean, depending on your definition of what that entails…’

‘You are bending the definition of the wedding night to suit your whims,’ Spock replies. ‘Perhaps to keep things interesting?’

‘That’s not all I could bend to keep things interesting.’ Jim winces at himself. Is that seriously the best he can do? ‘Also, the definition of talking naughty is that it doesn’t matter what you say so much as how you say it. For the record.’

‘I shall take this new information under advisement.’

‘I know you will. You’re good about cultural adaptation. You’re pretty bendy, yourself.’

‘I have not yet been given the opportunity—’

‘Yeah,’ Jim says quickly. ‘I know you haven’t, Spock. Not much opportunity for bending in our lives so far.’ The literal kind, anyway. Jim’s been doing emotional gymnastics since they first met and there’s been plenty of metaphorical bending for one another, but the kind of bending Jim means—the kind of bending Spock means, for that matter, in a stunning turn of good luck that has Jim’s heart racing and skidding like one of Dad’s fastest convertibles—has to do with bodies, not principles or perspectives. It has to do with elbows and knees and Spock’s slim legs and Jim’s hard, his throat tight, his pulse threatening to crash.

With his hands on Spock’s skin, he knows Spock has to feel it. Jim wants him to, especially if it’ll
darken that blush on Spock’s cheeks to a brand new shade.

It does. Jim can feel, in turn, the bloom of heat on Spock’s flesh. He rests his cheekbone to Spock’s, his mouth to Spock’s jawline, arching his hips forward by rocking onto the balls of his feet. The leather of his old boots creaks. His erection bumps Spock’s hipbone. Spock’s breath catches in the length of his throat and when he swallows there’s no sound, only a disturbance of the shadows held between them.

‘How’s your, uh…’ Jim forgets how to speak for a moment, his hoarse voice raspy and weak. ‘The resolve that you’ve… You weren’t comfortable before with the—’

Spock grips Jim’s shirt with both hands at the small of his back. It’s a strong grip, enough that Jim rises off the ground a scant centimeter, the soles of his boots barely scraping the balcony floor.

Jim never got around to asking the question, but Spock’s given him an obvious answer.

‘And that’s another thing,’ Jim adds, always pushing his luck. ‘Another tradition about the wedding night—somebody gets carried over the threshold. I’m not particular on who gets carried and who does the carrying, but considering the Vulcan super-strength angle, the logical choice…’

Jim trails off, lips too close to Spock’s to continue forming sentences.

‘Separately,’ he says, ‘we’re like words. Together we’re a sentence.’

It made more sense in his head.

This is why Spock needs to kiss him more often.

Whether it’s Jim’s influence on Spock’s instincts of Jim’s mental influence on Spock’s brain, Spock picks up on what Jim’s putting out. His hands slip lower, firm under Jim’s ass and braced on the backs of his thighs. When he lifts, Jim assists.

‘This is so hot, Spock,’ Jim says.

‘If you are experiencing above-normal fluctuations of your body temperature—’

‘Uh-uh, Spock. I’ve had enough Bones for the year. This is a fever only you can treat.’

He’s so lucky that Spock isn’t human—so lucky that Spock isn’t anything other than what he is—because anyone else would groan at a line like that. There’s a lot that’s groan-worthy about Jim and not even in the good way.

Sometimes in the good way.

But Spock takes him at face value, which is a lot of responsibility. It makes Jim want to live up to the way he sees him. Be that guy. Drag himself up from the depths of Reckless Royal-ism.

Spock’s the one lifting him up now, hands firm around Jim’s thighs. He flexes his muscles under Spock’s grip just to feel how tight he’s holding him.

‘Vulcan strength,’ Jim murmurs, and Spock draws back halfway to look at him.

‘Have you commented on our positions because you wish to make some change in them? Are you currently uncomfortable?’

‘No way.’ Jim’s voice is gruffer than he’d like but at least it isn’t breaking. ‘Don’t change a thing.’
Spock raises his eyebrow. ‘To refrain from further movement at this stage would be illogical. We would never cross the figurative threshold, which I am aware signifies considerable importance in your human customs.’

‘Oh. My God. Spock.’ Jim squeezes his legs around Spock’s waist, the heels of his boots dragging at the soft back of Spock’s shirt.

It’s not exactly tradition to be straddling his husband-to-be—and husband, at the same time, if they’re going by Vulcan standards, a physics puzzle Jim hasn’t gotten into with the reporters because as far as anyone on Earth is concerned they’re still fiancés—when they cross the threshold, but Jim’s never been that buttoned up.

It’s the idea of the thing that matters, not the thing itself.

The night before, not the night of; the threshold, not how Spock’s holding him. As long as they’re making gestures toward the right idea, Jim can convince himself he’s not giving Spock a totally bastardized version of human culture.

He drops his hands to Spock’s shoulders and ducks to bite his lower lip when they start to move. It’s a gesture of self-preservation as much as romance. He doesn’t want to start things off with a blow to the head. And if he shows up for the wedding tomorrow with a big purple goose-egg blooming on his face there’ll be some dissension in the ranks with the makeup department. Honest workers could lose their jobs.

And people think he’s selfish.

If Jim thinks Spock’s strength is evident from how easily he hefted Jim’s and all of his hard-earned muscle, it’s twice as bad when he throws Jim down onto their bed. Jim bounces—bounces—from the impact, the mattress bowing, then rocking up beneath him.

The closest description of the sound the mattress makes is sproing.

Jim laughs, breathless, before Spock kisses him, so he would’ve wound up breathless no matter what. His lungs protest but the rest of him agrees, scrambling to reach his own fly and release some of the tension down below.

When he was younger he had a reputation for ruining his clothes—always snagging a sleeve on something or splitting his collar from being too active, somersaults and tree-climbing and big-brother-wrestling—but if he starts ripping his pants open now there’s no telling what tales the tabloids will tell.

Jim won’t have them reporting on Spock stripping him to shreds until he’s the one tearing Jim’s clothes off.

They’ll get to that. Jim thinks about it—among other things, a reckless, raucous montage of all the images he jerked off to when that was still a thing he needed to do, picturing Spock’s fingers in place of his own, hiding his face in his pillow while pretending it was Spock’s chest muffling his grunts and moans. This time it’s actually Spock’s chest, Jim’s breath pooling in hot pants on the fabric of Spock’s sweater, thinking about the skin beneath with only a mouthful of fibers for his efforts.

It’s only a sweater. It’s nothing as far as barriers or distances are concerned. Relative to the moment, it might seem insurmountable, but Jim scrapes his teeth over it anyway, and he’s rewarded with a hitching sound when the friction does something inexplicable to Spock’s skin.
Something Spock can’t deny.

So what’ll it take to help Spock really let go? How many nights alone and learning, fingers threading through fingers, letting Spock drink in every physical reaction Jim’s skin has to his touch, before Jim hears him whimper or sigh or cry out?

‘So fucking hot,’ Jim says, for once in total agreement with himself, the rhythm of his words choppy. It’s like trying to talk in a busted shuttle during a crash landing, bouncing in a rickety vessel over uneven terrain. Jim’s hand closes around his erection through his boxers and Spock pushes it, not even tentatively, out of the way, to take care of him instead, jerking him off in strong, certain strokes. Jim whimpers, sighs, and cries out. He does the last thing plenty, Spock hiccupping through his lungs and stuck in his throat and muffled in the pillow below him, in Spock’s shoulder and chest above him.

He’ll be embarrassed by how quickly he comes later. He’s too hot and happy to feel anything other than those two things in the present, making a mess out of his boxers, the tent of soft cotton and the heat of Spock’s hand.

Jim comes around slowly, but not as slowly as if he were alone. There’s Spock to think about, after all—but Spock’s brow is knotted, his face shadowed, his head bent, and Jim puts two and two together with the sluggishness of physical satisfaction and the keen, imaginative intuition of the sexually aroused.

Spock felt that.

Spock felt all of that.

Every twitch and spike of heat in Jim’s blood; every raw impulse of muscle and desire. Spock felt that.

‘Okay,’ Jim whispers. ‘Hand-jobs. I get it. That’s gonna be a thing for us.’

‘You feel,’ Spock replies, from far away but somehow closer than he’s ever been, ‘more deeply than you know.’

Jim’s not sure if he’s talking to himself or not.

He tucks the words away in the back of his mind, holding them against his heart where he stores the few secrets he hasn’t blurted out to either Spock or the intergalactic reporting feeds. He’s not sure whether it’s kindness or cowardice that’s keeping him in check, then chalks it up to a healthy mix of both.

Jim’s not a whole of one thing or another. He’s as much of a mutt as Linc was before Sam took him off-world. The sum of many parts.

That sounds very Vulcan.

There’s probably a Surak thing that has to do with being a small cog in a vast piece of machinery, except that Surak came pre-Industrial Revolution so his metaphors are more likely to have something to do with being a single grain of sand amidst a vast, red-brown dune.

‘Your mind is disordered,’ Spock says.

His fingers graze Jim’s temple, skirting his cheekbone to frame the curve of his jaw. He’s touching just to touch for the first time in their marriage. It seems appropriate for a wedding night.
Pre-wedding night. Wedding’s eve.

Maybe Spock’s right about Jim’s mind after all.

Jim can feel the slack lassitude of post-coital bliss settling into his muscles, making him heavy where he’s tucked against Spock’s body. He can feel his heart beating against his stomach. It’s a weird sensation, not because of its location, but because of how hard it’s going. Almost the same speed as Jim’s.

Little by little, they’re working out an actual, functional arrangement. They’re doing everything backwards but that’s fine by Jim’s standards—and he’s not about to tell Spock, if he hasn’t already noticed, that they’re screwed on wrong.

Jim takes Spock down with the momentum of his own body: heavy, inert weight exerting a force Spock doesn’t care to counterbalance. Jim has the absent thought that he should probably move, make some effort to sort himself out, get the covers over them—basically anything other than lying on top of Spock and tangling their legs together, sweaty and half asleep.

‘You’re really good at that,’ Jim says, ‘for a beginner. For an anyone, frankly.’

Even drifting in and out of consciousness, he’s aware of the tremor of stiffness as it rolls, prudently, through Spock’s muscles.

‘I informed you I had been thorough in my research.’

‘Jesus.’ There’s a twitch of arousal that hits Jim like a phaser blast; it burns clean through from gut to spine, leaving him warm and lazy, a prisoner to the urge to burrow his face into Spock’s throat. Impulse is action in moments like these. Jim’s nose rests on Spock’s pulse. ‘Only you could make a thorough study sound that sexy.’

‘It was not intentionally unclean dialogue,’ Spock replies.

‘Dirty talk, Spock. Just say dirty talk.’

‘That is what I said.’

‘Kind of.’

‘The literal meaning was explicit.’

‘OK, OK. You win.’

‘I was unaware until now that we were engaged in competition.’

Jim nestles even closer, rubbing Spock’s neck with the tip of his nose, his lips, his chin. ‘Mm. Kinda. But I guess we both won.’

He means it.

Despite the nerves building up over the course of the past forty-eight hours, the palace and environs amped up to high wedding gear, Jim sleeps deeply. He doesn’t dream about arriving to the altar naked while Andorians make fun of his junk—and if that’s something Spock’s engineered, one hand still cupping the side of Jim’s face, great.

*
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Wedding crashers.

Still, when Jim wakes in the morning because someone’s rigged the computer intercom to boom the wedding march, he wishes he’d gone for the escape anyway, instead of making passionate love to his half-Vulcan fiancé and blissing out after like they’re normal people who can get away with a measure of joyous, sinful simplicity.

‘Mendelssohn,’ Spock says, sitting up. ‘From Earth’s seventeenth century.’

‘He can stay there,’ Jim replies, rolling over and burying himself under the nearest pillow. If he squeezes his eyes shut hard enough, there’s a snowball’s chance on Vulcan that he’ll chase his peaceful, lazy dreams back to their natural conclusion, but futile attempts to maintain unconsciousness are the ultimate expression of humanity. That blind hope; that blissful yearning. The perfect warmth of a bed in the morning.

A shared bed.

Jim rolls over again and goes belly-up while Spock remains as-is, straight-backed and stiff-shouldered, his hands resting gracefully on his knees. He looks like he might be meditating, which Jim can’t help but take personally, considering he’s right there and his pants are around his ankles, in a rumpled mess of blankets and pillows with his freshly-cut hair tousled like sex.

Spock isn’t even looking at him.

‘Spock,’ Jim says. Spock doesn’t turn around. ‘Hey. Spock. Spock.’ Jim swipes his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. ‘You feel deeper than you even know.’

That gets a response, Spock’s profile as stark as ever, but not quite as distant this morning. They’ve bridged some of that last night, crossing together, hand in hand; also, in the most literal sense, Spock’s not halfway across the room already, and that makes a major difference. Jim could reach out and touch him if he wasn’t so lazily comfortable. The point is, it’s a possibility. His fingers twitch where they’re curled against a pillow, stifling a yawn in his shoulder.

‘My thoughts aren’t all that’s disordered,’ Jim adds, quirking a brow. Considering he hasn’t even brushed his teeth yet, he’s in prime flirtation mode.

‘Indeed,’ Spock replies. ‘You would be best served with a sonic shower and a change of clothes. Today is, as we have been repeatedly informed, what is known as ‘the big day’. Though it will not differ in size from any other day, I have concluded the choice of ‘big’ is meant to emphasize magnitude, rather than dimension.’

Jim considers, briefly, going back to the beautiful, stifling silence of the pillows. He mouths the word magnitude instead, then dimension, then grins. ‘Magnitude and dimension—I can work with that.’

‘Sonic shower,’ Spock says.
Which is exactly where Jim and his magnitude and dimension end up.

‘So much for Here Comes the Bride,’ Jim says, then laughs at his own joke.

There’s no one in the shower to hear him, much less laugh with him. Spock could probably wrap that giant Vulcan brain of his around the concept of a shared sonic, but it’s clearly not his preference. Even if he’d never go so far as to say if he likes one thing over another, Jim pays enough attention to be able to tell the difference.

Spock’s a water guy.

There’s no such thing as a long, hot sonic bath.

Anyway, somewhere between the bed and the shower, Spock made a point of separating them. Jim has to assume that’s on purpose: a well-researched effort to adhere to tradition and keep them from seeing each other before ‘the big day’.

There’s movement in the room when Jim shuts off the shower.

‘Don’t tell me,’ he says, sliding out from between the glass doors, ‘you had second thoughts about our twenty-four hour period of magnitude.’

‘Prince James.’ Wedding Planner Four covers her eyes with her PADD. ‘I’ve come to get you for final fittings.’

‘Ah.’ Jim reaches for a towel, privately cursing whatever part of himself was optimistic enough to think Spock might’ve stuck around to say hey. Odds are, he was intercepted by Three and whisked off to a second location. ‘Well, did you get a good enough look? Think you could eyeball it?’

‘No balls,’ Wedding Planner Four says. ‘I mean—no, Prince James, there’s no need to eyeball anything. It’s not a fitting, we’re dressing you. But I thought that sounded strange. You know—come and get dressed. Please. Prince James.’

‘Not any stranger than a grown man being dressed by servants,’ Jim says.

He lets himself be whisked through the halls in his towel; it’s nothing anyone hasn’t seen before and it doesn’t make sense to dress before he’s dressed. They pass a cavalcade of ushers bearing big, sneezy bouquets that miraculously don’t make his nose itch. Once they’re through the hall, Jim gets a glimpse of Spock being hurried into his own dressing room.

‘Hey, groomie,’ Jim hollers, high on adrenaline and low blood sugar. There’s no one to stop him. His own better judgment sure isn’t about to get in the way and Wedding Planner Four refuses to touch him after seeing him naked.

Spock looks up; their eyes meet for a second across the corridor before he’s hauled through the doorway. He’s already dressed, so he must be headed into styling.

That’s the last glimpse of him that Jim gets before preparations are fully underway, and he’s so busy being buttoned up and poked and prodded and curling ironed.

‘Watch the face, Jim says, ‘the face.’

He can see it now: after Bones’ careful monitoring, and Jim’s uncharacteristic self-restraint, and Sam being kind enough to wrestle with him instead of clipping him in the handsome Kirk jaw, all his wedding photographs are going to come complete with a hot iron burn blooming on his
cheekbone. Spock won’t have the decency to flush green as a show of solidarity, so Jim’ll be pink and blushing for all of Vulcan to see and privately judge.

Four snaps her fingers, then looks shocked at her own bravery. ‘Nothing will happen if you stop wriggling, Prince James,’ she adds, bracing herself to be fired.

Jim lets it slide. Of course he does. She’s right.

And he doesn’t get burnt.

He can’t say that his official wedding whites—with gold brocade and a matching cape—aren’t just as dangerous as a rogue curling iron. The collar’s so high and tight that Jim can’t swallow, which has to be a health hazard, not to mention a serious oversight as far as reciting his wedding vows is concerned.

‘I thought—’ Jim’s voice squeaks and he slides a finger under the collar, attempting to tug it into tension a shade looser than outright chokehold. ‘I thought I put in for this thing to be loosened. Didn’t I put in for this thing to be loosened?’

Four reaches out and neatly folds the collar over.

Just like that, Jim can breathe again.

‘You need a promotion,’ Jim tells her.

‘You don’t have to tell me that,’ she replies. There’s a hint of a smile on her face. ‘Tonia Barrows, by the way. If you’re serious about that promotion.’

‘Duly noted.’ Jim catches sight of himself in the mirror and grimaces, checking his teeth—blindingly white—and the curl that’s happening in the front of his hair—does he like it? Does he hate it? He can’t tell.

‘You’re going to be fine, Prince James,’ Tonia says. ‘Everyone has jitters.’

‘Even princes?’

‘Well, this is my first royal wedding, but unless human royalty isn’t, you know, human…’ Tonia swallows. ‘Everything’s going to be perfect. Because if it isn’t, then I’m not going to get my promotion, and after all this work? I’m getting that promotion.’

‘I believe you,’ Jim says.

He waits as she straightens his cape on his shoulders, tugging invisible wrinkles even more wrinkle-free, brushing his hand away every time he reaches up to twist his forefinger in that disturbingly perfect curl in an attempt to de-perfect it, if only a little.

Spock’s hair doesn’t curl. In fact, Jim’s never seen a Vulcan with curly hair. Maybe because it’s so dry on their deserts.

‘Fine,’ Tonia reminds him.

‘This curl, though—’ Jim begins. ‘I mean, you’d tell me the truth, right, it’s not…too much?’

‘You know what I think, Prince James?’

‘That’s what I asked for. Come on, give it to me. I’m strong. I wrestled a giant lizard once, escaped
a Klingon attack party. I can take it.’

‘I think,’ Tonia says, ‘I should’ve requested to be on Prince Spock’s detail.’

‘I am not,’ Jim replies, ‘as difficult as a Vulcan. Even a half-Vulcan. Their hair doesn’t curl, either, not as far as I know.’

Tonia taps an earpiece. ‘Earth One, this is Earth One. The subject is ready for transit.’

‘Hey, I’m a prince, not a shipment of goods,’ Jim whispers.

‘Standing by for guard detail. Do you copy?’

There’s a crackle of static feedback that even Jim can hear, so he can’t imagine how loud it must be at ground zero. It pulses back through Tonia’s earpiece and she tips her head to the side on instinct like it’s a sound she can get away from.

‘Piece of crap,’ Jim offers.

‘It’s never done that before,’ Tonia says. ‘Hell of a time to—well, you’ll pardon my language, but it’s game day here, Your Majesty.’

‘If referring to it like a sporting event is supposed to make me feel better,’ Jim says. ‘Actually, that’s not a bad strategy.’

‘Like I said.’ Tonia unhooks her earpiece, tossing it on top of her PADD. ‘You can thank me by promoting me.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ Jim says. ‘Should you be checking that out?’

Hendorff ducks his head in, all decked out in the usual security uniform but with decorative trim. He looks more like a wedding cake than the wedding cake designs Jim approved.

‘Hey,’ Hendorff says. ‘I mean—reporting in. Comm systems are down, so we’re gonna do this manually.’

‘You’re kidding,’ Tonia says.

Hendorff’s silence suggests he’s not the kind of guy who kids, at least not while he’s on the job.

‘Well,’ Jim says, ‘at least it happened early.’

He has it on good authority that something always goes wrong with weddings. His money was on some mishap with the cake or seating an Andorian too close to a Tellarite and sparking a fistfight with intergalactic implications in the middle of the vows that’d end in a dismembered antennae, fur flying everywhere and Jim’s allergies acting up because of the dander in the air.

‘You certainly picked a day to be optimistic,’ Hendorff says. ‘Come on, Your Majesty. We’d better get you to the hall before someone panics.’

Tempers and patience both are running short as Jim’s bustled from one end of the palace to the other, into the turbolift that’ll take them above the main entrance to the ballroom.

There hasn’t been an official gala since Dad’s death, and despite seeing mock-ups and swatches and scaled-down miniatures of what the event planners wanted the room to look like ahead of time, Jim’s still blown away by the sight of it when Hendorff slips him in through the back door.
There are climbing flowers and lights twined around the tall windows, blue and genetically-cultivated silver petals in tumbling bounty. The combination casts the glass-ceilinged room in a misty light that’s diametrically opposed to Vulcan’s red-orange, dry heat. Jim can’t tell whether it’s flattering on his skin or if the resulting reflections make him look like a frog-person.

It’s not gonna matter, since he’s miraculously free of photographers for one whole day. Well, more like a four-hour window.

‘You’re good?’ Hendorff asks. ‘Cause I gotta get back to my post.’

Jim notes, with a brief pause for interest that pierces the bubble of his private world and his half-memorized wedding vows, that Hendorff taps his earpiece too. Just like Tonia.

‘Interference?’ Jim asks. ‘Having trouble hearing the main hub? Could be all the extra chatter from the press clogging up the airwaves, right?’

Hendorff doesn’t respond, pulling the earpiece out to fiddle with it. His hands look comically huge against the tiny piece of equipment and Jim harbors a brief pang of sympathy, remembering the last time Bones referred to his ham hands mucking up sensitive medical paraphernalia or whatever he called it in the heat of the moment.

‘You know, I’m actually pretty good with that tech,’ Jim adds, shielding his eyes from the glare off a nearby string of lights that sparkle exactly like—and it turns out the main wedding planner was right about this, before she disappeared to a beach somewhere far from the capital—miniature stars. It’s magical, one of those words Jim scoffed at under his breath, only he gets it now. ‘I once rigged the main system to broadcast some rock music when I was—yeah, you know what? Never mind. That was years ago, when I was less mature and a lot more trouble, but if you want, I could see about fixing—’

The ground shakes, a tremor that could be the discontented shifting of tectonic plates—only there were no signs or warnings of a minor earthquake that morning, and Jim can’t imagine there wouldn’t have been seismic indications. If there had been, Jim would’ve heard about it, even if the plan was ‘hide the bad shit from the lucky couple so their perfect day is perfectly magical’.

Jim’s good at picking up on that stuff—when the people around him are nervous, he feels it, too.

The equally perfect curl in his hair slips out of place, falling over his forehead and tickling his skin.

‘Comm lines are down,’ Hendorff says.

‘Wait,’ Jim replies. ‘You don’t think this is anything ser—’

‘This way, your majesty,’ Hendorff says. He grips Jim’s arm, pulling him close, and Jim waves after Tonia, the grand ballroom unexpectedly quiet, not to mention unnervingly empty. The ground trembles again and the nearest string of lights rattles against the wall. It could be Jim’s pulse quickening—or it could be he just heard the echo of some kind of explosion in the distance.

Hendorff crushes Jim against his chest like a solid wall of personal protection. It’s not the person Jim was planning on being close to all night long and they don’t even use the turbolift, heading for an emergency exit instead.

In the hall, the lights are red, flashing off clinical, reinforced steel. It’s blinding if you look at it head on. Those are panic lights and Jim knows these fortified safeways because they’re the same ones he was ushered through when Dad died, before he ever knew Dad was dead. All he knew was that something was wrong, which is how he knows something’s wrong now.
Again.

It’s just like it was back then, save for one, very important difference.

‘Spock,’ Jim says, but the comms are down, like Hendorff said. They’re not in contact with central security. It’s not like Tonia knows what’s going on, but Jim locks eyes with her before his training kicks in.

Never show panic.

Not in front of his people.

They have to have someone to look to, so they can feel like everything’s all right.

‘He’s gonna get one hell of an idea about how we run things here on Earth,’ Jim says, his voice steady. Tonia gives him a tight-lipped smile, but she’s worried. Jim knows worry.

He can’t blame her. The behind-the-scenes backbone of the palace doesn’t exactly inspire confidence. It’s all function over style, the impersonal, hidden workings of what keeps the royal family up and running. They’ve gone from the glittering false twilight of a wedding ballroom to dimly lit service corridors, walls triple-thick to protect the Kirks from a threat that’s already hit them at home once before.

Jim’s trying not to think about Dad, but it creeps in like overflow from a leaky engine that won’t stay patched.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Jim says, rocking on the balls of his feet. His toes are getting sore inside his dress boots and they haven’t even started the ceremony yet. Because, obviously, Jim got hustled out before they could start it. Security breach. It’s probably nothing. ‘This is all part of your plan to get me out of here so you can have me all to yourself, right, cupcake?’

Hendorff, to his credit, doesn’t even break a sweat. He’s well-trained. They all are. Makes it harder for Jim to get under their skin and be the distraction he’s destined to be.

‘But I’ll give you points for imagination,’ Jim adds.

‘Your Highness…’ Tonia knows what he’s doing. Either that or she’s got less patience for Jim’s jokes than he let himself imagine. ‘I’m not sure that’s appropriate.’

‘What?’ Jim can practically feel himself settling into a younger version of the prince the world knows, yappy as Linc when he was a puppy. ‘It’s not like you need me to be quiet—we’re not gonna hear anything over the comms.’

‘Oh,’ Tonia says, ‘well, when you put it like that.’

She tries to smile, but the flashing red lights cast troubled shadows over her face. She’s doubting that promotion, doubting herself for ever having wanted it. Jim can’t blame her.

‘We need to reconvene at the west end of the palace,’ Hendorff says. Jim can’t tell whether it’s directed at them or if he’s just reciting the security rules back to himself. In case of a crisis... He picks up the pace, hustling the three of them along and down the wide, dark corridor.

‘What about the wedding guests?’ Tonia asks. ‘The hall was already full by the time Prince James arrived—’
‘Civilians have their own exit strategy,’ Hendorff says. The walls around them rattle as the ground starts to shake; earthquakes aren’t uncommon in San Francisco, but to Jim they might just as well be the aftershocks of a sonic detonation or another, unnamed explosive device.

What he wouldn’t do for Spock to take the thoughts out of his head right now. His imagination’s too active for his own good.

When he thinks about it that way, he doesn’t have to worry about Spock being worried. Of all the major concerns that flash rapid-fire from Jim’s head straight to his heart, Spock not knowing what to do isn’t among them. It’s a constant. He won’t be frightened or anything other than clinically disturbed. Wherever he is.

Presuming he’s safe.

That’s a Pandora’s box of mental unrest Jim doesn’t have the energy to deal with the fallout of, once it’s open. He clamps the lid on it in a feat of near Herculean strength and ignores the blisters forming on his toes, the voice inside his head that says it’d be a great idea to lighten the mood by mentioning how impractical for panic scenarios formal footwear is.

Hendorff’s forehead is shiny. Jim can see that bald skin glistening in the strobing lights.

Mom’ll be safe. Spock’ll be fine. Sam’ll be Sam. Civilians have their own exit strategy and Jim has Tonia and Hendorff.

And Hendorff seems to know what he’s doing, despite needing to mutter protocol under his breath for emphasis now and then. He doesn’t pause in his directions, leading Jim past checkpoints where he swipes an access card and scans his fingerprints. There’s one station that looks like it might have a comm setup for inter-palace security contacts but they’re already on the move again without pausing to check in, and Jim knows that’s because he’s here. Because he’s the number one priority, and until he’s safe, they have to act like nothing else matters.

He knows where they’re headed, too: one of many safe-zones that even he doesn’t know the secret location of. It’s a Saturday, but the locations are eternally on rotation, and he knows with sinking clarity that wherever he’s being taken, security measures demand that Spock be taken elsewhere.

Don’t put all your royal eggs in one basket.

That’s the strategy.

‘Shit,’ Tonia says, grabbing Hendorff’s arm and managing—Jim’s impressed, honestly—to stop him by brute force alone. ‘I’ve got a comm signal. I’ve got a signal! It’s weak, but it’s—’

Hendorff squares Jim against the wall while Tonia twists in various directions trying to get the clearest signal. Jim can hear words, muffled by her ear and the two fingertips she has pressed against the bud, but the only one he really needs to listen for is the fifth one he hears.

Klingons.

After that, despite the rush of unpleasant déjà vu, he picks up a few other syllables that sound familiar. For example, *omulans* becomes *Romulans*, and *that* can’t be good.

‘Right,’ Tonia says, mouth hard, posture grim. She rips the earpiece out and hands it over to Hendorff. ‘I should probably have let you in on that at the start. You’re…taller, you might be able to get more than I did.’
Hendorff nods. If it’s as bad as he thinks it is, then the same intel will be on loop. This is just confirmation of what little they know.

‘What’re we dealing with here?’ Jim asks, drawing Tonia close while Hendorff checks in. Eagle three, present and accounted for. Baby bird on the move. Are the other eggs in their baskets? And why is it always fowl metaphors, for that matter?

Tonia takes a deep breath. ‘Klingon attack from above. Hit something—probably a power center. Two of their warbirds broke through defenses, which means they must’ve been cloaked. I mean, I couldn’t make out much, but it sounded to me like they weren’t alone. Like they were aided by Romulans.’ Jim squints at her. ‘I took classes at Starfleet,’ she explains. ‘I know things. I know enough.’

‘We have technology for detecting Klingon cloaking patterns,’ Jim says. ‘Besides, they’d need to decloak to fire on anything, and if they did—’

Tonia shrugs. Hendorff grunts. ‘Eagle three,’ he says, ‘present and accounted for. Transporting him now.’

At least Jim’s graduated from baby bird status.

Mom and Sam must be Eagles One and Two, respectively. Jim wonders what Spock’s code name is. They don’t have eagles on Vulcan, but there’s probably some kind of local variant. It doesn’t help that the only thing running through Jim’s head is warbird, warbird. Either Klingon or Romulan; it doesn’t matter. Neither means something good for the Federation.

‘Where’re we headed?’ Jim asks, but Hendorff’s always had trouble with thinking and talking at the same time. He snaps his fingers instead, taking an abrupt turn into one of the sublevel turbo-lifts. They operate on separate dilithium batteries, so there’s no chance of getting trapped in one during a grid blackout.

‘I won’t say it’s nothing,’ Tonia murmurs, PADD tucked tightly into her hand. It’s dark, so there aren’t any updates coming in. ‘But I do think it’s better not to worry until we know there’s something to worry about.’

‘You heard that transmission, right?’

Hendorff’s in a mood now. Jim can’t exactly blame him, since they said the magic words. Klingons, possibly Romulans. There’s no alliance that they know of, not much intel on the inner workings of their separate governments. They’re not Federation compliant. That’s the problem. It was Jim’s understanding that the Romulans didn’t ally with anyone, but that could be old information.

It’s been a while since he touched base with his friends at HQ. He’s been busy getting to other bases with Spock.

If Jim was Starfleet, he’d have more of an idea what’s happening right now. He could tap into tactical, find Uhura to use her skills in the linguistics department to translate any incoming communications, or get that Chekov nerd to stabilize incoming transmissions. Every time he thinks he’s getting past that old yearning it comes back double-strong.

Being a prince means all the freedom in the world until you’re being herded along bunker-reinforced pathways underground because you’re too precious to be left to the open air.

He’s hiding.
He could help.

Just the thought of it makes Jim’s skin itch. He’s too hot under his formal collar, sweating in his formal clothes. He’s gonna need to hit the laundry before they double back to the ballroom.

If there’s still a ballroom.

The turbolift jerks to a halt, shuddering like another one of those mini-quakes all around them. The emergency lights flicker, then go out.

‘Shit,’ Jim says.

So much for keeping up a positive front with the public.

‘There’s a manual release here somewhere.’ Tonia sets her PADD on the floor, feeling around the walls in the dark. ‘They drill everyone in them when we first show up. Give me a boost?’

‘I know you’re not talking to His Majesty,’ Hendorff says.

Jim’s not so sure.

‘Actually, you know what, I’ve got it,’ Jim says. He might get tangled in his fancy cape and choke to death, never to learn about the latest threat to his kingdom, but the least he can do is give Tonia Barrows a boost. He gets down on one knee, not the proposal in the ballroom with the starry lighting strings he was anticipating, and holds out both gloved hands.

They’re just gloves, white and stiff and expensive. Shoeprints on the fabric won’t make a difference. Sacrifices have to be made.

Tonia Barrows kicks off her heels and whispers a sorry before she stands on Jim’s palms, which are braced on Jim’s thigh. She knees him in the face on her way up and doesn’t bother with a sorry this time, which honestly is a relief.

Watch the face, Jim remembers.

It seems like years ago; it was barely an hour. Tonia’s shin crushes a muscle in Jim’s shoulder and he grunts; Hendorff makes a noise that’s either a whimper or a stifled chuckle. It could just as easily be a combination of both.

Sometimes people laugh when they’re afraid or freaked out. Jim had to fight the urge when he heard about Dad the first time: an incredulous, terrible snort that burbled up from the depths of his chest and made it into the light, no chance of being stopped for the sake of propriety. It’s a sound Jim still hears in his nightmares, although he hasn’t had many of those since he started sleeping with Spock.

Sleeping next to Spock.

He’ll tell Spock—when he gets the chance, and he will—that it’s thinking of him that gets him through these dark moments, and the moments after, when the auxiliary power flickers on and Tonia throws the switch and the turbolift buckles before continuing its descent, which sends Tonia toppling, the three of them landing in a heap on Hendorff.

‘You’re not going to tell me where I’m going,’ Jim says, Hendorff hauling him back to his feet, Tonia brushing what she can off Jim’s wedding clothes. ‘It’s OK,’ Jim says. He means the clothes. He means Hendorff not being cleared to tell him a damn thing.
The turbolift doors open, and Jim’s shuttled into a bunker cell. Safe. Faintly warm. Quiet and otherwise empty.

‘Could you do me a favor, Tonia?’ Jim asks while Hendorff checks the lockdown protocol, before both of them leave him.

‘Sure, Prince James,’ Tonia replies. ‘I mean—it would be my honor, your majesty.’

Jim grins to cover a cringe. ‘Would you leave me your PADD? Something to pass the time. I’ll give it back safe and sound, I swear.’

Tonia pauses, checking with Hendorff. Hendorff sighs and nods.

‘I’ll hold you to it,’ Tonia says.

Jim grips the PADD tight. ‘That and the promotion. I promise.’

*
Chapter 44

Old methods of communication.

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: just like old times right
STARDATE: 2250.298

hey spock,

i think there’s a leak in my room.

i mean, it’s impenetrable other than the environmental controls, so i’m sure it’s not a leak, but the smell, spock. it’s like some kind of weird, musty smell like a damp closet. maybe it’s just that this place hasn’t been aired out since…

well, since.

i don’t know why i do that, since you know what i’m talking about. you weren’t here for the thing with dad, but this is what it was like. i’m not sure if i mentioned the whole bunker situation before, might’ve wanted to make lockdown sound more glamorous than it really was. you know. hanging around eating apples, watching the city from behind my force-fielded windows.

yeah. surprise, it’s not so much with the windows.

i don’t know why i’m even bothering with this considering i don’t even know whether you managed to snag a padd, but i’m willing to bet you’re smart enough to have snagged yourself one.

let me be the first to tell you, in case you don’t know: this is NOT a traditional earth wedding ceremony. not by a long shot.

miss you

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: It is empirically different from old times.
STARDATE: 2250.299
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.
I was informed that your personal safety had been secured, so I was not concerned regarding your
health or well-being, nor did I seek to pry by investigating your location or status further.

The protocol for an evacuation procedure was followed to the letter during the time of the attack as
far as I was capable of observing it. This will be reflected in my reports home and to the Vulcan
government in future contact.

If you are in possession of a PADD of your own, may I assume that you arranged a connection for
news updates as well as the exchange of personal correspondence, and are therefore aware of the
current situation?

Naturally, we must be held separately in order to ‘serve and scatter’ as I have heard the custom
referred to during this period of lockdown. I had not determined that the actions as taken by the
palace security team on Earth were the result of a ‘practical joke’ element to the human wedding
ceremony traditions. The ritual known commonly as ‘hazing’ is not one associated with marriage.

I trust that you have no rash actions planned for the future and will maintain protocol as those
around us have endeavored to protect procedural integrity.

Consider meditation.

Yours,
Spock

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: Yeah, the accommodations aren’t as good.
STARDATE: 2250.299
SECURE CHANNEL

hey, spock

sorry it took me a while to get back to you, this thing’s not encoded for security and it took me a
while to get the right tools for the job. people won’t bring me stuff all at once, it’s some kind of
security risk.

i got the news working before i encoded this sucker to talk to you.

whatever’s going on out there they’ve got it running on some secure channels, it took me awhile to
decrypt em.

what i’ve got is: no one can tell the difference between vulcan and romulan, the dialect’s subtle. i
got a friend who could probably get that down no problem, but she’s not answering any of my
messages. you’re gonna say i shouldn’t be sending any messages, so let me just tell you i already
know that so we don’t have to get into it.

guess i’m kind of avoiding the subject here.

but there’s not a lot of good news. doesn’t exactly sound like they know any better out there what’s
going on than we do in here. it was a strategic strike aimed at starfleet hq this time, not us, we were
just a casualty.
or our wedding was, anyway.

sorry about that, again.

i’m guessing you don’t want to hear about my great escape plan, then. does that fall under rash actions?

you ok? doing a lot of meditating I hope.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: The accommodations are not unpleasant. They could certainly be worse.
STARDATE: 2250.299
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I understand that you are eager for reliable and timely news of the events outside of our safety zones, especially as it directly involves your planet and its people, and that your eagerness is often best expressed through action, so that you do not grow restless in solitary. I understand also that you do not find your time best spent alone, as it offers you insufficient distraction.

Perhaps you believe that anything will be better than your current position; however, that is a position which labors under a limited definition of ‘anything’ and therefore one that does not suit your ample imagination and more than rudimentary intelligence.

Many have risked a great deal in order to safeguard our positions. We are royalty. It is of utmost importance that we do nothing to jeopardize that which those around us hold in profound esteem.

Nevertheless, I know that you are more than capable of establishing a satisfactorily secure channel for communication.

I have followed similar protocol based on my knowledge of the same, and made contact with Vulcan, whereupon I have ascertained that a simultaneous attack was made upon the Vulcan High Council. It is true that there is a faction of Romulans that have joined with a Klingon house that refuses to adhere to the tenets of the future Federation treaty and acceptance.

Your brother has elected to be a public face for the Federation’s united resistance to that group.

It is likely that you are aware of these facts already.

I have missed your company, as well.

“XO”

Spock
FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: Did I not tell you about the mildewy smell?
STARDATE: 2250.300
SECURE CHANNEL

i hate this i hate this i hate this i hate this i hate this i hate this i hate this i hate this

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: part two
STARDATE: 2250.300
SECURE CHANNEL

i wanted you to be the first to know, i’m gonna get out of here

i’m gonna bust out and then i’m gonna kill sam

better me than the romulans right

sure

less political that way

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: addendum
STARDATE: 2250.300
SECURE CHANNEL

i realize it’s not fair of me to joke when you can't see the subtle inflections of my perfect face, so

just for the record that was a joke

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: i ever tell you i’m not very good at solitary?
STARDATE: 2250.300
SECURE CHANNEL

i mean it’s not technically solitary, but i miss you and sam's out there probably doing god knows what like he doesn't know I'M the stupid one in this family resistance has jim kirk all over it.

miss you too.

xo

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: There is no mildew affliction where I am being held.
STARDATE: 2250.300
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I have recently been moved to another location and am told that you have been moved as well in order to maximize comfort. I have not been informed as to the location and have not inquired after your whereabouts, for to do so may well prove a threat to your safety. I only know that said safety is currently assured as much as it can be at such a time.

For what reason is it that you are expressing anger at your brother, Prince George Samuel, given that he is behaving as befits someone of his position, despite the danger in which this will place him? Or is it a misplaced frustration at the element of danger that causes you to direct your anger at your brother rather than that which truly compromises your emotional state?

Jim, do not behave in any fashion that will curry danger of your own. We are not on ‘Spockeria V’ and dealing with ‘Tiberius lizards’ and the threat that the Romulan-Klingon alliance has posed is one that cannot be taken lightly.

My contacts on Vulcan inform me that the strikes are, by necessity, swift and unpredictable, but the threat is therefore localized so as not to place a strain on the alliance’s limited resources.

Jim, be careful.

“XO”

Spock

FROM: Jim
TO: Spock
SUBJECT: It's not an affliction so much as an odor.
STARDATE: 2250.301
SECURE CHANNEL

where in the hell are they keeping you this time?

no, don't answer that. i hope they didn't wake you up in the middle of the night like they did me, i thought i was getting ambushed. most exciting thing that's happened to me in days.

at least we've got daylight here. you've got daylight, right?

you're still planetside, aren't you?

never mind. i guess you don't need me to tell you not to answer that either, you're smarter than i am about that stuff. discretion is the better part of vulcan valor.

i'm not gonna do anything stupid. i guess it's time for a little positive reinforcement, but i talk about that stuff mostly because i CAN'T do it. it's called mouthing off -- i don't remember if i included that in our colloquial dictionary or not. anyway, the point is that the more i'm talking about it, the
less likely i am to actually run off and do anything. besides, like you said, they've got sam for the face of the resistance. we don't need two kirs getting messed up in that.

i heard from mom's handlers the other day, guess they finally got sick of me spamming their comms with questions.

you never answer me when i ask if you're all right, you know that right?

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: Am I to presume you are no longer afflicted?
STARDATE: 2250.301
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

As you have already surmised, I am unable to inform you of my location at this time, just as you are unable to inform me of yours. The intelligence is classified for a multitude of reasons, of which you are aware without requiring me to remind you.

Yet perhaps reminders are, on occasion, not without merit, despite the fact that they rely on repetition of the obvious.

I am aware, in turn, of your enjoyment of repetition.

Jim, I cannot tell you where I am.

Nevertheless, to know that you are well enough to send regular communications as well as to follow the progress of Prince George Samuel and inquire after the well-being of your mother the queen provides me with satisfactory confirmation of your own well-being. I am not unappreciative of that confirmation. It is the same confirmation I had believed I had made clear in return. I am capable of contacting Vulcan and remaining in communication with you; therefore, logically, you may conclude that I am well.

I had at no point intended to imply that you would not be an asset to any force you might join. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yet to act without having ascertained where your actions would be best served and most needed would allow that asset to be spent in vain.

I do not doubt that you have had ample time to consider how your assets would be best distributed. To what conclusion have you arrived on this matter?

“XO”

Spock
FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: No it smells like oranges here. You ever had oranges Spock?
STARDATE: 2250.302
SECURE CHANNEL

i have some thoughts about my asset distribution but they have more to do with you and me than the greater good

i'm gonna distribute the hell out of my assets all over you when we're reunited and wow that might not be sexy to a vulcan huh you probably don't wanna think about that much physical contact all at once. well, i'd distribute them in a restrained and respectful manner.

maybe not that either.

you can imagine something between the two that's probably the most accurate representation

i don't know right now i'm still trying to get over feeling like someone who got locked away at the first sign of trouble. i've been putting together comm relays to share info with some of my friends in starfleet. totally illegal, but i've got some pretty talented people in there and they've been giving me what they've got back. most of the action's been happening off-world since the first attack, they've got pike up there.

not that i talk to pike. he'd take my head off if he knew i wasn't following protocol in a time of crisis. he's a real hard ass. he'll be all right out there, though. always is.

what are you doing with all your spare time? you think about me?

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: The orange is similar in flavor to the sash-savas. I have not yet tried the former. Do they come in tacos?
STARDATE: 2250.302
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

As I have been reading your written communications and responding to them without allowing an extraneous amount of time to pass between the former indulgence and the latter, it should therefore be obvious that I am certainly thinking of you. I am thinking of a variety of subjects simultaneously and it is true that the majority of them are related to the current intergalactic political situation, as well as your relation to said situation, and mine, and our position within that political scale.

We have our obligations to our people, but how those obligations shall make themselves manifest in the coming days are less clear.

However, given your passion for the subject of action taken, specifically, and the fact that there is
nothing for us to do at present, save to consider the possibilities and weigh the balance of our options, it stands to reason that we may consult one another regarding how to best expend our energies in order to benefit Vulcan and Earth.

After measured consideration I have come to the only possible conclusion—which is that this will be the most productive avenue of exploration and inquiry. Your knowledge of humanity and its needs in times of crisis will be more valuable than mine.

I will defer to your good judgment.

“XO”

Spock

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FROM: Jim  
TO: Spock  
SUBJECT: No, no, Spock that would be disgusting.  
STARDATE: 2250.303  
SECURE CHANNEL

hey, spock,

man, listen to you talking about all this like it's all intellectual theory instead of something that's happening in real time and our real lives. that's a skill that's always amazed me, spock. i don't know how you do it.

sorry, that's -- i can see where that would sound sarcastic. i don't mean to take it out on you, i just don't do well in captivity.

anyway, you might be expecting too much. i'm not in a position to do much for my people being held hostage for my own safety. yesterday they started bringing starfleet security in to give the royal team some time off. i'm hazing them all by setting up buckets of water over all the doors and randomly assembling and disassembling the phasers in the munitions locker. my best time's under a minute and a half, but i'm pretty sure i can get it down to sixty seconds if i give it another week.

Listen

the truth is, i've got no clue

it's not like there's much we can do from where we are. it's not like there's an active resistance to make, they don't have any troops on the ground to fight against. all we can do is make sure the people know what's going on, that we're all right, that we're always gonna be all right, that sam's not gonna get his head blown off when he sticks it out of hiding.

it's way bigger than mine, so it makes a giant target.

but humanity needs... you know, something to rally around. they like to know things are gonna be all right and i guess it's up to us to tell them that.

xo

j
FROM: Spock  
TO: Jim  
SUBJECT: The complexities of human culinary tradition continue to elude me.  
STARDATE: 2250.303  
SECURE CHANNEL  

Jim, peace and long life.  

Surely the Starfleet officers sent to attend a prince of Earth are not expecting to be presented with buckets of water unloaded on their persons from above. Of course, they are in training to be prepared for any eventuality; therefore, it should not be outside their skill sets to brace themselves for any manner of assault, wherever it may originate.  

Even should it originate from an individual in a position of authority and influence.  

Perhaps the lessons you have given yourself on phaser assembly, disassembly and reassembly will present themselves as useful in the future, when travel is once again a possible avenue for expending your energies. It is my place to know what it is that you seek and I know that you seek exploration. The limitations placed upon you now are not those which suit your natural inclinations. The correct phrase is ‘stir crazy’.

However, it is my understanding of your natural inclinations that the phrase ‘not much we can do’ does not suit them, either.  

What is it that humanity would best rally around, Jim? I have discovered the importance of imagery, metaphor, and analogy in human culture. Symbolism on Earth is powerful. The tabloids appear to be proof enough of that.  

I too have requested the material necessary for the applied study of phaser assembly, disassembly and reassembly. After three hours of the day devoted to that study, my time is currently at fifty seven point four five seconds. I have learned through research that the fastest recorded time for this task in Starfleet Academy history is fifty-three point seven four seconds.  

“XO”  

Spock  

FROM: Jim  
TO: Spock  
SUBJECT: Would you really put oranges in your tacos Spock?  
STARDATE: 2250.304  
SECURE CHANNEL  

i feel like this is one of those things we should've talked about before we got married. well, vulcan-married. you can't put that kind of sweet citrus thing on a taco no no no blugh spock that's that's just wrong, all right?
are you serious that that's your time already all right i"m gonna start buckling down -- i got in a sixty seconds but here you are undercutting me, i'm real impressed, spock. gives me something to strive for beyond escaping and switching places with my best buds at starfleet. too bad my face has been plastered everywhere so i can't blend in and sneak back to hq

what i really need is a body double. imagine all the good i could do with one of THOSE

listen they're not

i mean, i've been hearing all kinds of crazy rumors in here, you know how humans love to gossip. they're not taking you back to vulcan or anything, right? this happened on earth and all but it's just as dangerous doing the intergalactic thing right now. it's not like vulcan's any safer while this is going on. it's probably nothing. no one around here knows what they're talking about.

you think we're gonna be out soon enough to worry about stuff like traveling?

how secure is this channel because you could -- you COULD tell me where you're staying, i could organize some kind of rescue operation.

i miss seeing you.

xo

j
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Spock writes some stuff.

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I am not in the position to make tacos, nor am I sufficiently educated for the task.
STARDATE: 2250.304
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I do not require a rescue attempt; as I have already made clear to you, I have been adequately cared for by the representatives of your government and have no complaints in regards to my treatment, no needs that have not been sufficiently met. The standard set by your people has left no avenue for my displeasure. I shall report as much to the proper authorities; any move made to adjust that with which I have been provided would reflect poorly on those who have fulfilled their duties without fault or flaw.

In the interest of full disclosure, there have been multiple plans discussed regarding my potential relocation. While it is commonly understood that Vulcan-Earth relations will be best served by a show of complete solidarity, it is nevertheless prudent to suggest a variety of undetermined possibilities in order to confuse any hostile faction that may be seeking to gather solid information as to any of our whereabouts.

Whatever is decided, I will execute my duties in what I intend to be as exemplary as those committed to protecting us have been.

Were you to have a ‘body double’, surely you realize that an individual such as that would not replace you in maximum security while you assist Prince George Samuel in public appearances. Therefore I can only conclude that you will also execute your duties in what you intend to be an exemplary fashion.

Fifty-five point one six seconds is the current time.

I cannot and will not tell you where I am.

I continue to think of and about you.

“XO”

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: Well, that you can look up.
STARDATE: 2250.305
SECURE CHANNEL

hey spock,

it was my understanding that body doubles made life EASIER for you not some kind of big boring nightmare, but i looked into it and apparently you're right.

finally heard from sam the other day. figured you'd wanna know, since you're part of the family now and all. even if we didn't get to have a wedding -- whatever, all right? that was just a formality to begin with. i'm starting to see a little more now about why people were so into it. i think sam might've been right when he said we needed morale around here. that's probably what he's thinking about, why he's got such a bug up his ass about being out there, the face of the people.

he probably thinks he's protecting us, you and me and mom. only we never asked for that.

of course, we didn't ask to get whomped by the galaxy's first ever klingon and romulan alliance either. do your guys on vulcan have any intel on what we did to piss em off so bad? or is it just the usual federation stuff, them viewing us as an expansive threat?

i caught something like that on a transmission between the uss endeavor and starfleet. i figure it has to be true since it didn't have to go through the prince filter.

so long as we're both on the same planet i think i can hold off on any rescue attempts.

i'm at 57.74 seconds you competent bastard.

take care of yourself, ok

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: Nowhere is the word ‘bastard’ given positive connotations.
STARDATE: 2250.305
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

The Klingon-Romulan alliance is, as you may or may not know to varying degrees of detailed intelligence, likely no more than the desperate actions taken by a smaller faction of Romulans. It has been determined that this smaller faction is the one lending manpower and firepower to a group of three united Klingon houses that oppose the inclusion of Klingons in the Federation, and especially the ensuing peace treaties such inclusion would bring about. While most Klingons feel that peace with the Federation is to their benefit, there are some that believe it will demand their subservience and inevitable dissolution of their way of life.
This Romulan-Klingon alliance will not prove a threat to the Federation in the long run; it cannot and does not hope to. But that does not mean they are not committed to their acts of terrorism and protest, and it does not mean they will not be capable of causing serious damage to unprotected Federation outposts throughout the Alpha Quadrant. That they have grown bold enough to attack Earth and Vulcan directly suggests a level of desperation that will make them dangerous indeed. We shall prevail but to prevail with minimal losses will be ideal.

Of course, these acts have brought tension between those members of the Federation that championed an alliance with Klingons as a positive step and those who opposed that alliance. The latter are now convinced that warfare has always been inevitable and our choice to remain demilitarized will be our downfall.

It is my stance that violence on the part of the Federation will do nothing more than beget further violence, which will only prove detrimental to every galactic power. Hostility is understandable in such times, but it is not necessary, nor is it constructive.

Having reviewed the cases made by both sides so that I may consider myself informed sufficiently of the arguments as they have been made, I remain of the mind that peace and Klingon inclusion to the Federation will be best, not merely in the long term but in the short term as well, and to succumb to prejudice will be the longer lasting of the scars left on the political landscape by the Romulan-supported Klingon acts of hostility.

Prince George Samuel has done what he can to show public positivity. Are you not proud of his commitment to peace?

Fifty-four point eight nine three seconds.

“XO”

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: It's affectionate like son of a bitch.
STARDATE: 2250.306
SECURE CHANNEL

wait

wait a minute

you think the klingons should join the federation??

THAT'S what they're talking about?

holy shit, spock, next thing you're gonna tell me the romulans want in too jesus Christ

is that the vulcan recommendation or is that what starfleet's doing?

you know they killed my dad, right? like, recently. and now they think it'd be a real good idea to just welcome them into the federation like nothing ever happened?
i can't talk about this right now, forget it.

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: Still not talking about it.
STARDATE: 2250.306
SECURE CHANNEL

All right.
All right.

I had a visit from Bones, we're both getting check-ups, you'll probably see him too. I was gonna warn you but I figure he's there by now. Anyway, I'm better now. I guess. We shouldn't talk about that other thing but it's sort of up in the air right now anyway, right? Probably. It's only one option, and quite frankly, I don't think it's the best option. Obviously. I guess I made that pretty clear.

Sam hasn't said anything about an alliance, so I think we can assume that's the last option on the table and move on from there. Does that sound reasonable?

I'm trying to be reasonable.

56.36
xo
j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: If I were to call a fellow diplomat a ‘son of a bitch’ would they concur that it is affectionate?
STARDATE: 2250.306
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

No doubt you will consult with your Doctor, Leonard ‘Bones’ McCoy, MD, in order to inquire after the results of his visit to me so that you may determine for yourself whether or not I am ‘well’. ( Regardless of the lack of specifics attributed to that single word, your interest in it has been noted and will not be overlooked.)

Allow me to be straightforward. Doctor McCoy’s knowledge of Vulcan anatomy when he arrived was rudimentary at best; this is not an insult or judgment of any kind, as I am merely repeating, though I am forced to paraphrase in order to conserve time that this communication will still be sent out today, what Doctor McCoy himself insisted upon informing me of at every opportunity. Vulcans are not his specialty, nor are Vulcan anatomy and Vulcan biology regularly taught at Starfleet Academy, where Doctor McCoy trained.

Perhaps, given the opportunity, we may institute a change on that front at some point in the unforeseeable future.
Doctor McCoy knew enough, however, that his opinion on the results of his inspection is, technically, valid. He expressed his other opinions regarding his main patient—I herein refer to you, Jim—and suggested he is certain that you are suffering from a variety of maladies that are ‘all in that big head of his [yours], bouncing around and eating away at what little normal function’s still hanging on for dear life.’ He seems certain that denying you avenues of exercise is highly dangerous to your health, but he agrees with my stance that to let you ‘roam free like a wild damn animal on the range’ will be equally detrimental.

I shall inform you that I also asked him about the matter of interpretation as far as the terms ‘son of a bitch’ and ‘bastard’ are concerned. On that subject, Doctor McCoy seemed to agree that there are certain occasions when both may imply affection, yet he also confirmed my suspicions that in reference to my person there is a ‘snowball’s chance on Vulcan’ that affection would be foremost among these connotations.

Given this evidence, and your unusual reticence within your most recent two communications, as well as your refusal to discuss a Klingon admittance into the Federation, I have been forced to conclude that you are displeased or perhaps even angry with me.

What occurred during the attack on your royal family was a tragedy and I would never intend to suggest otherwise. But the individuals who conducted that attack were a part of this renegade Klingon faction, Jim, and to imply that all Klingons were involved in the actions of a radical few would be willfully ignorant on your part.

Fifty four seconds exactly.

“XO”

Spock

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FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: No no no it's not that kind of thing Spock.
STARDATE: 2250.306
SECURE CHANNEL

it's PERSONAL and informal, you use it as a term of affection with people who know you well enough to be able to tell when you're joking around with them. that's a tip from me to you.

honestly i think the klingons should work out their shit before they get to come in and join the federation like let's see how they deal with the people who break our laws before we start just admitting them in like nothing ever happened i mean they get that we have rules, right? so maybe they should worry about about following them before we just accept them. i mean that just makes basic political sense. is sam negotiating any of these terms?

this sounds ridiculous, but i need to get in touch with my mom. whatever she's thinking -- well, i'm sure she's not behind this anyway. you think I'M upset, she must be fuming right about now.

i'm not mad at you, it's just -- whatever, spock. you made a logical analysis of the situation and came to the conclusion that best fitted the situation. i get that.

i do.
it just makes me not want to talk about it with you which is also whatever. a lot of whatever going on, i guess. don't worry about it. i'm gonna try and get in contact with the rest of the family. glad you passed your physical.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: Does it fall under the purview of unclean dialogue?
STARDATE: 2250.307
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

It would appear that despite your not unimpressive intellect, you are unable to assess the information and achieve a logical analysis of the situation due to the interference of your emotionalism. It is my duty as your husband on Vulcan and husband-to-be on Earth to acknowledge your position and to stand beside you in a show of solidarity, but it is not outside of my duties to challenge your position in private should I believe it to be flawed or potentially detrimental.

I must inform you that I do believe it to be flawed and more than potentially detrimental.

However, you have expressed your desire to avoid this topic of discussion with me specifically. I confess that my understanding of the complexities of human conversational subtleties remains rudimentary, much like Doctor McCoy’s understanding of Vulcan physiology. I am uncertain whether or not this suggests I should press the subject as that is your unspoken need in this matter, or of I should take your word at its face value and allow you to continue to ruminate on these complex moralities on your own without my counsel.

The phrase ‘a lot of whatever’ has not edified me as to the true nature of what would best serve you. At this distance I cannot—do not—know your thoughts beyond what you have written to me, and your words have kept me at a distance, it seems, purposefully.

Therefore I shall simply await your educated response.

“XO”

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: You could call it that sure
STARDATE: 2250.308
SECURE CHANNEL
it's kind of hard to pick a fight with you, has anyone ever told you that?

i guess not those asshole kids who used to pick on you.

i don't actually want to pick a fight. i'm being mostly facetious, here. i appreciate that you're trying to understand where i'm coming from and all. i'll admit i didn't do much trying to understand where you were coming from at all, mostly because i still think it doesn't make any kind of sense at all. lucky for me i'm not the decision-making power behind the throne. eagle three, and all. but i'm sure the family will appreciate you standing behind us, whatever they end up deciding.

mom's kind of with me but sam's on your side. figures, right. maybe you married the wrong brother after all, i'm sure you and sam could've hammered out some kind of diplomatic agreement in days.

i still don't know whether we're working this out ourselves or if we're liaising with starfleet or what the deal is. i'm sure vulcan would be thrilled to do its own thing, since you're all such brilliant negotiators.

i dunno, spock. i still don't think it's a good idea but i'd like to think i'm a big enough person to know when i'm not the right man for the job. i can't make that call. i'm obviously not the best equipped to handle it. i wouldn't make any trouble for anyone who wanted to open negotiations, i haven't even made it public that i think it's a bad idea.

i'm not stupid. the things i share with you are different from what i'd say to anyone else.

kind of makes me look like a terrible person sometimes, and i get that. i just wanted yo to know i'm not gonna do anything awful just because i'm saying dumb stuff in our letters.

makes a pretty big difference when i'm not making a first impression anymore.

xo

j

---

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: Should I call it that? Unlike you, I do not negotiate definitions.

STARDATE: 2250.308
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Vulcan does not intend to ‘do its own thing’ if I have interpreted that statement correctly. Neither do I intend to ‘do my own thing’ also under the supposition that the phrase means what I understand it to mean. Our alliance is not so malleable and neither is our partnership, specifically.

It had always been my intention that we should be partners.

That our positions are opposite does not mean they will not prove, in valuable ways, equal. The fact that we are approaching this from perspectives that challenge one another’s preconceptions will allow us to broaden our assumptions and illuminate our positions.

Ideally, that should be self-evident.
It has not been.

As I am not under the misimpression that you are stupid and neither have I at any point suggested that you were— I have gone over our communications in order to be certain of this fact— I shall not address that particular defense again.

Prince George Samuel is perhaps more keenly aware that prolonged animosity between the Klingon Empire and the Federation will result in needless bloodshed. Is peace truly not preferable?

I seek to understand you, Jim. But you do not make the process a straightforward means of study.

Yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: It's a little bit dirty talk, a little bit overly familiar. I can't properly classify it, I would if I could.
STARDATE: 2250.309
SECURE CHANNEL

i'm not trying to be difficult, i swear.

it's not an easy thing to admit being terrible at something, especially for me, because i'm great at everything and i'm really bad at taking no for an answer. that adds up to a really obnoxious personality, which is something you already know. something you're having trouble coping with i'd have to guess because like i've hinted at i've been REALLY trying to behave myself around you. not so much anymore.

which is not to say that i'm being such an unholy hellion right now or anything but i'm aware that i've been going really far in the other direction. of good behavior. i would call it bad behavior but that sounds like dirty talk too. which is kind of my thing. enjoyable.

i'm not enjoying this, any more than you are.

i'm invested in our partnership too. i think it's important to trust in our united front and all. i'm sorry that i made you look over our correspondence so much, i don't mean to be such a pain in the ass.

it's gonna be all right, spock. i mean -- we're gonna be all right, i'm gonna be all right, this whole thing is gonna blow over. i still think it's a mistake to have our first response to everything be to smooth it over and ESPECIALLY with a race of people who only respect fighting and warriors but, you know, it's not like i can ask my dad what he would've thought and in the absence of that it's kind of a moot point.

anyway, i don't want to fight with you about it. i already told you i'll be a good little diplomat and go with whatever they decide. isn't that enough?

xo

j
FROM: Spock  
TO: Jim  
SUBJECT: Classification is important to avoid misinformation and misinterpretation.  
STARDATE: 2250.309  
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I do not consider the actions taken to maintain peace with, as you have described the Klingons not incorrectly—though perhaps also not thoroughly—a combative empire to be a sign of weakness or capitulation. Likewise there are certain factions in the Klingon Empire, most notably the young member of the Klingon High Council known as Gorkon, which have advocated for peace repeatedly despite protests on both sides.

There are many in the Federation who I have come to understand believe as you do. Starfleet’s Admiral Marcus, for example, has been a passionate speaker on behalf of militarization—to meet fire with fire, as the popular saying goes. He is not the only one of such a mind, and there are numerous Vulcan officials who see the logic in confronting all Klingons in the same manner as a certain volatile group of Klingon noble families have chosen to engage us: through warfare alone.

Gorkon is merely one voice among many. I, too, am simply speaking my own mind, which is what you have always done, at least insofar as our correspondence has been concerned. I have appreciated your candor and shall continue to do so.

 Impressions are, ultimately, without meaning or substance. My impression of you matters little in the face of my knowledge of you, though you often defy categorization or simple definitions. You are complex, Jim. It is an often fascinating complexity.

I recall your affinity for compliments, but I do not pay these compliments lightly. Vulcans do not place any stock in flattery. I do not find that I have taken partnership with the incorrect Prince Kirk, for though I may agree with Prince George Samuel’s public stance on Klingon-Federation negotiations moreso than I agree with your private stance on the same, it is you, Jim, who occupy my mind and alter my thoughts.

Yours,

Spock
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

LOL ;)

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: Are you scolding me right now because i kind of like it.
STARDATE: 2250.310
SECURE CHANNEL

hey spock,

just when i think you're being a huge pain you go and say something that turns my stomach inside out.

figuratively speaking, of course.

that's not an actual description of my actual symptoms, in case you're keeping track. but it got to me. YOU get to me. i'm glad to hear it goes both ways, actually. i think that's important. sometimes i think you're gonna get swayed away by logic and all. but i guess it's not very logical to have feelings for someone else in the first place.

i'm not gonna act like i know everything, and more importantly i'm not gonna act like i don't know that the things that piss me off the most are the ones where i already know i'm wrong. i think this klingon thing might eventually be one of those. i'm still not convinced it's the right thing to do, but i already told you i'm not gonna stand in the way if dorkon wants to negotiate for the future of the klingon empire. whatever.

we should probably look into keeping him and his people safe, that way you and sam won't lose your only shot at getting your precious alliance going here. you know if anyone's got a protection detail going on that guy? someone should look into it.

thanks for not being afraid to piss me off, spock. at least it keeps me honest.

xo

j

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT:
STARDATE: 2250.310
SECURE CHANNEL

love you too spock.
FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I was not aware that one would or should scold one’s husband.
STARDATE: 2250.310
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

Your clarification in regards to your symptoms being metaphorical rather than literal did not pass unappreciated. Was this discomfited state of being a result of the ‘butterflies’ in your ‘stomach’ to which I have seen previous and disturbing reference in Earth’s literature?

Nonetheless, it is a relief to understand without further complication or confusion that Doctor McCoy’s immediate attendance is not required to investigate the possibility of a poisoning agent having made its way into your daily meals.

As it is no longer a matter of the highest level security, I am now able to inform you that I am currently residing at the Vulcan Consulate here on Earth, as it was determined would be best for the time being. Our alliance must remain unquestionable in the face of a threat and therefore it was concluded that my safety should be remanded to my fellow Vulcan representatives so that there will be no question or uncertainty should the worst befall either of us.

Despite what may seem most appealing to our private wishes, I am in agreement that this arrangement is in the best interest of all who serve us and all whom we serve. During this period, I have taken the liberty to make inquiries through available channels regarding the renegotiated terms of our human wedding ceremony.

Again, personal desires or preferences aside, I do not intend to deprive you of the wedding night in which you have shown such a distinct interest. I myself can admit to a certain measure of curiosity, due to your repetition of its importance.

Jim, the Klingon who has championed the cause of peace made with the Federation is named Gorkon, not Dorkon. Please adjust the automatic spelling correction program on your PADD accordingly.

Since the mind meld we shared, I have been aware of the feelings you harbor for me. Should we have the opportunity, I shall offer my own, as I have come to the conclusion that confirmation in these matters is considered appropriate.

Yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT:
STARDATE: 2250.311
SECURE CHANNEL
ok, the vulcan consulate, i can work with that. that's not too far. they've got me outside the city proper, over the bridge and inland. it's a big boring dud, no balconies and small windows, but if i get on the highest floor and stand on my tiptoes i can see the ocean.

i definitely can't see the consulate but i know where to look. i'll wave to you tonight.

yeah, you give me butterflies in my stomach. it's purely chemical in nature, your body gets flooded with adrenalin and it can't handle it so you feel all queasy in your general tummy area. that's a scientific explanation so i'd understand some of the technicalities go over your head.

i'm glad you're not offworld. i mean, logic would dictate that it doesn't matter either way where you go if we can't be together, but it makes a difference in my head. knowing you're close by. i COULD see you if i wanted to.

i do want to.

i won't try though, don't worry. i've used up all my stupid impulsiveness on this whole thing with dorkon on the klingons.

it was a joke, spock. dorkon. like a dork. it's -- i'm doing a bad job of explaining myself, because you're not actually supposed to explain jokes.

i can't believe i'm talking about dorkon when what i should be focusing on is the fact that you're trying to arrange a wedding night for us. that's romantic as hell, spock. it's been awhile. i forgot how good you are in the written word. very compelling.

miss you.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: To describe the complexities of humor to a race for which humor is not familiar is an admirable endeavor at cultural exchange.
STARDATE: 2250.311
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I would inform you that the sciences, specifically biology, regarding humans are subjects which I have studied extensively and therefore any technical discussion of a topic that falls beneath that more general heading would not be beyond my ability to grasp—yet, after careful consideration, I have determined that your statement had a 98.57% likelihood of being made sarcastically and so to explain myself without acknowledging the inherent attempt at humor would once again bring you displeasure.

However, I cannot express laughter when I have not laughed; that would be dishonest, and I have never been dishonest with you. While it is common practice to employ shorthand in written communications such as ours—“LOL” for “laugh out loud” and LMAO for “laughing my ass off”,
respectively—to do so when I am engaging in neither activity would again be misleading.

Your joke in the form of sarcastic language has been acknowledged despite the difficulty to ascertain sarcasm when there are no inflections, tonally, to indicate that sarcasm is being employed.

I understand now that Dorkon was an intentional misspelling on your part and also that I need not remind you such a false appellation, however humorous it may be in terms of its suitability vis-à-vis rhyme and derogatory meaning suitability, may present itself at an inopportune time now that we are, however subconsciously, aware of it.

It is at times such as these when I question not my “choice” of the two princes Kirk, but rather your choice of partners, Jim, when humor and laughter are so obviously important to you, yet I am regularly unable to join you and partake in either.

Yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: You're trying to butter me up now huh. Well I'm not immune to a little buttering.
STARDATE: 2250.312
SECURE CHANNEL

oh my god, spock. or should i say OMG.

have you been researching shorthand comm lingo because that's just about the best thing i've ever seen. it's ok, a lot of the time when people say LOL they aren't actually laughing out loud. it's more a figure of speech. you say it when you think things are funny, overexaggerated for effect to compensate for distance and being unable to see the person. it makes you feel better, like you're really in the same room talking instead of sending pathetic messages across the city.

if i had my bike, i'd be at the vulcan consulate right now.

that's another joke for you, there.

the dorkon thing wasn't that funny. god, i should stop saying it, you're right, we're gonna bust it out at the wrong moment and ruin sam's life.

and...

listen. you don't have to worry about it. or me. i mean, my sense of humor. it's not the most important thing to me. or to put it more clearly, maybe i LIKE being the funny one in our relationship. i definitely don't need someone who's gonna be outdoing me at dinner parties and stuff. and -- ironically, i dunno, spock, i like explaining humor to you. it's not a big deal. i like you the way you are.

xo

j
FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: Jim, I would not try to put butter on you.
STARDATE: 2250.312
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

And LOL.

I have employed the aforementioned shorthand in belated appreciation of your wordplay, and also in light of the explanation you have given for its functional usages. As it need not connote literal laughter out loud but is instead offered in the spirit of compensation for distance.

I am aware that this was not how you had hoped or anticipated you would be spending these days following the wedding ceremony—a wedding ceremony in which, despite the not insignificant plans made for its execution, we were unable to partake. Would “OMG” be appropriate if deployed here?

During my education, which itself is an ongoing progress, there has been little that has proven challenging. I have not met with difficulty when it comes to the pursuit of knowledge. There have been subjects on which I have meditated as they have been matters of moral or even emotional understanding.

These regard my parentage; that I am not, and never will be, fully Vulcan. They involve anger I could not control, of which I am not proud, and violence, of which I am even less proud, though I have over time put those behind me. They are a part of a childhood that was difficult. Though vague, that description is the most accurate I can offer.

What I intend to say is that written communication, at least, affords me the ability to consider your words—and to consider mine—without the immediacy demanded by conversation where both members are physically present. It has allowed me to be more responsive, though its hindrances are obvious, given the distance between us.

What I also intend to say is that you, too, are a difficult subject. There are many ways in which it is clear to me I have not offered and perhaps cannot offer, expressly, what you seek—which you desire—what will seem most natural to you, as a human individual whose emotions are, if not clear, then certainly deeply felt, as well as regularly acknowledged.

But I desire this difficulty.

I desire you.

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: You could grease me up anytime you like.
STARDATE: 2250.313
SECURE CHANNEL

hey spock,

oh my god, you're killing me a little with these acronyms. i know you're not LOLing out there at the vulcan consulate but i appreciate you conjuring the image. it's making me LOL for real, all alone in my dumb little suite across the bay. see, what i'm doing there is conjuring sympathy for myself. the place isn't that lonely. there are more people here than i would like, in and out on a daily basis. i shouldn't complain since it's technically for my own protection but -- well, you know me. i can technically complain about anything.

i like that we're both difficult. i think we work so well because you like it too. neither of us is looking to lead an easy life. i don't know whether that's necessarily a compliment or if it just points to us being a couple of frustrated malcontents.

either way i'm gonna go out on a limb and say we might just be made for each other.

man, i don't know what it is about this stupid format that makes me spill my guts and get all philosophical on you. i feel like i should be censoring myself way better than i'm doing.

you would think that'd be more of a problem in person since i can't delete anything i've said but there's something about being able to do this without seeing your face, i don't know.

i miss that face, though. i miss seeing you. trust me when i say that i'm gonna give you the wedding night of your life.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I conferred with Doctor McCoy and have learned you are not allergic to butter.
STARDATE: 2250.313
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

As you have expressed that you miss seeing my face I will begin by offering, in a similar vein as the shorthand discussed earlier, another item of text-based communication. After a brief period of research, I have learned of the human reliance upon the emoticon, which suggested that the following ‘face’ expresses solidarity and has positive connotations. :) Though this “smiley face” is obvious misleading in this circumstance—I am not smiling—neither was “LOL” held to the strictest of translations.

:)

If you have spilled your guts and intend me to interpret the meaning of that phrase as being metaphorical—in which “guts” are rather “private feelings” and not a literal expulsion of the food you have recently ingested, prior to full digestion—then it is safe and accurate to say that I have been conducting my communication in a similar manner. Many of the topics on which I have
touched are not those I would share with anyone else; neither would I broach them without reservation through any other means.

Even now I confront reservation in the intent of honoring the candor with which you have expressed yourself by meeting it in kind. By now you are aware I am not forthcoming; in my determination to adhere to the Vulcan principles and precepts set down on my father Sarek’s side, I have been perhaps more exacting of success than is conducive to fostering emotional connections with anyone, much less a human of your passionate nature.

Yet when I was uncertain of your whereabouts and your well-being, my concern for you before I was informed of your safety was beyond the confines of anything I have ever experienced before.

I shall await your response.

Yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: PLEASE tell me you didn't ask Bones about buttering me.
STARDATE: 2250.314
SECURE CHANNEL

oh my god, spock. are you really studying alternative methods of text-based communications, because i'm sure that the vulcan consulate -- and your people back on vulcan, no less -- would suggest that you have better things to do with your time. better things to study, definitely. which isn't a complaint on my part. i'm really enjoying the products of your research here.

:) ;):O :P

is this what it looks like when vulcans go stir crazy? because i'd feel pretty bad if this was a warning sign and i never caught on because i was too busy enjoying myself on the spoils of it.

to use another specifically human term, you're pretty good at sweet-talking me through letters. i never would've suspected, but i guess i'm not the only one who finds it easier to get things off my chest when we're not actually face-to-face. has anyone ever actually done a study like that, to see whether vulcans thrive on correspondence more than conversation? now that i'm thinking about it, it seems pretty natural.

i'll practice calling him gorkon now. gorkon. doesn't look right. gorkon? am i spelling that right because it seems all wrong.

i'm all right, spock. sorry for behaving like such a shithead earlier. and probably for the bulk of our marriage.

xo

j
FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I conducted necessary inquiry into any known butter on skin allergies with your primary physician.
STARDATE: 2250.314

SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life.

I have not gone crazy, whether the sub-categorization is stir or otherwise. As you have suggested, I am more than capable of productive study, self-conducted particularly, and I am not without avenues of inquest here at the Vulcan consulate. I assure you, I have pursued them.

The present day matters of state and political unrest have occupied much of my time, but as previous attempts to discuss Klingon-related matters with you have resulted in your discomfort and displeasure, I have sought another topic for our communications that will be more comfortable for you. While I do not intend to “coddle” or in any way distract you from more immediate subjects of concern, you are correct that at present there is little we can do, save for preparing ourselves with ample knowledge for our future actions. Therefore it is not unwise to approach other avenues, such as little dialogue, with which to engage our energies.

As a brief aside, Gorkon is the correct spelling of the name of the individual in question. Now that you have been informed, I trust there will be no further errors committed to text.

:)  

The “:P” emoticon is apt for your use considering the wealth of photographic evidence of you sticking your tongue out, which that particular “face” iconography is meant to represent. If one tips one’s head to the side in order to gain proper alignment and perspective.

Jim, shithead does not accurately describe you in any sense.

Yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: OK but did you tell him why or not.
STARDATE: 2250.315

SECURE CHANNEL

I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.

and if it's not, i think it's the nicest thing ANYONE has ever said to me.

are you saying you enjoy small talk or just that it's the most productive avenue for us now that i've shut down the whole political side of things? sam's been keeping me appraised of his communications with gorkon. he had to basically beg me to set up a secure channel so they could
hold talks in private without informing everyone on both sides who might not be as open-minded about the process as Sam and Gorkon themselves. I tried reminding him that I'M one of these people, but no dice.

:P

don't want you to coddle me, that's definitely not what I'm asking for here. But I'm not gonna deny that I appreciate the effort to keep our talk off the Klingons. It doesn't really matter how I feel about them either way, since I'm not the one making these policies, but for some reason I know it bothers you anyway. I'm trying to come around, Spock, I really am.

I can't promise that I ever will, but I'm making an effort. Figured since you prize hard work so much you'd want to know that.

We're gonna be all right. Maybe in spite of my better judgment.

gorkon gorkon gorkon gorkon gorkon gorkon gorkon gorkon

Ok, I think I've got it.

XO

J

---

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I expressed the reasoning behind my sudden concern, if that is what you are asking.

STARDATE: 2250.315
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. :)

I am aware of the communications you have facilitated between Prince George Samuel and the progressively-minded Klingon already discussed, Gorkon. In point of fact, Prince George Samuel has also been in semi-regular communication with me as far as these potential peace talks are concerned. To date, he has sought my opinion on the matter as well as my opinion on your opinion, which I gave him only after I determined that he had first consulted with you to ascertain your opinion directly from the source.

Naturally, we are both aware—due to your forthright response—of your opinion as regards Klingon inclusion in the Federation. Said opinion is not without merit, though you have made obviously impassioned arguments, themselves highly affected by your emotions.

Prince George Samuel is aware that many will respond to the prospect as you have—you are not the only individual who has lost a loved one due to Klingon hostilities. Many have experienced similar losses and many others on Earth are still reeling from the assassination of their king.

Nevertheless, you are unlike many in that subsequent to your initial, emotional response, you are uniquely capable of appraising said response and fully exploring your motivations. That you agreed to assist your brother, Prince George Samuel, with secured channels for communication that he might conduct safely and confidentially his private talks with Gorkon—despite your personal
feelings on one likely outcome of these talks—will, in the future, be appreciated by many, more than just Prince George Samuel and myself.

We shall discuss other subjects.

How is your mother?

Yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: SPOCK!!!!
STARDATE: 2250.316
SECURE CHANNEL

please, please don't confirm for me that you were talking to bones about me telling you to butter me up because he really doesn't like hearing about what i do in my personal life. he's made that incredibly clear and as you know from your own experiences with him the guy isn't exactly shy about expressing himself. i feel like i should be bracing for an incoming rebuke. or at the very least he's gonna contact me with a list of people who've injured themselves horribly in butter-related mishaps.

it'll probably have diagrams too. i guarantee you at least one grease fire. he's morbid like that.

mom's all right. she'll be happy you asked. she likes you a lot, i don't know if we had enough time with her to really make that clear, but i can tell. you're tough on me. i think she respects it. i know i do.

i'm front-loading all the nice stuff because i think i'm gonna get awful again. spock, there's a part of me that thinks it's real easy for sam to go around negotiating with klingons because he wasn't here when dad died and he doesn't know what it was like for the rest of us. now, i know that's not fair because mom WAS here and i know she's behind whatever is best for our people. if she can get over it, i should be able to too.

believe me, i've been through all that with myself.

aren't you proud of me i didn't even get all pissy about you talking with sam behind my back and i only SAY behind my back because he didn't tell me he was talking to you. it's probably got something to do with the fact that he figured i'd get annoyed with him for being in communication with you in the first place. but i'm not that petty. see?

have you been in on the gorkon talks too?

xo

j
Jim, peace and long life. :)

I shall begin by addressing your highly unexpected reaction of distress regarding Doctor Leonard McCoy’s involvement in what you have referred to as your “personal life”.

As he is your primary physician and aware of all matters concerning your health, I have consulted with Doctor McCoy on multiple matters regarding your person. I realize now that you may be surprised to learn that despite your reservations regarding the reaction you have imagined for him, he has maintained strict professionalism—this is, admittedly, also despite his proclivity to offer his personal opinions to color the exchange of what would otherwise be strictly factual information—during these conferences of ours.

Doctor McCoy also made me aware of more than one phrase involving butter, such as “butter would not melt”, and as such I am grateful to him for his experience with human colloquialisms as well as human anatomy. He has been invaluable with regards to informing me of the complexities of both.

Your mother the queen’s appraisal of my person has been duly noted. If such an exchange were to be equal, all things considered, then I believe the proper response to learning of her affection for me would be to say that the feeling is mutual. I have come to respect her less generally than I once did, though I have always respected her as a leader as well as an individual whose personality is hardly unpleasant.

Finally, I have at last come to that which is inevitable. I cannot end this communication without first taking the time to address your reaction to the news that I have offered my counsel to Prince George Samuel over the difficulties with the Klingons, and his meeting of minds with Gorkon.

As you had explained—a satisfactory explanation—you found and continue to deem it unpleasant to discuss the topic with me. I would not seek to obscure the truth of my communications elsewhere from you; this is why I have told you that Prince George Samuel has on eight separate occasions in the past week sought my advice and opinion.

He may not have been “around” upon the death of your father, King George, but I believe he has felt that loss, in his own way, quite similarly to you.

Perhaps the two of you should speak to one another on the subject—while avoiding, perhaps, the subject of Klingons as a general rule, as it appears to provoke an abundance of volatile emotions.

Yet that is merely a suggestion. I do not know what would be best for you. I do not know Prince George Samuel as you know him; I know you, but I am unable to determine if Prince George Samuel knows you to the same degree of study. Even I at times must admit that there is still more of you which presents mild surprise. I do not know all that there is to know and though I am devoted to the task of learning all that I may, I would not yet classify myself as an expert, merely as a scholar.

I have indeed spoken to Gorkon through the secure channel you established for your brother. I have no reason to disbelieve him or his intentions—the latter being to avoid any further bloodshed for the sake of us all.
honestly, spock, i'm not totally sure what part of this is more upsetting. the you and sam thing, you and bones, you and gorkon.

it's drinking me crazy not knowing what you're getting up to, how those conversations are going, that you're having them without me. as you can imagine, i haven't been in contact with gorkon at all. i think it'd be a bad idea, so no one ELSE needs to tell me it's a bad idea, like sam. i've been talking to sam, but not about the klingon stuff. i mean, i tried to advise him as best i could without hitting the roof but bones put an end to all that, said it was no good for my blood pressure and he'd know if i was disobeying orders whatever the hell THAT means.

i know he didn't mean he had a man on the inside, because YOU wouldn't rat me out to my doctor. except that having written that sentence it totally seems like something you'd do. not because it's a betrayal or anything like that, but because you'd be concerned for my safety and you'd want me to do the right thing and i WOULDN'T do the right thing so you'd have to go behind my back and talk to bones.

i get it.

i have a lot of time to think about these things all cooped up in here. lucky you, getting to hear all about them.

he can't have felt the loss like i did because he was halfway across the galaxy when it happened, he didn't have to deal with ANY of this, spock. and it's not like i still hold it against him, but the two aren't the same. i should probably work out a deal with myself where i stop talking about it because i am aware i'm making an asshole out of myself every time i bring it up.

how are things going with gorkon? you can tell me, and i'll try not to freak out.

xo

j
Jim, peace and long life. :)

I will inform you of Gorkon’s stance as he has presented it to me and allow you to draw your own conclusions. If you wish for further clarification beyond what I have imparted then I suggest you make contact with Gorkon himself, after having scrubbed your PADD of all memory of the spelling “Dorkon” to avoid potential offense.

As a young and politically minded Klingon, Gorkon is aware that continued militarization on Kronos and among the Klingon fleet will result in the escalation of hostilities beyond the scope of Klingon resources. He believes that to maintain hostilities will result in the elimination of his people—and while some Klingons believe that death in battle is the only way, he is not of the same mind when presented with the likelihood that death itself will be Klingon’s future.

The families that have not supported Gorkon and his bid for Federation acceptance have all but proven him to be correct in his assertions, as they have already depleted their own resources, leading them to forge their temporary alliance with certain opportunistic Romulan houses. That alliance is a polarizing event, as factions in the Klingon High Council that were not prepared to support Gorkon’s bid for peace now recognize that it may be their only true choice.

Continued efforts made on Gorkon’s part to alter misconceptions between both sides—Federation and Klingon—have shown his people that the Federation are not what initial, unfavorable encounters have led them to believe. It is the hope of your brother, Prince George Samuel, that the same will be said of Federation opinion.

There are honorable Klingons, Jim. Surely you must acknowledge that no individual should be prejudged for the actions of another of their race. Were it so, then Vulcan and Earth would never have found reason to ally themselves at all.

I do not intend to upset you further. However, Doctor McCoy has suggested on three separate instances that I am the only individual who will give him a “straight answer”—he elaborated to expand this to “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”—about your health. He seems to have found reason to suspect you are not always honest with him. In the interest of keeping you healthy and safe, a temporary alliance of my own made with the doctor is prudent.

I have every indication now that you are my t’hy’la, Jim, and as such, I must do whatever is in my capacity to assure your well-being.

Yours,

Spock
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Remiss in duties.

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: I'm allergic to thinking about it yeah.
STARDATE: 2250.318
SECURE CHANNEL

hey, spock :) 

listen i need

i need a bit of a definition clarification on the word t'hy'la because i'm looking it up and it's highly variable i don't think i've found anything definitive i mean you'd think there would be the whole POINT of getting a definition is for it to be definitive

i just

i wanna be sure i'm understanding what you said here because that seems like

the kind of think you'd want to understand

that I would want to understand

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: Sorry I think I misfired that one.
STARDATE: 2250.318
SECURE CHANNEL

OK, let's try that again.

i can see the sense in peace. i just wish it wasn't with the klingons.

i don't think i'm gonna talk to gorkon, i don't want to jeopardize everyone else's hard work based on my own stupid feelings. it kills me to say this but i think that sam's the better man for the job. i'll stand by him and you making whatever statements he wants to make, but i don't know whether i'd trust me to go speaking extemporaneously on the issues at hand.

i'm still wrapping my head around the concept so like i said i wouldn't put me in the field but if i can be useful then i want to help. duty and all, right?

i wanna be a respectable t'hy'la and all. if i understand the definition which i'm still not sure i do.

got another physical tomorrow, i'm gonna tell bones exactly what i think about him having all these
secret conversations with my t’hy’la.

you gonna help me pronounce that one too? i'd like to study it. on your mouth. with your tongue.

miss you, spock.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: You cannot be allergic to a thought.
STARDATE: 2250.318
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. :)  

The definition of t’hy’la is, as you have discovered for yourself, one of variables. For certain, a commonality of its numerous interpretations is that it has always been employed to profound implications. I trust you will excuse me if I do not choose here to elaborate on my personal definitions as attributed to my choice of designating it to you. I meant to imply, or rather to underscore and emphasize, your importance to me, Jim. As a Vulcan—as someone who has always endeavored to safeguard and uphold that which is Vulcan—to further divulge sentimental connotations or emotional content is anathema.

I will assist you on the pronunciation once we are reunited. It is a point of study better suited to personal instruction. I shall teach your tongue how to form the syllables when there is a suitable occasion—that is, when we are together.

I am not the only one believes that trust would not be misplaced in you were you to speak, even extemporaneously, on these issues.

While there is a case to be made for the dispassionate and straightforwardly reasoned argument, and while I am myself in favor of receiving my facts presented without emotion, there is admittedly more that an individual such as yourself—an individual of passions and a passionate approach—may bring to the public stage. A compelling speaker is, I have learned during my time on Earth and with its people, not always the most accurate, but the one to whom the majority of those listening are able to relate.

It is my opinion that there is much that you would bring to this cause—but only should you truly believe in it.

I am yours,

Spock

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: T’hy’la.
STARDATE: 2250.318
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, I have been remiss in my duties as a husband and as an ambassador of Vulcan. More importantly, I have been remiss in my duties as your friend. Though I consider you friend, brother, and lover, the truth remains that what I feel for you—though my very education suggests I should be ashamed of it—has only been heightened in the wake of the threat to your person during the attack on Starfleet’s headquarters on the day of our planned wedding ceremony. It would seem foolish in the extreme not to inform you of that which is true, all factors considered. That you might not know would be a grave error on my part to adhere, at the very least, to my principles of honesty.

“XO”

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: What are you, the thought police?
STARDATE: 2250.319

SECURE CHANNEL

ok, i guess i shouldn't have pushed you on the definitions. i kind of like that that it's got a few, it could apply in a wide variety of scenarios.

you know me, i'm a variable guy. anyway, i can accept that it means a few different things at once because mostly i do too. suits me, in that case. it really kind of suits us. and i'm

it means a lot to me that you busted that out, spock. i know that emotional closeness isn't really your deal and i know that this distance could've easily just existed between us without you being uncomfortable in the slightest, so it means a lot to me that you were willing to bridge that gap. which isn't to say that i think you're thrilled that we're apart or anything like that, but i know that it a lack of physical proximity isn't exactly the worst thing in the world for you.

not that i'm saying it would be for me.

i still think you might be overestimating my capacity to do good work here, but i promise i'll give it some thought. i'm not the worst person you could have to boost morale, but i'm not exactly what you'd call great at speeches either. i tend to improvise after i've already gone and got the script approved, which is apparently kind of a nightmare for the people involved. who knew, right?

you're not remiss in anything, spock.

i love you too.

i'd have to, right, to consider peace with the klingons. ;)

xo

j
FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I am not the thought police. I am merely informing you of a fact. Consult Doctor McCoy for confirmation that a thought allergy is psychosomatic and not a true diagnosis.
STARDATE: 2250.319
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. :) 

Despite your assurances to the contrary, I am aware that I have been remiss as far as emotional reciprocation has been concerned. You have been in need of that which I have not provided or could not provide. It is likely that what appears to be distance formed by a lack of affection has impacted you negatively since our union on Vulcan. What I believed I had offered and what I believed I could not offer did, inarguably, present you with a measure of uncertainty regarding my intentions. I know this to be true.

Vulcans do not express emotion with regularity as humans are so readily able. As a Vulcan I will not express emotion with regularity as you are so readily able. But if I thought you knew that which I had not shared, then I supposed incorrectly.

As I said before, there is still material I have to learn as regards humanity. In this, “cultural exchange” becomes a personal matter. Our matter. And it matters to me that I should learn it, in order to meet your expectations, or hopes, to the best of my abilities.

That you have committed yourself to understanding the limitations placed on me is proof, again, that you are far better suited to these matters on the political level than you are currently aware. That level of sensitivity is not commonly shared, in my experience.

I shall commit myself, then, to offering whatever I may to further that understanding.

It is of immeasurable worth to me that you are considering peace with the Klingons. You are correct. That action does have meaning.

This was, I believe, “the least I could do”, given the circumstances.

I am yours,
Spock

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FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: You just don't want to be the only one who talked to him about this butter thing I see how it is, Spock.
STARDATE: 2250.320
SECURE CHANNEL

spock, i'm not making empty reassurances or anything when i say you're doing all right. i'm not as needy as i pretend to be. i don't know why i do that, actually. but trust me, you can relax. seriously. you have your strengths and i have mine and we're both working on the stuff that's less strengthy.

if you're still confident in my speechifying abilities after that then i guess you really are stuck with
me. i'd say you're blinded by love if i didn't think you'd hate that expression. look at us, getting to
know each other. of course, it hasn't entirely stopped me from saying stupid things but at least i
acknowledge their stupidity am i right? that's a step forward. i think it's a step forward.

anyway, listen to me totally avoiding the topic of klingons like i think you're gonna let me get
away with that. i will say that the least i can do is come around on the idea, since you're working so
hard to try and shake yourself up for me. not that i'd be doing the klingon thing FOR you, but
you've been instrumental in convincing me. for some reason, when you make me mad i don't
totally lose my cool the way i do with sam.

it's pretty invaluable, actually.

i think that might have something to do with why mom likes you so much.

i can't believe i just said that. just a little something personal in there with our cultural exchange.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: I am now regretting having broached the topic with Doctor McCoy, if that is what you
mean.
STARDATE: 2250.320
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. :) 

Having thoroughly addressed the subject regarding our private exchange of cultures, it seems most
sensible to proceed now to other topics of discussion without belaboring the point further. As you
know it is not within my nature to be this expressive or demonstrative and I likely will not prove to
be so, save for rare occasion, in the future. If this should at any juncture prove disappointing to you
or detrimental to your pursuit of satisfaction, emotionally, and personal happiness…

Recall to my mind the contents of this particular exchange, immediately available to you for
quotation, though I see no reason why that should be necessary, and I will amend my behavior
accordingly. I do not wish to deprive you of that which you deserve; it is my opinion that, in this
matter, that which you desire is that which you deserve.

I am your husband. It would not be preferable that you should have cause to regret it.

I do not intend for you to regret it.

I also do not intend for you to regret any political involvement in the coming days. If you have
considered Gorkon’s appeal to the Federation at large and you have determined, for yourself, that
his course is the most logical, then and only then will your support provide that which the
campaign has been lacking. I do not think that you would acquiesce to support a cause on the basis
that your support would mean something to me, personally—it is my conclusion that your support
will mean more to your people, and to the Federation, but I would not compromise your principles
for the sake of pleasing me.
FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: Good.
STARDATE: 2250.321
SECURE CHANNEL

spock,

i don't think that you have to worry about me saving this to use against you in the future, but in the interest of total disclosure i guess i WILL hang onto it, because you told me to and i respect your judgment in our relationship matters. and in all matters, but the for the moment the context is relationship-based.

promise i'll stop talking about it now.

no more gooey emotional stuff.

but you're good. you're good, we're good. if we're not, then we can talk about it more. no big deal.

look at us communicating. we almost make marriage look easy.

i wish the klingon thing could be solved by clear communication, but the truth is i can't see how speaking my mind would go with a room full of klingons. even open-minded ones like gorkon. he seems all right, for a klingon, but i'm not sure i'll be able to properly overcome my natural bias. i mean, i want to help. i do. i know LOGICALLY that gorkon's fighting against the guys who killed my dad, but i can't help but ask myself why he couldn't have implemented this whole thing sooner. maybe it could've ended differently, you know.

i'm having trouble letting it go, spock. i don't think it's the kind of thing you can meditate away, either.

i guess if you have any advice on how to get over uncomfortable emotions...

well, look at who i'm talking to.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: You believe it is “good” that I regret consulting with your primary physician regarding matters of your health?
Jim, peace and long life. :)

As on prior occasions, I would recommend meditation.

Vulcans have never experienced the leisure of a dearth of deep emotions. We have them; you know this to be true. In our past, this represented a dangerous threat to all our people. Therefore, it is rather an applied discipline to control these deep emotions, rather than allow them to control us. An applied discipline—and a way of life. On Vulcan, we have dedicated ourselves to maintaining that control. It is a matter of survival, of progress, and of wisdom.

I would not suggest that you should follow the precepts of Surak when I recommend meditation to you, Jim. Meditation will merely allow you to confront that which troubles you and thereby examine its control over you. If you are capable of recognizing, intellectually, that there is ample merit in Gorkon's vision for a united Federation rather than the escalation of hostilities and militarization, then it will be possible—if not a simple task—to adjust the power of your emotions so that it is kept in check by the reins of your mind.

Were I there with you, I would guide you into a meditative trance myself. However, we are apart, though I would not rule out the possibility that you will be able to find your own peace in your own time, vis-à-vis your own methods.

You have always done things differently, Jim. This is not an incorrect assessment of your originality.

Inform me if you wish to speak on the matter further. As it stands, I shall continue to finalize plans for our reunion.

I am yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: Yeah, maybe you won't do it again.

I’m gonna come right out and say it, i don't know whether you’ll believe me, but i am INCREDIBLY bad at meditation. is it possible to be immune to meditation? like, if there's something chemically off in my brain that prevents me from being able to achieve inner peace? because i'm pretty sure that's the case right now. i'm a medical marvel. i'd call bones in to take a look, but maybe we'd better hear from some vulcan experts on the subject, once it's safe to travel back there. they can examine my brain for science and stuff. i'll be famous.

for something other than crashing my motorcycle in the rain and naked orion girls in my bedroom, that is.

can't believe we still haven't worked our way around to you and gaila meeting up yet. you're
PRACTICALLY acquainted thanks to how much time i've spent talking to both of you about each other, but it's not exactly the same. she was gonna be at the wedding, but since that never happened it's not much of an excuse.

feels weird to be thinking about all the mundane stuff now that we're settling into PEACE talks with the KLINGONS of all things. sorry, i had to emphasize it just to see how weird it looks. sam's arranging for me to try and rally some of the most vocal opposition, make some speeches to try and coax some of the fence-sitters onto our side.

their side. i don't know. it's a side. i guess it's ours.

have you heard anything? about us. i mean, our reunion. you said something about us being reunited and i haven't heard anything about it so i'm wondering whether you've been doing some eavesdropping and then using it to my benefit.

pretty sexy actually.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: In matters concerning your benefit I cannot promise to do anything other than what is best for you.
STARDATE: 2250.322
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. :) 

Now that you have appeared publicly in association with Prince George Samuel, in order to show solidarity and a united front from the royal house of Earth, you are no longer considered under strict house arrest—in my understanding, that is. I have also confirmed that you are now escorted by high security detail and the individual who assisted your escape immediately preceding the attack on our wedding day, Hendorff, has been assigned to you, along with others, highly qualified, who are tasked with protecting you above all else. Granted, there is still a measure of risk—once which I shall refrain from calculating and stating for your edification—but I can only assume from your discomfort in maximum security confinement that this change is a welcome one.

Since you believe you are allergic to certain thoughts as well as to the practice of meditation, it would seem to me that conversation—dialogue; discussion; diplomatic inquiry; and, finally, distraction—would serve you better in settling your thoughts.

Have you found this to be true?

In any case, now that you have been released—to an extent—I do not believe that it would be outside the realm of possibility to request that we are once again returned to one another’s side. It was toward this end goal that I have encouraged these steps you have taken, though I will assure you that my primary intent was to ameliorate the situation in which you had found yourself, not to improve my own through a renegotiation of my current living arrangements.
FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: I know, you're tricky like that. Gotta keep my eye on you. Both eyes, even.
STARDATE: 2250.323
SECURE CHANNEL

you caught that? i wasn't going to tell you we were making an official appearance just in case everything went south, but i'm glad you saw. with me and sam in the same room together, you never know what's gonna go down, but i guess things went all right. i caught some boos early on, but i think i acquitted myself admirably.

listen to me, i sound like a real pro. wrote that myself. i write all these myself.

can you believe i got myself stuck with cupcake of all people for a security detail? i swear, you say ONE nice thing about a guy's ability under pressure and than all of a sudden you're stuck staring at his big meathead day in and day out.

you know, you could've told me you were trying to get me to come around on the basis of trying to get us together more quickly. it would've lit a fire under my ass that much sooner.

i mean, not to say that you're all that's important to me, but you're motivating. you're motivational. you might not have the whatsit, the necessary passion to get people going and cheering for you in a crowd, but i find you very compelling.

well, i guess it doesn't matter now.

or it DOES matter, but not in any way that's currently productive.

looking forward to seeing you, spock. even if we're stuck trailing a regiment of chaperones.

xo

j

FROM: Spock
TO: Jim
SUBJECT: Then you are watching me.
STARDATE: 2250.323
SECURE CHANNEL

Jim, peace and long life. :)

The matter of cupcakes is one that I have always found to be of mild concern. As they are cakes that are not made in or with cups, the appellation has always seemed to me to be a grave misnomer,
preparing an individual to expect something specific, then offering them another experience entirely.

However, of this I am certain: there are no cupcakes assigned currently to active security duty. Therefore I must conclude that this is a nickname you have given the guard known as Hendorff and I can only trust that he does not find this nickname offensive, given that he behaved to his credit in protecting you, and should be treated with the respect such behavior deserves.

I cannot think that you would purposefully refer to him by a nickname that did not meet his approval. Is this ‘Cupcake’ similar to the nickname ‘Bones’ for Doctor Leonard McCoy? Does he suggest, falsely, that he does not appreciate the reference, in order to maintain an outward sense of pride, while inwardly the affection inherent in the act of nicknaming pleases him?

Once again, the behavioral choices of humans are fascinating.

Your speech, according to Gorkon, was inspiring. He harbors respect for both the princes of Earth, though he must have already informed you of the same. Klingons are not like Vulcans; they are capable of lying. But when it comes to respect, they take their honor as seriously as they treat their battles. Well done, Jim.

In other news, I will see you tomorrow.

I am yours,

Spock

FROM: J
TO: S
SUBJECT: I thought you might like that.
STARDATE: 2250.324
SECURE CHANNEL

sorry, i didn't mean to upset you with the existential problems of cupcakes, but in my defense i didn't realize it was such a problem for you. when we're together again, i promise to explain all the minutiae of cupcakes to you, frosting and all. from the wrapper up. i'll even unwrap YOU for demonstrative effect.

you're gonna miss these colorful little statements when i'm gone, aren't you? i mean, i'll still SAY things, but you won't have them recorded for posterity. then again, with that memory of yours it might as well be.

the hendorff thing isn't exactly a mutual decision. i mean, it didn't start OUT as a particularly affectionate nickname. we didn't get along so much in the beginning, things were said... mostly on my end. anyway, things are better now. which is a weird thing to say about someone who works for you -- i wouldn't call us friends or anything, but i think we've worked out a weird system of respect between us. he doesn't exactly like being called cupcake but i think he sees it as a mark of -- well, not respect. it singles him out. which i guess is good from a royal perspective.

and i think with that sentence i have officially contributed too much time to talking about hendorff in these letters. but my other prospects are gorkon (total buzzkill) and relating with sam (bleh) so you can't realllllly blame me.
means a lot that you think i did good.

i'll show you my gratitude tomorrow, in person.

very restrained.

for me, anyway.

xo

j

*
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

There's actually only two more chapters left after this. Whaaat.

The Vulcan Consulate in San Francisco is, not unexpectedly, far removed from the human side of Earth. It is nothing like palace life. It is quiet; not necessarily peaceful, but comparatively private; ordered, structured, and logically minded. Business proceeds unaffected and operates without distraction, no matter the troubles occurring on a galactic scale outside the confines of Vulcan political ground.

It is, therefore, nothing like life with Prince James Tiberius Kirk.

There are no lizards and no perplexing name choices for said lizards. There is a single bed in which Spock meditates more often than he chooses to achieve unconscious rest; that single bed exists without Jim’s body within it, a body even warmer than Spock had ever anticipated, and large, heavy, aesthetically appealing, and profoundly graced with a multitude of quirks and murmurs during sleep, questing hands and a broad chest, even broader shoulders.

Despite the lack of Jim, the memories of Jim swell to fill the empty spaces left behind by his physical form.

Spock thinks about him.

Spock thinks about him constantly.

If the realization of that vulnerability was not already clear, the danger presented—the lack of a connection establishing, without pause, Jim’s safety—served only to underscore for Spock that which should have already been apparent.

His affection. His caring. His distinct preference for the company of one individual above all others. There is within him a sentimentality regarding Jim, one which he has found difficulty reconciling with his strict Vulcan upbringing. There is no room for Jim Kirk among the precepts of Surak—none that Spock has discovered. And he has been searching.

It does not distract him from his duties. He continues as they are made obvious to him, discussing the reasons for peace with the Klingon Gorkon, discussing those reasons with Prince George Samuel, meditating on those reasons before broaching the topic with Jim, and committing himself to that which seems inevitable. There will be either peace or war. Peace is preferable.

Peace is regularly preferable.

On the morning of his reunion with Jim, he is neither nervous nor excited. He simply is. He is approached by the guards, both human and Vulcan, removing him from consulate grounds in an armored hovercar, driving in relative silence along the river and across the Golden Gate Bridge. Out the tinted window, Spock observes the sites he once passed on the back of Jim’s hoverbike, approaching and at one point exceeding the local speed limit.

After that ride, Jim’s hair showed the signs of the wind and the damp air. It curled in the front.
Spock’s fingers curled inward toward his palm to control the resulting urge to touch that curl, but again, it infiltrated his thoughts. It remains in his thoughts, but he is in control of the resultant emotions such thoughts carry.

The car ride to Jim’s location is not any longer than Spock has been informed it will be; if it appears longer, that is due to the relativity of time.

It is not an entirely logical theory, and yet Spock cannot deny having experienced its effects and thus falling prey to its existence the same as anyone other sentient being.

They are not being escorted to the palace proper but a secondary location: his former Majesty King George Kirk’s established home for raising the children outside the public eye. It is within the bounds of San Francisco city proper, and therefore not the childhood home in Iowa referenced by Jim in three separate dialogues shared between them, and a fourth wherein the mention was merely implied.

However, it is to be understood that some sentimental attachment would still be attributed to the location. Spock has therefore prepared himself to anticipate some measure of sensitivity from Jim regarding the matter of his father and his shared childhood with Prince George Samuel.

The house itself is large and could accurately be described as palatial in nature, perched on a cliff that overlooks the city’s noted Golden Gate Bridge. Architectural notes draw from Earth’s Mediterranean influence, creating an image that, from the correct vantage point, could easily be promotional material for the San Francisco tourism department.

If such a thing is required for morale, Spock will save the information until such a time as it becomes relevant.

There is a figure standing on one of the balconies overlooking the cliff-side drop into the ocean. It can only be Jim, not simply because his posture is immediately recognizable from a distance—it is—but because there is no one else who would be contrary enough to place themselves in such an accessible point of vantage with no sign of security detailing.

Spock retrieves his PADD from his personal belongings as the car pulls into park.

You are compromising your own security.

His view of Jim disappears as they come around the house, but he is afforded a momentary glimpse of him scrambling to answer the notification before Spock is called upon to exit the vehicle.

are you SPYING on me???

Spock replies: It was my intent to inform you that the tactics you refer to by making allusions to spying are unnecessary, as you have currently made yourself visible to anyone with eyes and the ability to use them.

Jim’s response is immediate.

oh my god you’re HERE.

‘Your Majesty?’ Spock’s personal security team greets him at the car door: two Vulcans and one human, though not a one of them is familiar enough to have earned themselves a moniker such as Cupcake. ‘We will escort you inside now, if you are amenable.’

Spock nods in acquiescence, tucks his PADD against his chest, and steps out of the car. They are in
a garage, the attributes of which Spock notes for future reference—should it be required. If they are called upon to need an escape for any reason, it may well be required. Spock commits the floor plan to memory, along with all visible exits. He has requested a floor plan for the entire building to be delivered to him under a secure channel; when it arrives, he will memorize that too.

There is no detail too minimal when it comes to Jim’s safety—and Spock’s safety along with it. Should anything resembling harm befall Spock while he is on Earth, it will strain the relationship between his people and Jim’s. And should anything resembling harm befall Jim, Spock is not certain what his reaction will be.

He has therefore prepared himself to the utmost, no detail left unaccounted for. He will do whatever it takes to prevent either eventuality.

Spock’s security detail meets with Jim’s bodyguards once they head through the checkpoint between the garage and the Kirk’s cliff-side family home proper. It is the level of preparation that Spock recognizes to be necessary, though he also recognizes, were Jim present to witness it, that Jim would find the entire display wasteful, tedious, and frustrating.

Jim’s complaints are regularly made half in earnest and half due to a natural desire to deflect full emotional impact—for despite his keen awareness of his emotions, the force of them at times unsettles him. He is not afraid of their true meaning. Rather, he is uncertain of them.

Spock understands this.

‘This way, Your Majesty.’ Hendorff, also known to Jim and now Spock as Cupcake, beckons Spock forward. Spock follows, whereupon he passes through a wide, sunny hall and into what appears at first glance to be a study, one with a view over the cliff and out across the water.

It is a handsome sight. Spock approaches the window to observe the same images a young James Tiberius Kirk must have viewed on countless occasions as a little boy—with his small hands pressed to the glass, leaving thoughtless fingerprints, wholly elsewhere than the present, while contemplating diving into the river, especially the monumental splash such a dive would engender.

If Spock knows him.

Spock does know him.

‘Oh my God.’ The door opens; Spock knows Jim is there before he speaks from the sudden intake of breath in which he indulges upon catching sight of Spock within. Vulcans do not indulge themselves or one another in the practice of surprises, but Jim is fond of being surprised—pleasantly, that is. Adjustments must be made. Compromises must be reached. That is the core of their marriage. Spock must adapt; Jim cannot be the only one who accepts an amended method of being. ‘You’re here.’

‘Indeed, as you had already surmised, I am,’ Spock replies. He turns to face Jim, who is still within the open doorway, one hand on the doorframe, the other raking its fingers through his hair. It is longer than Spock recalls having seen it last, but with its unmistakable messiness, which Spock finds suits him.

‘Spock,’ Jim says. All his breath leaves him. His cheeks are ruddy. Doctor McCoy was correct in imparting the information that Jim is well—as well as can be expected. ‘Spock, look, I’m about to run across the room and kiss you, all right? Fair warning.’

‘I consider myself warned,’ Spock replies.
Spock braces himself appropriately, although the distinction of the particular emotion with which he is struggling could be referred to accurately as anticipation.

Jim does not overstate his intentions and therefore Spock is not startled when Jim does indeed rush across the room. They collide with a force for which Spock has adequately prepared himself so as to negate the possibility of being knocked over. He is equally ready for Jim to wrap his arms around him—one of the cornerstones of the human practice of hugging, which Spock has taught himself to accept, if not quite reciprocate, when it is offered.

When it is Jim who offers it.

His body floods with warmth at their contact; Jim’s arms are only possessed of a strength limited by his human physicality, but they are strong. Spock does not enjoy the proximity that comes with being held so tightly but neither is he immune to its effects, or, more specifically, the effects it has on Jim. From the demeanor conveyed through his letters, their time spent in separated protective custody was detrimental to his mental well-being.

In addition, there was the troubling matter with the Klingons—providing an unfortunate confluence of events that contributed to Jim’s sense of unrest.

It is, therefore, important to give him an appropriate sense of reassurance.

‘Jesus, Spock, you’re making me feel like I’m hugging a commemorative statue, here.’ Jim’s breath is hot against Spock’s cheek. ‘You wanna maybe at least act like you missed me too?’

‘It would be unwise to mistake my lack of familiarity with this gesture for a lack of feeling,’ Spock reminds him.

‘Hug me back,’ Jim says.

He is, above all things, insistent and stubborn. Spock respects the honesty of it. Another person, one less willing to make himself clear, might have found difficulty in communicating with a Vulcan. Jim has risen admirably to the challenge.

The least Spock can do is return the gesture.

He will return the hug.

Jim’s hands are creeping down the muscles of Spock’s back from trapezius to latissimus dorsi; Spock recites the names of the pertinent anatomical structure in his head. When Jim’s fingers graze the external oblique muscles, Spock puts his arms around Jim’s shoulders. There is no remaining distance to close between them, but it is his understanding that by reciprocating the touch he is affording Jim reassurance on an emotional level.

‘All right, all right.’ Jim wriggles under Spock’s touch, twisting his body away only after relaxing into his hold. ‘Not in front of Cupcake, yeah? You’re gonna make me look soft in front of my bodyguards.’

Spock glances to Hendorff. Hendorff pointedly looks in another direction, though the act is for show only. He sees all that transpires in the vicinity of Jim because it is his job to see—to watch. That is the lack of privacy to which Jim has on prior occasion referred.

Jim’s cheeks are flushed redder. ‘We’re good here, by the way. Hendorff.’ He looks up at Spock from beneath his lashes, a position he has chosen in the past. It is singularly effective for reasons Spock cannot name or explain. They are a mystery. It appears that Jim may be seeking approval,
but there is a light in the blue of his eyes that suggests he is seeking something else as well. ‘Spock’s got super strength—did you know that? You’re dismissed.’ Jim straightens with a brief but convincing presence, a prince in more than name only. ‘We’re good. We’d like the privacy. Thanks, Hendorff.’

Hendorff nods. ‘Your Majesty,’ he replies, and closes the door on his way out.

Spock does not hear his footsteps receding down the length of the hall.

‘He’s right outside,’ Jim confirms. ‘Lucky he doesn’t have Vulcan hearing, right? Cause I’m pretty sure he doesn’t even want to eavesdrop on whatever he thinks we’ll be getting up to in here.’

Spock maintains a diplomatic silence. It betrays no sense of curiosity—while Jim searches Spock’s face and his expression softens, then hardens, then softens again, Spock’s expression does not shift or offer or respond.

‘Which, speaking of…’ Jim pauses; he does that often for effect, and it is, admittedly, effective. ‘What are we getting up to in here?’

‘We hugged,’ Spock replies. ‘Then we dismissed Hendorff, your bodyguard, and now, we are conversing.’

‘Another word for conversation is intercourse.’ Jim clears his throat. He does that often, as well, though what intended effect is born behind it, Spock requires further study to form a satisfactory theory. There is a sizeable chance that it is without motive—that it is purely random.

‘That is true.’

‘And that was the worst line I’ve ever—God, Spock, this is definitely the part where you kiss me and keep me from spewing line after terrible line.’

‘Ah,’ Spock says.

He would not break with tradition or ignore the proper order of actions as they have been outlined for him. To do so would be to display willful stubbornness. It is logical to behave as Jim has instructed, though Spock’s stiffness remains an element that he predicts Jim will notice and give undue consideration. It means nothing other than Spock’s unfamiliarity with the gesture; it should not connote unwillingness.

Spock takes Jim’s hand, which is warm with the pulse of red blood. Jim tightens his grip around Spock’s fingers with such natural, instinctive ease—though he gentles a moment later, consideration that might, to someone with lesser self-control, inspire frustration.

Spock would not mind something other than gentleness. However, Jim does not know this, because Spock has not told him.

‘You’re really gonna—’ Jim begins.

Spock kisses him.

Jim’s mouth opens under his; his quick tongue darts past his lips and Spock’s almost immediately. As a teacher of the human kiss, Spock would have no other instructor.

Although Jim would not consider himself possessed of the necessary skills to educate others, Spock has discovered that he is in the most important ways a capable mentor. While he is not gifted with a
patience that many would accurately associate with the task of teaching, Jim does possess a thirst for knowledge that in turn grants him an understanding of those who seek to pursue similar interests.

Spock cannot immediately conjure to mind a better example of mutual interest than their kissing.

He does not need contact—Jim’s fingers wrapped around the bones of Spock’s wrist where his sleeve does not extend to the base of his hand—to know that the interest is mutual. It is a fact that Jim has spoken of often enough both in his letters and in person for Spock to experience certainty surrounding that particular sentiment.

Jim’s mouth is hot and gives willingly beneath Spock’s own as Spock takes the implied opening as invitation, slipping his tongue over the swell of Jim’s lower lip, finding a ridge in the skin where it is chapped. Jim does not wince. Of all the things Spock has observed him to be forthcoming about, his own discomfort is not among them. Pain makes him secretive, whether it is emotional or otherwise.

‘Jesus, Spock.’ There is a distinct lassitude to Jim’s muscles as he sinks against Spock’s body. ‘It’s been forever.’

‘That is factually incorrect,’ Spock replies.

The words are slurred against Jim’s mouth, pressed close in a continuation of their bodily contact. Jim’s hands slip from Spock’s wrist to feel over and along his sides, tracing the shape of Spock’s pectoral muscles, holding onto Spock’s body to keep himself on his feet.

Jim is not a small man, but with Spock’s advantageous strength, it is not difficult to bear his weight. In letters Jim was prone to exaggeration with regards to his physical appearance, describing a much stockier individual than the one who is currently embracing Spock in his arms.

The height different between them is slight, not liable to prove a true obstacle to their closeness, but Spock is aware that Jim has noticed it. His appreciation of it varies from day to day, depending on whether he views it as a hindrance or an advantage.

Just now it is an advantage; Jim can use him as support.

That is an area in which Spock has already accustomed himself to being used. It is a necessary part of the marriage contract, but more than that, it aligns with his own personal desires.

A rare moment of concordance—which some might consider a stroke of luck. A variety of factors, none of them so variable as providence, are the true source.

‘Well, it felt like forever.’ Jim rallies, a task for which he is particularly well-suited. ‘How’s that? I swear, I haven’t been careless with my words when it comes with Dork—Gorkon. That was on purpose.’

Spock lifts a brow in order to remind Jim that they have already discussed the dangers of referring to Gorkon by a derogatory nickname. While it may not be something about which Hendorff the bodyguard can complain, it will not be appreciated with the same lenience by a Klingon warrior and official, no matter how understanding he may be compared to the rest of his people.

‘I’m a little distracted, Spock,’ Jim whispers.

He has purposefully chosen to press his words against Spock’s jaw. His lips and teeth skid a centimeter and a half below the lobe of Spock’s ear.
This is what Spock has come to recognize as ‘nuzzling’. Jim is partial to it and Spock intends to find the time to discover what about it pleases him and why he prefers it above other forms of contact.

‘I mean,’ Jim continues, words slurring down the side of Spock’s throat until he is, certainly not surprisingly, stopped by the line of Spock’s collar, ‘I’m more interested in kissing you a lot than I am in Gorkon right now. Or any Klingons. I’ve had so much Klingon lately and it’s time for a little Vulcan.’

‘A little Vulcan,’ Spock repeats.

Jim bites the fabric of Spock’s collar. He nips at it as a baby sehlat would, causing Spock to once again register surprise.

‘A not-so-little-but-definitely-half-Vulcan,’ Jim amends. He pauses. His shoulders brace as though for impact. The closest accurate description Spock considers is a wince, but it is more than that. Spock studies it at every juncture where their bodies make contact. ‘I keep bringing that up. Is that a turn-off?’

‘A turn-off,’ Spock repeats again.

Jim pulls back enough that he is able to meet Spock’s eyes; once again Spock is forced, not entirely unpleasantly or to his regret, to contemplate the colors they offer: a clear blue, the shade cerulean, clouded by seconds, moments, impulses, and always returning to their brighter emotions. Spock is aware that he cannot be ‘lost’ in anyone’s eyes as the common poetic descriptor asserts but he would easily be able to study that color and its complexities for at least an hour—perhaps more, simply for the enjoyment of that experience.


Spock glances around the room. ‘There is no bed here.’

‘You researched, Spock. So you’ve gotta know that beds are optional.’

Spock capitulates with a nod. ‘That is not factually incorrect.’ He must clarify. ‘Do you intend to engage in coitus here in this study without a bed?’

Jim blinks. ‘God,’ he says. ‘I missed you so much, Spock. You’re driving me insane right now and I still missed you so much.’

‘I did not intend—’

‘I know. I know. You did not intend; I know. I’m having a moment.’ Jim cups Spock’s face in both hands; their noses are less than a centimeter apart, point seven five centimeters, less when Jim breathes and shifts. ‘Sorry.’ Jim drops his hands but does not, Spock notes, wheel away as he might have on another occasion. ‘Didn’t mean to get all up in your Vulcan space.’

‘My Vulcan space is your space as well,’ Spock replies. ‘Your half-Vulcan space.’

Jim’s eyes brighten.

‘So it’s not a problem.’

‘To what are you referring?’ Spock asks.
They are still within adequate proximity for him to feel Jim’s breath on his face when Jim exhales. He breathes as he does everything in life: with a robust enthusiasm that has an obvious area of effect to those standing within the event horizon. He is comparable to a geyser when it explodes free of the earth, soaking everyone around it.

Spock is not drenched. Neither is he a person for whom metaphor holds compelling sway—and yet his time spent with Jim has afforded his mental processes a certain flair for the dramatic.

‘The half-Vulcan thing,’ Jim says. ‘I’m just trying to be accurate, you know. I don’t want to make our relationship into—into some kind of Vulcan-Human political tongue-bath.’

He bounces onto the balls of his feet, the flexible soles of his boots giving way easily with the movement. He is dressed informally for the occasion.

They are his favorite boots as they are more comfortable than others with less wear.

‘Is there a significance to the expression tongue-bath, given the context?’ Spock asks.

Jim’s fingers tug at the loose fabric that forms Spock’s collar, what humans colloquially refer to as a ‘turtleneck’ due to the garment’s resemblance to a turtle’s extra folds of skin. It is another example of Jim’s people’s fondness for metaphors, which Spock can approximate but never truly appreciate on his own terms.

Jim settles his palms on either side of Spock’s throat. His hands are warm, fingers stretching beneath his shirt to settle over the separate links of his vertebrae, as if he is committing their count to memory.

‘Something you wanna ask me, Spock? Something to do with tongues?’

‘I would suggest that I gain, at the least, more familiarity with that organ than the paparazzi photographers have accumulated,’ Spock says.

Jim’s laugh is close enough to feel, tightening his stomach muscles and traveling upward into his chest, leaving his mouth in another gust of hot air. Spock bridges the distance between them for a second time, mouth closing easily over Jim’s despite the difference in size.

‘You’re trying to smother me,’ Jim mutters, but he lets his hands fall to Spock’s waist again, pulling him in hard to close a distance he himself had put between them.

He is always protesting the things he wants the most. It is entirely illogical, and even moreso for Spock to appreciate that trait in his personality, given its contradictions.

In his reading on the subject of casual sexual intercourse between romantic partners, alternate locations where no bed is available included a wall, of which there are four within easy access.

The wall closest to the window is not preferable, as there is a bookcase against it on the right side, a potted plant on the left. The wall across from the window faces outward onto the hall where Hendorff maintains guard, and is not preferable for that reason primarily, and because it offers the best view from the window secondarily. While there is merely a promontory and a steep drop to the water, Spock is aware of the paparazzis’ imagination and perseverance to getting their ‘scoop’ and there is no reason to be careless when less public alternatives are equally possible.

The wall to the right is not easily accessible via a few straightforward steps in its direction due to mitigating pieces of furniture, most notably a long, low sofa and matching lounge chair. That leaves the wall to the left, a clear path to an equally clear spot between another, slimmer bookcase,
and a desk with a computer terminal.

Spock engineers their transportation efficiently and expediently. He recalls that Jim was not impartial to the position in which he was held by the backs of his thighs and it is no difficulty to guide him into that position again by mere suggestion, Spock’s fingertips squeezing Jim’s gluteal muscles.

He is treated to the sight of Jim’s tongue as Jim swipes his bottom lip, itself a tic that appears whenever he is aroused. Spock recognizes its appearance as a signifier of sexual desire and the ensuing gasp is in keeping with that mood.

‘Jesus,’ Jim says, his shoulders against the wall, his knees tightening around Spock’s waist. ‘Are you seriously doing this? Oh my God. We’re seriously doing this.’

‘There is no bed,’ Spock replies. ‘Beds are optional.’

‘So wall was your first—’ Jim laughs. Spock attempts to determine whether this laughter is shared or pointed and decides it is not the latter. If anything, it represents surprise and delight; Spock can tell because of the honesty in Jim’s eyes. ‘Wall was your first instinct. There was the floor and a desk and a couch and you went with wall.’

‘That much should be obvious. Do you find fault in this choice?’

‘What—no, Spock! No fault. Absolutely—the opposite of fault. It just tells me things about you, that’s all.’

Jim angles his head so that he is able to kiss Spock’s jaw, from his chin to his ear, experimenting with biting and sucking, in turn, on the lobe. Spock does not find it unpleasant. It is quite the opposite. It is not pleasurable enough to prove truly distracting, but it is certainly asserting itself in Spock’s current focus.

‘Things,’ Spock repeats.

Jim enjoys repetition. His thighs tighten once more, squeezing Spock at the hips, the heel of his left favorite boot finding leverage on the inside of Spock’s knee.

‘Things.’ More repetition. Jim is enjoying himself and he is not the only one deriving positive emotions from the experience, though Spock’s has much to do with the transference of Jim’s enjoyment as with his own physical appreciation of Jim’s body and its current position. ‘Like how you’re a kinky bastard. You are. You are. You want me up against the wall, this is—am I dreaming?’

‘You are not dreaming,’ Spock informs him.

Jim’s eyes flutter shut. Briefly—for no longer than two and a half seconds—his body relaxes, partially limp, a shiver running like lightning through his central nervous system.

‘There is nothing revelatory about my choice of the wall,’ Spock says. It is not difficult to use the wall in question as his own means of leverage, releasing Jim with one hand while pinning him between his chest and the polished wood. ‘I merely rated it the best of the available options.’

‘Uh huh.’ The expression on Jim’s face could be described as smug. He shifts his leg higher, gripping Spock’s waist tighter underneath it. ‘Sure you did.’

‘Vulcans cannot lie,’ Spock reminds him.
There is truth in that, although the statement is not as strictly accurate as possible. They are not *incapable* of bending the veracity of certain statements, but their strength and preference is to conduct themselves otherwise.

‘That’s hot,’ Jim says.

Their bodies are locked together at the hips, Jim balanced against Spock to keep from sliding to the floor. It doesn’t afford much room for Spock to trail his hand down Jim’s chest, fingers navigating the thin fabric of his shirt, tugging the hem where it has come untucked from the waist of his trousers.

Jim dresses simply, without unnecessary layers or accessories. His lack of a belt makes it simpler for Spock to slip open the button on his fly, drawing down the zipper.

There was a specific act which Jim had expressed preference for in the past, one which had met both their standards for physical intimacy. Spock is not so affected by their physical pursuits that he is unable to sort through his memories clearly. That is another complaint given by humans: that their heads become so clouded with arousal that thinking becomes impossible.

This is not a Vulcan problem.

Granted, giving a ‘handjob’ is not a Vulcan act, but Spock’s research and Jim’s response to his previous attentions have given him suitable knowledge with which to work. The tensile reaction of Jim’s muscles—first tighten, then loosen in surprised burst—shudder as his stomach goes taut against Spock’s fingers. It is simple enough to get his hand under the elastic waistband of Jim’s boxers, feeling around the hot, slick shape of his erection.

There is the faint thread of a pulse beating beneath the fragile skin. Spock can feel it racing through the tips of his fingers, obscured by Jim’s desire, his loneliness, his longing for physical contact.

Their time spent in protective custody must have been very trying for someone who prizes company the way Jim does.

He does not speak to confirm Spock’s suspicions. Rather, he makes his needs evident in a rush of small, greedy noises, wrestling one of his hands free to press over his mouth.

So he is more concerned by the possibility of being overheard by Hendorff than he chose to admit.

That is heartening—a positive point of note. There are changes in Jim’s demeanor from when they first began communications and even from when they first met, half a year later; he exhibits new and matured consciousness toward his reputation and does so generously, so as not to impact negatively on Spock. Spock is aware of that motivation but it is quieter, muted by the crush and crowd of emotions—raw, physical, hot-blooded—that push into Spock’s palm, threatening to overwhelm his rational, analytical process.

It would not be so terrible if he were to allow it to overwhelm him. If he ceased to observe and analyze; if he ceased to think.

That is the effect Jim has on him.

And Jim does not know.

Jim does not know much in this moment, specifically. Instead, he feels. His hips bump forward as his shoulders bump against the wall; Spock knows all too well that there is no protocol for this
particular form of reunion procedure, but that there will not always be protocol for the human relationship. For their relationship, specifically.

Jim’s emotions beat unsteadily into Spock’s fingers as they close around bare skin. The immediate contact is similar to no other sensation; the hot, thin skin, the desperation in the blood, the need and hopeful helplessness, are without metaphor. It is Jim in Spock’s hand and Spock forces himself to remain in control—as if he were to do otherwise, he would no longer be able to carry Jim’s weight.

He cannot allow that to happen. He must maintain the strength Jim requires of him to maintain for Jim’s sake. It is not a matter of pride—and this admission comes in a flood of Jim’s adrenaline, Jim’s sweat, Jim’s orgasm—but of necessity.

What Jim needs.

What Jim needs from him.

Jim whimpers. The noise, as it has taken Spock time and effort to reconcile, is not from pain or fear or unhappiness. It is without self-consciousness. Again, it simply is, and it is noisier and so natural it approaches the unnatural. It is not out of place in the space they have formed for themselves, with Jim’s release still racing through Spock’s blood.

Vulcan hands are sensitive.

‘Vulcan hands,’ Jim rasps.

Spock shifts, observing Jim’s expression and the features wearing that expression, which is as close to inscrutable as Jim has ever come. There is no bond. Jim cannot possibly know what Spock was thinking in that moment. The unexpected echo of Spock’s thoughts on Jim’s lips and tongue is nothing more than coincidence—however little stock Spock places in the concept. In this instance, it must be true.

‘Sensitive,’ Jim adds. His voice remains hoarse, and the quality is not unwelcome. Spock follows each snare and snag as it catches, breathless. ‘They’re sensitive. Did you—you felt that, right?’

‘I felt you,’ Spock confirms.

Jim wraps his arms around Spock’s shoulders, hands at the back of Spock’s neck. Though he is limp, his grip remains certain and strong. ‘Yeah, you felt me,’ he replies.

*
After he has had enough time to recover, Jim consents to give Spock the tour of the house—which falls upon the sentimental rather than the educational, unless one considers the sentimental to be educational. In this instance, that is exactly what it is.

‘That’s where we used to slide down the banister; that’s where Sam took a header off the second-floor balcony; that’s where Linc dragged a dead duck into the foyer. And that’s the garage, where I cobbled together my very first hoverbike...’

Jim slips his fingers through Spock’s in passing, their hands brushing as they pass from the interior first level to the second, then out the garden steps that wrap around the house. There is a sharp drop off the back that frames the scenic ocean cliff over which Spock had first caught a glimpse of Jim after their separation.

‘Mom never let us out here,’ Jim says in passing, tilting back his head to appreciate the fresh air blowing in off the sea. ‘She was afraid we’d fall to our deaths.’

‘Given what you have told me regarding your tendency toward accidental collisions and plummeting from high locations, Her Majesty Queen Winona was correct to forbid you access.’

‘Well, yeah,’ Jim says, ‘but now I’ve got you to protect me.’

‘This tour has been very informative,’ Spock replies.

It is not an example of human sarcasm.

Through the description of past events rather than the architecture and layout, Jim is recounting his history rather than the state of his childhood home, but it would be a mistake to dismiss this approach as lacking in valid information.

Spock does not require knowledge of the house’s infrastructure. The villa is only of significance because of Jim’s sentimental attachment to the facility. There is a wall where Queen Winona marked the heights of both princes, George Samuel above Jim. Spock believes this represents a curious encouragement of competition through something as arbitrary as height, especially given the noted age difference between brothers.

Piece by piece, Spock is presented with a greater picture of Jim’s childhood than he had been previously afforded. Anecdotes made mention of in passing are given a context, grounded in a live setting.

There are bedrooms on the second floor with Queen Winona’s located in the eastern corner, Prince George Samuel’s in the middle, and Jim’s on the far end, closest to a view of the city. There is no separate space for Spock to assume as his quarters, and so he is able to determine that he will be sharing Jim’s room. This assumption is confirmed seconds after Spock has made it, when Jim takes his arm, slipping his fingers through the crook of Spock’s elbow to draw him close.
The contact is not something Spock finds reason to object to.

‘I got here early to clear out all the embarrassing stuff,’ Jim confides. ‘You thought it was just chance timing, but no, I did it on purpose.’

‘What do you consider ‘the embarrassing stuff’?’ Spock asks.

Jim’s mouth opens, then summarily shuts. ‘Uh-uh. I see what you’re trying to do here. Get me all pliant, lower my guard, ask me what seems like an innocent question, and learn all my secrets.’

‘Should we keep secrets from one another?’

‘When it comes to pictures of me when I was thirteen and thought growing a chin squirrel was a good idea? Hell yes.’

Spock has no frame of reference for this new phrase. ‘A chin squirrel,’ he repeats.

‘It was a beard—thing—awful, incredibly bad decision, and I thought because everyone told me what a bad decision was, especially my mom, that that meant it was actually a good decision. They hadn’t figured out reverse psychology worked best on me yet and I hadn’t figured out that pre-teen facial hair is best on no one yet. They were dark times.’

‘A peculiarly emphatic reference to a choice of physical appearance that was brief at best.’

‘You never saw it—and you never will. If there is a God. Or if I managed to take care of the evidence properly. I’m banking on the latter but I’m not gonna discount the former just yet, in case it makes a difference in my case.’ Jim gives Spock’s elbow a squeeze. ‘There aren’t any embarrassing pictures of you, so I’m just trying to keep things fair and equal. The foundations for a good marriage.’

‘There are, by your qualifications, embarrassing pictures of me,’ Spock says.

‘Uh-uh, Spock. I saw ‘em all. Your mom—I mean, Lady Amanda went through the photo albums. You were a cute baby, an adorable kindergartner, a serious seven year old… You were never embarrassing.’

‘Then our qualifications differ. Therefore I should be allowed to see this evidence of your past, as it is likely I will not consider these images embarrassing based on our disparate perspectives.’

‘Nope,’ Jim says, and flashes Spock a wide and powerful grin.

Spock has no rejoinder for a wide and powerful grin, especially not Jim’s. Or perhaps it is because it is Jim’s that Spock has no rejoinder.

He acknowledges the view from the window in Jim’s room and the decorative choices, the poster of a deep space station on a Venusian colony displayed on the wall and the personal pictures—none of them containing Jim’s ‘embarrassing stuff’—on the desk. There is one of Jim and the dog Lincoln; there is another of Jim, Prince George Samuel, Queen Winona and King George and Spock judges Jim’s age at the time of the short-frame videograph to be somewhere between the age of eight and eight and a half. Without a broader sample of visual evidence Spock cannot pinpoint the age exactly.

He has been observing this particular visual evidence for long enough that Jim feels compelled to clear his throat.
‘You appear happy and healthy in this short-frame videograph,’ Spock says.

‘What? Oh. Yeah.’ Jim’s cheeks heat to a pinker color. ‘That was a good day. Picnic in the garden here, actually.’

‘Am I to understand that you are partial to the pastime known as the picnic?’ Spock asks.

‘Uh… Sure. Depends on the company, mostly. And what you’re eating. But when the weather’s nice, it’s nice.’

‘I have not experienced for myself the pastime known as the picnic,’ Spock says.

‘Is that your way of inviting me on a picnic date?’

‘The picnic is mentioned in a wide swath of historical and fictional literature composed on Earth. As such, it is likely a vital component of the human experience.’

‘Spock,’ Jim says. ‘You wanna go on a date with me? On a picnic?’

‘I feel that it is of significant cultural importance for me to experience something so valuable to human social customs,’ Spock says. ‘And as my husband, it is your duty to guide me through the particulars. To be accompanied by anyone else would be inappropriate.’

‘Uh huh.’ Jim rubs his palms on his thigh. ‘That’s a date. A picnic date that you asked me for.’

‘If that is how you wish to interpret my request,’ Spock says, ‘then I cannot refute the claim.’

‘Romantic,’ Jim says.

‘It is also my understanding that the practice of human picnicking is romantic in nature,’ Spock agrees.

Jim watches him, as if appraising Spock’s veracity despite recalling the Vulcan propensity for authenticity, as well as Spock’s demonstrable honesty in their dealings. There are wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, though his mouth has not yet turned up in compliance with the suggestion of a smile.

‘OK. Then I’ll see what I can work out with the kitchens.’

‘The presence of a kitchen suggests an unnecessary use of resources,’ Spock says. ‘A replicator would do equally well in this situation.’

‘You’re trying to distract me.’ Jim leans forward to touch Spock’s shoulder. More unnecessary contact; Spock does not shy away. ‘But it’s not gonna work. We’re gonna have a real picnic, with real sandwiches—ones that we made ourselves.’

‘Is that an instrumental part of the rules of a picnic?’ Spock asks.

‘Yes.’

Spock reflects that in retrospect the question may have been rhetorical in nature.

Jim walks him to the kitchen on the first floor, occupied by a small staff of three workers, none of whom seem particularly shocked when Jim orders them out to raid the pantry for his own priorities.
‘You be sure and stick to your dietary plan, Your Highness,’ one of them says as she passes out the door.

‘Hey, if I don’t, at least you can say you didn’t know anything about it,’ Jim replies, offering a wink to the staff before shutting them out of their place of work. ‘There. Now you can help me find the salami.’

‘Jim, the cured meat product in question would violate the dietary restrictions given to you by your royal doctor,’ Spock says. ‘Perhaps it would be prudent to start with more vegetarian options.’

Through a concentrated effort at teamwork, Jim and Spock do not manage to locate a traditional basket or the gingham blanket to line its inside, but they do build more than one variety of sandwiches, utilizing both vegetarian options and Jim’s favored ‘cold cuts.’

‘I do not understand the locution,’ Spock says.

‘They’re cut,’ Jim explains. ‘And they’re cold. Generally you wanna eat ‘em cold. There’s a vegetarian version of bologna, which is also a way to tell someone they’re full of it. Full of baloney.’

‘Fascinating,’ Spock says.

The weather outside is not as humid as the majority of the San Francisco days have proven and there is an enclosed garden area with temperature controls that provides the ideal spot for a picnic. They sit beneath a tree in what Spock would not be amiss calling an arboretum beneath a large oak tree, which Spock recognizes from the picture of Jim and his royal family that survived the purge of embarrassing things. The clouds gather halfway through the meal and, when it begins to rain, Jim ‘bumps up’ the temperature in the greenhouse enclosure so that they are able to lie back on the grass and observe the rainfall on the glass ceiling overhead.

‘Cozy, right?’ Jim asks. ‘I mean, as cozy as Vulcans get.’

‘That word would not be incorrectly applied.’

Jim huffs—a variation on the chuckle that Spock has come to recognize and, at the proper junctures, anticipate. ‘Yeah, it’s almost like Hendorff and two of your guards aren’t right outside, with another four secret service suits stationed at the front entrance, and Admiral Pike and a bunch of my friends aren’t in the air right now in the USS Enterprise NCC Seventeen-oh-one defending us from the same people I’ve been working to form an actual peace treaty with.’

Spock is silent. He does not have to remain so for long; as nature abhors a vacuum, Jim Kirk abhors a silence.

‘When I put it that way, I make it sound so complicated.’

‘There are many complications in the current political climate,’ Spock confirms.

‘I meant life,’ Jim says. ‘I meant our lives. The life we’re gonna share together.’

‘As that shared life is encapsulated by the current political climate—’

‘I’m gonna go crazy eventually,’ Jim says. Spock awaits clarification, which is again presented given a suitable pause for Jim to indulge in dramatic effect. ‘Crazy trying to figure out how you can kiss me the way you kiss me and touch me the way you touch me and still refer to us as encapsulated by the current political climate.’
‘The two are not mutually exclusive,’ Spock replies.

‘And deep conversations about Klingons and cold cuts aren’t mutually exclusive, either.’

‘I am no stranger to the curiosity provided by conflicting halves of a single whole.’

Jim softens, a full-bodied expression of thoughtful emotionalism. ‘Oh.’ He turns to stare at Spock in profile, which Spock has noticed that he seems to enjoy. ‘Or I’m gonna go crazy with how often I put my foot in my mouth. One or the other.’

‘That would also fall outside the itemized list of Doctor McCoy’s dietary prescriptions.’

Jim snorts. He has ‘got’ the joke.

‘I dunno, Spock. Maybe the Klingons’d respect me more if I just took off a boot and ate it in the middle of talks. Chewing up leather? That’s more hardcore than swallowing gagh without gaghing all over those same boots, right?’

‘That was wordplay. A pun,’ Spock says.

‘You don’t have to point it out every time.’

‘Yet I had intended to express my recognition and appreciation of your attempts at humor.’

‘My attempts at humor? That was hilarious.’

Spock acquiesces with a wordless agreement.

‘Glad we’re on the same page,’ Jim says.

The rain continues to fall and Jim shields Spock from it with the majority of his cape as they cross the garden, flanked by bodyguards, to return, very wet, into the house proper.

‘Now this is romantic,’ Jim says, just before shaking his hair out in an imitation of his favored canines when they shed water from their fur. ‘You and me, soaking wet after a picnic date? They make movies about that kind of thing.’

‘You used to love those movies.’

The acoustics from the foyer of the villa are favorable for a single speaker—one standing surrounded by his own security detail as he removes his jacket, leather dripping onto the stone floor.

Prince George Samuel has arrived. It is unclear to Spock why his retainers could not keep him dry during the transportation from the car to the house or why they did not enter via the garage. Perhaps it was a peculiar, illogical Kirk preference at play.

He is dressed informally, though not as informally as his brother, indicating a lack of appointments with Klingon representatives, either in person or through a secured communications channel.

Spock recalls the information he has been given on the situation. It is the hope of Chancellor Gorkon to be able to meet with the Earth government in person; however the climate for intergalactic space travel is not currently amenable to those desires.

This evidence is simple for Spock to process and it is analyzed and dismissed while Jim is still registering his brother’s presence, or perhaps assessing the growth of his facial hair.
‘Hey,’ Jim says. His hands on Spock’s arms tighten before he releases them. The greeting is too slow by colloquial standards; if Spock has noted this then Prince George Samuel will have also. ‘We having an impromptu family reunion?’

‘Sure,’ George Samuel replies. ‘You didn’t think we were gonna ship you lovebirds off on a private honeymoon before you got officially married, did you?’

The tension characteristic of a room wherein Jim is in contact with his brother slowly shifts, the atmosphere changing from one of relaxation to something more serious. While Spock has encouraged Jim to be more forthcoming in the expression of his feelings toward George Samuel, and much of the damage to their relationship in Spock’s understanding is being tentatively repaired, there is still a lingering strain between them.

The pressure is palpable.

‘Greetings, Prince George Samuel,’ Spock says, having waited the requisite amount of time for initial compliments to pass. ‘Your presence is welcome.’

‘Hey,’ Jim says. ‘Pretty sure that’s supposed to be my line.’ He turns to George Samuel, who has handed off his jacket, combing back his damp hair. ‘Is Mom showing up later? It’s not a security risk anymore for us to be a family together in the same place for once?’

‘She’ll be in and out,’ George Samuel says. ‘We’re working on peace talks—doesn’t exactly look good to the public to have us big shots hiding away while we expect them to stand behind us and rally. Gotta give them something to rally behind.’

‘And no one’s staying in the palace until we figure out whether it’s been compromised,’ Jim says. ‘Got it.’

‘Which is why the wedding’ll have to be smaller than you were looking forward to—hate to say it, but those are the breaks,’ George Samuel continues. ‘I know it’ll ruin all your delusions of grandeur, a small affair, but I promise, it’ll be classy.’

Spock gauges Jim’s surprise and the subsequent struggle to minimize its obviousness to his brother, who knows him well enough—despite their period of estrangement—to recognize it even with Jim’s efforts. After all, Jim is not at the level of the average Vulcan as far as the suppression of emotional reaction is concerned, but Spock notes a marked improvement.

Jim’s potential for growth is beyond prediction. It appears to be exponential in its progress.

‘The wedding,’ Jim says. ‘Here. You’re joking.’

‘I’m wet,’ George Samuel replies, ‘but I’m not joking.’

‘It would seem that Prince George Samuel believes too much time has already been expended without an official Earth ceremony,’ Spock says.

His duty as Jim’s husband is to expedite difficult matters and clarify difficult subjects.

‘Don’t say it like that, Prince Spock,’ George Samuel adds, with a grin that makes the family resemblance startlingly clear. It is brief, but it Spock appraises it completely, and notes that Jim also seems to recognize something of himself in George Samuel’s expression. ‘As if you didn’t have both hands in it. Prince Spock is the one who made all this happen.’

‘That is not strictly factually accurate,’ Spock reminds him, informing Jim of the truth
simultaneously.

‘Wait, you—what?’ Jim turns to Spock for clarification, then seems to remember, to his disappointment, that they cannot communicate telepathically through a single glance. Perhaps one day such communication will be possible, but it will take time and effort. The potential causes an unnamed stirring of emotion to bloom within, but it is set aside in favor of more pressing concerns.

‘Him,’ George Samuel says.

‘Among other individuals, including Her Majesty, your queen mother,’ Spock clarifies once more. ‘I could not have planned for and executed all the necessary details for the nuptials without considerable assistance from those who are better versed in these traditions and better suited to conduct the preparations.’

‘Him,’ George Samuel repeats.

Another family resemblance is the flagrant disregard of fact in order to promote the sensational, the dramatic, or the exciting. George Samuel is aware that Spock could not have acted on his own and that those in the position to do so deserve a majority of the credit, yet he has chosen to emphasize Spock’s contributions.

It is not strictly a lie—but it is assuredly an obfuscation of a more complex truth.

‘Huh,’ Jim says.

That is not among the responses to this surprise that Spock had considered and for which he had planned, but Jim is often capable of presenting surprises of his own. In fact, his nature is better suited to surprise than Spock’s.

‘That’s all you have to say?’ George Samuel is, by every indication, equally unprepared for Jim’s uncharacteristic reaction. ‘All that Klingon studying—you’re right. It’s been terrible for you. Terrible. I shouldn’t have forced it on you. I’ll call that doctor you like so much and get him out here right away, although it might just be terminal at this point.’

Jim’s silence has lasted fourteen seconds too long by Spock’s count, based on the aggregate data of his prior conversational aggression.

‘Prince George Samuel informed me during our communication that you would be appreciative of a surprise,’ Spock explains.

‘Huh,’ Jim says, repeating himself.

Although it is a characteristic Spock has observed as favored, he does not yet know whether it is indicative of a positive mood or a negative one. For someone as mercurial as Jim, one tends to feed into the other. The uncertainty is something that Spock has always found fascinating, although now there is an additional trace of ambiguity in Spock’s perception: he cannot pick up on whether Jim’s evaluation of the surprise is pleased or displeased.

He does not care for the lack of clarity.

Out of the corner of his peripheral vision, Spock can see George Samuel rolling his eyes.

‘Give him a second to process, Prince Spock. I’m sure he’ll remember his manners.’

‘I’m taking it in,’ Jim says, waking up under rebuke. Spock has not yet learned the root cause of
his tendency to respond to negativity; however, it is a reliable point of stimulus. He cannot blame George Samuel for utilizing it to his advantage. ‘Gimme a second.’

‘You’ve had a few by my count,’ George Samuel says.

‘One hundred twenty-seven seconds and counting,’ Spock replies.

Jim’s eyes are wide and blue, though they narrow at the interaction between Spock and his brother. A smile crosses his face as if by accident, amusement coloring his features.

‘Yeah, see, I’m not sure how I feel about this whole thing.’ Jim points between Spock next to him and George Samuel standing, wet, before them in the foyer. In spite of his discomfort, the conversation is of enough importance that the latter remain where he is. ‘The two of you getting along so well, it’s eerie. I’m not a fan.’

‘We are family.’ Spock reasons. ‘In order to operate as a unit, is it not important that we share similar interests and goals to share mutual appreciation toward the presentation of a united front.’

Jim’s hand tightens on the railing of the banister. His tongue is visible where it’s pushed against the side of his cheek, ducking his head to incline it in Spock’s direction.

‘I’m being an asshole, huh?’

It takes only five seconds for Spock to review his actions, his conversations with George Samuel and the new plans for the wedding ceremony. There is a distinct possibility that the problem lies not in their conversation but in the perceived violation of Jim’s privacy.

He has proven himself very protective of their relationship. It is a devotion to seclusion almost Vulcan in nature.

‘I can neither confirm nor deny this statement based on the colloquial reference involved,’ Spock says.

‘If you two are gonna start whispering amongst yourselves up there, I’m gonna excuse myself to go get dried off,’ George Samuel interjects. ‘Take care of that fiancé of yours, Jim. He worked hard on this. You might wanna even thank him.’

‘I think I know how to deal with my fiancé, Sam,’ Jim replies. There is no bite of true anger beneath the veneer of frustration in his tone, which appears to be largely for the sake of appearances and not to vent pure emotion. George Samuel passes Jim on his way toward the stairs and a much-needed towel in one of the upstairs bathrooms. Jim steps to the side for the express purpose of catching George Samuel’s broad shoulder with one of his own, a damp spot on Jim’s jacket left behind after contact. ‘I’m the one who wrote back, you know.’

‘Yes, Jim. Yes. I know.’ There is something resembling a smile of good humor in George Samuel’s voice, which Spock is able to detect because of its similarity to the sound of Jim’s voice when he is speaking while smiling. It is an honest sound. George Samuel’s voice is a single pitch deeper. It does not affect Spock in the way that Jim’s voice affects him. ‘Anything else you’d like to share? Have a club you’d like to use when you drag Prince Spock back to your cave? That,’ George Samuel adds, turning to face Spock with a brief, courteous nod of apology, ‘was a joke, Prince Spock. The royal house and I as its prominent representative would never condone clubbing a Prince of Vulcan under any circumstances, unless said clubbing was requested on your part, and all proper paperwork was filed to begin the procedure safely and legally.’

‘Hey now,’ Jim says. ‘What’s private between us is private. Don’t bring paperwork into it; it’ll kill
George Samuel bumps Jim’s shoulder with his own in return—a reciprocal gesture that must have a hidden but significant meaning of which Spock is not yet aware. He shall request edification from Jim when they are alone. ‘Whatever you say, little brother. I’m going to go get changed and you can continue with your private business—as long as Hendorff over there is within fifteen feet of you at all times.’

‘You care,’ Jim says. ‘I’m touched.’

‘In the head,’ George Samuel replies.

Brotherly banter on Earth between humans is nothing like the filial relationship Spock shares with his half-brother Sybok. They do not often find occasion to interact. They are both, by Sarek’s appraisal, distinct from their peers, but in dissimilar ways.

George Samuel takes the steps two at a time, trailed one step at a time by his private bodyguard retinue. That leaves Jim and Spock in the hall, amidst wet footprints on the polished wood floor, with Hendorff within fifteen feet of the former, fourteen feet of the latter.

‘You are appreciative of certain surprises,’ Spock says.

‘That’s true,’ Jim replies, leaning at an angle on the banister, propped up by his elbow. His expression is, unexpectedly, inscrutable.

‘But not all surprises,’ Spock says. ‘That is the important distinction.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You are appreciative of certain surprises, but you are not appreciative of this surprise,’ Spock clarifies.

‘No,’ Jim says. ‘I just don’t wanna make Hendorff or you uncomfortable by throwing myself into your arms, because that’s not something you’re appreciative of. Public demonstrations of physical affection.’

Hendorff, not obtrusively, clears his throat.

‘Exactly what I’m talking about.’ Jim draws attention to Hendorff despite his attempts to remain on the periphery. ‘Plus, there’s no way I’m giving Sam the satisfaction of seeing me all happy after he conspired with you against me.’

‘I would not conspire against you, Jim,’ Spock says.

‘Conspired with you for me, then.’ There is the beginning of a grin threatening the corner of Jim’s mouth, tightening the muscles around his jaw and forming new lines at the corners of his eyes. ‘Technicalities, Spock, really?’

‘This should come as no surprise.’

‘Then I guess I’m still reeling from the thing that did.’

Spock lifts his eyebrows, interested despite his knowledge of Jim and his understanding of how his mind works. There is always, appropriate to the current situation, a hidden shock where Jim is concerned.
‘While I understand that the condition of a surprise is by its nature unexpected and therefore not always appealing, I was under the impression that being taken unawares was something you enjoyed.’

Jim blinks, drawing his lower lip beneath his teeth and biting down on his own flesh. Once again, the silence maintained is longer than his usual tolerance for the same, leading Spock to follow up of his own volition.

‘Jim.’

This time, it is Jim’s eyebrows that lift; he leans close enough to touch without actually making contact. ‘Say taken unawares again. Do it for me.’

‘Ah,’ Spock says. ‘You have been distracted by flirtatious banter.’

Jim’s features draw together, crumpling in sudden laughter; he leans forward to grab Spock’s shoulder, holding him tightly for momentary support. It is not an intimate gesture—it is much the same way in which Jim was holding to the stair railing moments ago—and yet it stirs feelings of warmth in Spock’s abdomen, the proverbial butterflies, an expression which Spock still finds, due to its fanciful nature, distasteful.

‘Yeah, Spock. I’m trying to flirt with you. Apparently unsuccessfully.’

‘By that logic, I would deem the surprise engineered by myself and Prince George Samuel equally unsuccessful.’

Jim’s fingers tighten as they slide lower down Spock’s arm, squeezing his bicep muscle.

‘No… No no, no, I wouldn’t say that. Spock.’

‘It was my understanding that a surprise with positive connotations would be appreciated, given the serious tenor of our recent talks and the political climate.’

‘You were trying to cheer me up,’ Jim says. ‘By talking to my brother. I get it.’

There is a subtle tension in Jim’s voice, a taut energy to his muscles which means Spock cannot fully relax either. In spite of the resolution between both princes, it would appear that there is still some residual animosity on Jim’s side.

As the wronged party, it is understandable that Jim would face difficulty in putting the past behind him, although in Spock’s opinion it is not strictly warranted.

It is not an opinion he would see fit to share with Jim; all claims to sharing a familial bond aside, there are matters in which Spock does not yet have the experience to interfere. Jim’s hand slips lower still, tangling Spock’s cool fingers in his blunter, warmer ones.

‘Would you like to hear the details of the arrangements?’ Spock asks.

‘That depends,’ Jim says.

‘On what?’

‘On whether we’re waiting for my mom to arrive,’ Jim replies. ‘Is she in on it too?’

‘In on it,’ Spock repeats.
‘Was she involved in the planning? Was she a part of the super-secret, no-Jim-allowed group communication program I was completely in the dark about?’

‘There were messages exchanged,’ Spock says, ‘as I wished to ascertain her opinion on whether or not the proposed plan had her approval. As your mother, I believed she would know better than anyone what would be best for you.’

‘Actually, you know, I think I’m the one who knows better than anyone what would be best for me.’ Jim’s proximity to Spock—specifically his mouth’s proximity to Spock’s mouth—suggests he is not particularly unhappy, but Spock cannot be completely certain.

‘According to many of those who know you, that is untrue,’ Spock replies.

‘Don’t listen to them. They have no idea all the stuff that— Look, Spock, if it were up to me, we’d do something completely against the status quo. We’d hop on a hoverbike and drive all the way to Vegas, have somebody dressed up like me officiate the whole thing. It’d be amazing and stupid and unexpected and we’d have a hotel room in some cheap little place and nobody, nobody, would look to us as a symbol of anything. We’d be us.’

‘This is the surprise you wanted,’ Spock says, awaiting clarification. ‘I had not been made aware of your affinity for Vegas and ‘cheap little places’. You had not informed me of this preference, nor had you informed either your mother the queen or your brother, Prince George Samuel—’

‘It’s not possible.’ Jim bows his head, a curl of hair falling over his brow in the process. It is not the first time Spock’s fingers have considered the potential enjoyment of being the ones to smooth those hairs back into place—but there is something about their inclination toward the unruly that Spock would preserve just as readily. ‘In this climate, all the Klingon stuff, Starfleet officers out there protecting the skies—I wouldn’t do that. I couldn’t do that; we couldn’t and I definitely wouldn’t expect you to act out the way I used to. Ruining your image and all.’

‘Jim,’ Spock says.

‘Anyway, the point is, I’m just trying to wrap my head around all of this, that’s all.’

‘Jim,’ Spock repeats.

‘And it’s not that you didn’t do good—you did good, Spock. You’re getting along with my family, the people are overwhelmingly positive about you, this is all working out really well, save for the part where Klingons attacked on our other wedding day—’

‘Jim, it is my desire to marry you,’ Spock says. ‘If I have acted out of selfishness that in any way compromises your happiness then I will endeavor to undo these plans and undo the harm I have caused you.’

Jim looks up, almost immediately. His hair is still unruly in the front.

‘No,’ he says. His eyes are brighter than Spock expected. ‘No, what? Spock. Let’s get married. Finally. It’s about damn time, right?’

‘I would not employ that phrase,’ Spock replies, ‘but on Earth I believe the appropriate saying in this instance is, ‘something like that’.”
It has been seven days and thirteen hours and fifteen minutes and twenty nine seconds since Spock last spoke to his mother in real time. It is very early in the morning on Vulcan and late enough in the evening on Earth in San Francisco, at a time Spock understands has been reserved for the reunion of Jim, his brother, and his mother.

Amanda Grayson appears on the screen on the terminal in bright dawn sunlight. Spock has memorized her expressions—all of them—and he knows that she is happy to see him. Though his expression reveals nothing, he likewise knows that she will know he is happy to see her.

‘Spock.’

Although she is practiced in the Vulcan way of concealing any emotional, human outbursts, there is an obvious shift in her tone toward gladness. The apparent delight in her face gives way to relief, and Spock must remind himself to make excuses for her human nature as well as the distance between them.

It is difficult for humans to manage without the physical reassurance afforded them by being in one another’s presence. Spock does not indulge in conjecture, but he can rationalize how it would be difficult for his mother or any other human to hear of the latest attack on Starfleet’s Headquarters, knowing beloved relatives were close by in the same city.

In addition, there was the attack on Jim’s father to take into consideration as disturbing precedent.

There was no reason to assume that both Jim and Spock would emerge unharmed. While his mother has in the past demonstrated a stubborn adherence to her own version of optimism, Spock has known her character to be overwhelmingly rational. She is relieved for the same, not entirely irrational reasons every time they speak.

‘Mother,’ Spock says.

The inclination of his head is friendly, informal—a gesture of goodwill that she will recognize, being of Earth herself.

‘I’m so glad you’ve managed to find time to talk again.’ Mother’s scarves are loose around her hair and neck, undisturbed by the hot Vulcan winds, which blow in off the desert which Sarek’s office faces. ‘I didn’t want to push, but I’ve been so worried.’

‘There was no cause for concern,’ Spock says. ‘As I mentioned in the communication I was able to send you before we were taken into protective custody, Earth’s security forces have been more than adequate in a time of crisis.’

‘I know, I know.’ Mother does not lift her hand to wave it as Jim might in order to dismiss an unwanted avenue of discussion. Her demeanor is far more tranquil, something Spock can
appreciate on its own merits. ‘And I know you don’t like it when I worry, but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about that.’

‘Your effort to sustain a logical outlook on the situation is nonetheless appreciated,’ Spock says.

The corner of Mother’s mouth twitches with suppressed amusement. Since she is more adept at concealing her emotions than her demeanor would suggest, Spock can assume the revelation is for his benefit.

‘I thought you’d be married the next time we spoke in person,’ Mother says. ‘Well, married a second time, that is. I wouldn’t imply that the Vulcan ceremony was anything other than legally binding. I’m sure it felt binding for Prince James.’

‘He comported himself admirably, whether or not he felt bound.’

Mother’s eyes most certainly sparkle. Though the brightness would be considered dim in comparison to Jim’s readiness to smile with his eyes, to Spock, it is as clear as daylight. ‘Is that the official assessment? Is this channel not secure?’

‘I am speaking from both official and personal assessments, as the two are in compliance.’

‘He was admirable, now that I remember it. On more than one occasion, in fact.’ Mother pauses to touch the scarf at her cheek, tucking it into place under her chin. ‘I am glad to know that you have come to the same conclusion.’

‘Given the evidence, no other conclusion could have been drawn,’ Spock reassures her.

‘Oh, Spock.’ The moment of sentimentality is brief and less of an intrusion than it would be, Spock has finally determined, on a full Vulcan. For his own reasons, Sarek acknowledges and endures Spock’s mother’s occasional outburst by Vulcan standards; Spock, on the other hand, has reasons of heritage and commonality to explain why he has never minded them in private the way he has reason to infer he should. ‘But you are looking healthy. It wasn’t too much of a disappointment—what happened with the wedding—was it? I was hoping for pictures. As you know… It’s not the Vulcan way.’

‘My father Sarek keeps a picture of you on his travels,’ Spock says.

‘Indeed, he does. Do you have a picture of Jim, Spock?’

That is an oversight Spock had not considered until this moment. ‘He has sent me photographs in our communications. They are not official portraits.’

Mother tilts her head to one side. ‘Is that so? What, exactly, are they, Spock?’

‘Tabloid imagery. As you are from Earth, you are aware of tabloids, are you not?’

Mother covers her mouth with a gloved hand for a pause that has become familiar—like home—to Spock over time. He knows it no better or less than he knows any other facet of life on Vulcan, but it is a part of him nonetheless. ‘Yes, Spock,’ Mother says at last. ‘I am aware of tabloids. I used to read my fair share of them.’

‘They are without journalistic merit and are often exploitative of their subjects due to their notoriety,’ Spock replies.

‘Are you shocked to hear it, Spock?’ Mother asks. ‘Are you disappointed in me?’
‘It is my experience with tabloids that they are without journalistic merit and are often exploitative of their subjects, due to their notoriety,’ Spock repeats. ‘That is all that I said. If you found merit without them—’

‘I was young, once. That’s all there is to it.’ Mother leans closer, as though she believes she can glean more detail in Spock’s face or as though the few inches difference will allow her to feel nearer to him in spirit. ‘You really do look well, Spock. You look…’

‘Given my understanding of the nature of affection and preferential emotional treatment, as well as the correct, if complex, hierarchy of relationships, I have come to the conclusion that I love Prince James Tiberius Kirk,’ Spock informs her. ‘As you are a human who has entered into a romantic partnership with a Vulcan, it is logical to consult with you for advice.’

‘Oh,’ Mother says. She sounds breathless. ‘Oh. Oh, that’s wonderful news, Spock. Isn’t that wonderful—that’s so lovely to hear. And you’re asking me for advice. For my advice. I do think—that’s wonderful, too.’

It is a significant amount of information for her to process at once. Spock finds this understandable, and thus does not begrudge her the repetition. It does not seem deliberate, as in Jim’s case, but rather a result of her shock at being asked for her opinion in addition to Spock’s revelation about his feelings.

It was always his preference that Mother not encourage any discussion about emotionalism unless it was brought to her first. Spock never had cause to bring anything to her before, and therefore the topic was never raised. It was his understanding that this was always a position of some disappointment to her, though she never expressed that disappointment.

The human desire for a lack of distance, whether emotional or physical, has impacted Spock throughout his life. In spite of his determination to avoid sweeping distinctions based on cultural differences, there are certain similarities of personality amongst all humans—such as the enthusiasm for freedom and outspokenness shared by both his mother and his husband.

‘You’ll have to give me just a moment.’ Mother touches gloved fingers to the corners of her eyes, wiping a fall of tears which has not yet begun. ‘I realize that is what you’re doing, and I want you to know that it’s appreciated.’

‘I am aware.’ Spock’s hands are in his lap, clasped together over his knees. ‘However, I must remind you that the call may be interrupted at any moment, and as such I would request that your advice be given not swiftly, but with this caveat in mind.’

‘Of course,’ Mother says. ‘Oh—naturally. I’m just so happy, Spock.’

‘You are crying,’ Spock observes.

‘As I’m sure you already know, human biology can be a very curious thing.’ Mother straightens her shoulders, brushing her hair and scarves back from her face. ‘At times, we cry when we’re sad; at others, we cry when we’re happy. You have to understand that this is the kind of news about their child that a mother lives to hear, Spock. And in strict confidentiality, it’s more than I ever allowed myself to hope for from an arranged ceremony. I was attempting to be…logical about my expectations.’

‘All Vulcan bonds are prearranged,’ Spock reminds her.

‘But humans generally expect so much more,’ Mother says. ‘And knowing that you’ve managed to
find each other in spite of the odds, it’s just… Forgive me, Spock. You wanted my advice. Did you want that advice on any topic in particular?"

‘If there is any trouble you have encountered in your relationship with Father as a Vulcan and yourself as human, then I would seek to learn from your past experiences in order to avoid repeating your difficulties.’

‘Well, isn’t that a flattering way to put it?’

‘There was no judgment in my statement of that request.’

‘No; of course there wasn’t.’ Mother bears no grudge; she is not hiding her true feelings in order to lessen any potential friction. ‘I wouldn’t think that. But it’s another human thing, Spock—gentling the truth a little. Not lying, but…’

‘Is this advice in the form of a suggestion?’ Spock asks. ‘In other words, a gentle truth?’

Mother has stopped crying, though her eyes remain bright with the memory of her briefly shared tears. Spock has never seen them quite so bright. ‘Yes, Spock. That was exactly what it was. Your time on Earth, however brief and unusual it may have been, has certainly served you well.’

Spock nods in acknowledgment of a statement that may be interpreted as complimentary. ‘I will take this under advisement.’

‘I’m very glad to hear that you will. Specifics may help me better structure the rest of my advice, Spock. Is there anything in particular that you would like me to help you with?’

Though Spock has been prepared for this conversation and has drafted a list of pertinent questions in order to be fully prepared for his future together with Jim, drawing upon Mother’s unique expertise with a similar situation—and while he would not say that he has forgotten these questions, for he has not—it is one matter to outline a course of inquiry and another to face his mother with a list of personal inquiries. He recalls Jim’s discomfort with the realization that their union was being discussed with other parties absent his knowledge. He also recalls the shape and the weight of Jim’s body in the night, an instance of physical intimacy in their shared past that Spock recalls with extreme clarity.

Jim is heaviest when he sleeps, and vulnerable, and completely relaxed. He is at his most natural with his head pillowed upon Spock’s chest, though it cannot be as comfortable for his head as a true pillow would be.

Human choices are as unpredictable as they are inconsistent. Whatever Mother can offer Spock as far as perspective will merely be a structure, a skeleton, upon which to build Spock’s anticipation of Jim’s moods and needs.

‘It is my intention to bond with him,’ Spock says. ‘He has expressed his desire for this and has educated himself appropriately. I, in turn, have considered the drawbacks and implications and I have come to the conclusion that they are not enough to deter this course of action from being preferable to any other.’

‘Then that is what you must do,’ Mother replies. ‘Of course, nothing about it will be easy. But humans and other humans, Vulcans and their arranged marriages… No matter what it may seem like on the outside, Spock, it’s never easy. It is never easy for anyone.’

‘I am unsure if my father approves of this choice,’ Spock begins.
‘I am unsure if that matters,’ Mother says. ‘Don’t misinterpret what I’m saying, Spock. I have the utmost respect for your father, and my admiration of him does have something to do with the reasons for my devotion to him. Human emotionalism is another, and I’m not sorry to say it. I’m not ashamed to say it. But I firmly believe that he doesn’t know what’s best for you. Only you can know that.’

‘Your advice has not been unhelpful.’

‘Well, that’s a relief. I’ve always tried to be…not unhelpful.’ Mother pauses to adjust the settings on her terminal though no adjustment is strictly necessary. Their connection is clear and the angle of visual contact requires no alteration for them to see one another better. ‘I like him very much, you know.’

‘You believe he has been ‘good’ for me in the past.’

‘Isn’t that a lovely reason to love someone?’ Mother asks.

‘It was my understanding that reason has very little to do with love,’ Spock says.

Mother does not smile, but Spock can tell she wishes to. In a conversation where has already been overwhelmingly emotional in nature, he appreciates her further efforts at restraint. It is difficult to identify which traits he finds most admirable in humans when there is no discernible pattern to trace. Restraint is not something he would attribute to Jim in the slightest, and yet its absence does not color his perception of his husband.

It is curious. Perhaps the discrepancy is to be attributed to Spock and not human nature at all.

‘Well, you’re right about that,’ Mother says. ‘But we all have our reasons for loving someone, one way or another. I know it isn’t terribly reasonable.’

‘Are you engaging in wordplay?’ Spock asks.

‘I thought it was rather clever, myself.’ Mother does smile then, but Spock cannot fault her for finding amusement in a joke of her own making.

‘Jim has a fondness for clever wordplay,’ Spock says.

‘I’ve noticed,’ Mother replies. ‘It’s one of the things I like most about him.’

‘Your preference has been noted for posterity,’ Spock says.

‘I should clarify that I think you’re good for each other.’ Mother inclines her head to one side, adjusting the fall of her scarf around her neck. ‘You make a good match. And my opinion shouldn’t hold any water—it isn’t any of my business, no matter how much I wish it still could be—but I like the idea of the bond. It feels like overstepping my bounds just saying that, but I suppose I wanted you to know.’

‘Because I had mentioned Father’s reluctance toward the idea in question?’

‘Something like that,’ Mother nods, confirming Spock’s curiosity with a clarity that is not shared by her words. ‘I would care to emphasize that it doesn’t matter, and it’s not about taking sides. Your father likes Jim—at least, as much as he cares to devote his energies toward these things.’

‘Your discretion in this matter has been taken into consideration,’ Spock says. ‘While the decision has already been made, I appreciate the value of your input.’
‘Well, that’s what I’m here for. That’s what mothers in general are here for.’ It is a curious thing to hear Mother reduce herself to a single element, as though the various denominations that comprised Lady Amanda Grayson previous to her giving birth are no longer of any significance. Or at least, as though they no longer take precedent. ‘I’m glad you called, Spock. Even gladder to hear the reasons.’

‘You are more than simply my mother,’ Spock tells her.

‘We are all more than simply anything,’ Mother replies. ‘That being said, if I am to be remembered for any one reason, I should like it to be for doing the very best I could by the admirable person with whom I am discussing admirable matters right at this very moment. Because of how much I care for him—and because of how proud of him I continue to be.’

‘I also harbor feelings of love for you, mother,’ Spock says.

He is not certain—and that is a curious lack of certainty about an individual with whom he has spent the majority of his lifetime, believing until now that he knows her better than anyone—whether his mother would prefer to be alone with her emotions after this expression of affection, or whether she would prefer to remain in contact with him so that she will not feel, however incorrectly, alone with her emotions.

Just because Spock is not with her physically does not mean he is not with her, always.

That is sentimentality.

Spock allows it to pass unchecked where in the past he would have suppressed such indulgence. Perhaps it is not indulgence, not in the strictest definition.

‘That’s how wonderful it is,’ Mother says at last. ‘To love someone—to change them without expecting to change them; to change them without having set out to change them. To change through love as naturally as one changes through education or travel. I love you too, of course. So very much.’

‘It has been illuminating to speak to you,’ Spock says. ‘I express my gratitude for your assistance.’

‘I will say that I’ll be expecting another contact request after the wedding, Spock. I’ll even say that I’ll be looking forward to it.’

‘I would not disappoint you, mother. I will also see what can be done about acquiring ample photographic evidence for your personal satisfaction.’

‘Why, thank you,’ Mother says. ‘Good night, Spock.’

‘Good morning, mother,’ Spock replies.

The terminal screen darkens, but Spock is not alone. He has his thoughts of Jim to accompany him—and Jim in the room below and to the left, where he is talking heatedly with his mother the queen and his brother the crown prince. They are not speaking about Klingon peace—though they had been thirty-three minutes prior—but a personal matter, instead.

Spock rises with the intent to join them, though he would not attempt to impose his presence where it is uncalled for.

Jim looks up when Spock clears his throat in the doorway. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Uh-uh. We’re not talking about this anymore.’
‘Embarrassed?’ George Samuel asks. ‘It’s actually a cute story, Jim. No need to turn red about it. I think Spock should know.’

‘We were reminiscing, Prince Spock,’ Queen Winona adds. ‘You certainly aren’t interrupting. Things are a bit less formal right now, aren’t they?’

‘I would not attempt to impose my presence where it is uncalled for,’ Spock replies.

‘Get over here,’ Jim says, easing back on the couch of which he is currently occupying more than his fair share. He appears to believe he has made room for Spock, though after a brief pause, he shifts to enlarge the space so that Spock will be more comfortable. ‘But I want you to know that if Sam keeps talking about that time I got stuck in the tree—’

‘Freedom of speech is something the Federation takes very seriously, Jim,’ George Samuel says.

‘You’re free to say anything you want, Sam, and I’m free to sell your toddler photos during your naked phase to the highest tabloid bidder.’

‘Actually, I don’t think you are free to do that, Jim,’ Queen Winona says. ‘However, if you were to maintain your anonymity as a source…’

George Samuel groans. ‘If only the Klingons could hear us now.’

‘It’s a good thing they can’t,’ Jim agrees.

Spock steps over the threshold and into the room to take his place by Jim’s side. The seat of the couch is still warm from his latent body heat. He is a warm person.

Spock settles down.

*
EPILOGUE

Chapter Summary

This fic could have gone on forever, but that might have become tedious.

Chapter Notes

Thank-yous and emotional blither-blather at the very end, if you care for that sort of thing. If not, and you're reading, and you've been reading, and you've commented, you are wonderful and have all my love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

STARDATE: 2252.04

‘OK.’ Jim sits too close to Spock on a couch large enough for three separate individuals, giving himself an excuse to put his arm around Spock’s shoulders. The high collar of his formal jacket has been unbuttoned down to his clavicle, where a hint of pink, freckled skin can be glimpsed. ‘So: explain to me again how you manage to talk me into agreeing to seeing the Klingons on our wedding anniversary?’

‘Chancellor Gorkon’s daughter was very specific about their availability,’ Spock replies. His hand, while gloved, finds its way to Jim’s knee but no higher.

The circumstances surrounding peace with the Klingons and the signing of the treaty have all been highly publicized and as such, there are cameras everywhere. Discretion is a valuable commodity. Earlier, Prince George Samuel was captured on a balcony enjoying a discussion of Orion poetry with Gaila and Jim’s colleague Nyota Uhura.

Fortunately, the current political climate has been enough to overturn any interest in personal tabloid exploits. Though the period spanning the talks was lengthy—endless, according to Jim, though that was a clear exaggeration—the signing of the much-negotiated treaty has still managed to captivate the news circuits. Spock has been more personally captivated, enjoying the sight of Jim making his impassioned speeches to his people, various members of the Federation, and the visiting Klingon delegates.

Even now, in relative privacy, there are hints of his political fire, though his shoulders are sloped, legs stretched out in front of him as if he could fall asleep with his head on Spock’s shoulder at any moment. His hair is already falling forward from where it was slicked back at the start of the day. Spock’s fingers twitch with the surprising urge to smooth over the wrinkles in his forehead.

The surprise itself is a contradiction in terms. It should no longer surprise Spock that he is surprised, and yet...

Jim has not been sleeping much despite his anticipation of their anniversary date and his vocalized intentions to ‘enjoy the hell out of it’.
‘Yeah, I’ll just bet she was,’ Jim says. ‘Azetbur’s got it out for me.’

‘I would venture to guess that this was because you referred to her as Azeotrope on your first meeting,’ Spock says.

‘Aw, come on, now you’re gonna hold that against me, too?’ Jim slaps his knee with his palm, rumpling the fabric of his trousers over his thigh. ‘The translation encoding was messed up—that’s what I get for relying on third party software.’

‘Your own translation might well have been more accurate,’ Spock acknowledges. ‘Names always prove difficult to translation algorithms.’

‘Are you trying to make me feel better?’ Jim asks.

‘Offering support is one of many recommended spousal duties,’ Spock replies. ‘On the date of our anniversary, it is important to review my responsibilities in order to be certain I am performing effectively.’

Jim tips their heads together. ‘You’re looking at this as an evaluation. Of course you are.’

‘I would not suggest that I have allowed myself to be remiss in my duties at other times. However, as a year has passed, it is an appropriate time to begin said evaluation of our—’

‘Two years, actually,’ Jim says. Spock raises a brow at his math and Jim grins, tapping his temple with a bare forefinger after biting off one of his white gloves and letting it drop into his lap. ‘Two years since this started. Since we started. Because it’s two years since you wrote to me for the first time. So, two years. Actually.’

‘The anniversary at which we have arrived is that which celebrates the date of our human marriage ceremony; therefore, I was referring to that which most demands acknowledgment. The human marriage ceremony takes its anniversaries more seriously than any Vulcan recognition of the passage of a single year.’

‘Did you draw up any documents?’ Jim asks. ‘Questionnaires? Something for Sam to fill out, and Bones, and Hendorff, asking for their opinion on how we’re doing, too?’

‘I would not trouble them during the myriad distractions provided by the Klingon treaty signing,’ Spock replies. ‘However, having been made aware of the necessity for this step, I shall remedy the oversight once the treaty has been signed and the ensuing festivities have been sufficiently enjoyed.’

‘No, Spock. No.’ Jim very gently bumps Spock’s shoulder with his own, an example of physical contact that has become less a matter of contention and more a matter of indulgence over the aforementioned three hundred and sixty five Earth days. ‘I would not like you to do that. I want to get this treaty signed, not have certain important parts of my anatomy wither away forever under Azetbur’s steely glare, and then I want to dance with you. All night. Or not dance. Stand with you. Kiss you; make love to you.’

Spock clears his throat.

‘Seriously? Of all the things that don’t embarrass you, make love is what gets a throat clear?’ Jim is attempting to sound outraged, but his eyes are far too bright for him to be truly frustrated. He is teasing. The subtleties of teasing remain difficult to navigate but navigation is by no means impossible. It has not even been unpleasant. ‘I’m just pissed I have to share my special day with the Klingons, all right? I’m being selfish, but I’ve been so good for so long so I think I’ve got a free
pass. Don’t respond to that. I know I don’t get a free pass.’

‘Your glove,’ Spock says, lifting it from Jim’s knee. He helps Jim to put it on, sliding his fingers against Jim’s and watching as Jim’s cheeks redden, along with the skin on his throat, in the open v of his unbuttoned collar.

‘That,’ Jim whispers hoarsely, ‘was so hot, Spock.’

So good. So long. So hot.

Spock will employ those phrases later if they are afforded the appropriate opportunity.

For now, he cannot allow himself to distract Jim. He is, rather, meant to secure Jim against distraction, not be the source thereof.

‘You could give me a kiss for good luck,’ Jim adds, close to Spock’s cheek.

‘You are well aware that Vulcans do not ascribe to a philosophy in which luck is given any legitimacy.’

‘Then how do you explain us?’ Jim asks.

He includes a wink. There is a ninety seven percent chance that he is once again teasing. Jim defies more specific predictions.

Either way, there is no means of responding to Jim’s question without providing further distraction. Spock holds his hand, briefly.

‘You do not require luck,’ Spock says.

‘Now that sounds like wishful thinking.’ Jim nudges his elbow against Spock’s rib cage, a quarter inch over his heart. ‘Not very Vulcan of you.’

‘Perhaps it comes from the part of me that is still human,’ Spock acknowledges.

They depart. Jim does not forget to button his collar before they disembark from their armored ride.

The signing of the treaty is a formality, the product of long hours of negotiating the peace between two separate races that do not hold many similar values. Honesty has been prized on both sides of the table, with Jim buoying Prince George Samuel’s more diplomatic talents by using his own flair for the blunter truths. It has been the product of several heated and protracted discussions that the talks not devolve into a series of matches demonstrating strength and battle prowess.

There was also a three-day recess to discuss the liability of the offhand comment made by Jim when he suggested that Prince George Samuel marry Chancellor Gorkon’s daughter Azetbur in order to firm up their political alliance.

The idea was ultimately dissolved due to a lack of immediate interest on both sides. However, it was a subject of much amusement for Jim in the ensuing days.

To look at him now—overseeing the signatures of the treaty between the requisite Starfleet personnel, Prince George Samuel, Queen Winona and three of the available Klingon houses—it would be impossible to draw comparison between the young man chuckling over the idea of George Samuel with Klingon teeth-marks on his face and the prince shaking hands with his newfound allies.
As a matter of course, Klingons do not shake hands. However, after the third member of the diplomatic team was brought to Doctor McCoy with shattered ribs and hairline fractures in their skull, it was deemed an appropriate compromise, owing to the fragile physicality of humans.

It was Jim’s hairline fracture that prompted the official decision.

The signing is not made public. Yet once both parties are finished collecting the requisite signatures, the gallery is opened to the public for photo-ops and cameras, the room flooding with flashing lights and eager reporters. Jim’s right hand finds its way to the small of Spock’s back when they find themselves side by side, a touch hidden from view.

‘Lucky you have the second eyelid,’ Jim murmurs, without ensuring minimal movement of his lips, thereby guaranteeing that at least three of the photos currently being taken will be of him with his mouth open, at an unflattering angle, with an unfortunate percentage of visible tongue. ‘I’m blind. I think I’m blind. Oh, no, there’s Gorkon’s aide, the one with the nose that looks like a foot—now I only wish I was blind. You know, to Klingons, that’s a compliment, not an insult?’

After the treaty comes the highly anticipated party—not the anniversary celebration Jim desires, but a necessary atmosphere of politically approved revelry after the long hours of work put in by both delegations over the past year. It is not romantic as stipulated by human interest, but there is bloodwine.

There is also gagh.

‘We just made peace with a race that eats living worms they don’t even like the taste of,’ Jim tells Spock, in between the required pleasantries shared with other delegations, attentions they are bound to pay to every Federation member in attendance to avoid causing unintentional slight. Spock has spoken with the Orion delegate and her aide, the infamous Gaila; he has weathered the thinly-veiled insults of the Tellarite attaché; he has maintained silence during a Klingon opera song performed, impromptu, by one of Gorkon’s attendees. ‘Amazing. Incredible. Eating worms that are alive. Again, insulting them is actually one way of winning their respect.’

‘The Federation has grown under the guidance of the Princes of Earth,’ Spock replies, watching Jim’s lips against the glass rim of his tumbler of bloodwine. ‘It reflects well upon your house and your planet. Further exploration will now be possible into the far reaches of yet unexplored space.’

‘At the same time, Bones ate gagh once—did you know that?’ Jim tips his tumbler toward Gaila across the room in acknowledgment of her attention. ‘Bones. He ate gagh and I haven’t. It’s almost enough to make me want to try it, too.’

‘If you are unable to digest the gagh, suffer an allergic reaction to one or more of its ingredients, or find the taste so unpalatable that you are forced to regurgitate any or all of the mouthful you have taken, it will be taken as a grave offense to the Klingon delegates,’ Spock informs him.

‘I’m gonna try the gagh,’ Jim says.

‘Again, I would advise against it.’

‘I can’t go through life knowing Bones has eaten gagh and I haven’t. Admiral Pike,’ Jim adds, as the Starfleet officer in question passes by. The Klingon opera portion of their evening’s musical accompaniment ends and Earth’s musical offerings from the nineteenth century begin, a suitably passionate piece to appeal to Klingon sensibilities while remaining representative of human composition.
As infinite as the diversities to be found between races are, there will always be points of comparability.

Jim eats the *gagh*.

He sweats and turns a deeper shade of crimson, but Azetbur is pleased by the display of bravado and Gorkon’s laughter fills the hall, while Admiral Pike claps Jim on the back between the shoulder blades. There is no regurgitation; Doctor McCoy’s presence is not required. An intergalactic incident is avoided.

‘You were right, by the way,’ Jim says, an hour and a half later. They have found another moment to spend together without offending anyone else through lack of attention.

‘I advised you against a *gagh* tasting on the grounds that an allergic reaction or unplanned regurgitation would cause trouble with the Klingons. As neither of these eventualities occurred, I fail to see——’

‘You know what live worms in your mouth taste like, Spock?’ Jim asks.

‘I would not presume to guess at the specifics of the experience, not having enjoyed it for myself,’ Spock replies.

‘They taste like live worms in your mouth,’ Jim says. ‘I think I’m gonna need a kiss to make myself feel a little bit better about, you know. Everything. It’ll look good in the news, too. *Reckless Royal Renegotiates Lifestyle: A Vulcan Reckoning*. It’s our anniversary,’ Jim adds. ‘Human anniversaries involve kissing. And dancing. But we’ll work on dancing once you rescue me from the *gagh* situation.’

‘I was not aware you were in need of rescue,’ Spock says. ‘As your husband, I would be remiss if I did not offer the necessary aid.’

He is aware that Jim is arguing from a facetious standpoint and yet he does not feel the need to turn the matter into a fresh debate. Similarly, since he is speaking about human traditions with regard to anniversaries, it is simple to discern what manner of kiss Jim is seeking to enjoy.

In spite of that clarity, Spock leans in to brush his hand against Jim’s anyway, stroking the inside of his index and middle fingers before he is able to close the distance between his mouth and Jim’s. As their marriage is a blending of two cultures, it is important to honor both traditions when honoring one tradition.

And, seeing as how they are currently on Earth, it is in Spock’s interest to keep their interests balanced.

‘Hmm.’ Jim’s grin is wide and the reflected lights from the party lamps overhead sparkle in the blue of Jim’s irises. ‘Is that your idea of throwing me a life raft?’

‘You presented yourself as a man in need of rescue,’ Spock confirms.

Displays of affection in public are not his preferred method of indulging in physicality, but Spock’s understanding of the rituals of anniversaries dictate that something outside of the ordinary take place. His lips against Jim’s are demonstrative, as is the way Jim’s body fits against his, taut and muscular, the hammer of his heartbeat against Spock’s chest, out of time with his own, placed lower under Jim’s rib cage.

Jim slips his free arm around Spock’s waist, drawing him closer to eliminate any remaining,
discreet distance between their bodies. He allows the contact for a few brief, lingering moments before Sam lets out a whoop from across the room, reasserting Spock’s awareness of the crowd in the room.

Romance is one thing, but there is the matter of appearance to consider in the face of their new allies. A smattering of applause has begun, but Klingons do not applaud. They shout.

They will soon begin to shout.

‘Jim.’ Spock licks Jim’s lips as he steps back, hands dropping to Jim’s waist. *Later,* Spock implies through contact and the strengthening bond growing daily between them. What is public will remain public. What is private shall ever be theirs. Jim arches one brow, or attempts to; instead, both of them raise simultaneously. It is not the effect he had intended. Spock loves him. ‘Not in front of the Klingons.’

**THE END?**

Chapter End Notes

I’m REALLY EMOTIONAL RIGHT NOW THAT THIS IS OVER so this will come out all babbly but FIRST OF ALL to everyone who read along and even commented or hit kudos or WHATEVER you have made my life worth living I’m not even kidding about that you have given me a purpose and joy every three days and it means so much to me and I love you for it. So thank you!!!

Secondly, to those who drew fanart, I am your servant for all time. Seriously hit me up. Your servant: that's me.

Thirdly, since I can’t escape princes forever, the next project I’ll be slapping up here in the very near future is a Mirrorverse twist on a royalty AU with a bit more info to be found HERE! Also working with the amazing littlesmartass on tumblr to finally put down some AOS fic with Jim Kirk, Spock, and a little baby.

Basically you've made it awesome and wonderful to commit myself hugely to writing for this fandom and I am so grateful and so in love with you guys and so in love with space. Thank you so much for reading and I will see you...soon..............????????????

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