We Will Meet Again

Summary

(Previously titled The Shadow of Fate)

For the first time in his life, things are going right for Jim Kirk. He's been promoted to captain, he's getting the flagship, and he gets to hand-pick most of his crew. When he hears he's being assigned an XO—an infamous jerk of a Vulcan instructor—he's sure that it's bound to mess everything up. There's a catch, though; even though no one (Jim included) knows it, this is the very same Spock that Jim was best friends with as a kid.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Part One- Chapter One

Jim stared at the file before him, mouth tugged down at the corner. He scrolled through it, but there was no wiggle room- after the whole Kobayashi Maru incident, Starfleet probably knew better than to leave any loopholes for him. He didn’t like it. Not one bit.

“I don’t get it,” Jim moaned. “Why can’t I just bring my own XO?”

“You’re already getting almost all your bridge crew,” Uhura pointed out. “Starfleet probably can’t imagine having all your hand picked people in command. We’re all likely to agree with you on, well, just about everything.”

“She’s got a point,” Bones said.

“Of course I do.” Uhura smiled. “If you had your own, hand-picked command officer-“

“Your own ex-boyfriend.” Bones added.

“Well, who’s going to reign you in if you start getting out of hand?” Uhura asked.

Jim said, “Gary would reign me in.”

Bones and Uhura both gave him a look.

“What? He would!”

“And then you’d smile at him and slip a few select words and he’d be all about your hair-brained schemes.” Bones drawled. “We’ve seen it before- glad to know we’re not gonna see it again.”

Uhura snorted.

“You guys are the worst.” Jim said. “We haven’t even been on board one day and it’s already mutiny.”

“Sorry, Captain.” Uhura winked. “We’ll be professional on shift, promise.”

“That’s better.”

“I won’t.” Bones said. “I’ll be out there reminding you how stupid it is that we’re out there. Did you know-“

“Is it a scary fact about spontaneous combustion? Because in that case, yes, you’ve probably said it before.” Jim smirked at Bones, who only scowled.

“Why I even bother…” He trailed off.

“Because you love us,” Jim reminded him. He looked back down at the PADD he’d been skimming. “I admit, maybe you guys do have a point about Gary. But still- giving me a commanding officer I’ve never even met? Command teams are practically a marriage.”

“Well, arranged marriages have worked before.” Uhura pointed out.

“If they don’t kill each other.” Bones said. He peered over at the PADD. “And he’s a Vulcan? I’ll be certain to attend your funeral when wifey offs you, Jim.”
“Oh, Bones, you wound me. I can get along with a Vulcan.” He squinted at the screen. “I swear every Vulcan ever is named Spock.”

“You’ve met another Spock?” Uhura laughed.

“Two, actually. But one, well...” He straightened back up. “I haven’t thought about my Spock in... damn, it feels like a lifetime.”

Uhura laughed. “Don’t start daydreaming now.”

“Yeah,” Bones said. “Don’t know what the Spock’s you met were like, but this one is a damn piece of work.”

Jim’s brows raised. “You’ve met him?”

“Did you not listen to my griping in freshman year?” Bones snipped. “Pretty sure I complained about that damned hobgoblin about twice a day.”

“I don’t recall.” Jim drawled.

Uhura said, “Be nice, he wasn’t that bad.”

Jim sighed. “Has everyone but me met my Commander?”

“Just about,” Bones said. “And no one’s pleased, I can tell you that much. Man wouldn’t know a sense of humor if it walked up and bit ‘im on the nose.”

“He’s really not that bad.” Uhura said. “He’s just... Vulcan.” She shrugged.

“Vulcan I can handle.” Jim promised. “Asshole, not so much.”

Bones snorted. “Well good luck then, kid.”

Jim turned to Uhura, hoping she’d have a saving comment.

She smiled apologetically and shrugged.

“Really?” Jim groaned. “He’s an asshole? I’m spending five years chained to an asshole?”

“He’s smart.” Uhura tried.

“So they’ll be a perfect match,” Bones snorted. “Two genius assholes.”

“I hate you,” Jim said.

Bones said, “Love you too, dear.”

Jim opened his mouth to retort when he spotted the rest of his bridge crew making their way over. Scotty, Sulu, and Chekov- all talking animatedly between each other. They sat without interrupting their discussion.

“It’s clearly class three,” Sulu was saying. “You saw the engines on that thing, Scotty.”

“Aye, I did, and they ‘ere clearly class five if I ever seen one.”

“Plees,” Chekov drawled. “Zey vere class sewen.”
“Took you guys long enough.” Jim said. “Ready to meet our new XO?”

They paused in discussion. Sulu furrowed his brow, turning to Jim. “I thought Gary was gonna be Commander?”

“He got hawked by the Bradbury.” Jim muttered.

“That aside, they told Jim he’s already got an XO.” Uhura said. She picked up the PADD from where Jim had abandoned it on the lunchroom table, and slid it over to the three at her side. They all eagerly made a grab for it, but it was Scotty who won out, grinning smugly at the other two as he opened the document. Uhura continued, “Jim’s pulling all of us from other ships; he knew us in the Academy, we’re his friends. Not to mention Chekov.”

The boy grinned.

“You sure yer graduating in time for us to leave?” Bones drawled.

“Yees, sir.” Chekov beamed.

Jim said, “Apparently they need someone to keep us all in check. We’re getting Pike’s old science officer. He’s been on the Enterprise a while, so I guess it makes sense that they’d give him to us.”

“He’s not a pet, Jim.” Bones snorted. “They’re not giving him to you, they’re assigning a watch dog to your ass.”

Jim sighed.

“Ah, I remember him.” Scotty frowned. “Not a very nice fellow, if I recall.”

“Oh my god, Commander Spock? Are you kidding me?” Sulu groaned.

“Seriously?” Jim said. “You’ve all met him?”

“Not me,” Chekov said. He squinted at the name on the PADD. “Oh, I have heard ze horror stories of Professor Spock.” He looked back up at Jim in horror. “Zis is ze XO?”

“I guess so.” Jim groaned. He dropped his head into his hands.

“You could have met him before now, too- you should have taken xenolinguistics,” Uhura laughed.

Jim said, “I took Orion.”

Uhura snorted. “Ah, yes, and what a useful language that’s going to be.”

“This guy,” Sulu said, “Is ruthless. He made my friend Mia cry at least four times.”

“Aye,” Scotty nodded. “Perfection or nothing fer him, Captain.”

“Great.” Jim looked at the clock at the top of the PADD screen. “Well, we’d better be going. Wouldn’t want to be late meeting Mr. Perfect.”

They stood in unison. Jim lead the group down the halls of Starfleet headquarters, feeling more and more nervous by the minute. He’d dreamed his entire life of captaining the Enterprise- he’d grown up watching her become herself from just beyond the shipyard. What if this guy ruined everything?

Spock. It was the ‘Jim’ of Vulcan names, he supposed. The name flushed images through his mind,
rapid-fire. An old pair of eyes, deep with understanding and unfathomable compassion. A gnarled hand reaching out to him from the light, trying to draw him out of the shadows. A thick blanket dropped over his back while Jim was busy slurping chicken noodle soup from a thermos, and a kind command not to get too overzealous drinking it.

A small open hand. A young voice, saying, “Jim.”

“Jim?”

He startled back to the present.

“You daydreaming again?” Bones teased.

“Something like that,” Jim said.

“Nervous?” Bones asked.

Jim shrugged. “In a way.”

Bones nodded.

They were coming up on the conference room, Jim caught sight of Pike walking their way from another hall just ahead. Jim smiled and waved, and Pike nodded back. Jim turned to his crew.

“You guys head into the conference room,” he said. “I’m gonna grab Pike for a sec.”

“Damage assessment?” Uhura teased.

“I like to have a battle plan,” Jim replied. He started up a slight jog, heading off towards Pike while everyone else filtered into the conference room.

“Well don’t you look eager,” Pike greeted him.

“Hey,” Jim said. He smiled. “Long time no see.”

“Lucky for me.” Pike said.

Jim laughed.

“You want to talk about Spock,” Pike guessed.

Jim nodded. “I hear he’s…”

“Vulcan?”

“An ass.”

Pike laughed. “Well, he can certainly come off that way.”

Jim deflated. There went his last hope.

“But” Pike paused just outside of the conference room. “Don’t go in there with any preconceived notions about him, Jim. I’ll be the first to admit, he takes some getting used to, but he’s a damn good officer.”

Jim looked up, hopeful.
“Don’t blow this, Jim.” Pike said. “Spock is one of the best officers in the fleet, and he’ll make a
damn good First. Number One has always been the balance I needed, but if it had been Spock
standing up there next to me, I know we would have gotten along just as well. He’s got a good head
on his shoulders, and more sense than you do.”

Jim laughed. “Well, that’s not saying much.”

Pike grinned. “Hm, you’re right.” He reached out, clapping his hand over Jim’s shoulder. “I’m not
saying you have to be his best friend. I don’t expect you two to meet and start hugging it out right
then and there. Just… give him a chance.”

Jim nodded. He felt better after talking to Pike, and most of his apprehension had melted away.
Maybe this Spock was a jerk, but Jim had a good track record with all his past Vulcans named
Spock, and he was determined to make this new Spock a good experience too.

“No come on,” Pike said. He touched the door and it slid open. “Let’s boldly go.”

Jim laughed. He stepped into the room after Pike, and took in the conference table. His team were
already all seated, sitting straight and at attention. He was filled immediately with pride for them; they
looked ready. He turned his eyes up to the front, then, steeling himself for first contact.

His eyes met the Vulcan’s from across the room.

Jim froze.

Time stopped.

He could feel the crew watching him, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away; he couldn’t stop his mouth
from falling open in shock.

Spock looked about the same. He was standing stiffly in surprise, eyes wide as dinner plates.

“Spock.”

He could have heard a pin drop.

“Jim,” Spock said, his voice just barely audible.
Part One- Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

As some of my readers have noticed, I've deleted almost all of part one of this work. (It still reads just fine; I added in a little grab-bit.) This is because I decided to take the advice of several people who told me this really could be turned into an original work SO I took the main idea of this fic and turned it into an original series of my own, under the handle K. Anderson Books. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook

Thank you so much everyone!

Jim Kirk hadn’t had a perfect life by any means. The very day he’d been born, in fact, had pretty much been the worst set of circumstance anyone could put into thought. He’d kept that ball rolling for most of his life, really; he was a trouble-maker, a rule-breaker, a deviant.

From the time he was old enough to walk, he’d believed in love. From the time he was old enough to go to school, he’d believed in his fists. It was an odd combination—a bleeding heart who brawled more often than anyone actually knew—but it was who he was, regardless. He felt, oftentimes, that his duel natures were at war within his body, and he was certain that if it hadn’t been for a certain Vulcan in his life, he’d have gone crazy with it long, long ago.

Spock was the good in Jim’s life. Even if everything else sucked beyond reason, Spock was always there for him come summertime—the Vulcan and his human mother would take up residence in the house down the road until the school year began again for Jim, and then they would return home to Vulcan. Jim spent the majority of Spock’s time sneaking out at night to creep into the shipyard down the road in order to watch the construction on the Enterprise as she grew into herself, and Spock spend those trips largely complaining about how they were breaking the law.

Despite their differences, Jim had never really related to anyone like he did with Spock. He could tell Spock about his feelings and dreams without fear, and Spock did the same to Jim. They were as close as two people could be, and even if Jim’s mother didn’t like it, there was no changing it. For years, Jim had been able to hear Spock in his head, and knew that there was something special between them.

They did rapid-fire math together, and talked in lazy Vulcan and Klingon, and sometimes, they drove the bike they’d built around Iowa’s countryside. It wasn’t perfect. But it was everything that Jim needed.

That was due to change, though.

The strain between Jim and Winona had become enormous. She was gone for two months, back for one, gone for three, back for one month, gone for two months, back for summer.
In those two months that she’d been around, Jim had been busy with school— he was taking his first year of high school in Riverside, at Highland High school— which is a stupid name, he thought— taking as many college courses as he could get. His personal favorite was the Strategy and Tactics class, because while it was easy, it was fun. Most of the other classes were just easy, full-stop. Easy full-stop meant boredom, and boredom meant trouble.

By the time Winona returned from her first two months off-planet, Jim had rearranged the entire barn. He’d been mostly lying when he’d said he and Spock were cleaning it so that he could hang out in there, but the boredom had taken over and made the farce a truth. He’d made the barn into his own little tech garage, full of wonderful sparkling antique cars, his work bench, a desk with a giant home-made computer, and the Hali. She’d been impressed, if not nervous, because, and he quoted, “It looks like you’re planning planetary-taking over in here.”

Jim had thought about it, and there was just no way you could take over an entire planet without someone getting hurt, never mind killed, so he’d put that particular fantasy to bed. It wasn’t like he wanted to rule anything or anyone, anyway, but it would have been a true challenge. He wanted to know what it felt like to get his ass handed to him by someone (or someones, he wasn’t picky) smarter than him.

His mom gave him the updates on her job. Jim gave her the updates on his school. They both avoided each other around the house and Jim cursed in Vulcan when he could because he knew it annoyed her.

Worst of all, though, his mom went on dates.

Dates. As in plural. As in more than one date.

His mom was no stranger to dates. He’d sent her off on her way to plenty of them. But they were always with different men, and she always came back early, moaning about how Jim was going to be the only man in her life until the day she died. Those speeches had come to a grinding, shrieking halt, all on account of one man.

Frank. Fucking Frank.

There wasn’t really anything wrong with Frank except that he was dating Jim’s mom. He was a pretty nice guy, and he was funny sometimes, and he wasn’t lazy or stupid. He wasn’t smart, but he wasn’t stupid. And he seemed to really like Winona. Whenever Winona brought him around the house he even seemed to tolerate Jim.

Jim did not like him.

Not one bit.

Which was why, when Winona proposed having Frank over for dinner on the night that was meant for Spock, Amanda, and Sarek, Jim drew the line.

“No thanks.”

She raised a brow. “No thanks?”

“Yeah. I mean, I know he’s important to you, but this is important to me. So when you say ‘Jim would you like to have Frank over for dinner tonight, too’ I’m gonna have to go with a very determined ‘no thanks.’ Unless you weren’t actually asking me.”

She scowled.
“Mom, tonight’s about us and Spock’s family.”

“Well Frank is my boyfriend. He’s part of the family.”

“No he’s not.” Jim said. “He wasn’t on the Christmas card.”

“Jim we didn’t send out a Christmas card this year.”

“Guess we’re not a true family then.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re being difficult on purpose.”

“You got me.” He reached up for the freezer door and pulled it open, peering inside to search for the ice cream. It was waiting where he’d left it, faithfully tucked in next to the bag of mixed green beans and corn. He’d assured himself they would have dessert with dinner this summer, even if they’d gotten side-tracked every other year, and his mom had bought the good kind of ice cream.

Actually, Frank had bought it, but Jim had put it on the list of things they needed, and his mom had made the list, so who was to say exactly who had really instigated the frozen treat’s appearance in their freezer?

“Frank would love to meet Spock’s family.”

Jim sighed. “Which means you already told him.”

“I don’t keep secrets.”

Unless they’re from me, Jim thought.

“Jim, don’t be a pain. We’ve got room at the table, Frank should come.”

“Sarek’s never even met Frank. What if he hates him?”

“Why would it matter?” Winona asked. “Sarek is a Vulcan. He wouldn’t admit to hating anyone, because that’s emotional.”

“There are logical reasons to hate someone.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Those being?”

Jim sensed he’d made a mistake. “I don’t know,” he said, carefully. “Just saying it could happen.”

“Hm.” She turned back to where she was making veggie burgers. Crisis averted.

“Besides,” Jim ventured. “You said that he doesn’t eat vegetarian food.”

Winona rolled her eyes. “I was going to make him something different to eat.”

“That kinda defeats the whole purpose of a vegetarian night, doesn’t it?”

“Okay, smart ass.” She bumped him aside with her hip. “How’s the salad coming along?” She hinted.

He slipped around her to the other side of the counter, where he’d been cutting carrots. “Leafy green,” he said, grinning up at her cheekily. He resumed where he’d left off, cutting more veggies to add into the mix.
He couldn’t wait to see Spock. It felt like life was monochromatic when Spock wasn’t around, and when the Vulcan came back for the summers, the world burst into violent color again. Jim had spent many nights up, staring at his ceiling, wondering at his odd connection to Spock. He’d never been afraid of loving Spock, even know that Spock would always leave him. Jim had never doubted that Spock would come back, against all probability. Their meeting felt like fate - a divine destiny that they were unfolding year by year, as if they could never have existed in a life time where they did not meet.

Just knowing that Spock was on planet, and not with him, had him fidgeting. He could almost say he felt Spock, like a point on a compass, his internal arrow eagerly pointing the young Vulcan’s way when they got close.

Jim laughed a little thinking about it.

“What’s so funny?” Winona asked.

“Just thinking.” He said.

She nodded. “Excited to see Spock?”

He grinned. “Yeah. I am.”

“It’s too bad Sarek will be around all summer, I suppose you won’t want to sleep over there as often.”

Jim blinked up at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well…” She pressed her mouth into a thin line. “You don’t... like Sarek, do you?”

“I like Sarek.” Jim defended. “He might be a jerk sometimes, but he’s still... I don’t know. Amanda’s husband.”

Winona snorted. “Amanda’s husband? What happened to him being Spock’s dad?”

“That’s the only part about him I don’t like.” Jim said. “Sarek is cool. He just isn’t like, the best dad in the entire world. He’s always telling Spock that you know. Spock has to make his own choices and find his own path, but then he’s super obvious about which path he thinks Spock should take and gets all pissy when Spock doesn’t do it.”

“Pissy, hm?”

“Yeah. But he loves Amanda. And Spock. Just in his weird way, you know?”

“I thought he married Amanda because he was the ambassador to Earth.”

Jim snorted. “That’s just what he wants you to think. Amanda has his logical Vulcan ass wrapped around her illogical human finger.”

Winona laughed. “Well, then.”

There was a knock on the door. Jim dropped the knife and booked it, flashing around the table and out into the living room. He saw the silhouette of someone tall through the curtained window and nearly tripped in his haste to answer the door.

“James Kirk,” Sarek said. He held up his hand in the ta’al.
Jim flashed it back, leaning around Sarek. “Hi, Sarek,” he said, and wondered where the hell Amanda and Spock were.

“My son and my wife are at the hover car,” Sarek said.

Jim barely managed a “Thanks!” before scooting around Sarek and running out the door.

He saw the car, first, and then Amanda’s hair. She’d put it up in her familiar Vulcan style, the curls perfectly controlled. Jim smiled wide upon seeing her.

“Amanda!” He yelled.

She turned just in time to receive him. He crashed into her, throwing his arms around her body. “Oh-James!” She laughed. She hugged him back fiercely, tucking his head under her chin while she held him to her front.

“Hi.” Jim said.

She laughed.

“Jim,” came Spock’s voice. He was at the back of the hover, slinging a bag over his shoulder.

“Spock!” Jim abandoned Amanda to rush over to his friend, happily hugging him, too. ”You got tall again!” He stood up on his tip-toes so that they were nearly eye-to-eye. ”Next summer I'll be taller than you, I swear.”

"That is highly unlikely." Spock said.

Jim hugged him again, just because. Spock allowed it.

"Well come on you two," Amanda said. "Dinner is probably getting cold in there."

Jim grabbed Spock's wrist, loath to break their contact. He could feel the familiar hum of Spock's mind on the edge of his awareness; a sensation he'd missed more and more with time. Spock's calm, cool manner put Jim instantly at ease. He lead the way, Spock at his side, and Amanda just behind them, grinning all the way.

Spock was supposedly staying the night at their house, instead of the summer home, so Jim abandoned Amanda at the end of the stairs to run Spock up to his room. "It's changed a little," Jim said. He'd gotten new covers and sheets for his bed, and they'd painted the walls white.

The reveal was rather lackluster, but Jim was too happy to care. "Ta-da!" He threw his arms wide and spun in a circle in the middle of the room.

Spock took in the few changes and nodded his head. He walked over to the bed and gently set his bags down on top of it, still looking around. He seemed almost to be cataloging the changes to his memory, so that when he walked back into the room after dinner he would already know exactly the way every inch of space would look, and not be taken unaware by any of it. Jim loved him for it- no one observed things like Spock did, and it made his chest feel warm and light.

"Come on," Jim said. "Your mom's right- dinner's gonna get cold."

Spock turned around. "Of course," he said.

They journeyed back down the stairs and into the kitchen, where the adults were already waiting. Amanda and Winona had taken their usual places on the right side of the table. Sarek was at the
head, his back to the kitchen’s entry way. Amanda was at his right, and Spock moved to sit at his left. Jim sat across from his mother, turning a suspicious eye at the chair that had been pulled up to the other side of the table. Usually, it was just the four chairs, and the other two sat stationary by the screen door. It would make sense that one had been moved up to the head of the table for Sarek, but the other one...

He narrowed his eyes at his mother. She narrowed hers right back, as if issuing a silent challenge.

There was a knock at the door.

"Mom," Jim groaned. He thudded his head on the table.

"Excuse me for a moment," she said to Amanda and Sarek. She stood, neatly tucking her chair in. Jim didn't watch her as she hurried out of the kitchen, knowing already that the evening had taken a turn for the worse.

Spock leaned over. "Are you expecting further company, Jim?"

Jim looked up at Amanda and Sarek, who didn't look even slightly surprised. "Why don't you ask them?" He groaned. The traitors.

Spock didn't get the chance. Winona returned, Frank at her elbow, the both of them grinning extra wide and polite. "Everyone," said Winona, "This is Frank."

"Oh, Frank, Winona has told me so much about you," Amanda trilled.

Sarel simply nodded at the man. Jim watched Spock do the same, feeling a small bit of satisfaction in the way Frank seemed a bit off-put by the cold gesture. It was just the Vulcan way, of course- they were both being polite- but the fact that Frank took it as a sort of dismissal was delicious.

"Frank, this is Doctor Amanda Grayson," Winona said.

Frank held his hand out for a handshake. Amanda pulled back from him, eyes widening for a moment. Sarek stuck his hand out, and Amanda soothed her fingers over his, as if in reassurance. Frank awkwardly pulled his hand back.

Jim chuckled.

"Oh, um, Vulcans don't do handshakes, baby." Winona awkwardly said.

He furrowed his brow. "I thought you said she was human."

"I'm married to a Vulcan." Amanda laughed. "For a second there, I forgot about handshakes and was shocked by your audacity."

"Oh." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Uh... okay."

The awkwardness was palpable. Winona plowed on despite it. "Anyway, baby, this is Ambassador Sarek, and his son, Spock."

Frank nodded at them both. "It's good to meet you both."

Sarek and Spock said nothing.

Jim could have clapped his hands in delight.
Winona ushered Frank around to the end of the table, then. When they were all seated, they started in without preamble- Vulcans and Jim alike reaching for the food without a word. Winona and Frank blinked in surprise, Franks hands loosely clasped together from where he’d been about to begin saying grace. Jim could have laughed at them both- it was illogical to wait any longer to eat once all parties were seated, lest the food grow cold. Vulcans may have been all about ceremony, but they didn't tend to drawl where it counted.

"Okay then." Winona muttered. She reached out to begin serving herself.

"So Jim," Amanda began. "I hear you're in high school now!"

"Yep." He grinned around a bite of green beans, and then swallowed. "Just finished freshman year. Youngest kid there."

"How fun!" Amanda cheered. "I loved high school. Well, I went to boarding school, but I loved it."

"Boarding school?" Jim stuck his tongue out. "I can hardly stand one whole day at school. How did you live there?"

"It was an all girls' school." Amanda said. "Me and my three roommates were always getting into trouble, but it was a lot of fun. I don't know if I would have liked it so much if it weren't for them-the classes were all high standard, though, and the teachers knew what they were talking about. I learned a lot."

"I wish I could say the same." Jim snorted.

Amanda laughed. "You'll find someone who knows more than you eventually."

"You know more than me." Jim said.

"Well, maybe I'll have to teach you about linguistics sometime, then." She laughed. "Though I guess Spock already has, hm?"

"I used a great amount of your own research in my endeavor." Spock said.

Frank cut in. "Whoa, whoa, wait. Jim knows another language?"

"Ar'kadan rehkuh." Jim said. Try three.

Frank's brows furrowed. He opened his mouth to retort, but Winona cut in smoothly.

"It came as a surprise to me, too," she said. "But he's always talking Vulcan so Spock, so his grasp of the language is passable."

"Passable." Sarek intoned.

They all turned to look at him.

"Asides from my wife," he said, "I have never heard another human speak such perfect Vulcan. His diction and accent are nearly perfect- for one living off-planet."

Winona blinked in surprise.

Amanda flushed. "Husband, you flatter me."

Jim, meanwhile, was grinning at his mom and Frank. They might have thought he only used his
brain to get into trouble, but damn if this wasn't a way to prove them wrong. Sometimes he was really out learning, too.

Jim shuffled the conversation away in the back of his mind to use as evidence later, when he and Spock were likely to make another plea for Jim to join the party heading back to Vulcan for the school year. "See mom," he's say, "I learn when I'm with Amanda and Spock. Imagine what I could do on Vulcan for an entire nine months!"

That vein of thought ran deep. The adults had begun talking about the weather- gross- and other boring things, so Jim didn't feel bad about drifting into a near daydream. He and Spock both had birthdays during the school year- how cool would it be if they got to spend them together? Jim could see himself wandering the hot, dusty market places of Vulcan, searching for the perfect gift, federation credits and Earth tokens alike shoved into his pocket while he perused the stalls. What kind of gift would Spock like? A book? That seemed the most likely answer, but was it special enough? Maybe something science related. Jim could see himself looking for some kind of rare plant or specimen, maybe finding something from a planet they'd never even heard of. Spock would love that kind of thing- they could study alien moss for days. Or maybe a rock of some kind, from a far away galaxy; the minerals would key them in to so many different things about where it had come from. They could hypothesize for hours on end, putting together a million different possibilities.

And on his birthday, Jim wouldn't have to be alone. He wouldn't have to deal with his mother not-so-discreetly crying in her office and downing another glass of God knows what. He and Spock could spend the day out in the Vulcan heat, chasing down lizards and insects. Of course, Spock would probably never 'chase'- that would be undignified. Maybe they'd rig up some traps so that they could capture specimens without chance of harming them. That seemed like it would be more up their ally, but Jim couldn't get the image of running after a giant, yellow desert lizard out of his head. He wanted that life so badly he could taste it.

Amanda would wake them both up for school with the smell of pancakes. Spock pretended he was indifferent to them, but he loved them just as much as Jim did. She'd fix the buttons on Jim's shirt if he'd messed them up in his tired rush to get dressed, and she'd smooth over his hair and tease him about his cowlick. She'd drive them to school, and he and Spock would chatter a mile a minute in the back about all the things they were due to study for the day. They'd go to the same school, and have lunch together and they wouldn't be alone anymore.

Jim could feel the heat on his neck, the dry, ancient dust of the Vulcan plains in his mouth. He'd be the only kid out in shorts and it would distract people so much they'd forget to gawk at Spock and his half-humaness. They'd celebrate Passover with Spock's mom, and Jim wouldn't even be sorry to miss Christmas because it didn't snow on Vulcan, anyway. And-

"Right, Jim?"

Jim was snapped back into reality. He blinked and then looked over to his mother, who was waiting expectantly for an answer. "What?"

She sighed. "Well, there goes my point."

Jim had no idea what she was talking about. His plate, though, was empty, so he said, "Can Spock and I be excused?" A quick glance at Spock's spotless plate confirmed that the young Vulcan had simply been waiting for Jim.

Winona frowned. "Can't you-

"Oh, Winona," Amanda laughed. "Let them off the hook; it's their first night of summer."

"Thanks!" Jim hopped down from the table.

"At least put your dishes in the sink," Frank said. "Leave less for you mom to do."

Jim resisted the urge to point out that it was none of Frank's damn business and grabbed his plate, marching it over to the sink. Spock did the same, though Jim doubted Frank would have yelled at him if he'd left his plate where it was.

They took off towards Jim's room.

As Jim followed Spock up the stairs to the bedroom, he noticed that Spock had recently gotten his hair cut. The back of his head came to a neat, pointed Vulcan V; all straight, perfect lines and exact angles. Jim reached up without thinking and touched the bit that had been shaved. Spock stopped walking, standing up straight as a pole.

"Sorry," Jim said. "I like your haircut."

Spock looked over his shoulder, baffled. "It is the same as always."

"It's fresh." Jim said.

Spock raised a brow.

They proceeded the last few steps into Jim's room. Jim closed the door and then flopped down on his bed, bouncing Spock's bags up and nearly off. He scrambled to catch them and managed to grab the handles to both before they hit the floor. He stood and neatly set them on the chair at his desk, looking up to see if Spock was judging him.

He totally was.

"What?" Jim laughed. "I'm excited!"

"I was able to deduce as much."

"Oh, deduce, nice word." He grinned. "Come here, will you? You're making me feel weird by just standing there."

Spock loosened up and did as asked, padding over to the bed and then sitting himself on the edge. He smoothed out the materials of his pants as he did so, and Jim noticed that he wasn't wearing a thick sweater like usual.

"Hey, cool." He reached out and thumbed the sleeve closest to him, feeling the thinness of the material. "You're not all bundled up."

Spock preened under the attention. "I am fully capable of regulating my body temperature, as any Vulcan should be."

"That's so cool!" Jim said. "So even if we went out in the snow..."

"While I would suffer loss of body heat eventually, and then likely catch hypothermia, I would do so with more dignity than a human."

"Just you wait until we're out in the snow dying of cold. I'm going to go out as dignified as a king and then you'll have to eat your words." Jim said. "I bet if we went to Delta Vega I'd make it longer
"Untrue," said Spock. "I will be the one fending off the deadly wildlife of Delta Vega whilst you screamed in peril."

"I wouldn't scream." Jim laughed.

"I calculate a ninety three percent chance that you would scream."

"You made those odds up!" Jim laughed. "No, you'd be shivering super hard and I'd have to build us a fire and then you'd have to use my body heat to keep from dying. Trust me, it's science."

"I wish to see the factual evidence that has lead to your theory. If it is as scientific as you claim, then I will doubtlessly have to locate and correct the errors that lead to such an illogical outcome."

"Sometimes, Spock, you sound just like a computer."

"Flattery is appreciated, Jim, but not necessary."

"Shut up!" Jim laughed, kicking out at Spock, but Spock caught his leg before it made contact. He ran his finger up the underside of Jim's foot. Jim screamed, kicked, and fell off the bed.

"Fascinating," said Spock.

Jim grinned up at Spock from where he lay on the floor. "... I really missed you," he said.

"You have said this already."

"Yeah well it's so true that its worth repeating." He reached out and put his hand on Spock's ankle, to reestablish physical contact between the two of them. Even when he wasn't touching Spock's skin, he could still just barely sense the hum of the other boy's consciousness running along side his own. Spock felt content, and a little sleepy, and maybe even happy. Jim smiled up at him.

"Your feelings, to me, are like the sun." Spock said.

"Don't go getting romantic on me, Spock." Jim made a kiss-face, and Spock pulled out of his grasp. Spock crossed his legs on the bed, his socked feat neatly tucked under his legs. "Vulcans are not romantic," Spock said.

"Says you. Your dad was kissing your mom all night at dinner."

Spock greened a little. "Such displays of ownership are common for Vulcans."

Jim raised his brows. "Ownership?"

Spock paused. "I do not know a better word for it. My father belongs to my mother, as my mother belongs to my father. They are... to one another as one is to oneself. There is no word for it in Standard that I believe to be its equivalent. Do not be mistaken- my mother is not a possession which my father has collected, just as my father is not a possession which my mother has collected. They are... of one another."

"Is that how all bondmates are?" Jim asked.

"Not all." Spock answered. "Kissing is a display most bondmates initiate whilst meeting others. It is
Respectful to show that one belongs not only to oneself, and to inform others of their marital status. Belonging to one's bondmate is a sacred thing, which is not to be hidden, but rather lived by."

"That's very informative," Jim said. "But you completely avoided my true question.

Spock said, "You are perceptive, as usual, Jim." He looked at his lap. "While it is true that most bondmates would initiate a kiss upon meeting others, few ask for such a gesture quite as often as my father and mother do of one another. I see no logic in it."

Jim snorted. "Well, yeah. They don't do it because of logic. They love each other." He paused. "I guess bondmates are usually only together because it's the logical thing, then?"

Spock nodded, but did not elaborate.

"If other Vulcans loved each other as much as your parents do, I bet they'd kiss all the time."

"My father married my mother because it was logical," Spock said. "Love had no part in his actions."

"Let me guess- Sarek told you that."

"He did."

"Yeah, well, Vulcans are okay with lying when it comes to feelings, and your dad is a prime example of that. He'd head over heals for your mom. Maybe he's convinced you that he did it because of logic, maybe even himself, but that doesn't make it the truth. He's crazy about her."

"My father is quite sane."

"You know what I mean." Jim snorted. He pulled himself up onto the bed again, laying back behind Spock. He stared at the back of the Vulcan's head, saying, "Do you really think Sarek's not capable of love?"

"He is Vulcan."

"Even Vulcans love." Jim said. "Every living being in the universe has the capacity for love."

Spock looked back at him, raising a brow.

"Klingons have Par'Mach." Jim reasoned. "Gorn value best friends just as much as they do spouses. Even though the Irili produce asexually, they still have big families. They don't even have a scientific, evolutionary need to love, and yet, they adopt more aliens than any other species in the galaxy."

"Love is an emotion."

"An emotion all creatures feel." Jim said, certainly.

Spock looked back down at his lap. "It is disgraceful," he said, "To be over-come by an emotion."

"If you're going to be overcome by any emotion, I'd say that's probably the best one to be overcome by." He crossed his arms behind his head.

"... Have you been in love?" Spock asked.

Jim sat up, blinking at him in surprise. "Huh?"
He was silent.

"Well, sure I have." Jim said. "I love you, don't I? And Amanda, and my mom, and-"

"You speak of romantic love." Spock said. "When you refer to my father and mother, and their affection for one another. It is something you have always spoken about, with certainty and hope. Surely, then, you must have experienced it at some point."

"Well... I don't know." Jim said. "I had a bunch of crushes this year."

"Crushes?"

Jim nodded. "First this girl who always helps out in the library like I do named Sarah. She was really nice, and we could talk about books all day. But then she stopped hanging out with me because I'm way younger than her, and her friends kept teasing her for babysitting me. And I don't think I can be friends with someone who would give me up just because of something small like that. And then there was this guy in my science class with these huge brown eyes. He wears glasses, so they always looked all big and I just thought it was so cool. He was really smart, but he wouldn't give me the time of day. And then we got an exchange student from Renegias Seven, and he had this pale blue, almost clear skin and he could play like, any instrument ever, but he only hung out with the cool kids once they finally started paying attention to him, so he wouldn't hang out with me after that."

"You do not resent them for these things?"

"Everyone leaves me at some point, once they realize what I'm like. Either they think I'm cool and then leave when they find out I'm a huge nerd, or they hang out with me because they hear I'm a huge nerd and leave when they realize I won't be bitter and mean like they are, or... you know. Just all these things about me that clash with the personality type, I guess. It doesn't really bother me all that much. Crushes come and go."

"So then, you were never in love with any of these people?"

He shook his head.

Spock let out a sigh- he sounded relieved.

"What?"

"I have never had a crush. I worried, briefly, as many of my peers began to display behaviors of those searching for a partner at this age. When you, yourself, said as much, I worried perhaps..."

"You're not weird, Spock." Jim said.

"I see. Hearing of your own 'crushes' I admit I am rather glad to not have experienced my own."

Jim laughed. "Oh come on, Spock, it's not all getting shot down in flames. I bet everyone on Vulcan is lining up for your big brain. If you did get a crush, I bet whoever it was would like you back."

"Perhaps." Spock said. "You have... never been in love then, Jim?"

"Not yet." Jim said. He grinned wide. "One day, though."

"How can you be so certain?"

"I'm capable of loving," Jim said, "So love's gonna find me again."
It was all to be said on the matter.

"Come on," Jim said, standing up. "Dessert time. We've got ice cream to eat."

Spock followed, as always, closely by his side.

"Hey, Jimmy."

Jim peered over the door of the refrigerator at Frank. He was in his boxers and an old T shirt, which was super dumb, because Winona would never let Jim walk around the house in his underwear.

"Hey."

"Where's your buddy?"

"Upstairs." He'd hoped to grab some loot and then be back up in his room in a minute or less, and the small talk was hurting those chances. He grabbed the crate of orange juice and two apples, turning to make his escape.

"Where ya' going with all that orange juice?"

"Upstairs." Jim started out of the kitchen.

"Your mom let you take food out of the kitchen?"

As if she could stop him. "Yeah."

"Hm."

Jim made it half way up the stairs.

"You gonna drink all that orange juice?"

Jim rolled his eyes and turned around. "Spock's gonna help."

"You coming back down for glasses?"

Jim started to walk up the last couple of steps, tossing his reply over his shoulder. "We'll drink it from the carton."

Frank said, "Your mom okay with that?"

Jim pretended not to hear and closed the door.

Spock looked up from where they were on the brink of creating a perfect black hole simulation.

"You took longer than expected."

"Frank," Jim explained. He tossed Spock his apple.
Spock caught it without looking. "I see."

Jim took a savage bite of his apple, chewing loudly. He sat down next to Spock, looking over the Vulcan's shoulder. "Change that to a three," he said, pointing.

Spock looked. "Ah. I see now that I made an error. Thank you, Jim."

Jim took the cap off of the carton of orange juice, washing back the bits of apple stuck in his teeth. He passed the carton over to Spock. Years ago, Spock would have squirmed just thinking about sharing saliva, but he barely blinked as he took his own drink from the carton.

"Why is Frank here at this hour?" Spock asked.

Jim pinked. "He, uh. Stayed the night." He cleared his throat.

Spock paused. "I see," he said. He turned his full focus back to his work.

"Yeah."He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't like to think about it either."

"Your mother may do as she wills." Spock said. "She is an adult."

"Doesn't make it any less weird," Jim sighed. He scooted over so that he was sitting next to Spock, instead of at his back. "How long until we can test run this baby?"

"Our simulation is not an infant."

"Okay. How long until we can test run this comparatively young computer simulation?"

Spock gave him a look. Being Vulcan, Spock didn't glare, oh no- but damn if he could have fooled Jim.

Jim smirked at him. "Oh, was that too specific for your tastes, Mr. Spock?"

Spock turned back to their work. "I recognize that, as a human, you are prone to using sarcasm and wit to cover your negative emotions. Tell me, Jim; what is it that troubles you?"

Jim rolled his eyes, but he couldn't fight back his grin. "It's this person. A real pain in my ass."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Smart-ass type, thinks he knows it all, always bossing me around and poking fun at me. A real jerk."

"He sounds like someone whose presence I would enjoy."

"Trust me, you'd love him." Jim laughed. "He's the smartest person I know."

"Surely that is incorrect."

"Well, not counting myself."

Spock turned to Jim, raising a brow. "Do you mean to imply you are smarter than this person?"

"Well..." Jim raised his hands in an approximation of a shrug. "If the shoe fits."

Spock opened his mouth and then paused. He turned his attention to the door, and, in Vulcan, said, "Someone approaches. I do not believe it is your mother."
"Great," Jim groaned.

There was a knock at the door.

"What?" Jim called.

Frank opened the door. 'What' did not mean that he was invited in, and yet, there he was. "Hey," he said. "Your mom wants to go into town. Get dressed and ready, we'll leave in half an hour."

"We're busy." Jim said. "Can't you guys go without us?"

Frank furrowed his brows. "Don't you think you two are a little young to be left home alone?"

Jim snorted. "Little late on that train."

Spock said, "We are fully capable of caring for ourselves. Regardless, I am nearly fifteen Terran years of age, and as such, suited to the task of taking responsibility for myself as well as Jim."

Jim laughed.

Frank shook his head. "Just get ready, would you? She seemed like she wanted you to come with, Jim."

Jim didn't like that Spock had been excluded from the statement. "Well, if I go, Spock's going."

"I'll go talk to her." Frank left the door open.

Jim stared at it and then turned to Spock. "The nerve," he joked.

"Indeed."

God, he'd missed Spock.

"Well, what do you say, Spock? Does a run into town sound good to you?" Jim saw the light in Spock's eyes as the Vulcan opened his mouth. Jim held his hand up. "And before you say you don't think we could actually run all the way into down, let me just say you know what I mean."

Spock said, "How can you be so certain?"

"Because," Jim said. "Myself aside, you're the smartest person I know." He winked.

Spock said, "I see. In that case, I shall make myself ready for the trip. To avoid incurring the wrath of your mother, I suggest you do the same."

"Fine," Jim drawled.

Spock picked up one of his bags and left the room, closing the door neatly behind him. Jim stayed seated on the ground until he heard the bathroom door squeak open and shut. He stood, meandering over to his dresser to shuffle through it. He picked out the first set of clothes he touched, throwing them all on without any real care as to whether or not they matched or not. He picked the comb off the top of his dresser and ran it through his hair until his bedhead was at least gone, though the hair at the front of his head still stuck up a bit. He could never really wrestle that bit into submission, though, so he let it be.

Spock returned, looking as ruler-drawn and perfect as usual. Not a hair out of place on his head, his clothes all somehow wrinkle-free. Jim said, "You look nice."
Spock nodded his head. "You appear... ready." Which was a polite way of saying that Jim didn't look 'nice', per se, but that Spock did acknowledge he'd adhered to the specified parameters of his orders and had, after all, gotten dressed.

"I look good." Jim defended. He turned to the mirror posted nest to his dresser and struck a pose. He was wearing jean shorts and a yellow shirt, which was hopelessly wrinkled. He held the shirt out, pulling the material taunt. "See?"

Spock said, "And do you plan to wear socks, Jim?"

Jim looked down at his bare feet, and then over at Spock, who was completely ready to leave asides from shoes. "Haven't you ever heard of flip-flops?" Never mind he'd been planning on wearing his tennis shoes.

Spock raised a brow.

"Oh hush."

"I have not said anything."

"You were saying it in your head, I saw it."

"Impossible. You are not a telepath, and we are not currently in contact, so there is no conceivable possibility that would have allowed you to see my thoughts."

"Incorrect." Jim mimed Spock's tone. "Considering the amount of time we have spent, and will spend, together, we are officially best friends. It's a widely known fact amongst humans that all best friends can read each other's thoughts. Sorry Spock."

"You are fabricating evidence for your case."

"That's twice now you've called me a liar."

"Once only in my head, and never in such stark words out loud."

"Thrice now, by my count."

Spock's mouth ticked up in the corner.

Jim suddenly wondered what it would be like to match wits with Spock in a more palpable way- in a game, like hide and seek. Chess came to the front of his mind and he paused over the thought. If Spock knew how to play chess, then he'd surely offer a challenge. Beating his mom had grown boring in a day, but maybe Spock could make the game interesting again. It would be fun for them to play against each other, fighting to out-think each other in a battle they could see before there very eyes.

Jim smirked. Spock wasn't really one for games, but those were the ones that had no point. Chess was a game of logic- surely the Vulcan could see the merit in that.

"Jim," Frank pushed his door open. "Ready to go?"

Jim resisted the urge to point out that doors were to be knocked on. "Yeah."

"Come on. Your mom's ready."

Jim rolled his eyes as soon as Frank's back was turned. Spock followed first, and Jim took up the
rear. They headed directly downstairs and out the front door, Frank holding the door open and locking up behind them as they left. Jim thought he was a moron— they lived in the middle of nowhere, and they'd never locked their house before Frank. The alarms would tell them if anyone came in while they were out, and it had never happened. As Pops always said— if someone really wanted to get in, they'd find a way around anything.

Not that it really mattered.

Spock and Jim sat in the back of the car. Frank and Winona argued over music in the front, but it was easy enough to tune out. Jim and Spock fell easily into Vulcan, conversing quietly so as not to draw too much attention to their shift in language. Winona had been suspicious of it in the past, rightfully claiming Jim was using it to talk shit.

"How's mom liking having Sarek around for the summer?" Jim asked.

"She is, as she says, 'delighted.' I believe that my father is less impartial to the vacation, as he could be working were he back on Vulcan. However, he does not seem displeased. It is logical to take breaks. Rest and relaxation allowed the body and mind to repair faster than they otherwise would."

"And," Jim said, "It pleases dear mother."

"That may be the most prominent reasoning for vacation, yes." Spock nodded.

Jim smiled. "How long has it been since he took a vacation?"

"Approximately seven years, so far as I'm aware."

Jim's eyes widened. "That long?"

"Vulcans do not require as much rest as humans."

"Still," Jim said. "At least Vulcans get summer vacation while in school."

"Negative." Spock said.

"What? But you're here every summer."

"While that is true, I am merely choosing not to attend school. School on Vulcan runs year-round. Vulcans simply choose when to attend, as each person is responsible for their own betterment. So long as one keeps up with the level expected of a Vulcan, they may chose when to attend school at their own discretion."

Jim's eyes were wide. "What?" He said. "Are you kidding me?"

"Vulcans do not kid."

Jim groaned.

"I do not understand. Why are you distressed by this information?" Spock asked.

"Because if that was how we did things on Earth, I could be through college by now! You're telling me you just walk into school whenever you want and do as much learning as you want?"

"The school has regular hours. You would be unable to attend after certain hours, but could continue your work at home through your PADD device to a certain extent before there would be need to return."
"I could have a doctorate by now." Jim muttered.

Spock said, "My mother often expresses her own lamentations over the inferior education system she was forced to indulge in her youth. However, she does understand that the free-course system regulated on Vulcan would not benefit all Terrans."

"It'd benefit me." Jim grumbled.

Spock said nothing.

"I want to live on Vulcan with you." Jim demanded. "I want to go to school on Vulcan."

"That is, as you are aware, entirely up to our parents." Seeing Jim open his mouth and turn his head towards Winona, Spock hurried to add, "Your mother has been known to react in a positive manner when you go about your questions with tact."

"Fine then." Jim said. "You ask her." 

"I will not ask your mother for you." 

"Not for me. Ask like you want me to come back with you. If you want to, she's more likely to say yes."

"It is not the end of the summer. It is impractical to ask this very second."

Jim switched to Standard. "Mom!"

She looked up sharply in the rear-view mirror. "What?"

"School on Vulcan is better than school on Earth."

"Yeah," she said. "It's Vulcan."

"And you think Terran school sucks."

"For you, I guess." She shrugged. Then her eyes narrowed, though she never took them off the road. "Why? What are you building up to?"

"Spock wants me to come live with him on Vulcan."

Winona rolled her eyes.

"What?! He does!"

"Jim is telling the truth." Spock said. "I believe we would both benefit from Jim's living on Vulcan. If it would please you, I will be able to have a presentation ready to send to your PADD by the end of the day highlighting the various reasons and benefits-"

"No way." Winona said.

Spock nodded. "Perhaps I might verbally relay-"

"I wasn't no-waying your presentation idea, Spock." Winona said. "No way to Vulcan. Jim, you're human, and Earth is your home. You're staying here."

"What?" Jim cried.
Frank turned around in his seat. "Don't back-sass your mother."

"I wasn't even sassing her yet!" He returned his gaze to the back of his mother's head. "Mom, come on. I'm twelve years old, it's not like I'm a little kid anymore. It'd be just like the summers where I go live with Amanda and—"

"No way in hell, Jim." Winona said firmly. "That was the answer last time you asked, and nothing's changed since then."

"So what has to change?"

"I didn't mean it like that." She said. "But for starters, you get into way too much trouble. There's no way I'm unleashing you on an alien planet. Besides, you're my son- not Amanda's. You live with me."

"Yeah, when you're here." He said. "You're hardly even home anymore! Come on, please?"

Frank said, "She said no, Jim."

Jim narrowed his eyes at Frank. Where did he get off telling Jim what to do, anyway? "You're not my dad," he said.

"Jim." Winona snapped.

"He's not!"

"You are getting dangerously close to landing yourself in trouble." She said.

Jim huffed a sigh. "Fine. I'll drop it."

He turned back to Spock, who was eyeing the back of Frank's head with distaste. They switched back to Vulcan by some un-spoken rule. "He is not very respectful towards your person."

They arrived, then. Jim returned with a, "Yeah. He's an adult," and hopped out of the hover.

They were at the theater. Jim groaned, realizing he'd forgotten to ask where they were going to begin with. He liked a good holo now and then, but realizing they'd abandoned their black hole for something so stupid as a movie made him feel cheated. He'd thought, for some reason, that they were going to the grocery store. If that had been, he and Spock could have picked out snacks and such.

But no. They were going to see the new summer flick that was out about a human smuggler falling in love with an Orion slave. Jim and Spock whispered through most of it, to Winona and Frank's consternation.

Jim and Spock did not like the film. The Orion, Grishna, was portrayed as a sex fiend and a liar, just like the slavers whom she'd been freed from. She lied and attempted to steal the ship of the human who'd rescued her multiple times through out the movie, and when she wasn't doing that, she attempted to seduce the morally righteous smuggler, who wasn't as bad as he seemed because he was smuggling drugs from bad people, of course. She eventually fell in love with the smuggler, somehow, even though Jim was rooting for her to take off on Denebian Seven when they landed there so that she could go live her own life. They had sex on his ship, and the smuggler was upset because of course her pheromones had finally gotten to him and he couldn't believe he'd fallen for such a wicked woman. (Who, Jim wanted to remind the viewers, had been sexually abused and brainwashed into sexual behavior her entire life.) Then he'd finally started to fall in love with her, and so on Denebian Seven he set up a little house to leave her after they'd been married, and off he rode.
into the stars, waving goodbye to a wife who'd never been alone before and was suddenly married and taking care of a house all by herself on an alien planet.

Needless to say, Jim and Spock had a lot to talk about during the movie, even as Frank leaned into Winona's sides and whispered, "You'll be the Grishna to my Henderson, yeah?"

Jim wrinkled his nose in disgust at his mother's giggle. He turned to Spock, who was staring straight ahead as the credits rolled by.

"Grishna deserved better," Jim muttered.

"Human media continues to escape my understanding."

Jim snorted. "You and me both." Standing, he hurried to usher Spock out of their seats so that he wouldn't have to watch his mom and Frank flirt some more. They made it out of the showing room and into the main theater quickly enough, both stopped by the large recruitment poster proudly displayed in the hall.

An Orion in command golds; black hair pinned up out of her way, dark mouth quirked up in a determined smile. Behind her were the stars, glittering with promise of adventure. "Think you have what it takes to be an explorer? To be an officer? To command your own ship? Enlist in Starfleet today!"

Jim felt his smile growing. "Yeah," he said, softly. "Grishna deserves her own ship."

Spock looked at the poster for a moment before saying, "With proper training, she would have made an excellent starship captain. She had intimate knowledge of space and exploration from the years of being traded about the galaxy, exceptional piloting, navigating, and computer skills, as well as high-grade engineering abilities."

"I'd fly under her any day."

"What was that?"

Jim turned as Frank and his mother existed the showing room. His smile fell. "Nothing," he said.

"You'd do what under-"

"I'd fly with her." Jim rolled his eyes at Frank. "She'd make a good captain."

Frank eyed the poster. "Right..."

"Until I became the captain myself, of course." Jim grinned at Spock.

Frank said, "Oh, yeah? That's your dream?"

Jim tentatively turned. His mom was looking at the ground. Well, good- she deserved not to look into his eyes when he talked about his dream. She'd put it through the recycler trying to teach him a lesson. Jim looked over at Frank, wondering if the man would do the same.

Spock saved him. "It is not a dream," said the Vulcan. "It is his future."

Jim turned and smiled up at Spock. He reached out, brushing his fingers against Spock’s wrist to broadcast his gratitude. Spock sent back his natural sense of peace and ease, taking some of the nervousness out of Jim’s mood.
“Well,” Winona said. She looked nervously over to Frank, who had watched the exchange of contact with a curious tilt of his head. “We better get going. Plenty more on the schedule today.”

Jim felt crowded by their lack of understanding. He stepped closer to Spock, just barely resisting the urge to keep their skin in comfortable contact. He felt like Spock was the only person in the world he could trust at any given moment with his thoughts and emotions, never mind his well being.

“Yeah.” Jim said. “Let’s go.”

He didn’t miss the way Frank looked them over as he and Winona passed to lead their group from the theater-like he was trying to decide if he should say something about their behavior or not. He settled on keeping his mouth shut, and Jim wasn’t sure if he was glad or wished that the man would speak up only so that Jim could defend himself.


Frank wasn’t around the last few days that Spock stayed with them, to Jim’s relief. He already felt like he had to hide how deep his friendship with Spock ran while his mom was around, but it was even worse with Frank. Jim felt like if he let himself be soft and kind around Frank, he’d come off as weak. Despite that feeling, he forced himself to be as nice and gentle as he wanted to be, but it was tiring. Jim worried that Frank would think Jim’s personality was Spock’s fault.

For some reason, Spock was scheduled to stay over for the week. They’d both usually stayed over at the summer home together, since Amanda liked having them around more than Winona seemed to, but Jim wasn’t complaining about the way Amanda and Sarek had seemingly loaned Spock out to them for the week.

When the week was at its conclusion, and the “loan” came to an end, Spock returned to the summer home. Jim, of course, accompanied him- a large bag slung over his shoulder so that he could stay for as many nights as he wanted.

They walked into the house without knocking, taking their shoes off in the entry way. Spock said, “Give me your bag, Jim.”

Jim did, looking around the house to see if anything had changed. Spock walked up the stairs to his room, likely to put away the bag, as Amanda came around the corner. She beamed upon seeing Jim.

“Oh, James! Hello.”

“Hi.” He smiled. She looked refreshed- and as Sarek came trailing after his wife, Jim noted that he did, too. Vacation had done them both some good, it seemed. Jim held up his hand in the ta’al, switching over to Vulcan. “Thank you for allowing me into your home.”

Sarek said, “You are welcome here.”

Amanda laughed. “Oh, James, so polite. I just finished making some cinnamon rolls. Want to come into the kitchen and help me frost them?” She looked up at the stairs, then, saying, “And where
“Has my son gone off to?”

“He went to put our stuff away.” Jim said. He happily bounced past Amanda and her husband, heading for the kitchen. “I’ll help.”

“Spock!” Amanda called. “Come help make cinnamon rolls!”

“There is no need to yell, my wife.” Sarek leaned into her, reaching around her body to trail his fingers over hers. “Spock is Vulcan- he will hear you.”

She laughed, turning her head to lovingly kiss the side of his face with her mouth. “As if I could forget.” She untangled herself from him. “Now go on, you’ve got work to do- you told me yourself.”

“There is nothing which requires my immediate attention.” He stepped after her, maintaining a close distance that had her laughing again. “The exception, perhaps, being my wife, whom must always need me.”

“Stop!” She laughed. She playfully slapped his shoulder.

Jim looked away, feeling like he was intruding on a personal moment.

Luckily, Spock appeared at the top of the stairs, then. He came down in his usual unhurried and orderly fashion, to Jim’s side. He barely glanced at his parents, who were nearly against the wall by then.

“Jim?” He quirked a brow. “You are red.”

Jim chanced a look over at Sarek. “muSHa’bogh par’Mach.” *Your parents are flirting.*

Spock raised a brow at the sudden use of Klingon, but replied in kind. “teHlaH’a‘.” *This is true.*

“qatlh?” Why?

Spock said, “It is how married couples act.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. They’re not usually so…” He trailed off. Sarek had whispered something to Amanda that had her grinning up at him from under her eyelashes, laughing breathily. Jim looked sharply away.

Spock looked over his shoulder to his parents. “I had not noticed.”

“Sometimes, you’re dumber than the worm.”

Spock said, “Do not be insulting, Jim.” Switching back to Vulcan, he spoke out a little louder over Jim’s shoulder. “Mother, we are prepared to assist you.”

Amanda pushed Sarek away from her, fixing her head covering. “Of course,” she said, and started towards the kitchen. Sarek watched her go, expression nearly fond.

They were Spock’s parents, so of course it was weird and gross from them to be all in love. Privately, though, Jim sighed and wondered if one day, he would be in Amanda’s shoes- loved irrevocably by the person he loved most in the world. He’d always been in love with the very idea of love, and seeing it displayed so blatantly in front of him made him even more excited for it. He knew he was too young for such things, and that even when he was old enough to understand his peers enough to fall into love, it might be a long time coming before he found Amanda’s happily ever after. Still, he had hope- in the same way he knew one day he’d be among the stars, he knew that his heart...
would not always belong to himself alone.

The three of them frosted cinnamon rolls in the kitchen, listening to the music they made on Vulcan. Jim grinned and licked his fingers. Spock looked appalled.

Amanda said, “We really shouldn’t eat any, dinner will be soon…” Still, she brought out four plates. “But it’s a special occasion.”

Jim smiled wide and accepted the cinnamon roll she spooned out of the pan for him, eagerly reaching for a fork. Spock was a little more reserved, waiting patiently. Spock said, “What is the special occasion, mother?”

She blinked. “Oh.” She blinked again. “Well, it’s summer, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Spock.” Jim teased. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

“Vulcans do not experience happiness,” he deflected. He turned down to his cinnamon roll.

Jim looked at Amanda and rolled his eyes. She laughed.

“I’m going to bring one to Sarek,” she said, and picked up the remaining two plates. “Did you two need anything else, or should I leave you to be?”

“There is nothing we require.” Spock said.

Amanda nodded. “Then I’m going to pester your father some more.”

Jim watched her go. “Is your mom always like that when your dad is around?”

“Mother attends to my father as well as myself.” Spock said. “If there is nothing I require, she seems to enjoy being near my father.”

“Huh.” Jim smiled and took another bite of his cinnamon roll. “We’ve gotta try again on my mom.”

Spock raised a brow. “You should not expect me to understand what it is you refer to without further elaboration.”

Jim snorted. “You know what I mean, even if you want to pretend you don’t.”

“I admit that perhaps a repeated attempt in persuading your mother to allow you to spend the year with my family and I could potentially be beneficial to our cause.” Spock said. His brows came together in a small ‘v’ in the center of his forehead. “However, we must have tact. Your mother is… emotional.”

“Ilogical you mean.”

“Yes.”

Jim sighed. “I know. Once she’s made up her mind it’s hard to change it. But anything is possible. And she’s got Frank now; she doesn’t need me to be waiting for her on planet when she’s got another person to come back to.”

“A boyfriend can in no way replace one’s son.” Spock said.

“Well yeah. But for a year, I mean, just one person there to make sure she doesn’t go to space and never come back is what she needs. I think that’s what she’s afraid of- that one day she’s just not
Jim curled up into a ball underneath the covers, resting his forehead in-between Spock’s shoulder blades. Spock’s mind buzzed just on the brink of his own, a cool, soft tide against the shore of Jim’s mind. Spock was already asleep, and when Jim closed his eyes, he could see flashes of thought from Spock.

Dusty red rock, a garden, a futon on the floor. A paper book on the edge of a table, the title just out of sight.

Spock’s dreams were different from his own. There was no flow or ebb; it was like a presentation of images, looked at from every possible angel, as if being examined. There was curiosity attached to each one, like Spock was consciously looking through things he’d seen and hadn’t understood, trying to take them apart while he was sleeping.

Jim had missed sharing a bed with Spock. They’d both grown, and it was apparent that eventually they wouldn’t be able to share the bed anymore, but Jim grabbed onto the time that they had together and hoped it would be enough.

His love for Spock overwhelmed him sometimes. He felt like he’d never meet another person who he could connect to like he did with Spock- no one else he’d ever want inside his head, or who he’d want to share his destiny with. Spock’s precise understanding of Jim was something he treasured. Jim knew that Spock could always tell where he was emotionally, and that he’d listen when Jim spoke. He was never afraid that Spock would judge him, or that Spock wouldn’t understand. He felt like Spock understood him better than he did himself.

When he slept next to Spock, he felt like he would never be alone. By himself, maybe, but never without Spock in some way. It was like they were connected. He had trouble sleeping, by himself, but with his head pressed to Spock’s back, he was able to watch the foreign images flash by like a slideshow, until it lulled him to sleep.

Jim could tell when he’d fallen asleep, because he lost his awareness of the background sound Amanda kept playing in Spock’s room. He was somewhere unreal, the atmosphere around him a kaleidoscope of color. The colors were solid and hard like diamond, shifting into one another silently, moving beneath and into each other like ice sheets. Jim reached out to touch the odd display, but his fingers never came into contact with anything, nor did they seem to phase through anything. It was as if his view shifted around him.

Spock was there.

“This is, uh,” Jim blinked. “Distracting.”

“This is what your mind is like,” Spock said. “It is unorganized.”

Jim said, “This is my mind?”
“In a manner of speaking. It is how you chose to visualize it.” Spock reached out to touch. Jim could feel his hand against the churning crystal; his fingers burning stars against his head. “Fascinating.”

“I can’t concentrate like this.” Jim said. He closed his eyes, but there was nothing to shield his eyes from- it was all in his head. “Make it stop.”

Spock reached out towards him. His fingers touched Jim’s forehead. They were cooler in Jim’s mind than they were in reality. His touch sent cool mist into Jim’s body, tingling and damp; soothing.

The shapes stopped spinning and crashing. Slowly, the colors dissolved, until he and Spock were surrounded by space and stars, sitting adrift in the corvette. Jim was in the driver’s seat, hands loose where they lingered over the white leather of the steering wheel. Spock was buckled into the seat, like they were going somewhere. Jim was not.

“Is this better?”

“Yeah.” Jim looked around them. All above and below them, space extended on; a vast collection of shining stars. He grinned. “Is this how you see my mind?”

“This is how your mind looks when you are centered. I am able to do this for you only because I understand the process myself- you have often asked what the point of meditation is, and now you are able to actually see the results meditation has on the mind.”

Jim laughed. “And you can meditate for me?”

“I am able to order your mind while you are asleep. Were you awake, I doubt I would be able to do such a thing.”

“We could…” He looked around. “We could do this while we were awake?”

Spock looked down at his lap. He didn’t speak.

“Spock?”

“I am uncertain.” He said.

“What even is this?”

“I am uncertain.” He said again.

Jim looked around. “Why aren’t we in your mind?”

“We could be.”

He blinked, and they were laying beneath an odd, stark white tree with brittle red leaves. They were in the hot, dry red dirt of Vulcan, and the sky above them was without a moon. Jim could see Delta Vega in the distance, a small, white dot just barely bigger than the stars freckling the sky. There was nothing else but them for miles, under their oasis of a tree. He turned to look behind him, to see if the nothingness expanded out in all directions.

They were back in the corvette.

“I prefer to keep us out of my mind,” Spock explained. “If this is what I believe it to be, I do not wish to deeply merge our minds together.”

“What do you think this is?” Jim asked.
“It would seem we have accidentally melded.”

Jim’s brows rose. “A mind meld?”

Spock nodded.

“I thought only bondmates did that.”

“Negative.” Spock said. “It is a method used for healing as well. Likewise, some close friends and family at times use a meld to convey information in a timely manner if they possess the capability. It is, however, extremely intimate…” He greened. “I am uncertain of the inappropriateness of our current actions.”

Jim shrugged. “Who cares? It’s not like we did it on purpose.”

“That is what concerns me.” Spock said.

“What do you mean?”

“It is, normally, incredibly difficult to enter a mind meld. Even for bonded pairs- the first meld is infamously tremulous.” His mouth pulled down in the corner. “Perhaps, due to my status as a hybrid…”

“If you’re trying to insinuate that you messed up because you’re half human and half Vulcan, shut up.” Jim said. He leaned back in the seat of the car, crossing his hands behind his head. “Spock, you’re a strong telepath. We both know it.”

Spock said, “Perhaps.”

“The most talented of your generation, I bet.” Jim said. “Everyone else needs touch to use their telepathy, right?”

“So far as I have been informed.”

“You don’t.” It wasn’t a question. Somehow, Jim just knew.

Spock looked away.

“I knew it.” Jim said.

“It is not something to rejoice.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “I’m just saying, you didn’t screw up. Maybe you’re just so good at telepathy, a mind meld wasn’t hard.” Jim shrugged. “Sometimes, that’s how things are with us. Math is supposed to be hard. Astrophysics are supposed to be hard. Chemistry is supposed to be hard. But it’s not for us.”

“I had not considered it in such a way,” Spock said.

Jim smirked. “That’s why you’ve got me around.”

A shooting star went past.

“This is nice.” Jim said. “I… feel at peace.”

“Your mind offers a sort of solace I cannot find within my own,” Spock agreed. “Do you always feel
“this way?”

“No.” Jim said. “I’m usually… I don’t know. Not angry, but like. Frustrated.”

“I understand.”

“Spock.” Jim said, suddenly.

He turned to regard Jim, one eyebrow raised.

“I can’t go back.” Jim said. “I can’t go back to my house and to school when the summer is over. I can’t go back to being alone.”

“I am certain you are capable.”

“Of surviving the year, yeah. I’ve always been a survivor. But Spock, it’s… it’s never like this without you. I’m always full of fear and doubt and loneliness. Spock, before you came, I hadn’t talked to anyone for more than an half an hour at a time. I’m out of my mind with it. I… I feel like I’m the only person in the entire galaxy sometimes, Spock. Just waiting for you to come back, so that I’ll be one of two, and not just by myself so much I…”

Spock put his hand on Jim’s arm. “I know,” he said. He looked down at where his hand touched Jim’s skin, mouth tugged down just barely at the corner. “I find myself similarly dispositioned.”

“What are we going to do?” Jim asked.

“I do not know.” Spock said. “We are children. There is little we can do.”

Jim sighed, leaning down further in the seat. “I hate that. Just because we’re kids doesn’t mean we’re not people. We should get a say in our lives.”

Spock hummed his agreement.

“Besides,” Jim said. “You’re a teenager. You’re practically an adult.”

“I am still very young, for a Vulcan.”

That was right- Vulcans lived longer than humans. For a moment, Jim was gripped with a sudden fear. One day, he’d grow old, and feeble, and Spock would still be capable and strong where he stood. Would Spock leave him, when he wasn’t young any longer? Would Spock still want to be his friend when Jim was old and wrinkled?

He shook himself of the thought. Spock would always be there for him.

“I will,” Spock said.

Jim turned to him. “You can hear me thinking?”

“I can feel it.” He said. “We are in your mind, Jim.”

Jim looked around at the billions of stars surrounding them. “I’ve got a big head.” He joked.

“You have a very dynamic mind.” Spock said. “I am uncertain if I would be able to ‘keep up,’ as you say, were you awake. You are significantly calmer and pliant to mental touch while asleep.”

Jim nodded his head. “So this is a meld?”
“It is… close.” Spock said. “I have determined that we are not sharing a full meld.”

“Huh. That’s cool.”

Spock removed his hands from Jim’s arm, looking back out at the stars. “Indeed.”

They sat in silence for a time.

“Spock?”

“Yes, Jim?”

“I love you.”

Spock’s eyes grew gentle. “I know, Jim.” He reached out of the car, as if to touch the stars. Space seemed to bend beneath his fingertips. “I love you, as well.”

“I don’t like that you spend all your time with that Spock kid.”

Jim rolled his eyes. And I don’t like that my mom spends all her time with you. “You do realize he’s like, the only friend I have, right?” He looked up over his shoulder at Frank. The older man was looking through the fridge, frowning.

Jim just wanted to eat his cereal in peace. But no.

“That’s the part I don’t like.” Frank stood to full height, turning around to look at Jim. “You’re a nice kid, Jimmy. You’re fast as hell and a good athlete. Aren’t there any kids you could at least play with?”

“Play what with? Football?” Jim snorted. “No one ever wants to listen to tactics. It’s chaos out there—every man for himself. I’ll play when they grow interested in forming a real team.”

Frank sighed. “What about the kids in your grade?”

“No one in high school wants to hang out with a twelve year old.”

“Spock’s in high school, so what makes him different?”

“Spock’s an anomaly.” Jim said. “He doesn’t count.”

“Well I mean, it’s supposed to be hard to befriend Vulcans. So you must be good at it. Can’t you do what you did to Spock? Make some human friends who’ll still be dirt-side when the school year starts?”

“Do what I did to Spock?”

“You made Spock your friend. So do it again with someone else.”

Jim snorted. “I doubt that anyone’s going to be amused by me dropping a beetle in their hand. It barely worked with Spock, anyway.” At Frank’s confused face, Jim waved his hand. “Never mind,
“It’s stupid.”

“Still,” Frank said. “Other friends would be good for you.”

“Where’s my mom?” Jim asked. “Shouldn’t she be giving me this talk?”

“Shower.” He said. “She’s got a conference call with Commander Christopher Pike later.”

“Commander Pike, huh?” Jim raised his brows. “He’s an amazing officer. I’m betting he’ll make captain by next year- twenty years experience is more than enough.”

“I’d never even heard of him.” Frank said.

Jim shrugged. “Mom would have.”

“Why’s that?”

“He wrote his dissertation on the Kelvin incident.” Jim said.

Frank suddenly looked uncomfortable.

Jim rolled his eyes. “It’s not like they’re gonna be all buddy-buddy or anything. Mom’s about as good at making friends as I am.”

“Your mother has plenty of friends,” Frank said. “Which brings us back to my point.”

Jim groaned.

“Why don’t you check out what’s going on at the community center? Your mom mentioned that you like chess. I bet they have tournaments there, or something.”

“Frank, if I can beat my mom without any problems, there’s no way anyone else in Riverside is going to keep up with me.”

“Don’t get too full of yourself.”

“There’s a difference between being full of yourself and knowing your abilities. I’m well aware that I’m probably not the best chess player in the entire universe- but I am damn good. Better than anyone here, unless there’s another genius hiding out in the corn somewhere.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Genius,” he scoffed.

“Certifiable,” Jim said. “Doesn’t make me better than anyone else- it just makes it harder for me to connect to other people. Spock’s the only other genius I’ve ever met. Mom comes close, but I can only talk about warp cores for so long before I want to move on to something else, and then I lose her.”

Frank said, “I still think you might be a little full of it.”

“What, do you want to play chess with me?” Jim snorted.

“I can play chess,” Frank insisted.

Jim paused. “… Alright.” He said, finally. “Wanna play?”

Frank looked back towards the living room. “Your mother.-“
“Is gonna be on her call, right? You’ve got time to kill.”

Frank frowned.

“Oh come on. If you’re going to hang around all the time you might as well.” Jim narrowed his eyes. “Are you seriously nervous that I might beat you?”

Frank gave him a look. “No.”

“I beat mom.”

“She’s your mother.” The she’s letting you win, went unspoken, but Jim heard it loud and clear.

“Oh my god.” Jim said. He suddenly realized; “You really think people are exaggerating when they talk about the Kirks.”

Frank glared.

“Well now we have to play.” Jim said.

Frank said, “I guess I have time to kill.”

Jim smirked. “I’ll get the boards.”

He hurried up to his room and grabbed the box, dusting it off with the corner of his shorts. He raced back down stairs, where Frank was waiting at the kitchen table with a beer. Jim opened the box up and set the boards up, lining all the pieces up.

“You can take white if you want,” Jim said.

Frank shrugged. “Sure,” he said. “Why not?” He pulled over the rule book while Jim set their pieces up, skimming through it. “I think I remembered everything, but just to be sure…” He read on.

“Ready?”

Frank nodded.

Jim hadn’t played since the summer when his mom had taught him. Still, he hadn’t forgotten anything. The long nights alone in his room had meant watching matches of grand masters playing their chess games, learning all the classic moves and strategies, as well as a few new ones, and the tactics he’d implemented on his own. He waited for Frank to open and then snickered- the English opening. Classic, but Jim could already see the game unfolding. He’d have Frank in twenty moves or less.

Jim had him in eleven.

“What the hell?” Frank held up the rule book, and then looked back down at the board, where Jim’s rook was holding the King hostage. “That can’t be right.”

Jim shrugged. “Check mate,” he repeated.

Frank stared at the board. Winona had since headed to her office, briefly stopping in the hallway to wave at them. He looked back out at the office door, as if it would tell him if she was nearly done or not.

“One more.” He said.
Jim shrugged. He decided to draw it out to fifteen moves, but Frank left an opening too good to pass up on, and he ended up closing in eight instead. He grinned up at Frank’s baffled expression, waiting for the penny to drop.

“You’re… really smart.” Frank said, baffled.

“And humble, too.” Jim said, grinning.

Frank rolled his eyes and started packing up chess pieces. Jim took that as a sign that they were done and started to fold the boards up. Even if Frank was, well, dating his mother, the guy was still alright some of the time- he cleaned up after himself, and he seemed to respect Winona- fear her, even, if the mood was right. Winona could get pissed at the drop of a hat, and when that happened, Frank seemed to have enough sense to tip-toe around like Jim did. For that, Jim couldn’t help but respect him a little bit- all the other guys his mom had taken out seemed to think too highly of themselves, like they were tougher than her, better than her. She wasn’t a sad, soppy widow- she was an engineer with combat training and a mean streak a mile wide and a mile deep.

“Hey.” Frank said.

Jim looked up at him. “Huh?”

“Can I… talk to you?”

Jim didn’t like the serious tone Frank had taken on. “You just finished talking to me about how weird you think it is that I only ever hang out with Spock,” Jim joked. “Whatever you’re gonna follow up with can’t be that bad.”

“You’re just a kid,” Frank continued. “But… it’s your mom, and, you know… I really care about her, so…”

Jim wasn’t stupid. They’d just finished having a conversation about how not-stupid he was. Two plus two equaled four, and Frank wanted to marry his mom. “No.” Jim said. “No way.”

“I haven’t said anything yet,” Frank said, frustrated.

“You can’t marry my mom.”

His eyes went wide. He whipped around, as if Winona might rise up behind him and eat him alive, but there was, of course, nothing and no one there. He turned back around and leaned in, voice hushed. “Shut it, kid.”

“You’ve only been dating for like. A year.” Jim said. “You just moved here!”

“I’ve been here two years,” Frank snapped. “And I’ve spent most of that time here in this house.”

“So what, you’re marrying the house?”

“Wh- no! That’s not what I’m saying.” He dragged a hand down his face, shoulder sagging. “Can you just- Jesus. You’re the worst kid alive.”

“Yeah, so?”

Frank said, “Why not?”

“Why not?”
“Why can’t I marry her, huh?”

Jim frowned.

“I love her, don’t I? I treat her well. And she’s an amazing woman, Jim- I’m never going to find anyone like her.”

“She’s out of your league.” Jim snapped. Frank had no right to her- none! She was Jim’s mom, and Frank was just some guy who wanted to be a part of a broken family, and Jim… Jim wanted to hold onto his mother with all he had. She was all he had left, and what happened when Frank swooped in and took her?

“She damn well is.” Frank ran a hand through his hair. He was sweating, slightly. “Look, Jim, I’m not asking for your blessing or whatever. Okay? I just… she is your mom. And when I marry her, I’m gonna be your step dad. And I don’t want to walk into that without knowing you’re okay with it.”

“I don’t have a dad.” Jim said. “My dad is dead.”

“Step dad.” Frank said again.

“You don’t even know me!”

“Well I’m trying to.” Frank insisted. “I love your mom, and I wanna spend all my time with her, okay? I know you two are a package deal. I don’t get your mom without you there, too. And that’s fine, okay- I always wanted a son. And you’re as smart as they come.”

Jim narrowed his eyes. “I wouldn’t be your son.”

“I know that. But you’d be my wife’s son, and that’s close enough.”

Jim looked at the floor.

“I’m gonna ask her to marry me, Jim.” Frank said. “One day or another.”

“She’ll leave,” Jim said. “No matter what. She’ll always go back to the stars.”

“We’ll see,” Frank said, and Jim knew the man didn’t understand.

“Nothing can keep her here.” Jim assured the other man. “Not even us.”

Frank said nothing.

“Do you still want to marry her?”

He nodded.

Jim shrugged. “Guess she’ll have someone else to watch me when she leaves the planet.” When Frank looked at him oddly, Jim went on to explain. “She works for Starfleet. Did you think you could go with her? You’d have to go through courses at Starfleet Academy to just live on the ship. Five years if you want to be anything more than the spouse she brought along with her.”

“She was going to bring you,” Frank said.

“I’m her child.” Jim said. “She can bring me until I’m a legal adult.”
Frank furrowed his brow.

“Just think on that,” Jim said.

“Are you really trying to argue with me to get me not to marry your mom?”

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to her.” Jim said. “If she gets attached to you, but you can’t handle that she’s never here, and it all falls apart, she’s gonna be crushed. If that happens... I don’t know.”

Frank stared at him for a bit.

“What?” Jim asked.

“You’re alright, Jim.” He reached out, ruffling Jim’s hair. Jim didn’t shove him off, just the once. “You’re alright.”

It wasn’t a connection, but it was close enough. Jim ducked under Frank’s arm and slipped around the table. “I’m gonna take the Hali over to Spock’s house,” he said.

“I’d been meaning to ask you about that,” Frank said. “Where did you buy a bike that tricked out?”


He fell asleep with his head pressed up to Spock’s shoulder. The young Vulcan had fallen asleep on his back, next to a curled up Jim. Spock had pressed his leg into Jim’s knees, his shoulder brushing up against Jim’s nose. Jim had laughed and scooted closer, and eventually, he’d drifted off.

He was in his head again. Spock’s head- that was. Spock was sleeping next to him under the tree, his face shadowed by the leaves hanging above them. Jim looked off into the horizon, where the sun just barely clung to the sky. It looked huge and red, like he was viewing the one on Earth through smoke, magnified. He raised his hand to shade his eyes against the glare, but before he could complete the motion the brightness seemed to fade a little, responding to his thoughts.

He turned to Spock. Reaching out, he touched the Vulcan’s shoulder. “Spock.” He shook him a little. “Spock, wake up.” Spock’s shoulder was cool, like he’d been out in the wind.

Spock turned over in his sleep, rolling away from Jim.

Jim stood. He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the area. Just as before, there was nothing there- just miles and miles of the same red sand and dirt. He turned around, to survey the tree, but a shape in the distance caught his eye. Maybe there wasn’t nothing but dirt, after all.

He stepped out from under the shade of the tree, narrowing his eyes as he looked on. There was a shadow in the distance. It was far, far away, but Jim was certain he could reach it if he tried. He started to walk, surprised by how quickly the shape became clearer and larger. It was as if he were running- faster than any human could, too- but his feet touched the ground in their usual measured gate.
It was a house. A small, adobe house with slick finished lines and precise measurements. A Vulcan house- was it where Spock lived? It was incredibly small, almost like a little hut. Surely it would only be big enough for one person to live in. He looked over his shoulder to see if perhaps Spock had roused, but he’d left the tree far behind. It was merely a spot on the horizon.

Jim proceeded closer to the house. There was a small glass fence surrounding the property, and a thin stream and fountain circulated around the establishment, distributing water to a small collection of herbs. Jim carefully pushed the glass gate open and stepped onto a small sandstone path that lead to the door of the house. He crossed over the little stream, pausing to watch it trickle underneath the path and reappear on the other side. He didn’t delay long, moving on towards the door.

He knocked on the surface, waiting to see if anyone would appear, or if anything would happen. Nothing did, but he knocked a couple more times to be certain. He reached down for the handle, but it burned his hand- the hot metal of the doorknob must have been baking in the heat.

“Ouch!” He drew back quickly, shaking his hand. Curious, that it would be so hot when the sun wasn’t uncomfortable- he hadn’t even begun to sweat.

He crept around the side of the house, until he found a window. He pressed his nose to the glass, looking inside. It was a modern, white interior. There was a small kitchen with a single small table, topped by a glass vase housing a single, alien red flower, and then one chair at the table. There was the front door, and next to it, a closed off room- a bathroom, Jim guessed. Then there was a corner of the room taken up by a desk piled high with PADDs, and a shelf filled with them next to it. There were several models of Vulcan and its neighboring bodies hanging above the desk in the form of holo projection. The last corner of the room was taken up by a large futon, which was atop a thin, foamy peach mat- it was a larger version of the one Spock used for meditation. The mat extended past the futon, probably to be used for meditation before and after sleeping. Spock kept his at the side of the bed when he used it, too.

The futon was what he centered on. There was someone sleeping on top of it in white Vulcan robes. They were facing away from the window- the only sign of their person he could distinguish beyond the bare feet was the long, black hair, spilling across the bright white covers.

He tapped on the glass. “Hello?”

The figure sat up, peering at the door. Their body was tense; Jim would say almost annoyed. Had they been ignoring him knocking on the door before?

He slapped a hand against the window.

The figure spun around, hair flying. It was a girl- her pretty black eyes wide with surprise. They narrowed just as quickly in annoyance. She stood and walked to her desk, keeping her eyes on Jim. She grabbed a PADD, typed something rapidly on it without looking to the screen, and then marched back over to the window. She put the PADD up.

It was Vulcan writing. That made sense, because as Jim looked, he noticed the sharp brows, cheekbones, and most remarkably the pointed ears, poking out from under her waves of silky hair.

*Leave.* It read.

“What?” Jim yelled. He’d been speaking in Vulcan the entire time, but her face made him feel like he was doing it wrong, somehow.

*You are not to be here.* She wrote.
“Who are you?” He asked. “Are you some secret version of Spock?”

She narrowed her eyes. *I am extremely displeased with Spock.*

“I’m coming around to the door,” Jim yelled. “Let me in!”

She shook her head, but it was too late. Jim ran around the house, knocking on the door again. She didn’t answer right away, so he just kept knocking, until eventually it unlocked. The girl ripped it open, eyes blazing with fury.

“What is it that you are doing here?” She snapped.

“I don’t know.” He blinked, baffled by her rage. “Who are you?”

“Who am I?” She scoffed. “You come barging into my mind as if you have any right to it, and then you have the gal to ask who it is that you speak to. I will not meld with you, human, and your presence here offends me. To be forced to have my mind’s link viewed in such a manner- to lower myself to speaking with words within the confines of my own head. It is despicable. I am attempting to study, and you have forced me into meditation so that I may deal with your battering against my shields. I do not appreciated your telepathic aptitude, and ask you to leave and never return to this place.”

Jim jerked back. “Wh-what? But this is… I thought you were Spock.”

She scoffed. “To think you do not even know what it is you have done. Do not come here again, or the heat upon your hand is the least I will do. Do you understand, human? The fence is not meant to be crossed, and I ask you out.”

When she said out, Jim found himself suddenly outside the fence. He blinked. “W-wait!”

She slammed the door closed. Even from where he was, he could hear it lock. He stepped forward, to pursue her, but the fence rose and fused, until it was a giant glass dome, cutting the little house off from the rest of the world.

“What the hell?” He muttered.

“Jim.”

“Spock!” Jim turned, and he was back at the tree. He looked over his shoulder, baffled. There the house was- a small shadow dotting the landscape. He looked back at Spock, who was standing with an eyebrow raised. “Your head is weird,” Jim said.

“How long have you been here?”

“I dunno.” Jim shrugged. “Did you just fall asleep?”

“I had been meditating. I felt your presence in my mind and allowed it. I finished meditation, and so I have fallen asleep. I had not realized the meld was so deep- I thought you to still be within your own mindscape.”

Jim said, “No, been here all along. I saw something weird…” Something about the girl put him off. Spock raised his brow, but Jim just shook his head. “Never mind. What’s on the schedule for tonight?”

“I had not thought we would repeat the accidental journey into each other’s minds.” Spock admitted.
"I have slept next to my mother- even in her arms- countless times, and never have I joined our minds without meaning to."

"You’ve melded with your mom?"

Spock nodded. "Affirmative."

"Was it like this?"

"It was not. Every meld is different. The minds of two beings must find a comfortable medium to communicate through, to understand thought. With my mother, I felt as though I were floating through her very feelings, seeing her words and thoughts communicated to me by physical writing that appeared to my mind’s eye. I could feel her voice, but I did not hear it- not in this manner.” He paused. "This is… by far the most organized and understandable meld I have ever participated in."

"Even with your dad?"

"Melding with my father is… extremely difficult. To share information is relatively simple. To understand another mind is complicated."

"What was it like?"

"Sound. I was in the heat, and there was sound from all about me- my father’s many thoughts at once. I was overwhelmed when first encountering his mind. With time, I was able to shape sound into thought and communicate with him, and even understand the things he wished to present to me."

"Wait, I thought you said sharing information was easy?"

"Allow me to show you. I am going to share a memory with you.” Spock reached out, resting his fingers along Jim’s face in an odd configuration. "May I?"

"Go ahead,” Jim said, and then he was no longer Jim.

He was Spock, and his mother was cooking plomeek in the kitchen while his father watered the garden out back. He was drawing computer programs with shaky, childish hands, and he felt the slide of his skin against the glass surface of the PADD, and he felt the overwhelming heat like a gentle caress. His skin was odd, and soft, and he wasn’t sweating, even though his mother reached up continuously to wipe the back of her hand against her forehead, cheeks flushed with the temperature. He liked it, and more than that, he liked his mother’s humming. He could just barely make out the notes she failed to hit, and even though it was akin to a mistaken equation in a long line of perfect numbers, he could not find it within himself to detest the sound. He looked up to his father, watching water tumble from a pitcher and into the green- wondering why his father would tend to the earth plants and not his mother, if they were of her world, wondering how they came to grow, how they came from seed, how, how, how-

Jim jerked back to himself with a gasp.

"WH-" he sucked in a breath, feeling like he couldn’t breath. “What was that?"

"I have shared one of my memories with you.”

"It’s like I was there!” Jim managed. “I was you!”

Spock nodded. “You understand, then, why this method is only used between close companions. Though it is highly efficient and logical, it is intimate. I can chose to limit the experience, but it is
“Damn,” Jim breathed. “That was…” His own skin felt weirdly sweaty. “That was something else.”

He blinked. “So… you could show me what it was like to meld with your mom? Or your dad?”

Spock seemed to think about it.

“I could.”

Jim beamed.

“However.”

Jim frowned.

“To do so would be to… meld you to them, in a sense. You would merely be remembering the experience as I did, but it would be as if I were revealing an intensely personal secret to you which I had promised to keep.”

Jim nodded. “I get it. Don’t worry, Spock, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. I’m never going to judge you for wanting to keep some things private.”

“Thank you, Jim.” Spock said. He looked out at the horizon, and its unmoving sun. “If ever you wish to show me your own memories, or give me information—”

“Wait, there’s a way to just give straight up information?”

Spock nodded. “It is akin to memory. You understand how to start the Hali. If I did not, you would simply attempt to push that information to me. I would understand it as you did, retaining fractures of the memories you formed in creating the information. I would understand, then, how to start the bike, though not by living through your memories. I would simply have the knowledge.”

“How weird.” Jim said. “Doesn’t it take time?”

“No. Thought is the fastest force known to our species.” Spock said. “It takes the mere brushing of skin.”

“I get it.” Jim said. “You were about to tell me how to do it, right?”

He nodded. “Contact on the face, particularly at psi points is the most favorable for thought transference. It requires a surface meld, nothing deeper. Allow me to show you.” Spock reached up, placing his fingers along the side of Jim’s face.

Jim reached up, mirroring the action on Spock’s own skin.

“That is correct.” Spock said. He lowered his hand.

“Sometimes you just touch my forehead. Is that enough?”

“I am a very strong telapath.”

“Oh yeah.” Jim laughed. “So I’ve probably got to do it by the book.”

“Were you to meld with anyone else, perhaps. With myself, however, I believe it should be easier to initiate a meld. It would be easiest for you to imagine is as if you were slipping into my mind, physically. As one enters a bed, inserting themselves gently between the sheets.”
“Or like slipping into a pool.”

“That would be an apt description.”

“Kinda funny that something so basic to Vulcans would be about feelings. There’s not really a logical explanation to this process, huh?”

“There is,” Spock said, wryly. “Perhaps not one you would understand, of course.”

Jim grinned and pushed Spock’s shoulder. “Jerk.”

Spock raised a brow. “I believe you find my character favorable.”


“Ah, I see. However, when compared to the data I have collected, it is obsolete. You have said ‘I love you’ to me approximately-“

“Shut up!” Jim laughed. “You’re gonna embarrass me and then I’ll make you re-live some stupid embarrassing dreams I’ve had and you will be very illogically upset. Your teeth will all fall out and you’ll forget to wear clothes to school. You don’t want that, do you Spock?”

Spock lifted a hand to his mouth, brows raised. Firmly, he said, “My teeth will remain within my mouth.” Then, he clasped the collar of his sweater. “My clothes, likewise, will remain upon my body.”

“Vulcans don’t stress dream, then?”

“It is very rarely that we dream at all.” Spock said.

“Oh?”

“Dreaming is an illogical way for the mind to process problems, emotion, and events. Vulcans dedicate much of the time humans spend sleeping manually sorting such things through meditation. There is no need for us to dream.”

“You said rarely.” Jim said. “Which means sometimes…”

“We do.” Spock affirmed.

“What do you dream about?”

Spock closed his mouth and looked stubbornly away.

“Spock?”

“Home,” Spock said, but he wasn’t looking at the planet. He was staring up at the sky.

Jim followed Spock’s line of sight, leaning back into the dirt. “Yeah,” he sighed. “Me too.”
“No more Spock.”

Jim glared, balling his hands into fists. “What the hell, mom?”

“Language,” she admonished. She had her back to him and was working at her desk- or at least, pretending to work, so she wouldn’t have to face him. “Frank is right, Jim. You need to make some other friends.”

“Oh, so this is about Frank.” Jim drawled. He was furious.

“No, this is about you.” She said. “What about that Johnny kid? Didn’t you two used to be friends? He lives just down the road, you could go over to his house.”

“Johnny outgrew me,” Jim snapped. “Just like Spock didn’t.”

“Jim, don’t be contemptuous.”

“What, did you think I was going to take this one lying down? Mom, what happened to that whole not punishing Spock for my mistakes thing? What happened to not punishing me for doing nothing wrong?”

“I’m not punishing you,” she said. “You just need to get out more. Jim, make more friends. Spock is great, but he’s… like you.”

“Which is a bad thing.” He snorted.

“No, it’s not bad. It’s… Jim, you need to broaden your horizons. Have friends who like doing things other than what you do. Friends who like to hang out at the mall, or playing baseball, or-”

“Baseball?” Jim snapped. “Are you serious right now?”

“Jim-“

“If you want me to play baseball, I’ll go outside right now and Spock can pitch a few rounds. Is that what you want? For me to hit a ball with a stick and run around a field? Cuz I can do that! I’ll play any kind of ballgame you want. But I’m not dumping Spock to play with people who don’t even like me.”

“They’d like you if you gave them a chance,” she said.

“I’ve given them a chance! I’ve given them multiple chances! Hell, if someone walked up to me today and told me they’d like to hang out, even after snuffing me out so many times, I’d still give them a chance.” He dragged a hand down his face. “I’m not the one who shuts them out. I like people. I want to be friends with other people. But I’m- I’m weird, mom! I’m a nerd, I’m younger than everyone else, I’m not cool, I’m too soft, I’m a million things they don’t want and I’m not going to change who I am when there are people out there who like me just the way I am. People like Spock.”

“But that’s what I’m saying,” Winona turned around and sat down in the office chair, finally facing him. She folded her hands in her lap. “You’re never going to change if-“

“What’s wrong with the way I am now?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Yes you are! If there was nothing wrong with how I am you wouldn’t want me to change.”
“To evolve, Jim. You have to be exposed to different environments-“

“Don’t start talking science at me to try to win. You can rattle off Darwin all you want, but it doesn’t change the fact that you’re asking me to give up Spock for people who don’t like me so that I’ll turn into a normal kid. That’s not how this works.”

“I don’t want you to be a normal kid.” Winona protested. “I like you the way you are, Jim. I’d worry if you started acting like everyone else. But you’ve got to learn how to get along with people who aren’t like you. Spock can’t be your entire world- it’s not healthy.”

“Dad was your entire world.”

She flinched.

“I don’t live with Spock. We’re not even from the same planet. It’s impossible for us to be too absorbed in each other when we only get to see each other three months a year. Frank doesn’t like Spock because he doesn’t understand Spock. Frank wants me to hang out with other kids because he wants me to be like other kids. Frank is your boyfriend, but he is not my family, and he shouldn’t get a say in what I do.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Frank deserves your respect-“

“You deserve my respect.” he said. “You’re my mom. Frank is just some guy who hangs out here now. He can earn my respect.”

“Jim.”

“No! I’m not wrong here! You think- you think because you’re an adult, and because he’s an adult, that you both know what’s best for me. Well guess what, Mom. I’m me, and I know what’s best for me! This isn’t me arguing about eating my damn vegetables- this is about my happiness.”

She looked at her lap.

“Spock means everything to me.” Jim said. “If you take that away from me… I will never forgive you.”

“I’m not taking him away.” She said, carefully. “Just… maybe you guys should limit your contact. Once every two days.”

“Once every two days?” He calculated the time they had left under such a rule and scowled. “That’s hardly any time at all!”

She said nothing.

“Fine.” He turned around on his heel, feeling cheated and bitter.

“Jim…”

He didn’t turn around to look at her. “I hope Frank’s worth the trouble.”

She didn’t have a reply to that.
“It’s stupid that I have to do this.” Jim muttered.

Spock pulled.

“I mean, come on. We’re not Romeo and Juliet.”

“I would certainly hope not,” Spock managed.

Jim finally reached the window cill. He grabbed the side and hauled himself up, letting Spock help him over the ledge and into the room. “Thanks,” he said, and dragged the rope into the window. “You’re okay with this?”

“As a Vulcan, I require very little sleep.”

“As a Jim, I’m about the same.” He grinned.

Spock reached over and closed the window. “You must remember to keep your voice down, Jim. My mother was unaware of our nighttime activities only because she does not have the superior hearing of a Vulcan. My father will not be so easily avoided- he will hear us if we do not take care.”

Jim nodded. “Right. I forgot about that.” He tugged his backpack off of his shoulders and opened it up. “Dune?”

Spock raised a brow. “We have seen this movie seven times.”

“I’ve seen it like seventy.” Jim laughed under his breath.

“Surely you remember the events, then.”

“Yeah, but it’s a good movie.” He slid up to the headboard and propped up some of Spock’s pillows, leaning back. Seeing Spock hadn’t moved, he sighed. “We can watch something else if you want.”

 “… I would not be adverse to watching Dune again, if it pleases you, Jim.”

Jim smiled. “You sure?”

“I would not have said so if I were not.”

Jim flicked the screen. “Dune it is then.”

A beginning is a very delicate time. Know then, that it is the year 10191. The known universe is ruled by the Padisha Emperor Shaddam IV, my father. In this time, the most precious substance in the Universe is the spice melange. The spice extends life. The spice expands consciousness. The spice is vital to space travel. The Spacing Guild and its navigators, who the spice has mutated over four-thousand years, use the orange spice gas, which gives them the ability to fold space. That is, travel to any part of the Universe without moving. Oh yes, I forget to tell you...

Jim let his head fall onto Spock’s shoulder as he mouthed the lines. Spock leaned his head into Jim's, and they stayed like that for the movie, pressed side to side. It made Jim feel like maybe, just maybe, everything was going to be alright.
Jim succeeded in sneaking into Spock’s house every night for two and a half weeks. Week two, day five, was when it happened.

Jim looked down at his watch. It was time, Spock’s window was open, and he’d be waiting. As usual, Jim had tied the rope to a rock. He reared his arm back and threw it. Pale, green tinted arms flashed out the window, caught the rock, and drew it inside.

Jim tugged on the rope, ensuring it was taunt.

“James Kirk.”

Jim startled so badly he nearly fell over. “Jesus!”

Sarek stood behind him, hands clasped neatly behind his back, eyebrow raised. “Incorrect,” he said. “My name is Sarek. You know this.”

“I was just startled,” Jim explained. He felt flushed. “Um, what are you up to, uh, Sir? Taking a midnight stroll? Me too. Love the night air. Just. Out for a walk. It’s nice.”

“You are not out for a walk.” Sarek said. “You are attempting to scale the side of the house to enter Spock’s room through the window.”


Sarek tilted his head to the side, so that he saw neatly around Jim, and looked pointedly at the rope.

“That was there when I got here,” Jim said. He was sweating.

Sarek raised both brows. “This is also a lie, James Kirk. I observed you throw this rope to my son, just as you did the night prior to this.”

Jim sucked in a breath through his teeth. Shit.

“Would you care to explain why you do not enter through the front door?”

Jim looked up at Sarek. “Uh…” He rubbed the back of his neck, awkwardly. “Well, you know. My mom told you guys I’m not supposed to come around here every day anymore.”

Sarek nodded. “I am aware.”

“So… you know. You’d tell her and I’d be in trouble.”

Sarek raised his brow.

Jim paused. “… Wouldn’t you?”

“It is no business of mine if your mother is unable to prevent her son from leaving the house.” He said. “My wife and I have no such rule restricting you from seeing our son.”

Jim’s eyes went wide. “You mean…?”

“Should you wish to enter through the front door, there will be no complications. My wife and I have
been aware of your activity since the rule was implemented. You are very loud when you scale the side of the house.”

Jim flushed.

“She is worried about footprints on the paint.”

“S-sorry.”

Sarek said, “Kaidh.” He turned. “I am returning to the house, if you wish to follow.”

Jim looked up at the window. Spock’s head was hanging out- he’d seen the whole thing. Jim gave him a thumbs up and then ran after Sarek.

It was a short, quiet walk to the front door. Sarek ushered Jim inside, and then locked it. “When you leave in the morning, be certain to lock the door behind you.” He said. He turned and started towards his bedroom.

“Um… thank you?”

“Thanks are unnecessary.”

Jim ran up the stairs and to Spock’s room, entering just in time to see Spock drop the rock out the window as he coiled Jim’s rope up.

“Spock!” Jim cheered.

“Jim.” Spock handed the rope back over.

Jim took off his backpack, stuffing the rope inside, and then flung himself onto Spock’s bed. His body bounced with the impact and he laughed. “Your parents know,” he said. “And they don’t- they won’t tell my mom! Can you believe it?”

Spock sat beside him, reached out, and carded a hand through Jim’s hair. His eyes were fond. “There is no logic in my being without you.”

“Is there logic in sneaking out of the house at night to see the Enterprise?” Jim grinned.

“Perhaps,” Spock said.

“Come on.” Jim stood, smiling wide. “Let’s go see our lady.”

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Spock would be leaving in three days.

“We should begin back towards the house,” Spock said. “Otherwise you will have no time left to sleep.”

Jim shrugged. “I’ll catch up on sleep when mom leaves the house.”

“It is unwise,” Spock said. “If you are to fall asleep…”

“Then she’ll find out I’m gone and hang me from my toes by the ceiling fan.” Jim surmised.
Spock raised his brow. “I doubt she would take such drastic measures. Furthermore, the ceiling fan would not support your weight. However, I do believe you would be in trouble.”

“I don’t really care. Three days left- what’s she gonna do? Ground me?”

“She may.”

“Cuz that always works out for her.”

Spock sat up. “Jim, we cannot see the stars. There is no point in remaining here.”

Jim narrowed his eyes up at the cloudy sky.

“It soon will rain.”

Jim sighed; he’d been stalling for more time, but he had to admit it would have been wise to have called it quits hours ago. Spock was right- there was no reason to stay out. “Yeah, okay.”

He stood, stretching, and then bent down to pack up their things. Spock helped, which expedited the process. Jim frowned as he glance up at the sky. Usually, they would have left the moment the clouds rolled in. His stalling meant they were likely to get caught in the rain, if they didn't hurry.

They marched back to the fence of the ship yard. Jim gave Spock a leg up, and then climbed up over the fence after tossing his backpack to Spock. They both dusted themselves off and then headed for the Hali.

Jim started it, strapped his helmet on, and gestured for Spock to get on behind him. The hover bike rose off of the ground, though she wobbled slightly. They’d made her so long ago- it was beginning to be too small for them. They’d have to upgrade her.

Jim could barely keep his eyes open. A summer of sleepless nights and short naps was beginning to catch up with him, and he hadn’t pushed to be out so late in a long time. He held the handle bars of the bike tighter, letting the leather dig into his hands so that the discomfort would keep him awake. Spock hated driving, or Jim would have asked him to take over.

It was a long drive back.

With the clouds covering the sky, the night was pitch black. Nothing existed outside of the beam of the Hali’s headlight. Jim felt hypnotized by the blur of the road, and the rush of the cornfields to their sides. The road went on forever and ever, stretching before him, blurring, narrowing-

“Jim!”

Jim jerked the hand bars as a sudden dark form took shape before his eyes.

A black cow was standing in the middle of the road- materialized from the dark without warning. Jim clenched his eyes shut and for a moment was weightless. The Hali pitched into the ditch and Spock yanked them both from the bike. She hit a telephone pole and spun into the cornfield, giving a defeated whine as she smashed into the dirt.

For a moment, Jim just lay there, stunned. He groaned, sitting up, and turned to Spock. He ripped his helmet off. “Ouch… you okay?”

Spock sat up, removing his own helmet. His hair stood with static. “I am operational.”

Jim stood, dusting himself off. He’d be a mass of bruises in the morning, but the adrenalin shooting
through his veins took his mind off the pain. He was shaking. “You sure you’re okay?” He asked. He reached out and swiped the dirt off of Spock’s shoulders as the Vulcan stood.

Spock lifted his arm. His sweater was torn and his elbow was bleeding, though not badly. “This is the worst of my injuries.” Spock said. “I believe there is no cause for worry.”

Jim nodded. He looked over at the Hali, where she’d slammed into the dirt. Her front was completely dented in, smashed by the telephone pole. “Next time,” Jim said, “We build her from sturdier material.”

“Agreed.”

They both looked up at the sky as a sudden rumbled of thunder broke the night’s silence. Jim winced, and then looked back over to where the cow was still standing sedately in the road.

“At least we didn’t hit it.” Jim said.

Spock narrowed his eyes at the creature. “It is not very intelligent.”

“Cow’s are actually pretty smart,” Jim said. He quirked his head to the side. “Maybe we could ride him back home…”

Spock gave him a look.

“Yeah, okay, I get it.” Jim snorted. He opened his backpack for his PADD. “Let’s call your mom. I don’t want to get caught in the rain.” He pulled the PADD out and then fronted. It was cracked neatly down the middle, circuits on display. He’d landed on it when he’d fallen off the bike. “Shit.”

Spock squinted at the sky. “I suggest we begin walking.”

“Yeah.”

They did. They left the Hali behind, along with her blue glow, and ventured into the darkness. Soon, it was so dark that Jim couldn’t see anything. He clutched onto Spock’s arm and trusted Spock’s vision to lead them through the night.

He was tired, and he begun to stumble as they walked. Spock held him up, carefully, as they ventured on.

“Mom’s gonna kill me.” Jim moaned.

“There is still a possibility she will not know you left.”

“She’ll know when she sees the Hali missing in the morning.”

“Ah.”

They walked on.

It began to sprinkle. Lightly, at first, so Jim wasn’t too worried. Then the heavens opened up, and it began to rain in earnest, so that within moments Jim was completely soaked. His socks squished uncomfortably inside of his shoes, and he began to grow cold. He clenched his teeth and wrapped arm across his torso.

“Think we’re getting close?” Jim rightened himself after almost slipping in the mud.
Spock didn’t answer.

Jim said, “If we cut across the field we’ll get to my house faster.”

“Without the stars to guid us, I am uncertain of the direction we must go to end up at your house. We must follow the road.”

Jim shook his head. “That’ll take too long.” He could already feel how cold Spock’s arm had grown. Though the Vulcan didn’t shiver, nor did his teeth chatter, Jim knew it was only because of his Vulcan control. Spock wasn’t built for the rain.

“It will take precisely at long as it must.”

Jim frowned, but kept walking. He dropped his hand down to hold onto Spock’s wrist, so that he wouldn’t weigh down on his friend. Through their skin-to-skin contact, Jim could feel Spock’s apprehension and wariness. He squared his jaw and tried to focus on keeping a quick, steady pace, hoping that his worry wasn’t leaking through to Spock.

Spock tripped.

“Spock?” Jim turned to him, worried, as the other boy rightened himself. Spock didn’t stumble. His walk was calculated like a science- there was no room for a misstep. “You okay?”

“I am fine.” Spock said. The very fact that he’d used the word ‘fine’ worried Jim. It was too ambiguous a term- it was illogical. Spock normally wouldn’t have used it, but either he wasn’t up to his usual standards of logic, or he was being intentionally vague. Either way, it wasn’t good.

“Come on.” Jim said. He started to jog. “We’ll be warmer it we move faster.”

Spock kept up at first. The longer they were out in the pouring rain, though, the more stiffly Spock began to move. He was practically dragging his feet, and his wrist was so cold where it met Jim’s fingers that Jim began to worry that the Vulcan might be ill.

“Spock?” He turned when Spock stumbled again, catching the Vulcan and holding him up. Jim was shivering uncontrollably, then, but he managed to force his jaw to work. It hurt to move his cold lips. “Spock! Are you alright?”

Spock shook his head. His legs gave out.

Jim gasped, holding tight onto Spock so that the other boy wouldn’t fall into the mud. “Spock, come on! We can make it. Come on, Spock.” Spock’s head fell onto Jim’s shoulders. He was cold to the touch, his breathing labored against Jim’s collarbones.

“Shit.” Jim awkwardly shouldered Spock over, until the Vulcan was at his back. “Come on. Climb up.”

They managed to somehow get Spock onto Jim’s back. Spock hung limply there, his arms swaying over Jim’s shoulders and into his vision. Jim held Spock’s thighs, so that he was giving Spock a piggy back. He trudged off the road and into the corn field, hissing when the wet stalks of corn slapped against his face. He marched onwards, certain that he knew where he was going.

Licks of lightning in the distance lit their path from time to time. Jim could see the silhouette of the house in the distance, but it felt impossibly far away. His legs shook with the strain of supporting Spock, and the Vulcan’s body did nothing to warm Jim’s own. If anything, Spock seemed to be sapping away what little body heat Jim had left. He clenched his teeth to stop them from chattering
and moved on, stumbling through the field.

He walked.

He fell, once. Spock landed on top of him, not moving. Jim groaned and rolled over, depositing Spock on the wet ground. Jim stood and shrugged off his backpack, which had become heavier and heavier as the minutes dragged on, until it felt as though it weighed hundreds of pounds. He dropped the pack on the ground and then grabbed Spock’s wrist, struggling to sling the Vulcan back over his back.

He couldn’t get Spock up onto his back the way he had been before- he groaned and pulled, but there was no getting Spock’s legs up onto his hips. He grabbed one of Spock’s wrists in each hand and held the Vulcan to his back that way, cringing at the way Spock’s feet dragged through the mud. Spock’s pulse was flighty and light, like a bird’s, and his breathing was harsh in Jim’s ear.

Jim panted as he trudged on.

The house was just in the distance. He could see the porch light up ahead- a beacon calling out to him from the inexorable blackness of the night. Jim dragged Spock through the field, his toes, fingers, and ears numbed by the cold. His face was raw from the scrape of the cornstalks against his skin, and his arms were scraped and bleeding in places. He felt dizzy and sick to his stomach, but he knew he couldn’t stop.

“Fear is the mind killer,” he grit out. “Fear is the… the little death… that brings total obliteration…” He spit onto the ground and stumbled over a mound in the dirt. Spock’s head lolled against his own. Jim grew dizzy with the murky sickness rolling into him from Spock’s mind, but he shook himself of it and pressed onwards.

“I will face my fear.” He promised. “I will permit it to pass over and through me.”

The porch light was growing stronger. The corn was thinning out, and as he grew closer, he could make out the shape of the house against the sky. Thunder rolled dangerously close and Jim still did not pause. He’d lost one of his shoes to the mud, and his foot throbbed with a dull, cold pain.

“When my fear is gone,” he panted, “I will turn and face fear’s path.”

He made it into the yard. He stopped to look up at the house, feeling like he was seeing it for the first time. The sound of the rain against the tin roof had never been so pleasing- the yellow of the old light outside the screen door had never seemed so welcoming, or heavenly.

“And only I will remain.” Jim breathed.

His feet hit the porch like lead. He threw the screen door open and turned, dragging Spock’s limp body over the threshold. Mud and water streaked across the kitchen tiles as the screen door slammed shut, louder than thunder.

“Jim?” His mom’s door slammed shut. “Jim!”

“Mom!” His throat was raw. He was crying, he realized dimly. “Mom! Call Amanda!”

“Jim!” She was running down the stairs.

Jim had enough time to kneel next to Spock. He saw his mom’s honey hair and her wide, terrified eyes, before he told himself it was over- they were safe. “Help Spock,” he slurred, and then he let the dark claim him.
They were alright. Spock had a cold, and he was confined to his bed, piled in blankets and drowning in a sweater. He looked fairly miserable- the skin around his eyes was forest green and coppery yellow, and he had scrapes up and down his arms to match Jim’s.

Their mothers had both chewed them out. They’d both cried, and hugged, and yelled, and cried some more, and absolutely condemned the Hali for her failure to see them safely home. Jim blamed the cow.

It had been easy enough to fix Jim up. He’d felt like the hot bath he’d earned once he was okay enough to stand it was the best sensation he’d ever experienced. Watching the dirt and blood circle down the drain when he stepped from the waters afterwards was cathartic- he felt as though he’d been born anew.

“Sorry I got us into that mess.” Jim was tucked into bed next to Spock. Winona had been furious- she’d wanted to cut them off from each other to teach Jim a lesson about being stupid. Amanda had argued that they’d both learned it sevenfold.

“We share the blame in equal parts.” Spock said. He sniffed, rather dramatically if Jim did say so himself.

“Nah, you know what? It was the cow’s fault.”

Spock didn’t smile with his mouth, but his eyes gave him away. He was laughing on the inside. “The cow certainly must share some blame, being the cause of our crash.” Spock paused. “While I certainly do believe you will make an excellent starship, Captain, your driving skills leave much to be desired.”

“Hey!” Jim laughed. “You jerk, I avoided the cow, didn’t I?”

“You threw the both of us into a ditch and incapacitated the hover bike.”

“Well did you die? No? I’d say we did pretty great then.”

Spock raised his brow. “If simply not dying is the only parameter to our success, I worry for our future.”

Jim laughed again. He leaned his head into Spock’s shoulder and then slipped his hand up over onto Spock’s wrist. Spock was peaceful, and content- he’d meditated most of the morning, and his mind was in order once more. Jim sent him a wave of contentment and happiness. Spock turned to him.

“Are you not in pain?”

Jim shrugged. “Scrapes, bumps, and bruises.”

“And yet you feel only happiness.” He settled back into the pillows. “Fascinating.”

“It’ll take more than a little rain to count me out. I’m counting on getting eaten by a giant space worm
or getting stabbed by an alien or something cool like that. Rain? Pssh. That’s way to normal. I’m going out the cool way.”

“There is no such way.”

“Give a guy a little hope, won’t you Spock?”

Spock said, “Death is a fact. There is no hope or there lack of to dictate it.”

“Well.” Jim shrugged. “I guess there’s a sort of comfort in that alone, huh?”

Spock nodded his head once. “Somehow, I find myself in agreement.”

They were quiet for a time.

“You saved my life,” Spock said.

Jim sat up, leaning forward to see Spock’s face. “What? No I didn’t.”

“Had you left me—”

“Left you? I couldn’t have left you!”

“You likely would not have suffered any illness if you had.”

“Spock. If I’d left you…” He shook his head. “Illness would have been the least of my worries. I’d have been torn apart, even if you were okay. I could never leave you behind.”

“It would have been the logical thing to do.”

“Well, screw logic.” Jim said. “This time and any other time it means hurting you somehow.”

Spock said nothing.

“Don’t ever think I won’t go back for you.” Jim said. “Spock… you’re my best friend.”

“And you, mine.”

“So don’t ever think that I’ll leave you behind. Okay?”

Spock nodded. He looked comforted, though stiff- as if he didn’t want to accept what Jim was saying, but couldn’t help but like what he was hearing. Jim understood him deeply and as personally as if Spock were a part of his soul.

“Think mom’ll let me go home with you to Vulcan?”

Spock said, “It is highly unlikely.”

“Never thought I’d see the day you were too tired to give me exact chances.”

Spock’s brow quirked up, though his eyes remained closed.

Jim snorted. “Did the rain tire you out, Spock?”

“Something did,” Spock said, pointedly.

Jim laughed again. He leaned back into the pillows next to Spock, his hand lightly clasping Spock’s
wrist. Spock’s sleepiness seeped over into Jim, piling on top of his tiredness in a soft, warm blanket of home.

Jim allowed his eyes to lower, and with Spock, he fell asleep.

“See you next year?” Jim pulled out of their secret no-hand shake, smile sad and fond.

Spock nodded. He was looking better, though still pale and green around the gills. “I will return to you always, Jim.”

Jim smiled. He held up his hand in the ta’al. Spock ignored it completely, stepping forward to wrap his arms around Jim. Jim’s eyes went wide for a second before he slammed them closed, holding Spock close.

“I will notice your absence,” Spock said.

Jim gave a soft laugh. “Yeah. I’ll miss you too.”

He could feel his mother and Frank’s gazes boring into his back, but he ignored them both. Similarly, he knew Spock must have felt the eyes of his parents, and wondered what it was Sarek would have to say about such a blatant display of emotion. Jim wasn’t even Vulcan, and he was sure Frank would have plenty to say about the emotions on display.

He didn’t care. He carefully drew back, looking into Spock’s eyes. They were happy, if sad, and Jim loved him. He leaned forward, lightly butting their heads together.

See ya, He thought.

Spock nodded.

Jim watched the train depart as usual. He could feel it carrying Spock further and further away, like their hearts had been tethered together. The shuttle was nearly out of sight when his mom said, “Come on Jim. Let’s go home.”

“One sec,” Jim said, and kept his eye on the train as it reached towards the horizon.

They didn’t rush him. Jim waved a little, silly as it was, as the train winked out of view. He turned away with a weight in his heart, feeling like the next months would drag on forever. “Next year,” he said, “I’ll be on that train.”


It felt certain, though; as certain as the stars, as certain as his fate in space. He’d leave the planet next summer, one way or another, and that was that.

His awareness of Spock stretched thinner and thinner, until it popped like a soap bubble; dissolving into space.
“It’s a bug.”

The boy’s big, brown eyes blinked, curious, like he’d never seen such a thing before. He was bundled up in a coat, which struck Jim as odd, because it was probably a little over eighty degrees out. Jim was sweating in his T-shirt, how was this kid cold?

“Haven’t you ever seen a bug before?” Jim held the beetle out, offering. “It’s a false darkling beetle. You can tell it’s not a darkling because it’s a little longer, and thinner. See?” He held it up closer to the boy’s face. “I found it last night outside. They’re nocturnal. Here, check it out.”

The boy reached out, tentatively, hand open.

Jim dropped the beetle into the boy’s awaiting palm.

His eyes went wide and he stepped back, almost jerking, dropping the beetle on the ground. Jim gasped, dropping down to inspect the bug, but it seemed unharmed, if not agitated. He decided to leave it alone- they’d probably freaked it out enough, and he had other beetles in his bug catcher upstairs in his room.

“The sensation of its legs against my skin was unpleasant.” The boy said.

Jim laughed again. “Unpleasant, huh? And people say I’m a nerd.” He reached out and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I’m James Tiberius Kirk! But you can call me Jim. Your mom’s inside with mine, right?”

The boy nodded.

Jim said, “She’s always having fancy Starfleet people over. They always say they’re gonna stay in that house down the road, but they never do.”

The boy sighed, in what almost seemed to be relief. “I see.”

Jim’s smile fell. “What? Earth’s not a crummy place to live.”

“I wish to be home.” The boy explained. “It is cold here, and damp. The moon’s gravity discomforts me, and there is too much water about.”

“Where are you from?” He asked. Then he realized the boy hadn’t introduced himself. “What’s your name, anyway? How old are you? I’m five and a half and if I’m the oldest then I get to pick which game we play.”

“I am from the Shi’Kahr providence of the planet Vulcan. My name is Spock, son of Sarek. I am seven point eight Terran years of age.”

“Pick?”

Jim circled back. “You’re from Vulcan? That’s cool! I’ve read about Vulcan. It’s a lot bigger than earth, so the gravity must be more intense. I bet you’re probably stronger than me.”

“Vulcans are approximately three times as strong as the average human.”

“Damn.” Jim cursed again. Spock seemed less alarmed the second time. “Older and stronger? That’s not fair. But you’re probably going home, huh? Where’s your dad? Did he come with you? Do you have a dad?”

“I indeed have a father—he is currently in San Francisco. He came with us from Vulcan to Terra, but departed upon reaching the planet.”

“Cool, cool. My dad’s not around.”

Spock lifted a brow. Triple damn—Jim had always wanted to be able to do that.

“Mom says he passed away.” Jim explained. “Which is just polite for dead.”

“I grieve with thee,” Spock said, quietly. “I am sure that to an emotional human, the loss of one’s father would be… difficult.”

“I didn’t know him.” Jim shrugged. “I’m not supposed to tell people that when I first get to know ‘em—just out of the blue that he’s dead. But they always find out and then it gets all awkward, so I think it’s easy to get it out of the way quick.”

Spock nodded. “I see your logic and admire your thinking.”

Jim grinned. He was missing a tooth. “Thanks! So where are you guys staying? Are you going to stay here? Mom said you might stay here but some people leave right away and some go to the hotel and some go to that house so you never know.”

“Mother told me that we would be staying here, for the night.”

“Sweet! That means we get a sleepover! Usually when people come here if they have kids they’re older and they don’t really want to play with me. But you’ll play with me, right?” His eyes lit up as he darted over to the porch, where his bucket of plastic starships was waiting. “You can be the Enterprise! I painted her myself, it’s supposed to be like the one in the ship yard. I know she’s still just a skeleton right now but this is what she’ll like look when she’s done.” He held his model out proudly. “You can be her if you want. I’ll be the Farragut.”

“I have no preference.”

Jim held the Enterprise to his chest. “Well if you don’t care then you can be the Farragut, cuz’ I like the Enterprise best.” He happily handed the other toy over to Spock, watching as the young Vulcan turned it over in his hands curiously.

“I do not understand.” Spock said.

“Whadaya mean?”

“What am I meant to do with this inaccurate model?” He blinked. “Do you wish me to fix it?”
“No! You’re supposed to play with it.” He held his up, making then noise he imagined the engines on a warp-class starship would make if it entered atmosphere. It sounded suspiciously like blowing raspberries. “Like this!”

Spock held his up, confused. He didn’t make any noise.

“This is the USS Enterprise to the Farragut!” Jim called. “Come in, Farragut!”

Spock stared at him.

Jim whispered, “That’s you.”

“I am the Farragut.” Spock said. He sounded unconvinced.

“No!” He dropped his arm for a moment, yanking the Enterprise out of orbit. “You’re the Captain of the Farragut. Like, you pretend you’re on the ship and I’m calling you. Like this, watch.” He took the ship from Spock. “Come in, Farragut!” He lifted the Enterprise when he was speaking as her. “This is the Farragut! We read you, Enterprise!” He lifted the Farragut when talking as the other ship.

“I see.” Spock said. He held his hand out. “Allow me to begin again.”

Jim passed the toy over. “Take two,” he whispered. He lifted the Enterprise high up into the air, running in a circle around Spock before pausing before him. “This is the USS Enterprise! We’re here to rescue you! Come in, Farragut, answer us!”

“This Captain Spock of the USS Farragut. Enterprise, please identify yourself.”

Jim beamed. “Perfect!” He said, and then dropped back into character. “Captain Spock, this is Captain James Tiberius Kirk. We got your call for help and we’re here to rescue you!”

“Captain Kirk,” Spock said. “I was unaware we were broadcasting a distress call.”

“Klingons attacked you!” Jim shouted. “You’re barely alive!”

“I see.” Spock said. “Captain, if Klingons are in the area, it would be wise to act with caution. It would be unfortunate if both our ships were attacked.”

“No way; I kicked their butts.” Kirk assured. Then he gasped. “Watch out! They’re right behind you!”

Spock didn’t move. “They are not,” he said.

Jim ignored him, rolling down into the grass to spring up behind Spock, mouth working furiously to produce the sounds of his phasers and photon torpedoes firing on the enemy war bird. He kicked the grass in front of him, sending grass flying into the air, hollering as his imaginary rivals went down after the attack. “We got ‘em!” He circled back around to face Spock, grinning. “Captain Spock! Captain Spock, we did it! They’re dead in the water. Come on, we can help fix you up!”

Spock said, “I am sure engineering will be able to—“

Jim ducked under Spock’s arm, hauling the other boy across the lawn. Spock seemed a little distressed at being man-handled, but Jim was pretty sure that was just because he was playing along. He sat Spock down on the porch.

“Wait here.” He said, seriously.
Spock didn’t move.

Jim carefully balanced the Enterprise next to Spock on the porch before bolting back inside, cringing when the screen door banged loudly after him. His mom always yelled at him for that. He rushed into the bathroom, clamoring up onto the counter to pull the mirror cabinet open.

He grabbed a box of band aids and sprinted back out, wincing when he once again slammed the screen door closed. From inside the house, his mom yelled, “Jim!”

“Sorry!” He called back. He had more important matters to attend to.

He launched off of the porch and then came running back around to Spock, setting the box down at his side.

“Hang in there Captain Spock!” He pleaded. “Don’t you die on me!”

“I will endeavor to adhere to your request.” Spock said.

Jim hurried to produce a bandaid from the box, and then peeled it off the wrapper to put on Spock’s knee. Then he put one on Spock’s nose. And another on his chest, over his shirt. And one more on wrist. And then one on the Farragut, just to be safe.

He leaned down and kissed Spock’s knee. “All better!” He declared. He grinned, wide, waiting for Spock to thank him for saving his life. Spock just stared. “Captain Spock, I saved you!”

“So it would seem.” Spock sounded confused again.

Jim sighed. “Spock, you’re not playing along.”

“I am not certain what you wish me to do. Should I pretend to be dying, as you have only played a mild adhesive medical sticker upon my person? I will marvel at their scientific advancement if they managed to save my life in fiction.”

“No I just save you the regular way not with science.”

Spock blinked.

“You’re supposed to say thank you.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Jim grinned- that was more like it. He struck a heroic pose. “Any time, Spock.”

That night, they huddled together in Jim’s bed, crowded around Jim’s PADD. “This is the best part,” Jim whispered.

“You have said that four times.” Spock reminded him, quietly.

“But this really is the best part.”

“I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer.”

Jim sighed wistfully, whispering along with Paul. “Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.
I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over and through me. And when my fear is gone, I will turn and face fear’s path and only I will remain.”

He turned to see what Spock thought of it. He looked like he’d been struck over the head.

“What?” Jim asked, voice small in the dark.

He said nothing.

The movie passed in relative silence, broken only by Jim’s muttering the lines along with the characters every now and then. When it ended, they sat still, watching the credits scroll by for a time, until eventually the screen went black.

Jim turned the PADD off and leaned over the side of the bed, putting it on the nightstand. He looked back at Spock, who hadn’t moved from where he was wrapped up in two of Jim’s blankets, tucked under the comforter. He looked pale and green-tinted in the faint light the moon lent through Jim’s window.

“Are you okay?” Jim asked.

“I do not believe that was material intended for children of our age.”

Jim shrugged. “It’s a good movie.”

“It…” he paused. “It reminds me of home.”

Jim’s brows raised. “Really?”

He nodded. “Vulcan is a desert planet.”

“Do you miss it?”

“It is illogical to miss something. Vulcan is as I left it.”

Jim nodded his understanding, scooting a little closer to Spock. “It’s okay. Everyone gets homesick sometimes.” Well, Jim never did, but he wasn’t gone from the house very much. He’d never really felt like it was home, anyway- just somewhere that they lived.

“Vulcans do not.”

Jim laid down, prompting Spock to do the same. “You’re going home in the morning, right?”

Spock nodded.

“But you’ll be back next summer?”

“Yes. Mother believes I will better be able to regulate my body temperature with time.”

Jim grinned at that. Spock had been a bit of a baby about it all night- tugging on his mother’s skirt to get her attention, announcing several times that he was functioning below optimal temperatures. Jim’s mom had dug up one of Jim’s over-sized sweaters to squeeze Spock into, but it had only made Spock look more miserable.

He looked a little better, bundled up in bed. Jim was already sweating- he couldn’t imagine how Spock could still be cold.
“You’ll stay all summer next time.” Jim said. He was certain of it.

Spock said, “It is what my parents intend to do.”

He grinned. “Good.”

Spock looked over at him.

“I want to see you again. I don’t have many friends.” Johnny, maybe, but the older boy was often embarrassed to have Jim tagging along. “But you’re my friend, aren’t you Spock?”

“Vulcans do not have friends.” He turned over on his side, facing away from Jim. “Mother expected us to sleep long ago. I will ignore you if you speak to me so that I may sleep the amount of hours I need in order to function properly.”

Jim wiggled a little closer, so that their legs touched. Maybe Vulcans didn’t have friends, but Spock’s mom was human. Two plus two equaled four- and Spock wasn’t a full Vulcan. He grinned into the darkness, noticing that while Spock tensed for a moment, he didn’t move away from the touch.

Summer was coming to a close, and for once, he was thankful. It meant that next summer would come all the sooner- and he’d be with Spock again.

"Night, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim."
Part One- Chapter Four

Jim’s prediction of Winona leaving came true.

She married Frank at the end of March and left for a five month mission aboard the Reliant in the beginning of May, leaving Frank to watch over Jim and the farm. Jim felt awkward and unwelcome in his own home, which was suddenly Frank’s home, too.

Frank had given up on trying to be Jim’s dad months previous. He and Jim had come to an odd sort of stand-still, where they inhabited the same space but attempted not to interact.

Jim walked most places, but sometimes it was mandatory for Frank to play parent and drive him. Picking up Spock and Amanda was one such instance. The ride to the station was silent for the first stretch. Frank spoke when they were just in sight of the station.

“You’re fidgeting,” Frank said.

Jim shrugged. “Can’t help it.”

“You always like that?”

Jim shrugged again. “I guess.”

It had been a long year. Jim felt like the world had shrunk down to the size of a balloon, and it was all he could do to keep the planet from crumbling in on itself and turning into a black hole. He felt his mother’s absence like a physical thing, made even heavier by Frank’s presence. Frank, who had just wanted Winona and had instead gotten a full time babysitting gig. Frank, who’d hoped that his job in Iowa would mean big money and was slowly coming to find that he was just barely making bank. Frank, who seemed to be crumbling under the full implications of country life.

Five months.

They pulled into a parking space. Frank was always early, unlike Winona, who was always a little late. So Jim undid his seatbelt and then slumped down in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest.

The tension stretched between them.

“So,” Frank said. “Spock, huh?”

Jim looked up at him.

“Excited to see him again?”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t help but smile.

Frank noticed. “Are you two…?”

Jim looked up at him, questioningly tilting his head to the side. “What?”

“Never mind.” Frank said. He awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck.

Silence fell. Jim watched the station.

Eventually, Jim said, “I’m gonna…” He pointed out the window.
“Yeah. You’re a teenager,” Frank said. “You can do what you want.”

“Cool.” Jim opened the door to the hover car and hopped out, standing tall on the asphalt. He closed the door without looking back to Frank and then walked over to the station. There were a few other people already waiting, just beyond the force field’s line- it wasn’t on, yet; Jim couldn’t see the catch on the edges of the ceiling, but it would be activated once the train was close enough.

Jim watched the ceiling, waiting. He smiled, slowly, when he noticed the field come on.

Spock was close.

He could swear he almost felt Spock getting nearer to him, in his chest. He’d grown tall over the year, and no longer looked like a child to his own eyes. His heart, though, was just the same- brimming with love and kindness, and a thirst for adventure, and space. He stepped up to the force field, pressing his palms gently against it, and watched the train as it appeared in his line of sight.

His smile grew.

The train shot forward, growing bigger by the second, until it was screaming past Jim’s face, brakes pulling it to a quick, efficient stop. Jim heard the people waiting behind him rise and couldn’t help his smile from spreading. He started to hop in place, eager for the fields to lower. He nearly fell as they did, but he used the forward momentum to start into a light sprint.

*Spock!*

Jim nearly ran into the shuttle doors, just barely hopping back before he smashed his face into them, waiting impatiently as they slid open. Spock was waiting there, somehow having known. They collided in a tangle of long, awkward limbs and lean muscle, Jim laughing as he dug his hands into Spock’s robes.

People around them muttered about the obstruction, but Jim couldn’t have cared less. He drew back only enough to see Spock’s face, saying, “Spock!”

“Jim,” Spock surged back forward, wrapping his arms even tighter around Jim. Jim could feel Spock’s emotions as they surged into him, subtler than Jim’s own, but there nonetheless. Spock was relieved, and light, and happy. He felt the same as Jim did- like he was finally where he was supposed to be.

“Spock!” Amanda called over the crowd. “Spock, where are you?”

Jim laughed. “Give mom the slip?”

“It was not my intention,” Spock said into Jim’s neck.

“You knew I’d be here.”

Spock nodded. “I knew.”

“Spock!” Amanda’s voice came again.

Jim laughed. He drew back a little from Spock and raised his hand. “Here!” He called. “Amanda! We’re over here!”

Spock disentangled himself from Jim just as Amanda reached them, huffing as she struggled to carry their things. Spock looked immediately chastised, stepping forward with his hands stretched out.
“Allow me,” he said.

Amanda hefted a sigh. “Thank you,” she said, and transferred the luggage to Spock’s waiting arms. She turned to Jim, then, and fell into his embrace, hand cradling the back of his head. “Oh, James, honey. You’ve gotten so tall!”

“Hi Amanda.” He grinned into her shoulder. “Miss me?”

“Every day,” She teased. She pulled away from him, tapping the end of his nose with her index finger. “Oh, you have grown so much…”

Jim struck a pose. “Have I grown more… beautiful?”

She laughed. “Of course! Of course; so handsome.” She laughed some more, bracing herself with a hand on his shoulder. They were nearly of a height, Jim noticed. “Where is Winona?” She asked.

“Off-planet.” Jim answered. He allowed Amanda to usher him out of the way of the other passengers. “Frank’s waiting in the hover car.”

“I heard the happy news.” Amanda ventured. "I was sorry to miss the wedding."

“Yeah,” Jim said. “It was… something."

Amanda reached out, carding her hand through Jim’s bangs. “My, your hair’s gotten darker. I remember when it was nearly sunshine.” She grinned as Jim reached up to smooth his hair back into place. “You and Spock- both so fussy about your hair.”

Spock said, “It is logical to appear at one’s best.”

“Yeah,” Jim teamed. “You wouldn’t want me walking around looking like an idiot, would you?”

“Well, if you put it that way.” She grinned and reached out, smoothing his hair out. He preened under the attention, standing tall. “Very handsome, James.”

They started to walk towards the car.

“I made some adjustments to the house,” Jim started. “Remember how you always had to re-set the environmental controls? They operate at Vulcan norm now, so it shouldn’t bother you like it used to.”

“You didn’t need to do that,” Amanda said, but she looked happy.

Jim grinned. “Sure I did. Can’t have my second family going without, right?”

Amanda’s eyes softened. “I suppose, if we are family, it is only logical.”

Jim’s heart swelled in his chest. “See? Exactly.” He ran around Amanda’s side so that he could stand between her and Spock while they walked. His arm brushed Spock’s as they moved. “And I re-progamed the replicator with some more familiar foods. Not sure if they’re completely right, since I haven’t tasted all of them, but it should be better than it was. Oh, and I got bored and re-painted.”

Amanda’s brows shot up. “Re-painted?”

He nodded. “The outside of the house. It was starting to peel, so I just went ahead and added a fresh coat. Didn’t take too long.”
“Oh, James, you really are too kind.” She laughed. “Between you and Spock, I’ll have nothing left to do!”

“You always have your writing, Mother.” Spock said. “Along with your research.”

“Well, that is true.” She wrapped her arm around Jim. “Maybe the two of you can help me on that, too.”

“Sure thing,” Jim said. “Though I’m not sure how much help I can be.”

She fixed him with a look.

“What?”

“Do not pretend to be less intelligent than you are.”

“Raw intelligence doesn’t mean that much in the face of your research.” Jim laughed.

Spock said, “And yet, you would ‘make it work,’ would you not?”

“Oh, maybe.” Jim gave Spock a wink.

They’d arrived at the hover car. Frank had already opened the back, so Jim helped Spock pile their bags in like usual. Amanda got into the front seat, saying her polite hellos to Frank as she did. Jim closed the trunk and turned to Spock.

“You are…” Spock trailed off.

Jim shrugged. “Not happy?”

Spock pressed his lips into a thin line.

“It’s the way things are, sometimes.” He made to walk around the side of the car, but Spock’s hand on his elbow stopped him.

Spock seemed to struggle with himself, eyebrows drawn together. “I…” he started, and then let out a small breath. “I wish for only your happiness.”

Jim smiled a little. “Yeah?” He mused. “Well, you being here makes me happy.”

“It is my wish to continue to make you happy.”

Jim let out a small laugh. “Mine too.”

They split, walking around opposite sides of the hover to slip in. Jim didn’t crawl into the middle seat like he used to- there was no room for his legs. He laid his hand casually on the middle seat, heart climbing into his throat when Spock laid his a breath away. Frank started the car and threw it into drive, and Jim used the sudden acceleration as an excuse for his fingers to slip the extra few millimeters. His fingers laid casually over Spock’s wrist, and Spock made no move to draw away.

He felt Spock against his mind like a cool, spring breeze. Weight he hadn’t been aware of lifted from his shoulders, and suddenly he could breath easy. It had been a long time since he’d felt like anything more than a burden, but the genuine want in Spock’s presence dispelled all thoughts of being superfluous to anyone else. Spock craved Jim’s presence just as much as Jim craved his. Even if no one else wanted Jim around, Spock did, and Amanda did, and they were enough. They were a family who would never leave him, even when they were sixteen lightyears away.
They didn’t speak on the way home. Jim leaned over until his head settled on Spock’s shoulder, feeling sleepy with the sudden lack of anxiety crashing through his head. He looked up in the rear-view mirror and caught Frank looking at him. He met Frank’s eyes without blinking, challenging him to say anything. Jim would protect his softness and love from the harsh masculinity pushed on him by everyone, and he would do it with all the fierceness he’d been born into as a Kirk. Frank looked away quickly, and Jim knew Spock could feel his smug satisfaction.

Spock turned to him, raising a questioning brow.

*I’ll tell you later,* Jim telegraphed.

Spock turned his eyes back to the front. He shifted so that his cheek rested against Jim’s head. Jim smiled and let his eyes drift closed, reveling in the comfort that Spock’s presence lent him.

He hadn’t realized how tired he’d been. When was the last time he’d had a peaceful, full night of sleep? He couldn’t recall.

Jim didn’t realize he’d drifted off until he was suddenly being yanked back into awareness by Amanda’s voice. “- for the night, if you don’t mind.”

Jim blinked heavily and sat up, rubbing at his eyes. His hair was plastered to his neck from sweat, and his cheek felt wet with it. He’d forgotten how hot it got in the back of the hover car, and that coupled with Spock’s elevated body temperature had made him lethargically warm.

“Yes, I don’t care.” Frank said.

Jim perked up. “Am I staying the night?”

“If you want,” Amanda said. “We’d love to have you.”

Jim beamed. “Yeah! I brought a bag, just in case.” He grabbed it out from under his feet, pulling it into his lap to show he was prepared.

Spock slipped out of the car. “I will begin to unpack,” he said.

“I’ll help,” Jim said.

“Jim.” Frank stopped him.

Jim paused, watching as Amanda stepped out of the hover, closing her door behind her.

“A word,” Frank said.

Jim frowned. “What?” He leaned forward, making eye-contact with Frank in the mirror.

Spock opened up the back, but it was as if it was happening in another universe. He took his bags and started towards the house, where his mother was trying to unlock the door.

“You’re not going to get into any funny business, right?”

Jim said, “What kind of funny business?”

Frank scowled. “You know…”

Jim had a feeling, but he stubbornly said, “No, I don’t.”
“Sex stuff.” Frank muttered.

Jim rolled his eyes. “I’m thirteen. I’ll call you when I’ve gotten to hand-holding.”

Frank seemed equal parts relieved and annoyed by Jim’s flippancy. “Fine. Get outta here.”

“My pleasure,” Jim said, and slipped from the car.

He caught up with Spock, who was waiting at the door, even though his mother had already unlocked it and entered the house.

“What did he wish to speak to you about?”

Jim stuffed his hands into his jeans. “Wanted to make sure we weren’t up to anything.”

Spock raised a brow. “We will be up to many activities for the duration of your stay.”


They entered the house together, Jim yawning. Spock seemed to be sleepy, too. “Tired?”

“It has been a long journey,” Spock said, “And I was unable to meditate to my satisfaction due to several complications and interruptions. It has been a trying three days.”

“Come on,” Jim said, starting for the stairs. “I’ll show you an ancient human custom used to dispel fatigue.”

Spock raised a brow, starting after Jim. “I am intrigued,” he said.

“Good.” Jim laughed. He entered Spock’s room first, powering straight over to the bed to flop back on top of the covers, arms and legs sprawled every which way.

Spock followed at a more controlled pace, carefully placing his bags on the ground next to his desk. He turned and closed the door, like he usually did- Vulcans were creatures of intense privacy, Jim had noticed. Or rather, Spock and Sarek were, and Amanda did not seem to be surprised by their behavior.

“I am ready to observe your ritual.” Spock said.

Jim wiggled over to the side of the bed touching the wall, curling up there. “You’ve gotta join in. Come here.”

Spock did. He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. “I do not know what to do.”

“I’ll show you.” He patted the space next to him. “First you gotta lie down. This ritual requires absolute relaxation.”

Spock stiffly laid down, head on the pillow, hands linked over his stomach. “Like this?”

“Perfect.” Jim laughed. He scooted over, pressing his face into Spock’s shoulder, and threw his arm over his friend. “This is called a nap, by the way.”

Spock’s brow furrowed. “I have heard of napping. It is for infants.”

“And tired teenagers,” Jim argued.
Spock sighed. “You mean for us to sleep before it is required.”

“Maybe.” Jim closed his eyes, inching closer to Spock. Jim was dressed in a tank top and shorts, but Spock had on full-length pants, socks, and a knitted sweater. Jim liked the feeling of the foreign Vulcan yarn against his cheek and pressed in closer. He was already sweating, but he didn’t care— it was nearly a comfortable sort of heat.

“Jim, this is not productive.”

“Hush,” Jim teased. “Try it out, you might find it to your liking.”

“Hm.”

Jim smiled. “Okay,” he yawned. “Last step- and this is the crucial part. You’ve gotta close your eyes and go to sleep.”

Spock sighed, but he didn’t protest. When Jim chanced a peek up at Spock, he found the young Vulcan’s eyes closed and his face relaxed. Jim smiled.

“Your eyes are not closed, Jim,” Spock murmured. “If you intend for us to nap, then sleep.”

“Kay.” Jim smiled and laid his head back on Spock’s shoulder. He closed his eyes and gave in to the warmth and quiet, falling quickly into sleep.

When he opened his eyes, he was in his corvette again, driving through space. Spock was already there, awake and leaning over the edge of the car to run his hand through the trail of a comet.

“Hey,” Jim said.

Spock turned. “Hello, Jim.”

“Miss me?”

“More than words can describe.”

Jim laughed. “Me too, Spock. Me too.”

Jim took Spock around the barn, showing him all the new features he’d installed over the months they’d been apart. “I wish we could hang out in here more,” Jim said. “But it’s always dark, so, I guess this is just kinda where I go when the weather is crappy or if there’s too much cloud cover to see the stars.”

Spock looked up at the roof, contemplative.

Jim slowly started to grin. “Whacha cooking up over there, Spock?”

“I am not cooking.” Spock said. “However, I am formulating an idea which may have merit.”

“Hit me.”

“I will not,” said Spock. Jim rolled his eyes but allowed Spock to continue without interjecting. “If
the two of us were to study material on architecture and engineering, I believe we would be able to install what you would refer to as a sky light.”

Jim looked up at the roof. “Huh.” He said. He squinted. “You know, I think you might be right.”

“While glass is usually not suggested for a roof,” Spock started.

“Way ahead of you.” Jim ran over to his work bench, firing up his make-shift computer console. “I don’t have any money but I bet we could trade something, or something.” He shrugged. “Finding some high-grade, security glass shouldn’t be too hard. Super easy to make nowadays.”

Spock stepped up to look over Jim’s shoulder. “We should request permission to modify the barn roof from your mother as well as the city. Structural modification must first be approved through—”

“On it.” Jim passed Spock a PADD. “Here, you can start on the study, I’ll get us a permit and the glass.” He squinted at his screen. “Best not to tell mom; she’ll freak out.”

Spock nodded, looking down at his screen. “We are below legal age to have our project sanctioned by the city.”

“That’s why I’m going to be asking without mentioning our ages.” Jim said. “As far as the city knows, Frank’s the one doing all this and Mom’s the one who’ll be doing the actual building.”

“Lying is not the Vulcan way,” Spock said. He paused. “However, if it is you that shall be arranging these things…”

“Lying’s totally the human way.” Jim grinned. “I got your back covered, Spock.”

Spock hummed his acknowledgement, already deeply invested in his research.

It took the rest of the day, but by nightfall, Jim had his permits in line, and their glass would be arriving by noon the next day. (If you couldn’t get something fast, what was the point?) Jim was hoping they could patch up the Hali by then, because he’d arranged to trade it for the glass. It was much too small for him and Spock, and as he’d warned the buyer, it was extremely fragile.

They stayed up all night taking turns studying and working on the Hali. She was too small for them to both work on at once, after removing her totaled outer shell. Jim lost track of time completely, and though Spock had the ability to keep track of time, he seemed to either disregard it or forget its importance.

By the time the Hali was repaired, it was well into morning. They’d snacked all through the night, but Jim felt heavy with fatigue as he stepped out of the barn to meet sunlight. He blinked into the light, surprised by it. He rubbed his face, groaning.

“Spock,” he called. “It’s like. Morning.”

“It is o-seven-hundred.” Spock agreed.

“We’ve got five hours to catch up on sleep before the glass is here.”

Spock nodded and looked up from his PADD. “Should we take part in the ancient human custom of napping?”

Jim snorted out a laugh. “Smart-ass. Yeah, come on. We’ll take a nap and then we can come back out here and get started. You ordered some tools?”
Spock nodded. “I have.”

“Did that cost money?”

“I had a certain amount of credits at my disposal. My mother thought it important that I was given a small allowance.” Spock set down his PADD and stood, making his way out of the barn. “Tools can be used more than once, and as such, are a logical use of credits.”

Jim smiled. “Well, I won’t fault you for that. We can start after the glass gets here.”

Spock raised a brow. “Will you not be too tired?”

“That sentence implies that you won’t be.”

“Vulcans require less sleep than humans.”

“Well so do I.” Jim decided.

Spock raised a brow. “You are a human, Jim.”

“You’re half human, so there.”

Spock said, “It is important to note that I am also half-Vulcan. Biologically, I require less sleep than you.”

“Well, biologically, you can kiss my sleepless ass.”

Spock said, “That would not only be undignified, but also unnecessary and unsanitary.”

“You don’t say.” They journey back into the house, which was vacant- Frank would have left for work an hour ago. Jim grabbed the carton of milk from the fridge on his way through the kitchen, throwing it back and taking a long gulp. He handed the remains to Spock, who- despite his logical disposition towards manners- drank the rest before putting the container into the recycler.

Jim declared himself too tired to make the trek up the stairs. They went to the guest room, on the first floor, and fell into bed in a messy tangle of limbs, Spock pushing Jim off of him with a loud groan. Jim deliberately flopped over, hand landing on Spock’s face. Spock pushed Jim’s arm off and scooted back hard enough to nearly push Jim off the bed. Jim grabbed onto Spock’s shoulders to keep himself from falling and then rolled, squishing Spock’s body as he went over it.

“Jim,” Spock groaned. “You are crushing my body.”

“What? Can’t hear you, I’m sleeping.” Jim swallowed back a laugh and dug his hip into Spock’s stomach.

“You are not sleeping.” Spock said. He rolled so that Jim was flung to the side and then settled back on the mattress. He put his hand out, on Jim’s face. “I will keep you there in case you attempt to put yourself upon my person again.”

Jim struggled in vain, attempting to dodge Spock’s hand and roll on top of the Vulcan again. Spock was relentless, keeping his warm palm solidly pressed to Jim’s cheek. Jim opened his mouth to lick Spock’s hand before thinking better of it. He drooled instead.

Spock reared back as though he’d been burned. He stared at his wet hand in utter bafflement.

“Oops,” Jim laughed.
“You are disgusting.” Spock declared. He wiped his hand off on Jim’s shirt, and then let his hand rest on Jim’s chest. “Do not do such a thing again or I will take extreme measures against you.”

“Such as?”

“I will deliver the Vulcan nerve pinch and send you into sleep.”

“The Vulcan nerve pinch is a myth.” Jim scoffed.

Spock raised a brow. “Are you so certain?”

“…” Jim narrowed his eyes, but Spock’s face was a wall. “Not certain enough to test it,” Jim finally decided. He flopped onto his side, so he could face Spock. “See you in a couple of hours.”

“You will indeed.” Spock removed his person from Jim, settling down to sleep.

Jim closed his eyes. “Hey Spock?”

“I cannot sleep when you continue to speak to me, Jim.”

He’d heard that line before and it was BS. Spock could ignore his screaming, if it came down to it. “I love you.”

Spock made a show of huffing. “Yes, Jim, I am well aware.”

Jim smiled at him. “And…?”

“I have expressed my regard for you before. It has not changed.”

Jim pouted. “Spock, you’re my best friend. You know what best friends do? Tell each other they love each other. All the time. Especially before bed- it’s good luck.”

“You made that up,” Spock said, but he sounded uncertain.

“Nope.”

“Luck is illogical.” Spock decided.

“And love?”

“Quite.”

Jim laughed. “Well,” he said, “I wouldn’t have you be forced into something illogical.”

“Love is not forced,” Spock said.

“You would know,” Jim said. “Since you love me.”

“Sometimes, I question it.”

“You should.” Jim said. He settled in, then, his lack of sleep having taken its toll. “Night, Spock.”

“It is morning, Jim.”

“Shut up and go to sleep.”

Spock was quiet for a second. He whispered, “Jim.”
Jim opened one eye.

“I love you.” Spock muttered.

Jim laughed and grinned. “I know, Spock. Go to sleep.”

“Sleep well, Jim.”

“You too, Spock.”

They did.

The thing about the half-glass roof was that it gave them an excuse to stay up late. As the Enterprise grew nearer and nearer to her launch date—she’d have to be finished up in space—security grew tighter around her. Jim was friends with some of the guards, and he could slip in while he knew they were on shift, but his time beneath the ship was limited and coming to an end.

He couldn’t begrudge her for it. She was meant for better things than the dirt. Like him, she’d leave Iowa behind for the stars, set out to explore.

Jim and Spock started building a new hover bike. Jim had at first wanted to call it the Hali 2.0, but Spock had insisted the new bike would be nothing like the old, and he was right. They made her sleeker, darker, durable, and fast. She looked dangerous and coy in the dim light the moon cast through the roof of the barn, like something that could run away, but would turn to bite if provoked.

They named her the Starok.

Little by little, she came together. Jim dragged the mattress from the guest room in the house out to the barn, along with his old cartoon-spaceship sheets and blankets. He and Spock often slept out in the barn, despite Spock’s disinclination to the lower temperatures of the night. Jim brought plenty of blankets out for Spock, and he knew that together they generated a lot of body heat.

He remembered, once, asking Amanda how the hell she stood the heat and how she’d said that she had been happy to get used to it. At first, Jim hadn’t really understood what she meant, but it was beginning to make sense. He didn’t mind waking up in the night soaked in sweat because Spock had rolled over to snuggle into Jim’s warmth. It made him happy.

Frank was easier to deal with than Winona had been. Frank didn’t want them out after dark, but he didn’t care enough to check up. He’d insisted no sleepovers from the start, but so far, Spock hadn’t even set foot in Jim’s room—they’d done everything out in the barn. Jim would go to his room, pretend he was going to sleep, then stuff the covers and slip out the door. He’d learned not to let the screen door slam, finally.

Then they’d spend the night in the barn. Frank left for work before Jim was supposed to be up most days, and on the days Frank had off, Jim crept back into his room in the morning to ‘wake up.’

Spock humored him through it all, as did Amanda. He loved them both dearly for it.

Frank was also less observant than Winona. The barn wasn’t too far from the house, but Frank never
came out to it- he’d call Jim’s comm device instead. Because of that, he hadn’t even noticed the
modifications Jim and Spock had made to the roof. The tin roof had always reflected the sun, and the
glass was no different. Jim knew the second his mother got back the ruse would be up, and he’d be
in huge trouble, but until then, they’d have their fun.

Jim couldn’t believe how close he and Spock had become. They traded between Standard, Vulcan,
Klingonese, and Romulan in rapid fire, not bothering to set any real rhyme or reason to their speech.
Most often, they’d fall into Vulcan, but there were some things that were easier to convey in any of
the other three languages, and switching between kept them sharp. They kept the Romulan and
Klingonese a secret- even from Amanda; though they didn’t hide it from her, exactly, and would tell
her if she asked, they never showed off their skills. Nevertheless, Amanda picked up their interest in
language, and had promised to teach them both Orion next summer, when she wasn’t so busy. Orion
was one of the harder languages to learn, simply due to the fluctuating tenses and address to subject,
but she was confident that Jim and Spock could get it.

Jim wished Frank would let him just go live with Spock and Amanda. His mom had vetoed it before
she’d left, though. Jim had at one time been too young to understand, but his age told him what he’d
missed- she was afraid of being replaced. He didn’t blame her for her fear; he trusted Spock and
Amanda. For her, he felt a familial love, but he held no illusion of trust or closeness. They’d drifted
quietly apart, Winona unable to cope with a son who couldn’t be controlled, and Jim unable to heal
from her inability to keep him closer to her heart. He knew she loved him, dearly, but he saw how
much that scared her. Deep down, she was probably scared of losing him, too, and because of that,
she just couldn’t get close to him like they both wanted her to. It was different with Frank. Frank was
the guy who kissed her shoulders and made her laugh, the guy who kept her bed warm and watched
her son. If Frank fell off the face of the earth, he could be replaced- no matter how nice he was, no
matter what he did, he would never, ever, be George Kirk. Jim was a different story.

By the time the Starok was ready, the Enterprise was only a month out from launch. Jim pulled on
his helmet and slipped onto the back of the bike, peeking through the barn doors to be sure that
Frank’s light was off. It was- the cost was clear.

“Come on,” he whispered to Spock.

Spock slipped on behind him. “Endeavor not to crash this time.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jim smirked.

The Starok slipped out of the barn silently, gliding over the uneven earth smoothly. Jim laughed a
little, under his breath, and kept her front lights dim, just in case the reflection caught Frank’s
window. When they were out of the driveway he turned the beams up bright and held on tightly to
the handle bars, flicking the engine up high.

They shot down the road like a bullet. Technically, they’d been allowed to pilot the Hali around as
children due to her small size and inferior engine; the Starok was different. Jim knew that there were
more and more cops out along the dirt roads anymore, but during the night time, he hoped they
would be safe.

He started out towards the George Kirk Memorial Shipyard.

Jim wondered if he’d still be where he was if his dad was alive. Would Winona feel safe enough to
let him spend the summers with Spock and his parents? Would Jim crave escape enough to sneak out
every night to stare up at the sky with his starship? Would his dad have driven them out in the
antique cars at night to watch the Enterprise get put together? Would they have been dirt-side to
begin with? Or would have Jim grown up in space?
The thought of being out there, from the time he was too small to even crawl, sent a pang through his chest. What he would have given to have lived as a nomad amongst the galaxy, watching out his bedroom window as planets raced past. The people he’d have met, the things he’d have seen. He wanted so badly for that life for a singular moment that he felt it like a physical pain in his chest.

But then, if he’d grown up in space, someone else would have been chosen to take care of some other house on earth for Starfleet. Spock and Amanda and Sarek would have been put into someone else’s care. They would have been at some other house, and Spock would have had to make do with someone else’s kid.

And who would Jim have? Any number of friends, of those like him and not, but the possibility of having Spock? Too slim.

He wouldn’t have traded Spock for anything; not even the universe.

The Starok hugged the curves and turns in the road, engine singing a delightful, quiet tune. Spock’s hands were a soft anchor against Jim’s stomach, reminding him not to get carried away. Several times he imagined shapes in the darkness and slowed to a near stop, but nothing appeared in the road to stop them.

The Enterprise’s lights were up when they got there. Jim gasped in delight and pulled the Starok off into the ditch, neatly powering down the engines to dismount. He pulled his helmet off and absent-mindedly ran a hand through his wild blond locks, unable to take his eyes off the sight of her.

She looked like a jar of fireflies on his windowsill; filled with flickering lights and wishes, just waiting for him. She was a sleepy giant with a thousand blinking blue eyes, her body beautifully curled up against the ground while she slowly shook away her slumber.

“She’s beautiful,” Jim sighed.

Even Spock was awed. He stood next to Jim, clutching his helmet between his hands. His face looked greener than usual under the blueish light the Enterprise cast on them. His tongue darted out to moisten his lips- a flash of forest green against the pale of Spock’s skin.

“Let’s go,” Jim said. He ditched his helmet next to the Starok and took eagerly off into the night, unable to contain his manic grin. What a sight to behold- the Enterprise, nearly ready for the sky, and glowing with life. He felt like his life was slowly coming together, one minute at a time, as he grew closer and closer to his destiny.

He gave Spock the leg up over the fence like always and then climbed up himself, carefully watching for the guard. Since he’d crashed the Hali, it had been impossible to get the Enterprise back in the morning in time unless he was careful to spend very little time in the yard itself. The guard change hadn’t helped, either, but Jim felt that with the Starok he and Spock could sneak around for however long they wanted before they made off for home again.

They slipped around a couple of buildings and then out into the shadows, hunkering down in a ripped bulkhead to look up at the ship. Over her back they could see the sky, and there wasn’t a cloud about to ruin the sight. The light the Enterprise cast outshone the stars, slightly, so they were harder to see than usual, but Jim didn’t mind.

Spock opened up his PADD as he sat down next to Spock, and out loud he began to read the recent updates on the Enterprise. Technically speaking, they weren’t available to the public, but Kim J Tirk was an enlisted man who liked to read up on ships. If he didn’t actually exist, well, who was to know? Starfleet had better things to worry about than the nerd who kept downloading things about
the Enterprise. Jim had been certain to steer clear of her security protocols and weaponry to avoid raising a red flag, and thus far, it had been enough.

They stayed out until the sun began to rise. Jim had missed the Enterprise, and so had Spock, and even if they could no longer lie under her belly, being beside her was enough. Jim had stuffed a bag of chips into his backpack, along with two bottles of water. He and Spock snacked, watching the sun rise over the ship.

“You excited?” Jim asked.

Spock turned to him. “For what would I be excited?”

Jim smirked. “Being onboard.”

Spock looked back to the ship. “It will be quite some time before we are able to board her.”


Spock’s mouth remained impassive, but his eyes showed his smile. “Perhaps,” he allowed, as usual. “Are you?”

Jim laughed. “Oh Spock,” he said. “I’ve been dreaming about this since the day I was born.”

Breakfast was tense.

It had been tense the last couple of days. Maybe it was because Frank could read the shadows under Jim’s eyes and knew he wasn’t staying in bed at night. Maybe it was because Winona hadn’t comm’ed in a week. Maybe it was because the liquor store had stopped selling Andorian Bust™ beer, on account of the xenophobic marketing. Frank had loved that stuff.

“When are you heading to work?” Jim asked. Spock had actually gone home, that morning, but Jim was eager to go back to bed, and he didn’t like to when he knew Frank was awake and about. He knew it was stupid to fear being locked in his room, but it had happened often enough when he was in trouble for doing nothing at all, so he wondered how much it would take to happen again.

And he couldn’t escape out the window. That was another reason he was glad Spock hadn’t been inside his room- he was ashamed by the bars covering his escape, as posted there a few nights after he’d crashed the Hali the summer before. Winona had felt like she couldn’t trust Jim not to keep escaping out the window, and thus had finally caved into her own sense of protection and barred it shut.

Jim had a screwdriver and a crowbar stored in the vent beneath his desk for emergency escape, but she’d be able to tell if he took them off regularly. He’d gotten caught a couple of times, but he was rather good at sneaking down the stairs and out the back door anymore.

“I’m not going.” Frank said.

Jim looked up from his cereal. *Klingon Crunch*, the box read, but it was totally a rip-off of Lucky Charms. One Jim had willingly fallen for, as he loved the bat’leth shaped marshmallows inside.
Frank was frowning into his own cereal. Regular old cornflakes.

“Why not?” Jim asked.

“Got laid off.” Frank said. He didn’t make eye contact.

Jim deflated. “… Oh.”

“Yep.” Frank took a long swig of his orange juice. “Things haven’t been going so well, Jimmy. Yer mom’s sending back credits, of course, but it’s… it’s gonna be tight this year.” Frank’s voice conveyed that he’d never had to deal with it being ‘tight’ before. “Not sure what to do.”

“Can you get another job?”

“I can try.” Frank said. “But this town is small, kid. There aren’t many jobs open. In places like these, you have to wait for the old folks to retire, and with modern medicine that date just keeps getting pushed back further and further.”

“What about the shipyard?” Jim asked. “They’re looking for security.”

Frank raised a brow. “Are they?”

Jim nodded.

“Wouldn’t they want Starfleet personal?”

Jim shook his head. “They started out that way, but the pickings out here are slim. I bet if you applied for a day shift you’d get the job no problem.”

“Money’s probably no good,” Frank contemplated.

Jim shrugged. He wouldn’t know- he was never in it for the money.

“I’ll have to check it out.” Frank said. “Thanks, kid.”

Jim gave him a half-hearted thumbs up.

“How’d you know about the job at the shipyard, anyway?”

Jim shrugged. “I keep tabs on it.”

“Why’s that?”

“I like the Enterprise.”

Frank nodded, slowly. “Right, right. Your mom mentioned that, back a while. Said you were obsessed with the thing. Said it’s your other Spock.”

“She,” Jim corrected.

“Huh?”

“She. The Enterprise is a she.”

Frank gave a small laugh. “Guess your mom wasn’t kidding.” He said, “Why’d you always get so hung up about things you like? I’ve seen how it is with you. You get… you get near obsessed and can’t focus on anything else when you find something you like.”
“It dies off eventually,” Jim said. “Usually.”

“Yeah, sure. But can’t you enjoy things in moderation?”

Jim shrugged. “All or nothing, I guess.”

“Hm.”

It was silent, for a time.

“So what’s your current fixation? I don’t think I’ve ever actually been out to that barn, ya know, your mom says it smells like mold out there. Says your always playing in there, but you’re acting all obsessed again. What’s out there?”

“Been building a bike.”

Frank’s brows rose. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Jim said. “Named her the Starok.”

“Oh, so you finished?”

“A couple of days ago.” Jim admitted.

Frank said, “Then what have you been doing out in the barn these past few days?”

“Fine tuning.”

He nodded. “Another one of those hover bikes then, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You know… we could probably make real money if you custom built those things. They actually work, right? Like they don’t give out?”

“No. I build them better than any company would.” He frowned. “But… it’s not really something for sale. Me and Spock built her together. For us. It’s not something I’d want to do just to sell.”

Frank frowned. “Hmph.”

Jim shrugged. “Sorry.”

“We’re not that tight for money yet,” Frank sighed. “Though I’ve been thinking about selling the old-fashioned tractor out under that cover.”

“Go ahead. Mom’s been wanting to get rid of it.”

“And antiques sell for big.” Frank said.

Jim nodded. His head felt heavy.

Frank noticed. “You been sleeping well, kid?”

“I guess.” Jim shrugged. “Gets hot up in my room and I can’t open the windows.”

Frank snorted. “Save it. Win’ told me you’re a tricky bastard.”
“You can’t call me a bastard.” Jim said matter-of-factly. “That’s mean.”

“And a smart-ass, too.”

“Everyone’s gotta have a hobby.” Jim drawled.

Frank snorted. “If you ask me, you’ve got one too many.”

Jim shrugged. He’d finished with breakfast and desperately wanted to go up to his room and sleep. Frank be damned- he could lock Jim in if he wanted, Jim didn’t care. He just wanted to conk out for the next thirteen hours, if possible.

Frank stood. “I’m gonna head into the shipyard, see about that job. You comin’?”

“Nah,” Jim stood and hurried to put his dishes in the washer. “Think I’ll catch up on some research.”

“Suite yourself,” Frank said, and was out the door.

Jim waited until he heard the hover car start up before he dragged himself up to his room, where the sheets were so long over-due for use that they didn’t even smell like him anymore. He fell instantly, deeply asleep.

“Hey. Spock.”

“Yes, Jim?”

Jim put his head on Spock’s shoulder, watching his friend do math at a rapid-fire pace. Jim loved watching the numbers slide into place under the guide of Spock’s hands. “Let’s talk about feelings.”

“I have no such feelings to speak of.” Spock said.

“Liar.” Jim squinted at the next equation on Spock’s PADD. “What the hell? Is this warp theory?”

“Yes.”

“That’s so cool. Damn it, they don’t teach me anything cool like this in my school.”

“Are these the feelings you wished to speak of? Your frustration?”

Jim snorted. “Well it’s a start, isn’t it?”

“You are human. It would make sense that your education is only to human standards.”

“Every time we start talking about this kind of thing, I just want to leave to go to Vulcan with you even more.” Jim sighed. “Not like my mom would allow it. And your dad doesn’t seem so jazzed to have five and a half feet of emotional baggage staying in his home.”

Spock said, “You are not five and a half feet.”

“Close enough.”
“We will try again, this year, just as we have always have.” Spock said. “Perhaps it will be easier to persuade your mother while she is off-planet. I am not fond of trickery, but it is also wise to consider that your step-father might be a loop hole through which to gain permission.”

“Mom already told him I’d try to leave.” Jim sighed. “Not gonna work.”

“I should have considered as much. Your mother knows you well.”

“Well enough.” Jim sighed.

Spock swiped to the next problem. He lifted his finger to solve it.

“It’s sev-“

“I believe this is my work, Jim.” Spock cut him off. He quickly solved the problem himself. “It is dishonest to submit work you have completed in my stead.”

“Not like you don’t already know the answer.” Jim snickered.

Spock shut his PADD off and turned around in his desk chair. “Fine then. If you intend to pester me,” he thinned his lips together when Jim laughed, “Then I will put my work on hold to humor you. Let us talk of emotion, Jim.”

“Alright,” Jim said. “I’ll go first.”

Spock nodded.

Without so much as blinking, Jim said, “I feel trapped on earth and in my own home by my mother’s obsessive need to keep me like a possession while she battles her own inability to grow closer to another living being.”

Spock raised a brow. “That is certainly a way to begin.”

“Your turn.” Jim smirked.

“Very well.” Spock paused. “I feel at war with myself nearly constantly. My dual natures seemingly cannot exist within one person, and I feel I must chose one over the other. I am crushed by the pressure of my father’s expectation and his staunch belief that I will follow the Vulcan way. I am seemingly always at odds with my desire to follow in his footsteps, as you would say, to become a true Vulcan, while simultaneously being unable to purge myself of human emotions, as I find I do not wish to be rid of them so entirely.”

“I’m afraid no one will ever love me for who I am.”

“I am afraid to love anyone.” Spock said. “I fear that should I love another, I will be unable to express my love for fear of diverting from Surak’s teachings.”

“I’m afraid I’ll never get off of Earth. That I’ll die like this, full of longing for what I’ll never have.”

“I fear that I will fail to follow the path my heart wishes simply to follow logic.” Spock said. “I fear further that emotion will dictate my future, and that I will find myself without logic.”

“I fear being alone.”

“As do I.”
They were quiet.

“This isn’t as… therapeutic as I thought it would be.” Jim admitted.

“Indeed, talk of fear has served only to upset my appetite.” Spock said.

“I’m afraid that one day I’ll stop being kind. That I’ll just start looking out for myself, because it’s easier. That I’ll get hard, and callous, and that I’ll never be able to show how much I love things, simply because it’s hard to.”

Spock said, “I know you very well, and I assure you, Jim. It would not happen.”

“It could,” Jim whispered. “I feel like I get closer to it every day. It’s hard to be soft, and kind, Spock. I know you know that, but…” He sighed.

Spock reached out and put a hand on Jim’s shoulder. “You have never been one to take the easy way,”

Jim smiled. “Yeah. I guess not.” He looked back up to Spock. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You’ve never been one to take the paved road, either.” Jim said. “Maybe you won’t follow the Vulcan way to an exact T. Maybe it’s just not the way for you. Surak’s teachings are great, you know, they really saved Vulcan. But they’re not everything. Surak himself said that he did not know everything, and that to believe he did would be illogical. Well, it’s just as illogical to be something you’re not. You aren’t a bird, Spock, you don’t have feathers- you wouldn’t pretend to be a bird, would you?”

“I would not.” Spock said.

“So why pretend to be a full Vulcan? The best part about you is that you’re you, Spock. No one else can be. Half Human, half Vulcan- you should be able to take the things you enjoy from each part of yourself and live through them. I know that nothing is more important than logic to you, and I get it. But sometimes there’s logic in feeling. There’s logic in being yourself, Spock. Ignoring the human half of yourself… well, it’s like pretending to be a bird.”

Spock seemed to soak in Jim’s words, quietly.

“I don’t know everything either, Spock.” Jim said. “Maybe I’m talking nonsense. In the end, you can’t lean on me to make your choices, or your dad, or even Surak. You have to decide what’s right for yourself.”

“I am no wiser than anyone else,” Spock said. “How would I know what is best above them?”

“Because no one knows you like you do,” Jim said.

Spock was quiet.

“What makes you happy?” Jim asked.

Spock looked up. “Happy?”

“I like tall grass and running water.”

Spock blinked. “I am… partial to plomeek soup.”
“I like sunshine and thunder storms.”

“I enjoy my mother’s singing.” Spock said. “I enjoy playing the lute.”

“I like riding the Starok. I love feeling the wind in my hair, watching everything rush by in a blur of color… it’s like I’m flying.”

“I enjoy your presence,” Spock said. “I like to watch your dreams.”

“My dreams?”

Spock nodded. “When we sleep, you often times make physical contact with me. I catch bits and pieces of your dreams. Vulcans do not dream- as you know, meditation removes our need for such things. It is, however, pleasing to watch your own.”

Jim smiled. “Hope I don’t dream of anything embarrassing.”

“Not at all.” Spock said. “Sunshine, and stars, and running faster than is humanly possible. You are often searching for things, in the corn felid. Little golden pins and hearts. It is… delightfully nonsensical.”

Jim blushed. “Thanks.”

“The dreams you have that I enjoy most are the ones were you are the captain of the Enterprise. They are much more realistic.”

Jim said, “I’m sorry if I’ve been pushing my dreams at you.”

Spock shook his head. “It is not so. I had worried, for a time, you would feel I was spying.”

“Nah.” Jim said. “It’s just a part of who you are. Not your fault I can’t shield.”

Spock said, “Perhaps we should begin there, then.”

Jim raised a brow. “There?”

“I could teach you.” Spock explained. “To shield your mind.”

Jim beamed. “Really?”

“It would not be difficult.” Spock said.

“Well yeah then! Let’s do it!” Jim sat down on the mat at the side of Spock’s bed, folding his legs into the pose he so often woke to find Spock in. He closed his eyes, waiting. Spock didn’t move- or rather, Jim didn’t hear him move. He cracked open an eye and found Spock watching him. “What?”

“You are… a fascinating creature.”

Jim snorted out a laugh. “Yeah, you’re pretty interesting yourself. Now come one. I wanna learn some Vulcan voodoo.”

“It is not voodoo, Jim.” Spock stood and padded over to the meditation mat, sitting gracefully across from Jim. He reached his hand out, placing it on the side of Jim’s face. “I am going to attempt to read you. You can feel my presence in your mind, can you not?”

“I always can.” Jim said.
Spock nodded. “Good. Begin by thinking of pushing a wall at my presence. We will proceed from there.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon that way. Jim wouldn’t have traded it for the world.

“Hey mom.” Jim smiled wide at the PADD screen, taking in the sight of his mother. She looked a little more alive, out in space. Less tired. The bags under her eyes had receded, and her hair looked alive. “What’s up?”

“It’s been a crazy day.” Winona said. She ran a hand through her hair, shaking it loose— it was bunched up like it got when she’d had it in a bun for a while. “The engines crashed when navigation tried to push them to warp eleven outrunning a Klingon vessel yesterday, and we’ve ben busting our asses down in engineering since.”

“Oh wow.” Jim marveled. “Did you get it fixed?”

“For the most part,” Winona said. “Enough to limp back to a starbase to get everything fully repaired.”

“Cool.”

“Anyway, figured I’d call in and see how things are going. Frank feeding you?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s he been doing?”

Jim raised a brow. “Didn’t you just get off with him?”

“I meant with you.”

“Oh. Uh, fine, I guess.” Jim shrugged, awkwardly. He and Frank still pretty much avoided each other. “He sold the tractor the other day.”

“He did?”

“I thought he told you.”

“No.” She frowned. “Been meaning to get rid of that for a while anyway, I guess.”

“That’s what I told him.” Jim said. “Guess he wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Not really all that fond of surprises, but whatever.” She shrugged. “How about you? What have you been up to?”

“Made some changes to the barn,” he started.

“Oh yeah? That’s fun.”

“Yeah. Built another bike.”
She gave him a shrewd look.

“Safer than last time.” Jim promised. “She’s built like a tank.”

“Huh. Alright. Just be careful, okay?”

“We have been. We don’t even go up the driveway without helmets.” He said, “Spock and I haven’t even been allowed to have sleep overs, because of Frank.”

“Hm.”

He took her noncommittal noise to mean she’d been in on it. “But it’s been great to have him back. We go out to see the Enterprise whenever we can since she’ll be heading out in a couple of days.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard about that! Sad to see her go?”

“Miserable.” He said. “Who else am I going to hang out with?”

She snorted. “Maybe a living, breathing person?”

“Ew, what the hell? No way.”

Winona laughed. “I feel you kid. I prefer machines to people any day.”

Jim shifted where he was sitting on the couch, leaning over the edge to get comfortable. “How have you been?” He asked. “Do anything cool, other than saving their butts after the Klingon attack?”

“Not really. Routine maintenance. A patch-up here and there. Nothing too exciting.”

“Liar. You look like your having the time of your life.”

“I didn’t say I don’t enjoy the mundane,” she laughed. “Out here, even that’s enough.”

Jim laughed. “That sounds about right.”

“…” Winona’s smile slipped a little. “Yeah. You ready for school?”

“I’ve got a couple weeks. No rush to get ready.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“I’m too busy to worry about that right now.”

“With what?”

“Stuff.”

“Spock?”

“Spock,” he agreed. “I missed him like crazy.”

“Hm.”

“What’s that noise about?”

She shrugged.
He knew. “Speaking of Spock…”

She groaned. “Not this again, Jim.”

“I haven’t even asked yet!”

“You don’t have to. Jim, I thought we were past this.”

Jim sighed. “Well, I guess not. Mom, I’m dying to get out of here. You’re never around, and when you come back you’ll have Frank. Just one year, mom! It’s Vulcan. How much trouble can I get to on Vul\n\n\n“T’ve said it before and I’ll say it again- James T. Kirk, you’re not going to Vulcan.”

“One year!” He said. “Do you know how much I could learn in one year?”

“If you tried, you could do the same on Earth-“

“Oh bull. We don’t have that kind of money. Mom, I could get the best schooling in the universe for free. If I’m staying with Amanda and Sarek-“

“I said no.”

“Would you please just listen to me?”

“It would be a waste of both our time, because the answer will be no, Jim!”

Jim sat up, pitching the PADD to the other end of the couch.

“Jim, pick the PADD up right now.” His mom growled.

“Veruul,” he muttered.

“Did you just curse at me in Romulan?! ” She screeched. “Since when do you know Romulan? James- Jim. Pick the Padd up NOW.”

He did. “What?!”

“You know Romulan.”

“I know a lot!” He said. “And if I was able to go to Vul\n\n\n“He scowled.

“What? What is it this time? Are you seriously angry that I know another language?”

“I’m angry that you keep everything a secret from me.” She said.

“If you actually talked to me-“

“You don’t try to talk to me!” She said. “This is a two-way street, Jim.”

“You’re my mom- I shouldn’t have to reach out to you!” Jim snapped. “You should ask about me, ask how my day went, ask what I’ve been up to. You should want to know.”

“James T, I swear to God-“
“I’m done.” Jim said.

“Done?”

“Done. With this.” He waved at the PADD. “You’re not even here and you’re still trying to control every little thing I do. I’m done with it.”

“I’m your mother.” She hissed. “You’re not done with anything.”

“Yes I am.”

It was silent for a second.

“I’m coming home.” Winona said.

“What do you mean you’re coming home?” Jim scoffed. “You’re in space!”

“We’re docking at the station tonight. I’ll be on the first transport back to Earth.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re coming back to Earth to ground me? Are you kidding me?”

She scowled. “If I could trust you-“ Jim snorted. “-then I wouldn’t have to.”

“Good luck finding me when you get back,” he said.

Her eyes went wide. “Don’t you dare-“

But he did dare. Jim hung up, tossing the PADD away from him. It immediately began to buzz and ring again, but he threw a pillow over it and stood. He ditched his comm on the couch, too, and then ran up to his room. Frank wouldn’t be home for another hour, but he was fast anyway.

He packed a bunch of clothes, some books, the Enterprise, and his survival backpack. He’d never really planned to run away, but he’d always been cautious and suspicious- especially of his mother. He had a PADD he’d hacked to the ninth circle of hell, which he knew couldn’t be traced by anyone or anything short of divine intervention. He’d also saved a bunch of credits, human, standard, and a few other choice cultures- just in case. None of them electronic, so that they couldn’t be traced back to anyone or anything. He also had a fake I.D. or five, those, though, he’d mostly created just to see if he could. Well, he had, and now he was going to use them.

He had his things packed up and thrown in the back of the Chevy in a quick fifteen minutes. With that finished, he took off down the road, body jolting with each washboard the tires hit.

He went straight to Spock’s house. He knew his mom would call there as soon as she’d gotten ahold of Frank, but she had no way to know he’d left. She probably thought he was only ignoring her, and so it wouldn’t be until Frank found him missing that she’d call Amanda.

He pulled up to the house and jumped out, running around the side and to Spock’s window. “Spock!” He bent down to pick up a rock, but he didn't need it- the window came open.

Spock looked down at him, curious. “Jim.”

“Is your mom home?”

“Negative.”

“I’m coming in.”
Jim ran around the side of the house and to the front, punching in his code before racing up the stairs. Spock met him half way, brows drawn together in concern.

“Run away with me.” Jim said.

Spock’s brows raised.

“Please.”

“Where would we go?” Spock asked. “What is it we are running from?”

“I don’t know.” Jim said. “Anywhere.”

Spock said, “When would we return?”

Jim shrugged.

“Jim, this does not sound like a plan you have thought out.” Spock said. “Perhaps you would consider sitting and telling me what has happened to agitate you so.”

“I’m going to go insane.” Jim said. “Spock. Spock, I’m-“ and to his horror, he found his eyes welling up with tears. He looked up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly, but to no avail. They began to fall, hot and heavy, and Jim knew there was nothing he could do to hide them from Spock. “Fuck.” He scrubbed at his face with the back of his hand.

“Jim?” Spock reached out and touched his shoulder.

“I’m never getting out of here,” Jim choked. “Spock, if I- if I have to spend another year on Earth. I can’t. I can’t be alone again. Not like that. I can’t be alone for another year or I’ll lose my mind.” He started to cry in earnest, crumbling into a ball at the top of the stairs. Spock crouched next to him, rubbing circles on his back.

“Jim, has something happened?”

“I can’t leave.” Jim said. “Mom will never let me go.”

“You do not know that with certainty.”

“I do, though.” Jim said. “And you know it to. But it doesn’t matter, because if I’m stuck here for another school year. If I have to sit in a damn classroom every day listening to them tell me things I already know, while they treat me like I don’t know shit, like I’m not worth anything- I can’t. Spock, I can’t. The Enterprise won’t be around this time, I’ll be truly, honestly alone, with no one and nothing and I’ll lose it. I can’t do it.”

Spock stood.

Jim sniffed, looking up at him. “Spock?”

“Where will we go?” Spock asked.

“Away,” Jim whispered.

He nodded. “Remain here for me.” Spock said. “I will return shortly.”

Jim nodded. He knew Spock was probably only going to get his PADD, to call his mother and ask her to pull some strings, but even that was better than nothing. If anyone could change his mom’s
mind, it would be Amanda. Jim continued to quietly cry, stewing in his misery.

Spock reemerged from his room once Jim had managed to stop crying. He had his bags. “I am ready to depart,” he said.

“Wh- what?” Jim stood, shakily.

“You asked me to run away with you.” Spock said. “I am ready.”

“But… you. Really?”

He nodded.

Jim swallowed against the lump in his throat. “Okay.” He whispered. He turned for the door, feet hurried. “Yeah. Come on, let’s go.”

They threw Spock’s stuff in the back and then started onto the road, Jim in the passenger side while Spock drove. Spock never broke the speed limit, but they were going fast enough. They had all they needed and Jim was certain they wouldn’t have to stop until the car ran out of gas, and that was far off in the future. He and Spock could take turns driving, until they were gone, ghosts, so far away that no one could find them and chain them to the ground again.

It was silent.

Hours flew by. Jim and Spock took turns switching from the passenger seat to the driver’s seat. They made it to Nebraska as dusk was beginning to fall. A couple hours later, when it was truly dark out, the pre-installed navigation on the car lit up with an old-Earth telephone icon.

They stared at it it.

The speakers blared a jingle, startling them both yet again, as the image of the telephone shook. The screen displayed a name- Ambassador Sarek. They stared at it until it went away.

“What the-“

It started to ring again.

Impulsively, Jim reached out, touching the image of the phone.

“Hello?” The voice was instantly recognizable as Amanda’s. “Spock? James?”

“Mother?”

“Oh thank heavens. Spock, baby, where are you? Where’s James?”

“Jim and I are safe, mother.” Spock said. “How is it that you managed to contact us?”

“Your father,” Amanda explained.

Jim felt guilty immediately. Not only did Amanda sound scared out of her mind, but she’d gotten Sarek. They’d had to track down their missing son without any explanation, perhaps except that Jim was missing as well.

“What’s going on?” Amanda demanded. “What happened? Winona called us in a panic about Jim, saying he wasn’t at home and she was scared for the worst, and then when I got back and found you missing too…”
“It’s not his fault.” Jim said. “It’s mine.”

“James? Honey, is that you?”

“It’s me.” Jim grumbled.

“Are you hurt?” She asked immediately. “Did something happen?”

“I’m okay.” Jim said. “We both are.”

“Where are you?”

Jim looked to Spock. Spock looked out at the road and then down at his lap- he was in the passenger seat. Jim left it up to Spock.

“We cannot tell you.” Spock said, finally.

“They’ll track the car anyway.” Jim realized, groaning. “Shoulda thought to check it out, damn it. I’m an idiot.”

“We are in Nebraska.” Spock said.

“Nebraska? What- why? What are you doing all the way out there?”

“Getting the hell out of Riverside.” Jim said. “For good.”

Amanda’s breath hitched. “You don’t mean-”

“We’re running away.” Jim said.

Amanda started crying immediately.

“Mother,” Spock winced.

“Shit.” Jim cursed. He pulled over to the side of the road and put the car into park, leaning his forehead against the steering wheel. “Amanda-“

“What happened?” She sniffed. “James, honey, did Frank do something?”

“No.” Jim muttered. “They. I’m not allowed to go to Vulcan. I…” he sighed. “I over reacted.” He thudded his head against the steering wheel again, and again. Spock reached out and touched his shoulder, so Jim stopped. “I roped Spock into this, Amanda. I’m sorry. I just…”

“To be trapped alone is a terrible thing,” Spock said.

Amanda said, “Oh, James, honey, I’m so sorry… But please, you have to come back. Anything could happen to you two out there! How- where did you even get the car?”

“How did Sarek even track it down?” Jim muttered.

“It belonged to Jim’s father, George Kirk.” Spock responded.

“We fixed it up a couple of summers ago,” Jim added.

“Neither of you are old enough to drive.” Amanda reasoned. “Stay where you are- Sarek and I will come get you.”
Jim thunked his head against the steering wheel once more. He looked over to Spock, saying, “You might as well stay here. I’ll-”

“Don’t you even think about going anywhere,” Amanda said. “I’m not resting until I have both of you boys back at home and in bed where you belong.”

Jim’s heart fell. “You’re going to leave Earth soon anyway.” He said. “What’s the point?”

“The point?” Amanda repeated. “James. I would never be able to live with myself if something bad happened to you. I don’t care if I’m lightyears away- if. If you ran off and got into a wreck, or got kidnapped, or- or anything I just. My heart would break.”

Jim swallowed hard.

“We’ll be there soon.” Amanda said.

“Which means I’ll be locked in my room soon.” Jim moaned.

“I think not.” Amanda huffed. “I don’t care if that Frank fellow is your step-father or your real father or, or anything along those lines. We’ve known you far longer, and we’re your family. You’re coming back to the summer home with us, and until Winona gets back there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

“Unless they want to get the law involved.” Jim laughed a little. He felt like he was stuck between crying from misery and joy both at once. Amanda, perfect, wonderful Amanda- she really did love him, didn’t she? But what happened when she left? “Well, knowing Frank, I guess that won’t be a problem either. He doesn’t like to make a big deal out of anything.”

“Then it’s settled.” Amanda said. “You’re coming home with us.”

Jim sniffed. “Thanks, M- Amanda.”

“You two sit tight.” She said. “We’ll be along shortly.”

“Understood, mother.” Spock said. He reached out and terminated the transmission.

Then they were alone, in the dark, in the middle of nowhere.

Jim leaned back in his seat and let out a sad sigh. “I’m an idiot.”

“Incorrect,” Spock said. “You are a certified genius, as you often remind me.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “But I’m still an idiot.”

Silence.

“Why did I ever think this would work?”

“Desperation causes-“

“Desperation.” Jim snorted. “I’m so stupid. Getting all crazy about being lonely. I’ve been lonely my whole life. What does it matter, anyway?” He slumped down in the seat, wrapping his arms around himself. “Lot’s of people are lonely. And they don’t kidnap their best friends to run off into the night without any sort of plan. What the hell is wrong with me?”

Spock reached out and lightly touched his wrist. Calm flooded Jim’s mind.
“There is nothing wrong with you.” Spock said. “You are a human being.”

Jim slumped even further down. He threw his free arm over his eyes, swallowing back tears. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so low, and out in the middle of a back-road that went on without end for miles, all he had to show for it was the sound of the cricket’s chirping and the whoosh of the wind against the sides of the car.

“Jim,” Spock said.

Jim turned to him. Spock was lightly illuminated by the moonlight streaming in through the windows. In the darkness, his eyes were huge and black and beautiful. Jim wanted to press his face into Spock’s neck and hold on as tightly as he could to the Vulcan’s body, to never let go.

“Kaiidth.” Spock whispered. He curled his hand around Jim’s wrist, so that he wouldn’t slip away. “You are not stupid. You are not an idiot. You are not a failure.”

“I didn’t even say that one out-loud.”

“You were thinking it.”

Jim fell silent.

“You are none of these things.” Spock promised him. “You are… very dear to myself and my family. You are brilliant, and you matter very much to the universe. Your future is bright, and wonderful, and you will not always feel as you do now. What is, is, and what has happened cannot be changed, but you must look forward to what will be.”

Jim shifted over from his side of the car and pressed into Spock’s side. Spock put his arm around Jim, leaning their heads together. Jim felt less like a loose cannon with his forehead pressed into Spock’s temple. He tried to breath.

“I don’t want to be left alone again.” He whispered.

“Nor do I,” Spock said. “But this is the way it must be.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” Jim said. “If she would just listen.”

“There will come a time when your mother will have no say in your decisions.”

“By then it will be too late.” Jim muttered.

“You do not know this.” Spock said. “I believe in you, Jim.”

“… Thanks, Spock.”

He must have drifted asleep, because when he next opened his eyes, Amanda was hugging his head to her shoulder, quietly crying. “Oh, James,” she kissed his forehead. “Are you alright, honey?”

Jim blinked away, sitting up. “Where’s Spock?”

He needn’t have asked. The door behind him opened and Spock reached in to grab the last of their things. Out in the road was a small shuttle, and Sarek was waiting outside of it. He nodded at Jim when they met eyes.

Amanda smoothed back his hair. “It’s late,” she said. “You can sleep on the shuttle ride home.”
“Kay.” He stood sloppily, steadied by Amanda’s hand on his shoulder. He leaned into her as she put her arm around him, and let her guide him to the shuttle. He climbed up inside, past Sarek, and over to where Spock was waiting. He fell into the seat, leaning into Spock. Amanda slipped up front and then Sarek came after her. He reached out with two fingers and kissed Amanda in the Vulcan way.

“I am using a tractor beam to bring the car along with us.” Sarek informed them.

“Okay.” Jim said. His voice was small.

“What you both did was very ill-”

“Husband,” Amanda said, quietly. “They have been through enough. Save the lecture for later, please?”

He nodded. “If this is your wish, Wife.”

“It is.” She turned around in her seat. “You can go back to sleep, Jim. It’ll be a while before we’re home- I’ll wake you both when we get there.” She smiled at Spock, who was starting to look tired as well. “Thank you for letting us find you.”

“Yeah.” Jim smiled, tiredly. “Thanks for coming to get us.”

He fell back asleep before they got home, resting his head against Spock’s shoulder. When he woke up again they were landing. He shook Spock’s shoulder gently until the Vulcan woke up, and then together, they marched up to Spock’s room, Amanda and Sarek at their heels with all the luggage in tow.

Jim crawled into bed first, Spock right after him. Sarek set the bags he had down and then stood awkwardly in the doorway, clearly unsure as to how he was supposed to proceed. Amanda set a bag down and then came over to the bed, sitting on the side. She leaned over them, kissing them both on the head, one at a time.

“Don’t scare me like that.” She said.

“I apologize for my impulsive behavior.” Spock said.

“It was my fault,” Jim argued weakly.

Spock shook his head. “I was fully capable of making my own decision.”

Amanda let out a fond sigh. “It doesn’t matter how or why it happened. What matters it that you’re safe now, and that you’re home.” She stood, making her way over to Sarek. “Get some sleep, boys. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Okay.”

“Yes, mother.”

She smiled softly. “Goodnight,” she said. “I love you both dearly.”

“Goodnight, mother.”

“Goodnight, Amanda.”

She closed the door softly behind her.
Jim was out like a light, after that, and Spock wasn’t far behind.

Winona didn’t come back to Earth- Jim and Frank mutually decided to play down what had happened into an old case of “Oh yeah, Jimmy was just out in the barn sulking.”

It helped that Jim agreed to whip up a code close to Frank’s old favorite beer for the replicator. It didn’t take much work, since he and Spock had devised a computer program that could code formulas of synthesized taste.

The last fleeting days of summer he felt like he’d once again dissolved into Spock’s family. They all ate together, cooked together, talked together. Jim couldn’t manage to feel like he had last time they’d all been together- he knew that the sense of family he felt was an illusion that would break the moment they left the planet, leaving him alone again. Even though at times, he felt like they’d never leave, and he’d be happy forever.

The thing was, they did eventually have to go.

Winona wouldn’t let Jim leave with them to Vulcan, siting Jim’s rebellion and the lack of human resources on the planet as her main staples for refusal. There were plenty of reasons not to let him go, she said, but she struggled to put them into words.

Jim watched the shuttle leaving the station with a sense of foreboding in his gut. The year before, he’d promised himself he’d be off of Earth. Well, the time had come and passed, and he was stuck in the Iowa dust with nothing.

He was trapped on Earth. There was no way out- he was going to get older and older and stay stuck in the same place, dying for something new, something good, something more. Even just a higher-level school could have made it better, or a single friend, or some connection to a future in space. The only thing close was the shipyard, and the Enterprise would be shipping out herself in a couple days.

He wasn’t sure if he could watch her leave. It wasn’t like with Spock- once the ship was gone, she’d never be coming back.

And how long could he even count on Spock coming back, anyway? Spock was sixteen. Soon enough, he’d be off to do things on his own, living a full life, going on to get a higher education. God, he was years ahead of Jim.

What happened when Spock moved on and forgot about Jim? How was he supposed to live, then? Alone all year, every year, with no summer secrets to keep hidden in the corner of his smiles? What then?

“I’m not gonna make it,” he choked. He stared at the empty station for what felt like eons, pressing his legs back into the Starok to keep himself grounded.

He had to figure something out. Some thing to drive him. Passion or some sense of duty or rage. Something.

*The Enterprise.* He’d hold onto the hope that eventually, he’d be abroad her bridge.
The night before school started, Jim sat in the Chevy, just beyond the gate of the shipyard. All around the Enterprise were shuttles and air craft, leaching onto her body like remoras on her shark-gray body.

There wasn’t really a lot of press around the launch- she wasn’t even fully built yet, and it wasn’t like Starfleet would be putting a crew on her decks any time soon. It was simply that she was turning from a caterpillar to a cocoon. No one cared about that- they only wanted to the see the butterfly stage.

Well, almost everyone. Jim sat in his corvette feeling sick to his stomach, watching all the ships around the Enterprise light up as they went through their pre-flight checks. He’d wired himself into their network through the console in the car.

“This is seven-three-blue. Prepared for launch.”

“Copy seven-three-blue. Alpha-nine-red, signal?”

“This is alpha-red-nine. Prepared for launch.”

Jim let a shuddering sigh out through his open lips. He wrapped his arms a little tighter around himself, hitching his knees up against the bottom of the steering wheel. His eyes glimmered with unshed tears, but he was determined not to cry.

She had to leave. It was her nature- she couldn’t be finished in atmosphere. He understood that, and he loved her enough to know she had to go where he couldn’t so that she could be raised from her artificial slumber and turned to warp.

He knew. It was just… hard.

His toy Enterprise sat proudly on the dashboard of the corvette, a tiny mirror image of the big version’s future. He smiled sadly at the toy and looked back out towards the real thing as the earth began to shake.

She was leaving.

The ships all pulsed in unison, raising the Enterprise from her frame slowly. The metal creaked loudly in protest, and then cried as the Enterprise was pulled free.

Don’t go, Jim wanted to say, She’s crying for me. She knows I’m supposed to be with her.

But it was only the metal cradle being relieved of her weight, and Jim could only sit and watch as slowly, she rose up above the shipyard and into the clouds of the night, shimmering like a super nova above him.

He watched her rise up until all he could see was the faint blue glow of the engines on the ships raising her, and watched on until even those lights winked out.

“Ground control, this is leader one-one-seven. Requesting permission to switch to aerial base.”
“Permission granted leader one-one-seven. Ground control out.”

Jim curled in on himself.

She was gone.

Slowly, the lights in the shipyard went out one by one. Hovers flew past as the staff of the yard left for the night, signaling the true end of the launch. Jim stayed in the car until he felt himself slipping into sleep.

He sighed and sat up, turning the key over to ignite the engine. Slowly, he drove home, scrubbing at his eyes the entire way there.

Frank didn’t know he was out, of course. He’d be pissed when he found out the next morning—rather, in an hour, Jim noticed. The sun would rise soon, and there was no way in hell Jim was going to school after the night he’d had.

He parked the car in the garage and then crept up into bed, feeling more alone than ever.

“You can’t keep skipping school.”

Jim groaned and rolled over on the couch, looking up at Frank. “Why not?”

“Wh- why not?” Frank spluttered.

“I already know all the material.” Jim said. “Why should I go?”

Frank rolled his eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Jim turned his eyes back to the holo projector. “Mom won’t be mad at you for failing to make me go. She knows that it takes, I quote, ‘an act of god’ to move me.”

“Feeling a little self-righteous today, are we Jim?”

Jim shrugged. “I’m a moody teen. It happens.”

Frank snorted. “Whatever. Get up and put your shoes on, I need your help.”

Jim looked up. “What? I thought the guy that was gonna buy the wagon came by yesterday.”

“He did.” Frank leaned against the staircase railing. “This is another guy.”

“What’s he coming for?” Jim asked. “You know mom’s gonna be pissed when she finds you’re selling all this crap.”

“What else am I supposed to do? Shipyard don’t need me now that the ship’s gone. How else we gonna make ends meet?” He pulled his comm out from his pocket to fiddle with it. “Don’t worry, this is the last thing. We’ll be sitting pretty after this last offer.”

Jim felt his stomach twist with nervousness. He sat up. “Why? What’re you selling?”
“Huh? Oh, the String Ray or whatever. Thing’s an antique- worth a fortune.”

Jim’s eyes went wide.

“What?” Frank sighed. “I know you spent all that time getting it all fixed up, Jimmy, but that’s what makes it so valuable. I’ll get you some parts to make somethign else cool. This thing is worth-“

“You can’t sell the car!”

Frank’s brow furrowed. “Why the hell not? You can’t really do anything with it. It takes hours just to go a state over- what the hell are you gonna do with it?”

“It’s not yours!”

“Well, it ain’t yours, either.” Frank snorted. “I turned a blind eye when you started driving it illegally, but when it comes down to it, it’s still your moms, and what’s hers is mine.” He held up his hand, flashing his wedding band. “Legally.”

“That car belonged to my dad.” Jim snapped.

Frank’s brows raised. “Well… belonged is the key word here, Jim.” He went on, saying, “Listen, I know it’s sad. That’s how it is. But that car is worth so much money, Jim, and just keeping it in the barn is a damn shame.”

“It’s mine,” Jim snarled. He stood, backing towards the kitchen. “You can’t have it.”

“Jim, don’t be a brat. It’s an antique car! What are you gonna do with it?”

“Keep it.” Jim muttered. He kept backing up.

Frank’s eyes narrowed as he realized what Jim was intending to do. “Jim, think real hard about what you’re about to do. You’re gonna find yourself in a world of hurt if you don’t stop to think a second.”

“About what? Letting you sell off all that’s left of my dad?”

“It’s a car! Not your mom’s fucking photo album.”

“You didn’t even ask mom! She’d never let you sell it.”

“Well by the time she finds out, it’s gonna be too late. And besides, she’ll be happy when she sees how much we’re gonna make. Now- Jimmy. Don’t you dare take another step towards that door.”

“It’s not your car to sell!”

“Do you know who fucking pays for this house?!” Frank exploded. “Me! I do! While your mom’s out there galavanting about on a ship, I’m the one here with all this shit. I’m paying for this house. This is my house. That’s my barn, and everything in it is my shit, you got it, Jim? That’s my car!”

Jim put his hand on the screen, pushing.

“Don’t you dare.”

He ran.

"Jim!"
Like hell he was going to let Frank sell the car. His dad had loved those cars. He’d- damn it, he’d rather they’d been sucked into oblivion right alongside the Kelvin than be sold off to some asshole who liked to show them off. That wasn’t how things like that worked. Dad had treasured the cars, had collected them, loved them. The cars where his dad’s Enterprise- Jim couldn’t let them just go.

This guy would put them up on some shelf for other people to look at and touch. He’d wash off the home-town dust and the loving memory of George’s fingerprints. Like hell!

Jim got in it and drove.

He didn’t know why, or where. It wasn’t like last time, and he wasn’t running away. He just had to take the car away, put it somewhere they’d never find it. The other cars were still in danger, sure, but they didn’t run, and Frank wasn’t looking to sell them just then. And the corvette felt special. Jim knew it had likely been the crown jewel of his dad’s collection.

As he drove, he was filled with elation. Fuck it! Fuck Frank. Fuck Iowa, and school, and Earth. He was James Tiberius Kirk, born in the stars, genius madman, and he wasn’t going to let them do one damn thing.

He roared down the dirt road. He went the only direction he knew- towards the shipyard. It was bound to be empty between projects, but he’d find some place to stick the car until he came up with a better plan.

The consul began to ring. He reached over and answered it.

“Are you out of your mind?” Came Frank’s voice.

Maybe.

“That car’s an antique. You think you can get away with this just because your mother’s off planet? You get your ass back home now. You live in my house, and that’s my car. You get one scratch on that car, and I’m gonna whoop your ass-“

Jim shut him off. The car still had some of his dad’s old tunes on it; classical music he’d listened to in the quiet of the barn when the silence grew to much. He turned it on without much thought to it and then turned the music up as loud as he could stand it.

Not a scratch, huh? Oh I’ll show you something.

He reached up, jaw set in determination, and unclipped one side of the convertible roof. He leaned over and unlatched the other. Two plus two equaled four, and wind resistance…

The roof ripped straight off the car, spinning away into the distance with a displeased screech in the wind. Jim watched it land in the dirt and grinned.

How much is this thing worth now, huh, Frank?

He couldn’t help it. Out loud he started to scream along with the music, fire engulfing him whole. “YEAH!”

He was going so fast that the washboards didn’t even seem to touch the tires. Dirt plumed behind him in a huge cloud, billowing over the sides of the car and into the seats, coating his face. He laughed, wiping his eyes free of the dust, and pushed the petal down harder.

He felt like he was flying.
Up ahead he could see someone walking and instantly his grin stretched wider. Johny was walking back home from school, hitch-hiking like always, hoping to save himself the last couple miles of the walk. Jim leaned into the horn.

“Hey Johnny!” He waved, laughing to himself when he caught a flash of the boy’s baffled expression.

He’d never felt so free in his life.

And then he caught sight of the police in his rear-view mirror.

*Shit.*

“Citizen.” The officer pulled up next to the car, hover bike easily matching the retro car’s speed. Damn it, Jim had known there’d been more patrols in the area as of late- “Pull over.”

Fuck that.

Jim yanked hard on the wheel, nearly missing the turn-off into the second section of the ship yard. He hadn’t planned on going to the launch site, where they released smaller, atmosphere-ready craft, but it would do. He watched the cop disappear momentarily form his rear-view mirror.

The gates to the yard were coming up fast. He didn’t have time. He smashed through them, ducking behind the wheel in case shards of metal broke off, but he passed through safely. The cop was right on his tail.

And up ahead, yawning like a gaping mouth, was the canyon. It was how they tested the ships without putting them in atmosphere, so that if there was a problem, they could return to port.

*So let's give this one a test,* Jim thought. He put the car into a higher gear, slamming down the gas petal.

He was panicked. He hadn’t thought any of it through- he’d thought somehow it would just all work out. Once the police caught him, though, the car would go back to Frank, and Jim would be in too deep to do anything about it.

Unless the car didn’t go back.

Unless *he* didn’t go back.

The canyon grew deeper and longer before him, closer and closer. He wasn’t going to make it, he realized. There was no way they could clear the divide- he’d known it from the moment he’d seen the canyon, of course, but some childish hope had remained…

And what did it matter, if he fell? No car for Frank to sell, no Jim for Winona to deal with. He was trapped anyway, right? And this way he’d get his wish- he’d get to fly, just the one time.

But the Enterprise was waiting for him out there in the sky.

And oh, God, if he died. Winona would tell Spock and Amanda.

No.

He threw the car into park, knowing it wouldn’t be enough, and slammed down on the breaks. He smelled the rubber burning and let out a battle cry, as though he could keep the car from falling with pure will and rage alone. He couldn’t fucking die- he had shit to do! He had things to see and taste
and try and he had to fly above the clouds, not under them. What had he been thinking?

He wasn’t going to make it, he realized.

He jerked the wheel hard and jumped.

Time stretched on endlessly as he watched the ground disappear out from under his legs. The car went careening off the face of the cliff, below his feet, and his body tried to follow. No!

He dug his fingers into the dirt, pulling, yanking, and screamed, tugging with his whole body. He was sliding dangerously fast and the fall would kill him. He kicked and struggled and his fingers caught rock beneath the dirt. He hauled himself up in panic, scrambling away on all fours away from the ridge, barely able to catch his breath.

He looked up in time to see the police officer who’d been following him dismount.

Shit.

He stood hastily, fingers numb and bleeding. He looked over the cliff to see the car, but it was gone-the bottom of the ravine was so far down he couldn’t even see where it had landed. He looked back up to the cop.

Well, if he didn’t even have the car anyway…

“Is there a problem, officer?”

The man seemed baffled, even with his face completely covered, and it took him a moment to speak. His voice came out smooth and emotionless as it passed through the verbal modulizer, but Jim knew better.

“Citizen,” he said. “What is your name?”

This aughta’ make mom happy.

He grinned. “My name is James Tiberius Kirk.”
Part Two- Chapter Five

“So there’s a couple of options.”

Jim groaned and rolled over in bed, pressing his face into the pillow. “Can’t you just shoot me and get it over with?”

“I did not spend my time raising you for the last thirteen years just to shoot you.” Winona said. “Now. We’ve got some choices from the judge.” She looked down to her PADD. “Boot camp.”

“You and I both know I’ll be running the place in a week.”

She nodded. “Okay. School for troubled geniuses in Missouri.”


“Yeah that’s kinda what I said.” She frowned down at her list. “And it’s a little…”

“Stuffy?”

“That’s one way of putting it.” She muttered. “It’s a boarding school and-“

“Pass.”

“There’s this off-planet program-“

Jim sat up. “Off planet?”

She nodded, hesitantly. “Yeah. There’s this colony establishment. They’re taking a bunch of other smart-trouble-kids from Earth. You’ll be doing a lot of school work and physical labor. Farming, you know, building things for-“


“Yeah. Mostly humans.” She squinted. “It’s one of the Tarsus installments.”

“Five?”

“Four.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I haven’t heard about that one.”

“You wouldn’t have,” she said. “It’s five lightyears from any of the others, and they were hesitant to start a colony there because of the ion cloud cutting off communication from the surface. A bunch of old-fashioned folks loved that, though- the isolation. It’s going to be pretty low-tech, and kind of off the radar. A lot of people want that, I guess.”

“So they’re sending us bad kids there because it’ll be hard for us to get in trouble, too.” Jim guessed. “Less tech to mess with.”

“Exactly.”

“It’ll be the pioneer out there.” Jim smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, why not?”

She nodded. “It’s a three-year stint…”
He turned to her, frowning. “Three years?”

“Yeah. They don’t want too many incoming or outgoing ships. When the going gets a little tough on
the colony planets people remember how easy living on earth was and abandon the places they’re
supposed to be creating. It’s easier if they’re just kind of left alone.”

“Still, though. Three years?”

She shrugged. “If it’s awful, you can be out in a year.”

Jim narrowed his eyes. “Why aren’t you losing it about the time? You freaked out about three
months with Spock and Amanda…” At her cowed look her furrowed his brows. “You’re going back
out into space, aren’t you?”

She winced. “Jim-“

“How long? A year?” She didn’t move. “Two?”

“It’s not like I’m just dumping you off-“

“More than two?” He saw into her expression and said, “Oh my god, you signed on for a three year
exploratory, didn’t you?”

She was silent.

“Frank is going to flip the hell out.”

“Frank doesn’t know.” She said. “And he’s not going to find out from you.”

Jim raised his hands, as if to show his innocence. “Hey, that’s your bridge to burn, not mine.”

“It’s not like that,” she started.

“I don’t care about Frank.” Jim said. “Let’s focus on getting me out of your life, shall we?”

She scowled. “Jim.”

“I’m joking,” he said, but he wasn’t. “Why can’t you just send me to Vulcan? I bet if we made an
appeal the judge would bite.”

“Ugh, this again.” She rolled her eyes. “Amanda isn’t your mother.”

“Yeah, well, neither is Tarsus IV.”

“I swear, Jim.” She held her finger out, threateningly, but then deflated. “Vulcan isn’t on the list, and
Vulcan isn’t going to fix your attitude. It’s not going to teach you anything.”

“Well, I mean, with their schools, it would probably teach me a damn lot, but, you know.” He
shrunk under her gaze. “Tarsus is fine, too,” he said. Anything to get off this damn planet.

“Hmph.” She turned back to the PADD. “Last shuttle leaves in a month. That’s pretty fast.”

I can’t get out of here fast enough. “Let the personality correction commence immediately,” Jim
droned.

“Oh shut up.” She snorted. “You’re going there to learn how to take things seriously and respect
authority. They’re not giving you a brain transplant. Although…” She eyed him, grinning.

“Har-har-har.”

She laughed. “I’m messing with you,” she reached out and messed up his hair.

“You gonna miss me?” He reached up to flatten his hair back out. “Crazy old lady?”

“Old? You watch it.” She grinned and fake-punched his shoulder.

He laughed.

Sobering, she said, “I’ll miss you more than anything, Jim.” She reached out and carded a hand through his wild bangs, trying to wrestle them into submission. “By the time three years is up on Tarsus you’ll be sixteen. I was thinking that I could petition to bring you aboard for the junior engineering program.”

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

She nodded. “If you behave on Tarsus, I don’t see why not.”

“Mom! That is so cool!” He grinned, wide. “You mean, like, I’d actually be able to work on the ship?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she laughed. “You’d have a lot to learn before then.”

“But still! That would be so awesome.” He frowned, then. “What about Frank?”

She frowned, too. “What about him?”

“What’s he gonna do?”

“Frank’s my husband.” She said. “Not yours.”

He stuck his tongue out. “Ew, mom. What the hell?”

She just smirked at him. “Yeah, that’s what you get when you go poking in everyone’s business.” When he didn’t reply, Winona’s smirk slowly fell, until she was frowning again. “I don’t know, Jim. I just… I don’t know about any of this. I don’t want to send you away.”

“Better some other planet than here.”

“I want to take you with me, but…”

“I know.” Jim smiled, rueful. “What kind of trouble would I get into on a starship?”

“It’d be a reward for driving that car off a cliff.” She said. “You’ve gotta learn, son.”

“Learn what?” He snorted. “Not to drive things off cliffs? Regenerating my fingers from the bone up was a lesson on that, I can tell you that much.”

“Uh-huh.” She sighed. “Tarsus. That should be a good lesson for you.”

“Out in the fields, sewing seeds and living under some weird guy’s control.” Jim took the PADD from his mother and clicked into the Tarsus information. “What kind of guy volunteers to take a group of genius trouble makers?”
“A reformed genius trouble maker.” She said. “And Dan is a woman.”

“What kinda lady then.” Jim corrected himself.

She shrugged. “Ex-Starfleet security chief.”

“Cool. She might be able to handle me.” Jim smiled.

Winona sighed and then dragged him over to her side, where she’d sat next to him on the bed. “C’mere.” She hauled him under her arm into a close side-hug, resting the side of her face on his head. “I love you. You know that, right?”

“I love you too, mom.”

“I mean it.” She said. “I’m… I’m sorry that things have gotten like this.”

He was silent for a moment. *Me too,* he wanted to say. Or, *Maybe if you’d been here. Maybe if we understood each other. Maybe if dad was alive.* He didn’t say any of those things. He shrugged one shoulder. “Kaiidth,” he said. “What is, is.”

She nodded. “And boy, is it.”

He snorted out a laugh.

“We good?” She asked. “I mean… this all. It wasn’t to get back at me, was it?”

“No,” Jim admitted. “It wasn’t. We’re good.”

“Good.”

Jim tucked his fingers underneath the armrests on either side of his body, swallowing. He knew every last bit of science that involved propelling them out of the atmosphere- he knew all the mechanics and engineering and he knew, without a doubt, that launch would go fine.

He was still nervous.

“Ready, kiddo?”

Jim grinned at his mother, leaning his head into her shoulder. “Who do you think I am?”

"My son?"

"Yep. And he was born ready."

The take off caused a baby down the isle to start crying, but Jim barely noticed the noise. He watched out the window as the stationskycloudsatompshere whooshed by in a blur of color. He felt his ears pop and gave out a small, giddy laugh as he felt the G-force press him back into his seat.

And then they were out.
Space.

It stretched around them for all eternity, dark, and glittering, and precious. Jim felt like the breath had been knocked out of him as he took it all in. The vast emptiness was comforting in a way- the sun and stars didn’t know his name or his past, and they didn’t care to learn. He was another minuscule variable hurtling past them in a big ‘ol tin can, and something about that was wonderful.

“Mom!” He pointed excitedly out the window. “Look, look, it’s-“

“If you name all the stars, I’m going to go crazy, kid.” Winona laughed. “I know you know them all.”

“I’ve just never seen them from this angle…” He pressed his face to the glass. “It’s… damn. It’s beautiful out here.”

“Welcome to my world,” she teased, gently.

He felt an unquestionable sense of belonging. This was where he was meant to be. This was where he belonged. Not in Riverside, not in Iowa. Not on Earth. Out in space, exploring new worlds and stars and tracking comets, living without any concrete gravity to weigh his body down to the ground.

It was cold, out in space, but damn, did he feel warm.

“I’m glad your happy,” Winona said softly.

Jim looked over to her. She looked sad- her eyes lost and far away, mouth drawn in near pain. “What is it?” He asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Hm?” She blinked rapidly. “Oh, nothing. You just… You remind me of your father.”

He looked back out the window. “Yeah,” he said. “I always do.”

“Never more than now,” she sighed.

That was something he was glad he’d be getting away from. He’d always felt like a shadow of his parent’s tragedy- an off brand clone of the dead and famous George Kirk. With that behind him he would be his own man, and maybe more.

His mom reached over and took his hand. Jim held it back, loosely, remembering all the times she’d used the gesture to control him. He shook his head- it wasn’t time to be remembering the bad things. He was finally getting his wish.

The journey was a long one. Jim fell asleep a couple of times, but never for long. He couldn’t bear to have his eyes parted from the view outside his window. He hardly dared to blink for fear of missing something incredible.

It twenty seven hours to get to the starbase they were switching out on. They slept in the temporary quarters allowed to guests and then, eleven hours after disembarking, they boarded another ship. It took that ship twelve hours to make it out to a small moon base, where they had a three hour lay over. The last ship would take him all the way out to Tarsus IV- a three day ride.

Jim liked it. He could think of no better way to spend the last bit of his time with his mother. She bought him a few trinkets from the starbase and the lunar base, and even when he got over-enthusiastic she only smiled fondly at him and shook her head.
“I’m gonna miss you,” she said, and it sounded like she meant it.

She didn’t board the last ship. She hugged him fiercely before he got on, saying, “Be good, Jim.”

“I will.”

“Promise to write me.” She said. She stood, thumbing his chin. “I know they only send communications out past the ion cloud once every four months, but try to keep me in your thoughts, okay?”

“Alright.” He smiled and reached forward, wiping her cheek as a stray tear made its way down her face. “Don’t cry, mom. We’re both going on a new adventure. It’s gonna be great.”

“I know,” she said. “I just can’t help but feel like I’m losing you.”

“You know exactly where to find me,” he promised. He stepped out onto the platform, smiling. “See you later, alligator?”

“After a while, crocodile,” she said.

Jim turned away, and started into the shuttle.

“Jim!”

He paused at the entry, turning back to his mom. She was full-on crying, eyes already red and puffy.

“I love you!”

He smiled, feeling a little choked up himself. “I love you too!”

"Be safe!"

He turned and entered the shuttle, and just like that. Mom was gone. He was on his own.

There weren’t many people onboard. Five tired looking adults up front, and in the back, a rowdy pack of kids. There were seven of them- he’d be the eighth- and they looked like their ages ranged from around six to seventeen.

He hefted his backpack up on his shoulders- the old one that Amanda had bought him, with Star Base Seven on the back. His other luggage would be in the back of the ship already. Quickly, he made his way to the back where the other kids were loudly debating the schematics of Klingon romance.

They paused when he stepped up to their group.

“Hi,” he said. He grinned. “I’m Jim.”

“James T. Kirk,” one rattled off. “Thirteen years and seven months old, drove a car off a cliff to make a point.” The boy smiled- he looked to be around nine, and was missing one of his front teeth. “Nice to meet ya.”

“Well.” Jim said. “Looks like someone did their homework.”

“He knew all of us,” A girl said. She was chewing bubblegum, which was weird. No one chewed bubblegum anymore. “Don’t feel too intimidated.” She looked around sixteen herself.
“Ezra Fisher,” the boy said. “Nice to meet'cha!”

Jim laughed. “Well, you heard it from Ezra, I guess. I’m Jim. Who’re the rest of you?”

Ezra pointed at them one by one. “Melody Owens, six years old,” she had dimples and a cute, squishy face, and a large frizzy afro. She was adorable. “T Brown, gender unknown! Eleven years old.” They had a long black braids and bronze skin, with hazel eyes framed by long, dark lashes. They smiled and waved. “Sebastian Scott, thirteen.” He had ashy-blond hair and gray eyes, and a light smattering of freckles crossing his nose. “Nina Farrell, ten years!” He pointed to a girl with short, curly brown hair and blue eyes. “Joel Outhier, eleven.” He had dark hair and green eyes. He was incredibly tall for his age. “Jessie Harrison, sixteen—“

“It’s Jet,” it was the girl who had first spoken to him, with the chewing gum. She had almond shaped eyes and brown hair, cropped nearly at her jaw. “Not Jessie. Jet.”

Ezra ignored her. “And that’s it! We’re waiting on a Kevin Riley.”

The aforementioned Kevin Riley came stumbling onto the shuttle then. His family was still with him—a mother, father, and two brothers. They all stayed up in the front, shoeing Kevin on.

He turned and looked at them, eyes wide—a dear in the headlights.

Jim waved him over.

The boy skittered down the isle and threw himself into a seat, which nearly seemed to swallow him whole. He stared at them, silent.

“You’re late,” said Sebastian Scott.

“I know.” Kevin said, gravely. “I told mom we were going to be late but she wanted to finish the tour of the station.” He leaned forward, lowering his voice as if imparting a secret to them. “The life support for the station all goes through one power grid. It could be easily disabled in an attack.”

“Christ,” Jet said. “Literally all of us noticed.”

Jim was glad he wasn’t the only one.

“That’s so dangerous.” Kevin seemed nearly unable to get the words out.

“Lots of things are dangerous.” Melody helpfully added.

T said, “For example?”

“Knives,” Melody said.

Nina nodded, sagely. “Knives are, in fact, dangerous.”

“Blasters,” Melody added.

“Yep, yep, those are dangerous alright.” Ezra said.

“Chlorine gas,” Melody finished.

“Useful,” said Sebastian. “But yeah, dangerous.”

Jim grinned. These were so his people.
“So what’s Kevin in for, Ezra?” Jet asked. She was looking at her nails, as though she were disinterested. “You got the dirt on the rest of us.”

“He took apart his school bus because he wanted to fix the engine,” Ezra said. “Obviously didn’t finish it before he was discovered. Nice try though, buddy, it was a good effort.”

Kevin folded himself even further back into his seat.

“No fair,” Jim said. “We didn’t get to hear what the rest of you are here for.”

Melody said, “I accidentally blew up the kitchen.”

Jim blinked.

Ezra nodded enthusiastically. “Yep yep! Chemistry will do that.”

“What are you in for, anyway?” Jet asked. “Talking too fast?”

“Nope. Gotta say that’s a big ‘ol N-O. Gramps said it’s all very hush hush but you know.” He shrugged. “Well you know I just really wanted to see what kind of cool stuff they kept in the Starfleet museum down the way so I just went on ahead and hacked right into the security system and waltzed on it. Made myself an Admiral while I was at it. Admiral Fisher, at your service.”

“I am not surprised,” Jet said.

“What are you in for, Jet?” Sebastian asked. “I got here after you.”

“Sabotage.” She said. “Idiot boys thought they were better racers than me and tried to fuck with my pod. Showed them.”

Sebastian said, “Well I feel stupid now. You guys all did cool stuff. I just changed my documented species to a lobster so I could get on the shuttle for pet prices.”

They laughed.

“Passengers,” came a voice over the speaker-system. “Please be seated. We are detaching from the station. Passengers, please be seated. We are detaching from the station.”

“Guess that’s the final call,” T said. “No going back now.”

The shuttle lurched, but they were all ready for it and thus unaffected.

“What’re you in for, T?” Asked Sebastian.

“I wiped the entire school system because they refused to removed the xenophobic material from the course.” They shrugged. “Whoopsies.”

“Sweet,” said Jet.

“What about you?” Jim turned to Nina. “What did you do?”

“They put my mom in prison. She shot the man who did bad things to my other mom. So I hacked into the prison system and highjacked one of their automated guards to escort her out. They realized that she was gone about a month ago when the food they’d been putting in her cell started to stink.” She frowned.
“Sorry they found out,” said T.

“It’s okay.” Nina smiled. “She got pardoned.”

“Joel?” Sebastian turned to the boy. “What about you?”

“Ezra already told you, didn’t he?”

Sebastian shook his head. “I just got here before Jim did. I didn’t hear shit.”

Joel colored.

“What?” Seb grinned. “Something embarrassing?”

“Yeah…” He blew a breath out of his cheeks. “I stole a bunch of explosives.”

“What? Why?”

Joel shrugged. “News said it was impossible to do. Figured I’d try. Don’t- don’t let that fool you. I’m just a guy who likes plants.”

“Huh. I get that.”

Jim leaned back into his seat, grinning ear to ear. He was going to love Tarsus.

“What’s that look for?” T noticed. “You’re just as embarrassing, Kirk- you’re the least impressive out of all of us.”

Jim shrugged. It didn’t matter that he could have easily done what the other kids were guilty of, it was nice to be on the down-low for once. “Nothing,” he said. “I just think we’re gonna get along swell.”

“Jim was lined up with the rest of the group. They’d been put into alphabetical order by last name. Jim liked that he fell in the middle- being at the front and the back always seemed like a spell for trouble, somehow.

“First of all.” Dan said. “You have all been told you’re here because you’re trouble kids. Is that right?”

They all mumbled their yeses.

“Yes sir will do.” Dan barked.

They all stood up straight. “Yes, sir!” They chorused.
“Good, you learn fast.” She said. “That’s the first thing you’ll learn here. You address me with respect and you address me clearly. The second thing you’re going to learn; you are not here because you’re trouble.”

They all looked amongst each other.

“You’re here because you’re smart.” She said. “You’re here because your parents didn’t know how to raise a child of heightened intelligence. You’re here because somewhere along the way, the system failed you. You’re not trouble. You’re kids- smart kids. Good kids. Got it?”

They were silent.

“Got it?” She repeated.

“Yes, sir.” They said.

“Good. We’ll work on that later.” Dan stepped aside, sweeping her arm back to gesture at the small camp behind them. “This is going to be your new home for a while. Behind me is the classroom. We’ll spend most of our time there. To my left we’ve got the mess hall and gardens, and to the right is the barrack and bathhouse. You may noticed there is only one barrack. That’s because we’re all family now, and family shares a house. Each one of you will get your own room, but the bathroom is communal. You’ll learn to share. Sound good?”

They looked to each other.

Dan sighed. “Third thing you learn today. When I ask a question I expect a yes sir or a no sir. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Very good.” She looked down at the clip board in her hand- topped with real life paper. It was weird to see someone other than himself using it, Jim thought. “When I call your name step forward. Sebastian Scott.”

He stepped up from the end. “Yes, sir?”

“Scott, you’ve got room four.” Dan pointed to a table she’d had set up. It was topped with various things bins. “Take a pillow, a bed set, a journal and a pen. Your luggage should be waiting in the main hall of the barracks. Get yourself set up.”

He ran up to do as told.

“Jessie Harrison?”

She stepped forward, “My name’s Jet, sir.”

“Jet Harrison it is.” Dan said. “Same thing. Pillow, bed set, journal and pen. You’ve got room number six, go get set up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“James Kirk.”

Jim stepped forward. “Jim Kirk, sir.”

“Alright, Kirk. You’ve got room eight.”
“Yes, sir.”

It went on like that. The rooms were given by age- after Jim came T, then Joel, Nina, Ezra, Riley, and finally Mel. They were handed out so that each even number stood across from an odd. The odd numbers went to the little kids, the even to the older. That way, every kid had a partner across the hall from themselves. Room one went to Melody Owens, so that across from her, in two, would be Dan. Then came Kevin Riley in room three, and across from him, Sebastian Scott. They were all paired up at way- Mel and Dan, K. Riley and Seb Scott, E. Fisher and Jet H., Nina F. and J. Kirk, and finally Joel O. and T. Brown.

When they’d all finished setting up their rooms, Dan ordered them to line up out in front of the dining hall with their partners. “Team one,” she barked. Mel happily skipped next to Dan, holding up her finger to indicate the number one. “Riley and Scott.”

The two stepped forward, saying, “Yes, sir!”

“Team two, Fisher and Harrison!”

They stepped out of line as well. “Yes, sir!”

“You four are on kitchen duty. I’ve got ingredients and the recipe laid out nicely for you on the counter. I trust that you don’t need supervision. Get to it.” She nodded her head towards the mess hall.

“Yes, sir!” The four chorused. They took off at a run.

“Team three, Kirk and Farrell!”

Jim stepped forward, looking down to his side to be sure Nina did as well. She beamed as she marched out of line, hands neatly linked behind her back. She was proper enough to remind him of Spock.

“You two are on campfire duty. I want enough twigs gathered to make a good fire this evening. The fire pit is out behind the schoolhouse, I trust you’ll be able to find it.”

“Yes, sir!” Jim said. Nina chorused with him, practically yelling.

“Good. Team four, you’re with me- I’ll show you were the china is and we’ll get to setting the mess hall for dinner.”

Jim didn’t hear what was said after that. He and Nina took off in a sprint.

The weeks blurred by in the camp. Dan was nothing like Jim had expected. She had a loud, boisterous laugh and loved to hear about their past shenanigans. She was wicked smart, and a great teacher. They spent the mornings tending the gardens and cleaning, when it was cool enough to work without getting too overheated. They spent the hot afternoons learning, each at their own pace with the materials that Dan had personally set up for them each. They were each given a PADD- some of the only modern technology on the planet- to study with, though they couldn’t get any
modern updates from beyond the ion cloud. Dan had downloaded plenty in preparation.

In the evenings after dinner, they worked on practical skills- one for each day of the week. Monday, sewing and tailoring. Tuesday, engineering. Wednesday, martial arts. Thursday, marksmanship with dummy phasers. Friday, wilderness survival. Sunday, computer skills. Saturday they were allowed to do whatever they so pleased with their evenings, though that usually meant spending time lounging about together in the communal room of the barracks.

It was hard work, but it was the life Jim had always dreamed of. Nina was shy, but incredibly smart-she loved computer sciences and coding best out of everything they did, but she also seemed to like to garden. Jim loved it all himself, though he had to say he preferred it when he and Nina weren’t part of cooking detail. He could make a mean grilled cheese, and damn he knew how to code a replicator, but when it was just him and a cookbook staring each other down, he had to admit he felt rather wrong-footed.

They were all required to take art and language communally. Jim wasn’t very good at art, but watching Nina get to it was amazing. She and Joel both had an incredible eye, and it was fun to struggle along with Dan’s pre-recorded lessons from other teachers. Language was a different story. Dan decided to teach the language she knew best- Klingonese. She’d quickly found out that Jim Kirk only pretended he didn’t know how to speak it just well as she did, and he was promoted to helper. It kept him sharp, so he didn’t mind.

Dan kept them all out of trouble. For one thing, there wasn’t a town for miles and miles, and the only transportation they had was the old Earth jeep that Dan had put together from scrap. They could try to make off with it, she’d told them, but there was no way they’d really get anywhere. Everyone on the planet would know it was stolen.

That was the thing about Tarsus IV. There wasn’t really any place to get into trouble in the first place. Everything in their little camp was theirs to do with as they pleased, so there wasn’t really any point in getting out of hand. The few times others had tried had proven futile.

And it wasn’t like they got into huge trouble if they did do wrong. They just stopped getting to do the cool stuff. When Dan took them all out for a hike, you had to stay back in your room and clean up. When it came time for camping skills, once the fire was up you didn’t get to make s’mores. When it came to recreation time, you sat out on the sidelines.

It was enough, though.

Jim knew he wasn’t the only one who loved it. Really, they all respected Dan at the very least, though he was sure they all loved her in their own ways. And she loved them too- she called them her troops, and her kids, and her “wonderful screw-ups.”

A year went by in such a fashion, and Jim was so happy that he nearly forgot about what he was missing back home. It wasn’t until someone mentioned, off hand, that they’d usually be in the midsts of summer vacation that the reality came slamming home.

Spock. He was missing Spock.
“Hey, Kirk.”

Jim looked up from where he was hanging his head off the end of the couch in the community area. “Sir?”

“You want story telling tonight?” It was Sunday, and they’d integrated computer skills into their usual curriculum the past month, leaving Sundays open for team building. It was a professional way of saying “story time and fun games.”

Jim sat up, blinking. “I, uh, didn’t request it, sir.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dan sat next to him. She smiled. “You look put out lately, kid. I’m not boring you, am I?”

Jim shook his head. He hadn’t been bored in a long time.

“What’s up?” She asked. “Homesick?”

“Pssh. I’m not Outhier.”

She gave him the stink-eye. “Watch it, kid, you better be nice.”

“I don’t mean it like that.” Jim said. He looked over his shoulder, out the window. “Just… I don’t really have anything to be home-sick about.”

“Ah.” Dan leaned back into the couch. “It’s like that, huh?”

Jim shrugged.

“You know, in the entire time you’ve been here, you’ve hardly talked about home.”

“Not much to talk about.” Jim said. “Mom wasn’t around, Dad died early. You know that.”

“Then what’s got you looking so wistful?”

Jim let out a sigh. “Well… it’s summer time, sir.”

“I’m aware.” She looked out the window. “It’s always summer-weather on Tarsus.”

“I mean on Earth. In Iowa, anyway.”

She raised a brow. “Wish you were done with school?”

“No.”

“Then what’s up?” She fake-gasped. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a sweetheart waiting back on Earth for you, Kirk.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Jim teased.

“I can see it now,” Dan said. “Kirk, the universal heart-breaker.”


“Just?”

“My best friend.” Jim said. “He only ever came to Earth in the summers. This is the first year I’ll be
going without seeing him since we first met, back when I was only five.”

“And that’s why you get story tonight.”

Jim looked up, confused. “Sir?”

“Nostalgia.” She said. “We hardly ever get a Kirk story. Let’s hear one about you and this best friend of yours- I bet the two of you got up to all kinds of trouble.”

Jim smiled and ducked his head. “Well, that’s true. Even if he was a stickler for the rules, I could usually logic him into it.”

“So it’s settled.” She stood, clapping him on the back. “Story teller you shall be.”

“Good evening. I’m James T. Kirk, and I’ll be your host for the evening.” Jim leaned forward against the story-telling podium at the head of the community room. “Tonight we’ve got some special entertainment for you. I’d like to tell you all about my best friend in the whole world, Spock. Tonight’s story is called The Time Me and Spock Played Cards.”

From the audience, Jet barked out a laugh. “What?”

“It’s a lot cooler than it sounds.” Jim promised. “It goes a little something like this…”

“Jim,” Spock said. “This is an idea that has an eighty nine point four percent chance of failing.”

“Eighty nine, huh?” Jim smirked as he dropped down over the side of the fence. “Those are worse odds than usual. Is it my jacket? Too bright, right?”

Spock said, “You have noticed a change in the guards. It is likely that they will make rounds to our usual star-gazing location.”

“Nonsense,” Jim said. He grinned, hiking his backpack up over his shoulder. “Come on. There’s supposed to be a comet passing into view tonight.”

Spock didn’t argue with that.

They scurried along between the buildings and out into the shadow of the Enterprise, into the usual position Jim took up. He opened his backpack up and threw down a blanket for them to lay on, and then laid back on it with his arms crossed behind his head. Spock hesitantly joined him, casting a suspicious glance around.
“Oh come on,” Jim laughed. “I’ve been coming out here all year. We’re not gonna get caught.”

“There are more guards than there used to be,” Spock pointed out. “It is likely that the rotation has changed to cover more ground.”

“Nah,” Jim said. “Come on, it’s Iowa. What kinda sense would that make?”

Spock leveled him with a look. “Jim.”

Jim laughed. Leaning his head back, he looked up to the sky. “Any minute now, Spock, it’ll be passing overhead.”

Spock leaned his head back as well. “I estimate approximately another minute and thirty seven seconds.”

“Hm.” Jim laughed a little. “Approximately, huh?”

Spock nodded. “Approximately.”

“What happens the day you make an exact estimate?” Jim wondered out-loud. “Will the universe implode?”

“It is doubtful,” Spock said. His face was blank, but there was good humor in his eyes.

The comet zinged overhead, in and out of sight in a second.

“There!” Jim pointed at its tail. “Did you see it?”

“Fascinating,” Spock breathed. “It appeared to be-“

“HEY!”

Jim and Spock looked up just in time to each have the necks of their tops grabbed.

“What the-“ Jim grunted as he was yanked to his feet, right along Spock.

Spock shot him a look, as if to say, I told you so.

“What the hell?” The guard held them both out for inspection. “What’re you two kids doing out here?”

“Stargazing.” Spock said.

“Why here?” The guard seemed baffled.

“The Enterprise adds a special appeal.” Jim said. “She’s our beautiful lady and we love her.”

The guard narrowed his eyes at them.

Jim shrugged.

The guard- his name tag said Ware- squinted at their stuff. “That yours?”

“Yeah.”

“What you got in there?”
“A sweater, some Red Vines, and two juice pouches.” Jim thought for a second. “A PADD and a flashlight, too.”

“Pick it up. And your picnic blanket up, too, what the hell?”

Jim did as told, happily dancing out of the guard’s reach. He was happy to note that Spock had been released, too.

“Come on,” Ware said. “You two are in deep shit.”

“That is inaccurate,” Spock said. “There is no feces anywhere in the vicinity, let alone-“

“Yep!” Jim grabbed Spock’s wrist. “We got it.”

The guard huffed out a sigh. “March.”

Jim and Spock walked in front of the guard, who barked out instructions for them so that they wouldn’t give him the slip while trailing behind his back. He lead them to a building, which they hesitantly entered. It was the break room, where three other guards were sitting a table playing cards.

“Ross!” One of them called. “Whacha got?”

“Coupla’ stargazers,” Ware, or Ross, said.

Jim and Spock stood awkwardly near the wall.

“Is that a Vulcan?” One of the guards gawked.

Jim narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you have manners?”

The man had the decency to look cowed. “Sorry, kid.”

“Whacha gonna do with ‘em, Ware?” The last guard asked.

Ware walked over to a comm unit on the wall. “Hand ‘em over to the police.”

“What?” Jim wined. “But we were just hanging out?”

“Oh, sucks dude.” One of the guards chuckled.

Jim eyed the table. “Whacha playing?”

“Texas Hold ‘Em.” Said guard number two.

Jim turned to Ware. “Hey. Make you a deal.”

Ware looked back at him. “What?”

“Me and S- my friend, versus you guys. We’ve got Red Vines to bet.”

Ware narrowed his eyes.

“Oh shit, Red Vines?” Guard one perked up. “Hell yeah!”

“If we win, we leave scott free. If you guys win, you get the Red Vines and we get our asses handed over to the cops. What do you say?”
Ware frowned. “I don’t like it.”

Guard number three said, “Come on, Ware. It’s a couple of kids. Do you two even know how to play Texas Hold ‘Em?”

“No,” said Jim. “We learn fast, though.”

Number Three held his hands out. “See? Like taking candy from a baby. Red Vines, man.”

“I’m a Twizzlers fan.” Ware mumbled.

“Come on,” Jim implored him. “You’re not scared of losing to some kids, are you?”

Ware groaned.


“Red Vines, Red Vines!” Number two got in on it as well.

Ware sighed. “Fine.”

“Yes!”

“But if you tell the cops we stole your candy, I swear I’ll—“

Jim snorted. “We’re not total assholes.” He stuck his hand out towards Ross. “You four versus us two and a packet of Red Vines. They count for like a credit each. Whacha say?”

“Ugh. Fine.”

They shook on it.

“Sweet!” Jim dragged Spock over to the table, where they both sat after the other three men made room. “I’m Jim, and this is Spock.”

Number one said, “Mike.”

Two was, “Presley.”

“Alejandro,” was the third.

Jim grinned and cracked his knuckles. “Alright,” he said. “How do you play?”

The rules were quickly explained, with a few questions from Spock, who thought the whole thing was pointless, but would try his best regardless. That was all Jim could ask.

They won, of course.

And with a bag full of loose credits and Red Vines, they went on their merry way, waving goodbye to their four new tickets into the shipyard as they went.
Yeah, Jim thought. *Those were the good ‘ol days.*

It was great.

It was great, right up until it wasn't.
Chapter Notes

For anyone who would like to skip Tarsus, I will provide a summary at the end of this chapter, and you can feel free to resume reading when chapter 13 is posted. :) Thank you so much to everyone who commented! I was blown away by the amount of feedback I got; it's really been inspiring me to keep writing. Thank you for the kudos, too!

Big death flag for this chapter, ya'll.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Dan came to them with the problem, they figured it was one of her random ‘things’ for them to wrap their minds around. She came up with them fairly often problems with no solutions that they were supposed to muddle their way out of. There was no such thing as a dead end, she said. The trick was figuring out how to keep moving on.

“I want you to think about a planet just like Tarsus IV.” She said. “The plants were all artificially culminated years and years ago, before the people arrived, so that when they got there the planet would seem more like Earth than a floating rock and space. No animals or insects- the plant life is all genetically modified so that it can survive without the presence of other life forms, and is helped along by the grid. Got it?”

They all said, “Yes, sir.”

“An unidentified fungus starts destroying all the crops. There are hardly any replicators on the planet, and the ones that are here can only function to a certain standard before they’ll be exhausted as a resource. There’s no way to get the livestock to start reproducing faster or aging quicker, so that source of food will run out soon enough. What do you do to keep the colony from starving to death?”

They came up with several answers. For one, you would have to put a rations restriction so that no one ate more than they were supposed to. Crops clear of the fungus should be moved to clean areas, and more food should be genetically altered to resist the fungus. Replicators should only be used in an effort to sustain the crops. Livestock should be cut down by half and stored, because animals could still get sick and die, so it was too risky to try to sustain them with what little food was left on the planet. Effort should be extorted on combating the fungus, on finding a way to keep it off other crops, and on killing it before it killed the plants it infected.

“Excellent,” Dan had said.

But it wasn’t enough.
A truck from town came by once every two weeks to give them the food they didn’t grow in their
garden without fail, on the dot, never a minute late.

Jim stood outside with Nina, waiting, but the truck never came.

“What the hell?” He murmured.

“Yeah,” Nina echoed. “What the hell?”

Dan slipped out of the mess hall a few minutes later, face drawn. “So that’s it then,” she said under
her breath. She turned to them both. “Looks like the truck’s not coming.”

Jim shrugged. “I guess we’re having salad for dinner.”

Nina stuck her tongue out. “Ew.”

“Get used to it,” Dan said. “Not like we can comm into the city. We’ll have to wait another couple of
weeks for the next truck to show up.”

Jim squinted up at Dan. She never lied to them, so far as he knew, but the way she didn’t meet their
eyes when she spoke was telling. Something was up. Jim said, “What gives?”

“They might have forgotten.” Dan said. “It happens.”

“No it doesn’t,” Jim said. “We’ve been here over a year and it’s never happened before.”

Dan shrugged. “Come on,” she said. “Salad.”

Dan really meant it when she said ‘get used to it.’ They lived off the vegetable garden for two weeks,
for the most part, adding things from the cabinets until they were empty. They had peanut butter and
beans to go, but everything else was gone.

Two weeks passed. Jet and Ezra were scheduled to wait for the truck, but they all stood outside,
regardless of shift, eagerly bouncing on their toes as they waited for it to show. Dan leaned against
the mess hall’s wall, arms crossed.

The truck didn’t show.

“Come on,” Dan said. “Salad.”

They all groaned. Salad, salad, salad- it’s all that they’d had for weeks!

“We’ve got to go into town,” Jet said. “They forgot about us two weeks in a row.”

Dan shook her head. “Dinner theater tonight, kids.”

They all exchanged a look.

“Who’s performing?” Joel asked.
“Me,” Dan said, and she didn’t sound happy about it.

They should have known it wasn’t really a performance. They all crowded into the long table together, while Dan stood at the head and stared them all down with a grave set to her jaw.

“I’ve got bad news,” she said.

They turned their eyes up to her.

“No news is bad news,” Ezra quoted. “Information cannot be good or evil, it simply is.”

Dan smiled a little. “Very good,” she said. “Except… this time it really is. Bad news.”

They waited.

She let out a long sigh. “The truck’s not coming.”

“We know,” Seb said.

“Ever.” She clarified.

T said, “What? Why not?”

“Because there’s no food to give.” She looked up at them, slowly. “I’ve… been hiding something from you.” She pressed her mouth into a thin line. “I shouldn’t have. But I didn’t know what else to do.”

No food. No trucks. The garden…

Two plus two equalled four, and the fungus on the crops problem Dan had kept revisiting with them wasn’t a made up story. Jim swallowed hard and said, “The fungus…”

Everyone else clued in with wide, horrified eyes.

Dan nodded, slowly.

You could have heard a pin drop.

“How long?” Jet choked. “How long has this been going on?”

“The fungus popped up two months ago,” Dan said. She tiredly sank into the chair at the head of the table, resting her face in her palms. “It wiped out more than fifty percent of the crops.”

Silence.

“But it’s not too late,” Mel piped up, quietly. “Right Dan? We’ve been making solutions.”

She shook her head, mutely.

“How long until the next Star Fleet vessel arrives with supplies?” Jim asked.

“Six months.”

“There’s got to be someone else close by,” Kevin said, shakily. “Right?”

“People panicked when they found out about the shortage. The message boat that was supposed to take our data out past the ion cloud got disconnected from the planet. It might still be broadcasting a
distress call, but…”

“Don’t count on it.” Seb surmised.

Joel said, “How come you didn’t tell us?”

“I thought it would be worrying you for nothing.” She said. “I sent all your solutions up to Governor Kodos. He’s trying to get a hold onto things, but it’s chaos out there. I thought maybe they’d figure it out and we wouldn’t need to stress over it, but there comes a time when you can’t hide the stink anymore.”

“Oh or the Co2 could kill everyone,” Mel quietly said.

Dan nodded.

“What are we going to do?” T asked.

“I don’t know.” Dan said.

“How long will the garden sustain us?” Nina asked.

“A month.” Dan said. “Maybe more, if we let it stretch.”

“No animals to hunt,” Joel choked, “No insects to keep us from starving. All we have are the crops. When they’re gone, we’re- we’ll-“

“Calm yourself,” Dan said. “There’s no use in panicking.”

“But!”

“Fear is the mind killer.” Jim said, suddenly.

They stared at him.

“Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.” He looked up and over to Joel, staring him down. “I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over and through me. And when my fear is gone, I will turn and face fear’s path and only I will remain”

It was quiet for a minute.

“Yeah,” Dan said, with a weak chuckle. “That.”

“We can survive for another month if we add on all the measures we’ve come up with so far.” Jim said. “If we drop school and focus on the fungus and the problem, maybe we can last even longer than that until we figure out a solution.”

Dan nodded. “That’s what I’m hoping.”

“What about my family?” Kevin piped up.

Dan looked down at the table.

“What about all the other people?” Added Nina. “What happens when they come here looking for food? We’ve gotta share, don’t we? We can’t… we can’t just let them starve…”

“The longer we live, the better our chances of finding a solution.” Seb said. “No one knows we’re
here. We’ve… we’ve got to keep the food to ourselves and figure out how to stop this from happening.”

“But my family!” Kevin cried.

“And all those people,” Nina argued. “We can’t condemn them to starve just because we might be smarter than them! What gives us the right? We’re no better than they are!”

“It’s our food,” T said. “We grew it. We cared for it. They didn’t.”

“It’s not their fault that their food was eaten by a fungus.” Nina said.

“But-“

“Enough.” Dan said. “You’re all right. It’s not right to let other people starve when we have food. But as things are, it looks like we’d only be holding off starvation ourselves for a little while before we bit the dust too. I’m in charge of taking care of you kids, and if that means other people have to die so that you can live, so be it. We’re the best chance we’ve got, and I’ll extend those chances as far as I can, even at the expense of others. We’re not going to steal anyone else’s food. They have a fighting chance just the same as we do. But we’re not sharing, and that’s that.”

“My…” Kevin trailed off, lip wobbling.

“I’m sorry, Riley.” Dan said. “This is just the way it’s gotta be.”

He began to quietly cry. Sebastian scooted over to Kevin and pulled him into a hug, silent. Jim felt Nina nudge against him and lifted his arm, too, accepting her under his wing to make her feel better. He gave her a smile that she tentatively returned.

“We’ll figure it out,” Dan promised them. “The next Starfleet ship with supplies will be here in six months. If we can make it that long, then we’ll be fine. We’ve been working towards this. You kids are the smartest people I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. We’re not giving up. You hear?”

Together, they chorused, “Yes, sir.”

“Can I come in?”

Jim looked up to his doorway, brows climbing when he met eyes with Dan. He’d just finished reading Nina to sleep, since the girl had been too upset to go to bed on her own. She was safely tucked into bed across the hall from him, and so he’d figured he was good to relax for the night. All the other even numbers- the older kids- had already put their odd number partners to bed, too, so he’d been sure he was fine to change into his pajamas.

He flushed, standing at attention. “Yes, sir.”

“At ease, Kirk.” Dan said. She strode into the room and closed the door behind her before taking a seat in the desk chair. She looked at Jim for a long time.

He sat back down on the bed. “Can I help you with something, sir?”
“I never asked,” she started slowly. “Why did you drive that car off a cliff?”

Jim’s brows rose. He hadn’t thought about that in months.

“You don’t have to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable.” She said.

“No, no, it’s… it’s fine. Why do you want to know?”

She shrugged. “Indulge me, Kirk.”

Jim nodded. “Well…” It felt like a lifetime ago. He struggled to recall all the details. “My dad died on the Kelvin. You know that.”

“I do.”

“He, uh. He left behind some stuff. Games, clothes, trophies… cars.” He sighed. “The barn was full of ’em. Well, not full. Four. He collected them, you know? All these cool antiques; he’d buy the scraps and fix them up for fun. He really liked those cars. The Sting Ray, though… that one was the real deal. It still had the original engine in it and everything.”

She nodded. “Sounds like a good memento.”

“It was.” Jim said. “It… it was.”

He was silent for a second.

“Spock, uh, he’s my Vulcan friend. Spock and I fixed it up.” He said. “It wasn’t like with our hover-bikes, we made those from scratch, so they were special. More than the cars. But we figured we’d see if we could make any of them run, and the Chevy did. I spent summers sitting in that car with Spock. I’m pretty sure if someone went through the wreckage now, they’d still be able to find chip crumbs in the seats from all the time we spent snacking in there…”

“Go on.”

He did. “Frank found out. Uh, my mom’s husband. I drove the car a couple of times and he found out about it. It was a bad time for me. I wanted to get off the planet like crazy, and Spock and his family wanted me to go to Vulcan with them, but my mom wouldn’t hear it. I just felt like everything was over, somehow. Like I’d be stuck there forever. And then Frank says he’s selling the car.”

“I see.”

“Yeah.” Jim frowned. “It was like… it was the one connection I had to my dad, you know? Not even that. I don’t know if that even went through my head. It just, it wasn’t his! If anything, it was mine. Me and Spock, we spent weeks on that car, I- my head looks like that car.”

Her brows rose. “Pardon?”

Jim grimaced. “I mean… the inside of my head.” Seeing she still didn’t understand, he said, “How much do you know about Vulcans?”

“Is this part of the story?”

“Yeah,” he decided. It mattered.

“Hm… they have copper based blood, so it’s green. They have pointed ears. They live in a really hot climate… their society is based on logic. That’s all I can really think of.”
Jim said, “That’s about what everyone else knows.”

“I’m missing something,” she knew.

“They’re touch-telepaths,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “They are?”

He nodded. “That’s why it’s so rude to touch them. You’re shoving your thoughts at them and—well, never mind. That’s a whole other story. Spock and I used to meld minds, without really meaning to.”

Her eyes went even wider. “Without meaning to? Jim, I didn’t even know that was possible.”

“Well, either. Spock’s a really gifted telepath, though. But... when we would meld, he would kinda poke around and order my thoughts. Nothing invasive, you know—when he didn’t, everything was this colluding mess of crystal and light and color, and it was impossible to really do anything. He’d kind of meditate for me, I guess, just put all the thoughts on the shelves where they belonged. Those were the only times I was at peace. And when my head was like that, it was like... like we were in the Chevy, floating through space.” He paused. “That’s how much the car meant to me, I guess. You know? When I had to envision myself some place, it was there, on those leather seats, sailing through the black.”

“I understand,” she said. “So then, why crash it?”

“Like I said. Frank decided he was going to sell it. And I didn’t have time. If I waited he’d lock me in my room, and it just would have been this huge mess. I meant to drive it out to the shipyard, and hide it there, but the police caught me speeding by and I knew that there was no going back. The car was gone.”

It was quiet.

“I knew I’d rather crash that thing than let someone else have it. It— they wouldn’t.” He angrily pressed his lips together, upset by the way the words just didn’t seem willing to work with him. “It would have been wrong. They wouldn’t have known what it meant. And that little piece of me, and Spock, and my dad, and my head— it would just be up on some pedestal for some rich jerk to fawn over. And it wasn’t right.” He shrugged. “So I crashed it.”

“And barely managed not to go over the cliff with it, as I hear.”

“Yeah. It was...” He frowned. “I was in a bad place of mind.”

She nodded.

“Why?” He asked. He looked back up to her. “Why did you want to know?”

“It just tells me a lot about you,” she said. “And how far you’ve come.”

He frowned.

“Kirk,” she said, and there was a hint of urgency in her voice. “Scott and Harrison are both older than you. Realistically, I should be talking to one of them. But here’s the thing. They’re here because they were so smart, no one could control them. You’re here because of your heart. Your caring.”

Jim frowned. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” she said, surely. “No, never.”
“Then what?”

“You’re a leader, Kirk. A bleeding-heart with the brains to live up to it. You know what’s right, and you know what has to be done, even when it’s extreme, or out-landish. When I give Scott and Harrison problems that can’t be solved, they take a look and say as much. They’re smart. They know when there’s simply no solution. But you… Kirk, you never stop looking for a way out. You’re the kind of person this world needs.” She paused. “You’re the kind of person who has to make it through this.”

He started to feel nervous. “That’s… nice. To hear, I mean. But what does it have to-“

“Mel.” She said, simply. “Who’s Mel’s partner?”

“You are.”

“That’s right. And who’s in charge of taking care of all of you?”

“You, sir.”

“Right again. So tell me this, Kirk. If taking care of you bunch means I can’t be one of you, then who’s gonna be Mel’s partner?”

He started to realize where she was going. “Oh.”

“Oh is right.” Her face contorted into pain, briefly. “Kirk… if this is too much to ask of you, tell me. There’s no shame in it. But someone-“

“I’ll do it.”

Dan looked up at him in surprise.

“I’ll do it,” he said again, determined. “I’ll watch out for Mel.”

Dan sighed in relief. “Good. Thank… thank you.”

“I’ll watch out for all of them,” Jim said.

She looked away from him. She was hiding something, but not well enough.

“Two plus two equals four,” said Jim.

“Kirk?”

“And you’re not planning on making it.”

Dan sighed, slowly. “No,” she said, softly. “No, I’m not.”

Jim looked down at his lap and swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Oh."

"Kirk..." She reached out gently and then put her hand on his shoulder. He looked back up at her. She was smiling. "Don't tell anyone. Our secret, okay?"

"Gik'tal," he said, quietly.

She gently punched his arm. "Gik'tal," she agreed.
Jim couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t been hungry.

His stomach ached constantly- so that he almost didn’t notice it until he moved just right, or just wrong, and suddenly the pain came slamming back into focus. He and Nina sat side-by-side on the floor next to his bed, legs crossed neatly, eyes closed.

He’d laughed the first time Spock had tried to show him how to meditate. Little had he known, it would become something that kept him from losing it later on.

It wasn’t like when he and Spock went into a meld. He didn’t see any colors, or crystals, or cars. No star systems, or trees, or little adobe houses. It was a blank, empty blackness, interrupted only when he opened his eyes.

It was calming, though. When he’d first started attempting to do evening meditation with Spock, it had been impossible. His body was too fidgety, and his mind moved a mile a second. He’d barely been able to keep it up for a whole minute, in stark contrast to Spock’s twenty. He hadn’t even tried the morning meditation that Spock went through, though that was technically because Spock did it while Jim was still asleep. Morning meditation took Spock hours.

Spock had assured him, twenty minutes was ideal for humans. He was Vulcan, and like most other Vulcans, it was pertinent that he took the time to put his mind into complete order and logic before he began the day. There were emotions to dismantle, and thoughts to neatly compartmentalize. There was a reason that Vulcans didn’t require much sleep- if they did, they’d probably never have the appropriate amount of time to meditate.

That had been in the beginning. Anymore, Jim could easily make it twenty minutes, and sometimes found himself indulging even longer. All there was to do was focus on the in and out of his breathing, and allow his body to do the rest. Who knew all it would take to get him there was a bit of starvation?

His mind didn’t have to focus on anything. He simply had to exist.

Nina said, “I can’t.”

Jim’s eyes snapped open. He looked over to the clock on his desk and frowned. “It’s only been five minutes,” he said. Nina’s average was twelve.

“I can’t,” she cried. “I’m too hungry.”

Jim’s own stomach twisted with the reminder. “That’s the point,” Jim said. “To stop thinking about it.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” she insisted. “I am starving!”

Jim thought, *not yet, we aren’t, but soon…* Out loud he said, “We’ve only got another hour before lunch.”
“I don’t want lunch!” She yelled. “It’s gonna be stupid lettuce! All we ever eat is lettuce! I never want to see another lettuce leaf ever again!”

“I thought you were hungry,” Jim mused.

“I’m starving!” She screamed.

Jim stood, backing away from her. “Nina—“ she started to cry. Jim sighed and then knelt back down next to her, throwing his arm around her shoulders. “We’re not starving,” he said. “Just… hungry.”

“It hurts!” She sobbed. “I’m hungry all the time! I just want- I just want a hamburger? Is that too much to ask? Just one bite!?”

Thoughts of a huge, meaty burger, dripping with grease, and mustard, and ketchup- with slabs of pickles and tomato and melted Swiss cheese, and a thick, crisp bun, assaulted Jim’s mind. His stomach growled as his mouth filled with saliva. God, what he wouldn’t do for a burger.

“I promise,” Jim said, “Once we get off of this planet, first thing I’ll do is buy us both some big, juicy hamburgers. Okay?”

Defeated, she curled into his side. “Okay…”

“Wanna try again?” Jim asked, softly.

“No,” she said. She pushed away from him and rearranged her limbs into her mediation pose. “But I’ll do it anyway.”

“Thatta girl,” Jim said, and grinned. He put himself into position and closed his eyes, too.

The image of the hamburger hung in his subconscious, all-consuming. He swallowed back his spit and forcibly pushed away the image, returning his thoughts to his breath. In, and out. In, and out. In… and… out.

They were outside when the truck pulled up.

Jim eyes went wide, just like everyone else’s. They’d been out looking around for mushrooms in the yard, though they’d all told Dan they were just playing, but the sight of the food truck stopped them cold.

They all took off in a sprint towards it. Before they could reach it, though, Dan burst out of the school building and screamed, “WAIT!”

They all froze, looking back to her. Jim’s head swiveled between the truck and Dan, in those split seconds. He registered that something was wrong, but not everyone was so lucky. Sebastian Scott broke from the group and finished the run towards the truck, waving his arms.

“NO!” Dan yelled, but it was no use. The truck stopped, and from its back troops unloaded instead of food. Jim didn’t recognize them or their uniform and knew they weren’t from off-planet, coming
to save them all. They were too thin, too pale. Locals.

A man dressed in a suite stepped out after the six armed guards did, waving towards Dan. Sebastian scrambled back from the truck and re-formed with the group, guiltily lowering his head to stare at the ground when Dan glared at him.

Jim realized she’d probably hoped to get them all out of sight before the truck took them in. Sebastian had blown their cover, but why they would need that cover, Jim didn’t know. He nervously watched as Dan stepped forward and inclined her head to the man in the suite.

“Governor Kodos,” she said. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Jim could tell by her stony face that it wasn’t a surprise, and it was not pleasant.

He swallowed.

The man was tall, and he had dark gingery hair and a finely trimmed beard. His brown eyes were sharp with intelligence and authority. When he spoke, his voice came out clear, and crisp, with a roll of power to it.

“General,” he said.

“Not anymore, sir,” Dan reminded him patiently.

Kodos paid her no head. He looked around her, at their group. “These are your little troopers, hm?” He smiled at them. “Hello there. I’m terribly sorry we haven’t had the chance to meet in person, though Dan here has been sending me all your ideas through the telegraph. I must admit, they were excellent, even if they didn’t solve the problem.”

They all shifted awkwardly, not knowing what to do. Jet said, “Thank you, sir.”

“And so polite,” Kodos said with a smile.

He seemed nice, but Dan’s tense body language had Jim on edge.

“What can we do for you, Sir?” Dan asked. “Surely you didn’t just drop in to tell my kids thank you.”

“Oh, not at all. May we?” He gestured towards the mess hall.

“Of course,” Dan said. “Kids, why don’t you go back to your-“

“Oh, no, please, bring them along. What I have in mind concerns them, too.”

Dan nodded, jerkily. “Of course.”

They all shuffled into the mess hall, where they were directed to sit in their usual seats. Jim noted the way Dan angled her chair out, like she was ready to rise at a moment’s notice, and did the same. All along the table the other children noticed his shift and mimicked it, so that they were all angled out and ready to stand when Dan demanded it.

Kodo’s guards lined the wall they faced, each at the ready. Kodos walked before them, inspecting the dining hall. He peered around and into the kitchen, frowning. “It’s about dinner time, isn’t it?” He asked. “Yet you haven’t prepared any food.”

“Nothing left to prepare,” Dan said. “We’ve got a couple jars of peanut butter left in the cupboard.
“One of your ideas?” He looked at them.

“M-mine, sir.” Ezra shakily raised his hand. “Like in Narnia, with the prince.”

Kodo’s eyes gleamed. “A reader! How delightful. I loved the Narnia chronicles. Tell me, which was your favorite?”

Ezra seemed to shed his nervousness a little. “Um, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Sir. I really liked them all, but that one was my favorite. I like stories about ships.”

“I see.” Kodos smiled and sat at the empty end of the table. “I’m rather fond of *The Last Battle*, myself. Do you all read the classics?”

They all nodded, uneasily.

“Then you’ve read Shakespeare, of course?” Kodos asked.

Ezra eagerly nodded. “He’s one of our favorites! We loved *Hamlet*!”

“Y-yeah,” Mel pitched in. “It had a ghost in it.”

“Ah, to be, or not to be,” Kodos dramatically proclaimed. “That is the question.”

“You like Shakespeare, too?” Joel asked.

“My boy, it’s my passion! My favorite is *All’s Well that Ends Well*, if you can believe it.”

Ezra grinned. “We haven’t gotten to that one yet. We’re working on *Prince of Tyre*, but I think that *All’s Well* is next. Is that right, Dan?”

They all looked back at her. She didn’t share their merry mood, Jim noticed.

“That’s right.” She said, plainly. “Maybe the Governor here could come by again, and sit in on a reading.”

“Yeah!” Mel cheered. “You could do the voices!”

Kodos laughed. “You think I’ve a talent for it, do you?”

“Oh yeah,” Ezra said. “You’ve got the deep voice. It’s dramatic.”

“I’d be delighted,” Kodos said. “Though… there is one problem.”

“A problem?” Joel asked.

Kodos nodded. “Dan has exercised the lot of you from the government. In fact, I had no idea whether or not you were still here. She simply stopped replying to our telegrams…” he trailed off.

“It broke,” Dan said plainly.

“How odd, that you couldn’t get your group of geniuses to fix it,” Kodos said, lightly.

“Must of slipped my mind.”

“I’m sure.” He stood. Walking over to one of his guards, he held out his hand, and was passed a
thick file. “Now, I really wish I could continue our lovely conversation, but I’ve come on business.” He looked up at the kids. “How much do you know about eugenics? Go on, don’t be shy.”

“It’s out-dated science,” T said. They hadn’t piped up yet, so it startled Jim to hear them suddenly speak. “It’s a belief that you can pick and chose what people are better than the others based on their genetics.”

“To improve the quality of a human population,” Kodos said. “What else?”

“It was coined by a guy named Francis Galton back in the year 1883,” T continued. “Old-Earth stuff. Even back then, it was kinda taboo, before we’d even signed any agreement of ethics as a species. Hell, back before we even joined together as a species.”

“Old knowledge,” Kodos mused. “Just like Shakespeare, hm?”

They fell quiet.

“I looked over your work,” Kodos said. He put the file down on the table and sat again. “All of it. It was commendable, really- a very valiant effort. But the equation was wrong. You didn’t change it, look at it differently. X amount of food, Y amount of humans, Z amount of time.”

“That’s not true” Jet said, slowly. “We tested with all kinds of different amounts of food and time.”

“But not people,” Kodos said.

“You can’t change the number of people,” Jet said. “We know how many people are on the planet—there’s records. It wouldn’t make any sense to re-do the equation with any imaginary number, because in the end, there will still be that amount of people.”

Kodos said, “So it would seem. You are all criminals, you know—legally, see? Each one of you have a red tab on your file.” He showed them. “It’s bad enough as is, but I’ve decided to keep to my equation.” He picked up the first file in his stack. “Kevin Riley.”

Kevin jolted, sitting up straight. “Yes, sir?”

“You have asthma?”

“Yes, sir.”

Kodos nodded.

Dan stood. “Now hold on a minute—“

“Patience, General. I haven’t finished. Please. Have a seat.” The way his guards stood at eager attention didn’t leave any room for debate. Dan sat back down, slowly.

Jim could tell the jovial, easy mood from earlier was gone. Something was up.

“Ezra Fisher?”

The boy sat back up. “Y—yes sir?”

“Ah, my avid reader. You have a family history of diabetes?”

“I, um, guess. Mom has it, and so does grandpa.”
Kodos nodded. “Joel Outhier. Am I saying that right? Outheir?”

Joel said, “Yes sir.”

“Circulatory complications.”

“Um, yes, sir.” Joel looked down at the table.

Kodos said, “James Kirk?”

Jim looked up.

Kodos paused. “Kirk. Kirk, Kirk, Kirk- where have I heard that name?”

Jim sighed. “The Kelvin incident, sir.”

Kodos’s eyes lit up. “That’s right! George Kirk. Are you his son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard this before, but your father was a hero.”

Jim fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair. “Thank you, sir.”

“No need to be shy. I’m a fan, really. There was a man who understood that at times, there is no other option but for some to die in order for others to live. What he did was remarkable.” Then he frowned. “You have allergies, James?”

“I do.” Jim frowned. “Seasonal stuff. Lots of medications.”

“Unfortunate,” Kodos sighed. “Jessie Harrison?”

“It’s Jet,” she said.

“History of depression and a heart valve complication.”

She colored, looking away. “Yeah, that’s right.”

Kodos nodded. “And General Dan,” he said. He looked down the table towards her, and stood, closing the folder with all the papers in it. He hefted it back into his arms. “History of obesity, depression, PTSD, and anxiety.”

Dan narrowed her eyes. “My mental health records were sealed.”

“Being Governor has its perks,” he said. He stepped back against the wall. “I’m very sorry, children, General. But I’ve re-calculated your equation, and some variables have to change.”

_Oh_. Jim realized. _Oh no._

Dan stood up, suddenly, chair scraping against the floor. Her eyes lit up in fury as she whipped her shirt up and yanked a phaser from the front of her pants. “RUN!” She screamed.

They scattered.

Dan vaulted over the table and rushed Kodos. His guards fell into line hurriedly, to protect him. She shot one and he disappeared in a wave of light, but she didn’t make it any farther than that.
Jim grabbed Nina and Mel and was out, through the back kitchen. They’d had plenty of militant drills in the past, and they each knew which way to run and scatter, as well as when and where to rendezvous. Jim had never had Mel at his side, but she’d been sitting near enough to grab when Dan had let out her order, and he had no trouble scooping her up in his mad rush for the door.

The sound of chaos chased them out the door. There was shouting, and phaser fire, but Jim didn’t dare look back. He booked it into the woods, feet barely touching the ground, Nina’s hand clenched tightly in his.

They all had emergency bags on the edges of the property. He ducked down to grab his and found there was an extra there. Dan must have planned on this. He grabbed two himself and passed Nina her own in mere seconds, and then took off into the woods.

He ran, and ran, and ran, until every part of his body hurt. He didn’t stop then. Eventually, Nina’s legs gave out on her, and when that happened he paused only to hustle her up onto his back. He held Mel to his front and let Nina cling onto his shoulders and picked up again, not running, but trudging forward with determination.

Night fell.

He still didn’t stop. The ion cloud that hung about the planet scattered yellow-green light into their path, showing Jim the way. He’d tracked the emergency route plenty of times before, and knew his way by the stars- just barely visible beyond the ion cloud. He’d never done it so quickly, before-it had always taken the day to do.

*See if Kodos’s men keep up with us*, he thought, savagely.

It was the first thought that wasn’t instinct- *run, move, go*. He felt rage overtake him in the next instant and choked back a sob.

Dan was dead.

He collapsed in step, jarring Nina and Mel into awakening. As soon as he began to cry they joined in, too, weeping hard and quiet in the darkness of the woods. Jim drew the two girls closer to himself and hugged them both, allowing them all just a moment to be human. When Mel’s lamenting started to gain volume he stood, shaking his head.

“We have to be quiet,” he choked. “They’ll find us.”

“Dan,” Mel whimpered. “I want Dan!”

“Dan’s dead,” Nina bitterly whispered. “They killed her!”

Jim glared at Nina as Mel’s sobbing picked up intensity. Still, he couldn’t berate her for speaking the truth. “We’ve got to keep moving,” he said. “We can’t let them catch up.”

Both girls opened their mouths in protest, but Jim cut them off.

“No complaining. I know it’s hard. I know we’re tired. I know we’re hungry, and I know we’re sad. You can take all the time you want to process that when we’re at our hiding place, but until then, you have to be quiet. Understand?”

They both nodded.

“Good.” He unburdened himself of the three packs, arms shaking with the strain. “I can’t carry you
any more. You both have to walk, and carry your packs. Okay?”

“I can’t,” Mel said.

“You can,” said Jim. “I know you can. Come on. Get up.”

Mel shakily climbed to her feet. Jim reached down and took her hand in his. His other hand he offered up to Nina, who silently took it and began walking again. Jim ignored the instinct to comfort Mel as she continued to quietly sniff. They’d have time for that later- for the moment, they had to keep moving.

They made it when the sun began to peak over the horizon. Jim checked the dug-out before ushering both girls in, and then covered the entrance with leaves again after they all shimmied down into the darkness. It was damp, and cold, but it was safe.

Jim squished himself in-between the two girls and opened up his pack. They both perked at the sound of the zipper.

“A small drink,” he warned them. “We have to make it last.”

They both eagerly nodded. Jim had already commandeered their packs, so that they wouldn’t give in and waste. Slowly, he poured a lid full of water from his pack’s canteen and handed it to Mel. She carefully raised it to her lips and drank, sighing happily as she handed it back. He gave another lid-full over to Nina, and then drank one himself.

One of the girls’ stomachs loudly growled in the dark.

“Here here,” Jim joked.

They both giggled, albeit nervously.

Jim broke open one stick of jerky. He tore it into three parts and divested one to each girl, before eating one himself. It wasn’t enough- not nearly enough- but they had little choice if they wanted their limited rations to last.

“I’m still hungry,” Mel whispered.

“I know.” Jim sighed. “But that’s all we can eat right now. We’ll have another snack in the morning, okay? I promise.”

“We’ve got more food,” Nina tried. “One more stick of jerky couldn’t hurt.”

“You did the math same as me,” Jim said. “We have to make it last, and we can survive on this.”

Mel’s breath hitched, as though she was intending to start crying again.

“Want to hear a story?” Jim rushed.

Mel’s breathing returned to normal. “… A story?”

Jim found himself nodding, though he had no idea what he was going to say. “Yeah. A bedtime story.”

“Okay,” Mel whispered.

“Yeah,” Nina said. She tucked herself in closer to Jim, so that all three of them where in one big
heap of warmth. “A story would be nice.”


He had no idea what to say.

“Go on,” Mel said. “We won’t laugh at you.”

“Unless you want us to,” Nina added.

Jim laughed a little bit. “I was just thinking. Don’t worry. Okay…” And he had it. He smiled, and slipped one arm around each of his partners. “Once upon a time, there was a prince. He was half human, half alien, and he lived on a desert planet, far, far away.”

They settled into him, more comfortably. He felt them begin to relax.

“One day, the little prince had to leave his planet with the king and queen, to go back to the human queen’s planet.”

“Terra,” Mel whispered happily.

“Terra,” Jim agreed. “And even though the prince wanted nothing more than to stay home with his beloved pet I-Chaya, he had to go. Sadly, he packed his bags. Little did he know, there would be something waiting for him on Terra. A young Terran farm boy who had adventures in his back-pack, and a whole new planet for them to find.”

“I like this story,” said Nina.

“Me too,” said Mel.

Jim smiled. “Yeah, I’m pretty fond of it myself.”

“Keep going!” Mel urged him.

“Alright. On the day the prince and the Terran met, the Terran gave the prince a gift. Like nothing else the young prince had ever been given.”

“What was it?” Mel asked.

Jim grinned into the dark. “A false darkling beetle.”

He talked, and talked, and talked, all through the early morning chill, about the young prince and the farmer boy, until the girls both drifted off. Jim follow them shortly, into a deep, dream-full sleep, about Chevys, and corn fields, and huge, human brown eyes, asking him when he was coming home.

Soon, he hoped. Soon.

They all met in a cave deep within the forest a couple days later. It was to be their new home until things were "settled." Suddenly, they all knew what Dan meant by that. They had to wait everything out until Starfleet arrived, or they’d be killed.
Or rather, some of them. Jim theorized that those Kodos hadn’t called on after reading their files were the select few meant to leave the mess hall alive. Still, they all knew that only trouble was waiting for them outside the forest— even the select few who hadn’t been marked for death. There had been that whole thing about them all being criminals, anyway. It was possible that the majority of them having health complications was just the cherry on top; one final excuse to sentence them all to death.

Sebastian hadn’t made it to the cave.

Kevin wouldn’t talk about it. He sat silently, unwilling to speak, in the corner of the cave. He had two packs. One was splattered with blood. They were all able to draw their conclusions from there, but it was concerning that Kevin wouldn’t speak. He’d always loved to sing and dance, but they couldn’t even cajole him with a song. Eventually, they decided to leave him be.

Jet was the oldest, so she was in charge.

Jet wouldn’t get up from where she was laying curled up in her sleeping back.

“Jet,” Ezra pleaded. “Jet! Come on, Jet! We don’t know what to do.”

She pulled the sleeping bag tighter around her shoulder, ignoring him.

“Jet! Please!”

“I don’t know what to do either.” She said. Her voice held none of is fire. “Let me be.”

And so it fell to Jim.

He wanted to say I don’t know what to do, or, this was supposed to be Sebastian’s job, or Jet’s job, not mine, or even, don’t you realize I’m just as lost as you all are? Instead, he squared his jaw and stood tall.

“We’ll arranged all the sleeping bags in the back of the cave together, to conserve warmth. Partners next to partners, Kevin and Jet are partners now. Nina- you’re Ezra’s new partner.”

Nina said, “But you and I are-“

“I know,” he said. “But Ezra needs you.”

She opened her mouth again, as if to fight him, but she seemed to realize there was nothing to do about it. She closed her mouth and clenched her jaw before giving a determined nod. “Yes, sir.”

Oh hell no. "I'm not Dan," he said. "You don't have to call me sir."

But it stuck.

“All the packs over in that corner,” Jim instructed.

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll keep up snacking like we were before. No one eats alone, we all eat together. It has to be fair, no matter age or strength or what.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here are the new teams. Team one’s me and Mel. Two is T and Joel. Three is Nina and Ezra, and four is Jet and Kevin. One team always has to be here at the base to keep an eye on things… that’ll
be team four.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jim carefully laid out a plan. In the evenings, when they had the cover of darkness, two teams would leave the base to forage for food. Mushrooms, wild onions, berries; anything edible. Jim knew there were slim chances of finding anything that would really sustain them, but he had to hope. Dan had found a cave next to a creek, so once a day one team could go to bathe and collect drinking water. In the mornings, when it was still dark out, one team would collect kindling for a fire. They’d boil the water, and then when the sky got too clear and the haze of the ion cloud was pierced through by sunlight, they’d smother the flames.

There was always someone on lookout. Jim decided that they’d cycle between himself, T, Joel, and if she could be persuaded to get up, Jet. The others were young, and he worried their minds would wander.

They had enough rations to last a couple of weeks, if they ate the bare minimum.

“We can do this,” Jim said. “We will do this.”

“Yes, sir!”

They’d collected next to nothing. Mushrooms had proved bountiful, but most of them weren’t fit to eat. Joel was the resident mushroom expert, and he ruled out so many that Jim felt like he wanted to cry.

“Why the hell are so many poisonous?” Jim muttered. “People put them here! Who decides on putting poisonous mushrooms in artificial wild?!”

“They were planning on eventually introducing a living ecosystem,” Joel said. “Lots of animals and insects need the things we don’t.”

“Well they’re not here,” Jim had ground out, “We are. It would have been nice if they’d left us something more to forage.”

They were left with scraps to eat when they ran out of provisions, and it took its toll quickly.

By the end of their second week in hiding, Jet was too weak to stand. She didn’t eat, she barely drank. On the third day of the third week, Jet didn’t wake up.

They buried her by the cave, though Jim felt they hardly had the energy to dig even a shallow grave.

He added Kevin to Nina’s team. Jet’s death startled the boy into reality again, and though he still didn’t speak, he did as asked and worked just as hard as the others. Jim knew Jet was likely only the first to go- not the last- but he hoped.

It was all he could do, it seemed.
He could count each one of his ribs. He could see each one of Mel’s individual vertebra. Though it was hot outside when they went to bathe, Mel shook so hard with shivers that Jim feared she would fall at any given moment.

“J-J-Jim,” her teeth chattered, “Am I clean yet?”

“Nearly,” Jim said gently, and used one of Jet’s old shirts to finish wiping her back down. He knew that if they started to let themselves go, they might give up just like Jet had, so he hoped that the effort to stay clean and nearly presentable would keep their spirits high.

“Done,” Jim declared.

They’d all had one change of clothes in their packs. Mel used her old ones to towel off with, then changed into the new. She tossed the wet clothes over to Jim, who began to wash them in the creek water.

Mel crawled up onto a rock and splayed out like a lizard, her chattering teeth slowly ceasing their movement. She closed her eyes, and Jim called, “Don’t fall asleep.”

“I won’t,” she promised.

Twenty seconds later, she was lightly snoring.

Jim sighed. They all slept more than they should have been. They couldn’t help it- they were always tired, always sore. Jim felt like he had a nap instead of lunch every day, and a snooze instead of dinner, and he rested his eyes for breakfast, and-

All the thoughts of meal time twisted his stomach. He looked at the grass growing by the creek. No, he told himself, even as his hand reached out. No, this is a bad idea.

He ripped a chunk out of the ground and shoved it into his mouth.

Once he started, he couldn’t stop. He pulled fist-fulls of grass out of the ground frantically, shoving them into his mouth. He hadn’t chewed so much in months, his jaw instantly began to ache- and Jim loved it. He shoved more and more grass into his mouth, swallowing the stuff down half-chewed and nearly gagging on the texture.

“Jim?”

He looked over to where Mel was waking up, staring at him in complete bemusement.

He spat what was in his mouth out. “Mel, wait-”

But she was already pulling grass up by the roots and eagerly shoving it into her open mouth.

Jim made a move as if to stop her, but he could feel the grass in his stomach. He hadn’t felt so full in ages. He reached down to rip more out of the ground, chewing hurriedly. He swallowed more, and more, and more, until-

He doubled over, heaving loudly on to the ground. Mel froze where she’d been eating, hand halfway to her face. Jim threw up again, gagging, and spat. “Ugh…” he stood, sure he was done, just for
his stomach to painfully clench again. He fell to his hands and knees and started to throw up again.

Mel hadn’t eaten as much as he had by half, and so she sat worriedly upon her rock, waiting for him to finish. When Jim felt like he’d emptied himself of food completely he shakily forced himself to his feet.

“I’m sorry, Mel,” he said. His throat was raw and he had to whisper.

“Grass is bad for you,” she said. “We’re not cows, so we can’t break down the cellulose. We can’t get any nu- nutrition from it.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, weakly. “You said it, kid.”

They made their way slowly back to the cave.

“Don’t worry,” Mel joked. “I won’t tell anyone you went crazy.”

Jim smiled a little. “Thanks, Melody.”

Starfleet will come in six months, she’d said.

They were two weeks into the second month of waiting when Jim lost another one. It was nighttime, so they could finally get up without fear of being spotted. Jim went about rousing everyone from sleep like usual.

Except one didn’t wake.

“Nina,” Jim reached out and shook her shoulder. “Nina, come on. Don’t make me tickle you.”

She’d pulled the stunt before. She’d lay limp as a doll so that he’d think she was still in deep, deep sleep. Jim was worried by how often she did that, lately. All she ever seemed to do was sleep.

And her shoulder felt so bony beneath his hand, he worried if he gripped her any tighter, he might shatter her.

“Nina,” he said. She didn’t stir. “Alright, you asked for it.”

He reached down and ran his hands up and down her sides, which usually prompted her to shriek and kick him away. This time, however, she held still, not so much as twitching beneath his ministrations.

Hard, cold dread settled in his stomach like a weight.

“Nina?” He pulled back her sleeping bag and put his hand on her side. She was cold to the touch.

Revulsion rose up in his throat. He gagged, stumbling away from her body as horror took him by the neck. He scrambled back until he hit the way, and then curled in on himself.

Nina.
Nina.

She was only ten—eleven at most. She’d wanted to be a neurosurgeon. She’d had three brothers waiting for her on Mars, and a cat named Mr. Moose, and a sparkly blue tutu that she would wear to dinner when she was feeling particularly fancy and she’d liked his stories about Spock and she’d laughed at his stupid jokes and she’d told him she couldn’t wait to be home and oh god he’d promised to buy her a burger when they got off this fucking death planet, this trap, this rock that they were all chained on, all going to die on, all going to-

“She’s still fresh.” Joel said.

Jim looked up in horror. “What are you-“

“Meat.” Joel said, emptily. “That’s. That’s a lot of meat to waste.”

Jim turned to find the other kids eyeing her just as hungrily.

“No!” He exploded. He stood and held his arms out, shielding her body from view. “What are you saying?!?”

“We’re starving to death!” Joel cried. “She’s already gone, Kirk, we’ve got to eat!”

“She’s our friend!”

“Was,” said T, quietly.

Kevin inched a little closer, nodding.

“No.” Jim said, sternly. “No! This—this is wrong! I don’t care if it’s, if it’s the smart thing to do. No. We’re…” he swallowed against the lump in his throat. “We’re friends. We can’t. We can’t eat her. No…”

They slowly turned their eyes away from him.

“No.” Jim said, firmer. He was crying, but he didn’t care. “No! We’re going to give her a proper burial. It’s what she deserves.”

“And what do we deserve?” Joel snapped. “To starve?”

“I’m hungry!” Ezra screamed.

“I know! I know.” Jim said. He dragged a hand down his face. “I know. We’re all hungry.”

They were silent.

“Come on,” Jim said, quietly. “Help… help me get her out of here.”

No one moved.

Jim sighed. “Joel? T?”

Joel said, “Unless we’re moving her to the fire-“

“I’ll help you.” T said. They stood, slowly, and made their way over to Jim. “I’m sorry,” they whispered.
Jim nodded tightly. “It… it was bound to happen.”

T nodded.

Together, they buried Nina out beside Jet, marking her grave with a single stone. For a while, they stood there, staring.

“Thank you,” Jim said, voice small.

T nodded. “Yeah,” they said. “Promise you’re not gonna give up your stance?”

Jim turned, brows furrowed. “What? Of course I won’t. We- we’re not eating anyone.”

“Good.” T nodded.

“Why? Weren’t you just campaigning for it?”

“Yeah,” T said. They shrugged.

“Why the change of heart?”

“Because.” T said, simply. “Next time it might be me.”

They planned a raid. Jim felt awful about it, knowing that their survival meant other’s deaths, but they had very little choice in the matter. Jim had promised Dan to look after the other kids, and so he would.

Nina’s death was already heavy enough on his shoulders. If all they had to do was steal to ensure that it wouldn’t happen again, so be it.

Jim usually wouldn’t have gone alone, as Dan had always trained them to thrive in pairs. It was easier with two, but Jim knew that he might be caught. If so, he’d rather he died alone.

They’d already gone back to their base once before. It had been cleaned out completely- the buildings stood lonely, empty, and clean- ghosts of a time since passed. Even the mess hall had been cleaned up. There was no sign of a struggle, or any life, really. The school house had been emptied of its books, and their possessions had been stripped away from the bunk house.

Back then, when they hadn’t been so desperate, Jim had allowed himself to feel a momentary pang of sadness for the Enterprise, which he’d left sitting on his desk. She was gone, when he came back for her, but they’d had bigger things to worry about.

As Jim crept towards town, he wondered how it was that he’d ever had time to feel pain for an object. Anymore, it was hard to put living creatures into perspective under the force of his hunger. If he happened to be robbing the life from someone else, well… kaiidh.

The town was old-fashioned, almost western. The couple of times Dan had taken them in there had been a lot of grass and plants, but as Jim crept between the buildings he found that everything was dusty and brown. There wasn’t anyone out and about, though he saw a few houses and buildings
with the lights on. A nearby diner’s windows had all been smashed in, and the doors were boarded up. Jim swallowed hard and stuck to the shadows, feeling as though he were walking willingly into the jaws of death.

He didn’t want to take from the common people if he could avoid it. He knew it was more dangerous, but they were just as much victims as he and his troops. Kodos and his militia were the real villains.

Jim knew that if Kodos had stayed his hand, the populace would just be coming towards the end of their food supply. There had been riots when the killings had started, though, and a lot had been lost. Storage houses had burned to the ground. Resources had been lost. Jim had no idea how close the living population was to death.

He ducked behind a small brick wall as four armed guards went stepping down the middle of the street, legs falling into perfect unison. Jim felt his heart hammering in his chest, so hard and loud he worried that they could hear it.

They passed by. He remained behind the wall for a minute, trying to recollect himself.

He turned and continued on, down towards one of the guard stations. Night was falling fast, and the ion cloud that surrounded the planet turned the sunset a sickly green as it spread itself over the town. Jim stopped to hide in an alleyway as another squad of troops marched past. He clenched his hands into fists and looked down at them, noticing how awkwardly large they seemed on his stick-thin arms.

His skin was pale and greenish in the fading light of day. A memory arrested him, almost violently, with its suddenness and strength.

“Spock?” Jim turned to him, helping the young Vulcan right himself. His skin was cold and rain-slicked. Spock looked completely alien in the darkness, his lips turning coppery with the cold, his skin pale, tea green. His eyelids were olive and the tips of his fingers were nearly white. “You okay?”

“I am fine.”

“Come on,” Jim said. He started to jog. “We’ll be warmer if we move faster.”

Jim shook the memory off, startling back to the present. He pushed himself up straight and finished sneaking down the street, leaning against the wall of the guard house. He leaned up, hoping the darkness would excuse his shadow, and peered into the window.

Empty.

Kodos had put a curfew into effect, just like Jim had predicted. Good- that meant the guards would all be out on patrol.

Jim pushed the window up and open, pulling himself up over the sill. He landed soundlessly inside, looking around for any cameras or other traps that could detect him. He found none- he was completely alone in the guard house.

He made his way over to the only cabinet in the room that had been locked. Around the handles was a large, thick chain, and keeping them tight was an electronic lock. Jim grinned at it. While they were harder to break than padlocks or combination locks, and safer, that was only to the average person. Jim had hacked his fair share of locks in the past, and he was sure if he could get past Starfleet security locks, a standard pattern lock would be no different.
He was right. It had been a long time since he’d hacked into anything, and so it took him longer than he’d hoped. By the time he cracked the code his fingers were shaking with nerves and sweat had wet his face completely.

It opened with a small click. Jim let out a sigh and opened the cabinet, dropping the chains on the ground.

Heaven. He’d stumbled into heaven.

There were a couple jars of peanut butter, and some canned fish, and pickles, and beans. Jim had planned to be discrete, in case they wanted to come back and steal from the same place twice, but the sight of so much food arrested him immediately. He began to frantically fill the empty pack he’d slung over his shoulder.

This much food could last them a long, long time. Who cared if the guards knew they’d been robbed? They hadn’t found Jim or his group so far, and stealing wasn’t going to change that. He filled the pack to the brim and then crept back over to the window. He dropped the backpack carefully outside, and then threw his leg up over the cill.

He realized, then, that if he left the cabinet open and unlocked, the first person to walk back into the guard house would sound the alarm. He reluctantly turned around and moved back over to the cabinet, closing it and wrapping the chains back around the handles. He secured the lock and opened up the program, thinking then to change the code so that the soldiers wouldn’t be able to get in and discover the robbery for an even longer time.

That was when the door opened.

“Hey!”

Jim’s heart leapt into his throat. He turned just in time to avoid phaser fire. It hit the cabinet beside him, harmlessly- it was on stun.

Jim ducked and rolled, making a mad dash for the window. The guard caught on and ran forward, cutting off Jim’s escape. The guard had left the door open, though. Jim reached forward and grabbed a chair from a table posted in the middle of the room. He hefted it up, knees bucking under the weight, and threw it. It didn’t even hit the guard- it slammed against the wall next to the man- but it was enough of an obstacle and distraction. Jim made it to the door.

Another guard was waiting there. Jim’s eyes widened and he ducked, just as the guard swung down the butt of her phaser. It caught him in the back of the head, but he’d managed to avoid the brunt of the attack. He rolled and ran for it, feet barely touching the dusty ground as he made a mad dash for his bag.

He scooped it up and slung it over his back. The weight disrupted him as he swung around the back of the building, and along with the head wound, he was suddenly overcome by vertigo. He slammed into the side of the building, grunting, and then felt his stomach twist in horror as he heard glass shatter. His side grew wet where liquid from the broken jars in the bag seeped through.

“Shit,” he righted himself and made off into the woods, the two guards hot on his tail. He’d scoped out the area before hand and knew how to throw them off, even with the extra weight of his pack slowing him down. He ran, and ran, until slowly, he could no longer hear their voices or their footfalls as they persuade him. Even still, he didn’t allow himself to grow comfortable. He kept running.
He was dizzy with fatigue, hunger, and pain. He could feel blood trickling into his collar from where the guard had bashed him over the head, but he continued on regardless. It took him three hours to reach the cave, but when he did, he came home to cheers.

“Jim!” Mel ran from the cave to him, stopping him with a hug. “Jim, Jim, Jim! You did it!”

He grinned. “Sure did, Mel.”

T trotted out to him. “Kirk! You-” their smile fell. “You’re injured.”

Jim reached up to the back of his head, where the blood had grown tacky. He touched the wound, gingerly, and drew his hand back into his line of sight to look at it. The blood on his fingers was dark- almost brown tinged in the cover of night. “Yeah,” he said.

“Never mind that!” Joel said. “Food? Did you get it?”

Jim pulled the pack off of his shoulders and stumbled the last few steps into the cave, sliding down the wall to sit. Ezra and Kevin flanked him, eagerly waiting for the reveal.

Jim pulled the zipper open without any fanfare. His heart squeezed when he saw how many of the jars had been broken. Slowly, he pulled them out, cupping the food in his dirty hands. Kevin reached out and snatched a pickled from his hand, and then Ezra. T, Mel, and Joel surged forward, all grabbing from him and shoving the food into their mouths.

They moaned, eyes closing as they chewed. Jim laughed, weakly, and ate a pickle himself.

God, the flavor. It was the best thing he’d ever had. Salty, and just the side of bitter, and oh, heavenly garlic, real, real food.

“Tonight,” Jim said, and pulled the rest of the ruined jars from the pack, “We feast.”

They all cried out in joy.

“But shouldn’t we save it?” T asked.

Jim sighed. “I wish we could. But the jars that broke… the food in them will go bad.”

T nodded.

They had some peaches, pickles, and black-eyed peas. It was enough food to call a feast. Jim was torn between delight and sadness. Looking back in the pack, he had enough to maybe last them a couple of weeks, if they were careful. He’d been too careless. If they didn’t have to eat all they had that night, they could have made it so much longer.

“Hey,” T said. They could sense the conflicting roiling inside of Jim. “You did good.”

“Not good enough,” Jim said. One stupid mistake could mean the death of another one of his friends.

“Better than anyone else could have, Kirk.” T smiled. “Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

Jim nodded. His vision swam.

“Eat up,” T said. “I’ll patch your head up when we’ve stuffed ourselves silly.”

Jim smiled. He looked over and caught Kevin stuffing his mouth and snapped, “Hey!”
They all froze.

“Sorry,” he sighed. “Didn’t mean to shout at you. Pace yourselves, guys, we can let this all last until tomorrow night at least. Otherwise we’ll make ourselves sick.”

“We still might,” Joel said. He sighed, dreamily. “But god, what a way.”

Jim had to agree. “Sick from too much food. Never thought I’d see the day.”

They all laughed, even Kevin.

True to their word, T patched Jim up as soon as he’d eaten his fill. Wasn’t that a novelty? Jim had forgotten what it felt like to be full. He lounged back in his sleeping bag, feeling like a new man with a stomach full.

“Jim?” Mel piped up.

“Hm?”

“Tell us a story.”

Jim raised a brow. He cracked on eye open to find the rest of the kids watching him. “What? Really?” It had been a long time since they’d been in the mood to hear a story. They all nodded, even Joel, who’d never been that fond of stories to begin with. Jim smiled. “Alright. What kind of story?”

“About the prince!” Mel cried in delight.

“The prince?” Jim blinked in confusion. It came back to him, then. “Oh!”


“The prince and the Terran,” Jim mused. He settled back into his sleeping bag again, crossing his hands behind his head. “Hm… okay. Where did we leave off last time?” He couldn’t remember for the life of him.

“They built their robot friend, Hali!” Mel remembered.

“That’s right,” Jim mused. “Well. We’ll start there, then.”

The food didn’t last. It never did.

Ezra struggled to his feet. Jim turned around, as he’d been keeping watch, and watched the boy shakily make his way to the mouth of the cave. “Pee,” he’d explained, and slowly made his way out into the night.

Jim had waited for him to come back.

He waited, and waited, and waited.
Sometimes it took the kid a while, he’d told himself.

He’d waited.

But Ezra didn’t come back.

“T,” he’d called, and stood.

T looked up form their sleeping bag. “Hm?”

“I’m going out to find Ezra. Keep watch.”

T nodded and tiredly slipped out of their bag.

It took Jim a while to find the boy. He’d collapsed on his way back, it seemed. Jim picked up his small, weightless body, and had stood there for a while. He sobbed, silently. The young ones were more likely to go, he knew- they were just too small. But he’d hoped… Ezra was just so energetic, and he had fighting spirit, and yet.

And yet.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Joel was on look-out when it happened.

“Kirk,”

Jim rolled over, groaning.

“Kirk!” Joel insisted. He shook him harder. “Jim!”

Jim sat up, groaning. “What?”

“There’s something out there.” Joel whispered.

Jim was instantly alert. He stood up, eyes clear. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Joel said. “I thought it was a guard at first, but it’s not. I think…” he swallowed. “I think it’s an animal.”

“An animal?”

They crept to the mouth of the cave. Joel pointed. “Look.”

Jim did look. There was something moving in the shadows just beyond their cave, hidden from the sunlight by a large, leafy plant. (An inedible plant, Jim knew. It had given him a gross rash on his lips and made his mouth bleed when he’d tried chewing on it.)

He stepped out of the cave, hoping not to startled whatever it was. His stomach gurgled, loudly. A furry head popped out of the brush, ears perking forward. It was a dog- its ribs standing out taunt
against its skin. It loped over to them, tail wagging.

For a second, Jim and Joel just stared at it.

Jim swallowed.

“I don’t want to kill it.” Joel said, suddenly. “You do it.”

“Does it even have enough meat to be worth it?” Jim asked.

“We can suck the marrow out of the bones.” Joel said.

Jim knew. He nodded.

They really needed it.

“Come on, Kirk,” Joel said. “We don’t have any choice. We’re not gonna eat our friends.”

He reached out and pet the dog, heart sinking as it gave a happy wine.

“Kirk!” Jim protested. “You’re gonna get attached! Stop it.”

“Sorry,” Jim pulled back his hand. “Go… go get me a rock or something.”

Joel nodded and hurried off.

“This feels even worse than I think it would if I were killing a person,” Jim muttered.

Joel came back with a large rock clutched between his hands.

“Can’t you?” Jim pleaded.

“I’m not strong like you anyway,” Joel protested.

Jim nodded. “Fine.” He held out his hand. “Give it here.”

He did.

Jim fell asleep while he was on lookout. They all did- it was rather common, unfortunately, though Jim knew he did it least out of all of them. Anymore, they were all prone to fainting spells or simply slipping off at any moment if they allowed themselves to rest.

To Jim it was like being sucked into his head. One moment he was awake, staring out into the woods, and the next he was standing on firm, warm sand, the chirp of the T’cheye soft in his ears.

He’d dreamed of Spock’s mind many times before. It was no surprise to find himself there again. It was rarer to be aware that he was dreaming, but when the time came, he eagerly embraced it. He looked down at his hands and didn’t see the bones of his wrists jutting out of his skin. He had a good amount of flesh, and a bit of a pudge to his stomach. He clothed himself in an old “Terran-it-UP” shirt that he’d worn out in a single school year.
He also decided to wear sunglasses, and the hat that Amanda had bought him which had been stolen on his first day of school. He’d never actually gotten the thing back, but he remembered it well enough to put it upon his head.

And then, because he could, he summoned an apple to his hand and took a bite.

He’d forgotten what they tasted like, but the satisfying crunch and the pulp of the meat were muscle-memory. He chewed slowly, savoring the texture, and told himself there was no need to be hungry when he was asleep. He hungered nonetheless, but it wasn’t as urgent as usual.

“Jim.”

Jim turned, brows raised. He was at that house again- the little one on the edge of Spock’s mind. He blinked, rapidly, and swallowed. Standing just outside the fence of the little house was Spock, and the girl from inside. Her hair was done up, no longer flowing freely down her back. She looked lovely, if not like she wouldn’t hesitate to cut him.

He hid the apple behind his back, momentarily worried she might try to take it from him.

“Oh hey,” he said. “Spock. Angry woman.”

Her brows furrowed, just barely. There was a kind of elegance about her.

“This is the one,” said the girl. “The boy who touched my mind through Spock’s.”

There was suddenly an old lady there, too. Jim blinked in surprise. Not only had he never dreamed of the girl from Spock’s head, he’d never seen this woman in his dreams, either.

“Is this only your mind’s adaptation of him, Spock?” The woman asked, gravely.

“I do not know.” Spock said. He squinted. “Jim?”

Jim took a step forward. “Wow,” he said, and peered up into Spock’s eyes from underneath the Vulcan’s bangs. “Check out my imagination. I must be getting delirious out there- you look amazing.” Jim felt that if he reached out to touch Spock, he would be real. He feared that should he try, he would wake up, so he stood as close as he dared and did not touch.

“I have not rendered this,” Spock told the woman.

“Your name, human?” Asked the woman.

“James T. Kirk, nice to meet you little old lady that lives in my subconscious.” He tipped his hat. “Though I guess, this would be Spock’s subconscious. Hope he doesn’t mind me borrowing it.”

Spock’s brows furrowed.

“He is confused,” the woman said. “It matters not. We will proceed.”

“Jim,” Spock said, “Do you recognize this person?” He gestured to the girl at his side.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “Can we go do something? Don’t really want to waste a dream on this.”

“Please cooperate,” Spock said.

Jim shrugged. Even if it was boring, he still got to see his make-believe Spock. If he was delirious, why not go along with the ride? “Sure.”
“You recognize her,” Spock repeated. “How can this be?”

“Easy. One time when we melded I just walked over to her house and knocked on the window. She was pissed off, though.”

“Now you see.” The girl turned towards the old woman. “Spock has admitted to it, as well as this human. He has melded with another, and even from across the universe their minds are still linked. I have had my mind touched through my bond to Spock, without my consent. This is beyond the agreement struck between our parents, and I ask that our bond be broken.”

The old woman stared at Jim.

“Um, sorry if I… broke a rule.” Jim said, awkwardly.

“James Kirk,” she said, slowly. “You understand now that you are connected to Spock? It is not the way of our people.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. He shrugged. He knew that friendship wasn’t the Vulcan way, but he didn’t care. “So what? It makes us happy, so…” Then he laughed. “I’m really so hung up on him that I’m fighting make-believe Vulcans over our friendship? Hello? What universe is this?”

“Matriarch,” Spock said. His voice was thick with concern. “He is not himself. There is something amiss.”

“It is no business of mine, Spock.” She said. “T’Pring, you have made thy case. What say you, Spock?”

“If T’Pring wishes our bond to be broken, so be it.”

Jim blinked. “What?” Spock had other friends? Did he build them all houses in his head, so when they melded, they could come over? “Oh my god,” he said. “I’m dying.”

The three turned sharply to him.

“Jim?” Spock stepped forward, hands out like he wanted to touch, but didn’t.

“Like this is my. My atonement. My last good thing. I’m coming up with ways to make you happy and prove to myself you have other friends. This is it.”

The old woman said, “Spock. Lower your hands.” She stepped forward, and lifted her hand to Jim’s face without preamble.

Jim reeled at the sensation of her heated hand against his face. It felt real. “Hey-“

The woman drew away, looking grave. “He is not dying,” she said.

“You are hiding something from me,” Spock said. “Something is wrong.”

“It is not my place, nor your bondmate’s, as she is soon to be removed of you.”

Spock didn’t look like he liked it, but he nodded and stepped back towards the fence.

“James Kirk.” Said the woman again. “I am to break Spock’s mind from T’Pring’s. It is remarkable you would be here, for your connection was not forged by another. It is very weak, and I understand neither you nor Spock are able to access it yourselves. It is only through my ability that we have drawn you here today, but even this is a great feet. The link you have forged…”
“He knows nothing of these things,” Spock said.

“It is his right.” She said, firmly. “James Kirk. Understand now that as I raze Spock’s mind of another, it is likely what small ties you have may snap. This is the way of things.”

“Whatever,” Jim said. “Just because you’re breaking their friendship up doesn’t mean that you can break me and Spock up. We’re best friends, and even if you tell me some horrible secrets about him, I’m still gonna love him.”

Spock pressed his mouth into a thin line.

“You do not understand,” the woman said. “It is not our place to teach you.” She gave Spock an accusatory glare.

“I was unaware of these things which only T’Pring knew of until now.” He looked down at the sand. “I had not known there was a connection between myself and Jim.”

“Pssh. Liar. You know we’re besties.” Jim smiled at him, and then leaned against the fence. “If this is the introduction to purgatory, you’re gonna have to do a lot better than that to hurt my feelings. You bought me poetry, Spock. Poetry!”

He colored a faint olive. T’Pring raised her brow at him.

“As I said,” Spock ground out. “He is unaware.”

“The matter is closed.” Said the woman. “T’Pring has asked to be broken from you, and you have acquiesced. The ceremony will begin now.”

Jim pulled the apple out from behind his back. “Sweet.”

They stared at him.

“I am like.” He took a big bite and chewed it, swallowing quickly. “High. Pretty far gone right now. Oh look, bells.”

There were bells. Pretty, delicate bells of jade, hung up all around the house. They rang in time together, eerie in the red light the sun of Spock’s mind cast about them. The woman reached out and put her hands on Spock and T’Pring’s faces, one to each.

“Parted now and never paired,” the old woman began, “Never touching, never to be touched. My mind to your minds. My thoughts-“

Jim gasped and sat straight up, almost falling over as he suddenly woke from his dream and found himself in the cave. Without knowing why, he yelled, “To your thoughts!”

Kevin was nearby, and stared at him oddly.

Jim shook his head. His heart was pounding, and he was covered in sweat. His head felt like it had been bashed, throbbing so hard that it hurt to open his eyes. “Goddamn it,” he whispered, and wiped his face. Why was he crying? “Kevin. I think I almost died just now. I think I was standing at the gates of hell, or heaven, or the underworld- whatever. The afterlife.”

Kevin shrugged.

Jim raised a trembling hand up to his temple. “My head hurts,” he croaked.
Kevin slipped over to Jim’s side, resting his head on Jim’s shoulder. Jim threw an arm around the young boy, pulling him into a hug. Kevin held on tight.

“Thanks,” Jim managed. “I’m okay. Just a weird dream, that’s all.”

Kevin nodded.

“Come on,” he said. He was done for the day- they couldn’t keep constant watch anymore. His head felt like it was going to split open. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

Kevin nodded and sagged against him, closing his eyes.

Jim leaned back his head and closed his eyes, too.

Spock...

He did not sleep.

---

Mel and T got sick. They both had fevers, and trembled all through the night. They slept more than they were awake, and it was all Jim could do to keep them alive. Joel was on constant look out, so that Jim could attend to the rest of them. He wasn’t able to find much to eat, but they all chewed on handfuls of grass to at least absorb what nutrients they could, and they had water.

Jim wanted desperately to go back to the town and steal from them, but he knew that in his condition there was very little chance he’d make it back to them without getting caught and killed himself.

They’d been out there for four months.

“This is longer than you would have thought we could make it, right?” Jim joked.

Joel snorted, leaning passively against the mouth of the cave. “I’ll be dead any day now,” he said. “I can’t hardly even walk.”

“Nonsense,” said Jim. “You’re just fine.”

Joel shook his head, slowly. “I don’t know why I’ve been fighting it,” he said. “When I’m dead I won’t be so hungry all the time. We can’t make it another three months, you and I both know that. So why we keep struggling? It’s inevitable.”

Jim clenched his teeth. “It’s not. We can make it. Starfleet will come—”

“Starfleet’s never coming.” Joel said. “And if they are, not in time.”

“They will, Joel!” Jim stood and made his way over to the other boy, grabbing his shoulders. He delivered a sure share. “They will. You just have to keep holding on, and they’ll be here, you’ll see.”

“They won’t,” Joel said. He smiled a little. “But it’s a nice thought, Jim.”

Joel died two days later, in his sleep.
Jim braced himself against a tree, panting. The cold morning air stung against his lungs, and his legs shook with each step he took. He had a backpack with a couple handfuls of berries he’d found way, way out in the forest, and it weighed more than it should have. The thought of the others’ faces when they saw the bounty kept him going.

He shouldn’t have gone out so far. His rule was that no one was out during daylight, if they could help it. That was when you got spotted. Even troops from the town ventured out as far as the cave during the morning, anymore, and it didn’t matter how well it was hidden. If others were out and about the forest, Jim and his bunch wouldn’t be.

But he’d had no choice. They’d depleted all the sources they’d had nearby, and Jim knew he couldn’t risk going back to the village again. He’d been right in the end, anyway, when he’d found that berry bush. He worried that without Joel to identify them, they might be poisoned. He’d stuck a couple in his mouth and chewed, slowly, when he first found them. Nothing had happened, so he’d started back and swallowed a few more. He figured he’d know if they were bad by then, and so he could come back empty handed instead of getting them excited about the prospect of maybe having food.

There was movement to his right. Jim’s eyes went wide as he jerked back, startled, and then tripped over a root. He fell hard, and loudly, through the brush, breaking branches of the tree to his right as he went. Any hope he’d had of passing by undiscovered went out the window as the figure turned towards him. It was definitely a person.

Jim stood and ran.

“Wait,” the figure called, but Jim didn’t falter for a second.

He ran blindly in his panic and found himself at the side of a rocky cliff, going up, and up, forever. He cursed and turned to run back the way he’d come, but he could hear the person in the brush coming closer. He looked left and right, and then up the cliff. His hands and legs were already shaking with strain, and he knew he’d never make it to the top. Just down the way, though, was a small fissure int he rock face.

He ran over to it and climbed, quickly and painfully. His fingers scraped raw as he plunged them into the little cracks int he rock and dirt, hauling himself up.

“Wait!” Came the voice again. It was a man.

Jim slipped into the fissure and pushed himself back. He’d caught a glimpse of the guy, and he wasn’t wearing the dark grey uniform of Kodos’s men. Civilians could be just as deadly, but they wouldn’t be armed with phasers. Jim knew he was smaller than the man, who wouldn’t be able to get himself through the fissure.

He crammed himself back, suddenly glad he’d become so small.

A face appeared in the crack. The man was old, his face lined with his years, and he had a mathematically perfect haircut.
The man’s eyes widened. “Jim?”

Jim blinked. The man turned to look over his shoulder, waving at something, and Jim saw he had pointed ears.

A Vulcan? But the colony only has humans.

He’d finally lost it. He really was dead and dreaming this time.

“James T. Kirk?” The Vulcan asked.

Jim pushed himself further back into the crack. It was a trap.

The man pushed his arm in, slowly; gnarled hand reaching out to him from the light, trying to draw him out of the shadows. “I am not going to harm you,” he said, gently. “I am a friend. I understand you must be terrified, and rightfully so, but I mean only to help you.”

Jim cringed as he pushed himself even further back, out of reach of the hand. The Vulcan pulled his arm back.

“Do not continue to do yourself harm,” he said, softly. “I will not reach for you again if you do not wish me to touch you.”

“Why do you know my name?” Jim blurted. “Who are you?”

“I am Ambassador Spock,” said the Vulcan. “I am sorry it took me so long to get here, my friend. I had hoped, perhaps, that this time…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “Forgive me. The ramblings of an old man, nothing more.”

Spock was a damn common name. Every Vulcan I know is an Ambassador, or named Spock, or both. Jim realized. A startled laugh bubbled form his lips.

Ambassador Spock smiled.

Yep. A Vulcan, smiling. I’m definitely dreaming.

“Will you come out, Jim?” The Vulcan asked.

“No.” Jim said.

The ambassador drew back for a second, and pulled a backpack from his shoulders. He opened it and produced a banana. He held it out. “You may eat this, if you want.” He held it tantalizingly close.

Jim swallowed down the impulse to jump for it. “How do I know that once I come out, you’re not going to brain me and then eat me?” He knew it had happened in the town. The few times he’d gotten close enough he’d had to hide while passing patrols of guards marched by, and they’d talked loosely about it.

“I am Vulcan,” said Spock. “And therefor, a vegetarian.”

Jim narrowed his eyes.

“Additionally,” said Spock, “I believe that were I to attempt to ‘brain you,’ as you say, you would certainly rush away from me. You are young and would outrun me.”

“I am old,” said Spock.

“I am starving,” said Jim. “We’re on even ground.”

Spock studied him. He had kind eyes. Eyes could lie, though. “Perhaps,” he allowed. “May I throw this to you then, Jim?”

Jim narrowed his eyes.

Spock gently tossed it his way.

Jim caught the banana eagerly, tearing open its skin to bite down into the fruit. Flavor exploded over his tongue and he moaned in pleasure, chewing slowly to savor it. He opened his mouth to take another bite when he remembered the other kids, back in the cave. Slowly, sadly, he pulled the skin back up over the top of the banana and then tucked it into one of the pockets on his pants.

Spock watched him, eyes curious. He produced another fruit. “I have more, if you would like.”

“What’s your game?”

“Perhaps you did not hear me as I called after you. I am part of a rescue team. We have come to save the survivors of this planet, along with Starfleet. We landed two days ago.”

Jim swept his eyes up and down the Vulcan. He wasn’t starving, Jim realized. He wasn’t skinny or shaky, or weak. He didn’t look hungry, or act hungry. The concept was so bizarre that for a moment Jim couldn’t process it. How was it that there could be someone who existed who wasn’t hungry?

“Please, Jim,” Ambassador Spock said softly. “I am your friend. Allow me to help you.”

“You still never told me how you knew my name.”

“I have been looking for you.”

Jim rose a brow. “You mean… you guys knew that we escaped Kodos? How?” He furrowed his brow. “And why’d you care enough to come looking for a missing group of criminals?”

“I will explain later,” Spock said. “Know now only that your worth is immeasurable, and that should it have been necessary, I would have searched this entire planet to discover your whereabouts.”

Jim wanted to call BS. But Jim was a damn good liar, and even he wouldn’t have been able to give a line like that with such ardent conviction. Please don’t be a trap, he prayed. Please, please don’t be a trap.

Spock held up a small badge. A Starfleet comm. “Will you trust me, Jim?”

He didn’t want to. But what choice did he have?

Jim slowly, shakily reached out, pulling himself from the fissure. Spock stepped back and waited, arms outstretched to help Jim down from the height he’d climbed. Jim ignored him and jumped down, wincing slightly at the impact. He braced himself to run, but the Vulcan did not move.

“Is this real?” Jim asked himself.

The Vulcan flicked open the comm unit. “Spock to away team.”
“This is T’paun, I read you.”

“I have located a child in the woods, one James T. Kirk.”

“Any others?”

Spock looked expectantly at Jim. Jim pressed his mouth into a thin line.

“To be determined,” Spock said, finally. “Spock out.”

“Do you have more food?”

Spock nodded. “I do.”

Jim didn’t want to trust him, but what choice did he have. “If I lead you to the others… what will happen?”

“I will escort them and yourself to the town, were you will be cared for by relief squads and eventually returned to your homes. We will feed you, clothe you, and administer any medical help you require.”

Jim was overcome by how good it sounded. Home. He could go home. “How do I know this isn’t a trick?” His voice sounded small.

Spock knelt down. He held his hand out in a familiar, soft curve. “Do you know anything of Vulcan telepathy?”

“You can’t lie,” Jim realized.

He nodded. “Would you allow me to touch your mind?”

It had been so long. He’d been so alone. The very thought of another presence in his head made him want to sob with the profound wish for it all. He’d been strong for so long. Maybe it was a trap, but his Spock had taught him to shield, so even if this Ambassador betrayed them and razed Jim’s mind, he could protect the location of the others. All he was putting on the line was himself, and anymore, that felt like precious little.

He stepped forward, pressing his face to Ambassador Spock’s palm.

They hadn’t meant to meld, Jim knew, but he was sucked into the Ambassador’s mind immediately. He was in a bedroom with a large bed, the navy blue sheets neatly tucked under the mattress. There was a window overlooking the bed, and outside the stars rushed past. Jim staggered back, arrested by the unfamiliar atmosphere, and bumped into a bulkhead.

He was aboard a ship.

He licked his lips and looked around, quickly finding the design to be familiar. He was on a federation ship. The room was sparsely, but tastefully, decorated. In the corner there was a small podium with a jade pot upon it, which smoked gently and smelled of Vulcan spices. There were various nicknacks about the room, most alien, but some starting familiar. He recognized the heavily used cover of the Vulcan poetry book that Spock had given him- the book sitting on the shelf was nearly falling apart. Some other books, which he had back at his home on Earth, were placed upon the shelf, along with hundreds of other paper copies that he’d never read before. Some, he’d never even heard of before. A couple he couldn’t even make out- the language was foreign to him.
On the stand next to the bed was a timekeeping device, a starfleet badge, and a picture. It was of the Ambassador, who had just barely begun to grey, and an older, slightly chubby man with curly gray hair. They were both in casual clothing and sitting on a bench. The man with the curly hair had on old-fashioned glasses, which Jim had always wanted, and he was bent over a book, his back braced against the side of the bench. His feet were propped up in the Ambassador's lap. The Ambassador was looking at the man with naked fondness in his eyes, one hand settled on the man’s shin, the other tangled with the man’s hand on the back of the bench.

Jim stepped closer to the picture, reaching out to pick it up.

“Jim,”

He froze, turning around and tucking his hands behind his back.

The Ambassador didn’t look upset. “Forgive me,” he said. “I had… not intended a meld, even of this shallow nature. I did not expect your mind to be familiar enough with the technique to construct a mind-scape, as rudimentary as this is.” He leaned around Jim, and caught sight of what Jim had been reaching for. His eyes softened.

“Sorry,” Jim said. “I wasn’t snooping…”

“There is no reason to be sorry, my friend.” The Vulcan stepped past him and picked up the photograph, tracing a finger down the side. “I have been unable to make the retreat to this part of my mind as of late. I had not realized I was beginning to miss it…”

Jim cleared his throat. The Ambassador looked dangerously close to emotion. Jim knew that in a meld, one was always more emotional, but it was different with his Spock. He knew his Spock, and he wanted to see his emotions. With the Ambassador, he felt like he was intruding on something private.

“Come,” the Ambassador set the photograph down and gestured towards the door.

They stepped out and back onto Tarsus. In the town, many hours before, where Starfleet and a Vulcan ship had begun to go about picking up the pieces. Jim knew it was a memory and knew that there was no way the man could deceive him.

“Are you satisfied, Jim?”

Jim could feel the man’s intent to help. He nodded.

He came out of the meld with a gasp, stumbling back a step. He was momentarily overwhelmed with a deep, aching sadness. He shook his head.

“Forgive me,” Ambassador Spock stood. “Our meld was inelegant. Emotional transference may occur.”

“Yeah,” Jim choked, “I’m getting a hint of that.”

The Ambassador looked away from him. “Will you allow me to help you now?”

Jim nodded. “Yeah.” He waved Spock on. “This way.”
He sat on a log that had been laid out as a form of seating. Across from him a Vulcan woman was administering a set of hypos to Mel, who hardly flinched, her eyes glassy and feverish.

“Eat this.”

Jim looked up. The Ambassador regarded him with eyes filled with understanding and unfathomable compassion. Jim looked away, unable to handle the attention.

“Jim,” Ambassador Spock tried again.

Jim looked back up. The Vulcan was holding out a thermos.

He took it, carefully, and then nearly sobbed. It was chicken noodle soup; still steaming. He shakily raised it to his mouth, ignoring the spoon placed suggestively against the rim of the thermos. He drank, deeply, and coughed once as it burned his tongue. He ignored the pain and continued to noisily slurp it down.

A heavy blanket fell over his back. Jim looked up, questioning, but Spock said, “You are trembling, Jim.”

He was, wasn’t he? He didn’t care. He turned back to the soup.

“Do not become overzealous,” Spock warned. “You will make yourself sick.”

“Pace yourselves, guys, we can let this all last until tomorrow night at least. Otherwise we’ll make ourselves sick.”

“We still might,” Joel said. He sighed, dreamily. “But god, what a way.”

Jim laughed, nearly hysterically. “What a way to go,” he echoed, mechanically.

Spock sat next to him. He reached out carefully, placing his hand over Jim’s wrist. “There will be more,” he promised. “I know it is not easy to believe this, but I promise to you- there is more food still. Here,” he pushed a piece of bread into Jim’s hand. “Slowly.”

It didn’t seem real until his mother arrived. He’d been sitting up in bed, quietly discussing funeral arrangements for T, who hadn’t pulled through- help had been just a tad to late. He felt sick to his stomach and dizzy, and even with a relatively healthy Mel tucked under one arm and a recovering Kevin under the other, he still felt like at any moment they might be ripped away from him, too.

He sort of wanted to say that T’s family didn’t get a say in what happened to T’s body. T had made it clear that they weren’t interested in coming home to their old family. Dan and her troubled kids had been it for them. Jim missed T so ardently and desperately he felt it coating his bones like a second starvation. If he’d just given T a little more, had a little less himself...
Kevin was picking at the fuzz on his hospital gown. Mel was sleeping soundly, drooling a little on Jim’s shoulder. She was resting uncomfortably against the IV in his arm, but he couldn’t bear to move her or wake her.

“Theyir family will have to know, even if T didn’t want it.” Jim said. “They’ll get to decide, I guess. But T didn’t want to be incinerated. They wanted a burial, if possible, and—”

And that’s when she’d come in.

“Jim.”

He looked up past the nurse, confused. The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn’t place it. His eyes locked with familiar, watery hazel. He didn’t even have time to blink before his mother was bursting into tears, rushing across the room to fling herself at him.

“Jim!” She sobbed. She pressed her face into his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. Mel woke instantly with a jerk, pulling away from Winona’s wild hair with a soft gasp of surprise. Jim held onto Mel tightly, as if to ensure her they were safe.

“Mom?”

“Oh my god,” she cried. “Oh my god!”

She was shaking so hard that Jim felt dizzied by it. “Mom!” He let go of the kids and nodded at the nurse, who was giving him a should I leave? look. He held onto her shoulders, keeping her to him.

“Jim!” She sounded physically pained by her grief. “Oh my god, I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it, oh god, oh god—” she drew back, seeming almost panicked. “Your face! You look- oh my god, your face!”

He knew he looked like a skeleton. He smiled, weekly, but he felt like throwing up. “It’s okay, mom—”

“I didn’t know, Jim. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry! When the messages stopped coming through I thought- I don’t know, that you’d gotten bored of talking to me, that you were still made but. I never would have thought. Oh my god. Oh my god, Jim, Jim, I’m so sorry, my baby, my baby—” She pressed messy, wet kisses to his forehead. “Baby I’m so sorry, so sorry—”

“You didn’t know,” he said, softly. “It’s not your fault.”

“You wanted to go to Vulcan!” She sobbed. “I s-sent you here. I sent you to that- to that deathtrap,” she looked up at him, her face contorted and nearly unrecognizable with the severity of her agony. “Jim, oh Jim.”

And it was real.

He was really off of that planet.

He had food, and his two little troopers who’d pulled through, and he wasn’t going to die after all. They’d come in time.

“Mom,” he sniffed, and then broke down into heavy sobbing.

Four months.

The prophesied six months meant nothing. It had taken the universe four months to figure out something was up on Tarsus IV, and to subsequently arrive. Kevin prodded Jim’s arm and passed him a PADD with a disturbing amount of math on the screen.

In short. Had Kodos taken their preventative measures and ideas into hand, it was likely that they would have only just begun to see the deaths before help arrived. Instead, more than four thousand people were dead.

Kodos had gotten what had been coming to him, Jim heard. When Starfleet had arrived, the people had rebelled and gone after the governor. His mansion had been burned to the ground in the process, and Kodos had perished inside of it.

Jim didn’t feel comforted by the fact.

One death didn’t make up for the other four thousand.

They weren’t alone. There were other kids in the same wing of the hospital, all dealing with the same grief. Jim protected his kids with a fierceness he hadn’t known he could possess, but he found it in him to open himself to the others there, too. He met Thomas Leighton, who was a steady intelligence against Jim’s wild brilliance. He found peace with the nurses, and the doctors, and the therapists. He was going to get better because he wanted to get better, and even if no one understood his pain, or what he’d been through, they could help him understand and come to terms with it himself.

He was ready to be soft again. He knew in his heart that he would never be as naive as he had been before, that he’d leap to protect the people he loved even if it meant the death or destruction of the life forms against them. How many times had he played over Kodos in their mess hall? He’d been so close. If Jim had only been smarter, faster, then he could have killed the man and saved them. He could have…

Kaidth.

He kept to his meditation, and he went to his therapy appointments, and he slept long, troubled nights with Kevin and Mel overheating his bed. And even if he hid food in the wall panels, and even if he spent some nights throwing up- even if he still dreamed of his friend’s dead bodies, and the bodies he had seen in town, and the blood, and the smell, and the grass as it came back up again.

He was going to get better.

He had to.

Chapter End Notes

Summery: Jim and the rest of the camp meet Kodos, who comes to their camp, and barely escape with their lives. Dan and Seb die in the process. Over the next four months, only Jim, Mel, Kevin, and T survive to see rescue. T dies several days after
help arrives. It was Ambassador Spock who came to the planet and found Jim.
San Francisco was miserable.

The air was far too humid for his biology, the temperatures at night were too low, and worst of all, there was no Jim. What was the point in being on Terra if Jim was not there as well? Spock felt miserably laden by his own age and heritage- certain that if his parents were both Vulcan, and he, himself, full, he would have been deemed old enough to stay on Vulcan without either of them.

Of course, Mother would hear none of it.

What was worse was that he was hungry. Constantly. He knew he did not need to eat more than his fill, and yet, his brain insisted that he had not consumed enough, at every given moment in the day. Spock could easily block the feeling from his mind and body, but it took constant attention.

T’Pring, too, had complained of such a sensation, and had stated frankly that it was bleed-over from Spock. She found it incredibly distasteful, and Spock could do nothing but agree. He was very gifted, as a telepath, and it was above him to inflict his wife with such afflictions.

Though, as she so delicately put it, their bond itself was an affliction.

It were not as though he could argue her point.

“Spock, dear, are you really on the computer again?”

Spock did not look up from the screen. “Yes,” he said, and ignored his mother as she came to hover over his shoulder. He could feel her looking at the screen, but he did not cease his typing or ask her to look away from the open message he was composing.

Wife,

As you are aware, I am currently on Earth. There are no healers available to inspect the bond at this time. I understand the urgency of the condition and do not take it lightly. I will do what I am able to spare you any inconvenience.


Spock said, “I am currently engaged.” He continued to type.

When I return to our home world I will gladly meet with yourself and our clan matriarch to discuss the concerns you have addressed. Continue to make me aware of any distress our bond may be inadvertently causing you, and I will take the necessary measures.
“What problems?” His mother repeated.

Spock pushed himself away from the computer after he sent his message. “It is of a private nature, mother.”

She said, “Spock, I know the bond isn’t something anyone really talks about. But I am your mother. And I’m bonded, too. Maybe I can help.”

He frowned, slightly. “I severely doubt it.”

She gave him the eye. “Spock…”

“I am not questioning your intelligence or ability,” Spock hurried to assure her. “It is simply a matter of which I believe is rooted in my Vulcan half.”

“Did you talk to your father about it?”

Spock looked sharply away.

“Spock,” his mother sighed.

“It is shameful.” He felt his ears burning.

“I’m sure it can’t be that bad,” she said. She sat on the edge of the hotel desk. “You don’t have to tell me, but Spock, you know I would never judge you or make things worse. I only want to help, and the least I can do is listen.”

Spock said, “I am not certain I wish to verbalize the issues. I barely understand them myself.”

She reached out, hand hovering over his knee, and then pulled back, slowly. She did not touch him, and he appreciated it as much as it made him ache. “Well,” she said, softly, “I’m always here for you, Spock. Whatever you need.” She stood and started out of the room.

Spock turned back to the computer and stared at the blank screen.

Why?

He wanted so badly to be a child again. To be able to speak freely and emotionally with his mother. She cared deeply, and it showed, but to respond to her concern would be to admit to blatant emotionalism himself. He had thought, for a time, that perhaps he could allow himself to express his emotions in the bare minimum, but…

Sybok…

He clenched his hands where they rested on his lap.

It was the first trip to Terra where Sybok had not wished him farewell. Of course his older brother hadn’t come to the house to say goodbye. He was no longer welcome on the planet Vulcan. Spock knew that somehow, Sybok managed to come back when he did so please, but it still would have been senseless for his brother to come back simply to tell Spock to have a good trip.

It would have been overly-emotional, even for him.
Spock couldn’t say anything. Sybok had divorced himself dangerously from Vulcan society and Surak’s teachings. Spock knew that Vulcan emotions, strong and gripping in a way no other species understood, could be dangerous if they began to reign above logic. But what had been so dangerous about his brother’s love? What was dangerous about the man’s smile, his laugh, his sly humor and romanticism? Spock had seen no danger in his brother—only in Vulcan society and the way they made a criminal out of him.

And their father had stood by and done nothing as they drew and quartered Sybok, banishing him from his home forever.

What was to stop them from doing the same to Spock?

He was half-human. It was expected that he would fail to be Vulcan. At that point, where he finally turned and showed his soft underbelly, though—what would happen? Would they allow his human heart the same way they would any other species? Or would they surge in on him like they had his brother? Worst of all, would their father stand by and watch? Would he do nothing?

Spock knew his father cared. Sarek had warned his eldest, time and time again, of the path his actions would surely lead him down. He’d disapproved quietly, and then blatantly, as Sybok became more and more radical in his beliefs. But Sarek had fallen in love with a human, hadn’t he? He had to know something of passion, something of emotion. Spock didn’t doubt that Sarek had the capacity for emotion, but in his ruthless devotion to logic, he cut all familiar ties. Spock would be left to the wolves.

Spock looked up at the computer pinged.

Husband, T’Pring wrote.

I am aware of your situation. Tell me when it is you will disembark from Terra and return to Vulcan, and I will have the ceremony arranged to our mutual benefit. I am certain you are able to ascertain my difficulty through our bond, but if you find yourself incapable in this regard also, you must make me aware so that I may take extra measures to keep you informed of my present condition.

Do not concern yourself with shielding. I am perfectly capable of blocking you from my mind. So long as you do not invite the human into my psych again, there are no obstacles that I will be unable to usurp.

Peace and long life.

-I’nsh V’ich T’Pring

Spock stared at the message for a good time, wondering if he should reply. What would he even say? That he was glad to hear she was used to blocking him out? Did he even want to address ‘incapable in this regard also’ when she was, in the end, correct? T’Pring was cold, but she was not a liar, and when her words hurt it was only ever because they were a matter of fact, not because she meant to draw blood.

She had every right to be short with him, regardless.

Spock deleted the message and stood, making his way over to the window. It was raining out, yet again, and he pressed his forehead to the glass. It was painfully cold, but it managed to ease the throbbing in his head.

“Spock,” his mother called. “Want to help me with dinner?”
He was so, so hungry.

“If you so wish it,” he said, and turned, making his way out of the room and towards the sound of her voice.

He felt T’Pring raise her shields. He sighed, knowing it was in response to his thoughts of hunger. He did not blame her, and sent a gentle wash of apology against the edges of her mind. She touched them, gently, but did not reach back, curling behind her frosted-glass psych, leaving him in the darkness of his own thought.

He had never felt so alone in his entire life.

“Welcome home, little brother.”

Spock nodded his head in greeting as Michael approached him at the door. She inclined her head and then reached out to take his bags.

“I am capable,” he said, and held tighter to his luggage.

She raised her brows at him. “Have I caused you offense already?”

“He’s been that way the whole trip,” Amanda said. “Grumpy.”

Spock turned, saying, “Mother.”

“It would be logical to assume, then, that Kirk was not around.” She guessed. “You must be upset.”

“It is illogical to be upset,” Spock reminded her.

“It is logical to assume that one would respond to manners that effect them- even in a manner that could be constituted as emotional.” She tilted her head at him. They met eyes, locking into a sort of stare-down for a moment. The door opened again and she looked up, a smile in her eyes. “Sarek. You are home.”

He allowed her a look as he entered the house. “Daughter,”

She moved over to him, standing just out of reach so as not to be in his way. “How was your trip? Did you have much difficulty this time?”

“The trip was productive,” Sarek informed her. “There were no complications.”

“No children stealing cars or else wise?” There was a hint of a smile in the corner of her mouth.

“She must be upset,” Spock tightly protested.

Sarek ignored Spock completely. “Negative.” He dropped his bags in the foyer, bending to reach into one. “I have brought a piece of memorabilia from your planet of origin, as you have requested.” He reached into his bag before producing a light yellow scarf, which he delicately passed to Michael.
She blinked in surprise before plucking it from Sarek’s grasp, lifting it up to the light to examine it. “Silk,” she said, “And rayon velvet. Thank you, Sarek.” She wrapped it over her head, in the same fashion Amanda often times did. She tilted her head towards Sarek and Amanda both, saying, “Do I look very much like mother now?”

“The similarity is…” he paused. “There.”

Amanda snorted out a laugh.

“Ah, Sarek,” Michael sighed dramatically. “You can say we look nothing alike. It would be illogical for me to find hurt in the truth.”

He raised a brow at her and brushed past.

She watched him go, face slowly falling.

“He’s tired from the trip,” Amanda explained.

Spock wanted to raise an objection. His father was simply ‘not in the mood,’ as Jim might have said—just as he hadn’t been ‘in the mood’ for the last four months. It was as if Sybok’s expulsion from their society had convinced Sarek to become even more staunch in his unemotional Vulcanism.

“Yes,” Michael said, slowly. “I’m sure.”

Amanda smiled. “Don’t be sad, dear.”

“Sad? How illogical.”

Amanda just shook her head.

Spock didn’t have it in him to put up with any of his family’s usual shenanigans. He brushed past the both of them, intent on heading towards his room. His head hurt, and he was slightly space sick from the ride back. Never mind that he never used to get space sick before.

“What is the matter with Spock?”

Amanda just sighed.

Spock gently shut the door to his room before allowing himself to gently crumple on top his futon, face-first. He knew angst was beneath him, but he couldn’t help but be consumed by it regardless. Everyone was acting like nothing had changed, when in reality his entire world had been uprooted. As if Sybok hadn’t been enough…

Jim.

He turned on his side, pulling his pillow against his body.

They’d promised each other the year before that when summer came again, they’d be together. But Jim’s mother had called them long before then to give the news. She was going on a mission in deep space, and Jim was being sent off to some kind of correctional facility on a colony planet thirty-eight lightyears from Vulcan.

Spock had lost his only connections in the world. Or rather, he’d thought so, until T’Pring had stranded him in his own mind. Then he knew true isolation, and the way it coursed through him made him exhausted by its constancy.
Vulcans were not meant to exist within their minds alone.

A soft knock sounded at his door. He turned, watching as a stripe of orange light drew itself along the floor. Michael stood at the threshold, hand on the doorframe. “May I come in?”

“Do what you wish.” Spock said. He turned back over.

“Little brother…” Michael sat on the edge of his futon, curling her legs beneath her. “What is wrong?”

“I am functioning without flaw,” Spock said.

Michael put her hand on his shoulder, stiffly.

Spock politely shrugged it off. The swell of her pity against his mind was like a landslide of hot, tingling sand against the banks of his shields.

He briefly entertained the notion that he may just be violently sick. The vertigo passed just as quickly as it came.

“Talk to me,” Michael whispered. “Are you sick? Did you catch the flu as well?”

“Vulcans do not get the flu.”

“Mother did. Half-Vulcans might,” she said.

He shook his head.

“… Is this because of Sybok?”

“My half-brother has no bearing on my well being.”

“Physically, maybe.” She sighed, and then curled up next to him. She was just barely shorter than him, despite the large age gap between them. “Spock. Talk to me.”

“I am speaking to you.”

“Is this about Kirk?”

Spock frowned and did not speak.

“It is logical to feel sadness,” she said, gently. “If we did not feel sadness when we were robbed of another’s presence, there would be no incentive to maintain family bonds, or those of alliance. What allies would we have if we did not become sad at their parting?”

“Vulcans do not get sad.”

“I do not mean to further your depression,” Michael said. “However. You are not fully Vulcan.”

He turned over to face her. “Jim lives a life separate from mine. I understand this, and find no fault in it. It would be illogical to have any sort of negative emotional response to his absence on Terra.”

"Souvenirs, too, are illogical, and yet...” She held up her yellow scarf.

“You are human,” Spock excused.

“A Vulcan is the one who bought it. What logical explanation do you have for that?” When he didn’t
reply right away, she said, “Exactly. He bought it because I asked for it. Sarek is very, very Vulcan, Spock. If he feels, why would you not?”

“He does not feel.” Spock said. “If he felt, he would not have-“ he clamped his mouth shut.

“He would not have…?”

“I have said too much.”

“No, not nearly enough.” She sighed. “You were going to say something about Sybok.”

Spock pressed his lips together.

“Sybok… Sybok made his choices. Sarek couldn’t make them for him.”

“He did not have to stand by and watch as Sybok was banished, either.”

“You know full well that Sybok was asking for it,” Michael said.

“He was asking only to be heard. To be understood.”

Michael frowned. “… Is that what you want?”

“I am already heard,” Spock insisted. He turned back over.

“But understood?” Michael prodded. “It is a rare thing, to be understood.”

“I have been understood.”

“By Kirk?”

He stubbornly refused to answer.

“I would miss him too,” she said, “If someone knew me like I think Kirk knew you… I would miss them, quite fiercely.”

Spock curled into himself tighter.

“Spock…” Michael reached up and over his shoulder, pushing his bangs out of his eyes. “What is really going on?”

“There is nothing going on.”

“Then why is T’Pau coming to the house tomorrow?”

“It is none of your concern.”

“None of my concern?” Michael repeated. “You are my brother. You are my concern.”

He said, “It is a Vulcan matter.”

She sat up. “Spock,” she said, seriously. “Look at me.”

He sat up as well, turning to face her.

“You are behaving outside of your usual perameters.”
He looked down at his lap.

“I have never seen you in pain such as this.” She narrowed her eyes. “Is it T’Pring?”

“She has done nothing wrong.”

“I have noticed you did not answer my question, but avoided it.”

“The fault is mine alone,” Spock whispered.

“Fault?” She craned her head down, to stare up under his bangs.

He looked away from her.

“You cannot hide the truth anymore than you can hide yourself.”

“You are bothering me. Leave.”

Michael raised a brow. She’d gotten nearly as good at it as any Vulcan. “And what business are you conducting that I am bothering? What is it that I have interrupted?”

“It is no matter-“

“It is the matter.”

“It is not-“

“Spock, I see through you as one sees through glass-“

Finally, he exploded, “It is not your place!”

She jerked back from him as though burned, eyes wide.

He felt his eyes widen of their own accord. He reached up to touch his traitorous lips. Had he really raised his voice at her? “Forgive me,” he breathed. His voice sounded alien to his ears. “I had not intended to shout.”

“You are forgiven,” she said, easily.

“I am…” His face twisted in pain. “I am alone.”

“Alone?”

He raised a hand to his temple. “It is not easy to explain.”

“Show me.”

He looked at her, quickly. She was leaning towards him face-first, eyes steady with a challenge.

Spock said, “You have previously expressed displeasure in regards to the mind-meld.”

“My displeasure is outweighed by the need to see to the end of your pain.”

“I will do nothing to make you feel-“

“Spock,” she said. “It would be illogical to say something I do not mean.”
“If... if you are certain.” He reached up, slowly, to touch her face.

She closed her eyes.

It was not like it was with Jim. It never was; no two minds were alike, and no meld between another could be comparable. Still, there was the definite human ‘flavor’ to her mind that remained familiar.

Melding with her was like a free-fall. A collection of dusty wings, a fluttering sensation of silk against his face, a smell like roasted almonds and blinding, glittering gold scales flashing around him. He slipped past her most recent memories, all of which were floating on the surface of her mind- her promotion to lieutenant, the feeling of the yellow scarf against her skin, the beautiful curve of Vulcan’s surface as the ship came closer and closer to landing.

He pulled away from the grab of her thoughts, feeling them soaking into his skin and shifting against him like Tavasse tree oil. For a moment he nearly panicked, consumed as he was by her intelligence and speed of thought, but he reminded himself that it was always so with her, and that as she steadied herself and grasped the meld it would calm. She would release him.

She did, moments later. He felt darkness.

“Oh, Spock,” she thought.

He cold feel her in his mind, running her fingers through the cold sands of his lonesomeness. He nearly winced at her total comprehension, unable to help but feel vulnerable. It was a challenge to keep their minds anchored together; Michael’s thoughts were sound and swirling, like a tide pool, and they clashed with the neatly organized shelving of his mind. Still, he held them together, aware both at once of the him in Michael’s mind and the him sitting on his bed, hand pressed gently to her face.

“I understand now,” she thought. “You can let go.”

He did. Coming out of the meld made him gasp for breath, as if surfacing from underwater. He took in a deep breath to clear his head, just as Michael surged forward to wrap her arms around him.

“I am sorry, Spock,” she said.

“It is illogical to be sorry for that which is not your fault.”

“It is logical to connect empathetically to another to ensure their continued well-being.”

“…”

“I am sorry, my brother, for the pain you feel.” She said. “I did not know it was so painful to be alone within one’s mind. I am always alone in my head, but it… it does not feel like that.”

“It is so for Vulcans,” Spock said.

“Why is T’Pring cutting you off like this?”

“I will become used to it,” Spock said. “I have been able to keep in fleeting mental contact with mother, but…”

“It’s nothing like it used to be,” she said. “Not nearly as it was with Kirk.”

“Yes.” Spock pulled away from her, frowning. “The connection Jim and I share is… unconventional. We have melded without meaning to, when we share physical contact. I had not
anticipated missing our yearly interludes quite so."

“Sometimes that is just how things are,” she said. “You do not realize how much they matter until suddenly they do. It is difficult to explain.” She fell back on the bed next to him, neatly crossing her arms over her stomach. “He will come back, Spock."

“I am seventeen years of age,” Spock said. “By the time he has returned from Tarsus I will have already begun my career.”

“You said he is destined for Starfleet.” She said. “Maybe you two will be put on the same ship together.”

Spock shifted uncomfortably and did not answer. Michael noticed immediately.

Her eyes narrowed, “Just because I was not granted a seat on the Vulcan Science Embassy does not mean you should seek admittance in my place. Sarek does not require the presence of his offspring on the council, he only requests it.”

Spock said, “It is logical.“

“It is not,” Michael said. “You are aware that my regard for Sarek far exceeds that which I carry for any other. However. There is no reason to be what he wants you to be- you should be as you are. If you feel your destiny lies with the Vulcan Science Academy, then it is a different matter. If you wish to go to Starfleet, though…”

“Father has lost already one son,” Spock said. “He wishes for one to walk his path, to take his legacy. You have made the choice to turn to Starfleet now. How many officers from the planet Vulcan do they need?”

“As many as can make it,” she said. “Spock. Sarek is… Vulcan. Logical, and stuck to tradition. His father had a seat in the Vulcan Science Embassy, and his mother, and her father before her. For generations it’s continued. But not all traditions need to be carried out. Sarek’s father found himself a Vulcan wife, and his father, and all the fathers going all the way back until the dawn of time… And that was a tradition buried in logic. And yet, Sarek still chose to follow his heart and bind himself to Amanda. And he may speak of logic all he wants, but in the end, he broke from tradition because he wanted to.”

Spock said, “That is different.”

“It is not,” she said. “It is a choice about where and with whom you will be spending the rest of your life with. And Spock…” Her eyes flickered away from his. “I do not wish to miscommunicate with you. Know what I say, I say only out of my regard for you. Spock… the people here are cruel to you. Do you really think you could commit yourself to a lifetime surrounded by the peers that mocked you in your youth? If you remain, it is what you will find.”

“It would be illogical to-“

“Suffer? Chose Sarek’s expectations over your own happiness?”

Spock sighed. “Michael.”

“I know you do not wish to hear these things.”

He said, “I did not say that.”
“You did not have to.” She sat up neatly and then stood. She made her way to the door, stepped out of his room, and then paused there. “I ask that you… think about what I have said. And what Kirk has said, and your mother. Consider even Sybok’s words. We all wish you to be happy, Spock.”

“I will… consider your words,” he said, finally.

“Good.” She gently closed the door, and was gone then.

Spock was alone once more.

“There are many problems which the bond has created for me,” T’Pring said, easily. “I have compiled a list.” She handed of a PADD to T’Pau

The old woman took the PADD and nodded. “I see.”

“I believe I am not the only one with concerns,” T’Pring gave Spock a look.

He held back a sigh. “You are not,” he said. “Though my concerns are not so numerous as your own.”

“You say that Spock allowed another to touch your mind.” T’Pau frowned severely. “Spock. Is this true?”

“If it is, I would not be able to confirm so.” He said, “However, the presence T’Pring has described to me is one that I have let into my mind.”

T’Pau’s brows rose. “You melded with another?”

“It was not intentional,” Spock said.

“That is impossible,” said T’Pau. “Explain to me the circumstances.”

Spock said, “The person is named James Kirk. He and I are companions, and we often spend our nights together. It would be illogical to find separate accommodations, so we most often share a bed when we retire. Neither my bed nor his are very big, and often time we come into physical contact whilst sleeping. Several times this has resulted in our minds melding, albeit shallowly, without either of our intending it.”

T’Pau said, “Strange, indeed. Are there others who have come into contact with you whilst sleeping?”

“Affirmative,” Spock said. “None have ever melded with me as Jim has.”

She nodded. “And these melds. They are.. functional?”

“They are,” Spock said. “The melds we have shared have been remarkably structured and clear, especially when taking his human physiology into account.”

“I see,” she said. “Perhaps this is due in part to your hybrid status.”
“I had thought as much,” Spock said.

“You sister is human, is she not?”

“She is. As is my mother.”

“And this phenomenon has not accorded with either of them?”

“Negative,” Spock said. “Jim is the only one.”

“Then it would be logical to assume he is part of this equation. I have heard of circumstance such as these, but— she cut herself off, waving her hand. “It is of no importance. He is human- I would think it not to be.”

Spock nodded.

“We will proceed,” T’Pau said. “The both of you have logical reasons to dissolve the bond. Is this correct?”

“Yes,” said Spock.

“Affirmative,” said T’Pring.

T’Pau nodded. “You both understand the full implications of breaking this bond?”

“Yes,” said T’Pring.

“Affirmative,” said Spock.

“Then there is no logic in your continued marriage.” T’Pau held her gnarled hands out before her. “Kneel before me,” she said. “And we will begin the meld.”

Spock knelt, watching as T’Pring did the same next to him. She clasped her hands before her stomach and closed her eyes, waiting.

Icy fingers touched his face. Spock suppressed the urge to shrink back from his grandmother’s touch, forcing himself to remain where he was.

She did not even need the words.

When Spock opened his eyes, he was standing, which confused him. Melds with Vulcan kind did not manifest so physically, and it did not make sense that his mind had presented itself in such a form. He looked to his side, where T’Pring was standing equally confused.

He opened his mouth to ask what had gone wrong when he caught sight of him. A flash of blond hair, and the loud crunch of an apple. He felt his eyes go wide as he turned.

“Jim.”

Jim turned around. He was wearing sunglasses, and a hat, and a t shirt with the words “Terran-it-UP,” which Spock was admittedly confused about. Jim hurriedly hid the apple he’d been eating behind his back, and then stared for a moment, his brows raised above the rims of his glasses.

“Oh hey,” the human said. “Spock. Angry woman.”

Spock felt T’Pau join them, inserting herself between his body and T’Prings. The old woman stared
on impassively, as if the sight before her was to be expected. T’Pring took the opportunity as it presented itself.

“This is the one,” she said. “The boy who touched my mind through Spock’s.”

Spock was baffled.

T’Pau turned to him. “Is this only your mind’s adaptation of him, Spock?”

“I do not know.” Spock said. He’d never presented his mind in a manner such as he was but to Jim, but there was a possibility he was longing so intensely for his friend that he’d manifested it within his mind as a solid part of his person. And yet… “Jim?”

Jim took a step forward, bending down to peer up underneath Spock’s bangs. He grinned, and Spock was struck with the realization that he’d forgotten how perfect Jim’s smile was.

“Wow,” Jim said. “Check out my imagination. I must be getting delirious out there- you look amazing.”

There was no way he was making Jim up. He wouldn’t have accounted for Jim’s extra height, or the shirt that Jim wore now. He turned to T’Pau, certain. “I have not rendered this.”

T’Pau turned towards Jim. “Your name, human?”

Spock turned to see what Jim would do in response.

“James T. Kirk,” He said, and grinned. “Nice to meet you little old lady that lives in my subconscious.”

Spock was appalled.

Jim blundered on, tipping his hat. “Though I guess, this would be Spock’s subconscious. Hope he doesn’t mind me borrowing it.”

Spock’s brows furrowed. There was something off about Jim. The human had experienced mind-melds before; surely he’d recognize what was happening. Had they somehow pulled a dream-state Jim into the meld, across the universe? And even if so, how? How could Jim be there at all?

“He is confused,” T’Pau recognized. “It matters not. We will proceed.”

It was important to him to know if Jim had really touched T’Pring’s mind. Maybe they three had entangled themselves, somehow.

“Jim,” Spock said, “Do you recognize this person?” He gestured to T’Pring.

Jim hardly paid the question any heed, looking around in apparent interest. “Yeah. Can we go do something? Don’t really want to waste a dream on this.”

“Please cooperate,” Spock said. He wasn’t certain what was happening, but in the end, they hadn’t come into his mind to investigate his connection to Jim. They were there only to separate his mind from T’Pring’s.

Jim shrugged. “Sure.”

“You recognize her,” Spock repeated. If Jim had managed to touch T’Pring’s mind, it would make no sense for her meld with him to occur in the same manner as Spock’s. “How can this be?”
“Easy. One time when we melded I just walked over to her house and knocked on the window. She was pissed off, though.”

The house. His connection to T’Pring. Jim had simply… walked over to it? Spock didn’t know what to make of it. He was, honestly, still stunned by Jim’s sudden presence in his head.

“Now you see,” T’Pring said. “Spock has admitted to it, as well as this human. He has melded with another, and even from across the universe their minds are still linked. I have had my mind touched through my bond to Spock, without my consent. This is beyond the agreement struck between our parents, and I ask that our bond be broken.”

Spock nodded himself. Shameful as it was, it was true, and even without their lists of grievances, it was enough to break the bond. He had dirtied it by exposing T’Pring through a meld with another. It was not supposed to be possible- the mating bond between them was suppose to be untouchable by another. Only advanced healers and their matriarch, who had spun the bond to begin with, should have been able to interact with it. That he had somehow lead Jim to it…

“Um, sorry if I… broke a rule.” Jim said, awkwardly.

“James Kirk,” T’Pau said, slowly. “You understand now that you are connected to Spock? It is not the way of our people.”

Spock looked sharply to her.

“Yeah,” Jim shrugged. “So what? It makes us happy, so…” Then he laughed. “I’m really so hung up on him that I’m fighting make-believe Vulcans over our friendship? Hello? What universe is this?”

“Matriarch,” Spock interjected. Jim’s words were nonsensical, and furthermore, revealed he didn’t understand anything of bonds. Spock himself did not know what his grandmother meant when she referenced the connection he and Jim shared. More than that, though, something about Jim was off. “He is not himself. There is something amiss.”

“It is no business of mine, Spock.” She said. “T’Pring, you have made thy case. What say you, Spock?”

Spock looked sharply to her.

“Yeah,” Jim shrugged. “So what? It makes us happy, so…” Then he laughed. “I’m really so hung up on him that I’m fighting make-believe Vulcans over our friendship? Hello? What universe is this?”

“Matriarch,” Spock interjected. Jim’s words were nonsensical, and furthermore, revealed he didn’t understand anything of bonds. Spock himself did not know what his grandmother meant when she referenced the connection he and Jim shared. More than that, though, something about Jim was off. “He is not himself. There is something amiss.”

“It is no business of mine, Spock.” She said. “T’Pring, you have made thy case. What say you, Spock?”

Spock looked down at his feet. Of course they wouldn’t care to figure out what was happening with Jim, when they had come for one reason alone. “If T’Pring wishes our bond to be broken, so be it.”

“What?” Jim suddenly said. “Oh my god, I’m dying.”

The raw acceptance and pain in Jim’s voice sent a surge of adrenalin through Spock. He turned, quickly, to face Jim again, stepping forward. He lifted his hands to touch Jim, but stopped just short of it, uncertain. “Jim?”

“Like this is my. My atonement. My last good thing. I’m coming up with ways to make you happy and prove to myself you have other friends. This is it.”

Spock had just about made his mind up to reach out and touch Jim, no matter the reaction, but T’Pau said, “Spock. Lower your hands.”

Spock did. T’Pau stepped forward, and lifted her hand to Jim’s face without preamble.

Jim said, “Hey-“ but did not get farther than that before T’Pau drew back.

“He is not dying,” she said.
Spock saw something in her eyes that troubled him. “You are hiding something from me,” he said. “Something is wrong.”

“It is not my place,” T’Pau said. “Nor your bondmate’s, as she is soon to be removed of you.”

What choice did he have but to accept her words? He nodded and stepped away from Jim.

“James Kirk,” T’Pau said. “I am to break Spock’s mind from T’Pring’s. It is remarkable you would be here, for your connection was not foraged by another. It is very weak, and I understand neither you nor Spock are able to access it yourselves. It is only through my ability that we have drawn you here today, but even this is a great feet. The link you have foraged…”

“He knows nothing of these things,” Spock said- it sounded like she was trying to offer him a choice, or get his consent, and Spock didn’t even know what for. How could Jim give his word when he wouldn’t understand it either?

“It is his right.” She said, firmly, like Jim’s word meant anything without knowledge behind it. “James Kirk. Understand now that as I raze Spock’s mind of another, it is likely what small ties you have may snap. This is the way of things.”

Spock winced. There was nothing to be done of it, though. It was no longer his choice, as the fault was inarguably his. T’Pring had the right to be rid of him, and now, so did Jim.

“Whatever,” Jim said. “Just because you’re breaking their friendship up doesn’t mean that you can break me and Spock up. We’re best friends, and even if you tell me some horrible secrets about him, I’m still gonna love him.”

Spock pressed his mouth into a thin line. He was crushed by the war between Jim’s affection for him and the situation they had been thrust into.

“You do not understand,” T’Pua said. “It is not our place to teach you.” She gave Spock an accusatory glare.

“I was unaware of these things which only T’Pring knew of until now.” He looked down at the sand, wishing he’d had time to tell Jim more. Wishing he’d know about their apparent connection sooner. “I had not known there was a connection between myself and Jim.”

“Pssh. Liar. You know we’re besties.” Jim smiled at him, and then leaned against the fence. “If this is the introduction to purgatory, you’re gonna have to do a lot better than that to hurt my feelings. You bought me poetry, Spock. Poetry!”

T’Pring turned to raise her brow at him. He knew very well what that look meant.

“As I said,” Spock ground out. He knew he was blushing and hated himself for it. “He is unaware.”

“The matter is closed.” Said the T’Pau. “T’Pring has asked to be broken from you, and you have acquiesced. The ceremony will begin now.”

“Sweet,” said Jim. He pulled an apple from behind his back and brought it to his lips.

Spock stared at him, flabbergasted.


Spock knew the bells Jim spoke of. They were hung up all around his connection to T’Pring; a
memory brought to life. The bells were that of tradition, of all bonds, broken and solid, old and new. They rang in time together; ancient instructions that Spock and T’Pring followed instinctually. They turned to T’Pau, eyelids fluttering shut.

When T’Pau put her hand on Spock’s face, it was warm, and strong- a reflection of her mind.

“Parted now and never parted,” she began, “Never touching, never to be touched. My mind to your minds. My thoughts-“

*To your thoughts.*

Spock had never felt so ill in his life. He’d been in bed for a week, feverish and nauseated. His head pounded constantly, and when his mother or Michael brought him bowls of plomeek soup, he couldn’t help but drag the back of his hands against the insides of their wrists, desperate for a small touch of mental contact.

Amanda smiled sadly and ran a hand through his hair, “My wonderful son,” she’d say, and sigh. “I am sorry it had to be this way.”

Michael would fix his mused hair and say, “Nothing lasts forever- not even pain.”

Except that it did feel like it was going to last forever.

His father had avoided him for most of the week, more sensitive to the agony leaking from Spock’s mind. By the end of the week he appeared in Spock’s room very late, when the rest of the house was sure to be sleeping.

Spock rolled over on his futon, the sheets twisted around his legs. Vulcans did not dream, and yet Spock was plagued by images of pain and hunger, of another Vulcan’s hands running up a tanned, aristocratic arm, his ex-wife’s smile gentled by love. So many things he had never wanted to see, all roiling about in his head…

“My son,” Sarek said. He sat on the edge of the futon and folded his hands in his lap. “I hear your agony from great distance. There must be something I can do to alleviate your pain.”

Spock shook his head. “There is nothing to be done,” he said.

“I know your pain,” said Sarek.

“You do not,” said Spock.

“You forget,” Sarek said, “That I was bound to another, before your mother.”

Spock had forgotten. He looked up.

“T’Rea and I were not a match,” he said. “We did not intend to solidify the bond, and she left very shortly after we had begun to live together to pursue kolinahr. Her death disturbed me greatly. From lightyears away I still felt her loss as if it were a physical thing.”
Spock said, “I had not known.”

“I would have not told you,” Sarek said. “It was not relevant information until now.”

Spock closed his eyes.

“Never would I have wished a broken bond upon you, my son.” Sarek reached out carefully, placing his hand over Spock’s knee. “Though I know that the both of you had logical reasons to separate, I understand that such mental toll would be enormous to one of your youth. Your mother, when she heard you were to be bonded to T’Pring, expressed her great displeasure.”

“She did not understand,” Spock said.

“She did not,” Sarek agreed. “For one of our people to be alone such as you are now is a thing of brutality. I do know that the wound will heal with time, but it is not the natural way of our race. The stability of another mind within ones’ own is what has anchored our species in logic since the time of Surak. It is what has made our marriage to logic a thing of nature. There is no shame in this, Spock. Your pain is an ancient one.”

Spock said, “… Your words mean much to me.”

“This is as I had intended,” Sarek said. “It has been suggested that you and T’Pring might meet, to aid in your healing. She suffers as you do, my son.”

“I have no desire to see her,” Spock said.

“It is illogical to avoid that which might heal you.”

Spock closed his eyes. “If you believe…”

“I know,” Sarek said.

Spock nodded. “Then I will do as you ask.”

T’Pring sat down on the couch next to Spock, her demeanor unshaken. He would almost have believed she was completely unaffected, but the sweat beading on her forehead and upper lip gave her away.

“Spock,” she said.

“T’Pring.”

“How are you faring?”

“I am unwell,” Spock said. “Yourself?”

“I am similarly dispositioned.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Amanda had left the living room to make tea.
“How is your James Kirk?” T’Pring asked.

Spock said, “I would not know.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate indeed,” Spock said, “That I would not have one to comfort me in this time as you do.”

T’Pring whipped her head around to glare at him.

Spock stared back, impassive.

“It is no concern of yours,” T’Pring said.

“That is true,” Spock said. “Though I do wonder now if your desperation to break our bond was not due only to my failings as a husband, but yours as a wife.”

“My obligations to you were logical,” she said. “I never promised you my heart.”

Spock nodded, slowly. “Indeed you did not.”

“Then we are of a mind,” she said, “as I am not at fault.”

“Nor I,” Spock reminded her.

“Nor you,” she agreed.

Silence again.

“What is his name?” Spock eventually asked. His mother was taking her time with the tea.

“Stonn,” she said, easily.

“I do not know of him.”

“You would not,” she agreed. “He is not originally from this providence.”

“I see.” Spock looked down at his hands, neatly linked on his lap. “Do you intend to bond with him?”

“Perhaps,” T’Pring says. “Though I would not commit myself so quickly, despite this pain.”

Spock nodded. “Logical,” he said.

“I always am.”

Finally, his mother returned with the tea. She set it down on the small glass table stationed before the couch. She stood and smiled. “It’s good to see you again, T’Pring.”

T’Pring nodded her head. “It is expected you would find me distasteful after divorcing myself from your son. I am honored that this is not the case.”

Amanda smiled. “Oh, sweetheart, you’ll always be welcome in our home.” She turned and started out of the room. “Tell me before you leave, I’ll see you off.”

“If you wish,” T’Pring said.
Amanda left. Spock had been expecting her to stay, but alas.

T’Pring poured herself a cup of tea. She sat back and then curled her legs beneath herself, studiously avoiding eye contact with Spock. Spock followed her example and poured himself a cup of tea as well, taking a long, slow drink of it.

“It is…” T’Pring swallowed.

“Yes?”

“It is… very lonely,” she said. “I had not expected to miss your presence in my mind.”

“I had not thought I would miss yours, either.”

“Then we are in agreement,” she said.

Spock raised a brow. “About what do we agree?”

“It is lonely.” She looked down into her cup. “Is it not?”

“It is,” Spock slowly agreed.

“Do not misunderstand me,” she said, quickly. “I do not wish to repair the bond.”

“I would not wish to do so, either.”

She nodded. “However.”

Spock resisted the urge to sigh. “I can no longer read your mind,” he said. “You must speak it.”

She gave him a look. “I am well aware.”

“Then speak.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Perhaps I will not.”

“It will make no difference to me,” Spock decided. He took a long sip of his tea.

T’Pring looked away from him. “It would benefit us both to meld.”

Spock looked sharply back over at her. “Meld?”

“Yes.” She said. “Our minds are going through what might typically be described as withdrawals. It would perhaps ease the pain if we were to perform a surface meld, as a way to soothe the broken bond.”

“It is unconventional,” Spock said.

“It is not illogical,” T’Pring argued.

Spock considered what she’d said. “… I am in agreement with you.”

“Good,” she said. She set her cup down quickly and turned to him. She held her hand up, waiting for him to turn to face her.

Spock set his tea aside as well, rearranging his body so that his knees were nearly touching T’Pring’s. He let her hand touch his face, raising one of his to reach for her brow.
Their minds came together like an elastic band snapping back on itself. Spock nearly jerked out of the meld at the sudden flare of pain, but maintained composure. A moment passed and they slid together like usual.

T’Pring’s mind was like snow. Soft, and cold, and sharp. Her thoughts came around him like a bubble, icing delicately over in beautiful, complex patterns. The cold was an instant balm to the ache in his psych, and he eagerly sank into it, calming.

She’d been in a world of agony, less to his own, but still there. She’d been unable to stand touching Stonn, her lover, and the grate of her mother’s mind had been trying. Her father’s thoughts had been slightly less painful, but he’d radiated disapproval of her choices as well.

Spock could feel the slight tinge of jealousy she felt at observing the way his family had comforted him. She wouldn’t have traded place with him, however, sensing his agony ran deeper than her own. She didn’t judge him for it, but she was curious as to the cause.

He had no answer for her.

It was good to sift through her thoughts again. She was arranged like a machine, pieces neatly tucked together mathematically to ensure the whole piece worked in nothing but complete perfection.

They stayed like that, for a moment. T’Pring’s pain slowly ebbed away, and Spock could feel his slipping with it. She thought about disengaging the meld, but didn’t push the thought towards him, content to simply stay in the surface meld for a while longer. Spock felt there was nothing more that could be gained from it, though, and gently began to untangle their minds.

He came back to himself with a slow, restful breath. The throbbing in his head had ebbed away somewhat.

T’Pring opened her eyes slowly. Her gaze met his.

“Spock,” she said. “You were not the ideal husband. But you are an excellent Vulcan.”

“I find I must agree,” Spock said. “I would not enjoy you as my bondmate, but you are a welcome companion.”

She quirked an eyebrow up. “Companion?”

“Well,” Spock said, “I would not say friend.”

Her eyes glimmered with a hint of emotion. “Nor I,” she agreed.

Vulcans did lie, though, and somehow, they were friends.

He’d just started to feel better when the news came. He stared at his mother in shock, unable to move, unable to breath, unable to think. He had seen his mother cry before, but never to such a degree.

“Spock,” she sobbed, “I am- I am so, so sorry. Oh, Spock.”
He felt her arms around him and her wet face in his hair, but he could not move. He stared on and on at the holo projector, feeling gutted and lost. The reporters promised more information would be revealed as facts continued to pour in, but the bare bones of the tragedy had already been exposed.

Tarsus IV was the sight of a massacre, and over half the planet was dead.

Spock remembered how delirious Jim had been in their meld, how T'Pau had been careful to say he was not dying in that very moment. Jim had been starving to death. He had touched Jim’s mind from across the universe and had been able to do nothing; had been unable to see even what pain had been brought over his friend.

It made sense. The hunger he’d felt, second hand, the horrible melancholy that had settled over him. The ache in his mind that had lasted so long after T’Pring’s had begun to heal.

Jim was dead.

Spock felt his eyes sting unfamiliarly as his throat closed in on itself. He lurched forward, feeling unsteady, and felt his face become wet and hot. He reached up with shaking fingers to touch his cheek, and as he pulled away his damp fingers realized what was happening to him. He was crying.

"Excuse me," he choked, and retreated to his room.

He cried for a very long time that night. He heard his mother doing so in the other room. He wished to do something- anything- but... there was nothing to be done.
There had been some part of Spock which had hoped, however illogically, that perhaps he was more inclined towards humans than Vulcans. He got along with his human mother and sister. He had gotten along with Jim. There had been no one on Vulcan for him but his ex-wife, who was more dispositioned to gossip about her lover's latest failures with him over the comm system than she was to be a 'friend' by any measure. Still, it had been something- something he had been unable to replicate on Terra.

"Professor Spock," cadet Uhura was clearly attempting not to glare at him. When he'd first begun teaching, the nuances of human expressions had escaped him. He knew his mother's, he knew his sister's, but they were both "watered-down" and "Vulcanised." Jim had been different, but he was different, too, from the other humans on his planet. Spock found that understanding James Kirk didn't lend itself into understanding others very well at all.

Still, he was learning. "Yes, Cadet?"

"You marked me off on this," she pointed to a second of text on her PADD where he had, in fact, marked her incorrect.

"Your observation is correct," Spock said. "As you did not correctly transcribe the words, I was forced to mark it as being incorrect."

"This is perfectly fine!" She snipped. "It's high Vulcan, but-"

"The assignment, cadet, was to be carried out in modern Vulcan."

"Modern Vulcans still used high Vulcan, especially in circumstances such as these!"

"You will notice that was not part of the assignments' parameters."

The cadet glared. Spock could at least read that expression. He wondered what it was that was irking her. He was not being cruel, or lying to her. He was not being unfair. He simply did not understand.

"Kesh," she hissed under her breath.

Spock raised a brow. She likely did not know that he understood Klingonese. "Is that all, cadet?"

"That's all." She muttered. She collected her things and left.

Spock watched her go and wondered how it was that he could be of both Terra and Vulcan and still have nothing in common with either of its people.
"Are you always like this?" Jim asked.

The cadet glared at him. "Do you want me to hypo you, or are you just particularly stupid?"

"Oh, I like you," Jim decided. He grinned at the doctor. "This is very hush-hush, and you don't even have a bedside manner? What kind of people does Starfleet look for nowadays?"

"The suckers that won't veto being sent out into the goddamn vacuum of space just to check on some stupid kids." The cadet- his label read McCoy- grumbled. "You're just a little starved, honestly, what's all the fuss about?"

Jim threw back his head and laughed. He couldn't recall the last time he'd laughed so genuinely. "You're an asshole!" He accused, and leaned forward so that McCoy could press an instrument to his forehead. "Why are you even out here, if you hate space so much?"

"Wife took the whole damn planet in the divorce," the man sighed. "All I've got left are my bones."

"And your mouth, apparently." Jim snickered. "Well, Bones, if you're not nice to me, I may just tell your instructor."

"Do that, and I'll throw up on you."

It was quiet for a moment as the cadet wrote something down on his PADD.

"You like Starfleet?" Jim asked, off-hand.

"I'd like it a lot more if they didn't send me off-planet in a damn tin can," McCoy said. "But it's alright. Why?"

"That's where I'm destined to head," Jim said, grinning. "Maybe when I get there, you can be my roommate."

McCoy snorted. "Sure," he drawled. "And we'll be super best friends and braid each other's hair every night."

"Well duh."

He rolled his eyes. "And what track are you going for? Sassy mouth like that- I'd have to guess communications."

"Oh, no." Jim grinned. "I'm destined for the big-leagues, Doctor."

"Oh yeah? What'cha aiming for, kid?"

"Me? I'm gonna be a captain," he said, determined. "And you can count on that."

It was the start of a beautiful friendship.
The launch of the U.S.S Enterprise was beautiful. Even through his strict avoidance of emotionalism, Spock knew it. He listened to the clapping and cheering and felt the happiness in the room like a palpable thing. They were shipping out for the next three years, and no one looked sorry for the time that would be lost planet-side.

He wished that Jim was there to see it with him, however illogical it was to do so.

He stared at his room, hardly able to believe he'd actually made it. Somehow, between the crazy stunts and the tragedy and the long nights and the pain... he'd made it.

"You'll catch flies," Bones said, and reached out to push Jim's jaw closed.

"I have a dorm room." Jim said. "I'm a Starfleet cadet."

"That's right," Bones said. "So you're gonna act like one. That starts with you keeping your things on your side of the room, and not leaving dishes or food out, so help me god."

"I feel like I've just gotten married," Jim mused.

"Don't go getting sweet on my yet, honey." Bones drawled. "I've got a list of rules for keeping the bathroom clean. You're damn lucky I agreed to this, kid- most freshman are stuck over in the first division barracks. If you think the halls smell weird in here, you should have taken a walk through Freshman Hall. Smells like french cheese and dog hair."

"You know, Bones, you're making this whole experience a lot less magical than I'd anticipated it being."

"Good," Bones said. "Let your hopes and dreams die now. It'll save you time and energy in the future."

"Home sweet home," Jim laughed.

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_Vesht ko-telsu- T'Pring_ Spock wrote.

_I am in good health. I am certain that you ask only so that I will ask how you are, in return, so that you may relate your latest misery. I understand that you have exorcized Stonn from you life and must relate that I understand the struggle you face. As you are aware, I never developed an attraction to you, nor any other woman. This has made it easier for me to distinguish myself as homosexual. I understand that experiencing attraction to the male gender would make contradictory evidence to the hypothesis you have begun to formulate. I remind you that not all data remains pertinent under_
the influence of time. Certainly you have already thought of this, as you are never one to be out-
measured.

I similarly believe that you ask after my 'struggle' only to relate that you have no such issues, as you
are a being without flaw. This, or perhaps you might find some source of amusement in my plight, as
a perfect Vulcan. However, I will regale you of my complications, if only because it would be
impolite to refuse answering your question.

No. There is no one aboard the Enterprise who likes me. I do, however, find myself fascinated by the
ship, and by the worlds and problems we encounter. Captain Pike is a motivated and brilliant
individual, as well as a capable leader. I do not believe he understands Vulcan mannerism or
culture in any sort of depth, but he does seem to be attempting to offer me sympathy. I find that you
are my only continued source of unprofessional contact, as well as the only member of my race I
frequently exchange with. This information will answer your next question sufficiently, but I will
further comment simply to prolongate my correspondence to you, as Captain Pike is currently
watching me write you and hopes that I am writing my family home for the holidays of which we do
not celebrate. I do not wish to correct his assumption, for it would make me even more alien in his
eyes.

No, my father has not resumed contact between the two of us. My joining Starfleet has been
unforgivable in his mind. I suspect it will continue this way until I apologize. However, I have
nothing for which to apologize, so there shall be no words between us.

I request that you do not again call me childish or illogical. It does not do any damage to my psyche
or supposed 'ego,' but it is not a productive use of my time to read anything which can be considered
untrue or simply idealistic.

Thank you for the audio recording you sent with your last message. It has reminded me of just how
unpleasant I find the Vulcan flute. You are a very astute Vulcan, but a very poor musician. I will
include a recording of my own lute recital, so that you may prepare your own insults.

Live long and prosper.

-Spock

“Not interested.”

Jim raised his brows. “I just sat down,” he defended.

“You have that look in your eyes.” The woman pushed his drink away from hers. “Don’t offer to
buy me a drink, I won’t drink it, and I won’t sleep with you.”

Jesus, Jim thought. “Uh… okay. That’s cool. Jesus do I really come off as that big a douchebag?”

She leveled him with a look. “You over-gel your hair, your cologne is too strong, and-“

“I’m not sure if my self-esteem can handle that ‘and,’” Jim laughed. “You really think I over-gel my
hair?” He lifted a hand to touch it. “I toned it down this month by a lot.”
She raised a brow at him as if to ask why he was still there.

“I actually came over here because I think I’ve seen you around campus,” Jim said. “You’re enrolled in Starfleet Academy, right?”

“Yes, I am,” she said, slowly.

He stuck his hand out. “Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Jim—first year.”

“Uhura,” she said. She ignored his hand. “Second year.”

He nodded, easily dropping his hand away from her. “I thought so. I’ve seen you go in and out of the linguistics department. I think we have a mutual friend. Gaila ring any bells?”

“Oh. Gaila is my roommate.”

Jim smiled. “Aha! I was right, then! I knew I recognized you.” He lifted his head as the bartender stopped before them. “Andorian ale, double shot.”

“And here I thought you were just some dumb hick,” she mused.

“Well, not just a dumb hick.” He smiled and lifted his drink. “I also happen to have excellent taste.”

She snorted.

“So, you already said no to the drink. Think I could persuade you to let me buy us a backset of chilly fries? You can bitch about your least favorite professor and I’ll act like I know exactly what you mean.”

She actually laughed, then. “You know what? Sure. Why not?”

“That’s the spirit, Uhura.” He ordered as soon as he had his drink, sliding his credentials over towards the bar tender. He ran them quickly and then passed them back. Uhura caught sight of it, “Oh, so you’re Kirk.”

“You’ve heard of me?”

“You weren’t lying about our mutual friend. Gaila adores you.”

He smiled wide. “Well, what a coincidence. I just so happen to adore her as well.”

“She said you’re taking Orion?”

“Yep.”

“In an attempt to woo her, I’ll bet.”

Jim put a hand over his hear, gasping in mock-pain. “Your opinion of me just gets better and better. Next you’ll be accusing me of attempting to engage in friendship with you.”

“As if,” she laughed again.

“Hey,” he said, and lifted his glass. “Stranger things have happened.”

She smirked and lifted hers, too. “Indeed.”
“Captain.”

“Mr. Spock,” Captain Christopher Pike turned around and braced his hands over his desk. “Thank you for coming up here on such short notice- I know you’re all busy down in the labs right now, but I wanted to talk to you and I finally got the backlog of paperwork through.”

“Sir.”

“Sit down.”

Spock did. He clasped his hands in his lap and looked up at Pike, who was staring him down with grim determination.

“I’m gonna be honest, Spock,” Pike said.

“A quality most beneficial to a starship captain,” Spock agreed.

Pike sighed. “I don’t want to be that guy, Spock. But there’s simply no other way to put this. People don’t like you.”

Spock raised a brow. “Sir?”

“‘You’re too hard on them, Spock. You’re a great science officer; the best, even. No one can deny that. The problem here is that the people working with you aren’t all the best science officers to leave the academy. They’re regular officers. Good officers, but they’re not you.”

“I am aware,” Spock said.

“You treat them like they should be as good as you are,” Pike said. “You nitpick. You criticize minuscule errors. You drive them hard, and long, and you leave no room for exception or error. And I understand- that’s the way you conduct yourself. But they can’t keep up Spock. It might be one thing if they could come to you with their problems, but you don’t socialize at all. You don’t eat in the mess, you don’t work out in the gym, you don’t even come to staff events and parties.”

Spock looked down at his lap. Everything Pike said was true.

“You see what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“I am afraid I have failed to draw a conclusion from your words,” Spock said. ”Unless you mean to imply that I am an unsatisfactory science officer, in which case, I have understood.”

“No, Mr. Spock, that’s not what I’m saying. You have great potential. You’ve just got to open up to them,” he said. “Or at least loosen the reigns a little.”

Spock looked up, quizzical. “Reigns, sir?”

“A metaphor,” he said. “It just means you don’t have to be so hard on them. Give them a chance, Spock. Build some relationships. I know Vulcans aren’t really touchy-feely, but surely you can find something to talk about with someone. A few friends, Spock. It would make a hell of a difference.”

Spock furrowed his brow. He did not know how to make friends. “I will endeavor to ‘loosen the
reign,’ Captain.”

“And to socialize?”

Spock resisted the urge to sigh. “I will try, sir.”

Gary wasn’t his first relationship.

There’d been lots before Gary. There’d been Ruth, but she hadn’t been in love with him, and when he’d confessed his love to her she’d suggested they take a step back. He hadn’t held it against her, and there had been others, after her. He fell hard, he fell fast, and he fell often, and though it never ended as he wanted it to, he wouldn’t have changed it.

Gary was probably the first person he dated that he wasn’t in love with. But Gary had deep brown eyes, and black hair, and a jaw like glass, and, well, who was Kirk to say no? They’d been friends for a long time. And even if Gary felt… nearly off, like Jim was supposed to be with someone like him, but not him, it wasn’t really that concerning. Who else would he be with?


Gary groaned and rolled over in bed, glaring. “What?”

“I’m going to class. Kiss me goodbye.”

Gary groaned and leaned up, giving Jim a quick peck on the lips. “There. Get out of here so I can sleep.”

Jim grinned at him. “Alright, sir, if you insist.” He started towards the door.

“Jim!”

“Yeah?” He turned back around, smiling knowingly.

Gary flushed and pointed to his face. “One more.”

“Well,” Jim sashayed over to the bed, leaning down over his boyfriend. “Since you asked so nicely...” The best part about being a genius was that if you were late to class you could always catch up. Well, maybe it wasn't the best part, but it certainly was a perk. Jim threw himself back into bed with a grin and straddled Gary. ”Take two,” he said, and dove back in.

Spock ripped the chains out of the wall and lunged forward, rolling, and launched himself up to grab onto their jailer. He sunk his fingers into the man’s neck, flinching at the momentary psychic
feedback he received from the touch. He threw his shields up and let go, watching the man drop like a stone.

He secured the keys from their guard and moved over to Captain Pike, who was watching with wide eyes. He quietly released the captain from his chains and then stepped back, allowing the man to walk free.

“Mr. Spock,” Pike said, rubbing his wrists. “That was a hell of a trick.”

“It was not a trick,” Spock said. “I simply-“

Pike laughed. “Metaphor, Lieutenant.”

“I see.”

Pike took up the lead, hurrying towards the end of the room. He motioned for Spock to follow, saying, “Mr. Spock, keep pulling stunts like that, and you’ll have a friend in no time.”

Spock simply nodded, and followed along, keeping all the half-hearted objections to himself as he went. There was no need to tell Pike that Vulcans had no use for friends. He was half-Vulcan anyway, and even if he had been full blooded, it would have been a lie. He wondered, privately, if his father would approve.

He pushed the thought away and marched on. He was an officer of Starfleet. He did not need his old bonds, however painful their absence may have been. However comforting their presence could be. He thought, not for the first time, of Jim, and wondered- if things had gone differently, where they would be?

“Well, I don’t know what that punching bag ever did to you, but it must have been something.”

Jim looked up from where he’d been pummeling the bag relentlessly. One of the men from the class below him was grinning, arms crossed casually, a fencing foil hanging from his grip.

“Its name is Finnegan,” Jim panted.

“Beating a bag so as not to get expelled for fighting the real cause of your frustrations. A noble effort.” The guy held his hand out. “Hikaru Sulu. I’m looking for a sparring partner, and you seem to have plenty of steam to work off.”

Jim grinned and shook his hand. “James Kirk.”

“I know,” Sulu said. “So, how about it?”

“A sparring partner?” Jim looked down at the foil. “I’ve never picked up a sword in my life.”

“Oh, this?” Sulu held it up. “No, no, I’m talking hand-to-hand. I’d be better off fighting that bag than you, if we’re talking fencing.”

Jim laughed. “Well, you’re not wrong. Hand-to-hand, though?” He stretched his hands up above his
head. “I don’t see why not. But you have to promise not to go naming any punching bags Kirk when we’re done.”

“Why would I?” Sulu smiled. “When I’ve already got a punching bag with that very name?”


He had Sulu on his back in minutes.

"Where-" Sulu grimaced as he sat up. "Where the hell did you learn that?"

Jim stared down at his hands, which had moved in an alien way; quickly, and with persuasion, and with some sort of hidden familiarity he could feel right down to his very bones. "I don't know," he said, but he did. Spock. "Trick I picked up from my old Vulcan friend, I suppose."

"You're friends with a Vulcan?"

"Was," Jim said, and tried not to think too hard on it. "He moved on. But hey, it's the logical thing to do, right? When I grew up, I put my childish things behind me, and all that."

"... Show me that again," Sulu said.

Jim smiled wide and held his hands out, feeling as if somehow, Spock had taught him the moves while they were sleeping. "Sure thing."

God, did he miss him.

Ensign Komak slipped a little closer to his side. He could smell her perfume and noted she had applied more than usual. He stepped respectfully away from her, but she followed pseudo-casually, not looking up from where they were charting as she moved.

“Ensign?” Spock asked.

She flushed. “Please, sir,” she said. “Call me Edna.”

“Ensign Edna,” Spock said. “May I ask what it is you are doing?”

“Charting stars, sir.” She looked back down at their work.

Spock looked back down, too, determined to continue. A moment later, she slipped a little closer- he could feel the heat rolling off of her skin in waves. He looked up, sharply. “Ensign,” he said, “What is the reason for your proximity?”

She blinked a few times in succession, then looked down at the floor. “W-well, sir. Mr… Mr. Spock.” She looked up at him. “I was hoping. Hoping I could get close enough to… to do this.” She stood on her tip-toes and quickly pressed her lips to his.

He was hit with a flood of her nervousness, anticipation, lust, and anxiety. He shielded from her mind and then raised his hands, gently settling them on her shoulders to push her away. The touch in
his psych had been unwelcome, but her acts upon his physical person were even more so. He could not say why it felt so wrong- only that it did.

“Ensign Komak,” he said, quietly. “I request you do no such thing again.”

She watched as he folded his arms behind his back. She swallowed hard and looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “I… I take it this means my feelings aren’t returned?”

“I am Vulcan,” he said, and turned back to the chart. “I possess no feelings.”

A very Jim-Kirk like voice in the back of his head whispered, _liar._

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_A hand resting limp and useless on the ground, paler than it should have been. He was thin- so, so thin. Joel had said he was going to take watch, but Jim knew that the boy should have given up hours ago. Why hadn’t he woken him up?_

“Joel,” he whispered, and reached for the hand.

_Lifeless eyes turned towards him._

“Jim,” he choked, and there was no skin left on his body. _He was a skeleton, with two wide, blue eyeballs, bulging out in fear. “Jim!”_

"Joel?"

"Jim," the skeleton sobbed. "Why did you let me die?"

Jim jerked up in bed, heart pounding a mile a minute. He gasped and fumbled out off of the mattress, momentarily displaced. The faint light blue lights of his boyfriend’s quarters brought him back down to reality, but his adrenalin stayed high, his pulse rocketing right along with it.

“Jim?”

He turned, wiping at the sweat coating his face. “Hm?”

Gary sighed and reached up to him. “Nightmare?”

“Yeah.”

Gary tugged on his shoulder, pulling him back down into the covers. “Go back to sleep,” he said, softly. “It was only a dream. Whatever it is that wakes you up in the night, it’s over now.”

“Kaiidth,” Jim breathed, nodding.

“What?” Gary’s face screwed up in confusion.

“N-nothing,” Jim said. He laid back down. “Just… something we used to say.”

“We?”
“Go back to sleep,” Jim repeated.
Gary did.
Jim did not.

They discovered two black holes attempting to devour each other, in real time. Spock was immediately transported back to his childhood, where he and Jim had created black holes in simulations to attempt a guess at what would happen were such a phenomenon to occur.

He turned to the blond at his side, momentarily forgetting himself. “Jim,” he said eagerly, only to have Ensign Hales stare back at him with wide eyes.

He hadn’t thought of Jim in nearly a year.

“… Sir?”

“Forgive me,” he turned back to the readings and wondered how he could have allowed such a slip. He was Vulcan, and knew at all times where he was, and what he was doing. He had never lost his sense of current self, and the fact that he had was almost alarming. “Continue, Mr. Hales.”

Gary reached out to hold his hand.

Jim lifted his hand up, index and middle finger extended, waiting for his finger-kiss.

Gary stared at the gesture and finally said, “What are you pointing at?”

Jim flushed and lowered his hand. “Oh,” he said, and frowned. “Nothing.”

The night air was cold and damp against his skin. Spock watched star after star fall loose in the sky, tracking each one as it streaked across the black.

A warm hand slipped into the crook of his arm, and he allowed it, for reasons that were beyond him.

“Ever think about what we would have done if you’d been in time to save me?” Jim asked.
Spock sighed and looked back up at the stars. Vulcans did not dream, and yet, he was here—trapped in a matrix of his mind’s conjuring. He allowed himself fleeting happiness in the touch of the boy next to him, before the sadness set it. It was heavy and oppressive, and he felt it as purely as he had through Jim’s mind when they’d touched as children, the both of them curled up on the mattress in the barn, Jim wishing hopelessly that he’d escape that place.

“I am sorry,” Spock said. “I did not think that there was something from which to save you.”

“I starved to death,” Jim whispered. “Ever think about how awful that must have been?”

“I have. You... you have every right to resent me,” Spock said. “I failed you.”

“Everyone failed me,” Jim said. He lifted a hand to the sky. “That’s what I hate the most.”

Spock awoke in a cold sweat. He lay there, for a time, stiff and unmoving, until finally he accepted that he would be unable to go back to sleep. He stood and knelt at the side of his bed and began to mediate, trying in vain to put Jim out of mind.

He would be finished with mandatory leave and returning to the Enterprise for her second launch soon enough—another three years in space. When he was busy once again, he would have no time to be distracted by such illogical things are dreams and emotions.

"You never talk to me!" Gary yelled. "You're always going on and on about things I don't get and then you look at me like you think I'm gonna get it. I know I call you books-on-legs, Jim, but that doesn't mean I can fucking read you!"

"Maybe if you tried to read me, you could!" Jim said. He ran his hands through his hair, agitated. "You expect me to fit into this cookie-cutter impression of what a boyfriend should be, but there's a lot about me you don't know, Gary."

"That's what I'm saying! If you would talk to me-"

"There are things I don't want you to know!" Jim shouted.

Gary blinked at him. He cleared his throat. "Well, then." He looked up. "Maybe we should take some time apart. So you can sort out those things you're so desperate to hide from me."

"... You're saying we shouldn't finish vacation together."

"I'm saying you should call Bones and tell him he can have his roommate back," Gary said. "You can finish your third year living off campus."

"Are you serious right now?"

"More than serious." Gary said. "Jim. We're over, Jim."

Jim stared at him.

"I'm breaking up with you."

"Fine." Jim said.
Gary nodded, jerkily. "Fine."

Jim knew he should have felt bad. Horrible, even. He'd been with Gary for years. And he was sad, in a way. He sobbed about it on Bones's couch and ate a gallon of ice cream. But when it came down to it, he wasn't really that upset about their parting. It felt... like the way things were supposed to be.

As a man who believed firmly in romance, that scared Jim.

But what was there to be done?

"Bones," Jim drawled. "Would you date me?"

"Hell no," Bones said.

"Fair," Jim said. "I guess it's my destiny to travel the galaxy alone, then."

"Oh hush," Bones grumbled. "You'll find someone to keep by your side."

I thought I had, Jim thought. Of course, in his fantasies, it had never been Gary stationed as his first officer, but rather...

Well, it didn't matter either way, did it?

“Mr. Spock, damage report?”

“Hull integrity at thirty two percent, Captain."

“Good. Then this might just work.” Pike leaned over and pressed one of the buttons on the arm of his chair. “Sickbay, this is the Captain. How’s Number One?”

“‘She’ll live sir, but you’ve got to stop rocking the ship around if you want her to come out looking the same!’”

“Understood, Pike out.” The Captain whipped around to face Spock. “Think you can play first for a while more, Spock?”

He nodded. Privately, he knew he could get used to it.

“Excellent. You know what to do, Mr. Spock.”

They escaped with shields at .00005 percent. It's close. But it's enough.
“This fucking tech is worse than the hobgoblin,” Bones muttered.

“Hobgoblin?” Jim laughed.

“You weren’t here for him,” Bones said. “He taught in my first year. Don’t you remember me calling you all times of night to complain about him?”

“Oh, I guess,” every time Bones had brought up ‘He-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named,’ Jim had thought about his Spock, with his green tinged skin and pointy ears and perfect bangs. He’d missed most of what Bones had said, because of that.

“Good thing he’s not here anymore,” Bones snorted. “You’d have hated that guy.”

“Probably,” Jim said, on autopilot. His thoughts had been turning to Spock more and more as of late, and he’d hope to have gotten it under control. But with one thought in his head, the rest were soon to follow.

He missed Spock.

He pulled out his comm and opened it up, scrolling down to a contact he hadn’t opened in months.

“Hey,” he texted Gary. “You busy?”

He only had to wait a couple of minutes.

“No. Why, bookstack? Wanna hang out?”

“You know it. ;)”

Spock was overcome one day with such an intense sense of longing that he had to pause in the middle of his speech to catch his breath.

Number One looked up to him from where she sat behind her desk, concerned. “Everything alright, Mr. Spock?”

“Fine, sir,” Spock said. The feeling passed, and he continued.

“Montgomery Scott,” the man said. He held out his head, smiling in an easy, friendly way.

"Transfer."

“Scott, huh?” Jim smiled. “I heard about that stunt you pulled in Engines Sciences. How’d you like to be a part of my crew, when I captain the Enterprise?”
“Crew?” His brows rose up high.

“Yep,” he said, and his smile grew even wider. “I’m gonna beat the Kobayashi Maru.”

“Beat it, aye?” He laughed. “They say it’s impossible.”

“Which is why we’re gonna be famous when we defeat it, Scotty!” he said. “You in?”

“You had me at Enterprise,” Scott said. "I'm in."

Spock made his first tentative 'friend; when he finds a Tarinian playing chess alone in the rec room.

“May I?” Spock asked, indicating to the board.

The alien looked up, startled. “You play?” they asked.

Spock nodded. “It is a game based in logic,” he said, and sat. “My father was quite fond of it.”

The Tarinian nodded. “I see. Yes, it would be good to have an opponent. You may take whichever side you prefer, though I must warn you I play best as black.”

“I will be the white, then,” Spock said, and went about arranging his pieces.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. Somehow, things were going to be alright, one way or another.

Uhura sighed and leaned into Jim’s side. She was past tipsy and heading steadily into drunk, but Jim wasn’t far behind. “You know you wouldn’t have this problem if you just switched over to my linguistics class. I could actually help you, then.”

“I’m going to get these stupid genders down if it’s the last thing I do,” Jim swore.

“Gaila won’t help you, then?”

“Gaila grew up on Terra,” Jim said. “I know more Orion than she does.”

“I always forget that,” Uhura sighed.

“You’re drunk, I won’t hold it against you.” Jim patted her head.

“Still,” Uhura said. “Orion is one of the most difficult languages in the universe to master.”

“It wouldn’t be hard if I had a good teacher,” Jim said.
“See? So if you think you’ve got a good aptitude for this kind of thing, and you just want a different teacher, why don’t you just switch over to my class? You can study with me. I promise you, Vulcan isn’t *that* hard, once you get the hang of it. All you need is a talented tongue, Gary’s bragged about yours often enough that I’m staring to think it’s legitimate.”

“Nah,” Jim said. He smiled at her. “Vulcan? Way too hard for me.”

“Well, you’re probably not wrong,” she snorted. “The current teacher is good, even if she’s not as good as the last, but then, he was Vulcan. Or half, anyway.”

“I used to know a half-Vulcan,” Jim grinned. “*Very* well.”

“Oh hush,” Uhura laughed. “Now come on, one more time.”

“I think we should break up. Again.”

“…” Jim stared at him for a second. “You. I. We should?”

“Yeah,” Gary said. “We should.”

Jim stared at him for a second. “… I thought you said last time was a mistake.”

Gary shrugged. “I don’t know. I just… I think we should. Break up, I mean.”

Jim blinked at him.

“Well?”


"You're a great friend, and a better Captain. But as a lover, you couldn't be more far away." He stuck out his hand. “Friends?”

Jim blinked back to reality, looking down at the hand Gary was offering out to shake.

*Gik’tal!* Jim’s mind repeated. His hand tingled with the muscle memory.

Jim gave Gary’s hand a good, firm shake. “Yeah,” he said, and smiled. “Friends.”

“Though it is a matter of confidentiality, and thus I cannot reveal their identity to you, I must inform you that someone has beaten your test.”

Spock raised a brow. “That is impossible.”
“We gave them a medal for it. Can’t tell you which one, so you won’t look the poor kid up.”

“I do not desire to know their identity. Why have you contacted me to tell me this?”

“Think you can re-program a new test? The old one’s coding can’t be fixed; we’ve tried.”

“I will endeavor to do so.” Spock said. He felt like there was something else there, something he was missing, but he pushed the feeling aside. A ‘gut feeling’ was nothing when compared to logic, and there was no logical reason to be suspicious. “Spock out.”

“Congratulations to all of you! You are now members of Starfleet!”

Jim turned and kissed Bones on the forehead, with as much spit and force as was possible. Bones mimed gagging and pushed Jim off of him, glaring. There wasn’t ire behind his eyes, though. Jim could call his bluff any day.

“We did it!” Jim said. “We’re going into space!”

“God help me,” Bones groaned.

Spock sometimes wondered if he had made the right choice, in coming to Starfleet. His father had not spoken to him in some time, and his communication with the rest of his family was limited. He did miss them, quietly, but there was a great, nameless agony which arrested him most ardently in the small moments of the night, in the light of dawn and the soft breath of afternoon. He was pained without knowing why, feeling that, somehow, he was missing some integral part of himself.

He decided that if he could not control his emotions by the end of their three year mission, he would resign and return to his home planet to undergo kolinahr.

Jim was assigned to the Farragut, under the renown Captain Garrovick.

It was the beginning of destiny.
The second mission was coming to an end. Spock, for a great time, had felt his pain stronger than ever, but as they neared Earth, it began to lessen day by day. Over the years he’d discovered much, and he felt content with his position. Pike approached him one night as they were heading back.

“Spock,” he said. “I have something to ask you.”

“Yes, Captain?”

“How would you feel about becoming a first officer?”

Spock’s brow rose. “Sir,” he said, carefully. “I was under the impression you would have none other than Number One herself.”

“Not for me,” Pike said. “I’m staying dirt-side, and so is Number One. The Enterprise is getting a new crew, Spock. But she needs someone who knows her. Someone to show them the ropes. Starfleet, and I, well. We were wondering how you’d feel about being her first officer.”

Spock was uncertain.

“You’re really needed here, Spock. This new Captain- he’s a wild card. A loose cannon. We need someone to keep an eye on him. He’ll make a great Captain, Spock, but he needs someone to balance him out.”

Spock looked at his feet. A wild card. A loose cannon.

It was illogical, but Spock’s mind turned back to a young Jim Kirk, who’d loved the Enterprise more than anything. A reckless Captain could mean her destruction. Though it was not his yoke to bear, he couldn’t seem to divorce himself from the connection he had to the ship.

“If that is what Starfleet wishes, Captain.”

“Good.” Pike grinned. “You’ll make a great first officer, Commander Spock.”

He would give it one more try. He did not have to stay long- just enough to ensure the new Captain would not allow the ship to be blown from the sky. Then, he could terminate his position, and return home to remove himself of his emotions.

“Jim,” Pike said, and gave him a small grin. “I’ve got news.”

“No way,” Jim laughed. “No way!”

“Congratulations, son. The Enterprise is yours.”

Chapter End Notes
Before anyone asks why I had to go and make T'Pring gay when it adds like nothing to the narrative I'm going to just come out and say I've taken her character hostage and will be projecting onto her because no one can stop me. Forgive me.

Kesh- untranslated Klingon insult/curse
Vesht ko-telsu- basically Vulcan for "ex-wife"
Jim stared at the file before him, mouth tugged down at the corner. He scrolled through it, but there was no wiggle room- after the whole Kobayashi Maru incident, Starfleet probably knew better than to leave any loopholes for him. He didn’t like it. Not one bit.

“I don’t get it,” Jim moaned. “Why can’t I just bring my own XO?”

“You’re already getting almost all your bridge crew,” Uhura pointed out. “Starfleet probably can’t imagine having all your hand picked people in command. We’re all likely to agree with you on, well, just about everything.”

“She’s got a point,” Bones said.

“Of course I do.” Uhura smiled. “If you had your own, hand-picked command officer-“

“Your own ex-boyfriend.” Bones added.

“Well, who’s going to reign you in if you start getting out of hand?” Uhura asked.

Jim said, “Gary would reign me in.”

Bones and Uhura both gave him a look.

“What? He would!”

“And then you’d smile at him and slip a few select words and he’d be all about your hair-brained schemes.” Bones drawled. “We’ve seen it before- glad to know we’re not gonna see it again.”

Uhura snorted.

“You guys are the worst.” Jim said. “We haven’t even been on board one day and it’s already mutiny.”

“Sorry, Captain.” Uhura winked. “We’ll be professional on shift, promise.”

“That’s better.”

“I won’t.” Bones said. “I’ll be out there reminding you how stupid it is that we’re out there. Did you know-“

“Is it a scary fact about spontaneous combustion? Because in that case, yes, you’ve probably said it before.” Jim smirked at Bones, who only scowled.

“Why I even bother…” He trailed off.

“Because you love us,” Jim reminded him. He looked back down at the PADD he’d been skimming. “I admit, maybe you guys do have a point about Gary. But still- giving me a commanding officer I’ve never even met? Command teams are practically a marriage.”

“Well, arranged marriages have worked before.” Uhura pointed out.
“If they don’t kill each other.” Bones said. He peered over at the PADD. “And he’s a Vulcan? I’ll be certain to attend your funeral when wifey offs you, Jim.”

“Oh, Bones, you wound me. I can get along with a Vulcan.” He squinted at the screen. “I swear every Vulcan ever is named Spock.”

“You’ve met another Spock?” Uhura laughed.

“Two, actually. But one, well…” He straightened back up. “I haven’t thought about my Spock in… damn, it feels like a lifetime.”

Uhura laughed. “Don’t start daydreaming now.”

“Yeah,” Bones said. “Don’t know what the Spock’s you met were like, but this one is a damn piece of work.”

Jim’s brows raised. “You’ve met him?”

“Did you not listen to my griping in freshman year?” Bones snipped. “Pretty sure I complained about that damned hobgoblin about twice a day.”

“I don’t recall.” Jim drawled.

Uhura said, “Be nice, he wasn’t that bad.”

Jim sighed. “Has everyone but me met my Commander?”

“Just about,” Bones said. “And no one’s pleased, I can tell you that much. Man wouldn’t know a sense of humor if it walked up and bit ‘im on the nose.”

“He’s really not that bad.” Uhura said. “He’s just… Vulcan.” She shrugged.

“Vulcan I can handle.” Jim promised. “Asshole, not so much.”

Bones snorted. “Well good luck then, kid.”

Jim turned to Uhura, hoping she’d have a saving comment.

She smiled apologetically and shrugged.

“Really?” Jim groaned. “He’s an asshole? I’m spending five years chained to an asshole?”

“He’s smart.” Uhura tried.

“So they’ll be a perfect match,” Bones snorted. “Two genius assholes.”

“I hate you,” Jim said.

Bones said, “Love you too, dear.”

Jim opened his mouth to retort when he spotted the rest of his bridge crew making their way over. Scotty, Sulu, and Chekov- all talking animatedly between each other. They sat without interrupting their discussion.

“It’s clearly class three,” Sulu was saying. “You saw the engines on that thing, Scotty.”

“Aye, I did, and they ‘ere clearly class five if I ever seen one.”
“Plees,” Chekov drawled. “Zey vere class sewen.”

“T ook you guys long enough.” Jim said. “Ready to meet our new XO?”

They paused in discussion. Sulu furrowed his brow, turning to Jim. “I thought Gary was gonna be Commander?”

“He got hawked by the Bradbury.” Jim muttered.

“That aside, they told Jim he’s already got an XO.” Uhura said. She picked up the PADD from where Jim had abandoned it on the lunchroom table, and slid it over to the three at her side. They all eagerly made a grab for it, but it was Scotty who won out, grinning smugly at the other two as he opened the document. Uhura continued, “Jim’s pulling all of us from other ships; he knew us in the Academy, we’re his friends. Not to mention Chekov.”

The boy grinned.

“You sure yer graduating in time for us to leave?” Bones drawled.

“Yees, sir.” Chekov beamed.

Jim said, “Apparently they need someone to keep us all in check. We’re getting Pike’s old science officer. He’s been on the Enterprise a while, so I guess it makes sense that they’d give him to us.”

“He’s not a pet, Jim.” Bones snorted. “They’re not giving him to you, they’re assigning a watch dog to your ass.”

Jim sighed.

“Ah, I remember him.” Scotty frowned. “Not a very nice fellow, if I recall.”

“Oh my god, Commander Spock? Are you kidding me?” Sulu groaned.

“Seriously?” Jim said. “You’ve all met him?”

“Not me,” Chekov said. He squinted at the name on the PADD. “Oh, I have heard ze horror stories of Professor Spock.” He looked back up at Jim in horror. “Zis is ze XO?”

“I guess so.” Jim groaned. He dropped his head into his hands.

“You could have met him before now, too- you should have taken xenolinguistics,” Uhura laughed.

Jim said, “I took Orion.”

Uhura snorted. “Ah, yes, and what a useful language that’s going to be.”

“This guy,” Sulu said, “Is ruthless. He made my friend Mia cry at least four times.”

“Aye,” Scotty nodded. “Perfection or nothing fer him, Captain.”

“Great.” Jim looked at the clock at the top of the PADD screen. “Well, we’d better be going. Wouldn’t want to be late meeting Mr. Perfect.”

They stood in unison. Jim lead the group down the halls of Starfleet headquarters, feeling more and more nervous by the minute. He’d dreamed his entire life of captaining the Enterprise- he’d grown up watching her become herself from just beyond the shipyard. What if this guy ruined everything?
Spock. It was the ‘Jim’ of Vulcan names, he supposed. The name flushed images through his mind, rapid-fire. An old pair of eyes, deep with understanding and unfathomable compassion. A gnarled hand reaching out to him from the light, trying to draw him out of the shadows. A thick blanket dropped over his back while Jim was busy slurping chicken noodle soup from a thermos, and a kind command not to get too overzealous drinking it.

A small open hand. A young voice, saying, “Jim.”

“Jim?”

He startled back to the present.

“You daydreaming again?” Bones teased.

“Something like that,” Jim said.

“Nervous?” Bones asked.

Jim shrugged. “In a way.”

Bones nodded.

They were coming up on the conference room, Jim caught sight of Pike walking their way from another hall just ahead. Jim smiled and waved, and Pike nodded back. Jim turned to his crew.

“You guys head into the conference room,” he said. “I’m gonna grab Pike for a sec.”

“Damage assessment?” Uhura teased.

“I like to have a battle plan,” Jim replied. He started up a slight jog, heading off towards Pike while everyone else filtered into the conference room.

“Well don’t you look eager,” Pike greeted him.

“Hey,” Jim said. He smiled. “Long time no see.”

“Lucky for me.” Pike said.

Jim laughed.

“You want to talk about Spock,” Pike guessed.

Jim nodded. “I hear he’s…”

“Vulcan?”

“An ass.”

Pike laughed. “Well, he can certainly come off that way.”

Jim deflated. There went his last hope.

“But.” Pike paused just outside of the conference room. “Don’t go in there with any preconceived notions about him, Jim. I’ll be the first to admit, he takes some getting used to, but he’s a damn good officer.”

Jim looked up, hopeful.
“Don’t blow this, Jim.” Pike said. “Spock is one of the best officers in the fleet, and he’ll make a
damn good First. Number One has always been the balance I needed, but if it had been Spock
standing up there next to me, I know we would have gotten along just as well. He’s got a good head
on his shoulders, and more sense than you do.”

Jim laughed. “Well, that’s not saying much.”

Pike grinned. “Hm, you’re right.” He reached out, clapping his hand over Jim’s shoulder. “I’m not
saying you have to be his best friend. I don’t expect you two to meet and start hugging it out right
then and there. Just… give him a chance.”

Jim nodded. He felt better after talking to Pike, and most of his apprehension had melted away.
Maybe this Spock was a jerk, but Jim had a good track record with all his past Vulcans named
Spock, and he was determined to make this new Spock a good experience too.

“Now come on,” Pike said. He touched the door and it slid open. “Let’s boldly go.”

Jim laughed. He stepped into the room after Pike, and took in the conference table. His team were
already all seated, sitting straight and at attention. He was filled immediately with pride for them; they
looked ready. He turned his eyes up to the front, then, steeling himself for first contact.

His eyes met the Vulcan’s from across the room.

Jim froze.

Time stopped.

He could feel the crew watching him, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away; he couldn’t stop his mouth
from falling open in shock.

Spock looked about the same. He was standing stiffly in surprise, eyes wide as dinner plates.

“Spock.”

He could have heard a pin drop.

“Jim,” Spock said, his voice just barely audible.

_Spock, Jim’s mind echoed. It’s really him. It’s really Spock._

Jim hesitantly stepped forward.

_Year yawned between them, but Jim’s heart beat frantically at the sight of his old friend, oblivious to
the rift stretching across the room. He didn’t know what to do- what to say. How could he be sure
that Spock even still liked him? What if Spock resented him for all that time they’d been apart?_

Jim had tried to find him- why hadn’t Spock done the same? Jim had tried so, so hard. He’d even
thought he’d gotten the right comm number for Spock’s home on Vulcan, only to have it answered
by a human girl. He hadn’t been able to get any closer than that.

What if Spock hadn’t wanted to find him? How did you just… come out and ask that sort of thing?

_“Damn, you’re right.” Jim skipped a rock down the creek. “Well what about if like… we get
separated? I can’t just come right out in the open and ask if we’re still friends. Holding my hand out
for the handshake would be much cooler.”_

For a moment, fear closed in around him as Spock continued to stare at him, stoned in silence. Jim could feel his heartbeat beginning to pick up, faster and faster in his chest.

_Come on,_ he pleaded. _Come on Spock. It’s me. It’s me!_

Spock moved, and Jim could breath again. The Vulcan shot forward and closed the distance between them, their hands wrapping around each other’s wrists. Jim’s heart leapt into his throat as Spock’s shoulder bumped into his. He laughed a little, saying, “Gik’tal,” beneath his breath.

“Gik’tal,” Spock echoed, softly.

Warmth flooded his mind like sunshine. Everything else melted away and Jim stepped even closer to Spock, all thoughts of propriety and personal space thrown out the window. He closed his eyes, hard, against the sting of tears, and closed his arms around Spock. It was all their summers wrapped into one; like he'd been waiting at the station for years and years, and finally, _finally_, the shuttle had come sliding home, and Spock was back again. He was just a dirt-blown kid in Iowa, waiting to be happy again. And here Spock was, fresh off the train; just a dorky Vulcan kid, wrapped up in too many layers.

“You got tall again,” Jim teased.

Spock returned the embrace with ferocity, pressing Jim in close. He smelled familiar, and it made Jim's chest ache. Spock softly said, “It seems one of us had to.”

Jim laughed even harder. He pressed his face into Spock’s neck, closing his eyes for a brief moment. Then he drew back, hastily, still holding on to Spock- grasping the Vulcan’s biceps in his hands. _You're back_, his mind said, _I missed you, I missed you, God, how I've missed you_, but his mouth was moving for him, firing off what he’d wondered night after night all those years he’d been alone.

“You disappeared!” He accused. “Spock, I looked everywhere for you. As soon as I got back to—” he realized he was speaking Vulcan only when he came up short for a word, but he didn’t stop himself. The tongue was familiar, and old, and he loved the way Spock stared on at him in wonder when he spoke it. “—Iowa I tried to pick up your trail, but you were just gone.”

“I attempted to contact you as well, in the beginning,” Spock explained. “I… I heard of what happened, though, and when I could not reach you I… I thought…”

So what if he had almost died? Where the hell had Spock been hiding? “I even got ahold of you dad, once, and all he said was that you guys were no longer speaking!”

“Your mother would not return my communications.”

“I thought I’d found your address, but a human girl answered and I just.”

“I came here,” Spock said. “With little but hope. Knowing someday, you would come back to her.”


“I always did,” Spock said. “I knew if you were alive, you would find her.”
Jim laughed.

“I simply had not allowed myself to envision this day,” Spock said.

“Well, you wouldn’t allow yourself to envision the Hali running either, so I guess I won’t take offense, huh?” He ran his hands up and down Spock’s arms, grinning ear to ear. “Look at you! I’ve heard from a good source you’re one of the finest officers in the ‘Fleet now, Spock. My first officer. God, my first officer!” He laughed again.

“My captain,” Spock returned.

“That’s right.” His smile slowly fell, but didn’t ebb away completely. Quietly he said, “I… I’ve really missed you, Spock.”

Someone coughed.

Jim and Spock turned in unison to face the others in the room. Honestly, Jim had forgotten they were there completely until Sulu had cleared his throat. Every last one of them were staring on in abject horror, eyes wide, mouths slightly open.

Pike was the first to recover. “You know,” he said, “When I said I didn’t expect you two to be best friends and- and hug right off the bat, I meant it.”

Jim threw back his head and laughed. “You’re kidding me, right? Pike! This is Spock,” he pointed at Spock, though he kept one hand anchored on Spock’s shoulder, unwilling to part from him. He could feel Spock in his mind- a welcome presence that even after all the years, was somehow right.

“I’m aware,” Pike said. “What I don’t get is why that matters to you.”

“Am I dead and in hell, or did you two just embrace?” Bones griped. “Jim, what the devil’s gotten into you?”

“You don’t know Vulcan!” Uhura added, pointing at Jim. “I. You. You can’t know how to speak Vulcan!”

Jim grinned, remembering all the times she’d muttered about him in said language. It was clearly all coming back to her, if the look on her face was anything to go by. He wanted to say, yes, Uhura, I do remember the time you referred to me as Captain Hot Ass, and yes, I have the title framed on my wall.

Instead it was Spock who spoke. “Cadet Uhura,” he said. “You seem to be mistaken. Jim has one of the best grasps on Vulcan language out of any off-worlder I’ve ever encountered.”

“And of course we hugged,” Jim answered Bones. “This is Spock! My Spock! Guys, this- this is my long lost best friend!” He nearly stuttered over the last two words, feeling as though they were inadequate. T’hy’la, his mind whispered, but he didn’t know what the word meant, so he choked it back.

“I was not lost, Jim,” Spock reminded him. “It was you who was displaced.”

“Displaced?” Jim snorted. “I was sent to space-jail.”

“It was no jail, Jim. A correctional facility for the gifted does not equate-“

“Spock I drove our baby off a cliff; it was space jail.”
His brows rose. “You drove Starok off a cliff?”

“No, the Sting Ray.”

“Jim, that was an antique worth a fortune.”

“Exactly why it had to go.”

Spock’s eyes narrowed. “I believe it would be logical to assume you were not in the car as it made its decent.”

“Eh, schematics, Spock.”

Bones stood. “Hold on just a damn minute here! I’m more turned around than a tumbleweed in a tornado.”

“I as well,” Chekov said. “You… know each other?”

“You’re friends?” Pike repeated.

“I thought you didn’t know each other at all, Kirk!” Scotty added.

“Guys, guys, hold on.” Jim waved his hands. “No, it’s- I thought I didn’t know him.”

“However,” Spock said. “Jim and I have been aquatinted since the days of our early adolescence. We had unwillingly ceased contact with one another.”

“I have so much to tell you,” Jim gushed, turning to Spock. “Remember Frank?”

“You are aware that as a Vulcan, I possess perfect recall.”

“Of course,” Jim said. “Mom divorced him!”

Spock raised a brow. “It seems our wishes have been recognized, then.”

“Yeah. And-“ he paused, sensing the awkward atmosphere in the room. That was right- they were due to ship out soon, and here he was, depriving his crew of their introduction. “Later,” he promised Spock, as naturally as breathing.

“Of course, Jim.” Spock nodded.

“Guys,” Jim turned towards his crew. “Let me introduce you all to our first officer. Spock, son of Sarek. I believe you know most of the bridge already. We have Paval Chekov at navigation, Hikaru Sulu as the helmsman, Montgomery Scott as Chief Engineer, Doctor Leonard McCoy as our CMO, and Nyota Uhura as our communications and translations.”

Spock nodded at each of them in turn.

“I supposed there won’t be any problem with your assigned First, then,” Pike remarked dryly.

“Problem? Oh, no. No, sir.” He grinned over at Spock, feeling freer than he had in a long time. “I think this will do just fine.”

Spock’s back, Jim’s heart sang. He’s back!

Spock brushed his finger over the back of Jim's wrist. Jim felt the pulse of together in his psyche and
nearly sighed at the contact. Spock was regarding him openly and fondly, and Jim could have wept with it. Everything was good, everything was right. And Jim knew without a shadow of a doubt that his fate had found him, and taken him tenderly beneath its wing, and that from there on out, everything would be as it should.

“What the hell was that?”

Jim leaned back in bed, letting a happy sigh roll through his body. “Hm?”

“Earlier.” Bones threw himself down on his own bed, glaring hard at Jim.

“You’ll have to remind me,” Jim drawled. “I haven’t seen you since this afternoon-“

“You know damn well what I mean,” Bones said. “You threw all of us off. What was that? Some kind of- I don’t know. Something!”

“Yes, well, it was something.” Jim laughed a little.

“My God, man.”

“What?”

“You’re fuzzier than a damn rabbit in the midsts of July.”

“Not sure what that means, but if you’re attempting to accuse me of being happy, then I give- you are completely right.” He rolled over onto his side, smiling over at Bones. “I haven’t felt like this in a long time.”

“Start talking,” Bones demanded.

“What is there to tell?”

“I thought Vulcans didn’t have friends. Let alone Commander Spock! No one likes him, Jim, and I would have thought that would extend doubly to you. Did you know he’s the bastard that coded the Kobayashi Maru?!”

“I thought there was something familiar about the coding,” Jim mused. “That’s just like Spock, too. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before- he used to love his unsolvable problems. Pi was just the beginning of it, he used to-”

“You disgust me,” Bones said. “You used to say whoever made that goddamn test must have been the devil himself!”

“I call all my closest friends the devil,” Jim said.

“Well,” Bones muttered, “At least I know that much to be true.”

“You really think it’s strange? That he and I would be friends?”
“Try impossible.” Bones said.

Jim shrugged.

“How?”

“How?” Jim echoed.

“How did you and he become friends? Never mind that- you’re from different planets; how the hell did you two even meet?”

“His dad’s the Ambassador to Earth. Sarek- uh, his dad- came to Terra for about three months a year, during my summer vacation since it was the only time really warm enough to bring Spock. Spock was just a little guy- he couldn’t regulate his body temperature yet. It was too cold and humid in San Francisco for Spock, too, but Amanda- Spock’s mom- didn’t want to stay back on Vulcan since she missed earth.”

“Missed it?”

“She’s human.”

“Good lord.”

“Anyway. Starfleet owned the house down the street from us and had kinda given it to my mom as like. This side track while she recovered from the whole Kelvin thing. She was in charge of keeping it up and being the host for guests staying there. Guess they kinda just decided to give it to Sarek for his family to live in since they’re kinda a big deal. So Amanda and Spock would stay there every summer.”

“And you saw fit to annoy them whenever possible?”

“For your information, Spock was the one that came over to my house to begin with, okay?” Jim laughed. “I don’t know how it happened. I don’t remember some moment where suddenly we were friends. We just were. I felt… this deep connection to him, like nothing I’ve ever felt before…”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Bones said.


Bones gave him a look. Slowly, he said, “It did sound like he knew about… Tarsus.”

“That’s when we lost contact,” Jim said. “I’m not surprised he managed to find out that’s where I’d gone, though. God, no, I’m talking emotions, Bones. We seriously did this thing were we would stay up past midnight and just say what things made us feel sad.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m serious!”

“Spock? Sad? Isn’t that an emotion?”

Jim smirked. “Yeah. Guy’s full of them.”

“Could have fooled me,” Bones muttered.

“That’s the point, you know. It’s how Vulcans work.”
“Hmph.”

“God, he’d gotten tall. Did you know when he was younger he had these big, chubby cheeks? Now he looks like he’s made out of titanium.”

“This is too much for me to handle,” Bones said. He flopped over onto his other side, staring away from Jim. “Shut up. No more romantics. I will drag this mattress back to my old room, efficiency be damned.”

“No you won’t,” Jim teased. “It would be inconvenient for the cleaning crew if we forgot it there, and see how you’re a zombie when you first get up, you know it’s a real possibility, and you can’t stand the thought of being an inconvenience.”

“Shut up.”

“Make me.”

“Thirty CCs of Benzodiazepines, coming right up.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Very funny.”

“Goodnight, Jim.”

“Fine,” Jim groaned. “Goodnight, Bones.”

Jim couldn't sleep.

How could he? There were so many things, racing about in his head, he felt like he'd never be tired again. Any time he closed his eyes he felt a grin slowly creeping up on him, until he'd be holding back laughter and mashing his face into the pillow. His mind burned golden and lively, memories and ideas alike chasing each other through new daydreams. And he could feel Spock, somehow, like a physical thing- just like back in those days of summer, where he'd felt the space between them, and known when it was coming to an end.

He waited until he could hear Bones's breath even out before rolling out of bed and making his way out of their room. It wasn't just Spock that had him wired. They were going to be moving into the Enterprise in the morning, too. The combination was too much to reasonably handle, so he slunk out of the room and took to the hallways, intent on a long, tiring walk.

He got sidetracked at a window. He stopped and stared up at the sky, for a while, just looking at the moon.

“Jim.”

He turned and smiled. “Hey, Spock.” He waved the Vulcan over, slipping his fingers along the inside of Spock’s wrist, sending a gentle "tonk’peh" through their connection. He resisted the urge to sigh at the feeling of their minds touching. It was like wrapping up in a huge, fluffy blanket with a mug of hot chocolate after a tiring trek out in the cold.

“We did not come into contact with each other for ten years, and now we have stumbled across each other twice in one day,” Spock said. “The odds are nonexistent.”

“Fate,” Jim said. His smile slowly fell. “Ten years… God, has it really been that long?”

“Indeed.”
“Feels longer and shorter both at once,” he said. He turned to regard Spock.

The Vulcan was staring out the window, studiously. His face was shaper than Jim remembered it, his ears longer, and less curved. He’d grown taller than Jim again, and closely resembled the Sarek Jim remembered from their early youth.

He felt his smile start to grow, wider and wider. Spock turned and caught it, lifting a brow in silent query.

“Hey,” Jim said.

“Hello, Jim.”

He bumped his hip into Spock’s. “I really missed you, you know?”

“I have missed you as well.”

“I can hardly believe we found each other again. I mean, I always... I always felt like we would. But sometimes it was hard to believe, you know? It was weird. Like I was certain that even though we hadn't seen each other, somehow, we'd come back to each other, one day. Strange, huh?”

Spock was silent for a minute.

"Spock?"

“Jim…” the Vulcan said, slowly, "There is something you must know.”

Jim tilted his head to the side. “What is it?”

“When you were on Tarsus…”

“Yes?”

Spock looked down at his shoes. “Perhaps it is best not to speak of it, this very moment.”

“No, tell me. I promise, I won’t be mad.”

“You cannot promise that, as you do not know what I am about to say. When I have spoken, you may become upset at my words, and then, through no fault of your own, your promise would have been broken.”

“I see you took up my list of suggested old earth movies,” Jim laughed.

Spock raised a brow. “I was not quoting anything, Jim.”

“Oh, not word-for-word, of course.” Jim looked back out at the sky. “… Go on.”

“Ask me another time,” Spock said.

“Never thought I’d call you a tease,” Jim said. “And yet.”

“And yet,” Spock agreed.

“You know the curiosity will drive me insane.”

“Seeing as many already think you to be insane, I do not see how the outcome of my withholding information would be any different from the future in store should I chose to reveal it.”
“Which is exactly why you should tell me,” Jim laughed.

“You have misunderstood,” Spock started. “It is to say…” he narrowed his eyes at Jim’s devious smile. “You are teasing me,” he realized.

“Me? Tease you? Oh, Spock, never.” Then he smirked. “I suppose it’s Mr. Spock, now.”

“That would be the appropriate title, Captain.”

“Easy as that, huh? God, getting you to call me Captain back in the day was like pulling teeth.”

“You were not a Captain, ‘back in the day,’ Jim.”

Jim scuffed his shoe against the floor. “Well,” he said. “I suppose that’s fair.”

They stood in silence for a time.

“We have a lot to talk about,” Jim said, finally.

“We do,” Spock agreed.

“But not tonight. Tonight… I just want to look at the stars.”

“I find myself in a similar mindset.”

It was silent, for a time. A light streaked out across the black and Jim pointed at it, feeling seven years old again.

"Shooting star," Jim said. "Make a wish."

"Wishes are illogical."

"I knew you'd say that." Jim grinned back out at the night. "I'd make one for you, but mine's already come true."

They stood like that- side by side, watching the sky, for a good time. The years melted away like they'd never existed at all.

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Jim stood on the bridge of the Enterprise, just before the Captain’s chair. He linked his hands behind his back and stared out at the infinite space before them, unable to hold back his smile. All around him was the chatter of his crew as they went through pre-flight checks, calling back and forth as they completed the last few tasks before the Enterprise could ship out of dock.

“Captain,”

Jim turned to Spock, who had materialized on his right. “Mr. Spock,” Jim acknowledged.

“All checks have been completed. We can release from dock on your order, sir.”

Music to his ears. “Understood.” He backed up a step and sat down, curling his fingers under the
arm rests of the chair. “Mr. Sulu,” he called.

“Yes, sir?”

“Take us out.”

“Yes, sir.”

The entire ship lurched, just barely, as they disengaged from the station. Jim felt his smile growing as he looked around the bridge, watching his crew as they attached to their various stations.

“Heading, sir?” Chekov asked.

“Mark seven-hundred-thirty-two-point two.” Jim grinned. “Warp five.”

“Understood, sir.”

The stars blurred around them. Jim had seen it a thousand times, but never before from the Captain’s chair of the Enterprise. It was a religious experience- a coming home after years lost in the void. He felt goosebumps break out over his arms and legs, his smile widening at the slight dizzying effect that jumping to warp first had. He let out a small laugh, but he wasn’t alone- the rest of the bridge seemed nearly as awed as he was.

He looked over to Spock and grinned. Spock looked back, the corner of his mouth just barely lifted, his eyes holding the barest hint of a laugh. Jim sighed and managed to somehow look away from his friend, back out to the stars.

It had been weeks since Jim had been allotted a moment of free time to himself. He’d been swamped with paperwork and personnel, schedules and maintenance checks, procedures and speeches. He’d been prepared for the amount of work it would take to be a Captain, but he’d hoped that it would relent after about a week or so. Instead, it had last nearly three. He was just holding onto the hope that it wouldn’t always be so busy.

At first, he wasn’t even sure what to do with himself. What was he supposed to do when he wasn’t working? His bookshelf, however, stood calling out to him from the corner of his room. He pulled a hardback from the shelf and settled down at his desk with a toasted bagel, smothered in cream cheese.

He’d just settled in to read when the chime on his door sounded.

He groaned, closing his book and tossing it onto his desk. He sat up, tugging off his reading glasses and placing them aside the abandoned book. “Enter,” he called. Privately, he thought that whoever was interrupting him had better have a damn good reason.

Spock stepped into the room.

“Spock,” Jim sat up a little straighter, bad mood dissolving instantly. “Please, come in.”
Spock did. The door to Jim’s room slid shut behind him. Spock took a second to look around Jim’s quarters, eyes wandering about slowly. He said, “Your room is markedly different from that of your childhood.”

“Yeah, no bars on the windows this time.”

Spock raised a brow.

**Crap, Jim thought. I don’t think he ever found out about that.**

“I had meant that it was much cleaner,” Spock said.

Jim laughed. “Yeah, that’s true. Though, I just moved in. Give it time, I’ll have a bit of a mess eventually.”

“Undoubtedly.” Spock found his way over to the desk, and gestured to the lone chair sitting to the side of it. “May I sit?”

“Of course,” Jim said. “Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you.” Spock pulled the chair out and seated himself gracefully, clasping his hands together in his lap. “I had hoped to speak with you, if you are not busy.”

“I’m free,” Jim said. “What’s up?”

Spock looked up above his head.

Jim laughed. “No, I mean, what did you want to talk about?”

“There was no exact topic that I had in mind,” Spock said. “Except, perhaps…”

Jim’s smile slowly fell from his face. “My disappearance?”

“Yes,” Spock agreed. “If it is painful to speak about—“

“No, no. It’s okay.” Jim sunk back into his chair and crossed his hands over his stomach, sighing. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever really talked about it. Like that, I mean. I talk about it plenty- I saw about a billion different therapists.”

“So then it is true.” Spock said. “You were there, on Tarsus IV, at the time of the tragedy.”

“I was,” Jim nodded. “I… I meant to tell you, actually. Before I left. But then things just got so fast, and by the time I had gotten ahold of what I thought was your number, we were leaving. Mom said she’d give you guys a call when she got back to Terra to let you know, but it wasn’t the same. Did… did she ever let you guys know, even? Or was I just gone?”

“She told us,” he said. “Before she departed for her mission. When we next returned to Terra, my mother and I stayed in San Fransisco with my father.”

“I see.” Jim frowned.

“I attempted several communications with you, based on the information your mother left us,” he said. “I do not know if you ever received them.”

“I didn’t,” Jim said, sadly. “But I stopped getting Mom’s, too. The whole business with the ion cloud really screwed us all over.”
Spock’s brow furrowed. “How was it that Starfleet became aware of the problem, then? If I remember correctly, they arrived two months before schedule, and with disaster relief.”

“They did,” Jim said, slowly. “I’m… actually not sure how. The little mail carrier that brought messages up above the ion cloud got destroyed. Maybe we managed to get the distress call out before then, anyway.”

Spock nodded his head. He looked down at his hands, then. “When… when I was unable to locate you, after the evacuation of the planet, I began to think perhaps…”

“I should have gone back home,” Jim said, sadly. “Of course you wouldn’t have been able to find me. They were pretty hush-hush about it all, you know, so us survivors had our names buried. Especially those of us who actually saw Kodos. They didn’t want the media to harass us after the hearing.”

“You saw Kodos?”

Jim nodded. “With my own two eyes.” He paused, for a moment. "If… If I’d been faster. If I’d been smarter, I could have-“

“You were a child,” Spock interrupted him smoothly. “The fate of the planet did not rest on your shoulders. There were many others who failed their duty to protect the citizens of Tarsus IV, and amongst those failures your name will not be found.”

“But if I’d just acted on instinct… If I’d have killed him, then and there- and I could have! Spock, I really could have. If I’d just done it, all those people…”

“It is impossible to say what would have happened, Jim,” Spock said. “Kaiidth.”

Jim stared down at the polished surface of his desk.

“Where did you go, afterwards, if not back to Iowa?”

“I traveled around.” Jim shrugged. “Mom hated it, but she couldn’t really do anything about it. I was on her ship for about a month before I had to get out of there. Gave her the slip at the nearest star base and went from there. I was a nomad for about a year or so, I guess, before I finally decided it was enough. Nothing was coming to get me. I didn’t have to be this- this ghost, wandering from place to place, afraid that at any second Kodos’s men were going to catch up. I met Bones, and then I went back to Earth and enrolled in Starfleet, like I’d always dreamed of doing. And… here I am now.”

Spock nodded. “That would explain why I was unable to find you.”

“And what about you?” Jim asked. “I tried to find you, too. You were just… gone.”

Spock raised a brow. “I was not.”

“The only number I could find for your house? I called it twice, and both times a human answered. I don’t know how I screwed up badly enough to not even get out to Vulcan, but-“

“A human?” Spock said.

“Yeah.”

“A human woman?” Spock asked.
“… Yeah.”

“Would you describe her to me?”

“Uh. Well, she had short hair. A bowl cut, actually, but she wasn’t Vulcan, she was definitely a human. Dark skin, pretty brown eyes. Her name was kinda odd, actually, it was a guy’s name, typically. Crap, what was it?”

“Michael,” Spock supplied.

“That was it!” Jim snapped, sitting up straight. His smile fell. “How would you know-“

“Michael is my sister.” Spock said.

Jim blinked.

“My adopted sister, as you would probably have surmised.”

Jim opened his mouth. He close it. He opened it again. “I’m. I’m sorry, what?”

“Surely you are familiar with the concept of adoption.”

“Yeah, no, that’s not what I’m stumped on. How. How long has she been your sister?”

“My father and mother adopted her before I was conceived.”

“And you’ve known of her existence… How long?”

Spock tilted his head to the side. “She has been present in my life since the time of my birth.”

“Spock,” Jim breathed. “We’ve been best friends since. Since forever. And you never thought to tell me you have a sister? What the hell, Spock? Is she like a family outcast or something?”

“No,” Spock said. “I speak to her regularly.”

“Just not of her.”

“I fail to see any point at which bringing her up would have been supplemental to conversation,” Spock said.

“Literally at any given moment. Spock. Oh my god, Spock, I had the right place all along! Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“I assure you, Jim. Vulcans do not ‘kid.”’

“I can’t believe this.” He stood, talking a short walk over to the replicator.

“Jim?”

“Black coffee, hot.” He commanded. He took his drink and marched back over to the desk.

“Seriously?”

“I had not realized it would matter to you quite so much.”

“Oh my god.” He threw one of his hands up. “Spock! Okay, okay fine. Fine, let’s get this out of the way. Do you have any other secret sisters that you haven’t told me about?”
“Micheal is my only sister.”

“Yeah I would fucking hope so! Jesus Christ.”

“To continue-“

“Really? You’re just gonna keep going? Like we’re not going to talk about how you hid the existence of an entire sister from me somehow? What- how. How did she never come up in conversation? HOW?”

“To continue,” Spock plowed on. “I was intending to attend the Vulcan Science Academy.”

“Oh my god.”

“However, upon my acceptance, I found myself… rather unwilling to proceed. Not only did I continue to hope that you were alive, however illogically, I believed also that one day you would indeed find yourself aboard this vessel. I left Vulcan after a brief altercation with my father, and enrolled in Starfleet.”

“That’s… Spock,” Jim said, softly. He forgot to be annoyed. “You really thought that I’d make it here?”

“I did, and rightfully so.”

“What did you mean, about the altercation with your dad?”

“As you well know, my father believes that he knows best what I should commit my life to. He believed I would be living to my true potential if I were to follow in his steps and, one day, take his seat on the Vulcan Science Council. I disagreed.”

“So you guys had a fight?”

“I would not call it a fight, but… yes.” Spock paused. “We have not spoken since.”

“What!? Really? How long ago was that- like. Ten years?”

“He will not speak to a son who ignores logic as well as reason.”

“Okay, that’s bullshit. Sarek is cool and all, but are you kidding me? He can preach about logic all he wants, but not only does he have a human wife, he also, apparently, has a human child.”

“Michael is very devoted to logic.”

“Then let her take a the seat!”

“She was… denied it.” Spock said. “She chose to enroll in Starfleet as well.”

“So Sarek’s not talking to either of you?”

“…”

“Good fucking lord.” Jim groaned. “He’ll talk to her, but not you?”

“Michael did try.”

“I cannot believe this.”
“I speak only the truth, Jim.”

“Yeah well next time I see your dad I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind.”

“I would appreciate it if you did not do this.”

Jim narrowed his eyes down at his coffee. He took a long, calculated sip.

“Jim.”

“Maybe I won’t,” Jim said.

“That is not reassuring.”

“I said maybe!”

“The last time you said ‘maybe’ you would not do something,” Spock reminded him, “You began to do precisely what you said ‘maybe’ you would not approximately thirteen minutes later.”

“If you’re talking about the time I ate that entire carton of ice cream, Mom was challenging me, Spock. I had no choice.”

“You are astounding,” Spock said.

“I’m not sure if you mean it as a compliment,” Jim laughed. “But I’ll take it as one.”

They fell into silence.

Jim searched for something more to say, but came up blank. What was he supposed to ask? So much had happened in the time they’d been apart, it felt like no matter what he had to say, it wouldn’t be enough. He looked up at Spock and found the Vulcan staring down at his lap, seemingly just as contemplative. What did you say, to someone you knew as intimately as your own soul, but who you’d been out of touch with for nearly a decade?

“I had considered leaving Starfleet, for a time,” Spock said, suddenly.

Jim looked up sharply. “Leaving Starfleet? But why?”

“It is difficult to surmise. I felt I did not belong.”

“And now?”

Spock looked up at him. “It is as you always said it would be. We belong here, Jim.”

Slowly, Jim started to smile. “Yeah,” he said. “I feel the same way.”

It fell quiet for a second again, but Jim didn’t feel like he had to reach for anything to say anymore.

“You won’t leave, then?” Jim asked. “This five-year mission. You’ll see it out?”

“If you will have me,” Spock said.

“Always,” Jim said. “Always, Spock. I don’t know what I’d do out here without you.”

“You would survive,” Spock said. “There is nothing I do that another could not.”

“That’s not true,” Jim hurried. “You're important to me as a person, Spock. Not just as a science
Officer."

Spock lifted a brow.

“You’re my friend,” Jim said. It felt lame, once it came out of his mouth, but as he looked up to
gauge Spock’s reaction it felt less so. Spock looked soft in the dim light of Jim’s desk lamp, and his
eyes softer still.

“As you are mine,” Spock said, quietly.

Chapter End Notes

tonk'peh- hello in Vulcan.

This is not the end of the story- there will be more chapters, as Spock and Jim fall in
love and eventually get together.
“So you’re looking alright,” Bones said. “Muscle mass has dropped a little since we shipped out, but that’s to be expected. Have you had time to head on down to the gym?”

“Not yet,” Jim said. “I’ll make time, though.”

“I’m sure you will. Other than that, you look about right, Jim.”

Jim couldn’t help but rock back and forth as he sat on the bio bed. “You realize you should be calling me Captain now, right Bones?”

Bones snorted. “And you should be calling me Doctor.”

“Fair point,” Jim conceded. He looked towards the door. “Can I go now?”

Bones rolled his eyes. “Always so eager to get outta sick bay. Fine, fine. My office.”

Jim jumped up, and then strolled after his friend. “We have more to talk about?”

“Seeing as your best friend, yes, we do.”

Jim smirked. “Aw, Bones! I didn’t know you cared.”

“Shut up.” He entered his office after Jim, shutting the door behind him. Jim flopped down in one of the chairs at Bones’s desk, grinning as Bones made his way around to sit himself.

“How’re our kids doing, sweetheart?”

“Never refer to the crew as our kids ever again,” Bones said. “… They’re fine. Most everyone is as healthy as they can get, but that’s how it is when you first ship out. Just you wait- this ship is a giant petri dish and the viruses are gonna start breading like mad here in a month or so. I’ll have more colds than I know what to deal with, and then-“

“But for now,” Jim cut him off, “Pretty good health?”

“Pretty good.” Bones allowed. He bent and pulled a drawer out, and from within it, produced a tall glass of whisky and two glasses. He pour them each a finger, sliding Jim’s across the desk. “So. How’s being Captain treating you?”

“I barely have time to look up,” Jim said. “But otherwise, it’s great.” He drank.

“And you haven’t had any troubles with Spock yet?”


“Rumor mill’s already turning, s’all.” Bones shrugged.

“Rumors?” Jim narrowed his eyes, leaning forward. “What kind of rumors?”

“Oh, you know. Little things. Near as I can tell, you and Uhura are the only people who like Spock, and even with her it’s just barely.” He raised a brow. “From what I hear, the man’s an emotionless,
cold, robot.”

“Well, I’m sure he’d be happy to hear that,” Jim sighed.

Bones snorted.

“It astounds me, sometimes, that people actually fall for it.”

“Is being?”

“The act.” Jim said. “I mean, people seriously think he doesn’t have feelings? That he doesn’t care? It’s hard to believe, is all.”

“Not so hard,” Bones said. “I doubt the man cares about anything other than numbers.”

“I have never met, in all my travels, a soul more human,” Jim said.

Bones narrowed his eyes. “Be careful, Jim.”

“What?”

“You keep going on about the man, I’ll end up believing the rumor Uhura brought me.”

Jim crossed his arms over his chest. “Which is what?”

“Oh, nothing much. It made me laugh, actually. She laughed, too, shook her head and said ‘oh, well I knew it was ridiculous.’” Bones shrugged, and looked over at the wall. “If I tell you, I’ll expect you’ll laugh, too.”

“Bones,” Jim growled.

“Fine.” Bones turned back to him, blank-faced. “She said you’re in love with him.”

Jim blinked.

“Well?”


Bones followed Jim’s movement with a shrewd eye.

“In love. Ha!” Jim ran his hands through his hair. “Of all the far-fetched- why. Why I bet you she has feelings for him herself. I mean, who wouldn’t, after they got to know him? I don’t blame her. But me? In love with Spock? That’s just. I. Ridiculous.”

“Me thinks the lady doth protest too much,” Bones grumbled.

“That is- it’s insane.” Jim said. He sat. “And I cannot believe you’d buy into that sort of gossip.”

“I hadn’t,” Bones said. “But now you’re making me think that I should.”

“But I’m not in love with him!” Jim said. “I mean, come on, Bones. You’re my best friend- you said it yourself. You know I would have come to you to talk about this, just like I have every time before this. I’m… I’m not in love with Spock.”
“Not sure who you’re trying to convince here,” Bones muttered. “I already told you I laughed about it. I didn’t think you were in love with him, Jim. Settle down.”

“Well. Good.” Jim nodded. “Because I’m not.”

It had become almost a ritual for Spock to drop by around dinner time on Thursday nights. Usually, they’d eat together and talk about the day- the various changes they’d need to make to schedules, the way things were coming along, etcetera. Jim found it a grounding force- he didn’t feel so overwhelmed by the amount of work he had to do when he could talk it out with Spock, who was always available to help him if he wanted.

“Enter,” he called, as the door chimed.

Spock walked in and made his way over to the table immediately, sitting and pulling the soup Jim had already fetched forward. He began to eat without a word. Jim laughed.

“Long day?”

“As long as any other,” Spock said.

“You know what I mean.”

Spock lifted a brow, but relented a moment later. “It was… tiresome.”

“Tell me about it.” There had been a major warp core malfunction that had sparked a flurry of activity, paperwork, and problems. They’d somehow gotten it resolved, but it had taken a lot. “I think I’ll be finishing paperwork by the end of the week, if I keep to it.”

“A regrettable, but necessary outcome.”

Jim nodded.

“I see you have rearranged your quarters,” Spock said after a moment.

“I do that sometimes when I get stressed.” He looked around himself. “Didn’t move too much. You like it?”

“It is a logical design,” Spock said. His eyes stopped on the desk. “You play chess?”

Jim looked over at the desk, and then at the chess boards set up there. “Yeah,” he said to Spock. “That one was my dad’s. You’ve heard of the game?”

“It is an exercise in logic that Vulcan adopted from Terra,” Spock said. “I am familiar with it.”

“Familiar. You play?”

Spock inclined his head. “I do.”

“No way.” Jim grinned wide. “Really?”
“I would not lie to you, Captain.”

“Jim,” Jim reminded him.

“Jim,” Spock agreed.

“That’s awesome!” Jim continued. He stood and made his way over to the desk. “I started a chess club in the academy, but I never found anyone who could beat me. A couple gave me a run for my money, though.”

“Would you like to play?”

“Finish your dinner,” Jim said, easily. “No rush.”

Spock nodded and went back to eating. Jim pulled the set around to the middle of his desk and began setting the pieces up. By the time he was finished, Spock had completed his meal. They settled in at the desk together.

“You are human,” Spock began. “If you are defeated, know it is only due to my Vulcan heritage, and not your own lack of intelligence.”

“Smack-talk, Mr. Spock? I never knew you had it in you.”

“Of course not, sir.” He saw Jim’s look and said, “Jim.”

“Put your money where your mouth is,” Jim said. He turned the board. “I’ll even take black.”

Spock said, “I have no money, and if I did, I would certainly not put it to my mouth. However, I will endeavor to win.” He reached out and made his first move.

“Oh, the Queen’s Gambit.” Jim purred. “Clever.”

“Moving the queen’s pawn to d-four could lead to more outcomes than the Queen’s Gambit,” Spock said.

“That wasn’t a no,” Jim laughed.

They played most of the night. Jim won the first two games, to Spock’s bemusement, but Spock took him by surprise with the third. By the time they were setting up a fourth, it was well past midnight. Jim stole a look at the clock and gasped.

“Oh wow,” he said. “I didn’t realize how late it was getting.”

Spock looked over as well, but he didn’t seem surprised. He stood, neatly tucking his chair in behind him. “I should return to my quarters,” he said. He started towards the bathroom door.

“Yeah. Chess again tomorrow night?” Jim hoped.

Spock nodded. “I will even the score then.”

“In your dreams!” Jim taunted with a laugh. “See you on the bridge.”

“I will see you in the morning.” Spock said. He left, through their joined bathroom.

Jim stared after him for a good while. He wished, just barely, that Spock would have stayed. That they could be the way they were as kids- pressed together beneath the covers, Jim giggling when he
put his cold feet against Spock's warm shins. Spock, shoving him off with a near-glare and telling him to keep his person contained.

Would Spock still do that? Would he flush green with annoyance and continuously prod Jim over to his side of the bed? Would he threaten a nerve pinch when Jim wouldn't keep put, or would he let Jim lay on top of him like he'd used to? He missed Spock's warmth beneath the covers, their hands loosely clasped around each other's wrists.

Maybe, if Spock were to sleep with him now, they could hold hands, and...

And...

Oh no.

Jim stared at the door and muttered, “Well... Fuck.”

“I’m not in love,” Jim started.

“Jesus H Christ.” Bones pressed the privacy button on his desk and the door to his office slid shut. “It is too early for this, Jim. You don’t get to walk in here and open with that loaded roll.”

“I’m just saying,” Jim said. He sat. “I’m not in love.”

“I never said you were!”

“Good. Because I’m not.” He licked his lips. “But.”

“For Pete’s sake,” Bones grumbled. “I’m on shift. I can’t drink.”

“Good, I need you sober for this one.” Jim slid forward, placing his hands on the desk. “Bones, I’m in trouble. Deep trouble. I am not in love, okay? I’m not! But. I might. I might have a slight... a little, tiny bit of. Of a. Um. Of a crush.”

Bones buried his face in his hands and groaned. “I don’t want to hear about it.”

“He’s so smart! And his hands, Bones. They’re fucking art pieces. Where did he get those? His mom had normal hands! His dad had normal hands! Where the hell did he get these- these pornagraphic fingers? I’m pissed Bones. And his eyes, don’t get me started on his eyes, Bones.”

“I won’t. You can stop right there. No need to go on, it's fine.”

“They’re beautiful, Bones,” Jim groaned. “I’ve seen aliens with eyes that literally light up, but nothing compares. I’ve never seen eyes as beautiful as his. And he’s so fucking smart, Bones. He beat me at chess. No one’s ever beaten me at chess! He makes me feel things. Like, weird, fluttery things. I mean we’re just sitting across from each other playing a board game and I’m so turned on I could practically melt into my chair. Who the hell is he? Did you know he gave me a book of poetry, Bones? He was that romantic as a kid, what would he do to me now? I mean, he wouldn’t do anything. He never had any crushes when we were kids, and from all the catching up we’ve done I found out that he’s never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend. So I mean, he’s probably not interested, but.
But what if he was?

“You know, of all the illnesses I expected to hear about today, love sickness was not one of them.” He pulled a PADD over from the side of his desk, writing on it. “Here’s my prescription.”

Jim looked down at the screen.

YOU NEED TO GET OUT MORE.

“I don’t see what that’s going to do,” Jim sniffed.

“Spock isn’t even hot. I’m saying that from a completely objective standpoint.”

“Yeah, but you’re wrong,” Jim moaned, miserably.

“If it’s just a crush,” Bones reminded him, “It will go away.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Yeah… you’re right.” He nodded to himself and stood. “It’ll go away. I just have to ignore it. You’re right. It’s just a stupid crush. It’s not like I’m in love or anything.”

“Sure,” Bones drawled.

“You’re right!” Jim stood and began pacing. “I mean, when he comes by some nights it’s just like old times. We’ll talk for hours and hours and hours, way past when we should be asleep. And when he leaves on those nights I get upset that he’s not staying because that’s how it was when we were kids. I mean, I just want to like... Have sex with him, probably. Nothing romantic!”

“Just so long as you’re not daydreaming about kissing him, I’d say you’re fine,” Bones said. “You spend most of your time with the guy- sexual tension’s bound to spring up.”

“You’re right,” Jim said. He nodded. “You’re right.”

“Great,” Bones said. “Now get out of my office so I can go back to work.”

“Thanks Bones,” Jim said. He grinned. “You’re a life saver.”

“Don’t know why I bother,” the man grumbled, but he was smiling all the same.

Spock moved his knight up to the third board, dangerously close to Jim’s queen. Jim knew a diversion tactic when he saw it, though, and so he allowed the knight to settle where it was, forcing himself to leave his queen be.

He moved his rook instead, trailing after the pawns the Spock was attempting to arrange into an intricate trap.

“Your move,” he said, and leaned back into his chair to watch.

Spock surveyed the board, face blank, eyes calculating.

Jim watched him.
He really is thinking about this one, Jim thought. He’s even got his eyebrows all scrunched up. God, he’s really trying to get twenty moves ahead. Jokes on you, Spocko, I’ve got this one in the bag. Check in thirteen because there’s no way you’re gonna see this one coming.

Look at him, with his little frown. God he’s so fucking cute. I love when his lips get like that. Almost pouty. His lips look soft as hell. I bet if I kissed him right now…

And that lead into him imagining it. He’d stand and step around the desk, carefully lowering himself into Spock’s lap. He would put his hands on Spock’s upper arms and pull him into a hard kiss, so that he could imprint the feeling of Spock’s lips against his. He’d put one hand on the back of Spock’s neck, push his fingers through the hair at the back of his head. He’d bite at the swell of Spock’s lower lip, gently, and then he’d-

“Jim,” Spock said. “It is your move.”

He startled out of his daydream. “Y-yeah.” He looked down and realized Spock had figured his trick out. Shit. He quickly re-constructed his strategy, sure that he could still win as long as he played it carefully. No more staring off into space and daydreaming. Especially not about kissing.

… But what would Spock sound like? Would he be surprised? Would he let out a gasp as Jim settled into his lap, would he breathe out Jim’s name? Maybe he wouldn’t even be surprised- maybe he’d eagerly reach down to hold onto Jim’s waste, small words of encouragement falling from his mouth before they finally met in a kiss. Or maybe-

*Focus.* He moved his queen over a few spaces, to trick Spock into thinking he was defending his King. Or rather, to hopefully trick Spock. It wasn’t often that his ruses completely succeeded.

Spock moved his knight over, effectively capturing Jim’s queen.

*Fuck.*

“Check in three,” Spock said.

Jim surveyed the board. How the hell had he not realized earlier?

Spock’s mouth barely lifted at the corner. Jim felt his stomach erupt into butterflies, imagining to himself what it would feel like to kiss the smirk from those lips.

*Oh no,* he realized. *I’m fucked.*

“Your move, Jim.”

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The first time Spock invited someone else to dinner, Jim nearly thought he’d misheard. But no, clear as day, Spock had asked, “Would you mind if I were to bring additional company to our dinner later on this evening?”

Jim tried not to stare to openly. For a brief second, a flare of jealousy sparked to life within him. He smothered it before it could be anymore more than that and let happiness bloom in its stead. Spock had another friend- and that was more than awesome.
“Spock!” He cheered. “Of course you can!”

“Thank you, Captain.” They were on-shift, even if they were walking down the halls back to the turbo lift from the science lab, alone together. Spock still insisted on calling him Captain, no matter what, if they were on the clock. “I will see you at nineteen-hundred.”

“Yes you will,” Jim said, and stepped into the lift.

That night they decided to go out to the mess hall, as they often did. Jim stayed in his uniform, though he briefly wondered if something a little more fancy wasn’t required to meet Spock’s new friend. He was actually excited—finally, someone else who knew exactly how amazing Spock was.

He arrived just after Spock. No matter how badly he wanted to be early, it still felt like Spock beat him every time. The Vulcan had commandeered a circular table near a large, full-wall window displaying the space beyond the ship. There were three chairs neatly arranged around it, and Spock had taken the one in the corner, so as to survey the rest of the room.

Jim sat down on his left. “Ten minutes early and you still get the drop on me.”

Spock raised a brow. “The drop, captain?”

“You beat me here. You know, like—” he paused. Spock’s eyes were glimmering with humor. “Okay, smart ass. See if I explain metaphors to you ever again.”

“I am certain you will,” Spock said.

“Well, maybe.”

A new voice joined them, suddenly, “Sorry I’m late!”

Jim turned just as Uhura sat down. His brows rose—surely she was in the wrong place—but Spock said, “You are not late, Nyota. Jim and I were simply early.”

First name basis. There was no mistaking it—she was the friend Spock had made. Jim was a little confused on account of Uhura having been one of the people who had known, and not liked, Spock previously. If she’d changed her mind about Spock, though, Jim was glad to hear it. They needed more people on the bridge who trusted and, most of all, liked him.

Jim smiled at her. “What’s a place like you doing in a girl like this?”

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Shut it, Kirk.” Her grin fell for a second. “Am I allowed to let the ‘Captain’ thing slip off-shift?”

“Oh of course,” Jim said. “But only if I can call you Nyota.”

“Not a chance, sir.”

He laughed.

“Thank you for inviting me, Spock,” Uhura continued.

“I am pleased that you were inclined to join us,” Spock said. He stood. “I would not mind bringing you your food, if you would prefer to wait here.”

“Why thank you, Spock.” Uhura grinned charmingly up at the Vulcan.
She relayed her order and promised to hold down the fort. With that, Jim and Spock stood, heading over to the replicator. Spock put in Uhura’s food first—she’d asked for a seafood curry, which Jim hadn’t even realized was on the replicator’s menu. He got himself a bowl of plomeek to match Spock, knowing that it would make Bones happy to hear that he was eating healthy, and because it was a nostalgic dish. The replicator was nothing compared to Amanda’s home cooking, but it was still good.

“So,” Jim said, while they waited for the machine to cue up Uhura’s food. “You and Uhura?”

Spock nodded. “I was her professor her freshman year at Starfleet Academy. She wished to converse with me in Vulcan as we once did. She has become markedly improved, and it was enjoyable to speak to her. We developed a… friendship from there.”

“Spock, that’s great!” Jim reached out and clapped Spock on the shoulder.

Spock took his food, as well as Uhura’s, and stepped away from the replicator. “I am glad that our friendship pleases you.”

“Uhura is an amazing person,” Jim said, as he cued up his own dish. “I’m glad that you two are becoming friends. You know, she’s the kind of person that you want to have your back.”

“Indeed,” Spock said.

They returned to the table, where Uhura was waiting.

“Oh, thank you,” Uhura said, accepting her good from Spock. She looked at their bowls. “And what is it that you two have?”

“Plomeek,” Jim said. He held out his spoon. “Want a taste?”

She gave him an eye, as if to warn him against messing with her, but he meant it in a friendly way. She leaned forward and opened her mouth, allowing him to feed her a bite. She made a face and swallowed.

Jim laughed. “Yeah, I guess it would take some getting used to.”

She reached out and took her glass of water. “That seems about right,” she choked. She took a long, measured drink, and then stuck her tongue out.

“That’s probably the face I made when I first tried it,” Jim laughed.

“Negative,” Spock said. They turned towards him. “When you first tried it, you pretended to become ill and then mimed the action of vomiting over the floor.”

“Kirk! How rude!” Uhura laughed.

“To be fair, I was like, eight. And it’s way better when Amanda makes it. Spock burnt the crap out of it when he made it at our house, and that was the first taste he subjected me to.”

“Spock, there was so much burned on to the pan that mom gave up trying to get it clean and threw it away.” Jim said. “I mean, it’s supposed to be red-orange. What you served was brown.”

“You are employing hyperbole to make a point,” Spock said over Uhura’s laughter.
“No way. If I was exaggerating, I would have to say it was black and that the pan went up in flames,” Jim smirked at Spock and leaned forward, batting his lashes. “You at least managed to avoid that much, Mr. Chef.”

“I can’t imagine you cooking,” Uhura laughed. “Or failing at it, for that matter.”

“I did not fail. I simply prepared the dish in a unique manner.”

“A bad manner,” Jim added.

Spock shot him a look.

Uhura and him laughed.

“Aw, Spock, I don’t mean it in an unkind way,” He reached out, trailing his hand over Spock’s arm in apology. “You can’t be perfect at everything. Sometimes food gets burned.”

“May I remind you of the time you attempted to make what you referred to as ‘oven s’mores?’”

Jim cringed. “No, you may not.”

“Oh, now I’m interested.” Uhura scooted a little closer to Spock. “Go on.”

“Jim insisted it was a treat he had prepared, ‘one hundred times’ before. He was, in fact, lying.”

“I was employing hyperbole to make a point,” Jim defended himself.

“Of course,” Spock allowed. “He placed a baking sheet full of graham crackers and marshmallows into the oven.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Uhura said.

“When I say full, I mean to say there was no space uncovered on the surface of the tray. He then proceeded to forget about them completely. I did not know how long they were supposed to cook, or I would have caught the error.”

“Oh sure,” Jim said.

“Indeed. We became aware of Jim’s error when we smelled smoke.”

“Oh no!” Uhura laughed.

“We came down stairs into the kitchen to find the marshmallows had expanded over the sides of the baking sheet and melted down into the interior of the oven, where they proceeded to catch fire. The flames reached the rest of the s’mores, so that by the time we reached the oven, the interior was completely ablaze.”

“No!” Uhura laughed. “That’s awful!”

“I put the fire out,” Jim muttered.

“And I helped him to clean the oven so that his mother would be none the wiser.”

“Surely she smelled the smoke,” Uhura said.

“I lit a billion candles and claimed Spock was teaching me to meditate,” Jim said.
“In order to stay true to his words, I then did teach him the practice.” Spock said.

Uhura’s brows rose. “Oh, really? I would never have taken you for the kind of guy who would meditate.”

“He was a… difficult student.”

“But I paid attention!” Jim said. “I actually did learn it. Just took me a while.”

“That is true,” Spock said. “I wonder, though, if the lessons were beneficial to either of us.”

“Actually…” Jim said. “I meditate pretty regularly. I mean, I did for a while. Now I do it when it’s been a long day. Which, anymore, has been pretty regularly.”

Spock raised a brow. “I was unaware.”

“That’s so sweet,” Uhura said. “Perhaps you could teach me sometime, Spock.”

He nodded. “I would not be adverse to this.”

“Is she a good student, Spock?” Jim asked.

“Exemplary,” he said.

Uhura beamed.

“A better student than me?” Jim asked.

“By far,” Spock said. “When Nyota becomes frustrated at the material, she does not whine, pout, or curse at me... Usually. Furthermore, she has never attempted to push me out of my seat.”

“It’s true,” Uhura said. “Not once.”

“Okay, you jerks, if we’re going to hold kid-me’s actions up to today’s standard I want a formally written apology from kid-Spock for comparing my fashion sense to that of a Ferrangi’s on multiple occasions.”

“Why is that?” Spock asked. “If you dressed now as you did then, I would still compare you to a Ferrangi.”

“Oh screw you.”

Uhura said, “Did he dress terribly, Spock?”

“He once declared that wearing his ‘sweatpants’ and ‘pajama shirt’ backwards, together, was suitable attire for going out to a diner.” Spock paused. “He changed his shirt, but put it on backwards as well.”

“Okay, asshole, I was a kid.”

“It’s charming, in a way,” Uhura said. “I wonder- could you even get into your uniform if you tried to put it on backwards?”

“You know what, Uhura? Why don’t you and Spock find out?”

“It is against the dress code to wear a Starfleet uniform to shift in any manner other than those
illustrated in the official Starfleet dress book. Wearing one’s uniform backwards it not amongst the appropriate methods.”

“I’m writing to HQ about it being a religious right and then you’re both going to be ordered to it,” Jim said. “How about that?”

“Such an abuse of your position would not only be out of character for you, Jim, but also… undignified.”

Jim couldn’t help it. He cracked a smile, and then laughed. He reached out, holding onto Spock’s shoulder. “I hate you,” he laughed.

“You do not,” Spock said.

“I’m glad that you’re sure,” Uhura said. “The first time he told Scotty that the poor guy took it to heart.”

“He was guided by his feelings,” Spock said. “I am guided by logic.”

“And logically, I can’t hate you, because…?” Jim trailed off.

“The evidence against your statement outweighs that backing your hate for me.”

“You have evidence of my hate for you?” Jim asked.

“Only the few occasions you have said ‘I hate you,’ those of which are far, far outnumbered by the amount of times you have said you love me.”

Jim flushed as Uhura laughed. “I was a kid,” he sniffed. “I had no taste.”

“As proved by our previous discussion of your fashion choses,” Spock said.

Jim narrowed his eyes, fighting back a grin. “Damn you.”

Uhura laughed again, her voice like music.

Jim grinned at Spock across the table, glad to be there with them.

“Remember when we were kids, and we stayed up all night talking about feelings?”

Spock looked up from his PADD. “Jim,” he said. “As you are well aware, Vulcans possess eidetic memory. I would not have forgotten.”

“Those were some good times,” Jim said.

Spock sat his PADD down on his desk. They were in Spock’s quarters, separated only by Spock’s desk, catching up on paperwork. Jim had grown weary of it and had begun to daydream when the sudden thought struck him. He didn’t know what had prompted him to say anything, but he didn’t regret it.
“It was a long time ago,” Spock said, neutrally.

“Now you won’t even admit to having feelings, huh?” When Spock didn’t answer right away, Jim went on. “I don’t blame you. Vulcan control is no joke, from what I hear. And I know that you didn’t escape the pressure of being Vulcan when you entered Starfleet.”

“I did, in a way,” Spock said. “On Vulcan, I was too human. In Starfleet, I am too Vulcan.”

“I don’t think you’re too anything,” Jim said. “I like you just the way you are.”

“You are attempting to initiate another ‘feelings dump,’ but I will not be persuaded to join.” Spock picked his PADD back up. “Any emotional released you may glean from talking about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences, I am able to emulate through meditation.”

“You’re not the only person on board who meditates anymore, remember?”

“Then I fail to see why it is you would need to speak of your emotions, either.”

“I’m an emotional guy,” Jim said.

“Very,” Spock agreed.

“And besides, I like to talk about my feelings.”

Spock gave him a look.

“With you, anyway,” Jim admitted. “Look, I know it’s not exactly your game. But… I really miss those days. Where we could just talk about that kind of stuff. Because I’m a guy, people don’t really think I should be vulnerable or have, like… a full range of emotions. But I do. And so far, you’re one of the only person I’ve ever met who hasn’t judged me for it.”

“You are human,” said Spock. “You are expected to feel.”

“You’re half human,” Jim said. “So where does that leave us?”

“I will not continue to have this conversation with you.” Spock set his PADD back down and stood, making his way around the desk and past Jim. He headed for his bed.

“Why not?” Jim stood, too, following after him. He watched as Spock swiftly settled into a meditation pose at the foot of his bed. “Spock, I’ll bring it up again, and again, and again. I’ll bring it up as many times as it takes.”

“As many times as it takes, you say.” Spock closed his eyes. “As many times as it takes to do what, exactly?”

“For you to realize that you’re putting yourself in a box, when you shouldn’t have to.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps you are the one with a box I will not fit into?” He screwed up his face, slightly, as he often did when he tried to wrangle metaphors. “You do not understand.”

“Spock, if I’m- if I’m the one pressuring you to be something you’re not, then tell me right now. I won’t bring this up again. But if you’re still letting your father’s will lord over you, then you better expect I’m going to fight for you.” Spock said nothing. “Damn it, Spock! It’s not fair to you. I know you don’t feel things exactly like I do- like any human does, even. But you feel, differently than any Vulcan could, and you shouldn’t be punished for it! Vulcans control their emotions because if they didn’t, they’d be taken over by them. But you know how to navigate your human heart, Spock. You
know how to feel without giving in to what it is you’re feeling, and the fact that you have to repress all that— and for what? Your dad’s approval? Your planet’s?”

“I have chosen the Vulcan way,” Spock said. “It is not a choice for you to contest.”

“Then I won’t,” Jim said. “Spock, I just… I want you to do what’s best for you. And I don’t know what that is. Your dad doesn’t know what that is, either. Only you. And I feel this… this frustration from you, like you’re constantly caught up in this horrible balancing act. I don’t know, maybe it’s just me. But… if that’s how you really feel, I can’t just stand by and watch. You’re my friend, Spock. And I want you to be happy, or content, or whatever the Vulcan equivalent is.”

Spock’s eyes slowly slid open.

“So are you?” Jim asked. “Are you happy? Is… is this what you want to be?”

Spock stared at him for a good while. The seconds clicked by, one after the other, but Jim didn’t budge from his spot. He stared Spock down, unblinkingly, and waited.

Spock broke the stare first, looking down to his lap. “I… am uncertain,” he said.

Jim let out a long sigh. He moved the last few steps across the room and sunk down onto Spock’s bed, so that they wouldn’t have to stare at each other while they talked. That had always made things easier, somehow. “I don’t know, Spock. I’m not trying to make you uncertain. I just… I want you to be you. No one else.”

Spock stood and then put himself on the bed, so that he was lying on his back next to Jim. It was just as it had been when they were children— except, suddenly, they barely fit in the bed together, and the staunch material of their uniforms slid together without the cling of static.

“I feel as I must,” Spock said. “Even that much seems, at times, to be too much.”

“You’re doing your best,” Jim said. “That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

Spock said, “Very little, but something indeed.”

It was quiet for a moment.

“Remember when we were kids,” Jim lead, slowly, “And everything was about love for me?”

“Yes,” Spock said. “You found two ladybugs and attempted to officiate their wedding.”

“I wanna go back to then,” he said, “When I really believed love was everything. I used to be so certain that one day everything would just… click into place. I don’t mean, like, I’d find my soulmate and we’d live happily ever after. I just thought I’d love everyone and everything, and that they’d love me too, and it would be… happy. And now I have to decide who lives and dies, and sometimes, that means I’ve got to hate the people in the ship across from us with everything within me.”

“Is that not a sort of love, too?” Spock asked. “A love so deep for your crew, and your ship, that you would dredge up a hatred for those who would do them harm?”

Jim laughed, softly. “I guess the tables have turned, huh, Spock? You’ve got my lines down. We haven’t really changed, much, have we?”

“An expression my mother used to say comes to mind.”

“Oh?”
“Yes.” Spock nodded. “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

“Amen to that.” He let out a long sigh, pressing his side into Spock’s gently. He was filled, suddenly, with a gentle warmth, which consumed him entirely. He loved Spock, more than he’d ever loved another person in his life, and he was going to get to spend nights like this with Spock for years on end.

“What happens after the mission?” He found himself asking.

Spock looked over to him. “Clarify.”

“With us,” Jim said. “When the mission ends, what are you and I going to do?”

“That depends on many factors,” Spock said. “However. No matter what the future holds, I will always be your friend.”

Jim smiled. “Spock,” he said, “You may just make me believe in love again.”
“Captain, we’re picking up a distress call, priority three. Unknown vessel.”

“Patch it through.”

Jim turned away from where he’d been watching over Chekov’s shoulder and made his way to the Captain’s chair, sitting himself within it.

“Ready, Captain,” Uhura said.

“Put it on screen.”

The screen blinked. A woman appeared, her coifed red hair piled into an elaborately spun bun on the top of her head, crested with a bright green jewel. Her darks skin held a greenish hue to it, and the tips of her pointed ears matcher her severely drawn brows. She was Vulcan- if her appearance hadn’t given her away, the black and blue robes of the Vulcan Science Embassy would have. Jim took in the silver about her throat, and the bright, three matching jewels there- immediately declaring her rank.

“This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise,” he said. “To whom am I speaking?”

“Captain Kirk,” she nodded her head. “I am Captain T’Renna of the VSE Ha-Tal. Our vessel has been damaged by a spacial anomaly which has damaged our engines. Our sister ship is three days away and currently en-route to assist us if you have more pressing matters to attend to.”

“Not at all,” Jim said. “You said it damaged your engines?”

She nodded. “We currently have emergency power, as well as all life support systems. We are working on repairs currently.”

“Would you benefit from some assistance?”

“Affirmative,” she said.

Jim took that to mean they were either in a little more trouble than they were letting in on, or T’Renna was a very unusual Vulcan. “I can have an engineering team beam aboard immediately.”

“That would be appreciated,” she said. “I will have a list of requested materials and fields sent to your vessel. If there is anything you can spare which we require, we will be willing to enact a trade.”

“Understood,” Jim said. He looked over to Uhura, “Luietenant?”

“We’ve received the list,” she said. “I’m send it to engineering now.”

“Excellent.” He turned back to T’Renna. “I will meet with a team to gather any supplies we can spare and beam aboard in ten minutes.”

“Understood. I will have my first officer meet you in the transporter room. T’Renna out.”

The transmission flickered out, leaving them with their view of the vessel as they closed in on it. It
was a small exploratory vessel, one Jim didn’t recognize intimately, but knew the general design of from his time pestering Spock whilst the Vulcan was studying.

He stood. “Sulu, you have the conn. Spock, with me.”

“Captain,” Sulu acknowledged. He stood and made his way over to the chair.

Jim and Spock entered the turbo-lift. Spock turned to Jim as soon as the doors slid shut.

“The fact that they have agreed to our help may indicate there is more wrong than what Captain T’Renna has immediately revealed,” Spock said. “I suggest we proceed with extreme caution.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jim said. “Did you get a reading on them?”

“Initial scans of the ship showed the damage to the engines, as well as their reliance on emergency power. There were no further visible signs of damage.” He paused. “However, the ship was broadcasting a second signal, presumably to their sister ship, on priority one. Lieutenant Uhura is working on decoding it now. She will comm you as soon as she has succeeded.”

“Good.” The lift stopped and Jim stepped out into Engineering. Scotty was already waiting for him, looking none too pleased. “What we got, Scotty?”

“Well I want to know what kind ‘a engines these people think they’re packing!” Scotty exclaimed. “Type-three plasma coils? Dilithium crystal containment field? Condensed anti-matter? And- bloody three solid meters of Z72? Captain, I just don’t know about this.”

“Sketchier by the minute,” Jim sighed. “They’re Vulcans, Scotty; our friendly neighbors are having car troubles and it’s up to us to give them the jump start. Even if they ask for a couple of gallons of gas while they’re at it.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty sighed. “I’ll see what we kin spare.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Jim moved away from Scotty and over towards where several engineers were working. They were the best of the best on his ship- he knew, because he’d been the one to station them where they were. “Thomson, Fraser, Duran, you’re part of the boarding party. You’re with Mr. Scott.”

They all stood and hurried away to find Scotty. Spock looked over at Jim for a moment before reaching out, sneaking a quick swipe of his fingers over the skin of Jim’s wrist. Jim preened internally as he felt Spock’s admiration at his ability to remember the names of his crewmen. He’d worked hard at it.

Jim walked quickly to the transporter room, knowing his engineers would be soon to follow. On a hunch, he stopped by security first, peaking his head into the room. There were a couple officers working on paperwork. When they noticed him they stood quickly to attention.

“You, and you.” Jim pointed at two officers. “Names?”

“Angela Diaz, sir,” said one.

“Tyenner Rozz, sir,” said the other.

“Rozz, Diaz, each of you need a phaser. You’re part of the boarding team.”

Their eyes went wide as they snapped off a quick nod each. “Yes, sir.”
Jim and Spock proceeded to the transporter room, the two redshirts marching behind them.

“Sir,” Spock said, quietly. “The presence of the security officers—”

“Can easily be explained as muscle to help with repairs,” Jim said. He caught Spock’s look and said, “There’s nothing wrong with being a little cautious. Remember the last time we beamed an away party over without security?”

Spock’s greenish expression said that yes, in fact, he did.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “I don’t like to think about it either.”

They arrived at the transporter room. “Mr. Kyle,” Jim said, nodding to the technician at the controls.

“Sir.”

They stepped up onto the transporter pads. Jim looked to the door, knowing he’d only have to wait a moment. His engineering team came hurrying into the room, laden down by crates of equipment. Scotty looked frazzled, but ready to go.

As soon as they were all in place, Jim gave the order. “Energize.”

There was a flash of light. Jim felt his arms and legs go up in pins and needles for a moment, like a flash of static, and then he was hit with a heavy wall of heat. He blinked his eyes clear and stepped forward, taking a look around the Vulcan ship.

It was about what one would expect from Vulcans- clean, sharp, and precise. Jim had an immediate liking to the slight adobe color of the walls.

“T’nar pahk sarat y’rani.” A striking Vulcan woman with black eyes stepped forward, lifting her hand in the Vulcan salute. Jim mirrored it instinctually. There was something immediately familiar about the woman, whose dark hair was piled up high on her head and done with pearls. He felt as though he knew her, but couldn’t quite place it. “I am first officer T’Pring.”

Jim and his team stepped forward and off of the transporter pads. Jim felt Spock at his elbow and wondered why his first officer was hovering a little closer than usual. Jim was just about to offer up his own introductions when the woman’s eyes slid over to Spock.

“How charming,” T’Pring said, “That you would bring my ex-husband to greet me.”

Jim blinked. What? His mind said. The words the woman had said made no sense. He turned to Spock, almost wondering if there was a translation error; if perhaps Jim had been knocked over the head in the last few minutes without having realized it and was delusional.

“I was unaware you were serving aboard this vessel, T’Pring,” Spock said. “It is what humans would refer to as ‘a pleasant surprise.’”

“It would be no surprise at all if you had done your research before boarding,” she said. Somehow, it didn’t come off as completely icy. Jim was still lost, but he could at least glean that perhaps, she was… teasing them? “I find you in good health, I assume?”

“Indeed,” Spock said. “Your current predicament aside, I trust you are as well.”

“That is so,” T’Pring said. She lifted a brow, then. “Surely in the time of our divorce you have not forgotten your Vulcan mannerisms entirely, Spock. Introduce me to your crew members at once.”
“Of course,” Spock dipped his head. “Vesht ko-telsu, this is Captain James T. Kirk.”

“I am aware,” she said. “The rest?”

“Montgomery Scott, our chief engineer. Our specialized engineers, Lilian Thomson, Edmund Fraser, and Geroway Duran. These are Security personal Angela Diaz, and Tyenner Rozz.”

“Security?” T’Pring arched one delicate brow. “Do you think to meet trouble here, Captain?”

Jim snapped back into reality, shoving all his questions into the back of his mind. “I figured we might need the muscle to help with the repairs,” he said.

“Logical,” T’Pring praised. “You will follow me.”

Jim turned to his crew. “You heard her,” he said.

They all fell into line behind T’Pring. Jim drifted towards the back of the group, snagging Spock’s sleeve and pulling him along. Spock didn’t even meet his eyes, which was how Jim knew immediately that there was no error in his conclusion.

“Did you call her your ex wife?” He hissed.

“Captain,” Spock said. “You would do well to remember that Vulcans possess superior hearing over humans. Everything you say can and will be heard by T’Pring.”

Jim narrowed his eyes up at Spock.

Spock marched on, his eyes never once flickering from the path ahead.

“When we get back to the ship,” Jim said, “You and I are scheduled for a meeting in my ready room.”

“Yes, Captain.”

T’Pring directed the engineers and security detail to the engine rooms, and then began towards the bridge with Kirk and Spock in tow. She talked as they went, gracefully navigating the halls.

“The Ha-Tal is a botany vessel, foremost, though we do study fauna as well, and occasionally the biology of other sentient life forms. I would not usually tell you this, but I understand you both intimately, and therefor can safely relay information to you without fear of its misuse.”

Jim caught the ‘both of you’ and furrowed his brow, but said nothing more.

“Many of the samples we have collected will begin to expire before our sister ship arrives. It is imperative to our research that we regain functionality so that our return trip to Vulcan is expedited. Already we have begun to observe several of the specimens onboard beginning to collapse. The plants we have acquired from Sova III are unique and unpresidential in their delicacy.”

“That’s why you accepted our help,” Jim said, slowly.

“Yes. Usually we would have been better suited waiting for a similar Vulcan vessel to give its assistance, but for the time being, you will have to do.”

Jim laughed a little. “The Enterprise is top of the line,” he said.

“The Enterprise is a primarily human vessel,” she said. “It is fortunate that you carry some vestige of
Vulcan logic aboard.” She looked meaningfully at Spock.

Jim nodded. “Well, that’s certain. Mr. Spock’s logic has gotten us out of more than a few tight situations.”

“I would expect nothing less from a member of the house of Surak.” She turned and then stood before a door, holding her hand up to a panel on its side. The door whooshed open, revealing the bridge to them.

Captain T’Renna turned around. She gave Jim and Spock an appraising glance and then said, “Come.”

They stepped into the bridge, Jim casting a look around to catalog the differences between the Vulcan bridge and the one he knew as his own. The space was laid out almost like a classroom- with a few neat rows of Vulcans working busily at console and a neat walking space between them. Jim didn’t see any definite station where the Captain would be stationed, but T’Renna did stand elevated slightly behind the three rows of consuls.


“T’nar jaral.” Jim flashed her the ta’al. “Thank you for having us aboard.”

“It is only logical that we should accept your offer of assistance,” she said. Jim had never seen a Vulcan with red hair before, and he couldn’t help but continue to look at it in awe. “First,” said T’Renna, “You have shown their engineers to the appointed place?”

“I have,” said T’Pring. “I am familiar with both Captain and First of the Enterprise. I have further appraised them of the situation.”

T’Renna raised a brow. “You are aware I did not intend to share this information.”

“I am aware.” T’Pring said. “However, I was not instructed to keep my silence. Logic dictates that withholding information from those who can be trusted would be counter-productive.”

“Logical,” T’Renna decided. She turned her attention back to Jim and Spock. “You are Spock, son of Sarek.”

“I am.”

“Then you will not wish to speak with your parted,” T’Renna said. “I shall have a new guide procured.”

“It is unnecessary,” Spock said. “There is no ill-bonding between T’Pring and myself.”

T’Renna raised her brow again. She turned to T’Pring. “This is so, First?”

“This is so,” T’Pring affirmed. “I ask that we be treated as koon’ul.”

“It is illogical,” T’Renna said. “You are parted.”

“The bond is broken, but the two remain the same,” T’Pring said. “Spock to me is as he always has been.”

“I see,” T’Renna said. “While your engineers are working, Captain Kirk, I will have T’Pring entertain both you and your first officer. I am very busy and while I do welcome your presence here, I ask you do not interfere further. Dismissed.”
Jim would have been offended if he wasn’t familiar with the quick, efficient way of Vulcans. He turned sharply on his heal and then started off the bridge with Spock and T’Pring. He was profoundly uncomfortable, mostly due to all the talk about Spock and T’Pring’s supposed bond, but also due to the way he was begin mostly ignored. He could tell Spock was loath to be the center of attention, and wished he could somehow pull the limelight back towards himself- he’d never minded it.

His curiosity demanded that Spock remain in the spotlight, though- the Vulcan’s comfort be damned, just the once.

“So,” he said. He fell into step with T’Pring, so that their shoulders were nearly touching. She stepped away from him slightly, but didn’t otherwise dissuade him from speaking to her. “You and Spock were married, huh?”

“Yes,” T’Pring said. She looked at him curiously. “You should know this, James Kirk.”

“Well,” Jim drawled. He looked over his shoulder, to where Spock was following them along sulkily. “Someone neglected to bring that one up, actually.”

She gave him another odd look. “I see no reason for Spock to have spoken of it.”

Jim furrowed his brow, more confused than ever. “But- you. You just said I should have known.”

“Yes,” she agreed, strangely. “You should have.”

She quickened her pace, leaving Jim to tag along with Spock.

Jim tried to look up at Spock, to communicate how weird he felt everything was, but Spock wouldn’t look at him. Great, Jim thought. This just keeps getting better and better.

The mission ended without any explosions, deaths, monsters, or further complications. Jim commented, idly, as they all materialized back aboard the Enterprise, that if anyone else had a secret wife they needed to get it out of the way right then and there. The team had laughed. Spock had not.

By the time everything had been sorted out, Alpha shift was ending. Jim canceled his orders for Spock to meet him in the ready room and instead said, “Walk with me.”

Spock followed after him, face impassive.

They leisurely started down one of the halls, Jim leading with no real destination in mind. He wasn’t sure how to open up conversation. It had been one thing with Spock’s sister- but a wife? How could he have hidden something like that? Spock had fallen in and out of love, and he hadn’t thought to say anything about it? Jim had laid his soul bare, some nights, talking about his past loves. He’d watched Spock for so long, wistfully wondering if the Vulcan was another unrequited in a long line of them. He had never loved anyone more- had never been more in love with anyone. And all those nights, he’d thought Spock incapable of returning his feelings, and all the while…

A brief swell of hope nearly overshadowed his turmoil. If Spock had been married before, that meant
that there was a chance—however small—that Spock might love him back, some day.

He wasn’t sure how to feel, after that.

“She was not my wife,” Spock said, suddenly.

Jim stopped walking and turned around. They’d made their way to the observation deck, somehow, and it was empty—usual, for the late hour. To his left, the galaxy swam by sedately. Jim barely saw it; he had eyes only for Spock.

“I thought you said Vulcans didn’t lie,” Jim said.

“It is true that we were… telsu. But the bond was never completed. The translation to what you understand in terms of relationships doesn’t compute in the way you must think it does. Jim,” Spock said, “We were bonded as children.”

“Children?”

“Yes. The bond was created as what you may call a betrothal. It was not in the human sense—we were very closely woven together in mind, but not as thought we were truly married. It was more than your concept of betrothal, and less than marriage.”

“You… never loved her?”

Spock raised a brow. “I fail to see how such an emotion would factor into this.”

“What? Spock, love is what it’s all about! Betrothal, marriage, divorce… any of it.”

“Perhaps for you,” Spock said. “On Vulcan it is different.”

“If love doesn’t factor in, then why’d you two split, huh?”

Spock looked uncomfortable. He turned away from Jim, to stare out at the stars.

“Spock?”

“It was… very long ago. I wonder if you remember. At the time, you were delirious. I did not know why, whilst it was occurring, but looking back on it now, I’m certain you must have been…”

“Been what, Spock?”

“Starving,” Spock said, quietly.

Jim furrowed his brows. “I don’t understand.”

Spock let out a breath between his lips which nearly could have passed for a sigh. “Do you remember, once, while you were on Tarsus IV, having a dream where you were in my mind again?”

“What—no, of course….” But even as he said the words, he did remember. He trailed off, trying to piece it together. He been so sick at the time, he’d written it off as some sort of fever dream. He suddenly realized why T’Pring had seemed to familiar. He’d seen her before, twice, in Spock’s head. “The dream. With you, and T’Pring, and that old woman.”

Spock nodded solemnly. “That was T’Pau, our clan matriarch.”

Jim slowly nodded. “Then… it wasn’t a dream.”
“It was a meld,” Spock explained. “I do not understand how it was you were dragged into it, but you were. You had come into contact with T’Pring previously in my mind, had you not?”

“That’s right,” Jim remembered, “In that little house with the glass fence.”

“You were encountering the bond within my mind. Telepathically, we were linked, and somehow, you were able to access her through that link. It is… a most grievous invasion of privacy. You did not know, but I did. I allowed you in my mind, and should have known to shield her’s when I did so. I did not, however. She wanted our bond broken.”

“Be… because of me?” Jim felt his stomach twist. “Oh, God, Spock. I’m so sorry—“

“It was not your fault,” Spock said. “The blame lies with me alone. Even if I did not intend our childhood melds, I did not end them as soon as I realized they had begun. They were melds with no purpose- no sharing of information, no healing, no searching, nothing. We melded simply to be closer to one another, as bonded pairs as intended to do.”

“So, what you’re saying is… you cheated on your wife with me?”

“Perhaps not in such crude terms, but the comparison is apt nonetheless.”

“But we were just kids!”

“As I stated previously,” Spock said. “You would not understand the complexity of my people’s bonds. While the fault was mine, I did not fight against our separation. Rather, I welcomed it. I did not understand what it would be for me, at the time, but even still I cannot find it within me to regret our parting.”

“That old lady, shit. What did she say? She said. She said she would raze your mind. I- I thought when she was talking about all that bond stuff she was talking about feelings, and friendship and. Spock, she reached out and touched my mind?”

Spock inclined his head.

Jim felt sick, suddenly. “Spock. She knew.”

Spock was silent.

“She knew I was starving to death.”

Voice small, Spock said, “After learning of the happenings on Tarsus IV, I hypothesized as much.”

“I was dying! And she- did she even do anything!”?

“I do not know.”

“She had to know what was going on! She didn’t even tell you that I was seriously going to die. Spock. Spock! If the rescuers hadn’t showed up pretty soon there after, I’d be dead right now. And she wouldn’t have even told you?” He leaned back against the wall. “Are us humans really worth so little…?”

“No, Jim.” Spock stepped forward, hurriedly. He reached out, as if to hold Jim, but hovered awkwardly- just shy of touch- and then let his arms fall to his sides again. He hung his head. “No. It is the way of the healer to interfere only in pain of the mind. The occurrences outside of the mind are not to be interfered with.”
“People died, Spock.”

Spock was quiet a moment.

“My friends died,” Jim added, quieter.

“Jim.”

He looked up.

Spock was staring at him intently. “Who was it that found you?”

Jim blinked. “Found me?”

He nodded. “You said you were rescued. By whom?”

“A… Vulcan.” Jim blinked. “He said he… he’d been looking for me.”

“And this was shortly after we had melded.” Spock furrowed his brows. “How was it that Starfleet and the Vulcan embassy ship came to be aware of the tragedy?”

“I… I don’t know. I always just figured that someone had gotten a distress call out.” Jim started to move, walking, and then jogging. Spock kept up, the two of them heading swiftly to Jim's quarters. “But now that I think about it, that wouldn’t make sense. Part of the problem is that the planet was too far away to get signals out to anyone in the near area. Starfleet had to come pick up our transmissions and relay them to a station.”

“It is possible, then.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s possible.”

They filed into Jim’s quarters quickly and then dashed over to his desk. They bent over the computer together, Jim’s fingers flying over the controls as he quickly accessed records. Everything was sealed- wrapped up in miles of red tape and “TOP SECRET” stamps. Jim didn’t care. He’d been there, and he had every right to the information.

Finally they found what they were looking for. An Ambassador Spock had been petitioning to check on the colony for months, with extreme urgency, but to no affect. Then T’Pau had suddenly granted him a relief vessel and a team of healers, which had set out immediately. They’d reached the planet and immediately contacted Starfleet, who had arrived shortly there after.

They stared at the records for some time.

“I can’t believe it,” Jim choked.

“She tore your mind from my own believing you would die, but she did not condemn a planet to continue suffering.” He looked over at Jim. “It is possible this Ambassador Spock was looking for you very specifically after all.”

“It… makes sense,” Jim said. Then his brows furrowed. “But why was he petitioning to check up on the planet for so long? I’ve looked into him before, you know, I check up on his records every now and then to see how he’s doing. He seriously shows up on records out of the blue as an old man.”

“It is likely he was raised in the secluded temples of Vulcan’s monks. There are many such as him who left only in their later years to join outside society, finding no solace in the attempt for kolinahr.”
“So he shows up and then becomes an Ambassador, around 2233. He’s done some really great stuff in that time, but then out of nowhere he’s petitioning to go to some human colony planet that Vulcan has no stake in. Hell, no one had a stake in Tarsus, that’s why it was so easy to forget about us. It was fucking space Australia.”

“I do not get your meaning.”

“Never mind. All I want to know is why.”

“There are some things that are inexplicable, even with the application of logic.”

“T’Pau knew because of her telepathy, but Ambassador Spock.” Jim paused. He frowned. “Oh.”

“You have had a thought.”

“He… he melded with me, when he first found me. Kinda to give me an info dump, basically. But I was like, desperate, and you know. He wasn’t expecting me to have any grasp on melds. So I slipped into it easily…” Jim scrolled back up to the top of his file. “See? It says here he used to be bonded. No named bondmate, no death-date, nothing.”

“He may simply have been parted, as I was.”

“No. The meld.” He frowned. “He was married to a human.”

Spock’s brows rose. “A human?”

Jim nodded. “Some old guy with big cheeks. I saw it. And God, he missed the poor dude. What if…?”

“You do not mean to imply that his bandmate was situated on Tarsus as well.”

“It would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

Spock looked down at the surface of the desk. “It is distressing to think of.”

“No wonder he wanted to get there so bad.”

“If his bond was with a human, it is likely it was unsanctioned, as there have been no recent accounts of Human-Vulcan bondmates. There have been three since my parents.”

“So few?”

“It is extremely difficult to bond to a psi-null species. There have been many marriages, but very few mind links.”

“That makes sense,” Jim sighed. “So he eloped, and because of that, he couldn’t use his bond as evidence.”

“This is pure speculation,” Spock said. “But… it would make sense.”


“There is much missing from his file.”

“Yeah. I tried to hack into it but I think I over-showed my hand in the meld. He knows my coding style and adapted his own tricky blocks to keep me out. Honestly, this guy’s a genius.”
“Curious, that I would not have known of him.”

Jim shrugged. “Vulcan’s a big planet.”

“He certainly values his privacy,” Spock noted. They closed out of the file.

Jim sank down onto his desk, sitting on the edge. Spock set just across from him, in the desk chair. Jim felt exhausted, both from the mission and the rollercoaster of emotions he’d been thrown on to.

For a while, they sat in silence.

Eventually, Jim asked, “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Spock looked up at him.

“About your bond to T’Pring?”

Spock frowned down at his lap. “I was… embarrassed. As a child.”

“And now?”

“I did not see any reason to bring the subject up. My bond to T’Pring no longer has any bearing on my life.”

“Guess Ambassador Spock isn’t the only Spock out there who values insane amounts of privacy.”

Spock raised his brow.

Jim just smirked.

“You’re right,” Jim said with a grin. “You can’t keep me from hacking into your files no matter how hard you try.”

Spock said, “Perhaps it had simply not occurred to me to try.”

“Perhaps it had and you realized it was impossible.”

“Perhaps you are what is impossible.”

“Perhaps,” Jim said. “Perhaps.”

Silence.

“Where we…” Jim frowned and looked down at here his feet were braced against the floor. “You said. Agh, this is so hard to articulate.” He ran a hand through his hair. Spock watched him, patiently. “You said she broke our bond. What does that mean? Did we… were we… connected, somehow?”

“I am uncertain,” Spock said, slowly.

“But you have a guess.”

“Guessing is illogical.”

“Then give me your highly logical, informed hypothesis.”
Spock quirked up a brow. “It would not be-“

“Spock.” Jim cut him off. “Just tell me.”

Spock looked away from him. “Very well,” he said. “Yes. I believe that we had somehow forged a rudimentary bond of some sort. I do not know the nature of this bond, or how it formed, but there is evidence to support that it was there.”

Jim reached out, catching Spock’s wrist. “So why does this still work?” He asked. “Why can I still feel you, in my head? All I’ve got to do is reach out and touch you, and you’re right there, like you always used to be.”

“I do not know,” Spock said. He gently extricated his wrist from Jim’s grasp and stood, maneuvering back behind the desk chair so that it separated him from Jim. He looked down at his hands as he rested them over the back of the chair, saying, “Jim. This is not something to take lightly. It is… an intensely private matter.”

Jim stood, too, and paced over to the other side of the room to look through his window. The familiar sight of the stars calmed him slightly. “I don’t want to push, Spock. I really don’t. I know you don’t have all the answers, but you have to realize that this. This… whatever it is, it matters to me.”

Spock said nothing.

Jim scrubbed a hand through his hair and leaned into the window. “I’m exhausted,” he said. “In every possible way.”

“It is late,” Spock agreed. “I will leave you to take your rest.” He started towards the bathroom door.

“Spock.” Jim called, just as Spock was stepping from the room.

Spock paused.

“Thank you.”

Spock turned, brows raised. “What for?”

“Just… for being you.” Jim smiled a little. “Even if you are a secret keeping asshole.”

Spock did not smile. But it was a near thing. “In that case, I thank you as well, Jim.”

Jim smiled and looked away. “Goodnight, Spock.”

“Goodnight, Jim.”

The darkness was unending. Jim pulled his feet along, one after the other. Figures darted in and out of his vision, blurs of motion amongst the pitch black- old faces and new ones alike, all with eyes that pierced through the dark and voices that didn’t quite catch.

He struggled forward. The weight on his back was oppressive, but he couldn’t do anything about it.
He was soaked to the bone and heavy with fatigue, but he pressed onwards without knowing why it was so urgent that he continue. He felt it like a physical thing, pushing at his shoulders. He gripped Spock’s pale coppery wrists tighter and pulled his friend through the mud, shouldering through the tall stalks of corn as he ignored the visions that twisted through the grain like cool steam.

He’d lost so many already. Nina. He’d dropped her, somewhere along the way, and her voice followed him through the cold. She was hungry, she was hungry, he’d promised to buy her a big burger and a heaping plate of fries, but there was nothing to give. He reached out to pull an ear of corn from the stalk but it crumbled into dirt in his hands. He grabbed onto Spock’s wrist again and dredged onwards, knowing he could not stop, knowing it would not end.

He tripped over something and knew instinctually it was a body. He couldn’t force himself to look at it, but he knew the familiar jut of the hip bones, the smallness of the arms. He whispered a litany of apologies and pushed himself further.

It did not rain, and yet he continued to grow wetter. He’d lost his shoes and his feet were raw. He could barely stand the hunger twisting through him. What happened when he stopped walking? Would they find him? Would Kodos rise up from the field and steal Spock from his back, like he’d taken all the others? The porch light glowed a sickly yellow in the distance, but no matter how long he walked it never grew closer.

He was going to die out there. And worse, Spock was going to die with him.

He felt fear and frustration well up in the form of tears. They were hot and choking against his face, making it harder to breathe and see. He held tighter and tighter to Spock’s wrists, his fingers pruned with the cold and the rain. He couldn’t let go of Spock or all would be lost.

The panic was welling up inside of him like a tsunami. The night was alive and closing in around him, suffocating, the light of the porch growing dimmer and dimmer…

“Jim.”

He turned and it was all gone. The darkness, the whispers, the panic- everything he didn’t want to remember.

Sunshine played through Spock’s eyelashes as the Vulcan tilted his head to the side, curious. Jim was lying on the mattress in the middle of the barn, and the sun was lazily slipping down through the glass roof they’d installed.

The blankets were a mess. They’d just woken up, and were laying sprawled in the tangle. Spock’s bangs were in disarray, but he looked too sleepy and content to care. The sun shone on the brown irises of his eyes and cast them into honey-gold.

“Hey,” Jim took in a deep, steadying breath. He reached out and carded his hand through Spock’s hair. “Hey, Spock.”

“Hello, Jim.” Spock allowed the touch, closing his eyes. Jim carded his fingers through Spock’s hair over, and over, slowly settling into a rhythm. Spock murmured, “You are petting me.”

“I’m loving you,” Jim explained.

He knew he was dreaming. He hadn’t known before, but it was evident. When he woke up, he’d be alone in his bed aboard the Enterprise, and Spock would already be in the fresher preparing himself for the day.
“You are very good at it,” Spock said.

“Hm?”

“You are very good at loving me.”

Jim smiled and rolled over onto Spock, laying his head on the Vulcan’s chest. He stroked his fingers idly over Spock’s shoulder, drawing nonsensical patterns there. “I’ve been told I’m quite the skilled lover,” he said.

“Hm.” Spock wound his arms up over Jim.

Jim could feel his pulse working sluggishly. He would have been content to lay there, with Spock, for the rest of forever. He wormed up and pressed his nose to Spock’s neck, breathing in the smell of his laundered shirt. It was just as he remembered it; nothing like the same, staunch laundry soap so commonly employed for uniforms all over the Enterprise. He missed the unique blend that Amanda had used on their clothes.

He trailed his nose up, gracing the curve of Spock’s jaw. Spock’s chest rose higher as he let out a contented sigh. Jim opened his eyes, lazily, and pushed himself up, so that he hovered over Spock.

“Hey,” he said again.

Spock blinked a couple times to clear the sleep from his eyes. “Yes?”

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” Jim said.

“You think?”

“Yeah,” Jim breathed. He lowered himself slowly, until their noses bumped. “I do.”

T’hy’la, he thought.

And then he woke from his dream.

Jim stared at the ceiling of his room for a good, long minute. He reached up and touched his lips, which hadn’t quite reached Spock’s before he’d waken up. He lazily smiled and rolled over in bed.

He could hear Spock moving about in the bathroom and allowed himself a moment to pretend that he was simply waiting for Spock to come back into their shared room and tell him it was time to get up, that a Captain shouldn’t sleep in. The fantasy was a short one, but welcome nonetheless.

Jim slowly sat up and stretched, reaching over to turn his alarm off before it could scream at him. T’hy’la, he thought again. I wonder what it means.

Jim couldn’t pull the smile from his face. He pushed the diced strawberries around his plate idly, replaying a particular scene over in his head again and again. Sometimes, being out on the edge of space was a horror show, but other times, it was-
“-to Jim! Hello!”

Jim snapped to attention. “Huh?”

“Good lord, man,” Bones said. “Have you heard a damn word I’ve said?”

Jim thought for a second. The last thing he remembered was Bones complaining about the number of wrist injuries he’d been getting from Engineering lately. That had been before Jim had started in on his strawberry shortcake, and he had since finished it.

“Oh…”

Bones let out a sigh. “Knew I shoulda told ya there’d be a quiz at the end.”

“Sorry, Bones.” Jim rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess I zoned out again.”

“Like you’ve been doing all dinner. I might as well be talking to a wall. At least a wall wouldn’t stare off into space with such a dopey grin on its face.”

Jim glared. “I don’t have a dopey grin.”

“Oh?” Bones whipped out a PADD, and then slid it over to Jim. “I call this piece exhibit A- it’s from when you were ignoring me twenty minutes ago. At least I didn’t have to call your name eighty times that go-round.”

Jim cringed at the picture displayed on the PADD’s screen. He did have a dopey grin.

“What’s up with you, huh? If you just got laid, I don’t want to know.”

“I didn’t just get laid.”

Bone’s brows crept up into his hair line. “What? I had a shiny penny bet on that one.”

Jim rolled his eyes.

“I take it back, you know, if you did get laid, Jimmy, you can tell me. As long as you were safe, I won’t have a bad word to say about it, cross my heart.”

“I didn’t get laid,” Jim repeated.

“Then what’s got your head in the clouds? You can tell me.”

Jim blushed.

“Oh Christ.” Bones leaned back. “You’re blushing.”

“It’s just…” Jim looked back down at his plate, pushing the remnants of his dessert around the rim. “You know how we were taking data on those Falibien suns earlier? When you were on the bridge?”

“Yeah, I remember. Thing of beauty.”

“God, Bones,” Jim sighed. “The way Spock was looking at them…”

“I changed my mind.” Bones said. “You can’t tell me.”

“He just looked so in love!” Jim sighed. “Like he had found something really profound, you know. I
mean, his eyes, Bones. I could wax poetry about it.”

“Please. Do not.”

“I could! I won’t, because, well. I won’t. But the way he looked.” Jim shook his head. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.” Bones said. “What happened to you not being in love with him? You’re not, right? Come on. It’s Spock!”

“That’s the problem. It’s Spock.”

“What is to say…?”

Jim hung his head, miserably. Quietly, he admitted, “I’ve never felt like this about anyone, Bones. Not even Ruth.”

Bones stared at him in shock.

“I know!” Jim started bouncing his leg underneath the table. “It’s bad, Bones. I can’t get him out of my head. Did I tell you I dream about him now? Not like, in a weird way. Not even a sexy way. I seriously have dreams were we just lay out in the barn and cuddle, Bones. Cuddle! And you know what? They’re some of the best dreams I’ve ever had. They blow the kinky sex dreams out of the water.”

“Good lord.”

“I want to hold his hand,” Jim whispered.

“Well. There goes my appetite.” Bones pushed his, admittedly already empty, plate away. “You realize you could stop daydreaming about it and actually get the real deal if you just told him, don’t you?”

“Tell him?” Jim sat up so fast he nearly banged his knee into the table. “What? No!”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because we’re friends!”

“What is a problem because why, again?”

Jim groaned. “Bones, if he doesn’t feel the same way it’ll weird him out! And he’s my first officer. The best damn first officer in the fleet. I can’t lose him. What if I tell him and he decides I’m emotionally compromised and puts in a transfer request?”

“As if,” Bones snorted.

“Bones, I’m serious!”

“If you really think the hobgoblin would up and leave you, then you’re heads as empty as a church house next to a saloon.” Bones leaned forward. “Listen, Jim, I’ve been hearing. Rumors.”

“Here we go,” Jim groaned. “Do you actually treat people in sick bay or do you just gossip?”

“Shut it.” Bones ordered. “Uhura came in with a nasty backache the other day and she had some very interesting things to say about Spock. I can’t break doctor-patient confidentiality, but…”
“What? No! What did she say? Tell me, Bones, come on!”

“Alright, fine. All she said was that he seems to light up every time you enter the bridge. But knowing Spock, I’d say that’s a lot.”

Jim deflated. “We’re friends,” he sighed. “He’d be happy to see me.”

“Did you not hear the words ‘light up?’ What about that doesn’t scream romantic?”

Jim shrugged.


“Yeah?”

Bones slid his PADD forward again. Exhibit B. “Try to get a hold on the smile.” He grinned. “Crews gonna start to think something’s up, and when that happens… well, I hear things.”

“I hate you,” Jim said.

“Yeah.” Bones scoffed. “Love you too, sweetheart.”

Chapter End Notes

T'nar pahk sarat y'rani - an untranslated Vulcan greeting.

Vesht ko-telsu - ex wife

T'nar pahk sarat y'rani - same untranslated Vulcan greeting

T'nar jaral - untranslated response

koon’ul- betrothed

telsu- bonded

kolinahr- the purging of all emotion
Part Three- Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Next chapter will be the last. Thank you again to everyone who left kudos and, especially, those of you who reviewed. It’s been fun!

They were due to be receiving the Gandlorious Ambassadors in the transporter room, and Jim was tired of waiting. The collar of his dress uniform chafed uncomfortably at his throat, and the thick material was causing him to sweat.

“What is it with Ambassadors and always being late?” Jim muttered.

Spock’s voice came from behind him. “I believe that is a characteristic that extends only to non-Vulcans.”

Jim grinned, listening to Spock’s footsteps as the man came to stand besides Jim. “As I recall, Amanda often had something to say about your dad taking forever to get ready, but I suppose she made sure we were never too late to get anywhere.”

“A Vulcan arrives exactly when they mean to.”

“I can’t tell if that’s a Lord of the Rings ripoff or a Princess Diaries one, but either way, I’m proud of you for watching more holos without me.” Jim slid his eyes over to Spock to grin at the Vulcan.

Once he looked, he couldn’t look away. Jim had never found their dress uniforms to be all that impressive, but on Spock, it was another story entirely. The powder blue of his shirt contrasted pleasantly with the olive tint to Spock’s skin, and it made his eyes seem darker, and more mysterious. The cut outlined Spock’s shoulders pleasantly, and the precise lines of the uniform somehow aided in making Spock’s cheekbones look even more formidable than usual. Jim couldn’t help but stare for a moment, thinking Spock looked beautiful.

“I believe the appropriate human response to your claims would be ‘I plead the fifth.’”

Jim laughed. “Where did you even hear that? That saying is older than I am.”

“It is not older than my mother, it seems.”

“Well,” Jim mused, “That does seem like something she would say.”

The transporter began to hum, then. Jim snapped to attention, feeling Spock do the same at his side.

There were three of them. They all had pale blue skin, large, beakish noses, and variant shades of pink hair. Their eyes were also remarkably larger than that of humans or Vulcans, and they stood a little taller, as well, the shortest of them ranging at six feet tall.

The first had braided her peachy hair back into a neatly collected bun, and had some sort of large spiky black pin stuck into a side-braid. Her eyes were so deeply blue they were nearly black, and their large size and deep color made her instantly seem other-worldly, like a water nymph from the fables of Jim’s home world. She was wearing a long, flowing white dress which turned golden and
nearly transparent at her feet. She had large, bubble-like sleeves, and a collection of round, dark aqua stones arranged about her throat and shoulders. Like the two others, she wore long, greenish gloves, which matched her boots.

The second had huge, wild curls. Her dress matched the first except for the sleeves, which were not present. She had an impressive arrangement of copper around her collar, and around her waist. She also had large blotchy patches of deep blue all over her face and shoulders, almost like over-sized freckles. Her eyes were light blue, and smaller than those of the first. She was the shortest amongst them.

The final had thick, sharp eyebrows that lent her an instant wickedly coy look. She had ruffles over the top part of her dress, which covered one shoulder. She had some sort of green-yellow wire around her throat, which supported a large pink pearl. Her hair was darkest- nearly red- and almost touched the floor. She also seemed to have a yellow tattoo on her shoulder. Jim could not make out the runes.

“Ambassadors,” Jim said. “Welcome aboard. I’m Captain James T. Kirk, and this is my first officer, Commander Spock.”

The first one spoke, in a deep, masculine voice. “I am Virinia of T’roi. This is my first,” she gestured to the woman with the long straight her, “Meerina of He’lon. And my second, Arelen of Ri’car.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Jim said.

“I will begin our contact with information of my species, so that you do not make any mishaps,” Virinia said. “The Gandlorious people are of one gender, unlike your own. We realize that we most closely resemble your female population, so for the sake of efficiency, you may refer to us as you would your female shipmates. It is extremely offensive to touch our hands, so we ask you avoid such contact. What information would you chose to share with us?” She smiled. Her teeth were wickedly sharp.

“Thank you for that,” Jim said. “I’ll forgo the customary handshake then- I’m sure Mr. Spock will appreciate that.”

“Is it also offensive in your culture, Mr. Spock?” Asked Meerina. “You are different from the humans.”

“I am Vulcan,” Spock said. “We do not enjoy physical contact, though hands are considerably more offensive in context to strangers.”

“Us as well,” said Virinia. “It is contact reserved for family alone, though circumstances sometimes make this an impossibility.”

“I find this as well,” Spock said. “Captain, if I may?”

Jim blinked at him in surprise. “Mr. Spock.”

“I believe my explanation of your kind may benefit the Gandloriousians, as it seems our cultures are slightly similar.”

“Well, by all means, Mr. Spock.”

“Thank you, sir.” Spock turned back to the three ambassadors. “You will find humans to be incredibly tactile, as a species. They require touch to thrive, so please understand that as they grow accustomed to your presence, they may make mistakes at first. Touch can range from casual to
intimate. Should you wish to engage in physical contact, it is socially acceptable to touch limbs, or the back above the waist.”

“Very informative,” Virinia said. “We thank you for the exchange, Mr. Spock.”

He nodded his head.

“Well!” Jim clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Shall we proceed to the conference room? The trade negotiations won’t write themselves.”

All three of the Gandloriousians barked out a sharp noise, which seemed to emulate a laugh.

“Captain Kirk!” Said Arelen. “How clever! Indeed it will not.”

Jim liked them immediately. “If you’ll follow me.”

They started to the conference room, where Uhura would be waiting, along with a delegate from Starfleet. Uhura had been working on the Gandlorious language, but there were several ones- their planet hadn’t yet unified under one concrete language, but the majority of the inhabitants seemed to be bilingual. Uhura was, of course, already well onto her way to being fluent. Jim didn’t know how she did it, but he was honestly awed.

The universal translator would come in handy, of course, but Jim never went into negotiations without Uhura there to catch what the translator couldn’t. She was always the first to know if things were heading south, too, as she could read into body language just as easily as she could speech.

The trade negotiations went along rather smoothly. The Gandlorious people had a surplus of dilithium and a rare grain that could survive with virtually no water that they called Kami. There were several things that the federation had in generous supply which Gandlorious needed, and Jim found the three ambassadors to be rather agreeable and easily to compromise with.

That may have been thanks to Uhura, though. The Ambassadors each seemed to have developed a sort of fascination with her, on account of her ability to flawlessly reproduce their language and accent. It didn’t hurt that Uhura was lovely, too, and her short stature seemed to be completely novel to the three tall Gandloriousians.

They worked for three hours on the treaty that day, before ending their efforts in time for dinner. The mess hall was packed, as usual, but Jim managed to grab one of the long tables so that he, Uhura, and Spock could sit with their guests. The Gandloriousians mostly seemed to thrive off of meat, but they seemed to have a liking for fruits and nuts as well. Jim didn’t see a vegetable of leafy green anywhere in the near vicinity of any one of their plates.

Bones sat roughly down next to him, and immediately, noticed the same thing.

“Not a fan of veggies?” He grunted.

They blinked at him.

“Virinia, Meerina, Arelen. Allow me to introduce my Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Leonard McCoy.”

“Pleasure,” he said.

“What are… veggies?” Arelen asked.
“Vegetation, vegetables.” Uhura said.

“Ah,” Meerina said. “No. We eat those only during the second lunar shadow.”

Jim felt himself grin as he turned to Bones. He opened his mouth to say, see?

“Hmph.” Bones nodded. “That’s something. Ya’ll fans of red meat?”

“Oh yes,” Virinia said. “It is what we eat most.”

Bones just nodded. “You and the Captain both.”

Jim smiled, waving a hand over his steak. “You caught me.”

“Delightful, Captain, truly.” Meerina said. “You humans are so interesting.” Her eyes slid over to Uhura. “So… enchanting.”

Jim was used to being hit on aliens. Uhura was less so. She blushed and looked down at her plate. “No more enchanting than your kind,” she said, smiling.

_Uhura you smooth bastard._ Jim thought. He could tell Spock was thinking something similar, and beneath the table, trailed his fingers over the inside of Spock’s wrist. He sent out a general feeling of ‘Get some, Uhura,’ to which Spock’s mind replied with the impression of ‘fascinating.’

Jim looked back up at the ambassadors, and away from Spock.

They were staring at him openly.

He opened his mouth to ask what was wrong when Virinia cut him off.

“Captain Kirk,” she gasped, “I was unaware!”

“I as well.” Said Meerina.

“You must forgive us for not bringing you a gift,” Arelen added.

Jim was completely lost. He looked over at Spock, and then at Uhura, but they were both equally as bemused. Jim turned back to the Gandlorious ambassadors and carefully said, “A gift for what?”

“For your joining, of course.” Virinia reached up to the pearl proudly stitched into the bodice of her dress. “You did not wear a stone, so we were not aware of your status. I realize now that of course our customs would be different.”

He was starting to realize what they were talking about. His face went red. “Oh, uh, really, it’s not…” but he wasn’t sure what it wasn’t. “It’s not like we expected anything.”

“It is customary. You must be newly joined, of course.”

“Joined?” Spock asked.

Uhura to the rescue; “Married, coupled for life, bonded:“

“Understood, Lieutenant,” Jim cut in.

“To kiss so openly in public,” Arelen said. “You must be recently joined indeed.”

“Oh, uh, that… that wasn’t really a kiss.” Jim managed. He felt flushed. “Really, Spock and I aren’t
joined. At least, I don’t think we are- not in the way you might think.”

Virinia clicked her tongue in confusion. “Then what is the significance of your gesture?”

“Um… well.” Jim looked to Spock.

“My species are touch-telepaths,” Spock said, easily. “The Captain, at times, wishes to send me flashes of thought. He does so by coming into contact with my skin, and as my wrists are most often exposed and discrete, he chooses this area to touch.”

“You said yourself,” Meerina said, “It is intimate to touch hands, even for your people.”

“It is,” Spock said, slowly.

“But I mean. That’s not a kiss.” Jim said. “We’re just really close. Friends.”

“Ah,” Meerina said. She said, “T’ch-luchIt.” The translator couldn’t convert the word.

Spock, Bones, and Jim all leaned over to look at Uhura.

She shrugged. “The closest translation is basically friends with benefits.”

Jim felt his blush spread. “No, no!” He waved his hands in front of his face. “It’s not like that.”

“I do not understand.” Virinia said. “It is intimate contact. Yet you claim otherwise.”

“It’s… like a hug,” Jim said. “You know. Intimate, but not- not sexual or anything.”

They looked puzzled.

“I believe,” Spock said, “That we may be at a cultural impasse.”

“I think you may be right,” Virinia said. “You are… friends.”

“Yes,” Jim and Spock chorused.

“You are both unjoined, and without one to join to?”

“Yes,” they said again.

Arelen looked casually down the table. “Is it so for all of you, currently?” Her eyes settled on Uhura.

Bones coughed. “Uh.”

They ignored him.

Uhura blushed prettily and looked up from underneath her eyelashes. “Yes,” she said. “That’s correct.”

The ambassadors shared a look of glee. Jim was glad to have the attention diverted from him and Spock. He looked over to see if Spock looked similarly relieved, but he was simply watching Uhura with curiosity.

Jim looked back to his food. Of course Spock wouldn’t care, or be embarrassed. He knew they weren’t dating, so why would he get ruffled by the misunderstanding? It would be illogical. Jim had hoped, though, that maybe there would be something in Spock’s expression- some hint of his feelings…
He felt someone looking at him and turned.

Bones was wise to him. He was casting Jim a shrewd look, looking pleased as punch. Jim narrowed his eyes and mouthed, Don’t. Bones began to smirk, wider and wider with each passing second.

“Hey,” he said to the Gandloriousians.

They turned to him.

“What do ya’ll call it when someone wants to join someone else, but hasn’t said it yet.”

“Kyo’rack.” Meerina said easily. “It is the time of cowardice.”

Bones threw back his head and cackled.

“Shut up.” Jim growled.

“How is it that you ask, Doctor McCoy?” Arelen grinned. “Are you in cowardice, currently?”

He stopped laughing. “Now hold on a minute.”

“Who is it that has frightened you so?” Virinia asked. “We are very interested in your human culture.”

“Now hold on, I didn't see I was scared of anyone. You've got it all turned around.”

"How so?” Meerina asked. "Surely one such as yourself would be scared of someone."

"In a pig's eye!"

They blinked at him, confused.

“He says that's not exactly true,” Uhura helped.

They practically melted.

“Oh, Lieutenant Uhura, how helpful are you,” Virinia sighed.

“Such intelligence,” Arelen added.

“You must be exhausted, working so hard, oh, Captain Kirk, surely she is due for a vacation. The waters of our home world are quiet warm this time of year, Lieutenant Uhura, you would enjoy them profusely.”

She went back to staring at her food, face flushed.

“Sounds like y’aint the only coward,” Bones chuckled to Jim.


Spock leaned around him. “Sir?”

“Nothing,” Jim insisted. He whipped back around to glare at Bones, motioning a hand quickly across his throat. Shut it!

Bones just grinned, lazily. “Actually, Spock-“
“Well!” Jim would kill him. He stood, quickly. “It’s been lovely, ambassadors, but I’m afraid I have to be attending to the rest of Alpha shift. I’m sure Mr. Spock can show you to your rooms when you’re ready.”

“Could perhaps Lieutenant Uhura lead the way?” Arelen asked. The other two clicked their tongues eagerly in concurrence. “She speaks our tongue so well, it is best to hear the details of your ship from her mouth, yes?”

Jim looked over at Uhura, raising his brow.

She gave a slight nod.

“Well, if it would make you happy, I’m sure that can be arranged. Excuse me.” He extradited himself from the table, taking his tray with him. He was alarmed to feel Spock right behind him. He looked over his shoulder as he put his tray into the recycler. “Spock?”

“I will join you on your way to the bridge, as I must be attending shift as well.”

“Oh, Spock, you didn’t have to cut your dinner early just because I was.”

“I sensed that perhaps the Gandloriousians were… pleased by my leave.” He looked back over to where they were all laughing over something Uhura said, all of them looking completely love-struck. Uhura looked to be having a rather good time herself.

“Ah,” Jim chuckled. “Right.”

They made their way over to the lift. Jim allowed himself to relax slightly once her was there, tugging at the collar of his uniform. He chanced a look over at Spock, but the Vulcan looked cool as ever. Or rather, he did at first glance. After a second look, Jim noticed that Spock’s brows were just barely drawn together.

He felt himself flush again. He cleared his throat.

Spock looked over at him. “Captain?”

“Sorry. About earlier, I mean. I… didn’t realize.”

“I do not understand.”

“With the whole. Kiss thing.”

“Ah,” Spock said. He looked straight ahead.

It fell silent.


“It was not unpleasant,” Spock said, suddenly.

“What?” Jim whipped his head around to stare at Spock.

The Vulcan didn’t reply. They’d reached the bridge, and so Spock coolly stepped out of the lift and started towards his station, candidly calling, “Captain on the bridge,” as he went.

Jim went after him, slowly, feeling his grin spreading slowly, and unable to do anything to suppress it.
Maybe there was hope after all.

He couldn’t get the not-kiss out of his mind.

Sure, when he brushed his fingers over Spock’s wrist, he meant nothing by it. He wanted a small glance into Spock’s mind, and nothing more. But since the instance of romanticism from the Gandloriousians, he couldn’t stop thinking about how damn close it was to a kiss.

Just a few inches up, and it would be. When he’d been younger, and he’d seen Sarek and Amanda kissing, he hadn’t seen the appeal. Likewise, he hadn’t seen the point of mouths meeting mouths in the movies. Suddenly, though, the mere thought of pressing his finger tips to Spock's sent a curl of excitement through him. It was stupid- he was human, and humans held hands all the time- but the thought of what it would mean made his heart thud dangerously in his chest.

The night’s chess match was coming to an end. Jim was losing, badly, and he knew it was because he was distracted. He watched Spock’s long, delicate fingers as they graced the surface of an ivory bishop, mouth dry. He was aware he was swallowing too often, and that Spock could probably hear him. He wasn’t aroused, precisely, but there was that odd edge of want in his stomach that was dangerously close to tumbling into sexual excitement.

Spock laid his hand on the table. He did it casually, though Jim noticed it was closer than usual. Spock had leaned his body forward to see over the top of the third tier of the chess board.

Their fingers were mere inches apart. Jim slid his hand closely, readjusting his body to cover the movement. Their fingers were so close that if Jim were to just stretch his index finger out, it would nudge Spock’s. He felt his pulse in every part of his body, strumming along harder than usual. He licked his lips and swallowed again, and then nervously looked up to see if Spock had noticed.

Spock was staring at the board with a look of extreme concentration. So extreme, that for a moment, Jim wondered if he might be faking- if Spock were, somehow, overtaken by the odd mood that had fallen.

But then Spock removed his hand from the desk and reached up to the top of the board, moving his queen over. He looked up and met Jim’s eyes, his mouth set, but his eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

“Check,” he said.

Jim took in a deep breath and tried to get himself under control. Spock put his hand back down on the table just where it had been as he waited for Jim to move. Jim could feel the heat coming off of Spock’s body, hyperaware of the scant space between them.

He was working up the nerve to reach out and touch Spock. He’d ran miles upon miles when he was so exhausted he thought he might drop dead; he could inch hid hand forward a centimeter of two. It wouldn’t even be a true Vulcan kiss, just a nudge, nothing really. Spock could mistake it for an accidental tap. Unless Spock didn’t want to mistake it. If Spock wanted it just as badly as Jim did, maybe he’d turn his palm up, press their fingers together more snugly…

Surely it wasn’t just Jim. His apprehension had turned into full-on sexual tension. That was a two-
way street, wasn’t it? Would he be feeling it if Spock was oblivious? All he had to do was move; slide his hand forward and tap Spock’s fingertips. It would be a test. He could do it.

He swallowed again and lifted his hand off the surface of the table. His heart thudded hard in his chest, enough to make him feel momentarily dizzy.

He reached up and moved his King back out of the way, not even up to defending himself. He’d let Spock chase him for a bit and then call it quits.

He hadn’t been paying attention, though, and Spock moved a forgotten pawn into place. “Checkmate,” Spock said.

Jim reached out and tipped over his king. “That was brutal,” he joked. His voice sounded off and he resisted the urge to clear his throat.

Spock looked at him oddly.

“Welp,” Jim stood and stretched, hoping with ever fiber of his being that Spock wasn’t able to see any evidence of his arousal. “Think I’ll head to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Spock blinked at him. “Of course, Captain.”

“Jim,” he reminded, off-handedly. He forced himself to reach out and clap Spock over the shoulder. “Night, Spock.”

Spock stood and headed for the door, saying, “Goodnight, Jim,” over his shoulder.

Jim threw himself down into bed and listened to the door seal behind Spock. He shoved his face into his pillow and let out a long, deep groan.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “What the hell was that!?”

Am I seriously turned on by the thought of touching Spock’s hand? He asked himself. The answer was a an undeniable, loud, resounding yes!

They'd been in space a year. Jim wasn’t sure he could survive four more of such unbridled tension. Something had to give, but for the moment…

He grunted in embarrassment and peeked over his shoulder to be absolutely certain the bathroom door was shut.

… He’d make do.

He was in the barn again. They were working on installing the skylight, but they were older, and for some reason, Spock was in uniform. Still, the scene didn’t differ from there, and the dialog remained the same.

Jim grinned across the divide in the roof and yelled, “Hey, baby, what’s a place like you doing in a girl like this?”
Spock raised a brow. “Jim,” he called, “I am not a place. Nor am a baby. I am also not in a-“

“I saw it in a holo!” Jim called back. “The next line is what I was leading up to.”

“Proceed.”

“Here goes,” Jim said. He leaned forward, quirking up a brow as he smirked. “Wanna get out of here?”

“…” Spock stared at him.

“What?”

“Would it not have been easier to simply ask if I wished to take a break, Jim?”

“Oh, come on, Spock,” Jim laughed. “How else am I supposed to express my roguish charm?”

Spock said, “If you wish to be charming, perhaps you might begin by never repeating that particular sentence again.”

Jim laughed. “Spock! You jerk!”

“I would be amenable to taking a break,” he said.

They were lying in bed suddenly. The one in Jim’s room, but the bars had been removed from the window. Jim rolled over and pushed his face into Spock’s neck, wrapping his arm around Spock’s waste. For once, Spock was laying on his side, so Jim had the opportunity to spoon the Vulcan, as he’d often wanted. Spock’s neck was warm and soft, and Jim softly kissed beneath his ear.

Spock was wearing Jim’s old “Terran-it-UP” t shirt. Jim was inexplicably delighted.

Spock let out a small yawn and turned in Jim’s grip, so that they were facing each other. Their noses touched, and Spock’s eyes crossed momentarily as he observed the contact. His eyes turned back to Jim.

“Fascinating,” Spock whispered. “You have a speck of green in your left iris.”

Jim smiled, softly. Spock had said such a thing multiple times when he was sleepy.

Jim leaned forward to kiss Spock. They were no longer in bed, then. They were sitting at his desk, in his quarters aboard the Enterprise. Spock leaned over the desk and reached up to touch Jim’s face, hand clawed into an odd configuration.

Jim leaned into the touch.


Jim gasped as he jerked awake. Alone, in his quarters; his neck damp with sweat. His heart felt swollen in his chest, and he reached up to hold his hand over it, swallowing.

“T’hy’la,” he whispered into the darkness. It was a senseless word, but it felt like a simple truth.
The planet was small, but dense, with a gravitational pull point two times stronger than that of Terra. It was M-Class, with a breathable, oxygen rich atmosphere, and a temperature ranging between sixteen and eighteen degrees celsius on average. Spock was, understandably, not excited to be part of the boarding party, as someone who had grown up on a planet that had reached fifty degrees before and never dipped below twenty one.

It wasn’t an ice planet, though, and for that they were all thankful. Ice planets always seemed to lead to disaster. The kind of creatures that learned to live in the cold were terrifying.

Their scans of the planet revealed it to be uninhabited but for insect and ocean life, as well as plant life. The plant life seemed to be extremely diverse, and so they were intending to beam down to the planet to conduct an initial survey as well as collect flora samples. Bones was ecstatic at the thought that they might be able to make new medicines, and Sulu was practically bouncing with excitement at the thought of encountering new plant life.

Jim felt that it was rather routine for them, but he’d never been bored by a planet exploration. He left Uhura in charged of the Enterprise and beamed down to the planet with Spock, Bones, Chekov, Sulu, and five blue shirts. The science team all reported directly to Spock, so as they casually walked amongst the tall, willowy grass, they were constantly stopped by officers running up to Spock to hurriedly spit out reports.

“It is curious,” Spock said. “There is ample cloud cover, and yet, the humidity is only thirty percent. Fascinating.”

“One of your science nerds said that the vast majority of the water on the planet is stored in the ground. I don’t think it hardly even rains.”

Spock gave Jim a look. “Captain,” he said. “Please refrain from referring to my science officers as ‘science nerds.’ I doubt that any one of them completed their ample years of schooling to simply be referred to as such.”

Jim looked out over the field. “Command nerd,” he said, pointing at Chekov. “Medical nerd,” he pointed at Bones. Then he turned to Spock. He smiled. “Science nerd.” He poked Spock in the chest.

“Captain, please.”

He flipped open his comm. “Scotty?”

“Scotty here, Captain.”

“You’re still manning the transporters?”

“Aye, sir. The cloud coverage in’t interfering as of yet.”

“Good. Keep me posted.” He closed his communicator, and said, “Engineering nerd.”

Spock raised his eyebrow, just so.

Jim grinned at him. “You know, Spock, I don’t think there’s a single person aboard the Enterprise who isn’t a nerd.”

“And you are the captain of the vessel,” Spock said.
“Are you attempting to imply something, Mr. Spock?”

“Not at all, sir.” Spock said. “Though, logically, if one were to look at the facts, certainly if a starship were to be staffed entirely by ‘nerds,’ then the one captaining said starship would have to be the most nerd-like of them all.”

“Careful there, Mr. Spock,” Jim grinned at him. “You’re second in command, you know- that makes you Head Nerd just underneath me.”

“It is a position I will bear with as much dignity as possible,” Spock promised.

Jim threw back his head and laughed.

“Well aren’t you just pleased as punch.” Bones materialized at Jim’s other side.

“Oh, my medical nerd,” Jim said.

Bones scowled. “I’m a doctor, damn it.”

“Well, what can I do for you, doctor?” Jim laughed.

“Nothing, that’s what,” Bones huffed. “There’s not a damn useful thing out here. I don’t get it- it’s like every plant that coulda been worth something up and walked away. Even Sulu was commenting on it. It’s all grass, and inedible plant life.”

“Strange,” Jim commented. “I thought that initial scans showed the presence of diverse plant life.”

“They did,” Spock said. “It is strange that we would not experience that in a concentrated area. There is no populace which might have interfered with the natural dispersal of floral life.”

“But that’s what it seems like,” Bones muttered. “Like someone came and took anything useful to plant it somewhere else. Problem is, we can’t tell where in the seven hells ‘somewhere else’ might be.”

“Odd,” Jim said.

“Frustrating, is what it is.” Bones sighed.

Sulu appeared then. “Captain. We’ve finished collecting samples.”

Jim nodded. “I suppose you better beam up, then.”

“I’m coming with,” said Bones. “No sense in me staying here. Not a damn thing to do but look pretty, and lord knows I do that well enough in sick bay.”

Jim snorted. “Alright, alright. Go ahead and signal Scotty. Sulu, round up the rest of the team.”

Sulu nodded and headed off.

“Captain,” Spock’s voice came.

Jim looked over to find Spock had wondered off some feet, and was regarding the ground with an odd expression.

Jim jogged over to him, leaving Bones where the doctor stood. “Find something of interest, Mr. Spock?”
“Perhaps,” Spock said. He gestured to the ground.

Jim’s brows lifted. “A trail,” he said. It was very thin, but there was no doubt to it; something regularly moved over the ground and had left a neat path of dirt amidst the grass. “Wonder what made this. I thought the biggest thing out here were insects.”

“It is likely that this formed from water flow,” Spock said.

“That, or these are huge bugs,” Jim said.

“That is a possibility,” Spock decided.

Sulu was back with the rest of the group. They were talking animatedly amongst themselves, hefting their bags full of samples over their shoulders as they laughed together. Bones waved at Jim and Spock, indicating that they should join the party.

“You guys go ahead and beam up,” Jim called. “We’re gonna check this out real fast.”

Sulu said, “Find something interesting?”

“Perhaps a small dried run-off from a water source,” Spock said. “I would like to shortly investigate.”

Sulu shrugged. “Well, you guys have fun with that. We’re gonna get started on these plants. We can beam to another side of the planet for different specimens later.”

Jim nodded. Bones pulled out his communicator and had Scotty beam them up. As soon as the team faded off into light, Jim turned back to Spock. “Shall we?”

Spock nodded.

They followed the path. It was too narrow to walk on, so they trailed along the side of it. It headed steadily up hill and into a denser area of the planet, where tall, skinny trees with pale peachy leaves swayed delicately in the slight breeze. Jim zipped up his jacket and looked over at Spock. The Vulcan’s nose was tipped in green, as were his ears. Jim reached over and pulled the hood of Spock’s coat up over the Vulcan’s head.

“Better?” He asked.

Spock said, “Yes, thank you, sir.”

“You always forget about those.”

“Vulcans prefer separate head coverings,” he said. “It is easy to forget of a hood’s existence.”

Jim laughed.

They followed the trail a ways further until it finally ended. It cut off suddenly in a large hole, big enough that Jim knew he could fit in it himself. He didn’t like the look of it, though - it was definitely not a run off from water, and he was nervous about what creatures might be in such a large dug out. He leaned forward, peering into the darkness, and was arrested suddenly by a memory of Tarsus.

Those first few days, cramped into the dug out that Dan had made ahead of time, with Nina and Mel. It had the exact same smell of wet dirt and body odor that he’d forgotten, and the sense of ill-ease it gave him forced him back a few steps.
“Jim?”

“Something feels off about this,” Jim said. “If we’re going to investigate this further, we need to go get some security officers.” He and Spock both had their phasers, but it had been proved time and time again how little that did.

Spock nodded. “That would be logical, sir.”

“Come on,” Jim turned away from the hole. “Let’s head back to the beam up.”

He’d only taken a step forward when there was a noise behind him. A soft sniffling, like that of a distressed child. He turned around and froze, just as Spock did, as he tried to pinpoint where the sound had come from.

Something was moving in the mouth of the hole.

Jim took a cautious step forward, leaning forward to see into it. Wide, white eyes peered up from the darkness, almost glowing in the slight light that made it into the hole. Jim was immediately uneasy. He didn’t care if it was some hurt animal or alien in trouble, they needed to head back to the beam up for back up right away.

He stumbled back a step. “Let’s go,” he urged.

“Captain, we-“

Spock was cut off as something whizzed out of the hole. They dodged in time, watching as a whittled spear made from what looked to be bone lodged itself in a tree behind them.

“Run!” Jim yelled.

Something, or rather, someone, exploded from the hole. Jim didn’t really see what they looked like, but by the sounds, he could tell the one person whose eyes he’d seen had not been the only inhabitant of the dug-out. There was noise as several others scrambled up out of the hole, chasing after them with loud chirps and shrieks.

Jim threw a glance over his shoulder. They were humanoid, but they rain oddly- almost like deer; one leg in front of the other, bounding as they went. They’d been the ones to make the skinny path. The same path he and Spock were following, at an admittedly slower pace.

“Spock!” Jim broke from the path quickly, knowing Spock would follow. He hoped they would have a better chance of losing the aliens in the trees.

Spock was right behind him. They dodged between the tall, swaying trees, pushing hard off the soft dirt and running blindly. Jim waited a good while before chancing another look over his shoulder.

There were five of them. They were roughly the same size as the average human would have been, and luckily, they seemed to be having slight difficulty navigating the forest. Jim and Spock had already put some room between them. Jim took in all he could about the aliens in his one glance and then turned his eyes back forward, cataloging what he’d seen as he ran.

They all had pale white skin- so pale, in fact, that it was nearly translucent. He’d seen the blue of the veins in their arms and legs. They had hair just as stark white, also pale enough to be nearly see-through. The hair was long and trailed along the forest floor as they ran. Their foreheads and cheekbones were vibrant magenta, and they had blue lines down the middle of this lips, as well as small blue lines curling around their necks and shoulders. Red lines dropped from their throats like...
blood. None of them wore shirts, but they seemed to have some sort of armor just under their breasts—male and female alike. They wore matching armor around their wrists—an odd, scaly green material. Their ears were huge and bat like, the skin thin enough to see through, and peppered with the same fine white hair on their heads. They all wore complicated, woven pink skirts, and ran barefoot. Their feet were oddly slim and small, and their hands were long and spindly. Most alarming where their pure white eyes.

It was also something that gave Jim a clue. They were having trouble dodging around trees, moving at the very last minute each time.

“Spock!” He yelled. “I think they have poor eyesight!”

Spock said, “We seem to have disturbed a nest. They were likely sleeping, and therefor we can assume they are—” he ducked as another spear went flying pat his head. “—nocturnal.”

“Good!” Jim bolted off to the side, changing his direction suddenly. If they didn’t go in a straight line, maybe the aliens would lose sight of them.

Jim dodged a tree and then leapt out and grabbed Spock’s shoulder, pulling him along. He spotted a denser patch of trees just ahead and took off after them. He let go of Spock once he was sure that the XO knew where they were heading for.

Jim weaved between the trees after Spock, allowing the Vulcan to lead. The sounds of their pursuers was growing fainter and fainter, but Jim could barely breath. His legs burned. He wasn’t sure how long they could keep it up, and he also didn’t know how long the aliens could. He didn’t want to try to outrun them if they had more stamina. Even Spock had been shown up in the stamina department by a few alien species before.

Jim grabbed his comm and flicked it open. “Scotty!” He called. “Scotty do you read me?”

The engineer’s voice was garbled. “I- but it’s—’ard to hear you- I- the storm clouds are b- cking the signa-“

“Beam us up!” Jim insisted.

“Can’t get- old of your- nal.”

“Damn it.” Jim shoved his comm back into his belt. “Spock, any ideas?”

“Negative,” Spock huffed. He vaulted over a fallen tree.

Great, Jim thought. Of course their signal was interrupted, of course their were aliens on the supposedly empty planet, and of fucking course they were hostile. Jim was secure in the knowledge that, should it come down to it, he had a phaser on his belt, but he was not in the mood to be breaking the Prime Directive.

Jim looked behind him. Their pursuers were nowhere to be seen. Slowly, he decreased his speed. “Spock,” he said, quietly.

Spock came to a halt. Jim did the same. They stared the way they’d come, but nothing moved.

“I think we lost them.”

Spock narrowed his eyes. “Stop breathing,” he said.
Jim hefted out a sigh. “Well damn, Spock, tell me how you really feel why don’t you?”

“I cannot hear above the sound of you breath.” Spock said.

Jim sighed and then stepped a couple feet away from Spock, forcing himself to be quiet. He braced his hands over his knees and bent at the waste, trying to breath through his mouth.

“I do not hear anything,” Spock said, slowly.

“Think we can chance heading back over to the beam-up point?”

“I would usually advice against it,” Spock said. “However, if your hypothesis is correct, and they are nocturnal…”

Jim looked up at the sky. The planet had seven hour days and nine hour nights. Dark was falling fast. “I see your point.”

“We will be at a severe disadvantage.” Spock looked back over to Jim. “They may be waiting for us to return, Captain.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jim sighed. “Should we press forward?”

“It may be for the best. We can attempt to find a hiding place in which to take shelter for the night.”

“Uhura’s in charge,” Jim said. “She probably sent down a rescue team the minute I comm’ed Scotty. There’s no way we’re keeping the natives from seeing a phaser at this rate. We both have full charge, and we really don’t need the entire Enterprise searching for us.”

“Your argument is logical,” Spock said. “However, there were five of them, and all seemed to be armed. The chances that one us will become injured before we are able to stun all five is twenty-seven to one.”

“Not the worst odds you’ve given me,” Jim said. He started to walk back the way they’d come, phaser secured in his palm.

“May I remind you that the last time we were in a perilous situation, I calculated that we had a ninety seven percent chance of success, and yet, Ensign Monroe, Lieutenant Kell, and yourself were all admitted to sickbay thereafter with multiple injuries.”

“You win some, you loose some.” Jim said.

“We should be silent, now,” Spock said. “They will hear us.”

Jim nodded.

They walked through the brush as quietly as they could, leading with their phasers. Jim walked a little ways off from Spock, knowing they’d be able to see more if they spread out. He was certain to never let Spock out his sight, though. He often chanced a quick glance over to be sure his first officer was still alright, even knowing that it was silly to do so.

They made it to where the trees began to thin. They crept along silently, searching the ground. Maybe the aliens had given up and gone back to their hovel in the ground.

“Captain!”

Jim turned, eyes wide as movement caught his eye. Something hit his chest like a freight train,
knocking him to the ground. White and pink and blue took up his vision as he wrestled with the powdery skin of the alien, her loud screeches filling his ears. She’s knocked his phaser out of his hand, and was attempting to do away with him using a small, wickedly curved knife.

Spock was there in an instance. He fired his phaser, stunning the alien girl. He dragged her off of Jim just as another one of the aliens dropped down from the trees, landing on Spock just like the first one had landed on Jim. The man loudly chirped, likely signaling to the rest of his group.

“Spock!”

Jim didn’t have time to look for where he’d dropped his phaser. He dove forward, grabbing the alien by the arms to wrestle him off of Spock. The man let out a screech. Jim couldn’t see his hands, and the knife came out of nowhere. Jim jumped back just in time to avoid getting caught by it- his was definitely bigger than the woman’s, and it was dripping some sort of green liquid that Jim was willing to bet was poison. He kicked the alien in the head just as Spock finally managed to orient himself and reached out, delivering the Vulcan nerve pinch. The alien fell forward, unmoving.

“Spock,” Jim grabbed the alien’s body and heaved it off of Spock. “Spock, are you okay-“

Spock was not okay. The green substance that Jim had seen on the alien’s knife had not been poison- it had been green, Vulcan blood. Spock grunted and pressed his hand to his chest, where the blue material of his uniform was quickly turning dark.

“Shit!” Jim dropped to his knees. He recovered Spock’s phaser, knowing that the other aliens were likely not too far away. “Spock. Spock, shit-“

“Behind you, Captain,” Spock said.

Jim turned and fired at another of the aliens, who’d been running towards him. A second one came into view and he stunned them, too. “Four down,” he said. He turned back to Spock, who’s eyelids were fluttering. “What the hell, Spock? Come on, stay with me. What happened to Vulcans having superior- fuck. Superior everything? Get it together.”

“I am attempting to re-route the blood flow, however, it seems a central artery has been torn. I have also sustained blunt-force trauma to my head, and I am likely concussed.”

“Shit. Can you stand?”

Spock started to sit up and then grunted. He fell heavily back onto the forest floor. “Negative, Captain.”

“What if- what if I dragged you back to the beam-up point?”

“I will not be able to keep pressure on the wound and will likely bleed to death.”

“Shit.” Jim looked up as the fifth, and final, alien came sprinting towards them. She drew back her arm to throw her spear, but Jim stunned her before she could throw it. She hit the ground like a ton of bricks and then laid there, motionless.

Jim put the phaser on his belt and leaned forward, batting Spock’s hands out of the way. He pressed his hands down hard on the wound, cringing as Spock’s breath hitched in pain. “Sorry, Spock, I’m sorry. Gotta keep that blood in there.”

“I understand, sir.”
“You’re bleeding out, Spock, it’s okay to call me Jim,” he tried to come off humorously, but his smile failed.

"We are on shift."

"New rule- I'm Jim off shift and-slash-or when one of us is bleeding out."

“Jim,” Spock said.

Jim’s short laugh came out slightly hysterical. “That’s better. Did you know. Uh. Did you know that back when we were kids, I always secretly wanted you to call me Captain? And uh, now that you do, I’m always wanting to hear you say my name instead.”

Spock’s eyes slid shut. “Hm.”

“Hey! Open your eyes, damn it.” He reached out with one green-slicked hand and lightly slapped Spock. “Come on, baby, you gotta stay awake.”

“I am not an infant,” Spock mumbled. His eyes opened back up.

“I’ll call you a- a baby for the rest of forever if you go to sleep, Spock.”

“My body requires rest,” Spock said.

“If you go to sleep with a concussion you might never wake up,” Jim warned him. “Stay with me. Uhura will have sent people down to look for us.”

Spock’s hand fell over Jim’s belt. Jim looked down and watched Spock pull Jim’s comm out. He opened it and flicked the distress signal on, and then laid it gently on the ground. “They will find us with greater ease,” he explained.

“Good thinking, Mr. Spock.” Jim nodded. Spock’s eyes started to slide shut again. “Hey! Whoa, whoa, whoa. I don’t think so, sir. You keep your eyes open, and that’s an order.”

Spock’s eyes lazily opened back up.

“That’s better. Now, listen hear, Spock, I’m going to tell you a story and you have to listen to every word of it, because there will be a test at the end, and if you fail it, uh, you… you have to, um. Take on a yeoman. Who will go into your quarters and re-arrange your stuff and fold your laundry the human way. You hear me, Spock?”

“It would be unpleasant,” Spock breathed. “I am listening.”

“Good. A story. Um, it’s. I have a story. Shit.” Jim screwed his eyes shut, forcing back tears. He had to remain calm and collected, but it was impossible. He had never been so afraid in his life. Spock had survived the impossible, but when it came to stab wounds, Vulcans were infamously fragile. Once their internal systems were torn, things came crashing down awful fast.

“Jim,” Spock said.

“Spock?”

“You are afraid,” Spock said. Jim opened his mouth to protest, but Spock cut him off. “I can feel it as though your fear were my own.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll- I’ll shield, I-“
“Jim.”

Jim forced himself to look at Spock’s face.

“You must not fear,” Spock said, gently. “Fear is the mind killer.”

Together, they said, “Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.”

Jim nodded. “I will face my fear.”

“You will permit it to pass over and through you,” Spock said.

“And when my fear is gone, I will turn, and face fear’s path. And only I will remain.” He swallowed. “Of course you’d remember that.”

“You spoke those words to me, in my mind, that night in the rain,” Spock murmured. “I do not know if it was your intention, but I heard you nonetheless. It was… a small comfort.” He coughed.

“Shit.” Jim pressed a little harder, but it was hard to keep the pressure up when his hands were wet. He closed his eyes for a minute.

His fear was alive, and yawning before him like the canyon he’d driven his father’s car into. It would consume him if he let it. He took in a deep, calming breath, and allowed himself to look at it. His fear was bigger than he was, but that was alright. Everyone felt fear. He certainly did. He’d felt it since Spock had gone down, and for a moment, he allowed himself to feel it. To ascertain that the thought of Spock dying hurt him the way nothing else could. And that was alright. He could be afraid for that. But he didn’t have to let himself fall into it.

He was afraid, and small. But he stepped into the canyon and let himself fall, and when he hit the bottom, he was no worse for wear. The drop was terrifying, and the impact more so, but there was nothing his fear could do to him.

What happened, would happen, and he would go from there. Kaiidth.

He opened his eyes back up to Spock. The Vulcan had closed his eyes and was breathing shallowly.

“Spock,” Jim said.

“Mm.”

“How do I keep you awake?”

Spock sighed in reply.

Jim didn’t know what to do. But he had to do something. He had to keep Spock’s mind from slipping into the dark. Even if Spock’s body did fall asleep, as long as his brain didn’t know that, it would be okay, wouldn’t it? God, Jim didn’t know a thing about Vulcan physiology, he realized.

He did the only thing he thought to do.

He reached out with one hand, and messily copied a movement that had been burned into his brain. He pressed his finger tips to Spock’s face and felt something unfold inside of him- some sort of connection clicking into place. He swallowed hard and hoped he knew what he was doing.

“My mind, to your mind,” he said, out loud. Somehow, he knew the words, like he knew the Enterprise was meant for him, like he knew that the stars were his home. “My thoughts... to your thoughts.”
He was young, and his fury consumed him like fire. He’d remembered seeing the same thing in Jim’s mind- the same sort of manic desire to hurt, to attack, to give in. Never before had he allowed himself, but the slight against his mother was too much to bear. They had no right to speak of things they did not know- no right to speak of his mother, who was good, and light, and lovely.

His fists hurt with the force of his blows. The sound of their bodies sliding down the curve of the learning pod was loud and unforgettable, burning in his ears. He’d never felt so much like he existed in his body, and not his mind- never before so in tune with a thing that had no will of its own.

His face burned with pain, but it was easy to ignore. He could feel the horrified eyes of Stoan and Somec burning into his back. He was smaller than the boy beneath him, but his rage was larger than the both of them combined. He hit and hit and hit and-

His father was kneeling before him, hand reaching out, eyes closed. Spock braced himself for the intrusion, reminding himself it was natural to fear what one did not understand. All Vulcans cringed away from the first meld; it was difficult to open oneself so entirely. And his father was not slipping in, like his mother did, he was dropping in like a stone through a thin membrane, pulled by physics, tearing that which stood in its way.

Spock felt his father’s weight like gravity- a black hole spat into his thoughts, pulling him in, grabbing, tearing, forcing his thoughts into a very specific order. Spock struggled against it and felt Sarek try to coral the meld into compliance, but it was spiraling out of control. Sarek pulled, and Spock felt himself being dragged down into his father’s thoughts. As a desert species, they revered water, just as much as they feared it. Sarek was like that. Spock felt as though he was drowning, choking, sinking, as he clawed for the surface of his father’s mind. He’d never attempted to swim in water before, and he was certain it would not cling to him, would not make him heavy as his father’s thoughts did, he couldn’t breathe, and he kicked and pulled until finally he was not being smothered by his father’s influence over the meld.

He could feel that he was similarly obtrusive in his control as he took it from his father. To Sarek, his mind was like quicksand, pulling, grabbing, wet and without escape, growing harder to move in the more Sarek struggled, and it was awful awful awful it hurt it hurt it HURT!

GET OUT! He screamed.

They came apart suddenly, throwing themselves away from each other. Spock had never felt so ill in his life. He gagged onto the path of the garden and was gratified to see his father similarly affected. After all that- he didn’t want to appear weak.

Sarek slowly collected himself. “Spock,” he said. “We are… very different.”

“We are incompatible,” Spock said.

“With time, we would not be,” Sarek said. “I have experienced incompatibility before. The meld you and I have engaged in was tremulous, but not impossible to navigate. Were we to work towards it, I believe that in time our melds would be successful. I will do this only if you wish.”

“I do not wish to experience such a thing again,” Spock said honestly.
Sarek nodded. “There is no shame in this. We are able to communicate verbally. A meld is not required to further our relationship.”

Spock nodded, eagerly agreeing.

“We shall not meld again.” Sarek decided. “Unless circumstances should prove otherwise.” Sarek reached down, to grab Spock’s elbow and help him up. Spock offered up his elbow to allow the touch-

And he was going to be late to appear before the council if he didn’t pull himself together. But the thought of what waited for him beyond the bathroom door made his stomach turn again. He was determined not to throw up once more, as he’d finally cleaned himself to his satisfaction.

He was embarrassed by his lack of control. If the Vulcan Science Council denied him admission, it would be within reason. He was a lie- a falsehood- an emotional creature living in the skin of his Vulcan brethren.

He had to get himself together. He had come so far, and he would not be slighted simply due to his anxiety over what was to come. He was prepared for any outcome, and mother had arrived to wish him good luck, and-

And he was staring at his mother in shock, unable to move, unable to breath, unable to think. He had seen his mother cry before, but never to such a degree.

“Spock,” she sobbed, “I am- I am so, so sorry. Oh, Spock.”

He felt her arms around him and her wet face in his hair, but he could not move. He stared on and on at the holo projector, feeling gutted and lost. The reporters promised more information would be revealed as facts continued to pour in, but the bare bones of the tragedy had already been exposed.

Tarsus IV was the sight of a massacre, and over half the planet was dead.

Spock remembered how delirious Jim had been in their meld, how T’Pau had been careful to say he was not dying in that very moment. Jim had been starving to death. He had touched Jim’s mind from across the universe and had been able to do nothing; had been unable to see even what pain had been brought over his friend.

It made sense. The hunger he’d felt, second hand, the horrible melancholy that had settled over him. Jim was dead, and he was, he-

He was standing before Starfleet Academy, wishing not for the first time that he did not have to be alone to see it. It was illogical, to wish, but he knew logically that if certain things in the past had changed, his future would have aligned differently.

He knew also that there was no logic in standing before the school and not moving to enter it. He took his first step over the threshold and marched within, thinking that-

She was probably the best student he’d ever had. No one was smarter, no one quicker, no one so perfectly able to mimic a dialect. Cadet Nyota Uhura was everything that a Vulcan would want in a mate, and yet, he did not want her, could not want her, he wished only for-

The dreams to stop. He could not understand how it was that he dreamed of an older, healthy Jim, when no such Jim was likely to exist. He had taken post on the Enterprise with the foolish, human hope that perhaps, somewhere out there, Jim lived on, and would one day make his way back to the ship he’d loved so much as a child. To dream of Jim, though, was worse.
He dreamed of Jim standing before the mirror in an academy dorm bathroom, admiring himself in his cadet reds. Jim, laughing over desert with an Orion woman who had curly red hair. Jim, kissing a man and calling him ‘babs,’ though the word was nonsensical and meaningless. Jim, Jim, Jim, always Jim, in small, insignificant tidbits, but-

There was no way they were going to go down at the hands of the Ferengi smugglers. The alien ship was inferior, and their tactics—while underhanded and dirty—were not up to par with those of Christopher Pike. Spock calmly stood and took the seat of the compromised helmsman as Number One had ordered, pulling them out of the way of another round of fire. He was Vulcan, more so than ever before, and no emotion could possibly hope to infringe upon his judgement, which was fueled by perfect logic. He ran his fingers over-

Jim’s arm and wondered if the human could feel just how much he was loved. Jim glowed like the sun, as he looked on at the endless fields of sunflowers. Jim was right—the probability of finding a sunflower field on an alien planet so far from Terra were astronomical, and Spock calculated them to be exactly-

Where they should be. Side by side, facing the galaxy together, and how could Spock never have realized that he was-

Being attacked, and Jim was yelling and-

Falling into a meld directed by Jim, how-

Beautiful it was, to be joined together again, finally, finally, just like they were supposed to be.

“-tain! Captain Kirk!”

Jim startled back to himself with a desperate gasp. He looked up, and found Nurse Chapel shaking his shoulder.

“You’re alive, good.” She stood. “You have to released the commander now, sir.”

Jim looked down to where he was pressing his hands to Spock’s chest. Spock was awake, and staring at him through half-lidded eyes. Jim came back into awareness of himself and realized his hands hurt from pressing on Spock’s chest so long and hard, and that his face was wet. He had cried. He also noticed the wetness on his hands was still warm.

“R-Right.” Jim yanked himself away from Spock, and went to stand. Spock reached out quickly and grabbed Jim’s wrist. Jim stopped. “Spock?”

“Remain near me,” he rasped. “Our minds are loosely entangled yet.”

Jim looked up over Spock and became aware of Bones and two red shirts, who were stationed to transport Spock onto a hover-stretcher. Jim nodded at Bones. Spock let Jim’s wrist go, but Jim knew of his wish to stay connected. He wrapped his fingers loosely around Spock’s wrist and tried his best to stay out of the way.
Jim was barely aware of himself as they made their way back to the beam-up point. His legs were shaky and filled with pins and needles from kneeling still so long, but his thoughts drifted from the sensation and back to Spock.

Spock was… so much. His being had no beginning, no end. He was everything and nothing, he was all and none. He was so smart, and his mind was a wonderful kaleidoscope of thoughts and ideas and knowledge. Jim understood him intimately, and yet, felt as though suddenly he knew nothing about Spock at all.

How long had Spock been alone?

He understood, suddenly, that Vulcans were not built to withstand the weight of their minds alone. It was a horrible thing, to be unable to share one’s mind- a handicap that had haunted Spock all through the academy. Jim ached for his friend, and thrilled at the temporary bond spun between them as the deep-meld faded into memory.

They walked along. At one point Bones cursed and yelled, “He’s losing consciousness!”

“I got it,” Jim said. He held his hand up to ward of Chapel.

He reached for the bond and yanked. It made his stomach turn and he leaned over to vomit onto the ground, suddenly flooded with pain- an agony that spread through his chest like fire. He realized he had taken some of Spock’s pain and grimaced, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. He looked back up to his team, who were all staring at him, baffled.

Jim looked down to Spock, who was awake again, if not exhausted.

He looked back over to the doctor. “Bones?”

Bones looked down at his tricorder. “Well. Don’t know what the devil you did, but he’s back. Let’s hurry up.”

They did. Jim kept his fingers around Spock’s wrist, and his thoughts streaming through the delicate cracks in Spock’s shields. They were no longer in a meld, not even a surface one, but Jim could still feel Spock’s mind. Just as it had been when they were children- the touch ignited the link between them and opened it wide, so that Jim could feel Spock’s presence in his head, and his in Spock’s. It was an odd feeling, to exist in two places at once, as two people, as four people- the him he was, the him in Spock’s mind, as Spock, as the Spock within him. It was a sensation as closed to cathartic as he’d come since discovering himself in space after all he’d lost on Tarsus IV.

They made it to the beam-up point. Bone’s patch-job was enough to get Spock to stand, supported on one side by Jim and Chapel on the other. As soon as they materialized back on the ship, Bones rushed Spock off to sick bay.

Jim could feel their minds stretch between them, twining through the distance like tiny spools of thread unwinding from one end to the next. He had a lose impression of Spock in the back of his head, and he kept hold to it, unable to force himself to let go. Similarly, he could feel Spock gripping him back.

He reported to the bridge to relieve Uhura of her temporary captaincy. He stayed the remainder of his shift, even when Bones came up to the bridge to announce that Spock was fine, and that he could take visitors if anyone wanted to check up on him.

“So,” Bones leaned into the side of the captain’s chair, casually. “Mind telling me what the hell that was down there?”
“I know,” he said, “Those aliens were unreal. Like something from a-“

“Those aliens don’t amount to a hill of beans,” Bones snapped. "I’m talking about you and Spock in the middle of some voodoo ritual when we showed up to save your hides.”

Jim said, “Oh. That.”

“Yes, that!”

“Worried for my soul, Bones?”

“I’m worried for my sanity,” He grumbled. “You’ve got some ‘splainin to do, Jim.”

“Heaven to Betsy, he’s draggin’ out the accent,” Jim drawled. He grinned as Bones’s glare deepened. “I’m not sure what you want me to say, Bones. I’ve told you before- Vulcans are touch telepaths. I was keeping his mind awake by melding with him.”

Bones slowly nodded. “You threw up. Was that a side affect?”

Jim winced at the memory. “Yeah. He was not feeling okay. The pain was a lot to handle at once. Spock may be able to shut that part of his brain off, for the most part, but I’m only human.”

“Hmph.” Bones snorted. “Well, if that’s all there was to it, that’s all there was to it. He’s melded with others before, though, and he never seemed to need them to stick around to untangle when he was through.”

“Well… I initiated the meld,” Jim revealed. “And I think I jumped in pretty deep.”

“Good lord.”

“Yeah. It happened with Ambassador Spock, too.”

Bones raised a brow. “You meld with every Vulcan you ever see, Jim?”

“Just the Spocks,” Jim teased. “He didn’t think I’d be so good at it and I slipped in a little too easy. I saw a lot about him- we melded without really meaning to.”

“I’m sorry if this sounds xenophobic, but that just creeps me out,” Bones said. “I can’t imagine being inside another person’s head. Mine’s bad enough as is- I wouldn’t want anyone poking around up there.”

“It’s… not really like that,” Jim said. “It’s hard to explain. But you’re right- it’s not for everyone. If you’re not compatible, the meld can really hurt.”

“Hurt?”

Jim nodded. “Think of it as… two people running towards each other in full amor, expecting the armor to fall off so that they can like, hug, and then only some of the armor coming off, and neither one of them stopping. Just. Colliding in a huge mess of soft parts and iron spikes.”

“Yeah,” Bones said, slowly. “I think I’ll leave the meld-stuff to you and Spock.”

Jim grinned. “If you say so, Doc.”

“When you’re off shift, you should go and see him,” Bones said. He patted Jim’s shoulder, knowingly. “I gotta get back to sick bay, but come by when you’re done. I can’t imagine what his
poor logical mind must feel like now, having been exposed to you.”

“He probably had an inexplicable craving for a chocolate shake.”

“I’ll be sure to get him one if he asks,” Bones laughed. He left the bridge, then.

Jim smiled and looked out back to the view screen. Sulu and Chekov were looking up at him. He raised his brow at the both of them, as if asking them if they had something they wanted to say. They both whipped back around to their post. Jim looked over his shoulder at Uhura, to see if she was looking at him too, but he should have known better- she was busily working.

If only the rest of the crew shared her work ethic.

By the time the day was over, Jim was bone tired. He’d underestimated what kind of a toll the meld would have on his body and brain, and felt fuzzy with fatigue by the time he was turning the bridge over to the Beta shift crew. Still, he did want to see Spock, and Bones’s suggestion was fresh in his mind.

He made his way down to sick bay, waving a sleepy goodnight to yeoman Rand as he went.

The corridors of the Enterprise were quite and dimly lit, as the ship’s ‘night’ mode had been engaged. Jim passed by a couple of people on his way down to sick bay, but he wasn’t stopped by anyone. He stepped inside just as Bones was heading out.

“Oh, Jim,” Bones said. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that I don’t usually let people in when my patients are supposed to be resting, but Spock’s been sleeping most of Alpha anyway. Nurses shouldn’t bother ya; if anything’s up with Spock the system will wake me up.”

“Alright,” Jim said. He smiled and rubbed McCoy’s shoulder. “Get some sleep, Bones.”

“Will do. You should too, you know, you look half-dead as is.”

“Thanks. I can always count on you to tell me I look pretty.”

Bones snorted. “Sure, Jim, whatever makes you happy.”

They parted ways. M’benga was already in the main entry to sick bay, working at his desk. He looked up when Jim entered and waved, then said, “Mr. Spock’s in room two.” Jim nodded his thanks and carried on.

The door to the room was locked. However, as soon as he chimed for entrance the door slid open. Jim smiled and stepped into the dimly lit room, making his way over to the side of the bio bed.

“Captain,” Spock greeted. He kept his eyes closed.

“Hey, Spock.” Jim sat at the chair someone had posted at Spock’s bedside, reaching out to put his hand on Spock’s elbow. “How’re you doing?”

“I am well, Captain. My body is simply fatigued.”

“I bed your mind is, too.”

“In a manner,” Spock said. “Are you well, Captain?”

“What? Of course, why do you ask?”
“You seem anxious.”

“Anxious?”

Spock opened his eyes and looked pointedly down to where Jim was rubbing his fingers along the inside of Spock’s arm in small circles. Jim hadn’t realized he’d been doing it. He stopped, pulling his hand into his lap.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It was not bothering me,” Spock said. “In fact, the sensation was pleasant.”

“You… sure?” Jim reached out hesitantly, laying his hand flat on Spock’s arm again. Spock’s eyes fell closed. “I would not lie to you, Jim.”

Jim started again. For a minute or two, they were silent. Eventually, though, Jim had to speak again. “That was close, today,” he started.

“Explain.”

“I mean, you. God, Spock… you could have died.”

Spock said, “I understood the risk to my life when I enlisted.”

“Shut up,” Jim said, lightly. He leaned forward, so that his forehead rested on the bed next to Spock’s arm. “You scared me.”

“That was not my intention,” Spock said. “I apologize.”

“Spock, I don’t mean it like that. I know you didn’t mean to. Come on, who goes and almost gets themselves killed just to rile up their Captain? I don’t see the logic in that.”

“Nor I,” Spock said, wryly.

Jim cracked a small laugh. “Shut up,” he said again. “Just… I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I believe I should be thanking you,” Spock said. “Once again, you have saved my life.”

Jim lifted his head. “Once again?”

“Once before, when we were children. Had you left me in the rain—”

“Okay, first of all, it was my fault we were even in that situation, so it doesn’t count.” Jim said. “Second of all, we’ve already been there. I just… did what I had to do.”

“And yet, it is because of those actions that I am here today. Similarly, when you melded us, you were able to keep me from losing consciousness. What you did was impossible. I have never known a human to be able to initiate a meld.”

“Your mom can,” Jim said.

“With my father,” Spock argued. “They are bonded.”

“Well still.” Jim shrugged, uncomfortably. “I was just… doing what I thought you might do, if we’d switched positions. And I’m sorry. I know that a meld is… it’s intensely private, and something
you’d probably usually talk about a lot before doing. I’m sorry I didn’t get your consent, Spock.”

Spock raised a brow. “Seeing as I was bleeding out at the time, it is understandable.”

“Still.”

“Were I able to, I would have given you permission,” Spock said. “Do not trouble yourself.”

Jim nodded. “If you say so. I’m… just glad that it worked.”

“As am I.”

“Was…” Jim trailed off.

“Yes, Jim?”

“Was that what it’s always like?”

“Explain.”

“A meld. Was that what a full-meld is always like?”

Spock considered it for a moment. Finally, he said, “The melding of two minds is never the same. Every individual is unique; their minds more so. There is no set standard for what it is to be melded. However, if you are asking if what you performed was a regularly described meld, then I would have to say it was not. I believe your lack of experience, as well as my struggle to reaming awake, may be to blame.”

Jim said, “So it was… broken?”

“That would be an inaccurate description,” Spock said. “The components were all there. It was simply disjointed. Think of it as reading a book with the chapters out of order. Additionally, I was unable to explore your mind as I would in a full-meld. It was as if you reached into me to hold onto my mind. I was there. We were one. But I was not part of you.”


“Indeed. With practice, I believe a full-meld would be as easily navigated as the surface-melds of our childhood.”

“So we’re gonna do it again?” Jim asked, excitedly.

Spock hesitated. “I did not say that.”

Jim frowned. “You don’t want to?”

“I did not say that, either.” Spock sighed- an honest to god sigh. He must have been exhausted. “Jim. It is… an act of extreme intimacy. I understand that we are close, and that between the two of us is very little to hide, but I am uncertain if you would be comfortable with the reality of a full-meld.”

“Oh.” Jim frowned. “I mean… I knew it would be… a lot. If it ever happened. I knew it would be like, I don’t know. Like I was naked for an eternity, I guess. And with anyone else, that would probably make me uncomfortable. But Spock, with you, it’s just… it’s…” He searched for the right word and came up blank. “Freeing,” he said, lamely.

“Consider very carefully what you ask of me,” Spock said, slowly. “To lay bare all your feelings is
an act more vulnerable than physical intimacy, Jim.”

Jim did consider that. Everything he felt for Spock, on stark display. His friendship, his passion, his respect, his love… his romantic love. His lust. Spock was right, and there were some things Jim just couldn’t reveal. He nodded, slowly, though it pained him to do so. He had to remember, too, that it wasn’t a one-way street. Even if he was okay with Spock seeing everything, maybe Spock wasn’t alright with revealing himself so completely. Jim wouldn’t blame him.

“You’re right,” he said, eventually. But damn, Jim had never felt more right than he had when he’d been twined together with Spock, never better, never lighter, never more beautiful, never more kind. He craved that same intimacy again, and knowing he hadn’t even felt what it was completely tempted him beyond reason. But he couldn’t give in. Jim wanted it. Captain Kirk had to focus on more important things.

“Think you’ll be fit for duty after a day’s rest?”

“Were Doctor McCoy to allow it, I would be able to return to work tomorrow morning.”

“But he said you need a day off, huh?”

“You have guessed correctly.”

“Damn Bones, taking my best officer off duty.”

“My replacement is more than sufficient.”

“Whitaker? He’ll do his job. But he’s not you.”

“I do not understand why that should matter.”

“Because,” Jim snorted. “I like having you by my side.”

Spock opened his eyes a crack.

Jim suddenly felt like he’d revealed too much.

“I find myself similarly dispositioned to your presence as my Captain.” Spock said.

Jim laughed. “Spock,” he said, “You charmer. Is that your human side I’m hearing?”

“Please, Jim,” Spock said. “There is no need to be insulting.”

Jim laughed again. Half way through, his jaw split in a wide yawn. He shook his head and gave Spock a tired smile. “Sorry,” he said. “Guess I’m tired.”

“It has been a taxing day,” Spock said.

“Ugh, but I don’t want to leave yet. I’ve got this awful feeling that I’ll go back to my quarters and my illogical human brain will start wondering if you’re really okay. That was a lot of blood, Spock.”

Spock sat up.

“Wait, Spock, don’t get up—“

“I am not.” Spock pushed himself over to the very side of the bio bed. “There is room for the both of us, if you would like to relax your body, Jim.”
Jim bit his lip and grinned. “Yeah,” he said, softly. He stood and slipped up onto the bed, toeing his boots off as he went. The room had been set warmer than usual for Spock, so Jim was comfortable on top of the blankets. “Thanks, Spock.”

“It is no trouble, Captain.” Spock settled back down, his side pressed to Jim. He linked his hands over his stomach and closed his eyes.

The urge to reach out and lace his hand with Spock’s was nearly insurmountable. Jim hummed with the desire, his hand growing suddenly sweaty. He couldn’t hold Spock’s hand—maybe he’d been able to pass it off as a friendship kiss when they were younger, but they were both adults. Starfleet officers. He couldn’t just-

Spock held his hand out, in offering, and waited.

Jim stared at it, eyes wide.

“You forget,” Spock mumbled, tiredly. “I can feel your thoughts when we touch.”

Shit. Jim had forgotten. Face hot and red, he cleared his throat. “Sorry.” Still, he couldn’t turn down Spock’s offer. He wiped his hand on his pants and then shyly slipped his hand into Spock’s sure to keep their fingers from touching too intimately, and then lay lax on the bed. He could feel Spock; his thoughts and emotions a distant buzz beneath green-tinted skin. Jim squeezed Spock’s hand. Spock squeezed lightly back.

“Remember when we were little, and we both had to squeeze into the hotel bed in San Francisco?”

“We did not have to, Jim. You had your own bed.”

“Aw, but you would have been lonely all by yourself.”

“Ilogical,” Spock said. “You were right next to me.”


“Jim,” Spock said. “Do you recall what I said to you the second night you forced us to share that bed?”

They’d said a lot. “Uh… I don’t think so?”

“Be quiet. And go to sleep.”

Jim snorted. “Okay, smart-ass. I can take a hint.”

“Can you?” Spock asked. “You are continuing to speak.”

“If you weren’t injured, I’d kick your ass.”

“Unlikely,” Spock brushed him off.

Jim snorted again. “Next time we spar, you’re in for it.”

“I am sure.”

… “Spock?”

“Yes, Jim?”
“You’re important to me.”

“I know.” Spock said. “You love me.”

“And?”


“Goodnight, Spock.”

They fell asleep moments later.

He was on the observation deck. For some reason, he was wearing his gold-command onesie from when he’d been six. It was bigger, of course, but no less comfortable than he remembered. He rolled the sleeves up and took a seat on one of the lounge couches assembled before a window.

Spock was standing at the window, a long shadow cut out of the star-specked night.

“My feelings for you,” Spock said, “Are without limit, and without end, and without time.”

Jim blinked. Spock was wearing his sleeping clothes too- the Vulcan robes Jim sometimes observed him in.

Spock turned. “You consume me, T’hy’la.”

“That word again,” Jim said. “What does it mean?”

“It means nothing.” Spock took a step forward and bent at the waste, so that their faces were of a height. “It means everything.”

Jim could feel Spock’s breath on his face. He licked his lips.

“You are to me as the seas upon your home world.” Spock continued. “You are endless, and of unimaginable depth. You are of me, and I of you. Do you know this?”

“I’m dreaming,” Jim said, but he lowered his eyes and leaned forward, to close the scant inches between them. Spock’s lips looked soft in the dim light of the room. “Do you love me, Spock?”

“You could not imagine,” Spock said. “The scope of my feelings for you.”

“Then kiss me,” Jim said.

Their lips never met, however. As usual, Jim was doomed to wake before they could.

He came to with a gasp. He knew where he was immediately and for a second, was scared that Spock had just witnessed everything in his head thanks to their skin contact. He snapped his head to the side, but Spock was gone.

Jim sat up and removed his comm from his belt. His eyes widened when he saw the time.
He was *four hours* late for shift.

The door swished open. “Morning, sunshine,” Bones said. He leaned against the doorway and brought a cup of coffee to his lips. “That was quiet the increase in heart rate, there.”

“What!” Jim said. He threw his legs over the side of the bed. “Shit, I’m late-“

“Now hold your horses,” Bone said. “You’re not late for anything.”

“What?”

“Spock told me about the toll that meld from yesterday took on you. I’m giving you a mandatory day to recover. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you sleep so deep before- Spock wasn’t kidding.”

“What?” Jim said again. “I- I am perfectly fit for duty!”

“Maybe now,” Bones shrugged. “But if you had to be up four hours ago? Pretty sure your body would have thrown the fit of the century.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jim rubbed the back of his neck and then looked down at the hand still laying in his lap. The hand that had held Spock’s all night. If Spock hadn’t left, he might have caught snatches of Jim’s dream. Jim wasn’t sure if he was glad that Spock hadn’t been there.

“Well now I’m convinced,” Bones said. “You do need the day off.”

“What? Why?” Jim whipped his head up to stare at Bones.

“You look pensive. Like you’re *thinking*. The Kirk I know never thinks things through.”

“Liar,” Jim said. “You once called me the best strategic mind this side of the Mississippi.”

“Well now we’re in Space,” Bones said. “You’re not on any side of the river.”

“Which just makes me the best.”

“Sure,” Bones snorted. “So what big problem has the best strategic mind looking concerned, then?” Jim was quiet, but his silence was telling.

“If you just *told* the green-blooded bastard-“

“And what?” Jim sighed. He dragged a hand down his face. “Just hoped he didn’t immediately transfer over to a Captain who isn’t emotionally compromised?”

“Emotionally compromised? Jim, you love the man, you’re not compromised.”

“Who’s to say?”

“You love all your crew, and shut up, I know you do! Just because you love Spock a little different doesn’t mean he suddenly takes away your ability to reason. If it came down to it, and it was this ship’s safety over Spock’s, I know you’d make the right choice.”

Jim couldn’t argue with it, as much as he felt he should have. “I’d hesitate.”

“You’d hesitate no matter who it was on the other end,” Bones said.

Jim knew he was right.
“So there,” Bones said. “Nothing to fear.”

“Nothing but rejection.” Jim said.

“And are you really so afraid of being rejected that you’ll suffer in silence forever?”

“Yes!” Jim said. He stood and began to pace, fiddling with the cuffs of his uniform shirt. “You don’t get it. Spock’s Vulcan. It’s emotion is different from him than it is for me. I feel so much Bones, and there’s no logic to it, nothing about it that makes any really reason. And maybe that’s how some things just are, but. But Spock has always wanted so bad to just be Vulcan. What if I’m too human? What if—“

“What if you’re not?” Bones interrupted. “What if he wants this just as badly, Jim?”

“Argh!” Jim pulled at his hair. “He’s never even dated! He probably wouldn’t be interested.”

“Now you sound like you’re making excuses for yourself.”

“Do you blame me?” Jim moped. He threw himself moodily down into the bio bed. It began to beep in time with his racing heart. Jim ignored it and slammed his face into the pillow. “He’s just so. So much, Bones. He’s everything. I- I don’t know how to explain it. Like every good thing that’s ever happened to me is all bundled up inside him and. And when I see him, it’s like everything is going to be okay no matter what, and when I can tell he’s sad I just want to take all that hurt and put it in myself, just, take it out of him, and- like. I wish I could reach inside my chest and pull my heart out and give it to him because maybe then he’d finally know how wonderful he is, how perfect to me, how much he’s loved. How much I love him. You know? God, Bones. He’s…” Jim sighed and then let out a defeated chuckle. “He’s Spock.”

“Good Lord,” Bones groaned.

Jim looked over his shoulder. “What?”

“You’re over the moon,” Bones said. “Jim. Tell him.”

“But!—“

“But nothing. If you want him to know how much you love him, then all you have to do is say, ‘Spock, I’m—‘“

“You are what, doctor?”

Jim and Bones both jumped, spinning around.

“Spock,” Jim said. His voice came out high. He cleared his throat. “Ah- Mr. Spock.”

Spock lifted a brow.

“Spock,” Bones said decidedly. “I am about up to here with hearing how great a first officer you make.” Bones turned and fixed Jim with a look. It very clearly read tell him or so help me God.

Jim swallowed.

“Captain,” Spock ignored Bones completely. “I understand you are on temporary medical leave. However, you have a transmission from Admiral Xao waiting.”

Jim stood and ran a hand through his hair, and then looked down at himself. His pants were
hopelessly wrinkled from him sleeping in them, but his shirt didn’t look to awful. “I’ll take it in McCoy’s office,” Jim decided.

“Now see here-“

Jim grinned at Bones, breezing past him. “Sorry, Bones, duty calls.”

Bones crossed his arms and scowled.

Jim blew a kiss in his direction, and then backed into McCoy’s office. Spock followed him.

“Computer, receive transmission,” Jim said. He threw himself down in Bone’s chair.

“Recognized- James T. Kirk, Captain.”

The computer monitor winked on and displayed Admiral Xao. She was bald, and had striking black-brown eyes, and a scar interrupting her left brow.

“Admiral Xao,” Jim acknowledged. “What is it that I can do for you?”

“Captain Kirk.” She nodded. “I’ve got a simple mission for you. A milk-run, if you will.” She looked to the side, where Spock was standing just behind Jim. “Mr. Spock,” she acknowledged.

“Admiral Xao.”

Jim smiled. “So, what do you need from the store? Whole or two percent?”

Xao smiled, just barely. “The Salimbra people are interested in renegotiating their current alliance treaty. We previously offered them admittance. I am sure you remember.”

“Yes, sir.” Jim said. That had been a fun run, even if it hadn’t ended in success. The men on that planet danced like flame in a bowl. “Have they reconsidered their answer?”

“They have.” Xao said. “Your ship was in the sector. The planet should be about fourteen lightyears away from your current position. Is that correct?”

Spock said, “The planet Salimbra is thirteen point five-five-five-three lightyears from the Enterprise’s current position.”

“That’s correct,” Jim said. “We’re prepared to divert from our current course and meet with them, if those are your orders, sir.”

“They are.” She said. “You will keep me posted. Xao out.”
Part Three- Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

So I wanted to keep this fic rated T. Therefore, this last chapter has been subjected to some heavy editing. I think it's... 7k words now, but without the editing was up at 10k. I'll be posting the rated E chapter separately, for those of you who would like to read the 'original' instead of the rated T version. It will be called "Polaris" because I'm not creative when it comes to titles.

The Salimbrans were muscular, red-pink skinned people with long, twin horns curving up from their foreheads. They had curly, thick white hair and no brows, and strange red markings curving from the corners of their eyes, arching up above their eye sockets and down across their cheeks. They had black-painted lips and worse no shirts- they had male and female genders, but it was hard to tell which was which due to their lack of breasts. Jim suspected it had something to do with the markings on their horns; so far, he was pretty sure the women had the darker markings.

They wore flashy vestiges of slit pants, which showed their legs in flashes of magenta as they moved, and garnished belts of silver. They had elegantly black-painted wrists and three long, slender, clawed fingers on each hand. Their feet were similar- having only two protruding appendages.

They were a very established people, with advanced technology and impressive medical facilities. Their ships were less advanced than most of those in the federation, but what they lacked in technology they more than made up for in litheness. Their ships were small and sleek, and could easily complete maneuvers that most other ships would be unable to perform.

Scotty seemed to be a little taken with the ship that the Crown Prince had shown them about- the Filiststine. Jim reminded the engineer that he had a commitment relationship with the Enterprise. Scotty had scoffed and said, "Captain, I love the Enterprise, I do, sir, but if she can ‘ave two lovers what’s stopping me?"

To which Jim had said, “Who the hell’s her other lover?”

Scotty looked offended. “Captain,” he breathed. “Don’t ya even know your own ship? It's you, ya’ thickhead!”

Jim had let the insult slide since it was well deserved. “Oh. Right. Carry on.”

The meeting was more of a welcome ceremony than anything. By the time the Enterprise and her crew had arrived, Salimbra and her people had already signed the treaties they needed to. Jim was basically there as the welcoming committee. Not that he minded- the Salimbrans were the ones throwing the party. He and his crew were just there to pay nice with the planet’s royalty and answer questions.

They were about an hour into the festivities. The party was being held outside the planet’s capital building, in the crown city, which was called Ricahrd. There were long glass tables set up, piled with fruit, and two huge bonfires to the sides of the tables. The planet was warm- nearly uncomfortably so- and the heat the fires put out had Jim gleaming with perspiration. The rest of his crew wasn’t fairing much better, but no one seemed to mind it. Spock was the only one amongst them who
looked completely comfortable- Jim would even have gone so far as to say he was ‘in his element.’

And oh, did he look it.

Jim didn’t know why he found the sight of Spock in dress uniform so appealing, but it was undeniable. Spock looked beautiful in the orange light of the fires, his body loose and pliant, his hair a dark splotch against the red night sky. Salimbra’s three moons trailed after one another at Spock’s back, casting eerie red lights over this face. He looked unreal, and sharp, and beautiful. Jim licked his lips and blamed it on the heat, but he couldn’t move his eyes from Spock’s body.

A couple of Salimbran kids ran past Spock, trilling with high, bell-like laughter as they tripped around his shoes. One of them held back from the group as they ran ahead and daringly reached up to pluck curiously at the material of Spock’s shirt. Spock raised a brow at the child and they fell over laughing, gesturing happily at Spock’s face. The other kids came hustling back to see what all the fuss was about. Spock raised a brow at them, as well. They followed the first child’s example and proceeded to laugh earnestly, hands over their cheeks as fell back into the dirt.

Spock would lower his brow until they stopped laughing. Then, when each child was still and focussed intently upon his face again, he’d raise it once more. Jim laughed watching him repeat the ritual, to the children’s delight.

“Captain Kirk.”

Jim turned in time to receive one of the minor princes onto his lap. That was another reason Spock was so far away from the table- physical contact was a must between the Salimbrans. All around the table they were situated on each other’s persons as shows of friendship.

Jim swallowed as the prince- a very handsome man with wonderfully toned biceps- ran his finger under the curve of Jim’s jaw. “For a man such as yourself to be alone,” he clicked his tongue. “A true sadness, I say.”

Jim grinned and put his hands on the prince’s hips, as he’d been shown to the last time they’d been on the planet. “You flatter me, your highness. But my people are not used to the heat- I’m sure no one’s sitting on my lap because they’re afraid it will get too hot.”

“If it is too hot,” the prince said, and tugged eagerly at Jim’s tunic, “Divest yourself of covering.”

Jim didn’t know what to do but comply. He was uncomfortable in his stuffy dress shirt anyway, and the prince was right. He shrugged out of the uniform with the help of the prince’s eager hands. The night air felt good against Jim’s sweaty skin. He watched the prince toss the dress shirt onto an empty chair and laughed.

“This must be better for you, my dear human.” The prince grinned. His teeth gleamed like pearl in the moons’ light. “I have yet to name myself. Echor, for you, Captain Kirk.”

“Why thank you, Prince Echor.” Jim smiled up at him.

“Only Echor, please, I insist. And let me call you only Kirk. Make me happy, Captain.”

“Kirk it is, then.”

“Oh, delightful,” Echor clicked his tongue happily and leaned down, bumping his forehead to Jim’s in a quick kiss. He pulled back and waited for Jim’s reaction.

“I’m flattered,” Jim managed after a moment.
“Then you will let me take you to my room and lavish you with much pleasure.” Echor said. He began to run his hands through Jim’s hair. “I have never had a human to spoil with much attentions. Allow me to do this to you, Kirk.”

“I can’t,” Jim said with a huff.

The prince’s smile fell. “Have I displeased you?”

“No, not at all!”

“My form, then? I would render the room in darkness so you would feel only my loving, to not see a sight your human eyes displeased.”

“No, no, you’re- you’re quiet attractive.” Jim said.

The prince frowned. “I have read of you humans,” he said. “It is true, then. That there are those amongst you who are aroused only by their counter… what was it you called it? Gender?”

“I’m not one of them,” Jim laughed. “And yes, that’s the right word. The translator makes it kind of awkward, doesn’t it?”

“Extremely.” The prince sighed. Then he perked up. “You are religious!”

Jim tilted his head to the side. “Religious?”

The prince clicked his tongue eagerly. “Yes, yes. Those who are committed to the ways of Vasha bind themselves to another, and they are with them forever, as if in blood.”

“Oh. Like… mariage?”

“Yes! Yes, the translator is saying the word I am hoping to hear, yes.” He smiled wide again. “You are of a marriage. You are, Kirk.”

“Well…” He looked across the way, to where the children were conversing eagerly with Spock, all sitting at his feet and touching their feet to his boots. Spock seemed invested in the conversation, which made Jim smile softly. “I want to be.”

Echor followed his gaze. “Ah, yes, I see now,” he said. “It is the Vulcan way to be with one other only. You are to follow the ways of his people, Kirk. I can see this, and I understand I have no place amongst it. I will kiss you once more in farewell.”

They didn’t ask questions. They made statements and you said yes or no. Jim smiled and said, “Alright, that sounds good to me.”

“I am delighted by this,” Echor said. He bumped their foreheads together again, softly, and then reluctantly backed up, slipping off of Jim’s lap. “I will see you in your sleep,” Echor said. Jim resisted the urge to cringe, thinking that they really had to program a better translation for the Salimbran’s traditional farewell.

“I will see you in your sleep,” he repeated.

Echor paused over the tripping words as they were translated back, and then clicked his tongue again. Apparently, he liked the faulty translation about as much as Jim did.

Jim watched him go. He had time to sigh before Uhura was situating herself firmly in his lap, roping her arms around his neck. “You,” she said, “Are a dirty whore, Kirk.”
“And you’re insubordinate, Uhura.” Jim grinned at her.

“Making out with a prince, what will the Admiralty have to say?”

“What, I accidentally head-butted and alien. Demote me.”

She laughed.

“To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your company, Uhura?” Jim smiled.

“I’ve worked up a translation,” Uhura said. “I watched you two cringe apart and decided I’d fix this before we offended someone by accident.”

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Jim looked over to Spock. The Vulcan was saying ‘fascinating,’ Jim recognized the word in the move of Spock’s lips. The children started to laugh again. Spock was showing them the Vulcan ta’al. They were delighted- they had precisely enough digits to complete it.

Uhura followed his gaze and smirked. “I’ll dream of you,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s the goodbye. It’s to say that your meeting was significant enough that they hope it will come up in their dreams. Dreams are nearly religious here, sir.”

“Excellent.” Jim swallowed hard as the children excitedly began to motion at their torsos, standing to leap around Spock in excitement. Patiently, the Vulcan gave in to their demands and began to remove his tunic. “Make a… a note of it, and we’ll get it filtered into the translator.” Spock’s muscles were contoured by the flickering shadows the fire rendered over his chest.

Uhura nodded. “Sir,” she said. She made to rise and then aborted the movement, settling back down on Jim’s lap. “Oh, and sir?”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Try not to drool.”

Jim glared at her.

She winked and rose from his lap.

Jim sighed. At least he didn’t have anyone draped over him any-

“This is ridiculous.”

Never mind.

“Bones,” Jim said. He wrapped his arms around Leonard’s waste and grinned. “How can I help you?”

“I’ve got to drape myself all over you and of course you’re loving it. Where the hell’s your shirt? Someone squint at you too hard and it ripped off?”

“Bones, have I ever told you how hilarious you are? Honestly, you should do a comedy stint in the mess next time we’re holding a performance night.”

“Yeah, and you’ll be right up there with me, with the jokes you’re making.” Bones snorted. He
looked across the clearing, to where a lithe Salimbran was watching them with deep amber eyes. Bones smiled at the alien. Jim guessed it was a her, but from a distance, he couldn’t be sure.

“So, did you come over here to get in on a piece of the shirtless-Kirk action, or?”

Bones snorted. “I see you shirtless enough when you come in to sickbay.”

“So it’s ‘or’ then. Let’s hear it.”

“Well. I’m the CMO. So really, I don’t even need your permission.” Bones started.

Jim knew what it was about right away. His smile threatened to split his face as he said, “Bones! You son of a bitch, I didn’t know you had it in you!”

“Quiet, Spock’ll hear you and I’ll never live it down,” McCoy said. “I forgot about his freaky Vulcan hearing once Jim. Never again.”

“You know, he still likes to mention off-hand that you think he’s the best first officer in the-“

“Never mind that, you’ll kill my mood.” Bones said. He blushed, but powered on nonetheless. “Jim. I’m going to go back to Werena’s quarters and we’re going to share a glass of something she calls Tal’veck.”

“Well, hey, sounds good to me.” Jim grinned. He’d made the mistake of saying ‘you know what you can and can’t do’ before sending Bones on his way exactly once. Bones had exploded that no, apparently he didn’t, or Starfleet wouldn’t have made it so that you had to get Captain’s permission to make “first contact” as well.

“Good.” Bones squirmed on Jim’s lap. “And one more thing.”

“I’m pretty sure you know how to use protection.”

Bones glared. “Not that, you moron.” He lowered his voice. “I think that lady’s making the moves on Spock.”

“What?” Jim whipped his head up so fast it was a miracle he didn’t get whiplash. Sure enough, there was a woman draping herself against Spock’s chest just a ways off, balancing one of the children Spock had been entertaining on her hip. “Son of a-“

Bones grinned, glad that the tables had turned. “Thanks, Jim, have a good evenin’. I’ll see you while you’re sleeping, or however it is the saying goes.”

Jim didn’t even notice him leave. He was intently focused on Spock, who looked about as pliant as a column of marble. His hands were linked stiffly behind his back, his face was a brick wall, and his feet were planted like he was prepared to sprint away. Jim decided to take pity on him- he wasn’t jealous, or anything, he just wanted Spock to be comfortable.

Mostly.

There was, admittedly, a little tiny bit of jealousy there but mostly it was honest concern for Spock. He’d always swoop in to save Spock from tactile species so long as Spock looked to be unhappy with the contact, and if that just so happened to fall in line with Jim’s agenda anyway, well, that was great.

He hurried across the clearing.
“Spock!” He said. He grinned wide and leaned up, bumping their foreheads together. The woman did not look disappointed or offended, but she stepped back to make room for Jim. She’d just been making friendly conversation, then. Still, Jim attached himself to Spock, taking note in the way that Spock relaxed as the woman removed herself from his person.

“Ah, this must be the Captain Kirk,” she said. She smiled. “I am pleasing to be making your acquaintance.”

God, the translator was struggling with this language. “It’s nice to meet you, too.” He didn’t know her well enough to ask for her name, but she knew his already, so he said, “I can have your name.”

“Not yet, but I will give yours back,” she said. “Captain.”

“Ma’am.”

She smiled. “The Commander was telling me of the time you managed to out-wit a computer! Is this so?”

“Which one?” Jim laughed.

“You do not know which one.” She stated. She sounded confused.

“Oh. I do not know which one.” He said.

“Ah. Well the Commander was calling it the creation. He said you used logic to initiate a self-destruct of the robot, which believed itself purposeless from your words. How barbaric, I am very pleased to be hearing of this.”

“Oh, thank you.”

She reached out and plucked at the material of his pants. “Yes.”

She was probably a different dialect than the others he had been talking to so far, which would explain why the translator was having such difficulty. Jim looked across the learning and spotted Uhura, on Nurse Chapel’s lap. They were talking animatedly with a pair of Salimbra women, so Jim decided against separating them.

“It is hard to understand me.” The woman in front of them guessed.

“It is,” Spock admitted. “However, we do not mind struggling to understand in order to speak with you.”

“Oh I am pleasing. Thanks of your persons.”

Jim laughed.

She laughed as well.

“You are religious,” she said then. “How long have you following Vasha?”

Jim flushed.

“I do not understand,” Spock said.

“Two years.” Jim blurted.
Spock raised a brow. Jim didn’t make eye-contact.

“Two years!” She clicked her tongue. “A very good time. I myself tried religion in my youth, but it was not the way I am to taking.” She turned and showed off the child on her hip, who appeared to be dosing. “But I was blessed for my following!”

“Fascinating,” Spock said. “May I ask about how it is you were blessed?”

“I do not understand.”

“He will ask about how your procured the child.” Jim stated.

“Oh, he will.” She turned towards Spock, expectantly.

Spock said, “I am unsure how to pose my query without asking a question.”

“I'll help,” Jim said.

“I wish to ask. Was it you that became pregnant, or a partner? Is it expected that the one who is pregnant will then become the parent of the subsequent offspring?”

“You became pregnant with your son.” Jim said.

“I did!” She said.

“You were expected to become your son’s mother.”

She shook her head. “No, no, you must have the child’s destined parent selected by the priest. He will observe the two and decide which is to be giving the baby the best of the care.”

“I see,” Spock said. “Does gender have any baring on the outcome?”

“It is because you are a woman that the priest gave you your son.” Jim said.

“No. We do not do this… gender, that you do. I do not understand it.”

“Fascinating,” Spock said again.

Jim smiled fondly at him. He moved a little closer and was momentarily distracted by the feel of Spock’s chest hair. Jim’s chest was naked, too, he realized. That was a lot of skin-to-skin contact for Spock to read with. Jim knew if he suddenly threw his shields up, Spock would be curious, so instead he started thinking really, really hard about spaghetti.

Spock turned to him, brows raised. “Jim, are you hungry?”

“Just craving spaghetti,” Jim lied.

“I will procure-“

“No, no, don’t bother, Spock, it’s all good. I’ll shield, sorry.” Jim held Spock in place, throwing his mental shields up before he could begin to feel guilty about the white lie he’d given Spock. He turned back to the Salimbran. “You have had your son for many years.”

“I have had my son for six years,” she happily said. She turned her hip again so that they could see the boy. “He is a skilled dancer and he will bring much gluten to our family.”
Spock and Jim turned to each other, brows furrowed.

Finally, Jim said, “He will bring… gluten.”

She blinked. She clicked her tongue. “He will bring find a.” She frowned. “He will bring sell.”

Jim sighed. He leaned around the woman and yelled, “Lieutenant!”

She whipped her head around.

Jim gestured. “Tell her the word.”

The woman yelled, “Cro’krak’yuu!”

“Good fortune in the context of wealth and status!” Uhura called out.

“There we go,” Jim sighed. “Jesus, that was hard for the translator.”

“…” The woman frowned even further. “I don’t understand that word.”

“Never mind,” Jim hurried. It was probably ‘Jesus’ that had tripped up the translator. “I’m glad he’s a good dancer. Is that- I mean. That is the best thing you can be around here.”

“Unless you are a prince,” she said. She smiled again, and held her son closer, nuzzling the top of his head with her nose. “Yes, it is a very good thing to dance.”

It was as if her words started something. The crown prince stood, unearthing two of his people from his lap. He called out, “The dance begins!”

Many of the aliens let out whoops of delight, and Jim found himself laughing and hollering along. The crown prince stood and then started towards the cleaning between the two fires. There had been music playing the entire gathering, but with the sudden absence of conversation it roared to life. The prince began to move, body fluid and rippling, his skin painted orange by the light of the flame. The crowd cheered, shaking their heads so that the rings on their horns clinked loudly together.

Jim laughed. An instrument like the violin started up, and a man with a lovely voice began to sing in a language Jim couldn’t understand. Spectators of the crowd began to step out into the dirt, rolling their hips and moving theirs wrists above their heads. The dance had begun.

Jim watched Chekov materialize in the crowd, three Salimbrans dancing with him- two men and one women, if Jim could read their stripes correctly. Chekov threw back his head and laughed, orbiting between his three friends. He looked small in comparison to the alien’s bulk, and his movements were awkward in comparison, but his company appeared to delight them.

Jim turned to Spock, whose chest he was still leaning into. “Well, Mr. Spock, what’d you say to a dance?”

“It would be illogical to refuse,” Spock said.

Jim’s face lit up in delight. He slipped away from Spock and then turned to face the Vulcan, swaying his body in a close mimic of the prince’s. Spock only watched him for a moment, eyes reflecting the play of the flames at Jim’s back. Jim winked at him.

Spock stepped forward, body beginning to move. Jim had to command himself not to stop and stare. Spock moved just as the Salimbrans did, hips fluid, wrists erotic and loose. Jim swallowed hard. Of course Spock would be able to dance- he’d probably watched the Salimbrans and then turned their
movements into an easy equation of steps and time, which he was able to solve without thought.

Jim was enticed. He could feel his heart beginning to beat faster with excitement and knew he was blushing. He felt some sort of electric charge building between them and wondered if maybe, Spock could feel it to. Spock’s eyes looked hungry and dark as they trailed Jim’s body. Jim hoped with every fiber of his being that he wasn’t imagining it.

As tactile as the Salimbrans were, they never touched when they danced. They came close, hands skimming just above each other, leaning their heads in to brush past each other’s cheeks. Jim saw one couple nearly bump noses, but they redirected themselves at the last moment.

He longed to reach out and hold Spock’s hips. He made a pass at it, fingers coming so close he could feel the heat rolling off of Spock’s skin, but he didn’t touch. Spock rolled his shoulders and stepped closer.

Jim opened his mouth to breathe better as Spock dipped his head down. Jim felt Spock’s nose just barely pass over his cheek before Spock moved back, stepping away, his body broadcasting an easily deciphered come hither. Jim followed after him, stomach flooded with heat. Spock was like black hole, absorbing all the light in the world, eating up Jim’s gaze. Jim felt he would be consumed and wasn’t scared by the prospect.

Spock seemed unashamed of his partial nudity and provocative movements, a stark contrast to the way he’d been when they’d first started their five year tour. Spock had changed over the years, and Jim couldn’t help but feel a small pain of loss for that awkward, inverted boy who’d hidden his fingers in the cuffs of his sweater. The pain and passed in a millisecond’s time. As Spock moved his head and caught the light his face was illuminated, and the shadows of his cheekbones disappeared, and Jim could see that same, little kid in the Vulcan’s features. Jim’s heart throbbed with happiness. No matter how far they came, or how long they lived, Jim would always be able to find the kid he’d met in Iowa there in Spock’s features, hiding in the fullness of his lips, in the gentleness of his eyes.

Spock looked up from under his lashes and made another move towards Jim. All thoughts of the child he knew were gone in an instant, and in there place fell a lust for the man Spock had become.

Jim wasn’t sure how much more he could take.

Luckily- or unluckily, depending on how one looked at it- it was around then there was a commotion on the other side of the tables. Jim looked up and saw one of their red shirts and one of their gold looked close to blows. Jim looked to Spock and shrugged, a what can you do about it sort of gesture.

“Duty calls,” he breathed. He cleared his throat, realizing how husky he’d sounded. “I’ll just,” he pointed and then turned to hurry over to the two.

It was a minor fight over something that had happened between them months ago, apparently. Jim put on his Captain’s face and scolded them for going at it on a diplomatic missions. He then ordered them to both return to the ship. He was hyperaware of Spock at his shoulder the entire time.

“Well.” He turned back to Spock with a forced smile. “I think it’s about time I beamed back up.”

“I will accompany you.” Spock said.

“All partied out?”

Spock said, “It is unbecoming of an officer of my position to be improperly dressed before his cremates for such an extended period of time.”
“Can’t imagine what they think of me, then,” Jim laughed, gesturing to his own bare chest.

Spock’s eyes flicked down to look for a split second. He looked back up to Jim’s eyes and said nothing.

Jim felt his stomach tighten in arousal. It was the music, the lights, the several glasses of the Tal’veck he’d consumed—something.

Or maybe it was just Spock. Maybe it had always been Spock.

Jim looked away from the Vulcan hurriedly, afraid his eyes would telegraph his naked desire. “I’ll say farewell to the head prince. Would you mind finding Sulu to let him know he’s in charge and that we’re beaming back up?”

“I will do so.” Spock turned and left.

Jim felt instantly lighter—like he could breathe again. He sucked in a deep breath and told himself to get it under control before he made his way over to where the prince was leaning against the table refreshing himself. He was covered in sweat—or maybe it was oil? Jim didn’t care.

“Crown Prince,” Jim said.

The prince turned. “Captain,” he said. “We meet once more. Did you enjoy the dance?”

“Very much so,” Jim said. “You’re a skilled dancer.”

The prince grinned. “You are not so bad for an off-worlder.”

“Thank you.” Jim smiled. “My first officer and I are retiring for the evening. We’re allowing our people to remain here for as long as they’d like, but if at any time you’d like them to leave just tell them so. Any one of my officers will find their commanding officer and then they’ll get everyone back to the ship.”

“Your people may stay as long as they please, Captain,” the prince said. “I quite enjoy their presence.”

“You are very generous,” Jim said.

“I will be more so,” he said. “Any who wish to stay upon the planet are welcome to the open rooms within the palace. I ask only they leave the palace as it was before they came.”

“Thank you,” Jim said. He pulled out his comm and sent a quick message with the information to his senior staff. “I’ve just let them know. Thank you again, for your hospitably.”

“I will see you in your sleep,” the prince said.

“I’ll dream of you,” Jim said. Those words seemed to translate over much better, for the prince grinned in delight and clicked his tongue ‘goodbye.’ Jim made his way through the throngs of people—Starfleet and Salimbran alike—and found Spock, a coppery-green beacon amongst pinks and creams and browns.

“Ready to go, Spock?”

Spock dipped his head and pressed his badge. “Mr. Kyle,” he said. “Two to beam up.”

“Yes, sir.”
Jim watched the world blur gold. In moments, they were back aboard the Enterprise. Jim instantly sighed, breathing in the cool recycled air. He hadn’t realized just how hot it had been on Salimbra’s surface until he was suddenly in his usual atmosphere again. He looked to his right and saw that Spock looked uncomfortable already- wether it was because he was shirtless in front of Mr. Kyle or because the Enterprise was markedly cooler than Salimbra, Jim wasn’t sure.

“Mr. Kyle,” Jim nodded towards him and started out of the transporter room.

“Wild party, sir?”

“You could say that,” Jim laughed.

Spock was on his heels. They left the transporter room and then headed towards the lift, Jim intent on going back to his quarters. He looked to his side and smiled as Spock discreetly crossed his arms to conserve warmth. He couldn’t help it- he laughed.

Spock raised a brow. “Is there something amusing you, sir?”

“Just you,” Jim said.

Spock said, “I fail to see what is so amusing about my person.”

“Oh, just that sometimes I can totally see the little kid in the oversized sweater from my Iowa summers.” Jim smiled over at Spock, his heart swelling in his chest. “I think I’ve got an electric blanket in my room.”

“An electric blanket?” Spock raised a brow.

Jim chuckled. “Oh, you’re going to love this.”

The lift carried them to the person quarters deck. The lights were low, as Alpha shift had ended several hours before. Their were a few officers stumbling on to their quarters, likely having come back from the party themselves. The smell of smoke permeated the decks, having followed them from the planet’s surface to the Enterprise. Jim reached his door and put in his code, allowing himself and Spock inside.

As soon as the door shushed closed behind him, Jim was faced with a sudden realization. They were alone. Completely, and totally alone, and due to be off-shift until the later hours of the morning.

Jim took in the sight of Spock’s back in the dim of his quarters. The low light made Spock looked even stronger than usual, as the shadows hiding beneath his muscles had stretched longer and darker than they would in the light. Jim was momentarily assaulted by the urge to reach out and run his hands over Spock’s shoulders.

No. He reminded himself. He tore his eyes away from Spock’s skin and slipped around the Vulcan, heading towards his bed. He knelt before it, pulling the drawers out from under the bed.

He cleared his throat. “Should be in here,” he said. His voice sounded loud. He recovered the long, black blanket moments later and held it up, giving a short, “Aha!” of victory. He pressed the control button on the corner and turned back to Spock.

Spock had very silently walked towards Jim whilst he was searching for the blanket. As Jim stood and turned he nearly bashed his head into Spock’s chin, stepping back at the last moment. His legs his the edge of the bed and he fell back, sitting heavily.
“H-here.” He coughed slightly and looked at his lap, incensed by his body’s betrayal.

“Thank you, Jim.” Spock sat softly next to Jim on the bed, pulling the blanket around his shoulders.

Jim stood, eager to put distance between them. He didn’t trust himself not to do something stupid when he was within touching distance of Spock. He swallowed again and hoped desperately that Spock didn’t hear him. Spock was a genius- he’d put the signs together.

“I can’t believe you danced,” Jim said. He turned to his closet and started rooting around for a sleeping shirt, to give his hands something to do. It was easier to speak when he didn’t have to look at Spock.

“Why is it hard to believe?” Spock asked. His voice was like smoke.

Jim gripped a shirt and pulled it very deliberately from the hanger. The things Spock’s voice did to him… “Just, you know. It seems like letting go of control.”

“Vulcans dance,” Spock said. “It is an art form, like music.”

“I just didn’t know you did.” Jim said. He turned back around, wringing his sleep shirt between his hands. “It was… nice.” He forced himself not to wince. He looked up and saw Spock had raised a bow. “Really nice,” Jim said, and looked back down at his mangled shirt. Great. That had made it even worse.

“I am glad you enjoyed it,” Spock said.

“Y-yeah.” Jim stood in the middle of his bedroom. He didn’t know what to do. It felt like some chasm stretched between them, full of hot, heavy things that Jim could never voice. Spock wasn’t flushed, or sweaty, or showing any signs of discomfort or arousal. Jim had to get himself under control.

“I enjoyed your dancing as well.”

“Huh?” Jim looked up. “My dancing?”

“It was…” Spock tilted his head to the side, seemingly searching for the word he wanted. “Sensual.” He decided.

Jim blushed. He turned around to cover it up and started to mess with his shirt again. He needed to just reach up and pull it over his head already, but goddamn it, his palms were sweaty and if he didn’t have something to do with his hands he’d be lost. And. Fuck. He was supposed to reply to Spock.

He laughed, loud and sudden. It was fine- it was cool! Jim had that playboy reputation as a flirt that could cushion any interaction he was failing.

He turned around and smirked. “Spock!” He said, delighted by the compliment. That was all he would be- delighted. Nothing more. “Stop falling in love with me,” he teased.

His words fell between them, flightless. Jim stared at Spock, who stared back, proper and prim and sitting up straight even when his hair was ruffled and he was curled beneath a blanket.

“I cannot,” Spock said.

Jim blinked. “What?”
“I cannot,” Spock repeated. He sounded choked. “I am unable to cease.”

Jim felt his brain stop. His heart went out moments later. Then he re-started, brain coming back on line, heart firing off rapidly in his chest. Spock had said. But. They. Spock was implying. It. He. There was no way.

Jim swallowed heavily again. Spock surely had to hear it.

“I have tried,” Spock said. “I have meditated on these feelings for more hours than I would care to admit. I have done all I could think to do to dissuade these feelings I have developed, but to no effect, Jim.”

“Wh-“ Jim took a jerky step forward and stopped. “Wait. Let me. Let me get this straight are you. Are you saying that… that you. You’re in love with me?”

Spock dropped his head- a nod that seemed to broadcast that he was ready for the firing squad. “I am,” Spock whispered, and he sounded pained.

Jim could only stare.

Spock stood, so suddenly that the blanket fell off of his shoulders and landed in a crumbled pile on the floor. “I understand if you need time to come to terms with this truth,” he said. He started towards the bathroom door, brushing past Jim’s shoulder. “I ask only that you do not transfer me from this vessel, as I-“

Jim whipped around as it settled in. “Spock!” He grabbed Spock’s shoulder and jerked the Vulcan around to face him. “Spock,” he breathed. He ran his hands up and down Spock’s biceps, feeling his face begin to break into a smile. “You stupid Vulcan. All the clues were there and you still thought I-“ he laughed, giddy.

“Jim?”

“I love you.” Jim whispered. He took another step forward, over the shirt he’d dropped on the ground. “I love-love you. Like, I- I want to hold your hand, and kiss you, and… and…”

Spock seemed just as taken aback as Jim had been. His eyes were huge and wide, dark and beautiful. Jim laughed a little and then leaned forward, slowly, so that Spock could have time to back away if it wasn’t what he wanted.

"Spock," he whispered, and his breath touched Spock's mouth.

"Jim," Spock breathed.

Their lips met, soft and hesitant. Jim felt his stomach drop out as his heart freed itself from his ribcage. Spock, Spock, oh how he’d wanted, and waited, and wished, and now- now…

Spock reached up and delicately cupped Jim’s jaw, pulling back a millimeter to whisper, “Jim.” His nose skimmed Jim’s. He tilted his head and their lips touched again. Spock pressed in, telegraphing his intent as he slid his eyes shut.

Jim could have melted. He wasn’t sure he hadn’t.

He opened his mouth to Spock and felt the Vulcan respond in kind. It was nothing like he’d ever had before- no frenzy, no desperation, no hurry. He smoldered for Spock; a deep, consuming burn that’s been building his entire life. He felt eclipsed by his desire, like it outshone everything within him,
like he was a part of Spock, finally sliding home. It was more than he’d ever dreamed and oh had he dreamed.

Spock moaned. It was enough to make Jim’s breath catch. He’d never dared to hope for such results. He felt like crying and then realized, in near horror, he might have been close to it. He forced his eyes closed and wrapped his arms around Spock’s neck, sighing into the Vulcan’s mouth as he leaned them both against the bathroom door.

Kissing Spock was like laying in the sun. It was like naps in the barn and hot tea and fuzzy socks and big, downy comforters over his head while he watched snow fall outside his window. It was everything he could fit into happiness and comfort, and more. It was the feeling deep in his gut that urged him forward, saying there’s more, there’s always more. Spock was finally close enough to grasp and he’d wanted for so, so long. He could feel Spock’s mind against his and knew they’d both waited longer than they had needed to, but that was alright. They had all the time in the universe.

Jim slid his hands down Spock’s arms until their fingers brushed. Spock jolted back, knocking his head on the door. He looked down at Jim with dilated pupils, so far gone that the black’s consumed the brown but for a thin ring. Spock’s face was flushed Orion green, his lips dark and tempting as the peak of green tongue beyond his teeth.

“Spock,” Jim breathed. He ran their finger tips over each other. Spock slammed his eyes closed and breathed harshly. “I love you so much, I’m so- Spock. Spock, I’ve wanted you for so long, Spock-“

“Your words are dear to me,” Spock rumbled. “Your mouth simply tempts me beyond reason.” It was his only explanation before he was biting at the swell of Jim’s lower lip, tugging and nipping and licking his way into familiarity.

Jim was momentarily stunned by Spock’s ability to kiss before realizing their minds were connected, if even just barely- anything Jim did and knew, Spock got on feed-back. Jim felt his pulse jump with the realization and wove his fingers with Spock’s. It felt good.

God, he loved Spock so much, how the hell did they get here? How was he so lucky? All that fear- all that pain, when in the end, of course it was this. Of course it was him and Spock, together. How could it have been any other way?

Making love to Spock was like nothing else he’d ever done. It was gentle, and sweet, and Jim was so in love he could hardly breathe. When they laid down in Jim’s bed for the night, he felt undeniably right, as though he were finally right-footed; as though some part of his soul had been returned to him, as if he’d been meant for Spock all along.

There was still so much to do, so much to say. But he was content with the information that they loved each other, and had each other, as he settled into his bed for the night. Finally, with Spock at his side.

“You still smell like campfire,” Jim said, smiling at Spock as they lay curled beneath the covers together.

“That is what is likely to occur when one is in close proximity to fire for an extended period of time,” Spock said.

“Smart-ass.”

“My ‘ass’ has no intelligence of its own, but I am willing to accept that you are merely recognizing my intelligence in full. Therefore, I believe the proper response would be to thank you.”
“Again. Smart-ass.”

Spock took Jim’s wrist and then rolled over, pulling Jim against his back so that they were spooning. Jim smiled and pressed his face into Spock’s neck.

“We should really talk,” Jim yawned.

“Affirmative.”

“Tomorrow,” he decided.

“That would be agreeable.”

Jim chuckled, lightly. “Night, Spock.”

“Goodnight, Jim.” A pause, and then, “It is my duty as your best friend to remind you of my undying love.”

“I love you too, Spock.” He kissed the back of Spock’s neck, like he’d always wanted to, and felt his heart sing. “Goodnight.”

Jim stared at Bones. The doctor scowled and said immediately, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I came all this way down here to welcome you back on board, and this is the thanks I get?” Jim couldn’t fight down the smile on his face, nor could he hide the extra pep in his step. He was undeniably, unbelievably, purely happy, for the first time in recent memory.

He’d been excited to give Bones the good news, but the black eye and scuffed forehead Bones sported, along with his opening line, were too much to pass up on.

“As your captain,” Jim taunted, “I have the right to know about any altercations my crew members may have gotten themselves into.”

“I already got your permission for my damn altercation, so you can stick it where the sun don’t shine.”

Jim grinned in manic delight. “You got a sex wound?”

Bones whirled on him. “Keep your voice down, wouldya? You’d think you want this whole damn starship to know about my personal business.”

Jim laughed. “Oh, Bones, you devil.”

“Horns.” Bones spat out. “I should have known they would get in the way.”

Jim laughed even harder.

“Shut up,” Bones growled. “It’s hardly funny.”

Nurse Chapel looked up at they entered sick bay. “What’s not funny, Len?”
“Yeah, Len,” Jim teased. “What’s not funny?”

“Chapel, I want examination room three ready in twenty minutes. Cadet O’lesh is due for their physical.” He started straight into his office.

Chapel sighed and rolled her eyes. Jim offered a sympathetic shrug.

“I’ll get a nurse on that right away, sir.” She drawled.

Bones paused in the doorway to his office. “… Thank you,” he added, gruffly.

Jim stepped in after him, allowing the door to slide shut.

“Now.” Bones stepped around his desk and then grabbed a med kit from off the wall, popping it open to loot the dermal regenerator from within. He sat heavily in his desk chair and held it to his face. “What’s got you looking so damn pleased, hm?”

“Aw, don’t be that way,” Jim stood by the door, rocking back and forth on his heals, face consumed by his smile. “Can’t I be happy just to be happy?”

“No.” Bones said. He squinted. “What happened?”

Jim just smiled wider.

A second ticked by. Bones’s eyes went wide. “No.”

Jim nodded his head, biting his bottom lip.

“You didn’t.” Bones stood, setting the regenerator aside. “You told Spock, didn’t you?”

“Who’s a coward now?”

“Jim, you son of a bitch.” Bones smiled wide and stepped forward, grabbing Jim and hauling him into a hug. “You actually did it?”

“And then I got laid.” Jim sighed.

“Didn’t need to know,” Bones said, but he was still smiling nonetheless. “Jim, that’s great! I hate to say it, but… I’m happy for you, kid. I may not see eye-to-eye with Spock on the best of days, but I’ll be damned if he’s not a good man. You two are good for each other.”

“And this means I don’t have to feel weird about calling you both my best friend,” Jim laughed. “One best friend, one boyfriend.”

“Just be sure to remember which is which,” Bones said. “If you call me ‘dear’ I may just have to kill you.”

“But darling!” Jim cried.

Bones stepped away from the hug, trying to pull his grumpy facade back into place. “Okay, party’s over. I’m no longer happy for you. In fact, I never was. Go back to the bridge and be a Captain for once.”

“I’m hurt.” Jim leaned against the desk, still smiling.

Bones sat back down. He picked the regenerator back up and pressed it to his eye, but it couldn’t
hide his smile. “Really, though, Jim… you’re happy? He’s what you want?”

“More than anything.” Jim said. “And I… I am happy. Happier than I’ve been in a long, long time. This is it for me, Bones. This is… this is the love I always wanted, ever since I was a kid.”

“Then I’ll be happy for you,” Bones said, and smiled.

Jim let out a happy sigh.

“Now go,” Bones demanded. “Back to the bridge where you belong. I ain’t catching no love-sickness, and you’re acting extra contagious today.”

“Alright, alright, I’m going.” Jim made his way to the door, but paused when Bones called after him.

“Jim.”

He turned around.

Bones just chuckled. “Good job.”

Jim swallowed as Spock set himself on the floor, crossing his legs. He bounced his knees and tried to play it cool as he took up a meditation pose to mirror Spock’s, but the Vulcan saw through him.

“If you are nervous-“

“Excited.”

Spock gave him a look.

“Fine, fine, go on. Read me the disclaimers.”

“If you are nervous, we do not have to go through with this. A full-meld is not something done casually, Jim. It is… the most intimate act one can partake in- all physical activities we have so far engaged in pale in comparison. There is no shame in turning back or changing your mind.”

“Nope,” Jim said. “I want it.”

Spock nodded.

“If you don’t want to, though…” Jim trailed off.

“Jim,” Spock said, seriously. “For many, many years now, I have been alone within my mind. It is a painful thing, for a Vulcan. To meld with you has been one of my strongest, and most profound, desires.”

Jim smiled. He leaned forward, closing his eyes. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Spock’s hand graced the side of his face. “My mind to your mind,” Spock said.

*My thoughts. To your thoughts.*
It was like falling into a pile of leaves. Flashes of image, and sensation, and sound. Light and colors together, bending and shaping around each other, the feeling of falling, of being caught, of rushing past things he couldn’t quite reach. He heard voices and small catches of music, the sand in the wind, I-Chaya’s howl, the crack of a ball against a bat. Amanda’s laugh, Sarek’s cold eyes, a girl with beautiful black hair and a hand raised in a practiced Vulcan salute. More Vulcans, even one with kind eyes, and long hair, and a beard, and humans, and aliens, and the dunes of Perse III, and the glint of the Endar suns, and three pink moons, chasing each other through the sky, and—

Spock.

Just Spock.

Everything Spock had been, everything he was, everything he would be. Jim fell into him and over him and around him, and Spock was within him in the same manner. He felt Spock’s love, like a deep, heated river, and Spock’s logic like a blade made to cull the tide from becoming a drowning force. He wanted and had, he touched and was touching, he was parted and never parted, always and never, perfect and not. It was everything he’d ever hoped for, and outside of his head, he knew there would be no way to describe the sensation.

But god, Spock was something. He could feel himself in Spock’s mind—every grain of sand in the Vulcan landscape, every atom burning in the Vulcan sun, every leaf on Spock’s tree, ever strand of hair on Spock’s head. He felt complete.

He felt right.

It only lasted a minute. Jim wasn’t sure he could stand anything more, without practice. When he came out of it Spock was cradling his head, tenderly, his eyes light with affection. He leaned forward and kissed Jim in the human way, chaste and wet.

And Spock finally spoke the word.

“T’hy’la.”

And Jim knew, beyond a measure of a doubt, that he was home.

FIN

End Notes

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