strive seek find yield

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by waldorph

Summary

Spock is heir to the Federation throne, Jim is Prince of America because his fucking brother abdicated, and the Klingons are on the verge of blowing shit up--a love story.

Notes

Written for Star Trek Big Bang '10. For reference, this is Madeline—it's relevant, click art by ashleyj28 | fanmix by jazzy_peaches

5.4.12 - now with podfic read by the lovely sevenses available here!

See the end of the work for more notes
Part I

The first time Spock meets Jim Kirk, it's in the immediate aftermath of the Tarsus tragedy, and he
doesn't know that he's Jim Kirk (or even that that should be relevant). Spock was visiting his uncle
and touring the Federation when the communication broke through that, upon arriving for a
surprise inspection of the colony, Starfleet personnel found it a wasteland and scene of horrific
death and starvation. His uncle sent Spock with vague words about how moments like this will
define the man Spock will someday become.

Standing among the hollow-eyed survivors, Spock can only think that it speaks of the man his
uncle is, that he sent a sixteen-year-old instead of coming himself. He sent Spock with no words of
comfort and no instructions, and Spock spends one minute standing on the energizer pad of his
cruiser, wondering what he's going to do.

He decides to be useful, shrugging off handlers and his overcoat, distributing food packets and
logging in names of both survivors and those the survivors can't find. It's grim, and there are
moments where recognition flickers in some of their eyes, but not so often that he's forced to stop,
straighten his shoulders and clean off his hands and become a pristine example of the Empire's best
ideals and hopes, rather than sharing in part of its most tragic moments from intimate proximity.

Things have a habit of stopping when Spock arrives on a scene, people more worried about
behaving appropriately around him than about doing their jobs effectively. Now is most definitely
not the time for that.

"You're being an ass," a boy is saying flatly. He's too young to be a rescue worker, and his wrists
are so slender that it seems the activity of waving his hands around will snap them. That doesn't
seem to stop him from giving it his best shot, though. "Starfleet's here, we've got medics, and
you're refusing treatment. Yeah, your parents would be so proud of you, I don't even know."

The boy he's talking to—older, Spock notes, with the same hollow-look of the survivors—glares at
"Just because you're coping—"

"I keep throwing up the food," the boy spits back. "So, I'm probably going to die. You don't have to, you're not allergic to the shit they're putting in the MREs, so shut up, take a bite, and leave me alone."

"You're not—"

"Jesus fucking Christ!" the boy shouts, marking himself Terran. "I'm making it a royal edict!"

The other boy finally looks brow beaten, and Spock hands the younger one an MRE, which he takes and throws at the other boy. "People," the kid says to Spock, hurling it like an accusation as he whirls around, "are fucking stupid."

Spock looks at him. His sandy blond hair is in his bright blue eyes, color high on sharp cheekbones and skin pulled tight across his bones. He looks bare moments away from physical or emotional collapse, like his rage is the only thing keeping upright. "Sometimes," Spock agrees, carefully. "Though trauma—"

"Is no fucking excuse, because I'm traumatized, too, and look at me."

Spock does, again, and thinks that he's the least-traumatized-looking traumatized person Spock's ever seen, except for the shaking hands and the gaunt face and the way he needs to gain about thirty pounds. Comparatively, though, he's keeping it together fairly well, or at least faking it better than everyone else is managing to. Not that before today Spock had seen many traumatized people to have a baseline comparison, but the number's shot up drastically and he feels qualified to make this assessment.

"Sit down," Spock says, firm, and the boy does with a tired sigh, resting his head on his knees and twisting to keep Spock in his line of sight.

"You should eat something," Spock says, handing him a carton of chocolate milk.

"I'm allergic to it," the boy replies, but he sucks on the straw, so Spock assumes he's referring to the MREs, not the milk.

Spock hands him the chocolates he has in his pocket. He'd been saving them for Sybok, but this kid needs it more, and they're on the verge of melting anyway.

"You know I wasn't really even supposed to be here? I mean, I came for a semester to do an Applied Colony Development course. I think I should get credit for Extreme Survival and Tactical Thinking and also Grace Under Pressure." He breaks off a piece of chocolate and sucks on it, clearly brooding on the ways that the galaxy has wronged him. Spock thinks he has that right.

"You're at Starfleet Academy?" Spock asks, surprised because he's young, too young to be enrolled.

"Prep," he replies with a rough laugh that turns into something sharper and more hysterical, and Spock puts a hand on his back awkwardly, rubbing until the boy breathes again, face pressed into his knees.

Spock can see, out of the corner of his eye, his handlers nervously scanning for him, but with his hair mussed and in his face and his shirt dirty, hunched over next to another boy, he thinks he'll be hard to spot. He has a few more minutes before he's dragged off and decontaminated and scrubbed to within an inch of his life so he can report to his uncle and a proper speech can be made about
this travesty. Something with elegant, soaring rhetoric that scrubs away the sharpest edges of this, leaves it a lesson and not a horrifying blot on their collective consciousness. He doubts it will even make it into textbooks, just another thing to be swept under the rug because the Federation is at war, and morale must be maintained at any and all costs. He wonders if that's why Kodos did this: if he thought he'd get away with it because the Federation would look the other way.

Kodos is dead; the building he was in collapsed. There's a rumor that Lady Winona had something to do with that, and seeing her now, striding around with a blaster in hand, gold her hair loosely tied away from her face as she barks out orders, Spock thinks he can believe it. She's American; Terran, and the United American Continents have always had a dismissive attitude about the peerage, preferring their regents to be unconventional. Spock knows she is regent until her oldest son can take the American throne. She sees him, and nods her head in recognition and eyes on the boy next to him for a brief moment before she turns to speak to Kerev, a Tellarite Admiral.

"I'm Jim, by the way," Jim says, holding out a frail hand.

"Spock," Spock replies, taking it and bracing against the images slamming against his consciousness and subsequently tearing through Spock's—death everywhere and a speech and soldiers with phasers set to kill and a feeling of utter rage and impotence. Spock's shields are good, but this trauma is immense and can't be contained, not even by his shields.

"That's Vulcan, isn't it?" Jim asks, letting go of Spock's hand and reaching up to brush Spock's hair away from his eyebrows, then his ears, which more than anyone has touched Spock since his mother died. "You don't really seem Vulcan. With the hair. And the using contractions."

"I am…unconventional," Spock allows, and Jim laughs again, but this time it doesn't seem in danger of being hysterical.

"I wouldn't've—" Jim waves at Spock's hand "—if I'd known. Sorry about that." He means, it, and it's extraordinary to Spock that in the middle of this crisis, where he is clearly holding things together only just barely, this boy is worried about burdening Spock with his pain.

"Don't worry about it," Spock dismisses, and means it. A little transference is nothing in the grand scheme of things: in the face of this, and if sharing it helped Jim, just a little, Spock will be glad for it. They sit quietly for a moment, and Spock looks at families huddled together, at the spaces left by those who are missing or gone. Even the Vulcan aid workers seem sickened, and shortly the survivors will move out, be loaded onto shuttles and taken to the hospitals nearest to their home planets for treatment.

Jim's thigh is pressed close against Spock's: there is no space left by Jim, and Spock shifts and wraps his arm around Jim's shoulders, pressing them close together even as it's time to go onto the shuttle, coaxing Jim along into a biobed and sitting with him until the hypo takes effect. Only when Jim is asleep does Spock allow Heinemann to collect him, draw him into a room to sleep fitfully until the door opens, startling Spock out of sleep.

"I can't sleep. You play chess, right?" Jim says, and Spock blinks at him because that door was definitely locked, and then nods instead of telling Jim to get back to sickbay this instant.

"Yes."

"Good. Entertain me."

Spock scoots over in the bed and lets Jim in, load the 3D chess program onto Spock's PADD, and sit beside him on the bed, programming moves into their PADDs. It's not as satisfying as moving
the physical pieces as it is watching the projected holo, but it will do.

Spock loses.

Badly.

He's looking through the inky black of the room at the chessboard hours later when his valet bursts in flustered annoyance to say, "Your Royal Highness, I'm so sorry to interrupt—" only to be interrupted himself by a medic who says, with stark relief all over her face:

"Oh, there he is. I thought he'd taken a shuttle and gone off on his own!" She makes a face at Jim, who's sleeping soundly, curled against Spock's side, and Spock raises an eyebrow at her.

"I really need to get him back into a biobed," she says. "He's not exactly well. But thank you for keeping him occupied, Your Royal Highness." And with that she scoops Jim up like he's a mere child, and strides off with him. Heinemann raises his eyebrows, but says only,

"Your uncle expects your report at 0800 hours, Your Royal Highness."

Spock gives his report, and his uncle makes a speech, and Spock then buries himself in their policies for selecting governors and establishing colonies.

When he is king, this won't be allowed to happen.

Whenever anyone talks about Tarsus, from then on, in general, expansive terms, Spock thinks of the boy who bullied another into eating and quietly shook apart and put himself back together, who smiled and beat Spock at 3D chess and can't think of it in anything but desperately personal terms.

He thinks it will make him a better king.

Jim's origin story is public domain.

More than other people's, because people actually want to know about the circumstances of Jim's birth, because those circumstances changed the tone of a war that had been quietly brewing and trundling along for centuries.

Jim was born in a shuttle while his father was on a collision course with a Klingon K't'inga-Class battlecruiser. His father saved 800 people, including Jim and his mother, and Jim's birthday is a continental holiday where everyone gets the day off and commemorates the death of Prince George Samuel Kirk of America. Jim never really understood how he was supposed to celebrate his father's death, and so their family mostly pretends that January 22 doesn't exist.

Jim's half birthday is July 22, and that's the big deal. He gets cake and presents, and huge parties and his mother smiles and doesn't look tightly unhappy, which for her usually translates into causing a lot of problems for a lot of people, just because she can.

Winona Kirk is fearless. He believed that when he was a kid, holding her legs at formal events and watching her keep the women and men who wanted to hold him and call him such a dear little prince at bay; believed it when he was starving to death on Tarsus IV and she brought the cavalry and killed Kodos (sure, the building fell on top of him…after she'd planted the charges and kept
him inside and then detonated it); believes it now at sixteen.

Jim was born His Serene Highness James Tiberius Kirk, Marquess of Riverside, but it's pretty common knowledge that one day Sam—that is, His Serene Highness Prince George Samuel Kirk II of America, Duke of Iowa—will abdicate and marry Duchess Aurelan Hepburn of the Great Britain and revolutionize the science world, and Jim will be left with a title and a rank and somehow balance Starfleet and the peerage.

Right now though, Jim is a sixteen-year-old lieutenant junior grade and he's shoving Omibono off the smoking console, wincing at the current that goes through the (limp, smoking) man and up Jim's arms and then taking over, fingers slipping over the blood-slick console.

"I need power to the forward shi—" Pike begins to bark.

"Working on it!" Jim yells, trying to remember what Scotty had said (why don't they have Scotty? Stupid vendettas and stupider admirals).

Jim should be on the bridge. Jim should be firing, but instead he's down here in fucking Engineering and the console is frantically beeping at him, and all he can think is that he's so going to die here. With half an ear out for Pike's orders, he rips out wires, sucking the blood off his fingers and twisting them, rerouting the power and—yes, yes, here—

"Do it, do it, do it!" he shouts into the comm, and watches the power feedback and...yes, stabilized. He leans against the scaffolding and exhales, wipes sweat off of his forehead with a shaking hand and listens to Pike tell everyone that they're all going to be fine; the enemy is destroyed, all injured personnel report to medical bay.

"You're bleeding," Nudrani tells Jim, smoothing his hand across Jim's forehead. "And your fingers are a wreck. Come on, let's go see McCoy."

"He'll yell and stab me," Jim mutters as Nudrani hauls him up, and Jim can walk—he's fine, really, and proves it by walking into medbay of his own volition.

"I'm fine," he says to Bones, who immediately pauses in—is that reattaching a leg?—the middle of what he's doing to scowl at Jim.

"Sit," Bones snaps, and Jim does, with his hands carefully curled palm-up on his thighs until Bones has saved everyone three times and can come in and act like every single one of Jim's injuries is an insult to him. Like Jim got hurt just to hurt Bones.

"Why were you in Engineering?" Bones demands. "Engineering hates you."

It's true. Every time Jim goes into Engineering he comes out bleeding from somewhere.

"Omibono died," Jim replies as Bones runs the scanner over him. A five-hour-long firefight is a long fight, but not the longest they've been involved in. Jim's first had been fifteen hours, and he'd been fifteen and terrified by the blood around him. It's amazing what you get used to.

"Someone had to overlay the—"

"Yes, but why is it always you?" Bones asks, and he sounds tired and like Jim is breaking his heart a little, so Jim just stays quiet and watches the cuts pull together under the regenerator.

They both know the answer is because there's no-one else. Because Jim gets ships instinctively and what he can't intuit he learns. There's a reason Jim is sixteen and everyone knows when the Enterprise is finished in six years, he'll be her first captain.
"Get some sleep," Bones says, and Jim pulls the blanket over his head and tries.

Bones' wife had a miscarriage, and Jim knows it destroyed their marriage, but he thinks it warped Bones a little. Jim never had parents, not really. Winona is his mother, but she was absent a lot, and never did things like kiss the top of his head when he skinned his knee and blow on the cut. Frank is his stepfather, but Frank would really rather Jim died in a fire.

And so Bones is six years older than Jim and his best friend and the father he never had, complete with lie detector and paranoia about Jim's sex life. Jim curls his aching fingers against his chest and closes his eyes and tries to sleep.

It's July 22, and Jim spent the day on the edge of Klingon space and has (so far) lived to tell the tale.

When he wakes up, there will be a cake and candles and Bones scanning the cake for Banned Substances (Jim's allergies are variant and ever-increasing). Everyone will celebrate Jim's half-birthday and the fact that they're all still alive, somehow, and Jim will laugh and lean against Bones and go to bed with two of the younger science officers and life will be...pretty damn good, actually.

Part II

"I—are you hiding?" Sybok asks, frowning and looking around like maybe he's misinterpreted things, and that Spock will unfold himself, come out of the closet, and the world will make sense.

Spock considers his response, and then shrugs one shoulder and nods, cheek brushing along a pair of pants. "If they can't find me, they can't tell me," he says, and it's logic even their father would admire. It doesn't negate the fact that he is hiding from the somber people downstairs in his closet, still in his pajamas and dressing robe.

"The King is dead," Sybok replies, grunting a little as he sits down next to Spock in the back of the closet. "Long live the King. Sorry, someone had to tell you. Better to hear it from me than from Prime Minister Pike or Aunt Mary. Who, by the way, is sobbing uncontrollably. Lady Beatrice has the whole pile of hankies she's got ready for use, it's impressive in a sad kind of way."

"It's probably too late to abdicate," Spock muses, ignoring the latter half of that because Sybok has a tendency to ramble. Sybok grins in the dim light coming through the closet's adjacent door, hugging his knees and resting his cheek against them, looking at Spock, and it is strikingly familiar, and Spock needs to stop thinking about that one day on Tarsus IV, needed to stop when he was sixteen, let alone now when he's twenty-two.

"You won't." He sounds so sure, and Spock feels a slight flare of annoyance, which is pointless because it's true— Spock won't abdicate. But he might like to be at least a little humored in his moment of crisis.

"No," Spock agrees, leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes. "I won't."

He pushes himself up and ignores the looks from servants who were sure they'd already checked his bedroom for him, walking downstairs in the dim early morning light to the waiting members of
parliament and peerage: to be told that his uncle, King William XV, is dead.

That he is no longer Prince Spock of Vulcan, Duke of Shi’Kahr, Duke of Washington, Earl of Seattle, heir to the Federation throne, nephew of His Majesty King William XV of the United Federation of Planets.

"The King is dead," Prime Minister Pike says, his face worn and tired already, "long live the King."

He does not deliver it with any more gravitas than it deserves, but Spock feels it like a sentence handed down, a weight across his shoulders that he straightens against. He looks at his aunt's red-rimmed eyes and her chin, dimpled but firmly refusing to quaver, at Pike, at his father, and wonders what he can say. What a Vulcan would say, what a human would say, and how he, stuck interminably between the two, should respond.

"I grieve most sincerely for my uncle's passing," he says, finally, "but I will do my best to ensure that his life's work, his most sincere goal, peace between my empire and our neighbors, will be achieved."

The words, he knows, will be in the papers, repeated and dissected for nuance he never intended, and by the time he arrives on the Core to begin moving into his uncle's—his—palace, they'll already be part of history, put into textbooks for children and royal scholars both to study.

"The shuttle is ready," Aunt Mary says, and Spock nods, knows someone is fetching Sybok and that people are already packing away his life here and in Shi’Kahr and moving them to Bentley Palace on the Core, his mother's childhood home, and the place he'll live until he dies.

* 

His earliest memories are of his mother. He supposes that most people can, and do, claim that, but Spock's life has been dominated by his father, his uncle, his brother. That she is his first memory feels significant.

Amanda Grayson died when Spock was four. He remembers the confusion of her absence, and that Sybok would not explain and then that his father did, Sarek explaining in cool, detached language that Amanda was dead, would not be coming back ever again; that the last time Spock had seen her was the last. At the time Spock had been angry, furious that his father had been so cold about it. Years later when Spock found out how Amanda Grayson had been killed, he had realized his father had spared him, had been as kind as he could have been under the circumstances.

Spock can remember the scent of her perfume and the smooth fabric of her clothes; the way she brushed her fingers idly through his hair.

He never knew who she was, only that she was his mother and that he adored her in the way children do: thought her perfect and wonderful.

Amanda Grayson was the youngest child of Queen Anne IV and Prince Udi. Her older brother was King William XV. None of this, of course, would have any relevance for Spock if things were ordinary. Spock would be a minor Prince, third in line for the throne, and entirely at his leisure to pursue his own destiny. King William XV, however, had no children.

There were seven years of a succession crisis before Amanda got pregnant with Spock: talk of stepchildren inheriting the throne, people with no genetic claim to the throne thrust into positions of power.
Spock casts a glance at Sybok, who is sound asleep on the couch across from Spock, snoring lightly, and thinks that really, that was a crisis averted.

Sarek keeps casting disapproving glances in his direction, as though by sheer force of disapproval he can coax Sybok into being the son he always wanted: Sarek has been disappointed twice, Spock thinks. His first son was raised on Earth and adopted all of Earth's customs, flagrantly ignoring Surak's teachings. His second son was born to be a King, and though Spock might have chosen the Vulcan way of life if left to his own devices, that decision was not his to make.

And so Sarek, who is so very Vulcan, is left with two sons who are not.

Spock shifts and watches the Core's spacedock grow in his window. Somewhere below he knows that T'Pring is waiting, which Spock is simultaneously relieved by and apprehensive about. The last time they met, T'Pring had given him a bullet-point, referenced list of the reasons he was going to make a terrible king.

He had sent her a bouquet of flowers on her birthday in retaliation, to be delivered in front of Vulcan court, signed by an admirer. From what he heard, it caused quite a scandal.

At one point, Spock knows, there had been talk of them being betrothed before the idea was cast aside. Spock needed to appear, at least, a free agent who owed no one group of people more than the other. She is more like a sister, or a favorite cousin. When he had been nine, she had come to Seattle to visit and known immediately why he was having such bad headaches, had made him lock the door and taught him how to shield his mind better than his tutors had ever managed to.

"It is not outside the realm of possibility that you would be able to meld with an artificial intelligence, or perhaps inanimate object," she had informed him, her fingers pressing into psi points on his face, "but you cannot achieve this if you cannot control what enters your mind and what does not. Not requesting further assistance when it is required is illogical, and a sign of substandard intelligence."

Insulting Spock's mental faculties is T'Pring's favorite hobby, really. This...has the potential to be a disaster. At least Nyota he can count on not to sabotage him.

They begin to dock, and Spock exhales, kicking Sybok's shin to wake him up.

Nyota has agreed to be his Private Secretary, leave behind her own title to do what they had laughed about at so many state dinners, hiding together in closets or on balconies plotting how things would be different when Spock took the throne. Now he's taking it (the verbiage is wrong—he's not taking it, that implies force), he's determined to surround himself with intelligent people beholden to no-one but him. He's fighting years of tradition, but he's a hybrid who shouldn't technically exist. He doesn't understand why him wanting his own staff is going to cause problems (it will though. The peerage is notoriously threatened by anything even remotely resembling change).

"Oh. Wonderful," Sybok says flatly as they are escorted from their cruiser onto the spacedock and then into a shuttle which will take them to Bentley. "It's T'Pring."

"Indeed," T'Pring says, lifting an eyebrow before turning to Spock, less openly hostile abruptly, dipping effortlessly into a curtsy. "Your Majesty." She inclines her head towards Sarek. "Ambassador." She clearly contemplates ignoring Sybok, but decides it's illogical to let him disgruntle her so much. "Councilor."

"Duchess," Spock replies, shooting Sybok a quelling look before gesturing for her to sit. He's sore
from the sitting, from the stress of the day and he thinks longingly of his bed—which he'll never see again. It's a discomfiting realization that he's leaving everything behind.

"You need not concern yourself with details of the coronation," T'Pring says as soon as she's arranged herself neatly in the seat across from him, and Sybok leans his head back and pinches his eyes shut, muttering something about flashbacks to Vulcan school and people with the social graces of tornadoes. "They are standard, and can be arranged without your input. In fact, they ought to be arranged without your input," she edifies, pulling out a PADD and consulting it. "The only thing which you need to inform us of is the dancing order at the coronation ball, with particular reference to the first dance. We will draw up the list of appropriate dance partners, you need only order them."

"So your life is pretty much a romance novel now," Sybok remarks, and Sarek beats Spock to the reprimand with a low:

"If you cannot be helpful, maintain your silence."

Spock nods at T'Pring, because he might not have to worry about the coronation planning, but he does need to worry about the Romulans, and the politics of all of this, and for that he needs his Prime Minister. "I want a meeting arranged with Pike."

She nods, and then they're at Bentley, and Spock tries not to feel very small and very young, and not at all homesick.

"All I'm saying is that I really didn't want it," Sam says as he lays down in Jim's bed. Jim glares at him. He's sore. The gravity on Earth is making him feel a little bit heavy and lethargic, and now he has to get dressed up and learn how to be some sort of Prince because someone (someone, yeah, he knows it was Chris Pike, he should never have come down to Earth, he should have stopped over in Golth and hidden) had played politics and Jim is a freaking pawn.

He got to Earth, went to Iowa, had three nights of sleep and now he's being yanked to the Core for some bullshit about the coronation because Sam is a dick who got his first doctorate and abdicated.

Jim glares at Sam, who is the root of all Jim's problems (and that's if Jim's feeling generous, if he was less generous he'd say Sam is the root of everyone's problems, everywhere). "You remember the part where I just got back from fighting the Klingons?"

"That's because Una Pike kidnapped you when you were a small child and no-one had the sense to argue with her. Or had too much sense to argue with her." Sam contemplates this. "It was definitely one of those things."

"It's not my fault I'm awesome," Jim says, buttoning up the waistcoat (no seriously: waistcoat. To be followed with the ascot, and then the overcoat and the knee-high boots and when did his life become this farce?). He hasn't forgotten that Sam is a dick, but sometimes Sam gets more pissed off when Jim acts like he really is hot shit, and Jim wants him to suffer.

"You were 15," Sam scoffs. "And supposed to be on a milk run and then wound up in the bridge, which you've never fully explained, by the way."

"They had really, really terrible aim," Jim says earnestly. It's partially true: Jim hadn't been about to
just stand there and watch. And then Captain Pike had decided to keep him. That was also not Jim's fault. He'd been supposed to be doing his research paper with practical experience, and then finish his academy training and all that jazz, not get hijacked onto a flagship.

Not that Jim's complaining, because it's been pretty much the best four years ever.

Actually, it's kind of Jim's life story that every time he goes to get practical experience everything goes to shit. Tarsus IV, exhibit A.

Sam gives him a look. "Captain Pike is insane…her husband's possibly worse."

The reason there hadn't been a furor over the fifteen-year-old in combat was because Prime Minister Christopher Pike had used his powers for good (or evil, depending on your point of view) and gotten everyone to look the other way. Jim is perfectly legal now, so no-one wants to say anything, though sometimes the papers make insinuations that Gary likes to read out loud in the rec room until Sulu and Bones can't breathe for laughter.

Gary's kind of a dick, too. Jim's surrounded by them. And not in the good way.

"It doesn't matter because people dealt with it and Mom is totally cool with it and I am totally indispensable," Jim replies, shrugging and flinging his hands wide. He really would rather be in uniform. So much simpler. Makes him look like so much less of a pretentious asshole. "Lieutenant Commander James T Kirk, 19, youngest in history, and decorated war hero."

"Frank's going to love that."

"How is he even still alive?"

"See, talk like that? Is why Mom sends you away." Sam sighs theatrically. "You don't deserve the title. She's going to make up some sort of wasting disease for you to explain your absences. You're a bad prince."

"Says the brother who abdicated without telling me and let me find out when the press cornered me. Have I thanked you for that?" Jim demands, glaring at him, remembering to be pissed off because seriously the last thing you want to do after coming off of a ship and doing final checks and double-checks and triple-checks is deal with pushy photogs and people screaming at you. Bones may or may not have punched someone.

Jim should probably check on that. The last time Bones had been in prison it hadn't...ended well. For a man who swore to do no harm, he does a lot of damage when he's pissed enough.

"Well, I didn't want it," Sam dismisses. "Besides, I have a pure soul, and politics would destroy my tender, fragile ego." He puts a hand to his heart and flutters his eyelashes earnestly. Jim glowers and punches him in the shoulder. "You can run away to the stars and everyone will gush over how heroic you are when really you're just a wuss and avoiding your duties. Plus, you're Prince of America—it's not like we have a long and glorious tradition of like, ruling anything in earnest."
The fact that there would have been tensions about his marriage to Duchess Aurelan of Great Britain goes unspoken. They're getting married while Jim is home, and Jim thinks her hair is even a color found in nature this time. He really does like Aurie, with her drawling voice and the way she makes Sam so happy.

He also loves that she puts up this whole sweet front but is the biggest gossip on the planet. Aurelan Hepburn knows everyone's secrets, and if she ever does write that tell-all Earth is doomed.

"Asshole."
Sam grins, unfazed. "So, Your Serene Highness, James Tiberius Kirk, Prince of America, Duke of Iowa, and Lieutenant of Starfleet, what will you do now that you're home?"

"Steal the Antares, start a war with the Romulans—I'm getting bored with the Klingons." Jim grins, and then makes a face at him. "And do you have to rattle off the whole title? I think the only thing more ridiculous than that title is our lord and sovereign's."

"I like that it grows every time I see you," Sam says earnestly, getting up to readjust Jim's collar and straighten the jacket.

"Half of that was your fault!" Jim points out indignantly.

"I still like it," Sam replies with a shrug, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "And the sad part is? You're only half-joking about starting a war."

"Dude. I'm only an eighth joking. Sulu and is totally down with that shit, and Gary's got my back."

"Gary Mitchell is an asshole."

"Yeah, you just don't like him because he can read your brain."

"It's unnatural. And he always looks at me like I've got a porno running through my head."

"You need better shields, I've always said this."

"Fuck you. God, you look like a prince and everything."

Jim surveys his reflection. "That's sort of the point. I really don't want to see Frederick. I blame the inbreeding for Frederick."

Frederick is Prince of the United European and Russian States, and an unbearable ass. Frederick is the reason Sam abdicated, really: no one could stand Aurie marrying Frederick, least of all Aurie, who had sent Jim detailed instructions on how to kill her intended and then his brother if she ended up having to marry Frederick.

The awesome part was that it would totally have worked.

"Only one Kirk required. Well, Mom's going. Try not to spit spitballs at the Tellarites," Sam says.

"You ruin all our fun."

"Jim." Sam's smiling fondly at him.

"Yeah, I know. Best behavior, represent Earth, play nice with the other children."

"We're so doomed," Sam sighs, and falls back on the bed.

Jim's PADD pings, and he picks it up, expecting a message from Gary or Gaila or maybe Bones. So it's a little bit of a shock when he reads it, and then thinks maybe it's a joke: maybe Scotty thinks he's being funny except those encryption levels are really… "Holy shit."

"What?"

"I just got first dance."

"Oh my god," Sam says, awed. "We're not doomed: we're **fucked.** He's going to make you his
Jim throws a pillow at him. "Why would you even put that out there?"

Sam cackles, and then tries to stop Jim from smothering him. It only works because Winona comes in and threatens to make Jim wear a tiara (no shit, they actually have a tiara) before dragging him off to the waiting shuttle.

Jim keeps looking at his PADD expectantly; it has to be a cock-up. Any second now he's going to get a follow-up apologizing for the confusion.

It's not, and he doesn't. He tries to remind himself he's ben in worse situations: there was the time that he had to fight for Gaila's honor even though she kept insisting she didn't have any. Or the time he'd had to go to Bones for his six-month STD test. Those were usually pretty ghastly.

"Oh Christ," Winona exhales, in that annoyed and rough voice that means she's seen Prime Minister Pike. Jim is not prying into that relationship at all, he just knows that Captain Pike knew exactly how to manage Winona whenever Jim almost-died, and that Prime Minister Pike is the only politician allowed fifty feet from his mother. He's not asking, okay?

Pike, it turns out, is waiting for them at the dock, smiling pleasantly until they get onto the shuttle that's going to take them to Bentley. Of course, it's less of a shuttle and more of a...well, maybe a cruiser, but a pleasure cruiser and Jim wants to know why civilians need cruisers. His mother, who has no maternal love in her soul, straight-up abandons him, disappearing down a narrow hall in search of alcohol.

Jim carefully ignores the quiet look of hurt or longing or fondness or whatever on Pike's face and raises his eyebrow.

"So, how's the Cap?" he asks, and right on cue Pike glares at him. And then his gaze gets interested and sharp and assessing and Jim remembers that this man has been the elected Prime Minister for six years and he...is going to be prepping Jim. Jesus fuck.

"Look," Jim says hastily, stepping back. "I didn't do anything, I don't even know—"

Which is totally the wrong thing to say because Pike looks so, so pained and then growls out, "You're going to learn how not to embarrass all of us if I have to kill you to do it."

Jim doesn't even point out that that only barely makes sense, and the rest of the ride to the Core is filled with dance lessons and the most intensive etiquette lessons Jim has ever been through. Pike brought a team of specialists. They are terrifying and possibly robots—Jim's not brave enough to find out.

The only thing that saves him is that he's actually not half-bad at the diplomacy thing and is usually on the away team, which means he's really good at navigating minefields, and the peerage is nothing if not a minefield.

At least the parts where Pike tries to teach him the proper way to navigate a political conversation are fun. Mostly because they both end up shouting at each other and then Pike growls in absolute disgust that Jim is just like George, what the fuck is with you people?

Winona won't elaborate, just laughs and laughs and hands Jim a drink while Pike groans about alcoholism, collapsing onto the couch beside her and Jim doesn't watch as his mother slides a finger under Pike's collar.
Mostly because he's used that move.

"Well?" Sam asks as they're getting ready to dock over the Core, and Jim frowns at the background and realizes Sam's already in London.

"Mom's screwing Pike, and I'm fucked."

"Sounds about right. Have fun, Jimmy."

"I still hate you."

For the last seven years, Spock has been his uncle's goodwill ambassador. The public face of the crown, visiting impoverished children and devastated planets, highlighting their plight and sponsoring the arts and opening museums and attending exhibitions and fairs and festivals. He's poised to take his crown the most popular monarch in five hundred years, and that is not by accident.

Spock, though, when he thought about how his reign would look, imagined it hazily and vaguely. There were—are—concrete things he wants to accomplish, people he wants around him, but he never considered that he would have a headache all the time, that his personal staff will be even less concerned with personal boundaries than they ever were. Spock thought about his reign in expansive, broad terms: reestablish the Neutral Zone and the philosophy of mutually assured destruction (except that is something Spock will settle for, on his deathbed. He is half-Vulcan for a reason, and the shared ancestry between Vulcans and Romulans is something he fully intends to exploit. Spock will have peace with the Romulan Star Empire and thrash the Klingons into submission if they won't agree to a treaty. Spock will settle for a three-way standoff, but that will only be when the breath is leaving his body).

He never considered that he was going to have to put his household in order, that by surrounding himself with highly competent people he would still have to be the person it all comes down to: have to manage T'Pring and Nyota and be just as invested in day-to-day trivialities as he is in the big picture. He realizes, as Nyota opens the door to his study and gives him a significant look that means she needs five minutes and then he has seven meetings that he really needs to be attentive for, that his preconceptions about what ruling would be were delusional at best.

"We need to talk about the dance, it's gotten important," Nyota tells him. "And unless you want T'Pring to come in and explain to you who you'll be dancing with, you and I need to work this out."

"Dance," Spock repeats blankly, and then, with a slight frown, "the coronation dance?"

"That one," she agrees, sitting in the chair across from him. "They're equating it to a marriage proposal, which isn't really unheard of because usually there is a marriage already in the works when someone ascends the throne—you just like being unique."

Spock lifts an eyebrow at her and she smiles, then hands him a PADD.

"This is my shortlist. Two Terrans, an Illyri, an Andorian, two Vulcans, and two Qarns. None of them are married, but none of them have expressed any interest in marriage. They're in your age bracket, in an appropriate social bracket—"
"I trust you to have selected appropriate candidates," he interrupts, looking through profiles. Frederick of Eurussia. James of America— "I thought it was George of America?" he asks, frowning.

"No, he abdicated. Continued his family's grand tradition of ignoring their title. The United American Continents haven't ever been entirely impressed with the peerage. It went to his younger brother, who, you can see, is a lieutenant commander in Starfleet at the tender age of nineteen. It would make him an interesting choice..." she trails off and Spock looks up. "Do you know him?" she asks.

Spock looks back down at the picture. He can't be certain, James Kirk of America's hair is cut short, and he's tall and clearly on active duty, but Spock thinks he knows the eyes—thinks it's Jim's face, grown up. Spock scans the bio and finds it: Survivor, Tarsus IV.

"Your Majesty?" Nyota prompts, frowning.

"Jim," Spock says, firm, and she blinks.

"You know him." Nyota has a way of asking questions without asking them. It forces everyone to pay attention to her, even when she's being utterly scathing.

"We met once. On Tarsus IV," Spock elaborates, because he learned long ago that keeping anything from his handlers is foolish at best and dangerous at worst. Inevitably the press will find out and the story will need to be spun appropriately, but Spock is curious to see how the boy who trounced him at chess is six years later. "He was in bad shape, I sat with him."

"So you know him," she says, frowning, and Spock shakes his head. "I don't think he had any idea who I was, and I never caught his last name."

"He's the kid from the speech," she says, comprehension dawning across her features. "I'll have him hailed, we'll bring him here for the month." She taps on her PADD and then nods. "I have the Prime Minister waiting for you."

"Send him in."

"I heard Jim Kirk's name?" Pike asks, settling himself comfortably in the chair vacated by Nyota, and she rolls her eyes behind his back and they share a moment's pain at what gossips politicians are.

"You know him?" Spock inquires politely.

"Jimmy? Sure. I served with his parents on the Kelvin. My wife's his captain. He's a good kid. Going to be a terrible Prince. Which will make him a favorite in America, and make him his dad's kid. You considering him?" Pike, Spock has come to realize, speaks in short, usually fragmented sentences. He thinks it comes from being in parliament where one is frequently interrupted.

"I have chosen him."

Pike blinks at him in faint surprise, but he masks it quickly and well. "Well, he's a decorated war hero, three years younger than you, won't expect anything from it—not marriage, favor, nothing like that. You could do a lot worse; Jimmy's been in space the last four years, you can't get more politically neutral than that, and he's Starfleet, so he keeps his politics close."

Spock looks at the profile, and then frowns. "He was activated at fifteen?"
Never mind the winning medals for bravery and commendations for innovative thinking; that he is being watched and tracked to become a captain of his own vessel—fifteen?

"Small issue with the educational mission he was on going awry. She liked him, kept him on." Pike shrugs, which means there's far more to that story but Spock's not going to hear it right now. It's one of Pike's most annoying traits, Spock has found: the way he dispenses information like rewards.

"This isn't what you came here to talk about," Spock says, and Pike blinks then nods.

"No. What are your thoughts on the Klingons? Are we pulling that offensive back while you work on the Romulans or—"

"Technically," Spock interrupts, "we aren't on an offensive with the Klingons. We are patrolling the Neutral Zone and defending sovereign space."

Pike looks at him, fingers steepled and pressed to his lips, a smile playing in the corners of his mouth. "We're keeping the status quo while you and the Empress dance around each other."

"Essentially."

Jim is in his suite when Pike tracks him down. Jim is mostly walking around staring because he's pretty sure the whole of the Antares isn't as big as his suite. Who the hell needs this much space? Jim doesn't. A box is a box, this is just a box with delusions of grandeur. Although the bed…Jim could do things with that bed. It's going on his list of things to do while he's dirtside. Jim's very goal-oriented.

"Kirk, stop glaring at the room like it's stolen your girl, and if you do anything depraved on that bed I will have you executed."

"Prime Minister." Jim turns to grin at Pike—he looks good, excited and hopeful, which is kind of weird because Jim's used to Pike looking long-suffering. "Something else I need to learn right this second? Spock's favorite book change?"

"That's His Majesty, and no. I thought you'd like to get outside before you make a phaser out of the bits you find in this room and start terrorizing everyone."

"It's kind of frightening the way you do that," Jim informs him, but he follows easily enough, trying to look like he wasn't eyeing curtain rope and wondering if one could hang oneself with it (he doesn't think so, because it looks like it's gold-plated and wouldn't make a firm enough knot—amazing what you learn when you nearly get hanged for witchcraft).

Once outside, Jim tilts his face up to the sky; the sky on the Core is almost the same as the sky on Earth. Close enough to feel warm and familiar; it's known and non-threatening. It really is a beautiful planet.

"Pretend you know how to be a Prince," Pike admonishes wryly.

"But I don't. Sam abdicated while I was at war because he's a dick, and even your crash-course
from hell can't make me a prince." Jim is going to kill Sam, he's decided. He was lulled into a sense of false mercy by Sam's presence, because he'd misguided him. Jim knows better now. Now he's going to kill him for real. He's a tactician; he could totally target and fire a photon and hit Sam without destroying anything else.

But then Winona would bitch, and Jim doesn't think he could actually deal with both her and Captain Pike—between the two of them he'd be nothing but a smoking pile of bones in three seconds. Then Bones would reanimate him so he could kill him, and Jim just sees this getting needlessly messy.

Pike looks at him. "Please don't say that in front of His Majesty. I vouched for your character."

"Pike, how am I going to take any of this seriously? Why the hell did he pick me?" Because shit, how is Jim going to do this? How is he going to be…any of it?

"You look good on paper," Pike tells him.

"I look better in person." It's knee-jerk, really. Jim is a natural-born bullshitter, and also he actually really is not…interested in playing nice, here. At all.

"Head that big it's a wonder you can walk through doorways," Pike observes, almost despairing.

"I walk on water." Jim says easily, grinning, walking on the lip of a fountain.

"Jim." Pike looks almost desperate, and Jim sighs. Captain Pike can last so much longer before getting that exasperated with him. Also, she's armed, so…there's the fact that he's more afraid of her. The Prime Minister looks like he's about to stroke out though, so Jim sighs and relents:

"He is half-Terran, half-Vulcan. He has an older brother, but the brother has a different mother—ten years older, helped raise him, yes it sounds slightly familiar, whatever. Despite the fact that Sybok is full-Vulcan, he shows emotions like a Human. Spock's too young to be on the throne, but he's a genius, so it won't matter unless the Romulans and Klingons make a big deal of it, which they will.

"You are angling to get him fully in your camp before you lose power, which might be the next election, depending on the drought on Cirrius IV. His Private Secretary is Nyota Uhura, Duchess of Nairobi, his Lord Chamberlain will be T'Pring, Countess of T'Paal, currently she serves as Mistress of the Robe. The Duchess's Deputy Secretary is an Andorian—seemed nice, I met hir when I came in—"

"Jim…” Pike pinches the bridge of his nose. What, the ze'd been an incredible shade of blue, and Jim appreciates people of all walks of life and all aesthetics. Actually, Jim can't tell if the pinch is directed at Jim's libido or the fact that he's just showing off now.

"—hir name is Thalashras ch'Trhan, Baron of Laibok, but everyone calls hir Shras."

"Jim," Pike snaps, and his fingers twitch like he wants nothing more than to cuff Jim upside the head and maybe drown him in the clear water of the reflecting pool beside them. "Just—don't say anything. Shut up the whole time. You just have to get through it—you realize this man can strip your commission, and he's already noticed you were activated at fifteen?"

That's about the second Jim's stomach drops out, hits him like a punch to the solar plexus and he can't breathe for the horror of that. It wasn't—

They'd been attacked by Klingons, and Una Pike had yelled at him to take over for Rodriguez, who
had been hit when a circuit shorted out and was slumped, dead, over the console. Jim had shoved her over with a wince and begun to reroute power so that they could return fire, and for fifteen hours he stayed there, on the bridge, making it up as he went along and following the orders snapped at him. The battle ended, as usual, with the Klingon ship little bits of space dust, and Jim (also as usual) had been sent to sickbay for Bones to fret over, and Una Pike had put in a request that wasn't so much a request as a demand that Jim be assigned as an active officer to her ship.

It had gone through, with permission sign-offs from Winona and a few legal loopholes that no-one had ever really looked at closely, but if the King decided he didn't like that or didn't like Jim—there'd be nothing any of them could do about it and—

He looks at Pike, and Pike just nods, and it's that I'm not messing around here, Jim expression. "So be on your best behavior. And don't say anything."

"Your presence is not required," Spock tells Sybok without any hope that it will influence him. Sybok grins, unfolds his newspaper with relish, and settles into a wingback chair. "At least stop grinning like that," Spock sighs.

"What, we can't give the gossips the ammunition of you unsupervised with the Prime Minister and the Prince of America. I can see the headlines now: KING HAS WILD ORGY IN DRAWING ROOM."

Sybok once told Spock, when they were fighting, that Spock looked just like Father when he was angry. Spock gives him his best Sarek-glare now, and Sybok rolls his eyes and lifts the paper over the lower half of his face. "Fine. Whatever."

Spock doesn't have time to convey his deepest fraternal loathing, because there's a knock on the door and one of the footmen saying, "Your Majesty, Lord Pike and His Serene Highness James of America to see you, Your Majesty," and Spock's stomach is clenching.

Sybok tilts him a look, newspaper sinking just a little as he seems torn between glee and concern. "You're nervous. Who is this?"

"It's within my power to banish you to a remote location in the Neutral Zone, possibly in the Kelvin Radius," Spock reminds him lowly, and then turns as Pike enters.

"Your Majesty, may I present His Serene Highness James Tiberius Kirk, Prince of America, Duke of Iowa, Lieutenant Commander of Starfleet currently assigned to the Antares?" Lord Pike inquires and bows, stepping aside to allow the Prince to come forward.

Sybok exhales appreciatively, and Spock agrees: he looks better in person. It's also Jim, absolutely. Although Spock's a bit concerned by the fact that he is terrified. He can feel it coming off of him in waves, and Spock can't reconcile it with the angry thirteen-year-old of six years ago, not at all.

Jim bows the appropriate depth, and his eyes catch Spock's briefly and drop so hastily Spock can't think of a word other than 'flinch' to describe it.

That's...unexpected, given that the last time they met Jim had bullied another kid into eating and then hacked his way into Spock's room to demand entertainment.
"I wish to commend you on your bravery, Commander," Spock says, carefully choosing the form of address he thinks Jim will be most comfortable with, as he sits and gestures for Jim to do the same. Jim sits, straight-backed, in the chair, hands curved over his knees, which are pressed together. Spock can feel Sybok's incredulity. It's like Jim thinks Spock's going to attack him. Spock glances at Pike, who is watching Jim with an expression of weary suffering, and presses on.

"As you know, the Coronation is an extremely important event. As we are in a time of war, it holds even more significance. There will be the month of celebration, beginning with the coronation, and tomorrow after the ceremony there will be the ball, and then the various other activities which you've no doubt seen on the itinerary."

Absolutely no response, and Spock knows for a solid fact that the carpet in this room is boring and impossible to become engrossed in.

Spock tries again, but it comes out too-formal and stiff, the more uncertain Spock becomes the more it manifests in Vulcan speech patterns: "I very much look forward to your contribution towards an auspicious beginning and was gratified when you accepted my request."

Kirk nods, and doesn't raise his eyes. Behind him, Pike is starting to look torn between irritable and incredulous. He continually casts looks at Jim as though he has no idea what's going on, but doesn't want to provoke a reaction from him in Spock's presence. That's gratifying, actually, because it means this behavior is completely out of the ordinary.

"My Private Secretary informs me you are a talented dancer, you are familiar with the steps of the dance?"

Again, a nod.

"...Would you like to know what colors I shall be wearing for the ball so that you may coordinate? Sybok, I believe we have the designs on hand."

Sybok leans over the desk, and hands them to Jim, who doesn't take them; merely glances and nods. Again.

"Would you like a consultant to assist you in choosing an appropriate ensemble for the ball? What color scheme do you normally work in?" He's trying for an answer that can't be conveyed in negative or affirmative. He wants to hear him speak.

Jim stills as though cornered, and Spock exhales sharply, tired of this because it's Jim but it's not, and he's—he's spent a lot of time trying to be the kind of Prince that an angry kid would trust, and now he has Jim here and can say "I'm trying to fix everything" and Jim is...gone. Not here, completely and totally withdrawn, and Spock didn't expect to have this strong a reaction, but he is. Illogical as it is, he's mad.

"Jim." Jim's head jerks up, and Spock leans forward. "There are hyper-psi-sensitive species of armadillos in the Gamma quadrant whose sheer terror and fear when faced with a predator I wouldn't be able to sense as acutely as I can feel yours, which is striking me as a bit strange given that you once faced down a genocide and only got angry and then were activated in Starfleet at fifteen in the middle of a firefight. I'm curious to know how I am more frightening than either of those things."

Sybok is choking into his fist and Pike is suddenly hugely engrossed in a portrait of one of Spock's ancestors with a furiously itchy nose, but Jim is finally looking at him, and the moment that recognition dawns feels like something physically loosening in Spock's chest. Jim licks his lower
lip, then leans back. "Kehlant. Not armadillos: kehlant. You can roll them up and whip them around your head by their tails as fast as you can and then let go—they go flying. Then you let them hit—they think it's hilarious and they come back for more. You get like, this line of kehlantia."

His hands move to illustrate his point, and there is a smile on his lips as he snakes his arm in an approximation of the line of kehlantia.

"You throw them—" Spock starts, because that's just what he needs, animal rights groups picketing Starfleet.

"They like it," Jim dismisses, waving his hand. It's been a very long time since someone who wasn't Sybok has interrupted him. Jim leans in towards Spock, forearms braced easily on his knees. "You got a hair cut. I liked it better longer."

"It covered my ears and eyebrows," Spock points out.

"And people kept grabbing you and you were getting migraines?" Jim supplies.

"Only this one particular thirteen-year-old," Spock demurs wryly.

"Sounds like such an ass," Jim says cheerfully.

"He did apologize. But then he cheated at chess, so I was further insulted—"

"I didn't cheat!" Jim protests, and Spock lifts his eyebrow and tries very hard not to smile. Jim waves his hand dismissively. "Anyway. Are you going to go for peace with the Romulans first?"

"Jim," Pike says, moving swiftly to intercept a highly inappropriate line of discussion.

"No, it's—," Spock begins and Jim says at the same time, "It's Spock, he gave me chocolate on Tarsus," like that means something, everything, and Pike looks at them both like they're lost causes.

Spock turns to Jim. "Why would I do that?"

"You're half-Vulcan. Vulcans share a common ancestor with Romulans. If anyone can do it…it's gonna be you. And the Klingons are fucking unreasonable at this point, because they think they have something to prove, which they do since the Romulans just perfected cloaking and I just stole it, so we're up on them."

"I hope we're developing things of our own initiative," Spock says, and Jim grins.

"You should see Scotty's transwarp theories."

"Montgomery Scott, who disintegrated Admiral Archer's beagle?"

"Yeah...he feels bad about that." Jim lies very prettily, but he is lying nonetheless. "I'll make you a deal, Spock," Jim says, violating at least a dozen protocols, but when he smiles Spock's willing to let him get away with a dozen more. He is, actually, doomed.

"I'm listening."

"You make peace with Romulus, and I'll win you a war against the Klingons."

It's completely illogical to make a deal like this, and beneath him as King, but Jim's eyes are very
blue, and he's smiling and Spock would do this and more to keep him smiling.

"I'll endeavor to do my best," he says finally.

"That's all I'm asking," Jim says, leaning back in his chair with an air of smug triumph, the way he had fallen back into the pillows when he'd taken Spock's king.

Sybok comes over and murmurs in Spock's ear,

"As delighted as I am to have been witness to you getting played like a fiddle—and I'm pretty sure you have hearts instead of eyes right now—we are supposed to be meeting our father for dinner."

"Gentlemen, we have another engagement. It was a pleasure meeting you again, Jim," Spock says, and means it. "Perhaps after dinner I can interest you in a rematch?"

"Yeah, I'd like that," Jim says, and forgets utterly to bow, smiling as he stands.

"Wait for me outside, Jim," Pike instructs. "Your Majesty, a moment."

"What did you say to make him so nervous?" Spock demands when the door is shut behind Jim, frowning because he can't imagine what it was.

"...Ah. I mentioned you hold the keys to his commission, and that the circumstances of him having gotten that commission were suspect at best. Jim is...he hasn't ever heard 'no,'" Pike explains. "He can tend to be...a bit much."

"I prefer him that way."

"I noticed that, Your Majesty," Pike agrees, and before Spock can narrow his eyes, he bows. "If you'll excuse me, I don't want to keep you from your meeting with the Ambassador, and I don't want to leave His Serene Highness unsupervised for any longer than I can help. Your Private Secretary's assistant was very charmed, last I saw them."

"Yes, that'd be terrible," Sybok agrees lowly, and Spock wishes he was still five and could step on his brother's foot as Pike leaves.

"He was very confident of his abilities to win a war," Spock says as they head to the informal dining room.

"Tonight I'll send you his entire, unofficial record, Spock," Sybok promises. "You can stay up the night before your coronation fantasizing about the kid you're going to dance with, who's almost as smart as you are, and actually could win you a war. Hello, Father, you look particularly devoid of emotion today, have a good meditative session with T'Pringles?"

Sarek stands to greet them, and Spock lifts his hand in greeting and thinks that T'Pring might actually kill Sybok if she hears about this nickname.

Throughout their childhood Spock sat through many uncomfortable family dinners in which Sarek and Sybok fought (Sybok loud and angry, strident in his passion while Sarek was cool, logical and devastatingly tactless at times) and Spock wished Amanda had lived to show him how to soothe them both as he thinks she must have done: united both husband and son in love for her in a way Spock has never been able to do. Spock may be King and outrank them both, but he is still the youngest son and the younger brother and there will never be any changing of that.

Tonight's argument centers on the court's favorite subject: Spock's marriage.
Spock doesn't even understand how they're arguing, because at the root of it they agree: Spock should choose, everyone else should hold their tongues and leave him alone. But the rift between them is so enormous that they can't even agree when they're in agreement, and Spock eats without tasting and lets his mind wander.

After dinner, he has Jim brought to his drawing room and sets up the chess pieces.

"I like a real set better," Jim says in approval, coming in and toeing off his shoes beside Spock's before sitting in the vacant chair. Spock is absolutely not looking at Jim's shoes thrown haphazardly against Spock's and thinking that it would be nice if that could last. That would be ridiculous, and so he's not doing it.


"So why didn't you say?" Jim asks half an hour later, taking Spock's rook. "Who you were, I mean."

"You could have guessed," Spock points out. "It's not a common name."

"I was traumatized," Jim points out. "And they said I might have hallucinated you? Which I did, at Starfleet Medical, because they gave me Ibiderol, which, shockingly, I'm allergic to."

"Is it a long list?"

"Five pages at least. Bones—my friend, he's a doctor on the Antares—he keeps track of all the allergies and reactions in this spreadsheet of doom." Jim smiles, and Spock resigns himself to losing his queen. "Check."

It's been thirty-five minutes and Spock's in check: this is pathetic.

"That must make visiting alien worlds interesting," Spock observes, moving his king.

"It did, but now we're in the Neutral Zone. Not a lot to be allergic to there except Klingons. Check…mate. That's embarrassing."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell everyone that it took you thirty-seven minutes," Spock agrees, and Jim grins, fingers wrapped around Spock's king like he's weighing the ornate piece for some intrinsic value only Jim is aware of even as he stands.

"I could be persuaded," he says, and Spock looks up at him, breath catching as Jim bends and presses a kiss against Spock's lips, fingers resting lightly on Spock's jaw before he pulls back, sets the king carefully down and exits.

Spock slumps back and thinks that doomed doesn't even begin to cover it.

Jim suspects (in that way that you suspect things because you can't definitively prove them) that the person who arranged the seating for the coronation ceremony had heard that story about Winona and Jim at Frederick's 19th birthday, and had very prudently seated them on different sides of the aisle.

Mostly that sucks, because his mother knows everything about everyone and scares them all and
Jim's only fond memories of being noble are of being tucked against his mother's side and laughing into her chest as she whispered terrible, terrible things. It's also one of the reasons Starfleet won't seat Jim and Gary (and now Sulu, because the admiralty actually catches onto that shit fast) together at formal events.

Basically, Jim feels there's a conspiracy against his happiness going on.

Still, the view is good, even if his coat is stiff and his breeches (no, seriously, what is the argument against wearing full-length pants?) are biting into his knees and the shoes pinch. He's actually beside His Royal Highness, Sybok son of Sarek, Prince of Vulcan, Duke of Vulcana Regar, and Sybok is watching the double doors with a mixture of apprehension and dread, like he as as much faith as Jim that this is going to go smoothly.

He's surrounded by Spock's family. The dowager Queen is in mourning and looks wrecked with it, and His Royal Highness, Sarek son of Skon, Prince of Vulcan, Ambassador to Earth, and UFP Minister looks like...he could eat you for breakfast and not really feel guilty about it. Sarek is terrifying in a way Jim doesn't generally find Vulcans—and there was that one time he met T'Pau. No, okay, she was kind of terrifying.

"You've been upgraded," Sybok murmurs as the Federation Anthem is sung by an enormous choir.

"Where do I return it?" Jim mutters back, but he doesn't mean it, and less when the doors slide open and Spock walks in, past the peers and politicians, and the ceremony begins. The back and forth should be tedious, but through it all there are those pledges and promises that Spock says as though he means them; means to keep everyone safe and uphold the laws of the realm and protect and defend with his every breath until the last. Jim watches, quiet and feeling somehow small and like yes, this man he could die for.

And when Spock lifts his chin and calmly—so calmly it's almost unbearable—accepts the crown on his head, Jim realizes he's holding his breath; that they're all holding their breath, thinking maybe this could be snatched away, and their brief joint moment of insane hope will be crushed under the heels of the Klingons and Romulans.

Spock turns in front of the throne and looks out, like he knows what they're all thinking. It's as if he can feel how the hope everyone has for the future is tinged with desperation. It's unfair, Jim thinks suddenly; viciously. It's unfair that Spock has to be this for everyone— to be the one-person-equivalent of a safety net for trillions.

He sits on the throne then; a smooth fluid movement, and he seems to stare off into space for a moment—out past them all and straight into space and it's like he can see what's hurtling at all of them, dark eyes steady. Then the applause and shouts of "Long Live King Spock!" ring out, and then the bells start pealing, telling everyone that it's done, that the King is on the throne; that everyone can breathe.

Pike exhales, long and low. "That's that then," he murmurs, and Sarek nods.

"Indeed."

Sybok is barely containing his glee, vibrating with pride and affection and hope, but Jim's caught, standing at attention as Spock slants a glance over to them—to him, and Jim catches the look and smiles a little, tries not to show too many teeth because he'll go to war for Spock; he meant it. He'll win a war for Spock, and Spock nods just a little; a tiny fraction of movement, acknowledging that truth before looking back out.
Spock will make peace and Jim will win a war; resistance is futile, and Jim thinks maybe Winona
knows it by the quirk of her lips as she lifts an eyebrow at him; maybe Pike by the way his hand
rests heavy and restraining on Jim's shoulder. Jim shakes him off after the ceremony is over, Spock
off to take his first ride through the city as King while the rest of them...Jim doesn't know, gossip
or make small talk. He leans against a wall and comms Gary, leaving him detailed messages about
what Uhura is wearing (Gary's crush is pathetic and shameful, but Jim is an enabler) and then
Bones, because Bones will worry and glare and Jim will be able to feel it from seven planets over.

There's euphoria in the air, and it's strange because Jim usually thinks of court as stuffy, full of full
skirts and ridiculous outfits, mannerisms that don't come naturally to anyone and too much bullshit
and self-service and something decidedly stale about the whole thing. Today though...it's like
someone opened a window.

It's like Spock opened a window.

Jim shoves off the wall and heads towards Spock's suite.

"I have a question about the dance, it'll take twenty minutes, tops," Jim lies and smiles at Shras,
who gives him a long-suffering look, like ze knows this is a total lie on Jim's part, and regrets
having said that yes, Spock was back.

"The Duchess will kill me," ze says. Jim grins.


Shras glances around, but ze's clearly wavering. "He's alone, and this isn't appropriate."

"Shras, I will owe you," Jim coaxes, and Shras' antennae twitch, and ze flushes a little bluer.
It's
kind of cute, and Jim would be totally distracted if he didn't already have a mission.

"I'm so getting fired over this," Shras sighs and opens the door. "He has to be at the parade in a half
hour!"

"You're my favorite," Jim promises hir, and slips in, pushing it shut and locking it behind him.
Spock is sliding heavy rings off of long fingers, head bowed with the crown carefully placed on the
dresser and Jim can't stop the grin, because oh, yes.

"I'm entirely capable of dressing myself for the—" Spock begins, and then blinks at the reflection
in the mirror, because it's Jim Kirk, leaning against the door with a strangely intent look on his
face.

"I'm sure you are, but putting clothes on wasn't really what I was thinking of," Jim says, and Spock
looks at him for a long moment before turning around. Jim is giving off arousal in waves, and his
grin is wide and entirely sure of his welcome. Spock lifts his eyebrow.

"That works for you, doesn't it?" he asks.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jim lies blithely, coming forward and placing his hands
on Spock's hips, telegraphing the movements. Spock lifts his chin slightly, watching the faint flush
on Jim's cheeks spread to his neck.
"No, of course not," Spock agrees, and Jim laughs, bright and easy and Spock has to wonder at it. It is, in many ways, hard for him to remember that not everyone was brought up as he was; that Jim Kirk, despite his title, is no peer. Never had to be careful and guard his smiles from political rivals and the hypercritical eyes of the public and media.

Jim's knees hit the floor, his hands sliding down Spock's hips and wrapping around the back of Spock's thighs as he looks up at him, and Spock has a strange moment to note that his eyes are really very blue. "Spock."

"This is inadvisable—" Spock begins, and then cuts himself off sharply when Jim mouths him through his pants, hot, damp pressure.

"Ten minutes, tops," Jim murmurs, vibrations from the words twisting Spock's stomach into knots. "Say 'yes.'"

"Yes," Spock says, because this is consent. It's consent, but he has no choice: he defies anyone to say "no" to Jim Kirk on his knees in front of them, looking at them like he'll die if he can't get his mouth on them. Jim uses his teeth to unfasten Spock's pants, which Spock knows he should be surprised by but isn't (impressed, yes, absolutely, and irrationally jealous of those who Jim practiced that skill on), and sucks him in in a hot, smooth movement.

"You don't have to—" Spock tries, and it's just as well that Jim interrupts him because Spock doesn't know how he would have ended that sentence. As it is, Jim flicks his tongue around the head and then pulls off, pumping with his hand as he looks up. Spock can't at this moment even tell which way up is, and he grips the ledge of the table behind him

"Um, yeah, kind of do. Might explode if I don't." And Spock's can feel that, Jim's want, and no-one has ever touched Spock like this and he feels strangely invincible. It's a bad decision, and will likely backfire and spiral into disaster.

That doesn't mean he's going to stop it.

Spock tightens his hand a little in Jim's hair involuntarily as Jim swallows him back down. His hands are hard on Spock's hips, and Spock can't decide whether it's better to watch or close his eyes against the sight. Jim hums around him and Spock's hips stutter and Jim's mouth goes slack; inviting and open and Spock's hand reaches out and brushes against Jim's cheekbone, through the hair at his temple. It's unbelievably good, the heat and suction and Spock's fingers are shaking when he cups Jim's jaw, watching Jim's mouth stretched obscenely around his cock and thinks that maybe of everything that's happened today, this will be what he remembers with crystal clarity.

Jim slides all the way down, and it feels as though a switch has been hit, and Spock begins fucking into Jim's mouth, a smooth easy slide and of course Jim would not have a gag reflex. Of course.

"I'm—Jim—" Spock starts, warning, uncertain of protocol here but fairly certain that giving warning is appropriate, but Jim presses his tongue against the underside of Spock's dick and he is coming, coming hard down Jim's throat. Jim pulls off a little, wrapping his mouth against the head and pumping Spock through the aftershocks until Spock is slumped against the table, has no idea how he's going to get through the parade, at least he'll be sitting.

Jim grins, thumbs his chin and grabs a handkerchief from his waistcoat to wipe his face off with, and then wipes Spock off, tucking him back in.

"That was..." Spock begins, and this is going to be a thing with Jim, Spock can sense it: his inability to finish a sentence.
"Inappropriate?" Jim suggests, almost gleeful as he stands again, pressing a kiss to the underside of Spock's jaw, surprisingly tender and fond.

"Highly," Spock agrees, brushing the backs of his fingers against Jim's cheek, wondering slightly at him. Wondering how he can even exist.

"Good, though," Jim says, and Spock can do nothing but agree.

"Very."

"So I'll see you at the dance."

"That seems likely."

Jim grins, and nods.

"You may want to—" Spock gestures to Jim's pants, which are straining against his erection. "Should I—?"

"No," Jim says, grinning and stealing a kiss. "You can owe me."

The thing is, there's no way this ends well. Jim's already too over-invested, gone in a way he hasn't been, not for a long time—maybe not ever. If he was smarter, he'd call Bones or Gary or Gaila or even Sam, and let them shout at him until he could climb out of this hole he's dug for himself and then jumped into.

It would help if Spock was less...something.

Jim remembers him, from Tarsus. He really did think he'd made him up: the one person who hadn't babied or cosseted him to within an inch of his life.

He thuds his head against the headboard, closing his eyes against the dull, hollow ache that follows. Does it again, because maybe you can actually have sense knocked into you.

These are facts:

1. Spock needs a spouse and partner who's armcandy and who isn't a wanted war criminal in the Klingon Empire (it's complete shit, they fired first, and it's not a war crime to target the rear of a formation and watch them fall like dominoes, no matter what the Klingons say).

2. Jim is, in fact, a war criminal in the Klingon Empire and every single Klingon warbird has orders to shoot to kill any vessel Jim's even suspected of being on.

3. Jim isn't a princess; he's barely a prince, at that. Jim's an officer in Starfleet, and that's his best destiny, it's what he's meant to do and he can feel that in his bones.

3b. Spock needs a prince or princess who's dirtside at all times.

4. Jim doesn't actually give a shit.

4b. Re: the above: this is going to end in heartache, maybe heartbreak.
4c. On the other hand, Spock.

5. It's possible this list makes no sense.

Jim gets off the bed and changes, doing up the tiny buttons of his shirt, then sliding on the fitted coat with its ridiculously high collar, the golden brocade absurd and possibly made of real gold and Jim spares a moment to hate Sam as he pulls on the white trousers, slides his feet into his slickly polished boots, and then pulls on his gloves.

"Your Serene Highness," Sybok greets as Jim emerges from the room, waving off the woman who reaches up to fix his hair (that, at least, he can do the right way).


"How are you enjoying your stay?" Sybok asks, and Jim slants a look at him.

"It's been wonderful," Jim says, because he's decided it's best to treat Sybok like an alien on a planet they haven't figured out is hostile or not. Or like Scotty. Basically, like a crazy.

"Good," Sybok says blithely. "He'll be glad to know you're comfortable here." He smiles at Jim and looks briefly like a beneficent grandfather before he's announced, and then heads over to Sarek.

Jim tunes out the announcing of his absurd titles (he's still going to kill Sam. So, so dead), catches sight of Winona's deep blue gown and heads over to her.

She looks at him, and then at Sybok, and then bites the insides of her cheek, an eyebrow lifted as she scans the room. "Should I start picking out china patterns?" she inquires. "I'm sure we can find you a lovely, lovely veil. Of course, I'll have to fight Leonard for the honor of walking you down the aisle, but I can take him."

"Shut up," he begs, lowly, because there will be the veil and the tiara and Scotty weeping drunkenly and oh, god, he has to stop thinking about this right now. "Please, please shut—"

"His Majesty Spock, King of the United Federation of Planets."

The doors swing open and Jim turns and watches Spock come into the hall, bends at the waist with everyone else and thinks, Fuck it.

He's going to be selfish and take and enjoy this thing with Spock, whatever it is and however much he can get. And when it comes crashing back to reality, when Spock takes a proper spouse and Jim has to go back to the front lines (because that's how this ends, and Jim might be recklessly idealistic but he's not stupid), he'll at least have the memory. It might even be enough, the having, when weighed against the pain of losing this.

Losing what isn't his to ask for in the first place.

And hey, if he knows he's going to get his heart broken, it's bound to hurt less.

"It is inadvisable to start up a casual sexual-intercourse-based relationship at this juncture," T'Pring informs him as soon as she walks into the room after he gets back from the parade. Spock exhales
slowly, allowing his gaze to flick towards the ceiling in annoyance before he turns to face her.

"I have not started anything," he informs her, which is entirely true. He hasn't discouraged anything, but he has certainly not started this: that he places squarely on Jim's shoulders, which is, at the moment, very convenient.

"You have not stopped anything, either," T'Pring points out, which is also entirely true, not that Spock is going to acknowledge it.

"He will be gone by the end of the month," Spock reminds her as he pulls on his gloves. "And then we will turn to the tasks at hand."

"With full attention?" she says, almost gently, for her.

"With full attention," he agrees, running a hand through his hair in an attempt to make it sit correctly under the crown.

"If you wore it in Vulcan style, you would not find your coif problematic," she says. He gives her a look.

"I have the ears and the eyebrows, most people find that quite enough."

T'Pring's hair is knotted intricately in the way of High Vulcan society, sleek twists of black high on her head with gold combs tucked in for effect. Her upper eyelid has been darkened, and there is color on her cheeks. Her gown is silver and pale pale green, tight in the bodice and folding out at her hips, hugging the curve of her shoulders but leaving them bare. She is gorgeous, and he has never seen anyone look more like a queen. If he was any other man he would go down one a knee and beg to make her happy (of course, she would never be swayed by such an emotional display—he knows this from having witnessed it personally).

She lifts her eyebrow in an infinitely superior gesture as though she knows what he's thinking, and then begins quizzing him on the names of the peerage and parliamentarians and other important figures until Nyota walks in and collects (saves) him. She is equally stunning, her dress vibrant reds and golds and her hair twisted up and away from her face, interlaced with ribbon. Where T'Pring's energy is always serenely intense Nyota is calm, as though if anything happens she'll destroy it, and that will be the end.

"Are we ready?" she inquires.

"I do not believe that he can be better prepared than this," T'Pring acquiesces, which isn't a "yes", Spock notes. Nyota smiles at him wryly: she's noticed.

"Stop sulking because you're on Sybok-duty," Nyota admonishes, and then Skelev sticks his head inside the room and says,

"Are we going, or what?"

They head for the ballroom, Nyota a step behind on his right and T'Pring a step behind on his left, with Skelev bringing up the rear. "Just a precaution," Skelev says. "Would be shit for my reputation you got offed before the ball."

"That's appropriate," Nyota mutters, and Skelev bares his teeth in an approximation of a smile. Spock ignores them both. The crown feels strange on his head, and he reaches up to adjust it for the eighteenth time.
"Don't fiddle, it looks fine and won't fall off," Nyota admonishes, and then glances out. "Now, you'll go into the center of the floor, the Prince joins you…you dance, and then you dance with everyone on the list, without deviation. Shras and I will be here if you need us, and don't forget to make the rounds."

"I am more concerned with T'Pring's ability to keep Sybok in hand," Spock says, but it's a lie. He wants to get this right: it should be a celebration but it's not, too many eyes watching him for him to do something frivolous like enjoy himself.

T'Pring's homicidal calm makes Spock flinch on Sybok's behalf, and she meets his eyes, her eyebrows flicking a smirk in his direction.

The doors are swung open with great ceremony and he is announced, and in a staggering moment the crush of people all go down into low bows. It is…it makes him feel strangely young, and not at all ready for this.

He walks to the center of the open space, and when he turns, Jim is there, and Spock certainly doesn't do something as indulgent as catch his breath.

"This was a bad idea," Jim murmurs as Spock's white-gloved hand wraps around Jim's black-gloved hand. Spock wonders if there's symbolism there, and then process what Jim's said.

"Oh?" he inquires, and is promptly horrified by the indulgent tone of his own voice.

"I've forgotten all the steps," Jim says, and Spock looks at him, but he seems genuine.

"…That is not funny," Spock says flatly as the music begins and they start to move.

"It's kind of funny. Like that moment, just now, when you kind of went pale? That was funny to me," Jim assures him, grinning and not moving his mouth enough to let the gossips in on what he's saying.

"You are provoking them," Spock murmurs, but doesn't let his lips move either. It's catching, apparently, but something's coming loose in him.

"I am," Jim agrees. "Someone should have warned you that I don't play well with others."

"That is neither what I've heard nor experienced," Spock prevaricates, and Jim looks at him in pleased surprise, then bites his bottom lip against a laugh.

When it slides from between his teeth it's slick and red and Spock swallows and jerks his gaze back to Jim's eyes so he doesn't do something idiotic press a kiss to that lip, soothe it with his own tongue.

"Well," Jim allows, finally, "you're special."

The dance ends too soon, and Spock watches Jim melt into the crowd, tilting his head towards Prime Minister Pike to catch what he's saying before turning to the Lady Winona, and Spock dances with Prince Frederick and absolutely does not compare him to Jim and find him flawed.

The clock chimes past midnight and Jim's laughter draws Spock's attention from across the room. He is in a cluster with the leader of the Opposition, Lord Daakvich, and various other politicians; several admirals included, who look less than indulgent. His laughter has a strange edge to it; a weapon, suddenly.
"If you'll ex—" Pike begins, clearly with the same thought of saving Jim as has occurred to Spock. Jim puts a hand on Daakvich's arm and murmurs something to him, and even his smile is sharp-edged. Daakvich stares and then bursts out laughing, a great snorting bellow that echoes off the high ceiling. It turns heads, and a few other admirals are watching Jim with indulgent expressions, which is interesting; Jim seems to divide as he goes along, and there seem to be no shades of grey. Spock has yet to meet anyone who is apathetic to Jim Kirk.

"I do not think," T'Pring murmurs, watching out of the corner of her eye, "that he requires a rescue."

It doesn't matter, Spock is already moving across the floor because it's the first official day that has dawned with him as seated King, and he knows what he wants.

"I apologize," Spock says, and Jim's hand has closed around his before Spock's even finished the second word, "but I believe I was promised this dance."

"How forgetful of me," Jim sighs, all coquettish artifice, and then grins at the people he was entertaining and allows himself to be led out, fingers tangled in Spock's.

It's inadvisable, Spock knows, to show such preference. They will absolutely think that there's been an offer made, now, and T'Pring and Nyota will be marshaling their forces to launch the counter-offensive, saying that he and Jim are friends, that Spock is unattached and wants to focus on matters of state before he looks to marriage.

A quick glance around the room reveals his father as disapproving, Sybok as speculative, Pike concerned and T'Pring and Nyota long-suffering in their own ways.

It is his coronation; he is King. For now he will be indulgent and selfish and enjoy this.

"You seemed to be enjoying the company of the Leader of the Opposition," Spock observes.

"I like Tellerites, generally," Jim says with a shrug and grin. "They argue like it's a sport. And they're assholes, you gotta respect that."

"Indeed."

"I was informed I wasn't getting more than one dance," Jim says, glancing over to where Spock knows T'Pring is standing.

"It was mentioned once or twice," Spock agrees, and Jim slides his gaze from T'Pring to Spock.

"Going rogue?" he asks, and it's genuine and teasing both.

"You are a bad influence," Spock replies, and it's the truth, but maybe not in the way the phrase implies. Jim's presence seems to inspire Spock to shrug off the mantle of perfect Prince—King, now—and instead take up the mantle of who he wants to be. Live up to his best ideals. Which is vaguely embarrassing, actually.

Jim grins, and then shakes his head slightly. "I'm okay with that," he decides, and Spock tightens his hold on the small of Jim's back, drawing him in as Jim's conversation turns to the Antares crew and their misadventures.
To be fair, Jim doesn't actually plan on ending the evening with Spock's dick up his ass.

No, really—it would just be awesome if it did, is what he's saying.

He even tries to be a gentleman about it:

"I have a room—" Jim begins as Spock pulls him in, raises an eyebrow. "Probably not as nice as yours," Jim agrees airily: fuck being a gentleman. "Forget I said anything."

"I try to," Spock replies, and Jim has to kiss him just to shut him up.

Spock's lips are hot against his, the stretch of his smile impossible to resist tasting and they fall into the inner room of Spock's fucking wing laughing. Jim's shrugged out of his jacket; shoved Spock's away and has his waistcoat hanging off of one of Spock's arms, shirt haphazardly and ineffectually unbuttoned because Jim keeps getting distracted—wants to kiss the smile at the corner of Spock's mouth, the line of his jaw or nip the underside of his chin, suck a bruise to the exposed skin on his collarbone.

"Wait—" Spock says, and Jim lets him go into the bathroom, laughs when Spock comes out with a condom and lube because that answers that question. Also raises a few about Spock's staff, but Jim's going to take the path of least resistance and be really psyched about this.

He's already down to just his pants (Jim is the fastest stripper on the Antares—he'd proven it when they'd realized that their hosts, who had offered to clean their clothes, had actually put some kind of poisoned powder in them. Jim had his uniform off in 10 seconds flat—never mind that he still had the worst reaction of everyone, that is just his fucking life). Spock comes back into the circle of Jim's arms—naked, god, all that skin Jim wants to taste—lets Jim toss the condom and lube onto the bed and walk them back towards it.

Jim thinks he could take this slow because it's Spock's first time (and Jim's never really been a fan of the virgin thing, prefers his partners to have sure hands and mouths, but he's rethinking that really, really hard right now, jealous to have all of Spock's firsts). He even tries, for a bit, to softly kiss Spock and keep his hands above Spock's hips, but Spock gives him an incredulous look, dark hair falling into his face and Jim thinks that no-one ever got what they wanted by asking for something less and rolls Spock under him, drags his hips against Spock's in a long tease.

Spock arches under Jim's hands, small trembles and uncertain, hesitant brushes of fingertips, and the soft sound Spock makes might be Jim's name, or that might be wishful thinking on Jim's part.

Jim reaches out blindly, finding the condom and ripping open the packet, rolling it down Spock's dick and then slicking a hand up and down, coating it with lube and watching the way Spock goes abruptly boneless, splayed out and seemingly perfectly content to let Jim have his way with him, and isn't that an idea? He coats his fingers, reaches behind himself and slides them inside, hissing a little at the burn as he stretches himself loose, open for Spock's cock, watching Spock watching him with heavily-lidded eyes.

"Fuck," Spock finally manages, a hand skating along Jim's thigh, another wrapped loosely around his dick like he was going to jack off and got distracted before he could even start. His hand reaches around, and Jim shudders as Spock's finger drags around his hole, fingers tangling with Jim's and Jim shifts, slides his fingers out and says, aiming for light and falling somewhere around desperate:
"That's the idea, yeah."

He's the one who guides Spock's dick inside him, Spock's hands on Jim's thighs, watching like he's afraid Jim's somehow going to hurt himself, and Jim can't think about that too much because it will make him go insane, so he just slides down until he's got Spock's balls snug against his ass.

"Come on," Jim murmurs, grinding himself down, and Spock begins to move with him, following Jim's pace, which is great, fine, but it's better when Spock realizes that if he thrusts up just so he hits that sweet spot and Jim will choke and whimper, which apparently does it for Spock.

Jim—Jim just wants, can have, and Spock's here under him, spread out and slick and perfect; his, and it's almost too much.

There are promises and threats and utterly filthy things coming out of his mouth but Jim couldn't for the life of him say what those are, has no idea what he's saying at all. Hopes that Spock understands Jim's trying to say how good this is and how Spock's cock is perfect inside him, a hot thick stretch, filling him like he wasn't made to do anything else.

"Perfect in me," Jim gasps. "Spock." Bends forward and rolls his hips in sweet little moves that make Spock rub against his prostate, Spock's fingers in his hair and his tongue licking into Jim's mouth.

Jim's so close, his toes starting to curl and his thighs clenching as he strains towards it and it's bright and hot and such a fucking tease, just out of his reach. "Spock," Jim groans against Spock's mouth, pleading and not even sure for what, only—

"Jim," Spock manages, and it's torn from him, rough and in tatters, almost too weak to make it to Jim's ears but it's enough, and Jim's falling over the edge, head thrown back and clenching down, gripping Spock's shoulder for balance with one hand and the other on his cock. He blinks sweat from his eyes, every bit of him shaking and tired, f*cked out, but he thinks he could watch Spock like this, just like this forever. Could give everything up if this was what the universe was willing to give him in trade.

"Come on, Spock," he manages, and he sound so wrecked, even to his own ears. "Come on, come for me, fuck it right in—"

And Spock stills, presses bruises black and vivid into Jim's hips as he comes, shuddering inside, head thrown back and mouth open and looking stunned, and Jim gets it. Coming from jacking off is different from coming from a blowjob which is different from coming buried to the hilt inside someone.

Jim leans forward, slides off and shifts, ignores the burn and the ache of being empty, murmurs an apology as he gets rid of the condom, grabs a towel and runs it under hot water to clean them off with and then collapses against Spock.

"With me?" he asks, nuzzling lightly at Spock's jaw, and then laughs, just a little, when he's pinned to the bed and kissed, hard and sloppy like something should come of it; the kind of kiss that says sex is imminent, not that it just happened.

"Yes," Spock says, and Jim's forgotten the question but it can't be bad, not when the answer is "yes." There's a brief moment where Jim almost gets up, forces his body to wake up—and it's not that Jim doesn't know how to stay the night; Jim's the living breathing representation of the phrase "give an inch, takes a mile" but this is new, and Spock doesn't say "leave." If anything he curls around Jim so he'll stay, with Spock tucked against his back, legs a tangle in the huge, unforgivably
decadent bed. All in all, Jim's moment of 'shit, what did I do?' is a lot shorter than usual. Must mean he's growing as a person or something.

Spock's already awake when Jim jerks awake, glancing at his watch before slumping back into the pillows: he doesn't have to be up yet. Which begs the question of why Spock is, because it's eight, and they only got to sleep two hours ago.

"Come're," Jim says, voice hoarse from sleep and last night, and slings an arm around Spock's hip, pulling him in closer. "'S'too early to be awake," he mumbles. "Sleep." Spock is stiff, like he has regrets or is worried about what this means, and Jim presses close and sighs. "Be okay," he promises. "Go t' sleep." Spock shifts, just a little, tucking Jim against him more closely, and does.

"It's—" Spock starts, and watches as Jim makes a complicated face like he can't decide whether he can even bear to swallow. "Really. I'm fascinated by the idea that this is the line you've drawn about things going into your mouth."

Jim finally swallows the infinitesimally small sip of Vulcan tea, and gives Spock a very, very betrayed look. It is, unsurprisingly, highly attractive. There is, of course, the fact that Jim has declared all of his clothing "awful and unwearable, seriously, did you see that shit?" and so he's appropriated a pair of Spock's pajama bottoms and has worn them for the past two days. Though to be fair, neither one of them has spent more time than absolutely necessary in clothing. Spock blames Jim. It's becoming a running theme, actually.

"I'm just saying," Jim says now, "that was a really terrible thing. Like, weirdly terrible. Weirrible. What was it?"

"You couldn't pronounce it," Spock replies, and lets his eyebrow convey just what he thinks of the liberties Jim is taking with the language, and Jim reaches for his cup of coffee and coos at it. He sounds like a tribble. (Spock actually has no idea what the tea's native name is. His father has only ever called it "tea", and Sybok calls it "That fucking awful stuff", but he is not telling Jim that.)

A knock on the door interrupts whatever Spock was going to say about that fact (he was mentally composing it; it would have been devastating), and he gets up and finds Nyota on the other side of the door.

"Your Majesty," she says, and then, without even looking into the room, "Your Serene Highness."

"Duchess," Jim calls back cheerfully. The synthesizer trills—trills—happily, and Spock spares a moment to mourn the fact that it will never work the same again.

"What is it?" he asks, because there is a pinscratch line between her brows and her mouth is slightly pursed.

"The Empress of the Romulan Star Empire is hailing you, sire," she says. "She wishes to extend felicitations on the event of your coronation."
Jim leans against the door, and says blankly, "Bullshit."

Nyota looks rather like she said the same thing when she first realized what was going on.

"It's the Empress," she says, raising her eyebrows to convey that this is A Very Big Deal, as though Spock has been brain-damaged recently. "Not a minion or the head of the Romulan Senate."

"Give me five minutes," Spock says, and she nods, pulling the door closed behind her and he catches the faint sounds of her speaking with T'Pring.

Jim is drinking his coffee, watching Spock pull on clothing, Spock's crown hanging from Jim's little finger. Spock's sure there's some sort of message there: something to be interpreted, but it's Jim and it could just be that he picked it up and genuinely forgot he had it, or that he has no feeling in his pinky and was somehow unaware of its presence.

"Remember, peace with the Romulans, war with the Klingons," Jim says as Spock opens the door, and Spock gives him a look and heads into the Piaf Room to speak with the Romulan Empress.

"Your Majesty," the Romulan Empress, Mnheia i-Ra'tleihih tr'D'Amorok, says, inclining her head slightly. She looks like she could be T'Pring's sharper-faced aunt, with black tattoos framing sharp brown eyes and sharper cheekbones. She is devastatingly, cruelly beautiful, and Spock knows that this is part of her power. She is unnerving and beautiful and brilliant, and she knows it.

Spock's met Winona Kirk and Una Pike, and his entire life is run by T'Pring and Nyota Uhura. He's somewhat less than impressed by her, coming from that vantage point.

"Your Imperial Majesty," Spock replies, inclining his head just as much.

"I wish to personally extend my felicitations upon your ascension," she says, waving the fingers of one hand dismissively as though this doesn't mean as much as it does.

"I thank you for that; it is generous of you, given the situation we find ourselves speaking under."

"Tensions are as they have ever been, your Majesty."

"I believe we both recognize that to be a polite falsehood," Spock says, and then adds after a pause he lets linger too long, "Your Imperial Majesty."

Her eyebrow flicks up.

"War would exhaust both of our realms, leaving us both vulnerable to the Klingons. I believe I say with some assurance that neither of us will be seeking an alliance with them," he says, spreading his hands and keeping his face carefully, impossibly Vulcan-blank.

Do not think of it as burying your emotions, T'Pring had always said when he'd glared at her after one too many lessons on logic and Surak's ways. Think of it as...a subversion. You are subverting the emotional in service of the rational.

He thinks this is the first time he's understood why that would be a preferable way to live.

"You are correct in this. Klingons cannot be trusted; but then neither can the King of the Federation," Mnheia observes.

"I am disappointed to hear you say so."

"I am content to allow things to continue," she decides.
"If that were the case, you would not be speaking to me. You have placed much store in my coming. Your correspondences with my uncle have, ever since my birth, indicated that you cannot do business with a Terran, but might with a Vulcan. I am as near as you will get; when again do you suppose, after you have permitted this opportunity to pass you by, will you get a second chance at peace for your people? And do you think they will forgive you for it? I am a new King, I may be excused my foibles and missteps. You are forty years on your throne, and have as of yet delivered nothing but death to the hands of your people."

She watches him, and Spock doesn't drop her gaze, holds it until a faint smile twists the corner of her mouth. "Phralae ru au krowert. Glohhaasi' mnekha. Jolan'tru"

"Hann'yyo, lhhei. Phralae ru au krowert. Jolan'tru."

The screen goes blank, and Spock feels the grain of the desk under his hands course as though it's hacked log, and not polished wood. T'Pring is standing by the window, watching him, and he's grateful for her. Impossibly grateful that she will stand there and let him relax instead of demanding to know what he wants.

"Where is Nyota?" he asks, looking at her.

"Already informing your people that the Romulans have extended their best wishes," T'Pring replies.

"Of course," Spock agrees. Perfectly logical. "What did you think?"

She lifts an eyebrow and sits across from his desk: the technicians have already slipped from the room. There was a time, Spock thinks, that he would feel bad for not knowing their names or taking too much notice of them. He's only been on the throne three days and he's already become that kind of noble.

"She wished you good hunting," T'Pring points out. "This is obviously an extension of well-wishes, an advantage which must be pushed."

"Abandon all efforts towards Klingon?"

"Logic would suggest that as the most reasonable, efficient course of action." T'Pring looks at him. "This will extend the engagement with the Klingon Empire," she points out. "Based upon current projections, that implies an escalation."

She doesn't say, Jim Kirk leaves in a month for the Antares, and he will be going into the warzone. She doesn't have to.

"All the better reason to end this quickly," he replies, and she nods.

"That is logical," she says blandly, and he throws her a look.

"You damn me with faint praise."

"Then you must adjust your behavior to be worthy of fervid praise," she replies easily, unfolding herself gracefully and standing. "You are meeting with the Andorian delegation at 1400, and the Illyri Director will be in at 1600. Dinner with your father at 1900, and if you should happen upon your brother—"

"Is he missing?" Spock asks, slightly alarmed.
"He is…misplaced," she says, and Spock has seen that look on his father's face, on his own face and on all of their tutor's faces. He's fairly certain, however, that none of them ever had that faint air of homicide. He almost pities Sybok: when she finds him, it's not going to be pretty.

Spock has three hours before he has to meet with the Andorians.

Jim is on his stomach on the bed, coffee perched precariously on the mussed sheets. Spock pauses in the doorway, something unfamiliar and sharp caught in his chest and throat as Jim flips through the day's news.

"I've decided to start a war," Jim announces without looking up. "I'm stealing the Enterprise."

"I appreciate the advance notice," Spock replies, and shrugs out of coat and vest and undoes the ascot, stretching out next to Jim, sliding a hand down the smooth expanse of Jim's back, luxuriating in the feel of it; loving that this is something he can have, for however briefly.

"I can think of ways you can talk me out of it or distract me though, is the good news," Jim informs him, eyes still on the PADD, smile slowly revealing teeth.

"Very thoughtful of you," Spock agrees, and slides his hand down further.

"Now if only you'd be so good as to share them…"

"It's almost appalling how bad you are at this," Jim observes, staring at the board. They're playing chess, which is a perfectly acceptable, appropriate activity, even if Sarek, Sybok, Captain and Prime Minister Pike are in the room. Because Jim can't be trusted here, but it's perfectly fine for him to, you know. Not go back to his room.

They're all so very…on best behavior. And pretending that no-one knows that Jim hasn't been back to his suite since…he got here.

Right.

"I can relate," Spock winces when Jim moves his rook into a sacrificial position. Jim eyes the board and the piece in his hand and then raises his eyebrows.

"Empathizing with chess pieces is ill-advised, and kind of existentialist," he points out, and then, because this should be made abundantly clear: "And no-one is sacrificing you to the greater good." Spock gives him a long look, and Jim smiles his capitulation, shrugging a shoulder. "Get better than they are, then."

"T'Pring suggests I find a spouse who can play this game of politics better than I," he says, and then, "Your mother was mentioned. And Skkevron"

"Okay, first, that's fucking horrifying, shut up. And second…that's stupid. Why get someone who can play it for you? Find someone who can play it with you."

He won't, though, Jim doesn't think. Spock doesn't want a partner, someone who rules beside him equally. Jim doesn't know if that's because he's like a new captain, too afraid to let his XO have too much responsibility lest it make the captain look like a fucking slacker, or if it's a character flaw of Spock's.
As it is, Jim only has a week left so it's becoming less and less his problem.

Not that he's really excited about that bit. Never mind the fact that he's leaving Spock, he hasn't spoken to Gary or Sulu since they docked a month and a half ago, so he's going to get shit.

But the worst is going to be Bones, who is probably writing Winona long letters about what a disappointing son Jim is and why this is all her fault.

Jim's only 84% joking, there. Bones did write Winona a letter once, when he was particularly pissed off and Jim had almost gotten himself killed by being reckless.

She has the diatribe against her parenting skills framed in the main hallway of Kirk Estate.

Jim can tell that Spock wants to ask Jim who he thinks he should pick, if he was to pick someone to play it with him, this fucking game of politics. Jim doesn't have an answer for him. There's Stonn, of Vulcan, who would make a smart choice (Vulcan would be a smart choice, if you look at the Romulan angle, and a Vulcan from the southern hemisphere where Surak's influence never held too tightly). There's Frederick, who's an ass but politically a good pick. There's Ueri3 of Illyria, or Tamaska. Dozens, maybe hundreds of good candidates.

Jim's a shitty candidate, but he's the only one who's seen Spock shake apart, who's had him.

Having the captain around is strange, if only because it's confusing the two worlds Jim seems to be living in. Prince James of America (not to be confused with the dude who had Spock's come leaking out of his ass last night, god, not that Bones is ever finding that out because the rants about VDs and Jim's potential allergy to semen would scar him for life—that guy's just Jim) and Lieutenant Commander Kirk don't meet, but the captain is cheerfully blurring the distinctions.

Well, cheerfully. She's doing it with restrained amusement, which for her is the equivalent of pointing and laughing. Illyri are a very reserved people.

"What are you doing?" the captain asks, lifting her eyebrow at him. "Not that I'm not used to you accomplishing the relative impossible, but if you intend to have the Enterprise, you cannot have him."

"I could make him give it to me as a morning gift," Jim reflects, and she slants another look at him.

"Commander." That tone of voice never fails to make his back straighten, and he sighs.

"I hear you. I'm not angling to be his princess."

"Enjoying shore leave," she says, and he nods.

"Enjoying shore leave," he agrees.

She nods. "Shame we're leaving before the election."

Jim grins. "You just don't want to deal with him pouting."

"He's an infant," she informs him, and Jim laughs and makes a note to tell Chris that his wife has no faith in his ability to hold a majority, and also is running away from the epic sulk she expects
him to throw down.

"The captain has left?" Spock asks, later, with something strangely like relief.

"Mm, apparently Pike talked her into going home with him, or something," Jim agrees, reaching back, fitting snugly against Spock.

"You call him "Pike", but not her?" Spock asks.

"You're asking me about semantics when the door is closed and you don't have any meetings for the rest of the day?" Jim asks, and Spock's teeth drag against his neck, hot air skating along Jim's collarbone as Spock laughs.

"No," he says.

*I suppose not.*

They're not…talking about the whole end-of-shore-leave thing, even in Jim's last week. His stuff has been packed away, and he's already gone over the supplies list (there are always things that they have to buy for themselves. Things Starfleet doesn't think that they need or knows that they need but never supply them with. This time Scotty's sent Jim a desperate plea for cobicite coils and .8333 conductors made specifically from perillium. Jim has disposable income, he brings the things that Scotty needs and buys the things Gaila will forget to bring, the things Sulu won't bring because he thinks he won't want or miss them and then will mope about having neglected. He brings extra body butter for Madeline because she's Nymfae and her skin dries out and it always takes Scotty longer than he thinks it will to synthesize the stuff. He brings canned fruits and makes sure that they're stocked with tea and that Scotty's expanded the synthesizers' capabilities.

So Jim's going through the motions, getting the stuff they need and checking the roster and monitoring the Kelvin Disaster Radius (The KDR is just the easiest way to remember that that's the space the Klingons made their most brazen overtures towards outright war. If there's irony that that's the pocket of space Jim's spent the most time in, he doesn't want to hear about it).

And he's smiling at politicians and somehow representing Earth in ways he hasn't quite figured out but figures he's doing all right with because no-one has tried to kill him yet, and at night he continues Spock's sexual education.

And then, very abruptly, it's time to leave, and they're standing on opposite ends of the room with a table between them and Jim doesn't quite understand how that happened.

"It's not…" Jim starts, and breaks off, because he wants to say that this isn't goodbye. That this isn't the end, it's just an intermission, and when they come back from the break they'll be able to pick up just where they left off. That this won't change everything; that Jim won't become Spock's dirtiest secret that he'll grin wryly whenever Jim happens to come to mind, and then wave away explaining to his dutiful spouse.

That Jim's not going to smirk and tell one of his space harpies that he was the first person to blow the King. It'll be safe to tell them—in bars, no-one even listens to the shit coming out of someone's mouth, and Jim would only ever say it for shock value: would never tell anyone who might remember, take him seriously.

Spock smiles faintly, poised and put together and just a little bit more closed than he's ever been with Jim. "Try to be safe."

Jim considers. "Scotty's staying on for this tour," he says apologetically, and it doesn't get the smile
he's trying for, or the familiar look of you're annoying, but I'm enduring it because I like you for some incomprehensible reason.

"Jim," Spock says it softly, his hand reaching out and falling back to his side abortively, and Jim shifts, puts on his fuck yes, I'm James T. Kirk grin, and slides his hands into his pockets.

"I'll be fine. This I'm good at." Falling in love with people he can't have? That's something he's good at too. Not that he's going to share that—even he's not that suicidal, and Sarek always looks at Jim like he's going to kill him. Well, Sybok insists Sarek looks at everyone like that, which is a blatant lie because Spock he looks at indulgently and Sybok he wonders at in that soft way that parents do with their children.

"You have other talents," Spock says, serious and painfully genuine and—

"This one I can legally make money with," Jim points out lightly, and Spock gives him an exasperated look like Jim's not playing to the script. Fuck the script. "I'll see you in three years, Spock."

He's out the doors, down the hall and almost to the stairs before Spock catches him, kisses him brutally rough and desperate, hands in Jim's hair and Jim's back pressed against the wall too hard. Jim's hands grip his sides, clench in the layers of fabric and gives as good as he gets, using teeth and tongue.

"You will come back," Spock breathes against Jim's lips, pressing their foreheads together and it's a plea and command and declaration of something all in one.

"I'll come back," Jim agrees, and disentangles gently.

He walks out without looking back: Jim's good at this part.

Leaving.

It's not a surprise to find Sybok in his room when he enters, but Spock had kind of hoped to be pleasantly surprised by his absence.

"It was either me, Uhura, T'Pring or Father," Sybok informs him from the chair he's sprawled in. "I figured you'd like me best. Well, I say 'like' but—"

"How did you manage to win that fight?" Spock asks, sinking down onto the couch and putting his feet up, and only just bites back that really he'd like to be very alone to mope, thanks. Possibly watch a terrible movie and see if he's capable of having a good cry.

"I am very resourceful," Sybok says earnestly.

"You locked them in various places, didn't you? Am I going to have to send out a search party for my staff and our father?" Spock tries to convey to the ceiling how tired he is. The ceiling is entirely unsympathetic.

He can't look at the room: he shouldn't—he should have thought that the room reminding him of Jim would be an issue, that he would have to get into bed and lay on his side (he never had a side
before, but he does now) alone. That he would look at the desk and chairs and sofas and think of all the places he's had Jim. That he'd look at the chess set (still a brutal graveyard of his pieces, Jim's rook and queen towering over Spock's tipped over king) and know that it would be years before they'd play another game.

If ever.

Shit.

"Spock," Sybok sighs, crouching down beside the couch and looking at Spock like Spock's breaking his heart with his own broken heart. Sometimes Sybok seems such a child.

When Spock was young, still uncertain of his place in the world, knowing he was different but not knowing precisely how he was different, Sybok had curled up with him in his mother's study and read Spock the books Amanda had read to him. Some of the inflections, Spock remembers, had to have been Amanda's because they were so unlike Sybok's cadence.

Spock remembers being curled up against Sybok's side and feeling like there was no problem his brother couldn't fix: that Spock couldn't break things so bad that Sybok couldn't put them together again.

Their father, Spock knows, loved—loves—them both. But Sarek had always modeled how to be a perfect Vulcan, and Spock understands that—can see now that he's older that Sarek did it so that no-one could claim that Spock was anything less than the son of a Vulcan and Terran. That Sarek had had to compensate for Sybok's wildness by being even more reserved; an archetype more than a father.

Sarek protected them both by being beyond reproach, and Spock wonders how much that cost him: what his father would be like if his mother had survived. If he would have permitted himself to smile on occasion, or yell, or stroke Spock's hair affectionately when he was very young.

"What was I supposed to do?" Spock demands, weary suddenly of all of it; of the whole situation. "Tell me. I didn't make him any promise, and he's back out there for another three years at the least—if the Enterprise is ready he'll dock long enough to take her over and then be gone again. He might not even set foot on the ground, just beam aboard his new ship and—" he cuts himself off, moderates his tone. "I have no claim to him, and he would...hate me for asking him to stay," Spock says, and it's all true. It was foolish and reckless, and he indulged himself and now he's paying for it, if only in the form of a broken heart. He should be glad there have been no political repercussions, but of course there haven't been. The Federation loves Jim; has taken him and embraced him as its own golden prince; the boy born of tragedy and burnished in its fires. Spock is their hope for peace, but Jim is their figurehead for war; for surviving the impossible.

The Tellarites and Ilyrians especially are fond of him; Earth beams at the attention.

Sybok still looks at him sadly. "You have so much pain," he says, quietly miserable, so upset about something he hasn't caused and cannot fix.

"It will pass," Spock says, turning on the holo and watching the live feed as the crew members of the Antares depart their shuttles and step onto the Earth Spacedock, ready to head out into the black for five years.

Jim is laughing at a young man with brown hair and a quick smile, whom he abandons completely for an older man with a scowl which only wanes after several seconds of animated talk from Jim. They stand very close together, Spock notes, and the man looks openly affectionate. There are
others; there is Captain Una Pike, Lord Pike's wife, who merits at least as much coverage, but unless she walks into frame with Jim, Spock sincerely doubts she will be paid little more than lip service.

McCoy, Spock thinks when the man cuffs Jim upside the head, and something very like jealousy loosens inside his chest. That is his best friend, Leonard McCoy. The other must be Gary Mitchell. McCoy conducts an impromptu medical check, and Spock thinks that McCoy just asked Jim, 'Are you tracking?' as he moved his finger across Jim's field of vision. Jim pulls out a PADD and consults it, and Sybok and Spock both startle at the soft chime on Spock's desk.

I told you Bones was going to ask about rectal bleeding. You owe me— don't think I'm not going to collect just because it's three years. Spock looks up at the feed and Jim is grinning at the camera before allowing himself to be herded away.

"Oh yeah," Sybok says, looking at him with a combination of glee and pity on his face. "Yeah, you're gonna make a nice clean break. Not emotionally compromised at all."

"Shut up, please," Spock says, and Sybok sighs, and his fingers slide comforting through Spock's hair as the news anchor has a verbal orgasm over Jim's blue blue eyes and charming smile.

Bones is looming. Jim doesn't actually think that even Sarek could loom like Bones. It's the look that says "I'm going to hypo you to death" and also "we are going to be discussing rectal bleeding, don't even try to run."

Jim is not a fan of those looks. The fact that he can say looks, because he gets them frequently enough that he has them categorized, is really disturbing.

Gary, the vicious bastard, has abandoned him to his fate. Grabbed hold of Sulu's arm and they took off cackling like the unfeeling bastards they were once they'd managed to get into the spacedock, and not in the civilian areas.

Jim sighs. "Hi, honey, how was your shore leave?"

"Don't even give me that shit," Bones says with cheerful malice. "Jim, you know this is a safe space."

"It doesn't feel safe," Jim hedges, because he's pretty sure that's homicide glinting in Bones' eye.

"It is a safe space," Bones threatens. "Jim." He pauses, which is never a good sign, mouth twisting. "Did you feel forced?"

"What."

"Did he exert his...royal rights to your person?"

"You really just said that," Jim says in awed horror. Horrified awe. He is horrified and awestruck. Horrifawestruck.

"Well," Jim temporizes, because he's a shit and everyone knows it, and then he pauses, bites his lip artfully, and looks out the spacedock window a little wistfully.
Bones starts to have a quiet apoplectic fit across from him, clearly mentally cataloguing the hypos he's going to abuse Jim with and then the news outlets he's going to leak this information to. Possibly with strident PRINCE OF AMERICA SEXUALLY ABUSED BY KING plastered everywhere. Because Bones is the sensitive sort.

"He was really gentle," Jim says wistfully. "It was really... special, Bones."

Bones eyes him narrowly. "Jim."

"Yes, Bones?"

"Just stay here. I'm getting the gloves and the probe."

And then he gets up to do it. Jim flails for his arm.

"You ass!"

"Special, Jim? Really?" Bones replies, smirking like the sonovabitch he is.

Jim squeezes his arm tighter. "It was fine. No pressure, no strings—"

"Such a load of shit," Bones says cheerfully, sitting on the sofa beside Jim. "You're like that commercial with the condoms in the eyes instead of hearts."

"You always said that condoms were essential."

"Were?"

Well, and there it was. Jim's utter inability to keep anything from Bones because Bones is like a fucking lie detector and also catches every single slip Jim has ever made.

Jim leans back and covers his face with both hands.

"Were?" Bones demands, almost shrieking, and great, now the whole crew is going to know that Jim let Spock bareback him. Fuck his life. Fuck it so hard.

"I'm clean! You did my tests when we docked! And he's clean because he's—" Jim breaks off hastily but it's too late. The only thing Bones loves more than being pissed at Jim is gossip, and Jim knows it's too late to backtrack because Bones has stilled mid-grasp for hypo and stares at him with narrowed eyes.

"Um," Jim hedges. "I was... I mean..."

"Jim," Bones says, slow and labored. "Did you defile our new sovereign?"

"...'defile' is such a judgemental word," Jim says. "It wasn't—"


"What?" Jim demands, glaring and wishing for death.

"What you are telling me, essentially, right now, is that you managed in the space of one month—"

"Two days."

"...Two days. Two days—I no. Jim. You did in a couple of fucking days what—" Bones is actually
at a loss for words. He is *sputtering*, and barely able to talk through the scowl and clenched teeth. Jim would kill for a camera: this moment should be preserved for future generations. Or they should beam it into Klingon space and watch the bastards turn tail and flee in the face of Bones' awesome rage.

"I find power sexy," Jim informs him as earnestly as he can, spreading his hands.

"You find power—well, only in the sense that you *want* it, because you are a control freak with horrifying tendencies towards tyranny," Bones allows, and then his lips twist and he sighs, a deep gust of 'I'm so disappointed in you I don't even have words'. "*Jim.*"

"*Bones,*" Jim mimics. He is going to pay for this dearly when Bones does their pre-take-off check-Jim's-allergies-for-random-mutations check up, but this might actually be worth it.

Bones just looks at him. The guy's a whopping seven years older than Jim: even *Pike* doesn't manage to project distressed paternal concern like Bones.

Jim exhales. "I didn't *defile* your king, okay? I didn't seduce him and I didn't—"

"*Jim.*"

"I *didn't,*" Jim insists, because he honestly doesn't think that he did, here. If anything, he was the one seduced. But he can't say that because then they'd be right back to the royal rights to Jim's person being exercised and Jim just can't even deal with that shit.

Plus, Jim doesn't know how he'd explain the fact that he was the one whose fingers were pressing into Spock's thighs as he worked his cock down his throat, and Spock was the one grasping for purchase and trying really hard not to fuck Jim's face.

...okay, it's possible that Jim was the seducer here. But Jim doesn't see how Bones could blame him: he's clearly seen Spock.

"What I'm most curious about," Bones says, kicking Jim's ankle idly like a warning: DANGER, DANGER, THIS CONVERSATION IS NOT AS SAFE AS YOU THINK IT IS. "Is that true, you slept with him. I get that, it's you. But what I don't get is that after that, instead of taking shore leave with us or beating your brother into a bloody pulp, you, Jim 'I don't like diplomacy did you know I actually am licensed to kill' Kirk, stayed on the Core, at Bentley Palace, and played a good prince." Bones gives him a long, long look. "You see why I'm concerned here."

"I'm exercising my 'I don't like this conversation, let's make it stop' card," Jim decides.

"Oh, should we go back to testing you for disease? He might have been a virgin but he's a hybrid and he might have been carrying something from either of his parents. You'd never know, with Vulcans so fucking closed-mouthed and the royal family no fucking better. You'd never know and we'd leave a wake of dead space harpies in our wake."

"Why is it," Jim wants to know, "that when I sleep with them they're space harpies and tramps, and when you sleep with them they're goddesses?"

"Because you've got all the self-preservation of a drunk lemming at a family barbecue," Bones snaps comfortably.

Jim sighs, and surrenders to the tricorder and a regimen of antibiotics and vitamins that Bones decides he needs *right this second*. And then there's the uncomfortable moment of staring at the ceiling while Bones makes sure Jim's dick isn't going to fall off, and Jim is spared from having to
talk about his magical true love for their newly-minted (and defiled) monarch.

Jim heads out with Bones, because Bones understands that the press coverage is going to be absolutely batshit, and Captain Pike is going to pretend that she's momentarily sane and then possibly (very calmly) (literally) bite a reporter's head off.

It's Jim's duty as first mate to ensure that people are only maimed, not killed.

Also, he thinks it's fucking hilarious, so this is usually his favorite part of taking off.

But today it's not going to be hilarious, because that clusterfuck of vultures in the media room are for Jim, not for Pike, which is just fucking...insane.

But Bones' scowl is worth twenty Cupcakes, and when he walks blithely into seven high-tech recording systems because their handlers couldn't move them fast enough, people start to scramble and Jim thinks that he'd totally enter a sexless marriage with Bones, *that's* how much he loves him.

Gary and Sulu show up about two seconds before they start prepping to disengage from the docking port, but they do make it onto the ship and then life is normal, the *Antares* humming welcome and delight under Jim's feet, anxious to get out and go in a way Jim's almost forgotten to be.

"Hi, baby," he murmurs, sitting at his station and running systems check.

"You're so in love with this ship," Gaila coos at him, frowning at her headphone before twisting it in her ear. "I think this one is new, there's like, no ear wax on it. I hate it when Scotty fucking updates shit and doesn't tell us."

"That bit about ear wax? Could have gone without knowing," Jim tells her earnestly, and, once satisfied that everything is working the way it should, he heads over to Pike.

"So, we're heading towards the edge of Klingon space?"

"Kelvin disaster radius," she agrees, and then, "Kirk, go talk to Mr. Scott about his need to change the computer's voice. And its forms of address. 'Dear' is not a proper title for a captain."

Jim thinks even Prime Minister Pike is smart enough not to call Captain Pike "dear", and heads down to engineering to go talk to Scotty (and then Keenser, because if you're serious about getting something done, you talk to Keenser because Scotty is amazing with mechanics, but such complete fail at everything else).

"I like it when she croons to me," Scotty says earnestly, smiling fondly at the ship. He looks two seconds from crooning himself.

"Yes, but the Captain doesn't," Jim replies patiently, ignoring Scotty's madness because getting sucked into it is hazardous to Jim's liver, which is hazardous to his life because if Jim gets trashed one more time with Scotty he's going to get killed. "And we're active now, so turn the program off or I'll turn it off."

Scotty eyes him. They all remember the last time Jim turned something off: he'd gone in and found all of the subroutines and Scotty had almost cried.

"Fine," Scotty sulks, and Keenser rolls his eyes from behind them and Jim thinks it'll be a good trip: they're not even out of the gate and Jim's beaten Scotty into submission.
Stepping back in the turbolift and heading towards the bridge he slides his hands into his pockets and smiles. This might be okay after all.

Part III

"I know people," Sybok says earnestly, blatantly ignoring the fact that just yesterday Spock had told him flatly that Spock's space was his own, and that Sybok had his own suite and also his own residence. "We could have them all killed."

Spock looks at him. "'Tyrant' isn't exactly what I'm going for," he points out, though Sybok probably does know people who could effect that for him.

Come to think, so does Spock. He suspects if he told Jim he'd give him the Enterprise early, Jim would eliminate all of Spock's headaches.

Sybok shrugs. "Suit yourself. I could take away their pain, then they'd be very—"

"Sybok."

It's one of those things that they don't talk about, not because either of them is particularly uncomfortable with it but because their father always has been. What Sybok can do has always made Sarek and the people around Spock too nervous. It's not all that egregious; it's not terrifying. Sybok can, somehow, force people to confront their pain; the worst moments which haunt them and twist them apart and take it from them. "Take" is the wrong verb, Spock supposes. He doesn't take it, he just...helps them to process it. Forces them too. Sybok is a rarity among Vulcans, a touch-telepath second and an empath first.

Some people come out of a meld with Sybok unswayed. More often the shock of the trauma's absence leaves them almost infantile, and they cling to Sybok as their only rock as they readjust their world views—as though Sybok is the only thing that makes sense anymore. Weaker minds never recover, but Spock has only seen Sybok do that once.

Spock had been five. They'd been on Vulcan, and Spock had been asleep when the assassins had broken in. He remembers that there were phaser whines and several guards administering the pinch, but that Sybok had come through the door separating their rooms and grabbed Spock, blankets and all, and run with him.

They had somehow gotten twisted around in the broad expanse of the palace, and Spock, so afraid and small, had only been able to sense the black hate coming at him from the people following them and then Sybok's fear and anger. He raised his shields against it and buried his face in Sybok's shoulder, clung to him.

Sybok had stared at the walls, then turned to the three who had followed and said, breathing too hard, "Your pain runs deep."

Spock twisted to look up at him, stronger shields crashing down against the strange feeling coming from Sybok, and their pursuers began to choke and whimper, like small animals deprived of warmth and food, so near to death.
"Share it with me," Sybok snarled, and the air ran thick with it, pain and hurt and buried wrongs deflected against Sybok's shields, leaving behind shells. Three people sitting hard, staring at him in childish wonder, and Sybok being fifteen and unrepentant. He had knelt down to be eye-level with Spock, had smoothed his hands down Spock's cheeks and down his arms, over his chest, checking to make sure he was okay.

"I'm fine," Spock had said, and Sybok had looked so relieved and overwhelmed then, and maybe a little scared and Spock had lowered his shields because it was Sybok, and his brother, and Spock couldn't think of a place that would exist where Sybok would hurt him.

Sarek had found them, and he had pinched the three harmless would-be assassins and then fallen to the ground and sat beside them, staring at them both before reaching a shaking hand to Sybok's face, checking him for damage in the same way Sybok had checked Spock.

There had been questions, Spock remembers that. A hearing, maybe, all of it hushed and covered by Sarek and Uncle William. It had been an attack on the heir to the throne, and his brother had protected him. All the other details were irrelevant. Spock thinks that Sarek has never known what to say to either of them, but has always tried to say it in his actions.

*You are my sons: you are loved, protected, treasured. You are my world.*

Spock knows those three assassins, all of them half-Vulcan, half-Romulan, are institutionalized now, unable to care for themselves, reduced to an almost infantile place. He knows also that Sybok visits, and that it hurts him to see what he's done. Spock also knows that Sybok goes because they smile so brightly and are so joyful when he walks into the room: that Sybok takes this as his penance for what he's done.

Sybok smiles now, and shrugs. "T'Pring would kill me anyway, if I tried. She's got this thing about keeping it to myself and using proper channels and how we have to endure your privy council, I don't know where she gets that from. You know she wants to flay them all, I'd be doing all of you a favor."

"Yes," Spock agrees. "But she would hate you for denying her the pleasure of killing them."

"What did they want this time?"

"They think we shouldn't abandon peace with Klingon so swiftly."

"That's bullshit."

Spock raises his eyebrows in agreement, shrugging off the overcoat and laying it carefully over the back of a chair, undoing his shirtsleeves and rolling them up, sitting in the chair across from Sybok. "They are warming up to the topic of marriage."

"…Oh joy," Sybok says, making a face. "Who's the—not Frederick."

"No, I don't…well. Perhaps. I do not know, which only makes it worse."

"Maybe Sam Kirk."

Spock gives him a long, long look, and Sybok bites his lips and tries not to laugh when Spock points out that Sam Kirk is already engaged (perhaps married, the details are unclear), and the practice of bigamy is not permitted within the royal family.

Sybok grins as though this rule is a personal challenge, and Spock reminds himself that he can't kill
him. It's not allowed.

"Or another Kirk? Not that I think you're pining, it's just that you've ignored T'Pring flat-out to take a call from Jim. He writes and you forget that the rest of us—"

"Yes, Sybok, that's enough."

Sybok throws his head back and laughs. "Oh, Spock. Remember the part where you said this was going to pass?"

"I do remember being under the mistaken impression that people would leave it alone," Spock shoots back.

"You are so adorable when you're pissy," Sybok coos, and then levers himself up.

Spock glares after him, and then pulls a PADD towards him, writing to Jim. He has hundreds of letters that he will never send to Jim—petty complaints and too-earnest questions. Things that should be reserved for face-to-face encounters or things that he just can't bring himself to ask: they left it with no promises on either side, and Jim's retreating back was eloquent on where they stand now.

It will pass.

It has to pass.

*

The council finally makes its move on the topic of marriage after Jim has been gone for a year. Spock thinks, frankly, that it proves them to be greater cowards than he had believed. Indeed, they do not even breach the topic generally, they simply attack Jim, specifically, as a candidate.

"For a dance partner he is acceptable, but he must be excluded for contention of marriage," Lord Mendelson informs him. Spock lifts a brow at him, but the man doesn't take the hint.

"To make that statement I would presume you have sound reasoning and convincing arguments. I have merely asked to hear them. I wasn't aware that it would be an extraordinary request," Spock observes, and from behind Mendelson he can see Nyota shift her weight and school her face into something colder.

"No…no, of course not. Your Majesty is aware that Lieutenant Commander Kirk has a reputation within the fleet of being…zealous."

Spock says nothing.

"Quite." Mendelson clears his throat and glances about; he finds no allies, only averted eyes and embarrassed gestures. He perseveres. "Your Majesty, in order to negotiate peace with Romulus and Klingon we must display our good faith; our good intentions. Making the very man responsible for thousands of deaths on either side Prince Consort would damage the peace process irreparably."
"Indeed. Under whose authority has he committed these acts?" Spock demands, because he's not proposing marriage to Jim, and he will wind up married to someone he gets along tolerably well with and who is good for the Federation, but this will not be allowed to stand. This line of reasoning leaves Jim isolated and alone: leaves him with no allies, hanging in the wind when things go wrong. It leaves all of Spock's soldiers in that situation, but Jim specifically. Spock will not allow him to become the Federation's latest martyr. He won't permit him to be his father.

"I—"

"Has he acted in a way that counters his orders? Has he disobeyed the orders of his superiors?" Jim has sometimes broadly interpreted his orders, Spock knows, but they have always been backed by his superiors, if only after the fact.

Spock has spent hours reading Jim's mission reports and he knows now how to read in between lines: to hear what Pike doesn't say in her Captain's Logs. He's aware that this is borderline pathetic.

"Not to my knowledge," Mendelson grinds out.

"Where does the authority for any Starfleet member to act come from?" Spock presses inexorably.

"…They act upon your authority, your Majesty." This is said through gritted teeth.

"I see. And so you suggest that though I have been responsible for the deaths of Klingons and Romulans both, as it was under my reign that they have died, this will not be held against me. And yet, because he acted upon the orders I have given and have had made upon my behalf with my full endorsement, the Prince is somehow more faulted, and open to persecution for those actions. Am I understanding this correctly?"

"You can't expect them to see it that way," Lady Jiang protests, looking startled, her orange skin flushed red.

"I find it most peculiar," Spock observes, "that you are insinuating that I must ask both Romulans and Klingons for permission to marry. I had not realized that we had lost this war and given ourselves over in equal parts to them. I had been under the impression that my marriage would be my decision, and that the input of my government may be sought, but not required."

"Yes, Your Majesty," they all murmur, and they look both shamed and furious, all. Good.

"I believe we have exhausted the topic, you may see yourselves out."

With a rustle of fabric they exit, and Spock sits on the couch and pinches the bridge of his nose. His uncle used to do it; Spock supposes he picked up the habit from him, because his father never does it. Or perhaps his human heritage has failed to provide him any other way of dealing with such idiocy.

"Well. That was interesting," Nyota says, sounding too close to laughter.

"I believe you were dismissed." He doesn't look up.

"I missed that part. Spock. I know that they're overbearing and you've been dealing with it for a year, now, but really. Really—you can't antagonize them like that." She pauses, and something in her face softens when he looks at her. "Not even for Kirk. Not that I agree with—you were right to defend him as a soldier, but the marriage issue—"
"They presume too much."

"You can't afford to be labeled a tyrant. Not now. And he *isn't* a good choice—"

"This wasn't meant to be one of the things I had to worry about when I got here," he says finally, leaning back and closing his eyes, fingers unclenching from the arms of his chair.

"You have two and a half years. You've silenced them on the issue of marriage for now, and it's two and a half years until he comes back, and you can prove to them all that you're not interested in marriage." She gives him a long look. "Because you aren't."

It is an invitation for correction, an opening for him to tell her what she probably already knows, but instead he says, "Two years are nothing."

"Two years are everything," she retorts. "And that wasn't an answer."

"Nyota."

"Your Majesty…" she sighs.

"They have such an advantage over us. They are united internally; war is in their cultures, and we are disparate, as likely to fight each other as we are to fight them," Spock says, rubbing his forehead and getting up to stand at the window, feeling restless.

"They have no advantage. We have a strong governing body, and King who cares about his people so much that he seeks peace rather than to spill any innocent blood. A man who is going to forsake love in order to marry someone adequate, and don't give me that look, Sybok didn't *have* to say anything. I've known you since we were young enough to think that the world would turn when we told it to. If you could have kept him, you would have."

"I…am very young," Spock says, and means: *I may not be ready; I may not be enough; I may very well fail and we might be overcome by Romulans or Klingons or both.*

"I've never known you to be capable of failure," she replies, and folds her hand over his briefly. He thinks if he could have loved her, he would have. That he loves her now, in a grateful way; she is his best friend. "And I've been watching very closely." She leans back and pulls out a PADD from….somewhere in her voluminous skirts. "Here. Speaking of this 'advantage' you say they have. These are the numbers for Starfleet enrollment in the past year you've been on the throne."

Spock looks down at the numbers. And then he stares. "This—"

"Yeah. There's a 521% increase in enrollment in basic training in all quadrants. *You* did that."

"They fight for you. Your uncle was so little to them; you're everything. I know that it—you're everything to a lot of us, and here is the proof."

"I want to get this *right,*" Spock says softly, frowning at the PADD in his hands a little. "But I don't think that *they* are correct. Their advice is flawed; they have proven not to work, most of them served my uncle; even more my grandmother."

"At the end of the day you're the one who has to live with it," Sybok says slowly, and Spock looks up—he did not hear him come in. He is frowning thoughtfully at the ceiling, as though he can read all the secrets of the universe in the curls of the designs upon it. "*They* can hide in committees or blame their party leaders or the opposition and you, but you're the one who has to stand alone and own every decision."
"Was that meant to be comforting?" Spock demands, wry.

Nyota smiles, gently, looking at him. "Yes."

"I don't know, Gaila thinks it's something, and Gaila's got a good ear," Gary says, shrugging. "I mean, it's why she's—"

"I'm sorry, I'd like to speak to Gary's head now, not his dick," Sulu interrupts, giving him a look. "Gaila thought she heard one thing. We're in the Kelvin Zone, hearing weird shit is par for the course."

"Oh good, now we're going to talk about the haunted part of space," Jim says, and gives them both long looks. "Look, it might be something, it might not, I don't care, I just did a 36 because Madeline has that...whatever it is she's sick as a dog with, and I'm tired, and going to bed. Unless the ship blows up? I don't want to hear about it."

"Why—why would you even say that?" Gary demands, giving him a wronged look, gripping him by the shoulders and shaking. If Jim wasn't exhausted he'd be laughing or shoving him off; now he just kind of flops and glares. "I'm telling Bones on you and then he can remind you of the grand tradition of not jinxing us, goddamnit, Jim."

When he's released he rolls his eyes, and keys in his entry code. Sleep. He needs sleep.

He literally has one foot inside the door when the red alert lights wash everything in panic and the ship shudders.

"Motherfucker, Jim!" Gary shouts from somewhere down the hall, and Jim groans, and starts for the bridge. He stops to look at a readout and...did Scotty seriously just evacuate engineering? Is that what just happened there?

"Fucking fucking fuckery," Jim mutters, and tears off through the hall, digging out his communicator. "Kirk to the bridge, heading to—"

"Kirk, report to Engineering," Pike snaps in that really really calm voice she uses when everything is complete shit.

"Aye-aye," he agrees, and skids in the door. "The fuck?" he demands, and Keenser looks up, wiping his forehead and rolling his eyes. Really, Jim's going to be a captain in a few years, he should figure out how to do this kind of stuff without swearing.

On the other hand, he's been doing this since he was fifteen, it might just be a lost cause.

"Warp core is overloaded, they hit us with a delayed pulsar, the subsonic routers are going on and offline and and we've got an inexplicable power drain in sector seven, which is where he sent most people," Keenser reports, glancing behind him and then back at Jim. Jim stares at him, and Keenser nods. "Yeah, that."

"Motherfucker. Scotty!" he shouts, ducking in and looking around. The problem with engine rooms is that they're just fucking massive, and Scotty's really good at hiding.
Not that they've ever gotten drunk and played hide-and-go-seek. That would be unprofessional and shit.

"Aye!" Scotty looks over at him, and something in his face relaxes a bit at the sight of Jim.

"You on warp core or routers?"

"Core!"

Jim veers off to the left, dodging a spray of sparks—that's so bad, so so bad—and engineers to head up the scaffolding. The routers are are locked into an isolated mainframe, and Jim pulls up the diagnostic, grabbing onto the too-hot console when the ship lurches.

"That's the dampeners, Scotty!" he shouts.

"Aye, I know it!" Scotty hollers back.

"Think you could make sure we don't lose grav next?" A quick glance at the screen says that yeah, that's what's going next. Really soon.

"I'm doin' the best I can!"

"Do better!" Jim mutters back, not unprofessional enough to shout that because it's Scotty's department and he's a genius and Jim's just playing in his sandbox, basically. He turns to work on the inertial dampeners, because if those go they're going to have a serious issue, especially if Sulu's at the helm. Sulu can fucking fly a ship like most pilots just dream about having the skills to do, but they're all going to get dumped on their heads if Jim can't fix the dampeners, because Sulu likes to pretend that the ship is made out of putty, not metal.

"We're losing pressure on Deck 5!" Keenser reports.

"Go on then!" Scotty yells back, and Jim turns to Xu, who's slipped up with him and hands her a spanner.

"Routers, I've got grav and dampeners. If you see Simmons—" he starts, turning back to the grav.

"I'll yell," she agrees, and bends over the console, swearing at it as her fingers sizzle when she punches in the codes. Fuck, he likes Xu.

"Scotty, I've got—" he starts to shout.

"I can see that!" Scotty yells back.

Jim spares a minute to glare down at him, and then they're all rocked again, hard.

"Mr. Scott, we need those inertial dampeners operational," Pike's voice informs them.

"Yes, Captain!" Scotty agrees, and then hollers, "Jim!!" like somehow this is Jim's fault.

"Fucking working on it!" Jim shouts back, taking a second to press shaking hands to his eyes because he's tired, so so fucking tired, and then Simmons steps up with Vashrká, and Idoulé. The four of them split the work, pausing once the systems check goes green to see if they're going to be jolted, because sometimes the computers lie to them and they think they're done and things are actually worse.

Jim actually figured out how to make that a code and he and Scotty managed to dump it into a
Romulan warship a couple years ago. It was a beautiful thing.

"Dampeners operational, sir!" Idoulé shouts over the rail to Scotty.

"Excellent! Kirk, I could use your fingers!" Scotty yells, because Scotty's default setting is excitable and this shit makes him worse.

"That's what ze said," Jim mutters, sliding down the railing and heading over to him.

"Did ye—"

"They've got the grav, could we—"

"Aye, right here, see where—"

"Yeah, fine but—"

"Aye, right—"

"Yeah but—"

"Jim—"

"Scotty. It's further up, we're getting feedback loop up there and it's—"

"Fine, but I've got to stabilize—"

"Then it's good there are two of us," Jim points out, and Scotty gives him a dark look and then kind of kicks at him as Jim moves further up. He owes him so much Romulan ale it's not even funny for this kind of shit.

"Did they just divert all power to forward shields?" Scotty demands, and Jim looks up and then over at a readout.

"Yeah."

"Fuck it all to hell. Could they not give us a wee bit o' warnin'? Is it so bloody much to ask?"

"We can take—"

"No, we can't," Scotty says. "Just, get the warp up to function and we'll be all right."

Jim heads up another scaffold to make sure the transfer of power holds while Scotty and Keenser fight over which way is the better way to distribute power from the warp core.

That's when they start getting kickback.

It's nothing at first, a few sparks showering down, which—it's the Antares, and she's old, and he loves her but she's not really all that stable, so he expects some sparks.

Then a hose comes loose, and he reaches out and swears as his fingers blister around it, wrenching it back into place because they last thing they need is for flammable shit to mix into this atmosphere, which is already a little too thick with CO2 for his comfort. Sure, Keenser's probably doing really well, but the rest of them are going to start having problems.

He wipes sweat from his brow and thinks that this is just fucking typical of his life, he's exhausted
and now he has to fucking—

That's when everything explodes.

He's on his back, that he's aware of, and there's something sticking through his chest. And he can't feel his legs.

And he can't hear anything over the ringing in his ears. He tries to breathe steadily, not panic, and really not look at the pipe going through his ribcage.

"Fuck," he says on a short exhale, and looks around. There's a lot of smoke, rendered lazy orange by flames somewhere close enough that he can feel the licking, creeping heat.

At least he's in shock. This would really hurt if he wasn't, and he's never wanted to die in pain. Always thought freezing to death would be best, if he couldn't manage to be on the other end of a phaser. Well, carbon monoxide. That would be best. Fall asleep and never wake up.

Apparently dying makes him morbid.

But he's not going to die, because Bones is somewhere, armed with hypos and righteous fury, and even Death shrinks before him.

He shudders, suddenly cold. Bones is coming. He'll be fine. Gotten out of far worse than this.

"Jim," Scotty coughs, and he sounds like he's been saying it for a while, trying to get Jim's attention, and Jim turns his head. Scotty's pinned under...something. Big, metal, piece of the ship. This is what they get for trying to keep her in one piece. Squashed like pancakes.

Jim hasn't had pancakes since...that morning with Spock. They were really good pancakes.

"Spock's gonna kill them," Jim tells Scotty earnestly, "and I really want pancakes."

He can see Scotty say something, but he can't hear him, and then everything fades to black.

"I agree, but we must consider the—"

"Your Majesty!" Nyota interrupting someone is guaranteed to put Spock on edge more quickly than anything else. When he looks up at her, she looks...ashen. "Forgive me, my lords. Your Majesty, I have an urgent matter for your ears only."

"Leave me," Spock says, and the members of parliament, and T'Pring, do. It would be amusing at the way they trip over themselves to vacate if he weren't so focused on her expression. Nyota never looks shaken. He nods slightly to T'Pring, who nods back. She will smooth things over with the ruffled parliamentarians, even if that means she terrifies them into acquiescence. It's the method she uses with Sybok.

He turns to Nyota.

She says, "The crew of Antares was attacked while they were orbiting Nimbus VII. Reports say that it was a fleet of Klingon warbirds."
She says, "This is a private communication from Doctor Leonard McCoy to you."

She says, "I have not read it."

He takes it and opens it.

*Jim currently brain-dead; possibly fixable, will keep updated. Kill those motherfucking Klingon assholes. Also, he wants pancakes. Am authorizing use of genocidal force, doctor's orders. — McCoy*

"Is—" she cuts herself off, because 'is everything alright' is demonstrably stupid. "Your Majesty— Spock?"

"He is…brain dead," Spock says. "He—it's possibly fixable, according to the doctor."

He can see her mouth shaping the words 'brain dead' as though she has to taste them to render them real. He reaches behind him and sits down hard, sketching off a quick reply:

Thank you for informing me. Please let me know me the moment anything changes.

"Send them back in," he says, and she looks at him for a moment, reaches up and fixes his collar, gives him that critical second he needs to compose himself.

"Yes, Your Majesty," she says, and opens the door. T'Pring sits next to him, close enough that her foot can rest against his, moving to step on him when he loses focus, eyes drifting towards the window.

"The Klingons are escalating," he says by way of explanation, but this is a domestic council and they're discussing the taxation of wheat, so they don't press him for information.

The meeting runs over, because tax policy always grows heated at the end when frustrations are at their greatest point. By the time Spock finally gets into his private study his stomach has dropped out and his hands are shaking.

Chris Pike stands up when he walks in and Spock thinks of course Pike wouldn't give a damn if Spock wanted to be alone for one minute.

"What do you know?" Pike demands, voice heavily constricted like he's forcing it out.

"Jim is brain dead," Spock says. "My official report—"

Nyota hands it to him.

"—I have not yet had time to read."

"Brai—never mind. If you—"

"You will be the first," Spock agrees, and Pike blows out, followed by his secretary. Chris Pike served in Starfleet and has inroads: Spock doesn't know why he thought Spock would know more than he did, except that apparently Spock did and Spock doesn't know what that means, precisely, only that it means something.

T'Pring looks at him. "You cannot take this personally. You must hold to the course which you have set forth. This is the only way to win."

"I know."
"You cannot help him by—"

"I know!" he shouts, and then moderates his voice, closing his eyes and bracing against the desk. "Forgive me. I'm aware of how we must proceed—I'm allowed to be afraid for him in the privacy of my own chambers."

She looks at him for a long time, chin raised and dark eyes cool.

"T'Pring," Sybok says, quiet, and she turns and looks at him, and then at Spock.

"You will need to make a speech addressing this latest attack, and Nyota is already putting together a council of admirals to report. Take this emotion and make use of it, do not allow it to consume you."

"Fucking cold…” Sybok mutters, and she turns and glares at him.

"You would rather he break down—"

"I'd rather he processed his pain in a way that lets him function without turning him into a walking bomb with a countdown ticking towards all of our dest—"

"Perhaps you would take it from him?" she inquires, icily polite. "Share his pain, until he is without?"

Sybok doesn't flinch, just looks at her, sneers, and Spock should intervene the way he always does—send them each to their respective corners but he's not their parent, and even if he's the boss he's still younger and—

He closes his eyes and breathes in, and then out, settles his mind and raises his shields against them, turns and walks out, ignoring them both.

"What do you need?" Nyota asks him when he walks into her office, fingers stilling over the keys. She is not asking about right now: she means it more broadly. He looks at her, looking for the words.

"I need…I need everyone to continue performing admirably," he says. She nods.

"Okay," she agrees, and makes sure that that happens for him. She lets him sit in her office while she writes a speech and keeps Sybok and T'Pring away and tells him terrible stories about the time she thought it might be a good idea to date Frederick, because he couldn't be that bad. Apparently he was, and Spock feels less shaken by the time she finishes the speech and puts it into his hands.

Nyota's words sliding slick and golden from his mouth, and after the broadcast the admirals tell him that the Antares should not have survived that attack; that this is a victory, with only one possible casualty and that that's an impossible thing, that he should be proud.

Pike gets a boost in the ratings, because his wife was the captain who destroyed four Klingon warbirds.

Three months of posturing and policy and living for terse messages from Doctor McCoy take their toll, and Nyota clears his schedule and enlists Sarek to keep T'Pring and Sybok away, and Spock lays in his bed.

In the bigger picture, the Romulan Star Empire is the piece he needs to be pursuing, but all he wants is to send his entire Fleet after the Klingons; to exact vengeance in blood, turn the black of
space red.

He rereads McCoy's missives, if they can be called that.

*Physically he's fine; receptors working. Keeping in stasis; allergic to everything makes slow going.*

Spock began to wonder after the seventh such terse message if this is McCoy's manner of communicating, or if someone is editing out the swearing Spock suspects he's doing.

He curls up on his side of the bed and closes his eyes and thinks that a year later he is not supposed to be this involved. He is not supposed to feel like he will fly apart if Jim is not all right.

He was not supposed to fall in love with the idiot, and he was certainly not meant to *stay* in love with him.

*He's awake. He's fine. He wants you to know he's fine.*

Spock closes his eyes and breathes for what feels like the first time in months.

---

He's woken up in sickbay more times than he can even count. He can tell by the quality of the air how long it's been: by the sense of panic or its lack. Right now things are quiet, and a little strained, and there's a hand wrapped around his.

"My mouth feels weird," Jim decides, and keeps his eyes closed because it's too much effort to open them, to look at Bones' wrecked face.

"Jesus Christ, Jim," Bones' voice breathes near his head, relieved. Which means it was really really close this time, because Bones doesn't even sound mad.

"It was only a little bit of death," Jim tries, and then smacks his lips, running his tongue through his teeth. "My mouth is *gross.*"

"You're such a fucking princess," Bones mutters, and lets his hand go to reach for mouthwash. "Gargle, then spit," he instructs, like somehow Jim will have forgotten that skill.

Jim does, and then opens his eyes. He's on the stasis bed. Shit.

"What—"

"You got a rail through your left lung," Bones snarls. "And a concussion, and you broke your damn neck. All of that was fixable, except then we couldn't get your goddamn brain online, and then it was online and you decided to play fucking sleeping beauty, and the goddamn prince wasn't around to kiss you."

Jim has to ignore the last bit of that for his sanity. "How—"

"Three months. You've been mostly goddamn dead three months."

"…Shit."

"Yeah."
"Why—?"

Bones shakes his head. "Toxins got into your blood, plus you're allergic to every damn thing."

Jim looks at him, chest tight. If they get any worse, he can be discharged for being medically unfit. Bones has been really good at fudging Jim's records, which runs them the risk of Jim someday not getting treated properly but on the other hand keeps him in the only job he ever thought he could do.

"It's morphing," Bones amends, taking pity on him. "You've got immunity to a lot of the old stuff, but this was new shit. Usually you don't have the fucking spores in Engineering thrust into your vital organs like that."

Jim winces. "You didn't—"

Bones looks at him, waits for the rest of the sentence. Jim's not sure how to say You didn't tell Spock that I was dead, right? That would suck, and I kind of promised that I'd be back, so. He just settles for shifting and saying:

"Spock?"

Bones doesn't look surprised that that's the first name out of Jim's mouth, not Sam or his mother. "Been sending him updates. He gave a few speeches, apparently things are warming up with the Romulans. We beat the Klingons, if you're interested. Four to one, we nailed the bastards."

"I want—" Jim starts, struggling to sit up and looking at the bedside table: water, but no PADD.

"I figured," Bones agrees, smiling at him a little and Jim thinks that sometimes he could hate Bones for how well he knows Jim. Bones knows his best and his worst and the times he's tried to be both of those and failed, knows all of his secrets and Jim's never hidden anything from Bones—it's never been worth the effort, even if it would have been smarter to. Right now he just takes the offered PADD and thinks that he has to stop breaking Bones' heart.

Jim looks at the PADD after Uhura takes one look at him and patches him through and then there's Spock, looking at him and quiet and still like he's waiting for the bottom to drop out. He looks tired and smudged, and Jim flinches because he knows he's the one who took the metaphorical baseball bat to Spock. "I'm fine," Jim says, and Spock gives him his you're such an idiot face.

"'Fine' has variable definitions," he replies, and Jim rolls his eyes.

"If I knew you were going to be a pedantic bitch—"

"You almost died," Spock snaps, and he sounds genuinely pissed.

"Job hazard," Jim manages around the lump in his throat.

"You promised me—" Spock begins, and then breaks off, eyes skittering away to something out of frame—something not Jim.

"I didn't lie," Jim replies, throat scratchy and his voice has gone sideways and soft. "I didn't lie, because I'm fine. I just—wasn't. For a little. I am now—I'm okay, baby."

"I didn't—" Spock starts to say, and then breaks off and Jim can't believe that he thought he was getting over this. That he'd safely put Spock into the post-fuck, still-friends category that Gaila and Gary were in because that way he could keep Spock, even when Spock had to go get married to
some royal asshat who isn't Jim.

He'd been wrong, so wrong, so fucking unbelievably wrong, and wow, that was really a realization he could have done without.

"I'm still coming back," Jim says, soft and too gentle, no room for nuance, no room to claim that there's any way to interpret that that isn't I'm coming back for you.

His body aches from disuse, and soon Gary will be throwing him around and making him do Tai Chi and Sulu will be putting a sword in his hand and pretending Jim knows anything about fencing. Soon Jim will process all of this and get angry and genocidal, will sit up with Sulu and Gary planning how to kill all the Klingons until Bones comes in with alcohol and tells them to shut the fuck up, honest to fuck.

"Why were you in engineering?" Spock asks.

Jim starts to shrug and lie, but Spock kind of gives him this look like he's going to ask Bones if Jim lies to him and oh yes, Spock can still pull Jim's commission, and Jim thinks he's a total asshole before relenting. "I was off-duty, I worked a 36. Scotty needed help, I ran down…it's like every time I stop this ship from blowing up she has to thank me by making a play for my life."

"Jim," Spock sighs, and runs a hand through his hair.

"I don't know, maybe I miscalculated something. They uh—I haven't been debriefed yet. How'd it play—"

"Poorly, and then well," Spock says. "Pike might regain the majority, with his wife's new popularity. The Klingons claim it was provoked, but the evidence is blatant to the contrary, and it is to pattern: they attacked a Romulan patrol vessel in the same manner a month later."

"Do they think they can take us both on?" Jim genuinely wonders this. The thing is, mutually assured destruction doesn't work anymore, especially not if Spock actually manages to work an alliance with the Romulans. And if the fear of destruction is gone…it just makes the Klingons more dangerous. People who fight and don't care about the outcome are more terrifying than people who fight and think they stand a shot at winning. People who want to win have something to lose.

"They seem to believe they'll have no choice. Which is to my benefit, and means that they're nervous, which...is simultaneously good and bad. They informed me yesterday that they were issuing an extradition order for Captain Allen."

"Gonna ship her out?" Jim smirks. He knows Allen—she's amazing and terrifying.

"As soon as I'm through talking to you," Spock agrees blithely, and Jim grins.

"Sounds like a solid plan. Anything else I've missed?"

"The topic of my marriage has come around again," Spock says, and wow, that's like a punch to the solar plexus.

"Let me guess, my mom again?"

"Your brother was mentioned, actually," Spock says.

Jim thinks his smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Really? I'm sure he'll be honored."
"I'm not sure his wife would be amenable to bigamy."

"Sam's married?"

Spock looks uncertain for a minute. "They eloped about a month ago."

"Nice. I'm gonna kick his ass."

"There was talk of the duchess's betrothal to another. Frederic—"

"Oh, shit, that's right. Fine, he's forgiven."

"He can't be that bad," Spock says, and Jim gives him a look, biting back a grin.

"Uh-huh. Next time I'm around throw a ball or something, we'll invite Frederick. You'll see."

"We should do that," Spock agrees, and Jim grins because he's secretly fourteen and Spock said "we." He tries to smother a yawn, biting his lips around it, but Spock notices and says, "You need to rest."

"No, I'm—"

"He's right, shut up," Bones says, and Jim glares at him. "Say goodnight, Gracie."

Jim rolls his eyes. "Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim."

Bones gives him a long, exasperated look as he takes the PADD away. "So smitten."

"Go stab someone with a hypo."

It turns out that it wasn't anyone's fault. The ship just has it in for Jim. He takes a picture of Gary, Sulu, Gaila and Madeline all watching him in PT with worried looks, and then another of Bones in mid-rant and sends them to Spock.

*It's like living with 300 mother hens.*

He gets a blurred picture of T'Pring in frightening full-form. Behind her, Sybok is making an atrocious face and Uhura is covering one half of her face with her hand.

*At least it is not like minding a preschool,* Spock responds.

"So, we're back to heartbreak," Bones says, letting himself into Jim's room. He has whiskey, so Jim forgives him for breaking and entering.

…Jim really has to change his code.

"Shut up, I don't want to talk about it."

"Because avoiding shit solves everything. Mitchell says you need to get laid."

"Gary just left, actually," Jim says, and Bones grimaces and pours himself a drink.

"I can't hear this shit," Bones informs him.

"You're our doctor, you know we're all clean," Jim scoffs, rolling his eyes. Gary and Jim were
boyfriends first, and they somehow managed to stay friends even when they stopped having regular sex or pretending that either one of them wanted to be in a relationship. In high-stress situations or when one of them decides the other really needs to get laid, they fall back into old habits. "I've been in a coma, you know. We had to make sure it was all still working."

Bones groans and sits on the bed before getting up really fast, and Jim laughs. "You're secretly like, 80."

"Fuck you, Princess."

Jim grins, leaning back in the chair behind his desk as Bones perches on the edge of the desk itself.

"I'm just...worried about you," Bones sighs. "You were doin' all right, then he's the first one you wanna talk to and you look fucking twitterpated and I bet if I go ask Mitchell whose name you shouted—"

"Shut up," Jim snaps, because yeah, that's a little too close to the mark, there. Gary had laughed and offered to wear a tiara, buy one when they stop at Vega5, and it hadn't been a big deal except Bones makes shit a big deal.

"It's not fair to him either, baby," Bones continues, ruthless, and Jim flushes. "You got him twisted around your finger—"

"I didn't do that on purpose," Jim interrupts, glaring at him, and yeah, that wasn't exactly an argument, but Jim's never claimed not to be an asshole.

"You ain't done jack shit to do otherwise," Bones points out flatly. "It's been a year and change, and he's got things to focus on."

"Maybe he likes the safe outlet. Gets to flirt with me—"

"You aren't safe!" Bones shouts. "Not for him. And he's not for you. It won't be a happy-ever-after, it'll be a you-get-yanked-outta-the-sky-and-resent-him-forever-thing! It's not a goddamn fairytale, and you're old enough to fucking know better."

"Fuck you," Jim snarls.

"Grow up," Bones snaps back, and if the door could slam, it would.

Jim shoves himself back in his chair.

Fuck.

Spock thinks that everyone who thought Daakvich was going to be anything less than a disaster was full of shit. The point of a Prime Minister is that there is someone else to mind the domestic issues while Spock negotiates peace, and so Spock shouldn't be doing things like arguing with taxes and meeting with backbenchers and cabinet members and members of the shadow cabinet and—

He's going to choke someone. He's going to choke Daakvich.
No. He is as a stone.

That place of tentative Zen lasts right up until the Romulan Empress decides to test his patience. So, he has a day of serenity.

"We require the planets listed to be recognized as under the protection of the Romulan Star Empire," Empress Mnheia announces abruptly when he opens up the communication line. He looks down at his hands, and wonders how to tell her that she's out of her fucking mind, and he'd rather sign a declaration of surrender, because that's what this is tantamount to.

He absolutely does not calculate how quickly he could get his fleet to Romulus.

"That is absurd. Those planets have been in the Neutral Zone for generations."

"You continue reaching out and expanding; this is peace? We are to assume that this is not an attempt at encroachment masquerading as scientific discovery? Surely—"

"We reach out not into your territory or quadrant, but into the unknown," Spock interrupts. She knows this full well; she is either posturing, or three years later she has decided to honestly attempt a dialogue and is simply ensuring that he will not back down. "To ask us to give that up is to ask us to give up our way of living. We seek what is unknown."

"To build up an army against us."

"If that were the case, Starfleet would not be volunteer-based and we would have quotas and a curriculum far more precipitated upon waging war than upon studying and interacting with unknown cultures without an intent to subvert.

"I am willing and able to negotiate the continuation of the Neutral Zone into as-yet undiscovered space. I am not willing to cede any part of the Neutral Zone to you, nor to cater to your empire's insecurities," he says, lifting both chin and eyebrow.

"Romulans fear nothing," she sneers.

"Then my demands should not seem unreasonable to you," he retorts, and he has her, he can see the moment she realizes it. He's been getting that expression a lot lately, people realizing that he's not just a figurehead, that there is no puppet-master behind the scenes.

Empress Mnheia looks at him for a long moment, and then the left corner of her mouth lifts. "You would have made an excellent Romulan, King Spock."

"You honor me," he replies, just the right touch of wry amusement curling through his voice. "Can we negotiate?"

"Yes. I shall send my sister, Sindari i-Ra'tleihfi tr'D'Amarok."

"I shall send my father, Sarek son of Skon in an equal show of good faith. I trust we will not regret this."

"I trust we will not," she agrees.

He looks at Sarek when the communication is terminated.

"That was well-executed," Sarek observes.

"You honor me," Spock replies, more genuine this time, unclenching his hands.
"We're sending him with bodyguards, right?" Sybok demands, and then gives them both broad grins when they both turn to look at him. "You know when you both do that it's creepy? Stop looking at me like that!"

"Of course he's going to have security," Spock says, rubbing his temple.

T'Pring's chime rings from his PADD and Spock looks down at the message.

*Klingon warbird destroyed, Kirk credited.*

"Problem?" Sarek asks, and Spock looks up at his father.

"No," he replies, shaking his head. "No, not a problem."

Sarek leaves for the Romulan court in the same month that general elections are held.

Sybok is sulking and not speaking to Spock (which Spock thinks is completely ridiculous), so he watches the election results come in with T'Pring. Nyota is home, visiting her family on a much-deserved and long-overdue vacation.

"It looks as though the Liberals have it after all," T'Pring observes, late that night. Her shoes have been discarded and she is draped along a couch.

"There was never any doubt," he replies, shifting more comfortably in his chair. He will have to receive Daakvich's request to dissolve his cabinet and then grant Pike permission to form his government, preside over the transferring of power and endure accusations that he favors Pike—that somehow he influenced the election.

It's been three years, and the government has already transferred parties twice. Daakvich presided over a hung parliament; it was bound to fall, shocking that it lasted as long as it did under his gross incompetence.

"You have seemed more withdrawn," T'Pring murmurs.

"That does not sound like the ringing compliment it should be, coming from you," Spock replies, glancing over at her with a faint smile.

"It would indicate you are unhappy," she replies. "Is it the talk of marriage?"

"I will not marry."

"Do not be absurd. Of course you will, and have an heir, and project the impression of stability which this Empire must have. It has been two generations since there was any indication of stability: you are the best hope for many things, not least this."

He looks down at his PADD, and can feel the weight of her gaze.

"It is perhaps time to let him go," she says, not unkindly, and he looks up at her, so weary of this conversation in all of its incarnations.

"It is possible," he replies, slowly because every word needs testing; this is a dangerous thought to put words to, but it can't stay within him. "That it's not possible to do so, and I would rather try and fail then let go without any effort made."

He meets her eyes, and she nods once. "You are King. If you wish to take him—"
"I'm not taking him," he interrupts flatly. "I won't keep him like a bird in a cage."

"You will simply hold the door open?" she inquires. "And hope that he will be enticed by the treat within; join you in your gilded cage?"

"Don't attribute that metaphor to me," he warns. "I don't chafe against this."

"You simply refuse to accept its limitations," she replies.

"Yes," he agrees, smiling slightly. "I do."

It's been several months (five months, two weeks, three days) since he's spoken to Jim—there's an occasional message, usually written with exhaustion evident in every word. The *Antares* has been in the Kelvin Disaster Radius for eighteen months, and hasn't had a shortage of encounters.

Sometimes Jim sends a photo, or an annotated news clipping, sometimes propaganda that they pick up from Klingon space. Sometimes Spock thinks Jim is trying to keep his distance; erect lines that define what it is that they're doing up until the moment he's too tired to do so. It's a telling cycle, and Spock knows that in a week or two Jim will call, and no matter what he's doing Spock will get up and take it. Nyota will be indulgent and Sybok mocking and T'Pring disapproving, and Spock will ignore them all, because it will be the only time he will feel like he's doing something right, when he can coax a laugh out of Jim.

"That's…"

"Yeah," Jim agrees, low, gut tightening with adrenaline, scanning the bay below them. "Yeah. Shit."

"They've got some fucking nerve," Gary mutters, sitting down and glancing around. "I mean, if anyone's going to pull a stunt like this, it should be us."

Jim grins, and then says, "Here, hand me—"

Gary hands him the phasers they took off what they had thought, two hours ago, were just Klingon colonists on Nimbus XI. Yeah, maybe not so much, what with the factory of battleships he and Gary are currently hiding in. The huge, huge, factory that hadn't showed up on any scanners.

They need to get that tech. Gary has a tricorder, they can download most of what they find onto that.

He thinks.

"You think they'll take us to a prison planet or kill us?" Gary asks, watching Jim work. "You know, when they find us."

"Public execution, I'm thinking," Jim says, wincing when he stabs his finger. "After an appetizer of public and broadcasted torture, of course."

"For dessert we'll be left to rot."

"Maybe they'll shoot us into space so that we drift back towards the Federation."
"Floating bodies would be a really slow way to send a message," Gary points out, pulling out the tricorder and running a scan. "I mean, there's a nice poetry to it, but it's really inefficient."

"I know, but now I've thought it I just like the idea. They could even stick a message to us, you know? Maybe carve it onto our backs..."

"This shit right here is why you can't actually be the princess," Gary informs him, waving his hand in Jim's face. "This gruesome bullshit right here."

"You don't want me to be a princess because you want to be my XO, and if I'm an imperial princess I can't have an active commission," Jim scoffs, and Gary grins, shifting his grip on his phaser and sliding the tricorder back into his bag.

"Well, there's that. What is it that you're mak—" he pauses, looks down at the bomb Jim's rigged, and then says, "Yeah, that doesn't have remote detonation."

"I was thinking the 'throw-and-run' technique," Jim admits, leaning up to look over the railing again. Based on the patrols, he thinks they're looking at a bunker inhabited by about four hundred. Which is a lot—Klingons don't like to concentrate their forces so heavily, which means that this place is more significant than he'd been thinking. Which means they really need to take it out.

"Ah, a classic grenade motif. Well, I am a fan of the classics," Gary admits. "Usually in a more academic sense, I admit, but—"

"Gary, focus."

"Yeah, okay."

Klingons, for all their ruthlessness and their undisputed genius for war tactics and mindfucking, are actually really shit at anticipating crazy. For example, it's absolutely fucking insane for two Starfleet officers to skulk into a warbird factory, make a makeshift bomb, and then try to hack into the computer systems to figure out the method of shielding. That's insane: no-one would do that, and deserved or not, Starfleet has a reputation for being a little bit timid ("cautious" is the official party line, but it basically means they're pussies).

Romulans have figured out that that's total bullshit, and a myth perpetuated by Starfleet to lulling their enemies into a false sense of security, so sneaking into a Romulan anything is next to impossible, because they've figured out to expect the insane.

"Faster would be better," Jim mutters.

"Fast as I can, sweetheart," Gary hisses back, typing on the console and then looking at the tricorder. "This isn't easy, and technical Klingon's a bitch to read, plus the formatting is just..."

Jim throws him a dirty look, glancing down at the screen before looking up: he thinks he can hear the heavy lockstep of a patrol coming towards them. "Patrol is going to—"

"Yes, I know, thanks," Gary snaps, and then: "Got it."

"Got it?"

"Yep, got it. Okay, so, the classical bomb should go off..."

Jim grabs him by the arm just as the phaser whines and spits red at them.
"You have that layout memorized, right?"

"Oh, yeah, totally." Gary agrees, twisting to look over his shoulder. "Seven on our tail and they're calling for backup."

"We have to get out."

"Really, is that what we have to do?"

"You're not being very constructive, which I should tell you isn't actually all that helpful, Gary," Jim snaps, looking up and down the hall. Yeah, they're just going to have to run and hope for the best.

"Shit, get—"

They go tumbling down the staircase when Gary shoves Jim to avoid getting shot in the back, and it's a blur, then, of blood and running desperately, realizing that they lost the classical bomb somewhere and so they have no idea when it's actually going to detonate and then running even in the middle of the explosion, because that's something that Starfleet does teach you: run even when you're doomed beyond a shadow of a doubt. Run even when you're going to get sucked into space, because if you don't run then how the hell is anyone going to rescue you?

Outside the compound, Jim drags Gary around, leaning against the wall, tucked neatly against it while the factory inside burns and explodes and burns some more. The problem with the Nimbus planets is that they're all desert wastelands, so at least the explosion is keeping them warm.

"Oh shit," Gary exhales, sitting down hard on his left hip, then falling to his elbows, gasping for breath, his forehead hot against Jim's thigh. "Oh, shit. We have to stop doing this. We're too young and pretty to die."

Jim shakes his head, lets his head fall back against the wall. "I quit."

"They can't pay us enough," Gary pants, rolling onto his back and putting his hand over his face. "Holy shit."

Jim fists his hand in Gary's hair, tugging lightly. "On the other hand."

"Jim."

"I'm just saying. That was pretty fucking awesome, right? Like, really. Really—"

"So fucking awesome," Gary laughs, reaching a hand to pat Jim's cheek. "We rock like rocks in a box and are you bleeding?" Gary asks, shifting to look up at Jim, squinting a little in the dying light.

"Yeah, caught me in the arm, but it's not that bad. I think I got a burn on my...everything, too. You?"

"Eh, I think my ankle broke, sizzled my hair. No big, pretty face still intact."

"Good, I was fucking worried," Jim says, stroking a hand through Gary's hair, and they both laugh a little. "This is why we can't be civilians," Jim reflects, catching his breath as the wall at his back shakes a little. "We think that this kind of shit is no big deal. Give me your comm."

"Doesn't work. Blood on it."
"Yours?"

"No, no, um, not my blood," Gary replies, and gives it over. He pauses then, locking his hands over his chest and shifting his position on Jim's lap a little. "Well, I don't think so."

Jim snorts, then grins, wiping his thumb over the slick blood. Too dark to tell whether it's Terran or Klingon, but he would put money on it being Klingon. "You don't know?"

"Well, I mean. Hard to say, not knowing. I'm all full of adrenaline, clouding my judgement."

"Didn't we deal with that in some class or something? 'How to Take Inventory Of Yourself When You Are Wounded' or some shit?"

"Mm, I skipped that day, was getting laid. I did show up for 'How to Enjoy the Being Alive Part' though."

Jim laughs, and then says into the comm, "This is Commander Kirk hailing the HMS Antares. I'm stranded with Lieutenant Mitchell, coordinates...unknown, outside of the old stronghold. Have medical team on standby, Kirk out."

"Kirk, this is HMS Antares, locking onto your position, standby for beam-up," Gaila replies, and fuck her so hard she sounds like she's laughing.

*

"Kirk, Mitchell. Tell me that there was something in that beside senseless violence."

Gary grins. "Sure. Their cloaking tech won't work for anything that moves, but they've figured out how to use the gravitational warping of a planet to mask a stable position so that your eye passes right over it, and scanners pass it off as a mountain—natural, part of the planet's geography."

Pike looks at them.

"We got bored waiting for the beam-up," Gary explains. "Jim managed to get the PADD working and we—"


"You two got bored and started cloaking random shit," Bones says, stabbing Gary in the neck with a hypo. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"On the plus side," Jim says, "we don't think that there's a reversal, so if it's cloaked then it stays cloaked. So, if you were to put, say...oh, off the top of my head...a warbird-manufacturing plant on an abandoned planet in the Neutral Zone and then it blew up...well. You'd have to remember where you put it, specifically."

Pike lifts her eyebrow, and then smirks a little, leaning against the biobed across from them. "How inconvenient that they can't even register a complaint."

"I expect that the death certificates will say 'training accident,'" Gary agrees, beaming. "We got most of the specs, there, but we were running hot, so."

"Any day they can't build even one more is a good day," Pike dismisses. "All right, you two. Take a shift off, I want you on the bridge in 24—we're heading for Vega5."

Jim stares at her, then laughs: Vega5 is a ridiculous planet based on Las Vegas, and Jim loves the
city but he loves the planet more. "You're rewarding the kiddies!"

"Don't make me change my mind," she replies, and then laughs a little, heading back to the bridge.

"Dude, we rock," Gary sighs, flopping back.

"You know they're not going to say it was a training exercise. You know somehow this is going to leak."

"So what? It leaks to our side, we're heroes, it leaks to their side we're mass-murderers. That'll really change our lives," Gary snorts. "Dude, we're getting a vacation, and then we're on leave for a year and you get the Enterprise. Which, I've been thinking about, because. It's like you and Pike are getting a divorce and are having a custody battle."

"Yeah, I know," Jim says. He knows Gary will come, Sulu will probably sign on, Madeline will, Bones is a sure thing...he's not sure about Gaila, and Scotty—well, Scotty he'll get because Pike doesn't want to deal with him anymore. He winces as he gets up, newly-grown skin on his back tender and tight. Third degree burns suck.

By the time they're in orbit over Vega5, the news of the raid has hit the intergalactic news circuit. Jim and Gary give statements, and Pike does one press-conference. The Romulans seem to be more pissed that the Klingons are building warbirds in the Neutral Zone than they are that Starfleet just killed a few hundred Klingons. Jim wonders how much of that is Spock: three years ago he thinks that that wouldn't have been the response. Three years ago the Romulans would have been equally pissed at both and the deadlock would continue. Something's changed now, and they can all feel it. Something tastes less hopeless in the air.

Jim grins a little, to himself. Three years and he's doing it. In three years Spock's—

Gary flops onto Jim's bed. "We need to go out and drink. And by drink, I mean get so fucking drunk that I can't remember the last twenty-four years, for they have mostly been an absolute shitshow."

"Aww, I love you too," Jim snorts, and Gary flips him off.

"You're twenty-three," Sulu points out, bellyflopping down on the bed next to him.

"Am I? God, I feel old. At least thirty."

Jim looks at them both, and finishes buttoning up his jeans. "You are both insane. And Sulu, you're not dressed for shore leave. What is the matter with you, are we going out or aren't we?"

"Fuck you, Kirk" Sulu groans. "The uniform thing is smoking."

"You two, with the last name thing, is still really strange, okay? It's been three years, we should graduate onto first names," Gary groans. "Okay. We'll go out, get drunk, get laid and forget that we are fine upstanding Starfleet officers."

"Unless that gets us laid," Sulu amends, and pulls himself up. "Okay. I'm going to change, meet you at the transporter room. Is Gaila coming?"

"You gonna hit that if she is?" Gary snorts.

"Nah, she's had it with me this year. I think she and Madeline are going to 4th Street, something about broadening Madeline's sexual horizons. You know: it's Gaila," Sulu shrugs and shuts the
door behind him.

Gary looks at Jim, Jim looks back.

"What?" Jim says finally, slipping his wallet into his pocket.

"You're gonna fuck someone tonight?" Gary asks. "Really?"

"A gentleman doesn't—"

"Because you've been kind of celibate for three or so years. I mean, fine, we've messed around and you and Gaila but that's—"

"Gary."

"Jim. Look, it was hilarious for a while, you know, when you were going to be his princess and it's still kind of fucking hilarious, but…I'm kind of getting freaked out, here. You know. Because you were my favorite slut, and you like sex, and—"

"Shut the fuck up and let's put something in your mouth," Jim sighs. "Goddamnit."

The thing is, Jim does like sex. Fucking loves fucking, and yeah, it's been…a long time to get hung up on something that isn't really anything.

So they head into a bar people don't go to for anything other than getting laid, bodies twisting and arching as the music pulses. Sulu slips away with a woman within the first five minutes, and Gary and Jim lean against the railing and watch the writhing bodies below.

"Found him," Gary decides, pointing, and Jim shakes his head.

"Jailbait," he replies. Slight kid with curly blond hair, getting ground on by three guys. Such jailbait.

"Eh, that's what shore leave's about. Getting arrested."

"I'm not bailing you out."

"You're a good friend!" Gary calls over his shoulder, laughing as he makes his way down the stairs.

Jim shakes his head. He drinks his very strong drink (it might be diluted Romulan Ale—Jim's not saying it isn't, that's for damn sure), and ends the night in the VIP lounge in the back as a Nurami kisses his way down Jim's stomach, undoing his pants and sucking him until Jim pulls him up, kisses hot and dirty and just this side of desperate, takes him against the wall, one of his legs around his hip as he laughs, arching and writhing and so fucking beautiful as he comes, face flushing blue, one of his four hands cupping Jim's mouth, the others making short work of him.

He goes back to his hotel, fucks him again later that night after room service and is gone by the time the sun's up, wandering the streets and trying to remember how to do this—he's fucking twenty-one. He should remember how to do this—young twenties is the time to be stupid and irresponsible and he—

"Hey, it's me."

"I know who it is," Spock replies, voice thick with sleep. "It's four in the morning here, Jim."
"Sorry. It's not much better here, actually." He gropes for a clock: two fifty-seven.

"Where's here?"

"Vega5."

There's a pause and the sound of movement on the other end, and Jim thinks this as a bad idea, because this wasn't cheating but it feels like maybe it was, and he hates himself for being that guy. The one who's stupid enough to think that he's in a situation where he could be doing something that counts as cheating because oh yeah, they're not fucking dating.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping so that you can lose all of your hard-earned pay in the late night hours?" Spock asks.

"Did you get that line from a movie?"

"Shockingly, I haven't been to many casino planets," Spock says, dry, and Jim laughs, sits down on the edge of a fountain and lets this warm him.

"I'll take you," Jim promises. "After we see the kehlant."

"I still think you're lying about them, and that there will be animal-abuse protesters, and that is one scandal I do not need."

"You've got to learn to start trusting me," Jim says.

"I do," Spock replies, and it curls around Jim, better than a blanket. "You're coming back soon, aren't you?"

"Three more months? We have to just do a loop, then we're back to Earth for our debrief and then mandatory year off, because our tour of duty was longer than it should have been."

"You do sound tired."

"Yeah, well. No rest for a first officer."

"So it would appear. I'm surprised Doctor McCoy isn't lurking with sedatives at the ready."

"Don't say that around him," Jim mutters, glancing behind him. "He'd do it. He's like a ninja when he wants to be."

"I'll restrain myself." There's a long, comfortable pause, and then Spock says, "Will you come here, after you've gone home?"

His face is soft and a little puffy, eyes heavy with sleep and his hair is a mess and Jim misses him so much that it actually hurts, somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach. "Um," he says, because on the one hand he should say no, absolutely not, no. On the other hand, what's the harm in just going to visit him? Maybe all Jim has to do is get it out of his system, maybe when he goes he'll find out that Spock's actually unbearable and he hates the sight of him and Jim will be free to live his own fucking life.

Maybe tomorrow the Klingons will spontaneously surrender and make Jim their god.

"Yeah," Jim says, scraping the word past his uncertainties. "Yeah, I could do that."

Spock smiles. "I'll look forward to it, then. Goodnight, Jim."
"Night, Spock."

Bones looks up when Jim comes in, and then wordlessly pours him a finger and hands it to him.

Jim throws it back and looks at Bones' hotel room ceiling. "So," he says, finally. "I'm fucked."

"Yeah," Bones agrees, nodding. "Kinda."

Part IV

It's not that Spock doesn't like ruling, or even that he resents the parliamentarian rules that mean that the Federation works, and nothing gets passed too quickly. It's not even that he dislikes his government.

He just hates that when it comes to dealing with the Klingons, everyone is too afraid to move, and "stay the course" has turned into "RUN AWAY AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE" which...well. Isn't supported by Spock's policies or the way Starfleet functions, so Spock is spending most of his days lately in parliament lending his support to the admirals who are trying to point out that retreat very often gives Klingons the wrong idea. Spock, of course, can't quite take a side here. The debate is too intensely political, and while Spock is allowed to favor one side over another, but he's not allowed to seem too political. So he does a lot of listening and brings admirals with him and asks for private meetings and frankly...he's tired.

There are times that Spock wants to dismiss the entire body politick. Which would of course cause crisis and send his political capital plummeting and make his government look disunited (less united...they already don't project a picture of perfect unification). So he can't. But sometimes he gets through blustering speeches by imagining everyone's face if he stood up and abruptly dismissed them and called for new elections. He may have to encourage Pike to move up the timeline—Pike's majority and public support are both strong: perhaps it's time to weed out the backbenchers who are causing problems in the form of infinite delays.

Spock exhales and cracks his neck, waving off Admiral Gladit and heading towards his office. T'Pring disappeared after the meeting with the Minister of Defense to discuss the latest funding bill and brow-beat him into trimming it. Spock knows this is her least-favorite topic, only because Vulcans have embraced pacifism so whole-heartedly since Surak, and the angry clacking of her heels down the hallway don't really bode well for him.

He should have shut the door, maybe then he could hide.

"Spock!" someone who isn't T'Pring shouts, angry and hard and Spock turns, frowning. All he can see is a phaser, pointed at him and glowing red and wonders where in all hell his security is. He puts the PADD down carefully, raising his eyes to look at her. Her face is twisted in an ugly, hateful sneer and all he can think is that if he dies now the Federation is going to fall to the Klingons or Romulans and he'll have failed, and the thought actually makes him sick.

And he'll never have seen Jim again, which is depressing and really, really not the point.

And then the woman is falling, twisting with momentum and looking so so shocked. She hits the ground and bounces, just a little, and he stares at her, limp and unmoving on the ground, waiting
for it to be a trick. She stays down, and doesn't breathe or twitch or blink and she has to be dead but Spock can't move, feels rooted to the spot. Someone else moves and he jerks his eyes up and—

"So I was going to just say 'hi'," Jim says, lowering the phaser (how he got his phaser into the building is another question entirely, one Spock has zero interest in investigating) and sliding it into his thigh holster, tilting his head slightly. "But this is better, don't you think?"

"Much more dramatically heroic. Very white knight," Spock agrees, glancing involuntarily back down at the assassin crumpled on the floor. "Your timing is...excellent."

"Well, my training has been extensive," Jim says agreeably as he crosses the room, and Spock still can't move, afraid to break this moment because the Antares isn't due for another three days, so he must be hallucinating. Stress.

"I'm so pleased the investment has paid off," Spock manages, and he doesn't really know what he's saying but it draws a grin out of Jim, bright and easy, so he thinks it was the right thing to say.

"I like to think I'm a credit to my training. You okay?"

"I—I'm fine," Spock says, and Jim is in his space, hands smoothing across Spock's chest and down his arms, coming back up to stroke thumbs across Spock's cheekbones and Spock realizes Jim is a little out of breath, like he ran. Like he was afraid he wasn't going to make it in time, and Spock wonders what it looks like out there, if Jim knew that this was going to happen or if he'd just dropped by and happened to see her and had run, not having the time to warn anyone else. Spock turns into the touch, wrapping his hands around Jim's wrists. "I'm fine," he repeats, and doesn't say now but thinks Jim hears it.

"Good." Jim smiles a little more, thumbs stroking easily, comfortingly.

It happens so fast Spock doesn't actually realize what's happened until Skelev and Jim have their phasers drawn on each other, Jim's body shielding Spock, his face tucked against Jim's neck. Spock wants to know when Jim learned to move that fast and why it's not in his file.

Not that Spock's read Jim's file except the once. Twice. Five times.

This inability to focus might be shock.

"That's Jim Kirk!" Admiral Roux snaps, grabbing Skelev's wrist and jerking it down.
"Commander."

"Admiral," Jim replies, lowering his phaser but not releasing Spock, fingers stroking the hair at the nape of his neck gently.

"Since Commander Kirk did your job for you, I suggest you handle the assassin's corpse," Roux snaps at Skelev, who glares at her before nodding to the security officers.

"Sire, we need to get you back to the palace," he says brusquely, and Spock slides his fingers gently along the exposed skin above Jim's pants before pulling back enough to look at them all.

"Kirk, debrief—"

"Already done it with Admiral Archer," Jim interrupts. "I am officially on shore leave for the next eleven months, thirty days, twenty three hours and”—he checks his watch—"twenty seven minutes."
Spock doesn't let go of him on the walk out to the vehicle, or when they get to Bentley, or when they're in Spock's rooms with Jim's phaser on the dresser on his side of the bed (there is a level of pathetic to this that Spock hasn't really examined).

"You're early," he says finally, forcing his fingers to unwrap from Jim's wrist.

"The *Jimmy Carter* stopped over on Illyria so we didn't have to," Jim says. "So, your security sucks."

Spock huffs a laugh, falling forward to press his forehead to Jim's shoulder. "So it would seem."

"That hasn't—"

"Not since I was…very young," Spock says, pulling back to look at Jim. There are reddish welts on his neck—McCoy must have done his shots before letting Jim go. He looks completely exhausted, now that the adrenaline has worn off. "You're tired."

"Perpetually until I die forever and ever amen," Jim agrees. "Don't you nag, I've already got Bones."

Spock reaches out and begins pulling the gold shirt off, and Jim raises his hands obediently, lets Spock strip him down to boxers and tuck him under the sheets.

Jim falls asleep in a matter of seconds and Spock watches him, arm curled under his own pillow.

He had known, objectively, that Jim has killed people. That he is a soldier and that he is ruthless enough that Klingons know him by name. Knowing it and experiencing it are two very different things.

His PADD pings and the report from this afternoon is waiting for him. He pulls himself up to sit up against the headboard and reads it. The woman ran up the stairs of the building and witnesses reported seeing a Starfleet officer run after her. He wonders when Jim spotted her, if he hadn't gotten a clear shot until that moment. Why he didn't set it to 'stun'.

It doesn't matter—not really. It doesn't change anything.

She belonged to *Patriots for Prosperity*, an anti-monarchy group which believes Spock is attempting to make them part of the Romulan Empire. They're the ones who claim he's not actually half-Vulcan, but half-Romulan.

Her name was Trq p'Dannath, and she was a native of Grendu IV. She was thirty-one, and had two children.

He puts the PADD aside. There won't be a trial, Jim had acted as judge, jury and executioner. Which Spock doesn't—can't—blame him for. Is grateful. But still…

Spock exhales and comms T'Pring.

"Yes?"

"Come to my study with Nyota," he says.

"Damage control?" Nyota asks as soon as she walks in. "Where is he?"

"Asleep. And yes."
She nods. "He was off-duty, but in matters of national security Starfleet officers have the same charter as your personal security."

"The fact that he shot to kill—" T'Pring begins.

"That's what I'm worried about," Spock says, and T'Pring nods, shrugging a shoulder.

"He acted above his position. He had time to set it to stun, but he chose not to. Your emotional attachment aside, even Skelev would be brought under investigation under those circumstances."

"He would be cleared," Nyota points out.

"That is not for us to decide. The law—"

"Applies where I say so," Spock points out, and T'Pring raises both of her eyebrows at him.

"Ah," she says, mildly. "I had not realized we had entered into the age of Dictator Spock. Your desire to protect Commander Kirk due to your emotional compromise where he is concerned is duly noted, however—"

"The press is already covering him as a hero," Nyota interrupts. "Bringing Jim Kirk to trial after this kind of press—"

"Would still be the legal course of action," T'Pring insists.

Nyota gives her a long look at then turns to Spock deliberately. "Your Majesty. The people are on your side, and more than that they are on Kirk's. You can start the process of an investigation, or we can let this lie."

"He should be investigated, and if the report demands it, brought to trial," T'Pring says flatly.

"That's an amazing display of gratitude," Nyota snaps.

"Your gratitude for his action clouds your judgement," T'Pring observes.

"No, your marriage to logic deprives you of seeing what's best for the Federation and the monarchy," Nyota retorts.

T'Pring gives her a scathingly blank look. "Call for an investigation; couch it in the terms of investigating more thoroughly how this all happened. If they find that Lieutenant Commander Kirk has acted within the Starfleet charter, then we do not need to concern ourselves with the matter further. If they find he acted improperly, then we may take steps, which may include turning him over to Starfleet for an internal tribunal hearing."

Spock looks at Nyota and lifts his eyebrow, and she nods: If they find he acted improperly, she'll bury it. Still, Starfleet tribunals often find their own officers have acted within the realm of propriety—T'Pring has already provided them with an escape hatch, should they need it.

"Thank you both. I believe I'll retire for the evening. Nyota, please clear my schedule," he says, standing, and they both bow and leave. It's only four in the afternoon but he feels exhausted.

"Where'd you go?" Jim murmurs when Spock slides into bed with him, Jim's arm sliding across Spock's waist and a leg tangling between Spock's.

"Just some business," Spock says, hushed. "Sleep."
Jim wakes up late in the morning and panics, breath coming too sharp and everything tensing and it's all Spock can do to grab hold of him and murmur, "Calm down."

Jim's very blue eyes open fully, and he looks at Spock for a long time, unreadable. Spock wants to know what he's thinking—wants to know if it's something good or if he still thinks he's dreaming or if Jim has, after a full night's sleep, decided that being here again isn't actually what he wants. Spock knows what makes Jim laugh and what makes him angry and he knows that Jim doesn't give a quarter, is in charge and deferred to all the time. He knows from McCoy that Jim is allergic to the universe, and he knows from Jim that McCoy worries too much.

But Spock doesn't know if Jim had a happy childhood, and he doesn't know his favorite color. If the recklessness is something he acquired or if it's inborn, if he tore through Riverside the way he tears through the galaxy or if he was quiet and learned to be louder.

He doesn't know how Jim feels about his father, doesn't know if he feels the loss as sharply as Spock feels Amanda's or if it's duller. He knows that Jim can encrypt and hack, that he was originally tracked for engineering before he was hauled into command, but he doesn't know if Jim would rather be in engineering—if for all his love for the Enterprise he'd rather be the one taking care of her rather than the one commanding her.

He doesn't know about Sam and Jim's relationship, or Jim and Winona's. He doesn't know so much but he wants to. Wants to know if Jim always wakes up in a startled panic or if it's when he's on-world and he can't hear a ship around him. He wants to ask, but he's not sure, even now, if he has the right. If Jim would answer or shrug and smile and kiss him, distracting and deflecting easily. Spock would let him, and he thinks that that would be an answer in its own right.

"Morning," Jim murmurs scratchily, turning into him and pressing a kiss to Spock's collarbone, warm and lush and here.

"Jim," Spock sighs.

"I had a plan, you know" Jim confesses, working his way up Spock's neck. "It involved a lot of fucking, and less showing up exhausted and trigger-happy"

"I have faith in your improvisational skills," Spock assures him, dipping his head to catch Jim's mouth, making a small sound when Jim pulls back, just a little, smiling wide and happy at him.

"My improvisational skills are the stuff of legend."

"Prove it," Spock sighs into the space between their lips, not quite a plea but not quite an invitation either.

"Welcome home to me," Jim beams, and leans over him, pressing Spock back into the pillows and sliding against him. Sleeping pants are discarded, kicked to the bottom of the bed where they'll have to be fetched later. Jim is half-on top of him, hands never still, stroking up Spock's side or his face, sliding through his hair or smoothing along his arms until Spock decides he's had enough, that it's too much of a tease. He settles over Jim's thighs and wraps a hand around Jim's cock. Jim groans, head dropping back on the pillows and like he can't decide which is better, feeling Spock's mouth around him or watching.

"Have you—" Jim asks, breaking off to moan when Spock flicks his tongue over the head experimentally. It's been three years, but the taste is the same.
"No," Spock says, pumping Jim with his hand. "You'll have to remind me."

"Oh fuck," Jim groans. Spock grins and then dives back down and it's familiar, Jim's hand resting on the back of his skull or moving to rub at his shoulder, groaning wordless encouragement. Spock wants him, and trails a finger down, lower. Jim rests a hand on Spock's head, the other clenched in the pillow under his head. "Just like that, baby," he murmurs, and Spock wonders if Jim even knows he's saying it, and thinks that no-one else can ever know.

Spock stops pumping with his hand to play with Jim's balls and Jim chokes, laughs a little and says, "If you're gonna fuck me and you want to see me come on your dick, you wanna move things along."

Spock pulls off, surges up Jim's body to kiss him and Jim licks the bitter taste of precome out of Spock's mouth, holds him close and rolls his hips up so their cocks drag against each other like the best kinds of promises.

"Jim," Spock manages, and he sounds...broken or wrecked or hopeful to his own ears and he doesn't know which interpretation Jim picks, only knows that Jim pulls him closer, kisses him like he wants to take all of Spock's air—all of everything Spock has to offer and Spock will give it all and more. Give it without question or hesitation, and that is a terrifying realization.

He's sliding two fingers into Jim's body, slicked up from the lube Jim's thrust at him before he knows it, Jim working himself down on the fingers impatiently, a steady stream of, "Yes, now, now, come on, want you in me, come on" muttered against Spock's lips in between stinging, biting kisses.

Finally, Spock slicks up and settles between Jim's legs, lines himself up and presses the head of his cock in.

"Oh, motherfuck," Jim grunts and Spock has to lean up, kiss him as he pushes further in, bottoming out while Jim opens, hot and slick around him, his legs locked around Spock's hips, pulling him in. "Move, move move," Jim demands, rolling his hips impatiently and Spock obliges, fucks into him with short hard thrusts, biting at Jim's jaw while Jim moans, panting.

"Yes, fuck, yes, harder, come on, come on," Jim manages in a whine. His ankles dig into Spock's back as Spock drives forward, and Jim keeps rolling his hips, coming up to meet every thrust as the bed moves under them. Spock reaches between them to pump Jim's dick in time with his thrusts, Jim pulling him in for kisses that break off too quickly so Jim can gasp for air, choke out shouts when Spock speeds up. He has one hand digging into Spock's neck, the other on his thigh, urging him on. It's not quite right, Jim's panting but still grabbing at Spock, and so he shifts, just a little, braces his hands on the mattress and bends Jim's knees in front of him so Jim's bent in half and that—that angle is right.

"Come for me," Spock says, and Jim makes a mangled sound that seems like it's torn out of him. Spock bends and sucks a bruise into his neck, wants to mark him and have this, have it forever—and it's a thought he won't give voice to now, and maybe not ever. He'll be content to have Jim as long as the bruises last, as long as Jim's willing to be here, tense and groaning and flushed in Spock's bed.

Jim comes, sobbing against Spock's mouth, spilling hot between them, clenching around Spock and Spock fucks him through it, catches his gasping mouth in another kiss, greedy for it.

"Come on, baby," Jim coaxes, his voice harsh and sated at once, the hard clench of his body giving into something more languid. "Make me feel it."
Spock swears and gasps, "Jim," buried deep and emptying himself out inside Jim, orgasm hitting him too fast and too hard, knocking everything out of him until he's pulling out, hissing in sympathy when Jim clenches and makes a noise high in his throat.

Jim is lazy and half asleep, looking blissful and Spock forces himself up, to get a wet, warm cloth to wipe them both down with and Jim reaches down, touches Spock's cheek and traces the line of his jaw before skidding back up to curl two fingers against his temple. Jim's hole is red and puffy, leaking, and Spock glances up at him, because that was a magnitude of irresponsibility the monarchy was supposed to have beaten out of him.

"Clean," Jim says on a sigh, and Spock slides back up, avoiding the wet spot and tangling around him, pressing close. He feels heavy and warm and sated, and thinks when they wake up they'll do it again, do everything he remembers and more.

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Jim wakes up and feels disoriented—thinks this must be one of those planets that want to make him their god/king/sex slave. It's amazing how hard it is to tell the difference at first.

But when he jerks his eyes open, the ceiling is familiar, and the spread of the warm body beside him—hogging the blankets and all the space in the bed and half of Jim's pillow—is familiar, and he feels himself slide back into that lazy place where you don't have to be asleep or awake, and so you're not either, not really. He rolls onto his side, and thinks this is one of those things that marks whatever…whatever this is as different. Jim doesn't stay the night. He's slept in the same bed as Bones, stuffed into sleeping bags or that one time when decks 4-7 had been out of commission because of the incorporeal aliens and Bones had shown up on Jim's doorstep and said, "Shut up and don't hog the covers."

He smiles a little when Spock snuffles discontentedly and rolls and twists before settling exactly as he was before. He can have this. He knows it—knows Spock doesn't think Jim will stay and wouldn't ask, but Jim thinks he could. Could fit here, have this to come home to. They could figure it out. They're both fucking geniuses.

"I can hear you thinking."

"Touch telepathy makes you a cheat," Jim replies, bending to kiss one of Spock's shoulders.

"That," Spock sighs, rolling over to look at Jim, "made no sense whatever, since I wasn't touching you."

"Don't bother me with details," Jim dismisses, grinning.

"No, never," Spock agrees, glancing at the clock and then back to Jim, sliding an arm around him to pull him in close.

"Don't pick Stonn," Jim says, and Spock pulls back a little to blink at him.

"What?"

"Or Ueri3 or—don't pick the good choices. Or—don't pick one of them. Whatever, just—don't."

Spock watches his face, and Jim wants to know if Spock's learning the differences, if there are any.
If how Jim looked three years and four flatlines later is different from how he looks now. "I won't," Spock promises.

"Good," Jim says, and moves to sit up. Spock lets him, watches quietly and Jim thinks, stupid and young, *don't break my heart, here.*

He stands up and then grimaces. Shower, absolutely. He's sticky and sore—wow, so sore—and he can't face the world (any of them) without a shower.

T'Pring comes in, stops just inside and takes perfunctory stock of the bruises pressed red and purple and possessive into Jim's skin, and then begins to tell Spock about all the things he needs to do, like, yesterday.

Jim pauses at the door of the bathroom and glances back. Spock looks like he's trying not to laugh, sheets pooled around his hips as he leans against abused pillows and listens to T'Pring, consulting the PADD he's pulled out of the drawer in the bedside table.

*Next to the lube,* Jim's fourteen-year-old self notes gleefully.

The shower is as good as Jim remembered it: he's had dreams about this shower, and he wonders if Spock knows that this is a luxury.

When he comes back out Spock is gone, which is probably for the best since Jim just got clean, and he looks damn good damp if he does say so himself.

T'Pring looks at him from her seat by the window, arching an eyebrow as he pulls on the pants that were laid out. They fit, which doesn't surprise him, not really, but it's weird. For the last year he and Gary have been sharing shirts because Jim bled on one too many. Or, as Sulu's always quick to point out, it's not the bleeding that's the issue, it's the fact that he always manages to rip them to shreds. So he and Gary shared six shirts when they'd started out with eighteen a piece (Gary claims that his shirts, like other people's socks, just don't come back from laundry. Jim doesn't really care enough to investigate that).

Which reminds him (indirectly, but it does) that he needs to make sure Scotty stays way from Archer and that he focuses on that inorganic replicator he'd been working on a few months ago.

Basically, Jim needs to keep Scotty busy until the *Enterprise* is ready for tampering…and even then it's possible that Jim's going to have problems then, too. Give Scotty no time and he's a fucking genius; give him two days and he works miracles. Give him two weeks…well, two weeks and the man turns into a walking disaster. And Jim doesn't even think that this is going to be one of those situations where Keenser will be any help because he'll be too busy joygasming over the warp core.

Yeah, this could be pretty fucking problematic, Jim thinks at his shirt as he buttons the thousands of tiny round (motherfuck, don't let them be pearl) buttons.

T'Pring reasserts her presence by saying, "You have engaged in unprotected intercourse with His Royal Majesty."

"Yeah, see, there's really no way that you could say that without just being rude," Jim muses, and ignores the ascot (*ascot*), but pulls on the waistcoat. He eyes the jacket, then the window past T'Pring. Yeah, all right, he'll wear the jacket.

"Matters concerning the King take precedence over societal mores," she informs him, and Jim gives her a look, amused.
"Does that ever work?" he wants to know. He bets it does: he bets that people tell her every little detail just to keep her from killing them brutally.

"With alarming frequency," she admits.

"See, I'm not just a pretty face."

"You're hardly even that," she informs him, and he stares at her.

"That was a fucking joke," he says, and she lifts an eyebrow at him.

"The complexities of Terran humor—"

"Stow it," Jim tells her cheerfully, pulling on his other boot.

"Where are you going?" she inquires.

"Apartment-hunting. It's too early to be a kept man," he informs her confidentially. "Cosmo says so."

"A trite magazine dispensing vulgar advice—"

"So you've read it," Jim says, and laughs when she arches an eyebrow at him. "Come on, I'll let you help me."

"Does that ever work for you?" she mimics, and Jim beams.

"It's working now," he tells her.

Which is how he ends up apartment hunting with T'Pring, who has a list of appropriate locations. She won't let their realtor show him anything under the fifteenth floor, and Jim wants to argue except from the fifteenth he can see Bentley and the sky equally, so he shuts up and lets her browbeat the poor man.

He ends up with a gorgeous place, sleek and wide open with lots of light.

"I don't need this much space," he says, because he doesn't, but that doesn't mean that he isn't a little bit in love with the lines and curves of this place. It doesn't mean that he won't fight tooth and nail to have it.

"Neither does His Majesty, and yet," T'Pring replies archly, going through the paperwork as Jim investigates. Three bedrooms, enough space to put up the morons he works with when they need somewhere to stay.

"That's true, but Bentley's kind of a hotel-slash-dorm," Jim points out, coming back into the dining room.

"You should speak of your future home less disparagingly," she informs him, handing him a pen and the paperwork for his signature. He chokes and screws up his own fucking signature while the realtor's mask of disinterest starts to hit that really, really interested level of disinterested. Right, so this is getting sold to some paper and the headlines tomorrow will read:

**WEDDING BELLS IN THE WORKS: HRM TO MARRY PRINCE OF AMERICA**

Bones will call in a panic and Gary will probably kill Jim, but the papers get signed and this place is his, vast and empty but *his.*
"It is very empty," T'Pring observes after shutting the door behind the realtor.

Jim doesn't actually have a lot of stuff. Most of what he has is Starfleet issue, and because he lives on a ship, and has done for the last eight years or so he doesn't have furniture. He has holos, but they're stored and projected from one disk. He doesn't have posters or wall hangings, and T'Pring sighs and they end up shutting down a store.

She keeps suggesting things that are ugly, ugly, so ugly.

"Is that a Vulcan thing?" he finally demands after she points to a twisted couch that he can't even sit on, just keeps sliding off of and getting violated by, "or a you thing?"

"Taste is societally dictated, but fluctuates on an individual basis," she says severely, which probably means he should stop making fun of the shit she picks up.

Then she picks up something that might be a tribble that's been mounted and stuffed and he has to veto it or cry.

*

Bones' take on the whole thing is that Jim should just put them all out of their misery.

"Just marry him, already," Bones pleads.

"I'm about to get my commission!" Jim points out, flopping onto his new couch and staring at his new ceiling and glancing over at whatever T'Pring had left on when she'd been called away to deal with some crisis at Bentley.

He thinks it's Austen. He could be wrong, but he thinks that that's Sense and Sensibility.

Not that Jim's familiar with those movies…

"And you'll spend the entire fucking trip lookin' like someone with a wasting disease pining for lost love," Bones says with vicious satisfaction.

"Hey!"

"As your doctor, I'm telling you to marry the boy before you fuckin' pine away and haunt us all calling 'Spooooooook' in a mournful tone."

"You can't call our sovereign a boy, and what the fuck have you been reading? Or…watching?"

"You're right. If you break our sovereign's fucking heart, James Tiberius Kirk—"

"Do you know that even my mom doesn't use my full name like that?"

"Fuck off." There's a long pause, and then Bones sighs. "Jim. We've got a year. Take the year and…sort yourself out. You gotta place on the Core, figure out if it's something you can do. Think you'll find maybe you can."

Jim doesn't know anyone on the Core, and the apartment really is too big and lonely.

But T'Pring comes over and thrusts take out into his hands saying, "This means that we are friends, and you must allow me to stay here in order to prevent homicide."

Jim's more intrigued than anything else, so he shrugs and sits beside her while they watch a remake
of *Pride and Prejudice*. Jim's not really sure *why* they're watching that, since Jim's never really liked period pieces about fucking old love stories, and T'Pring is a Vulcan so it's not really the assumption you'd jump to, but whatever. They're watching it. Suffering through it.

Semantics.

T'Pring tucks her toes under Jim's thigh, watching in disgust as Darcy fumbles his way through a declaration of love, and Jim realizes that he's mooning at the holo and that that shit's just not on, so he pokes her.

"Projecting?"

"Absolutely not."

He grins at her and she ignores him resolutely, ignoring him further when Scotty calls and tells Jim that he can't bear Scotland anymore and that Gaila wants him to make babies so he's going to the *Enterprise* to hide, and then it's two hours getting Scotty clearance and arguing with Archer, who really needs to stop coasting on the family name and being a dick. Scotty's going one way or another, Jim points out. Really, it's just whether or not they decide to look like idiots trying to keep him off the ship or let him go and save face.

Shockingly, Starfleet opts to save face.

"You should really use condoms," T'Pring mumbles when he shakes her awake and guides her to one of the guest rooms.

"I can't get pregnant," he points out. "And it kind of feels awesome."

She gives him a hateful look, which is impressive because she actually doesn't *make* a face. It's like she projects hatefulness. "You are deliberately provoking," she says.

"Yeah," he agrees, and goes to bed.

Yeah, he is.

---

Spock stares at T'Pring. "What?" he asks helplessly.

"He has procured a living space in which he can exercise his individuality," she informs him. "He made very cogent arguments." She pauses, and then says, "However, his taste in real estate is—"

"T'Pring!" Spock says, and she slants an amused look at him.

"I believe he is overwhelmed," she explains. "He wishes to make an analysis of his feelings towards you and how much he is willing to sacrifice in the name of a relationship. You would be wise to accept and respect that," she says, almost reproachful, and Spock closes his eyes and wonders when Jim co-opted *Spock's* childhood friend. T'Pring doesn't really like anyone, but she *clearly* likes Jim.

"I'm not—"

"No," she agrees, and then says, "You are having unprotected sexual intercourse."
"T'Pring!" he groans, dropping his face into his hands. He's the King, damnit. He shouldn't have to put up with this. He blames Jim. Blames Jim a lot.

"His Serene Highness was not very forthcoming with details," she begins, and Spock is momentarily thrilled that this new friendship of horror has not resulted in them gossiping about Spock's technique in bed (oh, oh, that's a horrible, horrible thought). Then she continues, "But as your body belongs to the Empire now—"

"I don't remember signing that paper," Spock interrupts.

"—It is imperative that I be aware of any danger presented to you. I have informed Sergeant Skelev—"

"You didn't."

"—that we should be monitoring your personal interactions for threats as well."

"Commander Kirk is not making an attempt on my life—"

"No," she agrees, and then: "Why do you always call him by his Starfleet title and not the peerage title?"

Spock inhales and reminds himself that he is His Majesty Spock, King of the United Federation of Planets, and technically he can have her killed.

She's smirking at him.

He'll kill her.

"Out," he says, pointing at the door.

"As Your Majesty wishes," she replies, probably to go tell Jim that she's driving Spock crazy.

You didn't let her decorate anything, did you? He sends it off to Jim after a moment of thought.

I am not that crazy. Stuffed and mounted tribble, Spock. That's all I'm saying. You should come over, enjoy the solitude.

Spock smiles at the message, and then at Nyota when she comes in, PADD on her arm and brittle smile in place.

Raincheck, he replies, and then stands to deal with whatever crisis is bearing down on them now.

He does make it over, and they break the apartment in, fucking on every surface and redecorating, changing the locks and Jim laughs and says that Spock can use it as a hideaway, when things are too hideous.

As much time as they spend together, they are often putting out fires of their own. Spock's tend to feel larger, but just as often he comes into his suite to find Jim snapping into his comm at his future crew, at his current crew, at Admirals, at his mother. The only person Jim seems not to yell at is Commander Madeline Arbor, who is slated to be the Enterprise's Chief Science Officer.

Spock is certain that at least 40% of those issues should be the domain of Captain Pike, but that his efficiency as First Officer allows her to enjoy her shore leave while Jim rubs his forehead and asks, biting off small words and sharp syllables, while the mainframe conductors are now only internally-directed instead of dual; why the synthesizers can't be updated to organic replicators; if
he needs to come over and observe this personally.

Spock changes into pajama pants and watches Jim try not to laugh as he asks Gaila if he needs to send Bones along with his VD testing kit (Lieutenant Gaila Athhorra, future Chief Communications Officer on the Enterprise, and an Orion woman born to freedom, who has lived on Earth her entire life until joining Starfleet. From what Spock can tell, she enjoys inciting all types of chaos, and Jim is her first choice for her one allotted communication when she's been locked up again. Spock also thinks she calls Jim just for kicks, not because she wants him to bail her out).

Two months into his stay Jim has to shuttle to Earth in order to be Prince of America, and while he's there he has to go to Earth Spacedock and make sure that the Enterprise isn't, actually, listing to the left.

It is, and Spock laughs as quietly as possible that night when Jim calls him to complain, occasionally muffled because he's using a headset and he puts extra tools in his mouth. Spock can hear "Scotty" and Keenser in the background, and thinks that this works. That if he wondered if they could do this here is his answer in practical application.

"When will you be home?" he asks.

"If it's not done in two days I'm going to stick Scotty in the right thruster and see if that works," Jim says. "What time is it there?"

"Late," Spock says, not glancing at the clock because if he does he'll know exactly how soon he needs to be awake to deal with tomorrow, and some things don't bear thinking about.

"Sorry, I should have—"

"No, it's fine, I wouldn't have answered if it was a problem," Spock says, firmly.

Jim laughs. "Yeah, you would have."

Spock sits down on the edge of the bed. "Yes," he agrees. "I would have."

"I love you too," Jim says, and that carries Spock through negotiations with Romulus, a private communication from Sarek that leaves Sybok angry and taking it out on T'Pring, who goes after him with relish.

At the end of the day he finds himself looking at a picture of his parents. It was taken before they were married, but from Sarek's private collection, not one of the glossy stills the press still circulates when Spock's genetic make-up becomes a thing that needs discussion.

Amanda looks young and happy in it, her hair a mess around her face and a flush high on her cheeks, and she has her cheek pressed to Sarek's, leaning over the back of his chair to look at what he's reading. Sarek's face is turned, just slightly, towards her, and they look perfectly young and happy. Somewhere, Spock knows, Sybok was lurking in the background or playing, and it would be three years until Spock even came around, another three before she was killed. They look like two people with all the time in the world, and completely content with each other.

"You look thoughtful," Sybok observes, and glances at the photo, then at Spock. "You're going to ask him, aren't you?"

Spock doesn't ask how Sybok knows, just says quietly, "I am."
Sybok nods, pressing a finger to the smile on Amanda's lips almost reverently before pulling back to lean against the windowsill. "Well, you gave the galaxy four years to get used to it, if they're not it's sort of their own damn faults."

"I—"

"Yeah, I know, you two thought that you could deny your epic love or some shit, but the rest of us kind of figured it was a matter of time," Sybok tells him patronizingly, and Spock throws him a dirty look. "Seriously, though. What're you going to do about—"

"I don't—He'll have his commission, his ship and I'll...endure it."

"Excuse me, I have to vomit in my mouth a little," Sybok says.

"You can leave. I didn't invite you—"

"Fine, fine, I'm sorry. So what, it's incentive to win the war? Why would you do that to yourself?"

"Because—" Spock shakes his head and then looks at him. "Because he would stay if I asked him to."

"I don't understand."

"He would stay, and he would be bored and it would torment him, but he would stay because—" Spock breaks off and shakes his head, putting the picture down gently to pace.

"I really want to see you sell this to T'Pring."

"You just want me to get her worked up for you—" Spock breaks off in horror when Sybok flushes and looks studiously out the window. "Oh, you're kidding me."

"It's not really any of your—"

"Finish that sentence, I dare you," Spock invites, and Sybok grins a little and then glares at him.

"Look, we're both adults and—and you're the one getting married, why am I the one on the defensive?"

"He hasn't said 'yes', yet," Spock points out.

"You can't think he won't," Sybok scoffs.

Everyone seems so certain it's a sure thing. That Spock will ask and Jim will say yes and maybe that is a certainty, though Spock doesn't feel so confident about it. Feels stupid and clumsy and desperately scared, low in his stomach. Still, even if Jim says "yes"—even if he agrees and makes Spock ridiculously happy—there's so much to figure out.

Translating what they have into a marriage, with all the constraints that come along with a Royal Marriage (Spock can't think of it without the fucking capital letters—can't hear it without seeing them), will be...Spock isn't afraid to ask, he realizes. He's not afraid to ask, he's afraid to get into this and have Jim realize it was a mistake, that Spock won't be able to navigate this right and Jim will turn around and—and it's unfounded, and he realizes that. But then, perhaps it's not.

And he's terrified of that for himself, certainly, but also because he doesn't know that he can project stability if his marriage—isn't. Doesn't know how this will all affect his ability to be a ruler.
He sighs and scrubs his face, opening the ring box and looking at it, three layers of gold-pressed latinum with diamonds inlaid, modified from its original opulence but still ostentatious, and Spock can't help but grin a little in anticipation of Jim's face when he sees it. It's valued, Spock's informed, at 234,000 credits, without its historical context.

FUCK IT, he decides viciously. He doesn't want one of the good choices, he wants Jim. He's not so afraid of losing this that he won't grab it with both hands and hold on until his fingers bleed.

"So, I've been thinking," Jim says, and Spock turns and looks at him in surprise. Jim grins his acknowledgement of Spock's shock—he must have been able to leave earlier, the ass.

"I'm thinking of having those four words classified as deadly weapons," Spock tells him seriously as he puts the box back into his pocket, and Jim beams, presses a kiss to Spock's lips before throwing himself onto the bed. He props his chin on his hands and lifts an eyebrow, and Spock relents.

"Yes, Jim, what have you been thinking?"

"I've been thinking that generally three years is an absurdly long tour of duty, and should be shortened to half that."

Spock lays beside him, laying on his back so he can look up into Jim's face without much effort. Not Jim's most attractive angle, not that that matters very much. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I admit to having a vested interest in that, and I'm not suggesting that we cut down on the exploratory tours, that should stay five years because anything less just doesn't let you accomplish anything, and those tend to run long anyway. No, but, for combat tours. Eighteen months."

Spock pauses, and then starts to say something but it catches on the laugh welling up in his throat. He clears it and then tries again. "This is one of those things where you have proposals already drawn up and you've press-ganged doctors and admirals and the literature has a million footnotes on it, isn't it?"

"...I admit to nothing," Jim informs him, grinning, which is a give-away in and of itself. "Also, more to the point, you read my papers from school?"

"You were gone for a long time," Spock replies.

"Aww, you pined! Did you jerk off to the one about how to defeat the Klingons?" Jim demands. "Because that was a work of fucking genius."

"You were seventeen." Which is not the same as saying that he didn't jerk off to the paper, but that would have been...a bit of a lie. Spock finds intelligence attractive. He also made sure that the right admirals saw it and dropped hints that students' papers should be monitored for ideas that were applicable to the ongoing conflict, not that Jim ever every needs to know that, because Spock would never hear the end of it.

"I'm a fucking genius," Jim emphasizes, laughing.

Spock looks at him thoughtfully, then surges up, pins him down and kisses him. Jim's mouth opens under his, instantly giving, his hands hot on Spock's back, one legs falling open so Spock's nestled in the cradle of Jim's hips. They're not hard, not yet, and Spock thinks that they can do this.

They can do fucking anything.

*
He decides he's just going to propose on a random Thursday when he's going through the last Romulan dispatch. Except Jim is at a meeting at Starfleet, and so Spock sends him a note to see him when he gets in. And then he tries to get more work done, and that's not happening.

At all.

And then he has nothing to do for hours, and he can't see anyone because they'll know or they'll ask and Spock thinks that—this is between him and Jim and they should be the first to know. Spock exhales, and then sits down.

"Are you okay?" Jim asks before he's even in the door, shutting it behind him because that's one of Jim's tics—he never leaves a door open behind him if he can help it. "I got your message—"

"I'm fine," Spock says, and then gestures to the sofa beside him, mouth suddenly dry. "Have a seat."

"…Am I in trouble? Because I didn't do it, it was Sybok," Jim says immediately, sitting down and frowning at Spock.

"Your disturbing penchant for both assuming you're in trouble and blaming my brother aside, no. I just—I have something I want to ask you," he says, and he's a gifted diplomat and he can give excellent speeches. Really, he can. "I just—I mean, it would make me very happy, ridiculously—if you—" he exhales, frustrated, and Jim's look of confusion melts away into something gleeful and smug and he moves closer.

"You mean, you want me to stay with you," Jim says, leaning in a little because this is Spock fumbling for words.

"Yes, I'd—stay with me," Spock agrees, huffing a little laugh as he leans in.

The grin is going to split his face in half, it's so big, and he can barely get the words through it, but they come, brushed against Spock's lips: "And marry you."

"And marry me," Spock agrees, and then Jim kisses him because what the hell, he's supposed to resist that?

"Bed," he says firmly, sitting up and stripping, leaving clothes behind him until he's naked, and then Spock's there, pressed up behind him and kissing the curve of his neck, sliding hands down Jim's stomach to pump his dick from half-hard to fully erect before turning him around again, spreading him out on the bed. Jim thinks he's never so malleable as when he's in Spock's bed, which should probably worry him. A lot, but.

Spock pulls lube out of the drawer and settles between Jim's legs, arranging him and slicking up Jim's hole and his hand and then Spock's fingers slide into him, two of them right out of the gate. Jim arches and bears down, rolls his hips, hungry for it. "Now," he insists, clenching and unclenching his hands in the sheets restlessly.

Spock doesn't respond, just smiles at him a little and crooks and scissors his fingers, finding Jim's prostate and working it until Jim thinks he's just going to come on that, and he'd really like to get fucked, actually, so he makes a full effort to haul himself up and glare.
"In me," he insists, except it turns into a whine almost immediately because Spock settles between he legs and his tongue slides in with his fingers, eating Jim out and okay, that—yeah, that's in him but not the way Jim meant and what, now he has to be—"Oh, fuck, yes," he gasps, choking on it when Spock adds a third finger and keeps at him, tonguing the loosening ring of muscle before diving in and Jim is ready, more than ready, going to fucking come—

And he does, clenching around Spock's fingers and swearing his way through it.

"Not—" he says, when he has his voice back, "what I meant by in me."

"I'm ignoring you," Spock says, starting their engagement on a solid foundation of mutual understanding and respect.

"Oh, fuck y-you," Jim says when Spock's fingers curl back into him as Spock bends over Jim's sprawled out body to lick the come off his stomach, his chest. He chases even the smallest drops, like he's drawing the world's filthiest connect-the-dots on Jim's body and Jim's orgasm-loose but he still wants him, wants to feel Spock inside him so he says, moans out, "Spock, come on, please, fuck me, fuck—"

Spock makes a sound like he's dying or Jim's killing him and it sounds like victory, Spock shifting up over him and kissing Jim incoherent, if not silent. Jim returns it with interest, a hand fisting in Spock's hair (perfect length for getting a handful of and yanking) and the other hand reaching down between them, finding Spock's slicked-up cock and guiding it into his hole, sliding a leg up around Spock's hips to guide him in and Spock makes another one of those noises.

Jim likes getting fucked when he hasn't come, but he likes this too, when the edge has burned off of him and he can just feel this, Spock bottoming out in him with his balls pressed tight against Jim's ass, huge inside him, filling him up. Spock fucks into him desperate, chanting Jim's name like it's the only word he knows—will ever know. He's got Jim pinned, grip hard and tight partly because Jim likes that and partly because he's so far gone he's not thinking about it. Jim's almost bent in half, here, and Spock's hips are beginning to stutter, losing his rhythm entirely and Jim's dick twists in interest, apparently going to rejoin the party and Jim reaches down, strokes himself and shudders and clenches when the head of Spock's dick drags over his prostate and fuck, fuck—

Spock leans in, presses his lips against Jim's and it's not a kiss, too graceless and wet and too hard to be a kiss, more Spock mouthing at the general area of Jim's mouth as he presses in and shudders, pouring himself out hot and wet inside of Jim, dick twitching and it's enough or it's too much but Jim's coming again, hard enough to wreck him, second orgasm coming out of nowhere and stringing him tight, everything tensed too hard even as Spock gasps against his cheek still deep inside.

After, when there's been a nap (well-deserved and earned and god, Jim loves this) and Spock's cleaned them up ("You did the fucking, you can do the cleaning" "That argument is predicated on what, exactly?" "My ass being too sore to walk" "...I see your point."), Spock pulls out the engagement ring and slides it onto Jim's left ring finger.

He stares at it, the three linked layers and the diamonds. It's halfway to his knuckle—it's big, and not at all understated, and it feels strange on his finger.

"I'm too mellow to even bitch at you about this," he admits. He throws an arm over his eyes, sighing hugely. "You're such a fucking cheater."

"I've been studying Pavlov's work," Spock yawns earnestly, and Jim shoots him a dirty look before curling up.
"We're going to get married," he realizes, too well-fucked to really get worked up over it.

Spock smiles languidly, pleased. "Yeah," he agrees. He takes Jim's hand in his, kissing the knuckles. "It won't be how they all assume," he says, and Jim watches him with a small frown. "I wouldn't ask you to—"

"I know," Jim interrupts. "I know you wouldn't."

Spock nods. "I love you," he says, and Jim's not a big fan of the catch-and-return phrases, not really.

"I love you, too," he replies, because sometimes—sometimes shit like that has to be heard.

* 

Gary stares at him. "You were...you were going to have a ship. I don't—I don't understand why you would give up what we've been waiting for for a really fucking long time for—to what? Play house? Be his docile, silent...arm candy? So that he can project a manufactured image of fucking stability—you'd have to have kids," he realizes in horror. "You couldn't—Jim. What the fuck?"

"I'm still going to—" Jim starts, because Gary's his best friend and his future XO and Jim owes it to him to explain, or at least be patient. You know, until it's too much and Jim has to choke a bitch.

"Yeah, I know. He's gonna let you keep the ship. Except how will that look? Prince Consort of the Federation fighting on the front lines, give me a break. They'll give you the Enterprise, and then we'll be fucking stuck behind the—"

"You fucking asshole," Jim snaps, because wow Gary's being a fuckhole about this. "You really think that I would just let that happen. That I'd—wow, good to know what you think of me."
"I don't know what to think! An hour ago I thought we were still on the gameplan of fuck him out of your system! What happened to that plan?"

"I'll put in your recommendation to take over from me for Pike as XO. Unless, of course, she's too political. She is married to the head of the civil government."

"Bullshit. Politicians come and go, the monarchy stays until it dies."

"Fine. Stay with Pike," Jim snaps. "I'll take everyone else out on the Enterprise, we'll kick some ass, and if you ever manage to get your head out of your ass you can look me up sometime."

He gets a call from Sulu, then Gaila, then Bones, then Sam, then Bones, and finally he picks it up and snaps, "What?"

"You know, for two assholes who usually can read each other pretty well you two fucked that up good," Bones drawls, sounding delighted.

"Fuck you."

"Now, Jimmy," he tuts, and Jim barely manages not to punch a wall.

"He just—can't someone—clearly someone else—explain that things aren't going to go off-book, here?"

"Jim, you idiot," Bones sighs, affection and hate in his voice in equal parts. "You're getting married to the King and you didn't tell him. Pull your head outta your goddamn ass and cut the kid some slack."

Jim hangs up and glares. "I take back what I said before," he tells Spock. "It's a kindergarten."

Spock raises his eyebrows and then says, "We're going to a gala event, wear something that won't make Page 8," which is unfair. Well, okay, not, because when he and T'Pring had gone shopping when he'd first gotten the apartment they'd made Page 8, with snide comments about Jim's tight pants, and then the joygasms over his dress uniform had kept him horrified for a week while Spock, the unsupportive asshat, had laughed and laughed and laughed.

Jim does, and prepares to rub elbows with the peerage while supporting the arts, joy of joys.

"So how long do we have to look at these and pretend that they're not Caridian vaginas?" Jim asks after they've been there for two hours. Spock chokes a little and glances at him, then back at the paintings, and then resolutely at a place between the pictures.

They're art-y, but those are definitely vaginas, and Jim can look at vaginas for a long time, but he can't really handle the way everyone seems to be just looking at them like they're an interesting variation on a spontaneous concept shape with different colors and brushstrokes (hah).

Spock waits until some lord something-or-other walks by and then gives Jim a look. "You're doing that on purpose."

"I have no idea what you mean," Jim says earnestly. "Not that I'm against—"

Spock reaches out, a hand on the back of Jim's neck, dragging him forward for a kiss. "Please shut up," he says, pressing his forehead against Jim's, and just for that Jim nips at his bottom lip, sliding an arm around his hips.
"Only because you asked nicely," Jim decides. Spock's look conveys that he is very concerned about Jim's life up to this point if Jim thinks that that was asking nicely, but in Jim's book if there's a "please" attached to it, it's nice.

Well, polite at least.

Plus, Spock just flaunted their engagement in front of everyone and Jim isn't above being girlishly thrilled by that.

"Have you spoken to Gary?" Spock asks as they take another turn of the room.

"Oh look, vag—"

"Jim."

"No. He's still being a fucker." He sighs, and looks around. "They're all staring."

"Mm, well, you're more interesting than female anatomy, apparently," Spock agrees.

"Really?" Jim asks, raising his eyebrows archly.

"Really," Spock replies, and his small smile is absolutely filthy and shouldn't be allowed in public at all.

Which is somehow how they end up in the bathroom with Jim scrabbling for purchase against the sink while Spock sucks him down, humming thoughtfully around Jim's dick.

Jim keeps glancing at the door, like it might spontaneously unlock, and then down at Spock's head. Spock's hands are planted on Jim's thighs, fingers brushing his hips enough to pin him in place as he pulls off to lick up the underside, sucking just the head back in and tonguing the slit, then swirling his tongue around until Jim's hips are jerking uselessly. It's easy to forget how strong Spock is until he has Jim pinned.

Not that Jim's complaining and oh motherfuck.

Spock's mouth slides down and keeps going, taking him in to the root and Jim's eyes roll back in his head because yes, of course Spock would keep that talent a secret until he's blowing Jim in the bathroom of an art gallery. Naturally.

Spock pulls off and then slides back down, presses his fingertips hard enough to bruise into Jim's thighs and Jim comes with a mangled sound, knees giving out for a second and the counter pressing too hard into his ass.

Spock pulls off and licks his lips like he's chasing any bit of Jim's taste that he's missed, and it's too hot. "You're going to kill me," he says, and Spock laughs, tucking Jim back in and zipping him up.

"That isn't the intention," he says, and Jim kind of loves him unbearably.

* 

Sulu has enough of the Jim/Gary rift after seven weeks of it, and drags Jim out to a club. He calls it their bonding experience. Jim calls it His Crew Ganging Up on Him to Make Him Deal With Gary.
Sulu's is catchier, Jim admits.

"Does this mean Gary's the new mommy?" he asks Scotty, because Scotty's his bro and will let him ignore Gary. Scotty considers.

"Aye," he says firmly, which makes Madeline laugh and throw her arms around Gary's neck.

"Awww, Mommy," she coos. "Ovary up and talk to Daddy again, because if you think for a second that we're letting you stay with Pike you're crazycakes, and we'll get McCoy to hypo you and you'll wake up and have to do the job. Essentially, what I'm saying is we'll kidnap your ass."

Gaila throws her head back and laughs while Gary sulks into his beer. Bones watches them all fatally, like he's been shanghaied into spending time with all of them instead of this being a volunteers-only operation.

"Dude, seriously. We're gonna be fine, right?" Sulu demands. "We're outfitted and ready to go and shit? Not gonna try to take off with only eight of us? Because while I think that we could pilot her by ourselves, I don't actually want to."

Keenser raises his drink to that fervidly. "Yes," he says. "That."

"I'd like to have a nurse," Bones informs them all. "What with the way you all break, I need another pair of hands."

"We just need another helmsman," Jim sighs. "I have like, a million applicants and they're all balls."

Gary glances up, then remembers he hates everyone and looks away again, and then goes a little white and stills.

"What?" Jim demands, low enough that the sound doesn't travel beyond their table and reaching for a phaser that isn't there, dropping both feet to the floor. Sulu leans forward in the chair, wrapping his hand around the neck of the bottle they're sharing with deceptive casualness.

"Remember how he was jailbait?" Gary asks, pained. "Um, he's being carded."

Jim frowns, and then Gaila collapses into silent, gasping laughter.

"Wait," Sulu says. "Wait, wait. From Vega5, like, almost a year ago? Didn't you take him home?"

"Oh my god, he's underage."

"That is a child," Bones says flatly, waving to their waitress for a refill. She almost breaks her neck running over: Bones is in there.

"Under drinking age is not under the age of consent," Jim points out. "And that's 16 on Earth."

"You don't know he's Terran," Sulu protests, and Jim gives him a look before turning to Gary. Jim knows, Jim always knows.

"He's Terran," Gary relents. "Russian bloc, but does this weird thing with his v's like he's East European, so I don't even—"

"How do you do that?" Sulu demands, and Jim grins and shrugs because it's a gift as Gary says urgently,
"Gaila, oh my god, make out with me right now he's seen me!"

"He's adorable," she coos, putting her forearms on the table and pushing her breasts together enticingly. Like lures, Jim thinks as she adds, "And I am sworn off of men for at least a week."

"Gendered, sexed, or currently-identifying-as?" Madeline asks.

"...Haven't decided," Gaila admits. "I'm sort of identifying it as 'Not Gary' and going from there."

"Fuck you," Gary mutters, looking at Madeline hopefully.

"Nice, I'm second choice?" she scoffs.

"He is an infant," Bones is hissing at Gary, and Gary looks at him helplessly like he wants to say he looked older in the bar, but there's no way he ever looked older.

"Keptin Kirk?" the kid says.

Gary blinks, and Jim blinks, and they must make a fucking picture, the soon-to-be senior staff of HMS Enterprise gaping at a boychild. Wow, what is he, fifteen? Jim gives Gary a sidelong look and he shakes his head helplessly.

"Yeah?"

"My name is Pavel Chekov. I am an Ensign and I would like to formally apply for ze position of helmsman."

Jim takes the datafile from him, taking the PADD Madeline hands over and pulling up the kid's CV.

"Is that Meadow?" Sulu demands, low, leaning over to look at the references. Bones whistles lowly as he scans it, which pretty much cinches things.

"Battle experience?" Madeline asks Chekov like she's not wearing a slinky green dress and is in full uniform. "I'm Commander Madeline Arbor, Chief Science Officer of the Enterprise."

Chekov salutes, which is just so funny in a bar.

Jim glances across at Gary and gives him a look that says, awwww, you fucked an infant, you pedophile.

It's a complicated look.

Gary gets it though, judging by the glare he gives Jim. Bones does too, because he snorts into his whiskey.

"One," Chekov admits. "As you can see there—"

"You were a passenger," Jim says, frowning. "What were you doing on the bridge?"

"I could do it," Chekov says, and flushes a little, clearly afraid he's coming off like an arrogant asshole. Jim likes arrogant assholes. Clearly: the table's full of them. "I—I could do it, so I did."

"Yeah, good enough for me," Jim decides. "I have to give it some thought, but I'll let you know by the end of the week."
He smiles, bright and young then, and then slants a look at Gary, looking away hastily and flushing and yeah, he's pretty, and if Jim went for that he'd hit it in a Cardassian second.

"Why don't you two go discuss what it would be like if Chekov joined up?" Gaila suggests sweetly. "Gary is our First Officer, Chekov. He can tell you what to expect if you're selected to join our crew."

"Excellent idea," Jim agrees, and Gary grits his teeth and says,

"Jim. Can I see you over there, please?"

Jim grins, and turns to Gary expectantly once they're out of hearing-range.

"Yes, darling?"

"Is this payback?" he demands. "Are you punishing me because you don't like what I said and now I'm going to be—"

"Did you see his CV? He's joining the crew, Gary. If he's good I'm putting him up front with Sulu, so suck it up and find a way to be okay with it. Or, you know, suck something more literally."

"You're such an asshole."

"Yeah, but I'm gonna be your captain, so while you're at it you can suck my—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

They both turn, and then they both go blank in the face. Reporters.

"I was just wondering what the relationship here is?" the reporter says, smiling too wide and slippery.

"This is my first officer, Commander Gareth Mitchell," Jim says. "And this was a private conversation."

The reporter looks at him, then Gary, and Jim leans in, just a little.

"That means 'go away'," he says, helpfully, and the reporter does because, well, Jim's crazy smile is frightening.

"He's going to report trash," Gary sighs.

"They all do anyway," Jim shrugs.

"That's an awesome philosophy."

"Go bang the child some more," Jim invites. "I'm going home to my fiancé."

"The glee you get from saying that is disturbing," Gary sighs as they walk back to the table.

"Your jealousy is disturbing," Jim replies, and Gary looks at him sadly like Jim's brain left and he wants it back.

The headline the next morning is a classic: IS AMERICA'S REBEL PRINCE GOING TO BREAK HRM'S HEART?
There's a picture of Gary and Jim leaning into each other, Jim's smile teasing and Gary leaning in to speak in his ear.

"Should I be worried?" Spock asks, more amused than anything.

Jim shrugs, mouthing a kiss against Spock's shoulder. "I think my fiancé would kill me if I cheated on him," he says. "He's kind of a big deal—he can do that."

Spock nods, and puts the PADD aside. "I have no morning meetings today."

"I approve of that."

"I thought I would sleep in," Spock continues, and Jim gives him a long look.

"We are not so far into the relationship where you don't want a dick in an orifice," he says flatly, and Spock just looks at him before laughing and kissing him.

"Well, that was such an appetizing way of putting it," he mutters, and Jim pulls him down. Spock, because he's a contrary motherfucker, says, "You are very penile-oriented."

Jim groans. "Congratulations, least sexy thing said during sex award goes to yo—uhn—you."

Spock slides down Jim's body, settling by his knees with an arm braced across Jim's hips to keep him still while the first finger of his other hand teases at Jim's entrance, pushing in and then slipping back out, circling and pressing without breaching until Jim thinks that the tease of this is going to kill him, if only because he wants to reach down and make Spock get on with it.

He does, eventually, all the way past the second knuckle with his fingers pressing against Jim's ass, a promise of more as Spock rocks that finger in and out, slick and an easy slide until he adds another finger, Jim's hips rolling to meet them when they slide back in, filling him up and feeling strangely big inside of him. He feels like he's come already, that languid, boneless feeling come over him as Spock adds a third finger, adding a twist to the steady in-and-out. Spock is pressing, searching, finding Jim's prostate and then ghosting lightly over it, a teasing promise and it's almost a shock for Jim to look down the length of his body and see his cock hard and leaking against his stomach, leaving wet smears against it. Part of him wants to beg and plead, but another part of him thinks he should keep quiet, and when he tamps down on a moan and gets a quick, sharp smile in answer he knows he read that right.

"I want you to come from this," Spock says, murmurs really, pressing a kiss to the inside of Jim's thigh. "Just from my fingers inside you."

Jim doesn't know, honestly, if he can, without working his cock. Doesn't know if he can come just from this but knows without a doubt that Spock will keep it up until Jim does. That he'll keep doing this until Jim is shaking and drenched and keening, and he does, keeps it up with the steady pressure over Jim's prostate and murmuring "Just like this, Jim. Just for me. I want you always like this: mine. Keep you here in my bed, desperate for it, fill you up—"

Jim feels a wordless groan deep in his throat wrench itself free and he's so close it feels like building thunder in the air, almost ominous and definitely inevitable and then he's coming, sobbing and clenching down and shattering, shuddering apart until there's no breath left in his lungs, no strength left in his muscles.

"Make you come back," Spock finishes, and then he's leaning up over Jim, rubbing against the crease of Jim's leg and it's not long before he's coming all over Jim's stomach, and Jim reaches out clumsily and cups his cheek, pulls him down for a kiss.
"Couldn't stay away," he says, and it's true—truer maybe than Jim would like, but he doesn't think he could. Not then, not now, not ever.

Spock insists on meeting Jim's crew because he's met the Kirks, and they're...well, they're definitely Jim's family, but he wants to know the people who Jim is going to be with for eighteen months at a time. Jim insists that they do it at Bentley, because, he claims, the awe of the location might incite better behavior.

Spock had given him a long look, but agreed. Still, when Nyota comes in and introduces Doctor Leonard McCoy, Commander Madeline Arbor, Commander Gareth Mitchell, Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott, Lieutenant Gaila Athhorra Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu, Lieutenant Keenser, and Ensign Pavel Chekov, Spock doesn't feel like he has the home court advantage.

They all bow and curtsey, and Jim is clearly restraining himself from grabbing a towel or something to cover up Gaila's cleavage, and giving Mitchell significant looks Spock can't read.

"It is a great pleasure to finally meet you all," Spock says, gesturing for them to sit and help themselves to the tea, coffee and cookies (Jim had insisted he wasn't giving any of them utensils more dangerous than a spoon, so meals were out).

McCoy looks at him like he knows what Spock's been doing to Jim and he does not approve, and god, Spock is going to have to deal with the condom question again, isn't he?

Jim is sprawled on the couch next to Spock, and he's tilted them all a quelling look. It's interesting, if only because Spock doesn't ever get to see this Jim, who they all seem to circle around. McCoy, he notes, gets the chair next to Jim, while Mitchell and Chekov sit across from him, with Commander Arbor closest to Spock to complete the circle.

"So, when's the wedding?" Lieutenant Athhorra asks, picking up a cookie and handing it to Commander Arbor, who examines it and then hands it to Lieutenant Keenser, who shoots a poisonous look at Commander Scott before eating it.

"Gaila," Jim groans.

"Aye, has to be soonish, we ship out in what...when's your birthday? We ship out like, the day—" Scott begins, and gets distracted by coffee.

"Twenty-third of January, yes," Mitchell agrees, and shoots a wry smile at Jim, who returns it.

"Twenty-second is a jinxed day," Arbor explains, somehow catching Spock's confusion. "Especially for a ship captained by a Kirk. We lobbied to get the date moved back a day."

"You're not going to break my ship with another extra day, right?" Jim says to Scott, who widens his eyes, the perfect image of insulted innocence.

"I'll work on it," Keenser grumbles, adding sugar—a lot of sugar—to his tea.

"So. Your Royal Majesty—" McCoy begins, and Spock interrupts:

"Spock, please."
"Spock. How often would you say you two go at it without a condom?"

Jim actually spits his coffee everywhere and the rest of them seem torn between killing McCoy and helping Jim.

"You can't just—" Athhorra starts, and then, biting her lip around an absolutely wicked grin, "well, okay, I want to know, too."

"I hate you all," Jim mutters, and Mitchell beams.

"I defer answering the question due to the dictates of doctor-patient confidentiality," Spock says, and McCoy raises his coffee to him with a grin.

"Good man."

"Besides, we're getting married, so it's allowed," Jim points out.

"Are we scaring you yet, new child?" Athhorra inquires sweetly of the boy pressed against Mitchell's side.

"New?" Spock asks.

"I am…new," Chekov says. "To ze crew. Three weeks."

"That is very new," Spock agrees. "How are you finding it so far?"

"Zey have all been very helpful," he says, earnestly, and casts a suspiciously coy look towards Mitchell.

"Oh, that reminds me, Gary," Sulu says, brightly, pulling out a sheaf of papers. "I got your application to MBLA."

"Mmblah?" Scotty repeats, looking at Jim with a frown.


"Fuck you very much," Mitchell snaps, mouth twisted on his grin as he buries his face in his hands.

"I resent that," Chekov informs them all primly. "I'm sewenteen."

"Yeah, he's seventeen," McCoy agrees in a scathing voice.

"He was fifteen at the—"

"Shut up, Sulu," Mitchell growls, and Jim presses his laugh into Spock's shoulder before saying, "See, we went to Vega5 before we came home, remember? And Chekov here was Gary's…fling. Who didn't stay flung, except now when they're flinging." He contemplates the verbiage. "I think that works."

"I see. He is—"

"Age of consent is sixteen on Earth, and he was sixteen and Terran," Jim soothes. "It's fine, we're just, you know. Gary's so old, being all of twenty-four."

"That's an eight year age difference," Sulu informs Spock helpfully. "He's banging a child. Can't you lock people up for that?"
"I defer to your captain," Spock says, and it's worth it for the grin Jim throws him.

"Look, I don't understand why we're so down on MBLA," Athhorra says, brushing crumbs off of her breasts. "I mean, if it's consensual—"

"A child cannot consent to sex," Arbor says severely. "The power imbalance therein is too—"

"Power imbalances happen all the time," Athhorra dismisses. "Look at these two!"

She gestures at Jim and Spock, and Spock notes that McCoy, at least, seems to want to kill her.

"Not the same at all!" he says. "Jim could'a said 'no', and why the fuck are we talking about MBLA? Sulu."

"Gary's the pedophile, it's his fault," Sulu says immediately, cringing, and Spock notes that most of them have shrunk back a little while Jim just lets McCoy terrorize them back into submission. Spock can see, he thinks, how they all fit together. They're so young, though, with McCoy less of a paternal figure than the sly older brother who eggs everyone on until he's abruptly had enough. Even at that, he's only 29. A crew of twenty-somethings.

"You wanted to meet them," Jim murmurs.

"I understand you better now," Spock replies. "They're trying to shock me."

"Desperately."

"How am I doing?"

"I'll show you later," Jim promises, filthy smile before raising his eyebrows and wading back into the fray.

*

Telling Sarek that he is engaged is not nearly as simple as informing Jim's crew or Sybok and Spock's staff. Secure channels must be established, and the whole process seems so detached. Sarek, however, just looks at Spock serenely, and Spock searches for any indication that he's being treated poorly: that he's under undue strain.

He can't find any, his father looks the same as he as always looked, somehow entirely untouchable by the world around him. It's something Spock has always envied him: tried to emulate.

He is unbelievably nervous. He lifts his hand in greeting. "Father."

"Spock."

"I have—how are talks progressing?" he asks, wrong-footed. Jim had told Winona in an off-handed way—said he wasn't coming home and that if she made him wear white he was going to revolt. Sam Kirk-now-Hepburn had laughed and demanded their firstborn in thanks as this was all his doing: if he hadn't abdicated Jim would never have met Spock. Winona had nodded at Spock and asked him if he knew what he was getting into. Spock had answered truthfully that he only knew parts so far, but he wanted to know the rest.

She had looked at him a little sadly, then, like she knew what it was to be so in love, and had lost that. Jim tells Spock that Winona remarried for fairytale reasons: the evil stepfather brought in because the widow thought her children should have two parents, or at least one and a half. That
she had been gone for much of his childhood and that America is littered with memorials to George Kirk because Winona couldn't quite let go, not really.

Spock had thought, after hearing Jim talk about it, that he preferred his father's coping mechanisms. At least Spock had never been wanting for a parent; had never felt alone. He doesn't think Sarek will disapprove: he met Jim at Spock's coronation and had spoken well of him—Spock knows that they carried on a conversation (it still floors him that Jim, who is so Terran, can navigate different cultures so well. Spock's never been allowed to embrace one ethnicity entirely for fear that he would lose his cultural sensitivity: it's a shock to him eternally that those raised in one culture can interact with those of another).

Still, Sarek is the only parent Spock has, and the only father he will ever have. He wants Sarek to approve of the man Spock will be spending the rest of his life with.

"The Empress continues to be a gracious host. It is not illogical to suppose that common ground will yet be found," Sarek replies evenly.

"That is good, I'm—I am gratified to hear it."

Sarek looks at him and then folds his hands in his lap and tilts his eyebrow at Spock. "Spock. You did not ask for a private call to discuss policy."

"I—" Spock exhales and settles himself and says, still too-formal, "I have asked Ji—Prince James of America—I've asked Jim Kirk to marry me."

Sarek is quiet for a moment, and then, "Are you happy?"

"Yes," Spock says.

"A parent can ask for no more," Sarek says, spreading his hands.

"The wedding is set for October 17th," Spock says. "The official announcement will be released tomorrow and then—"

"I do not believe it will cause incident for me to return," Sarek says. "The Romulans stress familial loyalty above all. You must of course offer to allow the Princess to return."

Spock nods. "Yes, of course. I am—"

"Spock," Sarek interrupts, gentle and somehow fond, and the one word said in that tone is more eloquent than hundreds of words in the way only Sarek can manage.

"Be well, Father," he says.

"And you, my son," Sarek agrees, lifting his hand in farewell.

"Well?" Jim asks when Spock comes into the room, putting down his book. Spock frowns at the cover: an old Terran classic, iRobot.

"My father gives his approval, and will be here for our wedding."

"Wedding," Jim repeats, shaking his head. "That is just—weird. We're getting married. I'm getting married."

Spock gives him a long look. "It's too late to back out now. Perhaps four years too late, but at least three weeks."
Jim grins. "You're so stuck with me it's not even funny."

* 

He invites the Romulan Princess Sindari into his study to inform her of his engagement personally, before the public speech. Pike has already been informed, Spock's staff all know, but Nyota and T'Pring run a flawless household and there have been no leaks. Even Jim's crew have said nothing to anyone, which Spock is surprised by (it's not that he doesn't think that they would do it maliciously, he just knows exactly how much alcohol was consumed that night because he was the one dealing with Jim in the morning).

She nods, carefully. In spite of himself, he likes her, the way she tilts her head and smiles, just a little, just enough to make people nervous.

Spock likes people who make others nervous: it's probably going to bite him in the ass at some point.

"James Kirk is known to us," she says, finally. "He is an adept at thwarting Klingons."

"He is," Spock agrees.

She nods again. "It speaks well of you that you choose a soldier, even if he is Terran."

"I would be honored if you would attend the ceremony and act as witness," Spock tells her, inclining his head slightly. "Though as my father will be returning to act as witness I understand that you may wish to return to Romulus for the duration."

She smiles, quick and sharp. "Yes, you would be very honored," she agrees. "And I will discuss the matter of temporary return with the Empress, though it seems more a hostage negotiation than peace discussions."

Her verdict is that she will stay and witness, and Spock is almost giddy with it: they are so close. That Sindari will stay and witness Spock's marriage is huge; that the Romulans will allow Sarek to return without recalling Sindari may be bigger.

That eclipses the news of their engagement and his jump in the polls as a result.

Spock tries to explain that while the polls are flattering, Sindari's support is huge, to Jim. Jim just look at him and then says, "Yeah, but what about the funding for the cloaking disruptors?"

Spock sighs, because he knows that it's not that Jim doesn't care about the Romulan front, it's just that his immediate concern is the Klingons, and Jim is very problem-oriented.

That Spock is the one who goes to what has been dubbed "the war room" to fetch his fiancé and drag him away from his plotting is a sign, Spock's sure, that he's going to endure a lifetime being the saner, more mature version of their pair.

There are a lot of these things that Spock is just going to have to endure, he's realizing.

The worst part, Jim thinks, is that it comes from T'Pring. Not Spock saying, "The Klingons have sent us messages and now we're in peace talks and might be relaxing our patrols around Nimbus"
"III" but T'Pring blithely commenting that it's strange, that the Klingons seem cooperative when clearly they intend to be anything but. And because Vulcans don't lie and he asks, she tells him that Spock's been in talks with them for over two months.

Since before he proposed.

And apparently he didn't feel like he needed to tell Jim, which, fine, not Jim's business except that it's the Klingons, and they are Jim's business. And Spock knows how Jim fucking feels about them and…and he expected better or too much or something.

"He's in a meeting—" Shras starts to protest, but Jim just gives hir a look and ze flinches back.

"Let me at least tell him you're here?" ze says, not quite meeting Jim's eyes.

"Yeah. Go ahead." Warn him. It might not be a big deal. It—could just be that Jim's misunderstanding.

Again, the Klingons could make Jim their King.

He stands outside, not sure what he's going to say. Why didn't you tell me? seems like a good place to start. Why didn't you trust my opinion about this at all, and who exactly is feeding you advice on this?

Pike comes out of the room and looks at Jim, then double-takes.

"Kirk, something wrong?"

"I'm about to find out," Jim replies, and brushes by Shras and shuts the door firmly on whatever Pike's saying next. He locks it for good measure.

"Jim…that was an important meeting, what's so—"

"How long have you been in talks with the Klingons?"

"Four months."

Right after Jim got back. He'd wonder at the timing, but then again he's not an idiot, and everyone knew Spock was going to propose except for Jim and Spock. It fits. Motherfuckers.

"And where did this plan come from? It's not coming out of Starfleet, because if it was I'd know about it," he says.

"The Ministry of Defense, the Defense Committee and—"

"Save us from the politicians," Jim mutters, exhaling.

"We are not prepared to engage in a full-scale battle with the Klingons. Engaging them—" Spock starts, standing on the other side of the desk, one eyebrow up.

"Is showing our stomachs while they make more birds of prey and continue to go after our border planets! Spock, they're playing you," Jim says, because this is so fucking like them, so like the Klingons and he can see this plain as fucking day—so why can't Spock, who's supposed to be this great genius?

"Engaging them in negotiations shows that we are making a good-faith effort. Nothing has ever been lost in attempting diplomacy."
"Meanwhile the Oregon just limped back out of Klingon space and they just sent in five more extradition orders," Jim points out, bracing himself on the desk.

"Which we are not honoring."

"Where do you—"

"You're mistaking diplomacy for pacification."

"They have nothing left to lose. You have to send someone out to see what the hell they're up to because this is a front—"

"I am already discussing it with parliament—"

"That'll do a lot," Jim snorts. "Maybe they'll order a commission, weigh the pros and cons, write a few books on it, take seven or eight polls and wait until the election cycle is over. Meanwhile the border will be eroded and we'll be sitting around with our thumbs up our asses, but—"

"You can't think that this is something I take lightly—"

"And what're you gonna do, Spock?" Jim wants to know. He really does: he wants to know what the fuck Spock is going to do when this reaches its inevitable conclusion. "Tour Hangor IX after it gets attacked, put on your compassionate face and make a speech about the Klingons and hope that rhetoric makes people forget that they've just lost family members, been casualties of a war that no-one will fucking declare is happening? Play chess with a few survivors? You can't—you can't engage in fucking talks with them while they're out there slaughtering people!"

"I'm the King. I think you'll find I can do what I think is best." Spock's posture is tight and closed off and wow, he's so pissed, but fuck it, so's Jim, and Jim's right.

"And I'm just the guy who's been out there on the front lines fighting these assholes. I know how they think, Spock—"

"And I have to think on a grander scale. How we behave here affects how the Romulans engage with us; affects how parliament and the people react to this war. There will be a war we just—are not prepared yet."

"That's bullshit. I've been in this war my whole fucking life, and I've been on the front lines for eight years. I grew up on this war, and now you're saying that you don't trust those of us who can win it to do it? Way to show confidence in your troops. I'll lend you Scotty, maybe he can come up with some sort of robot army. They'll follow your orders more exactly, it'll make this whole thing so much more efficient."

"You're being ridiculous."

"And you're being patronizing. Do you know what these policies mean? More red tape, more… stupid instructions that sound really good when you're sitting in a room with a lot of other bureaucrats but when you're out there, on the front? They mean more people dying, more Klingons who get away to fight another day because we have to sit on it because if we don't we'll lose our commissions at best and at worst get put on trial."

"The military must be subservient to the civil government—"

"I'm not advocating military rule!" Jim snaps. "I'm advocating you sit down and listen to what I'm saying to you! This is not going to work and we're going to come out of it the worse while you play
at diplomat!"

"And when they come after you? When they claim that we're being more aggressive because I'm marrying you and you hate them with this genocidal passion?"

"This picked up as soon as I came home! They're going to claim that *anyway*, or they're going to make you hand me over, and when you don't we'll be in the same fucking place!"

"But I will have bought us *time*. Time to get ourselves together, maybe get the Romulans on our side. This isn't something that can be solved with clever heroics and last minute saves."

"Where do you—"

And the thing is—it's so fucking stupid, but Jim had…he'd thought Spock had trusted him to do this, to—he thought Spock had *known* that Jim could do this, win this war. Jim speaks seven fucking dialects of Klingon, he knows them better than almost anyone, and he. God, he's so fucking tired of politicians. Tired of having their power waved in front of his face—in front of his crew's faces. They serve at Spock's pleasure, all of them. Jim just never really put that together because it's *Spock*.

And Spock was supposed to be different.

"The best part is," he says, tight an staring at the desk with his hands clenched into fists at his side, "I actually thought you'd trust us to be able to do this."

"Trust has nothing—"

Jim laughs, and sounds sneering and derisive to his own ears. "Yeah, well. That's why soldiers won't ever trust politicians. That *right there*. Go out and die for our causes, make them your own, but don't you dare ask for us to give you any leeway because we might change our minds: we might need to do something else, and we really have to cover our asses."

"That's enough," Spock snaps, leaning forward across the desk. "Yeah. It fucking is," he agrees.

*  

It takes two days and one call from Bones (who thinks Jim is being an ass, a stubborn ass, and who's too used to being able to bully everyone around him into doing what he wants) for Jim to admit that Spock…might have a point. Not about a lot of it: Jim maintains that he was right about bureaucrats gumming up the works with their stupid policies, but—Spock does have to look at the bigger picture and that means that he has to play nice. Or at least pretend to. And the thing is, it's been two fucking miserable days, and he's not—

He's not breaking up his fucking marriage over this before he even gets the ring on his finger. Although he does take a moment to glare down at the diamond ring resentfully, because he's noticed that Spock doesn't have to wear one.

He doesn't have a plan beyond *don't start a fight*, but…well, he does his best (and worst) work without a plan. Jim works best when he has room to move (lies, Jim works fucking great when he has no room at all, but let's stay focused). He puts on civilian clothing and even the fucking cravat (he wants to know *why so many layers*?), and when he opens the door he literally runs into Spock.

"I was—what are—hi," he decides, and Spock's lips twitch a little.
"Hi," he replies. "Can I come in?"

"I—yeah?"

Jim lets him in, and before he can say what he was going to say (or, you know, figure out what he was going to say) Spock starts.

"It occurred to me that I am giving you a ship. Well, indirectly, but you will have a ship, and you'll…" Spock stops and looks frustrated, like the words aren't coming right. "I don't want you out there with your hands tied behind your back because we don't understand what it is to fight this.

"But—I can't—I won't cede on the ground that these negotiations are necessary. I do need to buy us the time, whether you like or believe that reality—"

"I know. I just—you should have told me. I should know shit like this, or else what use am I going to be as—Prince Consort or your husband or—"

"I know," Spock agrees. "I should—I didn't tell you and then it became such a thing, keeping it from you because I was afraid of the way you'd react and by the time you found out…"

Jim nods. Yeah, these things tend to build until they have lives of their own, so. Yeah. Okay, fine, he—is really tired of this particular incarnation of this fight (he's not stupid enough to think they won't have it again in some other variation, but he's so done with this go-round).

"Come home?"

Jim looks at him, then glances around at the apartment that has very little of Jim and no Spock, but maybe some T'Pring, which is wrong on many levels.

"I really hate this place," Spock confesses. "I really hate that you have this place you can—leave me. Which is probably unfair, but I have spent a lot of time over the last two days hating this place and contemplating how to best have it condemned."

Jim grins at him, pulls him in and kisses him because yeah, they just had their first fight but it's not the end of the world. Or the Federation, or the galaxy, though they could do that.

"So…make up sex?" Jim asks.

Spock sighs like he's being put upon, and backs Jim through the apartment, into the bedroom. It's reassuring, Jim thinks, that at the end of all of this it was never about whether or not this was a deal-breaker. It wasn't do I have to leave you? it was how the hell am I going to learn to live with this new fuckery?

That is better than the makeup sex but Jim pretends that's not true because he's not ready to be that much of a grown-up.

Spock very kindly pretends that he doesn't know better.

Jim's stuff (what little of it there is) gets moved into Spock's—their—room. Well, suite of rooms.

The reality of living with Jim manifests itself in the strangest things. Jim's uniform boots, black and
slick, thrown into the bottom of the closet on top of Spock's (shameful number of) shoes, catch Spock so off-guard that he stands, staring at them for thirty seconds before Nyota comes in to see if he's gotten lost between the closet and the door.

Sometimes it's Jim's neglected glass on the bedside table (or the desk, or the coffee table, or the windowsill. It seems to be a truism that Jim never finishes a glass of water, and is incapable of refilling a glass he has already used); the book he's left on a couch or the evidence of someone else in the bed; it's the smell of coffee in the mornings or the sound of him informing Gaila that he doesn't care how old ze said ze was, underaged is still underaged, and no he didn't care if "underaged" meant "under 700", it still counted and why did she hate him so much?

It's other things, like the chess set being arranged and moving so when either of them come into the room there's another move to be made. Jim still wins, but Spock thinks he's getting better (it's a lie, it's such a lie, Spock is abysmally bad).

Jim gives T'Pring long, blank looks when she explains that Jim is not, in fact, allowed to cohabitate with Spock until after the wedding, and Nyota bites her lips and raises her eyebrows innocently at T'Pring and deftly dodges inappropriate questions directed at (or about) them. She and Jim circle each other with a wariness Spock doesn't understand and, frankly, doesn't want to get to the bottom of because in some matters he is a coward.

Gary Mitchell becomes a constant presence, and he and Sybok are immediately friends, so much so that Jim complains that Gary doesn't come to see him, but Sybok. Mitchell gives him long looks at then tells Spock to keep his boytoy in line, which usually results in Spock trying not to laugh as Jim starts in on Pavel Chekov's age.

Sam comes and goes, brings his new wife who smiles at Jim, twisting her blue hair around her finger and taking Shras from Nyota to have a long conversation about the flirtatious instincts of Kirks.

Jim in Spock's life seems to mean that Spock is doomed to be surrounded by more people, though they seem to expect nothing of him except to keep Jim happy.

Life for Spock doesn't stop just because Spock finally finally has Jim, as much as he'd like it to.

Empress Mnheia clearly thinks she can drive a harder bargain now that Spock will be distracted by wedded bliss (he spends that entire conference call trying to figure out why she is so much clearer both visually and audibly, and then realizes that there is a mostly-empty coffee cup on a shelf and tries to figure out how he's going to explain to Jim that he's not actually allowed to tamper with things, not least because engineering tries to kill him, and Spock's not convinced that that's limited to the Antares).

Since the engagement was announced there have been headlines like: JAMES KIRK: MAN OF THE PEOPLE (Critics Warn of an American Prince as Consort—Analysts Examine Why It's the Only Logical Choice) and HRM TO MARRY STARFLEET'S BADBOY and AS TALKS BETWEEN ROMULUS AND THE FEDERATION HEAT UP, IS HRM'S CHOICE WISE?

Spock sighs like it's to be expected, but Jim is still getting to that point, and he hasn't liked reporters since Sam bailed and Jim got accosted upon landing. So he sulks in bed and waves the ridiculous ring in Spock's face and then groans when Spock slides into him where he's still loose from the night before and slick, and eventually Spock can make him forget about the headlines—and some days his own name.

Nyota keeps trying to tell Spock that he needs to slow down and appear, at least, distracted. He
points out that his soon-to-be husband has co-opted three rooms in the north wing and is usually to be found seducing the staff, yelling at his crew, or charming admirals into blood-lust.

She gives him a blank look, which is full of lies because he knows that she's the one who made Shras Jim's personal PR manager and she's the one who's giving them the contacts they need. "Yes?"

The Klingon Chancellor is Paghal Sirella, and she responds the the announcement that Spock is getting married by sending the first recorded transmission the Klingon Chancellor has sent to the Federation's King for two hundred years. Jim leans against the back of Spock's chair as Spock watches it, watches her snarlingly inform Spock that she personally demands that "the war criminal known as James Tiberius Kirk" be extradited for war crimes "of a most brutal nature"; that she takes his intention to marry said war criminal as "tantamount to a solid declaration of war"; that there "can be no peace while Jim's blood flows red through his veins".

Jim snorts when the transmission is over, close to Spock's ear. "Fucking Klingons—I told you."

"Yes, and we made a good-faith effort," Spock agrees, and then twists to look at him, because he's afraid that this will reanimate that fight and he's not—they're a day away and he doesn't want to fight with Jim today.

And then Spock really...really looks at him, forcing his eyes to travel the entire length of Jim's body and then wishing he hadn't because—what is that. "What are you—"

"My bridal ensemble," he says with great flourish. It is...truly, truly ghastly. Spock doesn't even have the words to articulate the sheer horror of that...whatever it is he's wearing. Iridescent white and too-tight pants (Spock has to get married in front of the entire Empire and the three superpowers of the Galaxy and he is not going to have his husband looking like—some sort of hooker). There's an ascot and a waistcoat and a vest and a shirt and so many ruffles, and Spock's eyes are going to leap for freedom in a minute.

"You're wearing a modified dress uniform," he says flatly, because if he doesn't control his voice he's going to weep.

"But white is traditional." Jim actually has the gall to flutter his eyelashes. Spock looks away from all that white and lace before it permanently scars him.

"You aren't a virgin," Spock points out. "I know that personally, and I could call at least three other people off the top of my head who could verify that." Which is horrifying, actually, and there are only two people in Jim's crew that Spock is certain he hasn't fucked: McCoy and Chekov.

"I didn't say accurate," Jim points out, and grins as Spock stands up, backs him against the table and begins stripping it off of him. He's going to have it burned.

It's their last night before they're married they're supposed to spend it alone. Jim's suite is all set up for him. Spock knows that tradition well, and he never thought he would hate it. He also never thought he'd be marrying someone he liked, damn the political consequences (of which there have been very few, which Spock knows is a credit to Nyota's brutal spinning of all the less flattering news and Jim's own charm, but that won't last forever).

"We should sleep," Jim says, looking up from between Spock's legs thoughtfully, one hand casually wrapped around the base of Spock's dick, shiny from Jim's mouth. Spock raises himself up onto his elbows and stares at him incredulously, because only Jim would stop in the middle of blowing someone to—he's trying to drive Spock insane, it's the only explanation.
"You'll have bags under your eyes and yawn through the ceremony. T'Pring will kill us, and Nyota will stuff us and get Scotty to reanimate us."

"Jim."

Jim grins at him, wide and careless. "Yes?"

"Suck it and shut up."

The wedding was, as Jim put it, a shitshow.

It wasn't a disaster or horrific and he's sure people will be talking about it long after they're both gone, but. It was highly managed and neither Jim nor Spock had had much of a say in it at all, and it was so choreographed and as Spock stood up and tried to keep his composure with his wards almost gone and Jim's hand warm against his as that he couldn't help but agree with Jim's theory that it was like porn: better for the people watching than the people doing.

Spock had given him a long, long look for that thought, and Jim had just gazed at the Chief Justice beatifically and been utterly remorseless.

Their marriage, according to everyone, is going to usher in a new era of stability and hope for the entire Federation, which was why there was a parade after, and the ceremony and the parade were both broadcasted everywhere, and the party had gone on for twenty-seven hours after eleven hours of ceremony and parade and by the time they'd gotten to go to their marriage bed, they'd both looked at each other and decided sex could wait until there wasn't a danger of one of them falling asleep in the middle.

Spock wakes up first, the sun high in the sky behind the heavy curtains, and Jim sprawled over him. Jim swears it's because Spock is a bed hog: Spock thinks Jim is just a secret cuddler. Spock's left ring finger has a gold-pressed latinum band that reaches almost to his first knuckle, and it glints in the late morning light as he flexes his hand and examines it.

"We didn't even have wedding night sex," Spock laments to Jim, who shifts, disgruntled even in sleep. "I know," Spock agrees. "Depressing."

He's not sure that he thought things would change, once he had the ring on his finger and the papers signed and had said vows in front of the galaxy, but something has changed. Not between them, but—it feels permanent. Secure—like it can't be wrested from him at any moment without provocation or explanation.

Jim blinks awake, frowning and rubbing his nose before opening his eyes, smiling slightly up at Spock. "Good morning."

"Morning," Spock says, smiling faintly. "It's nearly noon."

"I'm shocked no-one has come in to check the sheets."

"Thanks for that mental image, Jim."

"Don't mention it." Jim slides out of bed and Spock follows, taking his turn in the bathroom and
then frowning because he was sure there was a PADD in the room and oh look, Jim is very, very naked, sprawled against the pillows and idly stroking his cock. It's…distracting.

Very.

"Get back in bed," Jim says, and Spock does, licks the curve of Jim's filthy smile and slides against him.

"We should go see the kehlant," Jim decides as he arches against Spock's teeth as they graze a nipple. Spock grins and does it again.

"I can't be away that long," Spock laughs. "Not with all that's going on."

Jim stares at him, pulling him back by the hair and Spock winces a little. "How long a honeymoon is this?"

"Three days?" Spock tries, and Jim gives him a long, long look.

"Three days. You didn't tell me on purpose."

"I—yeah," Spock agrees, because he figured if he told Jim now, Jim would be distracted by sex. Rather than telling him earlier and letting him pick that fight for months. Strategy.

Jim has ninety-two days before he has to leave. Three months and change and Spock doesn't think it's going to be enough, not nearly.

"Right," Jim decides. "We have 60 hours left for fucking, let's go."

Spock looks at him as collapses into the pillows beside him. "The romance is dead."

"The romance was never alive. It's a null argument," Jim replies, reaching down to wrap his hand around Spock's dick, which traitorously takes interest while Spock pretends to be wrapped up in the death of their romance.

"I'd argue we're something of the romance of the century," Spock points out, because they are, whether they like it or not.

"You've been reading Uhura's press too much," Jim says, kissing the corner of Spock's mouth. "It's okay, she's engaged in propaganda warfare to turn us into a fairytale. Some people are just more susceptible to that than others."

Spock lifts an eyebrow at him, turning his head to kiss Jim. "I see. So I was never your knight in shining armor?"

"I saved you, baby," Jim points out kindly. It's true in a lot of ways, not just the specific time Spock thinks Jim means, and Spock will never not be grateful for Jim, for what he's been to Spock.

He lets his hands drift across Jim's chest, his collarbone, slide down his sides as they kiss. Jim's hand curls over his hip, drags them together and Spock ducks his head, sucks a bruise into Jim's throat, possessive.

"Let me," Jim says, and Spock thinks anything as Jim pulls back, shifts. Spock lets Jim arrange him and settle behind him, tongue and fingers working in and out. Spock's had Jim's fingers inside him, questing, crooking and opening him, usually with Jim's mouth hot and tight around Spock's dick. Jim's working with purpose here, two, then three and Spock has to flex his hands because he's
clenching the sheets hard enough to tear, head dropped down and shaking as Jim works that spot, pressing back for more, more. Spock drags his lower lip through his teeth, opens his mouth to say get on with it but doesn't manage it. All that comes out is a long, low groan, and Jim murmuring against his skin, hot and close.

"So tight," Jim murmurs, not a complaint, Spock can feel that as Jim's fingers slide out, sliding over the curve of his ass and holding him steady as he presses at Spock's hole.

Spock is shaking, hypersensitized and desperate for it—more, feels empty and then Jim's there, slick and hard and pressing, pushing inside him inexorably and Spock's breath stutters because the stretch of it burns and it feels—strange, to be so filled. He has to fight not to clench—to bear down as Jim murmurs endearments into his shoulder, telling him to wait, that it'll be amazing, just breathe, breathe.

And then Jim's moving, in and out and steady and Spock shakes and takes it and thinks he'd destroy worlds for this.

* *

They don't end up leaving the suite, food brought to them, tangled up in each other and Jim pulls back after blowing Spock the morning of the second day and says, "You can bond, can't you?"

Spock stills, struggling to get his brain back online (he's actually fairly sure Jim sucked out his dick, and cliché or not that's how it feels), and then says, "Yes."

He knows his parents were, but no-one knows if he will experience Pon Farr—if he will need a bondmate. He's half-Terran, and he doesn't live according to Vulcan society and—and it's possible, entirely, that he won't need one.

Needing and wanting are two very, very different things.

"We—" Jim breaks off, watching him, arms folded across Spock's stomach and his chin resting on top of them, looking up at him with sharp blue eyes. "I'd like to, but you'll have to show me how."

It feels oddly strange, sitting up, cross-legged and facing each other, Spock reaching and spreading his fingers to the psi-points and feeling Jim's mind, curious and wary but open and impossible to resist now that it's been offered up.

"I can't—" Spock starts—thinks to say Be sure because in a moment I won't be able to stop, but Jim's hand curls around his wrist and he says,

"Now, Spock."

There are traditional words, Spock knows. Had to memorize them under T'Pau's watchful eye and repeat them for a skeptical T'Pring, but the shock of Jim around him, inside him—it feels like coming or falling; the jolt of adrenaline after almost being killed. Things like words seem completely beyond him, he couldn't form them if he was forced to.

He is aware of everything, knows what it was to live through Tarsus IV and what Gaila's mouth tastes like, the choking bitterness of a ship under attack, controls hot under his fingers and the exhilaration of winning, being so good that even your enemies say your name with something akin to wonder.

Jim circles the memory of Amanda, flings over into Sybok and Spock feels the burst of protective rage at the assassination attempt, the curiosity when Jim finds Spock's first memories of Jim.
Spock circles around something else, something that feels vaguely like Sybok until Spock can place it, realize that Jim, whose intuition is the stuff of legend, is an empath. Spock doesn't think Jim knows, circles it and examines and realizes that no, Jim doesn't, and neither does he care: that to Jim it's "gut" and "intuition" and other Terran concepts and that's all it needs to be. It makes Jim a good captain and a good friend, lets him know that Spock would say "yes" when Jim wanted to play chess, or blow him after the coronation. Introspection isn't Jim's strongest suite, and to him it's just charm, but there isn't anyone who's that charming. Spock feels a flare of affection and then leaves it, turns to other memories as he slides deeper, living in a house that was too big and never being still, running because that was all he was shown, following his mother's footsteps. It's too much, to be within and around Jim's mind, surrounded by so much reckless laughter and the faint sheen of rage that has colored Jim's life—not anger, but fury, rage, something pushing and shoving him.

Jim doesn't hide or lock things away, and Spock sees the fights he picked with his stepfather, feels the warm wind in his hair as he drives a classic car off a cliff and jumps at the last minute, not trying to die, never—the thought not even in his mind that he could die, just that he had to do something.

In fact, Spock realizes, Jim never thinks he's going to die, even when he's losing blood and consciousness—the thought might occur, but he never believes it and Spock loves him, loves him so much he might burst with it, is vaguely aware that they're tangled together, stretched on the bed and sliding against each other, kissing and gripping and so close, so good, and Spock doesn't want. Doesn't want for anything.

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Part V

Jim gets by by very stubbornly pretending that he's not leaving.

He goes through the motions, visits the Enterprise and stares at her, because they told him she was finished and there are wires and circuits open everywhere and... "Scotty!"

"I think she was put together by monkeys, Captain!" Scotty protests plaintively, because giving Jim an aneurysm is Scotty's secret dream. "I had to put her back together right, what with the madness we're bound to be facing!"

"January twenty-third, Scotty. I want her ready by the first of the month."

"Aye, aye," Scotty agrees, waving a hand and Jim makes a frustrated sound and clutches at his hair. Scottish asshole: he's going to be the death of Jim's liver, Jim can feel it coming.

He goes home and doesn't think about it until Sam calls and decides that he wants to bond or talk or some bullshit that Jim really doesn't actually have time for because holy fucking fuckery it's December and there's less than a month left.

"You—eighteen months is a long time, Jim," Sam says when he calls to tell Jim that Aurie's pregnant, and that he fears for his life. "You two have barely—"

"I can't stay," Jim says, and frowns at the distribution charts. Technically, Jim's Starfleet status keeps him out of these records (not that it's ever stopped him, he just makes sure that he's far
enough away that they can't prosecute him), but his new status as HBIC gets him blanket access to a shitton of stuff. "They are so stupid it's causing me pain, Sam," he says.

"Who—what are you doing?"

"Starfleet's screwing with the distribution of resources. I'm fixing things. Plus there's a regulation I have to switch the wording on because Scotty's doing something that might not actually be technically legal."

Sam's quiet for a long time, in that way he got quiet when he had something to say that he knew Jim wasn't going to like. When they were kids Sam saved those revelations and observations up and dropped them all on Jim when he was sick or full of candy—times when Jim couldn't do his level best to beat sense into Sam's head (in Jim's defense, he hadn't realized that "beat some sense into you" was just a phrase and not meant to be a literal threat until he was 12, and by that time it was too late to change his ways). Sam, as a result, has an excellent memory for detail and Jim hates being sick and doesn't like sugary sweets and prefers chocolate.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just—Jimmy."

"Are you dying?" Jim demands, putting down the PADD and stilling, because hell no, he's not taking in his sister-in-law and their spawn, and impending death is the only reason anyone should ever call him "Jimmy". Even then, Jim's not convinced it's allowed at all. It's just he can't get Bones to take the memo and—

"What? No. No I'm no—Jim. He's your husband, and you're leaving him."

"People leave all the time, Sam," Jim replies, picking the PADD back up and flipping through the star charts for the next patrol. "It's the coming back that's important."

Sam does that other silence, the one that says that he thinks Jim is full of shit and is still kind of afraid to say so because Jim's the one who went into Starfleet and Sam took the academic route and bruises like a peach when you so much as poke him (Jim may have done extensive research as a child…teen…at the wedding…whatever, it's an ongoing experiment). But Sam's the one who gets left and Jim's the one who leaves and they're never going to agree on this—never have. Sam resents George for leaving him, in an admittedly irrational way, resents Winona for leaving and then Jim —Sam doesn't like getting left, and he can't see that it's ever justifiable.

"Okay. Well. I'll—talk to you before you ship out," Sam says finally. "At the thing."

"Yeah," Jim agrees. "Good luck with the baby."

"Oh, thanks for reminding me," Sam groans, and Jim smiles because his work here is done.

"That is a dangerous-looking smile," Spock observes as he walks in, looking at Jim's desk and the holos and then shaking his head. "This is abuse of your powers."

"Says the man who hacked into my school records," Jim snorts, tilting his head up for a kiss. Spock shakes his head, catches Jim's chin and kisses him thoroughly.

"I was pining," Spock says, lips twisting like he realizes how ridiculous he sounds but can't be assed to care. "You are…"

"Fixing things," Jim replies firmly, because there's a distinction between abusing power and using
power that should have been given to him. "And I have to—this has to get done before the end of
the week because then I have to—well."

Spock nods because he knows by the end of the week Jim has to spend a week at the Spacedock
over Earth and go to San Francisco to talk with Captain Pike, and then there are only two weeks
before—and the ship is still a mess of cables and Keenser allegedly tried to kill Scotty yesterday—

Jim makes a sounds he will never admit is a whimper and pulls Spock into his lap so he can rest his
head against his shoulder and maybe have Spock stroke his hair.

"You are getting progressively more clingy," Spock observes, but he does stroke Jim's hair.

"If you tell anyone I'll beat you," Jim mutters.

"Domestic violence is no joking matter," Spock informs him, tugging lightly on his hair. "Jim."

"I know."

"No, I don't—I was going to say," Spock says, careful because apparently Jim's a bomb waiting to
go off and everyone has to be careful around him, pulling back enough to brush a light kiss across
Jim's lips. "There is a—"

"I don't want to talk about that," Jim interrupts flatly, turning his head and burying it in Spock's
shoulder.

Doesn't want to talk, again, about the fact that Jim could stay. Could draw up battle plans and fight
this war from the ground. Could be the guy who's been up there and who knows what they need,
but he—he can't. He can't.

He just—can't.

It's a fight they're going to have, once Spock gets tired of letting Uhura and Shras and the admirals
do the talking; once he realizes that Jim's actually that stubborn.

Because Jim would have stayed, when he thought that he could have Spock or the Enterprise but
not both, but now he can and Jim's never taken an inch when he can get away with a mile.

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"Yellow isn't my color," he mutters, pulling the shirt out from behind the bed and over his head,
then groaning and taking it off and putting it on right-side out. "I am not a yellow-color person."

Spock gives him a long look. He, of course, is ready to go, and every time Jim wants to know
where something is Spock knows exactly where it is, so either he's hiding shit or the cleaning staff
are giving him detailed lists of where everything is. "No, you would look better in blue, or perhaps
red."

"I wore red as a cadet," Jim points out. "All two years."

At the prep academy they'd worn hunter green. Jim has no idea why he knows that shit.

"You weren't unattractive in those photos," Spock points out, because of course he looked those up.

"Oh baby, give me more lukewarm compliments, you know how they get me hot," Jim snorts,
looking around the room. "I think that's everything."
He doesn't like goodbyes. Usually he leaves before anyone else is awake—slips away. Not that Sam or Winona or Frank ever really cried over Jim leaving, but it's—easier.

Still he makes himself look up. "I'll be back."

"I know," Spock agrees, but there's something miserable in the corners of his mouth—the knowledge that Jim's promised this same thing once before, and twice might tempt fate one too many times. There's a reason, Jim knows, that Starfleet officers are usually divorced, widowed or unmarried if their spouse isn't in the service. It's too hard to ask someone to keep waiting for you.

"Faster you brow-beat them all to peace faster I'm home," he teases, leaning in to catch Spock's lips in a kiss.

Spock doesn't say anything, leans into Jim's grip and then presses their foreheads together after like Jim's breaking his heart.

There had been talk about Spock waving Jim away, a carefully choreographed farewell, but Jim had shot it down, point blank. It hurts too much to be the one left, Jim knows from watching Winona ship out. He'd been paraded in front of the press with Sam because nothing sells more papers or wins more public support than the face of tragedy, and Jim and Sam watching their mother board a shuttle, her back straight and chin lifted, tears on Sam's cheeks and stubbornness in Jim's chin, had sold. Sam solemnly saluting George's empty coffin had also sold—the Kirks' tragedy is documented and has solidified their continued reign of the continent. The gross irony being that none of them wants to reign the continent, happy to leave it to the politicians and be figureheads.

Spock had made noises like he could have done watched stoically as he was left behind, but Jim fights dirty, with sex and by swaying Sybok and Nyota and shouting gleefully at T'Pring, and he won.

They both attend the twenty-third anniversary of George Kirk's death, ceremony to be held in San Francisco, and Jim will leave the following morning.

Winona comes without Frank because she never brings Frank. Jim stands on her right side, Sam beside him, and Spock and Aurie behind them. Spock gives one of the organizers a look when they suggest that he stand front and center, and Chris Pike had laughed a little and stood behind his wife.

The thing is, the Kelvin went down and his father saved eight hundred lives—but that was on one ship. There were four others in the disaster radius, and he bought them the time they needed, and as much as Winona Kirk and Una Pike are heroes of that day for evacuating everyone, as much as Jim is a talisman for that, Jim thinks his father will never get to just be a man. That he'll always be a hero, larger than life and perfect, heroic and unflawed, and not a father who left behind his son to see the stars. Because Jim might be the talisman, but it's Sam who was left behind: Sam who bore the brunt of all of this and Jim can stand here and listen and snort, but Sam's the one whose hand shakes in Jim's, who has had twenty-three years of not being able to get over this; of not being allowed to.

Aurie has Sam's other hand, and Jim wonders if maybe Sam and Sybok should talk: Jim guards his 'pain' furiously, because what's life if you're not allowed to get a little pissed off and hurt? But maybe…maybe Sam should have the option of releasing his.

Later, Winona and Pike disappear to go drink and possibly fuck (Jim's not thinking about it, not thinking about it, not thinking about it) the way they always do, Jim takes Spock to the spacedock
and kisses him goodbye.

Spock has a cruiser waiting to take him back to the core, and Jim's beautiful ship is waiting for him.

"I love you," Spock tells him, when they finally break for air lips bruised and jaw tight. His eyes are dark and he looks...defeated, which is wrong and bad and Jim wants to hit whatever's made him look like that, but he's not so much of an idiot that he doesn't know that it's him.

Jim nods, and picks up his bag, takes a step back as his tongue chases the taste of Spock's mouth across his lips. "You too," he says, and turns on his heel and walks away.

He thinks, actually, that the worst thing he's ever been through was watching Jim walk away like that. It stays in his head, haunts him, unsettles him. The sound the bag had made when Jim had heaved it over his shoulder and it had hit his back, dull and sliding against the fabric, lingers—the sound Jim's well-worn boots had made in the hallway, the way Jim hadn't looked back.

Worse is that everything seems to have fallen apart and so Spock, who had just gotten used to sharing his space and expecting Jim to be there, doesn't have time to catch his footing.

Sindari becomes cold and evasive, something in her smile that makes Spock's hackles rise and the Romulans are drawing away, cooling off just that much, drawing things out and rehashing what's already been decided.

He can't decide if they're attempting to save face or if it's a matter of public opinion in the Star Empire shifting, but Sarek spends a lot of his time attending dinners and parties and not talking policy at all.

The Klingons get worse, and for a month Jim doesn't send him anything but terse, weary messages like, I'm fine.

Eating vegetables, because Bones is on a kick about bowel regularity. Do you know how much he knows about the digestive system? I do.

Fucking Klingons.

And somedays the message is: I'm still coming home, and those days Spock sits down, hands shaking, because those days are bad days. Those days Spock thinks that Jim is trying to convince himself as much as he's trying to convince Spock and it's all Spock can do not to throw the PADD across the room and declare full-out war, to snarl at the Romulans that it's now or never; how many more lives have to be lost before they all decide that the price is too steep?

"You're starting to look strained," Nyota tells him. "I don't care if I need to invest in a make-up company so that we can fix this, or start bringing in pharmaceuticals in order to help you sleep, but this is going to be fixed."

He gives her a long look but nods, and Heinemann informs him when it's time for Spock to go to sleep and then wakes him in the morning and Spock has a moment to think he's regressed years—
needing his valet to help micromanage his life.

Another election comes and goes, and Pike remains Prime Minister.

"How are you holding up, your Majesty?" he asks Spock as they watch the snow come down.

"Not well, considering."

"It's different when you're married," Pike says. "You put the ring on their finger and you think somehow that means you get to keep them, and then they fu—leave you."

Spock shoots him an amused look at the hasty cover-up: a year of Jim and he'd forgotten, somehow, that people *don't swear* around him. Fuck. "How do you endure it?"

"I stay busy and crush my enemies," Pike replies instantly, like he's thought about it, developed theses and schedules for coping with this. "And I write a lot of letters. Too many, if you ask my wife, who informs me she reads the first and last sentences. Once I made all seventeen pages a sentence," he recalls, smiling, and then the smile falls off. "We gave—we gave up a lot for both of us to lead these lives," he continues, frowning and sipping his tea. "Having a family. Birthdays, anniversaries, fights delayed until we were both in the same system and then—" he shakes his head and looks at Spock. "Sometimes I think I should have stayed in Starfleet rather than going into politics, but we all react differently to tragedy and after what happened to George—well. For a long time I couldn't get onto a cruiser."

"I've made him a target," Spock says, and it's the first time he's voiced it but he knows the intelligence, and the Klingons are going to go after Jim (if they can find him) with a single-mindedness that is, frankly, terrifying.

"You've made him more of one," Pike corrects. "Jim Kirk's walked around with a bullseye on his forehead and back since the day he was old enough to talk. But yeah, they'll go after him twice as hard now they know." He shakes his head. "You didn't have a weakness, before. Now you do."

"I—"

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. I've seen people do insane things when the person they love was threatened." Pike shrugs a shoulder. "One of the reasons that Starfleet tries to enforce anti-fraternization policies."

"How does that work?" Spock asks, genuinely curious. He's met all of Jim's closest crew-mates, and the whole thing seems kind of incestuous. Jim and Gary have slept together, Gary and Sulu have slept together, Jim and Sulu apparently shared hand-jobs (which don't count, according to Jim). Jim and Gaila and Gary have slept together (separate and together, apparently), Gaila and Sulu have slept together, Gaila and McCoy have slept together, and Gary and Chekov have slept together.

Actually, it seems like that bit of policy might be a total failure.

"You've met Jim," Pike replies with a wry smile.

Spock nods. As the months go on there are more and more times where he wants to find Jim and say, 'I don't know how this is going to play out in the air'—wants his *husband* with the *experience* to be here. The letters help, Jim's diatribes against bureaucracy and sometimes Spock can catch him and they can talk, but whenever Jim sees him...well, the talking is never really policy-related, and more about seeing whether he can a) get Spock to blush or b) come in under ten minutes.
And Spock knows by the end of the first year, as Jim's birthday comes and goes, that he can't do this again. That he just—that he can't endure Jim leaving, not again. That they didn't come this far and break as many rules as they have (and they have—broken so many and left them by the wayside; spouse on active duty, spouse with a job, married for no expansion, married the most unpeerlike peer who was ever born) for Jim to die. And Spock doesn't know—how Jim can want that. Can genuinely think that this ends well: that he wins his war in the air and he comes back to Spock here and there and Spock spends their marriage waiting for an absent husband. If that was all this was—if that's all this was ever going to be then it's possible that Spock needs to get out of it.

And it's ridiculous and he knows that: knows that it was a year ago when he was willing to wait and endure long absences and take what he could get from Jim; whatever Jim was willing to give him. Except now he's had him, had a whole year and put a ring (two) on his finger and bonded with him and woken up and gone to bed with Jim beside him and everything has shifted, and he can't go back.

Doesn't want to. Doesn't want the Pikes' relationship or to be Winona Kirk without even a child to remember Jim by (and that's—that a whole other subject, another fight he and T'Pring are having when she gets tired of fighting with Sybok and Spock gets tired of being miserable).

And twice, now, Spock has had his knees buckle and all the wind knocked out of him; had to be helped into bed with Sybok's hands wrapped around one of his with T'Pring on the other side, both of them ready to house his katra by brute force if necessary until McCoy can bring Jim back from a flatline.

And Jim looks at him, after, through a fuzzy transmission with his voice a little scratchy as he reassures Spock and it's fine—until next time.

And really—Spock just can't.

He just.

He can't.

"Excellent, you are not busy," T'Pring observes, shutting the door behind her. Spock shrinks into his chair and wishes Sybok would come in and rescue him, or that there would be something urgent needing his attention yesterday.

"I am very—"

"You are not avoiding this conversation."

"I haven't even had this conversation with Jim! I'm not discussing—"

"You discussed proposing to him with us prior to the actual event, as well as the coronation dance, this fits the established pattern: your argument is illogical and thus invalid."

"In the vaguest sense—"

"In every sense. You need a child. If your husband is going to spend 150% more of his time away from you than he is with—"

"Thank you for rubbing that in—"

"That gives us three months to go through the fertility process—"
"Oh, yeah, that'll—"

"Unless of course you do not care that Jim will not be home to see the child when it has matured fully enough to leave the gestation device," she suggests.

"That's a conversation that I will have to have with Jim."

"You need an heir, almost immediately," she tells him. "You are allowed to be a newlywed but the fact that he is no longer here eradicates all the stability we achieved with that marriage. It actually undermines it, as he could die at any moment, as evidenced over the past thirteen months, and you would be widowed and we would have yet another term of uncertainty. I realize that you have an emotional objection to this, but for the good of the Federation logic must prevail here."

He looks at her. "T'Pring—"

"Everything you have gained in the past five years is commendable, but we are not done, and what has been gained is fragile at best. In this, I am adamant: there must be a child within the next two years."

Usually he would lift an eyebrow and demand whether or not she was dictating to him, if only to make sure that the balance between them isn't overreached because—well, she could effect a coup pretty easily and Spock's not an idiot.

Now he just nods, and lets her go.

The reality is, Spock grew up without his mother and he does know what that does to a child: how it twists you and how you're never free of their absence. How the hole they leave never closes over; how people tip-toe around it and even if you don't remember why, you remember that you're missing something. Spock knows what he was missing—what he is missing by the wistful way Sybok will talk about her sometimes; by the small, almost off-hand comments dropped around him like pennies for him to collect and keep close. He can't—he won't put a child through that. He just doesn't know how he's going to get Jim to agree.

He lays his head on his folded arms. He's so exhausted, and thinks that this bone-deep ache wasn't supposed to surface until he was at least into his second century, not barely a quarter through his first.

Sybok finds him like that, and Spock wonders if they have him on a rotation: don't leave him alone for more than an hour or he pines too much.

"No," Sybok says. "I'd have seen the charts if that was the case. T'Pring would make them. They'd be rigid and efficient and—"

"Please stop fetishizing her organizational skills."

"She is in charge, gets me hot," Sybok informs him with a grin, and Spock wants to die so hard. "What's with the face?"

"I can't do this again," Spock admits, and it hurts, feels like it's stripped out of his bones.

"I know," Sybok agrees, sitting in the chair across from Spock's desk. "I know."

"How do I say that to him? How the hell do you tell someone you changed your mind? That you thought you could do this but—"
"You tell him that. Your husband kind of loves you, and he's a smart cookie. I mean, he did manage to keep them all alive with the—"

"Sybok."

"I'm just saying, he had five ships under his command, that's impressive," Sybok says. "I'm glad he's on our side."

Spock pinches the bridge of his nose. Three months ago Jim had taken five ships to orchestrate a response to Klingon aggression, had gotten himself killed ("Mostly dead!" McCoy had emphasized), and then, instead of speaking with Spock for more than twenty minutes, bawled out the admiralty. Spock had had admirals clogging up his free time for weeks asking whether or not he could do anything to control his husband.

Spock, who'd been understandably upset (read: furious) that Jim had been in that situation, had refused to do anything of the sort.

Sybok looks at him, narrows his eyes and really looks. "What did she tell you?" he asks finally, glancing over his shoulder. "Are you getting a divorce? Because I don't care what she says, that's not logical."

"No. Nothing so melodramatic."

"Well?"

"I need an heir sooner than we'd—I'd—thought."

"...Well shit, son."

Spock gives him a look but Sybok refuses to look repentant.

"How are you—"

"I don't know," Spock says flatly, and he's so angry—at all of this. Tired and angry and impotent and—and really he just wants his husband back. Doesn't know how he waited for three years and change when he can't bear half that.

______________________________

Spock is waiting when Jim comes off the ship, squinting against the photographers' lights and Bones' hand on the small of his back, his snarl keeping them all at bay.

Jim sees him, standing so so still but surrounded by movement, people jostling and calling and Jim ignores them, cuts a path and shakes Bones and Gary off, walks past Skelev and T'Pring's preemptive sigh and cups Spock's face, smoothes his thumbs over Spock's cheekbones and kisses him. Spock's arms wrap around him, hands tight on Jim's back, on his shoulder, keeping him close until they can't breathe and Jim thinks, air, what, that's not important more of this now—except that Spock does pull away, huffing a laugh and smudging a kiss across Jim's cheek before resting their foreheads together, still no space between them.

Never allowed to leave again, can't/not for that long/died twice.

Here/I'm here/I'm alive/I'm here.
They get shuffled into a cruiser, but no-one tries to untangle them which is good—it's fucking great because Jim doesn't know where he stops and where Spock starts, and by some miracle they're home and in bed and Jim is coming from something other than his hand in a year and a half and holy shit, yes.

He sleeps, just like last time, for two days, because that's what Jim does, and when he wakes up Spock is sitting in bed next to him, reading his PADD with his fingers stroking through Jim's hair.

"Did you even—" Jim mumbles, sleep-thick, and Spock looks at him and waits for the end of the sentence, but Jim gives it up as a lost cause. "Hi."

"We made the front page of everything everywhere," Spock says, tilting the PADD to show Jim the still image of them kissing. He's pleased to note it looks less desperate than it'd felt. "T'Pring informs me that my numbers have gone up."

"I'm great for ratings and morale," Jim agrees, yawning before getting up to use the bathroom and wash his face because he feels _gross_.

Spock reaches down and touches the knotted scar over Jim's heart when Jim flops back into bed. "This is new."

"They have batons, for when their phasers stop working," Jim mutters.

"I am confused as to why you were on—"

"We may have beamed aboard. Temporarily." It was to rescue Chekov, who somehow is still enduring Gary (who, Jim has decided, is actually the younger of the two of them, forget actual age), and Jim had caught it just at the wrong angle, because that was his life.

"Jim."

"Everyone's alive. My whole—my whole fucking crew survived," Jim says, grinning because that's a huge deal.

"And…"

"Second time I flatlined," Jim relents, soft. He'd bled out, mostly, known it was happening even as he'd dragged Chekov behind him. He doesn't remember getting out—when he woke up he and Chekov were both on biobeds, and Bones said he'd had to resuscitate both of them, had called Jim an idiot and smoothed his hair off his forehead with a shaking hand and Jim had known it had been close: too close.

Gary told him that he'd had to scrape them both off the floor—yelled at Jim for making him pick. He'd dragged Jim to Sulu, who'd beamed down with him, and then gone back for Chekov.

Spock's fingers work now over the scar tissue, trace its ridges and its twin, two inches down, smaller but there. He leans forward and kisses it, finds all the new marks on Jim's body and memorizes them and that—that's what breaks Jim. That Spock is trying to memorize them; that it's been so long that things Jim's gotten used to are new to him.

"Come here, come here," he says. Spock's hand slides down Jim's hip, for the first time really alerting Jim to the fact that he's naked because he's home and allowed to be free of the tyranny of pants in the privacy of his own bedroom.

He has his fingers tight in Spock's hair (longer? Is it longer than it was?) as Spock grinds them
together and Jim makes a needy noise that he will deny to his dying day.

Spock's mouth is hot on his neck, teeth a sharp, delicious scrape followed by a broad stroke of tongue and Jim tilts his head up, offering it up, whatever Spock wants, however he wants it. Brain offline, just heat curling up his spine and his dick so hard so fast, trapped between them and leaking already against Jim's stomach.

Spock reaches over, and finds lube easily because clearly the bastard was—oh fuck—lying in wait, slicking up his fingers and still rolling his hips against Jim's pulling back just enough for Jim to focus on his face, lips swollen and dark, eyes hooded and intent before he slides down Jim's body, open mouthed kisses dragging his lips, hot and wet down Jim's stomach before Spock settles between his legs and Jim debates watching or closing his eyes: knows either way this is over embarrassingly fast.

He bends his knees, legs falling apart and Spock kisses the crease of his thigh as he slides a finger inside.

"Oh, fuck," Jim gasps, hips jerking. Spock laughs into the skin of Jim's thigh, dark and happy—so fucking happy. He crooks, adds another, scissors them and so good—so much better than his own fingers and he works himself back on them, doesn't care about the burn or stretch and Spock is just going for it, finding that spot and keeping on it until Jim's pretty sure that Spock just wants to watch until Jim's there, tensing and toes digging deep into the mattress, hips lifting off and then—and then the bastard pulls out.

"Fuck you so hard," Jim groans, biting his lower lip and throwing an arm over his eyes. "Come on, baby, come on—"

"Jim," Spock moans, sounds like he's about to break apart in a million directions. "Jim." He slides back up Jim's body like he can't support himself enough not to drag their bodies together, and it's going to just—wreck Jim. He's shaking over Jim, and Jim reaches down and guides Spock in while Spock's teeth dig into his lower lip, eyes closed and head hanging, Jim bent almost in half to do it but fuck, that's what the PT is for.

And then it's like coming home and a million other trite metaphors that feel true when you're there, in the moment. Jim's hips cradling Spock's and their bodies moving together and Spock hot and huge and heavy between his thighs, a reminder that it's been so long in the ache of it. Spock's right hand is clenched around Jim's left, and some hazy part of Jim's mind realizes that he needs some sort of reminder and Jim opens up, mind pulling against Spock's and keeping him close, closer.

I missed you/missed this/missed us, he tries to convey, gasping and so close, so so fucking—

Don't leave me anymore. It's involuntary, Jim can feel that in the way Spock recoils from it but Jim slides his legs around Spock's hips, pulls him closer and catches his mouth in a sloppy kiss, coming, coming, coming. Spock follows, sharp thrusts later and coming, hot inside Jim and making an almost wounded sound.

He presses kisses to Spock's mouth as he pulls out, and it's a mess—he's a mess—but he's too tired, lazy, sated, whatever. He doesn't want to move, and wraps his arms around Spock, presses a kiss to his shoulder and slides back into sleep.

He wakes up cleaned up—hopes devoutly that that was Spock and not Heinemann, who hasn't approved of Jim since Jim was a thirteen-year-old genocide survivor.
Jim glances at the clock beside the bed and realizes he's managed to waste away three days. He has to give a report and check in with the crew and—

"I'm—I'm glad you're home," Spock says, turning his face into Jim's neck, and there's something else—something Spock's not saying and it's been eighteen long, long months but Jim doesn't think he's any less fluent.

"Me too, baby," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to Spock's temple and slanting a glance at the door as Spock's breathing evens out, waiting for T'Pring to burst in with dozens of things Spock should have already attended to, but she doesn't. It's all just blissfully quiet and still.

He shifts, and then realizes that once again Spock has the entirety of the bed claimed, not to mention Jim.

It's an argument for staying right here: clearly a year wasn't enough time to train Spock to share a bed, and a year and half was plenty of time for him to even stop pretending to try to stay on his own side.

…It's an argument for staying.

Jim didn't…he didn't realize this was going to be the argument he was going to be having with himself.

Fuck it. He needs pants if he's going to think about this.

He slides out of bed, takes a shower and puts on some clothes before heading out into the rest of the castle, which is wide awake. It's amazing how used to genuflections he's gotten; salutes or bows, he barely notices either.

He shuts the door behind him and leans against it, looking around the war room. It's not a memorial, or as he left it. There are audio analyzers running and holos with flight-pattern grids, smooth blues and whites running data and reports popping up as they're filed.

He should get Scotty in here, he thinks as he goes through the tech. Maybe Keenser, Keenser's better with delicate systems. Gaila could help him figure out how to splice into the deadspace transmissions the Klingons got fond of using in the last four months…this all seems dated. He thinks that's probably the result of necessity being the mother of innovation: no upgrades here because there was no worry that the oxygen sensors were going to bust out if they couldn't bypass the carbon synth.

The thing is. The thing is, Jim could run a war from here. Could have saved those eight ships if he hadn't been so busy trying to save his own; if he'd been able to throw the controls to Gary—Gary could have handled it but Jim could only be captain of so many ships and keep his own people alive—there was only so much of him to go around. Only so much he could do.

Diplomacy's not going to work. Spock can want it all he likes, but…in the end this is going to be a war. It might be short; Jim thinks that if Spock could…get the Romulans in on it, it could be very short. Three years, maybe. Best case scenario.

He frowns a little, then slides a finger along the table because… "Exeter you have three drones coming your way at warp 8, cloaks up."

"...Kirk? What—Slean, get me a reading and see what he's talking about. Kirk, you're supposed to be on shore leave."
Jim grins, mostly because he can't help it; he always liked Adrienne Ruik. "Take care of the drones, Ruik. Kirk out."

The thing is...Jim, even though he was activated really young, he did all the requisite coursework. Jim knows his histories and knows that military campaigns are defined by one general. That they can be fought for love of a sovereign but that there is always one voice above the rest, and there hasn't been for this conflict. There have been bickering admirals and rule-by-council and bureaucratic and political intervention, and it's left captains to make their own decisions; to be reckless and take risks they shouldn't have to. It's a combination of the fact that the war's gone on too long and Spock's uncle and grandmother were idiots.

Not that Jim judges, except oh wait.

Jim's flatlined because he made the decisions no-one else could, or would. Jim's almost died and put other people in harm's way because it's what has to happen, and Jim wonders if that's something Starfleet's missing. If it's not that it's lacking the impulse to leap before it looks, but just the impulse to leap.

Yeah. He can do this.

Decision made he sits in a chair at the table and grabs a comm. He bullies his way through to Admiral Fischer and then he grabs Shras, who looks at him like they're completely doomed.

"Let me assemble a staff," ze sighs, running a hand through hir white hair and sitting down next to Jim, throwing hir feet up on the table and fixing hir eyes on hir PADD.

Jim sends a message to Uhura: Stealing Shras forever. He adds the xoxo just for fun.

Doing this...doing this really won't really be any different from shoving a smoking body off a console and taking up a battle station on a starship. That was fifteen—so at twenty-three he's going to hijack a war. It fits to pattern.

Really, it's Spock's fault.

"He what?" Spock demands, putting down his stylus and staring at T'Pring because what?

"Resigned his active commission, tapped Gareth Mitchell to succeed him as Captain of the Enterprise and apparently called a meeting of the admiralty for 1900."

It...doesn't make any more sense with repetition, actually. He glances at a clock. "That's in twenty minutes."

"It appears that he frightens admirals in his spare time," she observes dryly, and Spock looks at her helplessly. What? She gives him a look and lifts her brow, which means she's disgusted with his idiocy and she's not helping.

Shras skids by the open door and then says to T'Pring, "His Royal Highness wants—" ze notices Spock and bows hastily before continuing "—to know who's in charge of cleaning, and why people are...interfering with his things."
Spock doubts that that's how that was phrased.

"Kindly remind his Royal Highness that he has been gone for eighteen months," T'Pring says.

Shras lifts hir delicate eyebrows and gazes up at T'Pring, who lifts one of her own back. "Perhaps a consultation with the housekeeping staff," she suggests, in that tone that implies Shras' parents should have fed hir to wolves at birth.

"Your Grace is very wise," Shras says without a hint of irony, and then vanishes.

Nyota shows Spock the message Jim sent her without commentary: Stealing Shras forever xoxo.

"This is either a good thing," she says, "or we're all going to die."

"This meeting—" he starts, and then gets distracted when his PADD pings with a new message.

*Hijacking the war, don't wait up.*

Spock stares down at the screen (he doesn't get any xoxos. He's not sure how he feels about that), then closes his eyes, frustration giving way abruptly with realization that this means Jim is staying.

That happy feeling lasts until Spock has to go and get him at two in the morning, because his workaholic husband is somehow worse than he was a year and a half ago. Then the feeling is less happy and more resigned weariness and sheer bafflement.

"I'm fine, look, I need to talk to the Minister for Defense—" Jim says, and Spock gives him a look.

"No."

"What?"

"It's two-fifteen in the morning, she's asleep, and I'm not waking her up because—"

"If I'm up she should be," Jim tells him and fuck this, he's serious. Spock should have expected this. Jim had been too stable for too long, it was only a matter of time before he pulled the rug out from under Spock.

"You resigned your active commission?" Spock asks, shutting the door to their room and beginning to undo the buttons on Jim's waistcoat.

"Someone has to run this shitshow from the ground, and before you say anything you've been doing great uniting everyone but the whole actual tactical shit wasn't your job and whoever's job it was should be fired. And the thing is, I can't run this and captain a ship, and Gary can do it just as well as I did, so—"

"Jim." Spock mostly breaks in because Jim hasn't stopped for air yet, but also because… what? He says this all so casually and Spock—he had a plan. Carefully laid plans and arguments that maybe cited George Kirk and Jim is just…ruining them, and Spock is off-balance.

Again. He should just get used to it.

He folds Jim's shirt and waistcoat and puts them on a chair, smoothing his hands over the fabric before turning back to Jim.

Jim, who'd been heading towards the bed, turns on him, so serious so abruptly. He licks his lower lip and then rubs it. He's trying to kill Spock, it's the only possible explanation. "What was the
point of getting married if—if this last year and a half was all we were ever going to have, on
infinite fucking loop?"

Spock wonders if he knew that Jim was like this, or if he let himself forget.

"I—" he starts, and then shakes his head. "You're staying."

Jim laughs a little, and pulls Spock in for a kiss that Spock returns before letting himself be pulled
into bed, tucked in. "Yeah, baby. I'm staying."

Spock thinks that they're going to have to discuss this "baby" thing, but right now he lets Jim wrap
around him and thinks that he made the right choice.

For his own sanity, Spock imposes a rule that no-one can talk to him about any
problem/disagreement/argument/war they're having with Jim. If people pick fights with Jim, Spock
is a firm believer that they should have to deal with it themselves. Spock does this partially because
if he listened to everyone with a complaint he'd never get anything done but mostly because he
thinks anyone who fights with Jim deserves what they get. He also thinks it's hilarious, and one of
the hottest things he's ever seen, but that's neither here nor there (Sybok, Spock thinks, is onto him
because he spends a lot of time smirking).

Pike gives him a plaintive look the first time he tries to get Spock to intervene, but Jim and T'Pring
have managed to take the war room into the next level of high-tech and Jim doesn't actually care
about politics and...Spock's not doing anything until Jim endangers them all.

Shras, who Spock frankly overlooked all the time when ze was Nyota's right hand, is now an
invaluable ally. T'Pring and Sybok get suckered in by Jim, Nyota steers clear and has decided Jim
is in the "not my problem" category of her life, but Shras.

Shras has Spock's direct line and will send him messages like Be advised, MoD on way, v
frustrated. Ze's never overly personal, never updates Spock's on Jim's whims or moods, but Shras
understands and acknowledges what Jim ignores: everything Jim does has repercussions for Spock.
Skelev's daughter, Tagrev, can often be found lounging in Jim's office yelling from here to Tellar
Prime about how they're all huge pussies, and then Jim yells at her about gender insensitivity and
Spock has to tell T'Pring to stop telling him these things.

The first time Sindari tries to have a conversation with Jim he asks her how their cloaking tech is
going, and if they're still having that pesky problem with having to decloak before firing. He says it
with wide blue eyes and a very charming smile, and Sybok leans over to Spock (who is not
laughing only because he has had 26 years of training for moments like these) and says,

"Have you noticed he always seems his friendliest right before he's about to destroy things?"

"I have," Spock agrees, and watches his husband and the Romulan ambassador spar and thinks that
they're both enjoying the opportunity to be hostile.

Jim's first two months home are incredible.

Spock should have known better than to get comfortable.
"I can't do it," Gary says flatly.

Jim blinks at him groggily, fingers uncurling from his phaser which he absolutely does not keep under his pillow next to the lube, nope. "Did you just break into my room?"

"Yes," Gary says, and he has his crazy eyes on.

"What?" Spock manages, looking pathetically exhausted. Jim bites his lips on a smile and slides out of bed.

"Nothing, go back to bed."

Gary waits for Jim to locate and pull on pants and a shirt and then follows him out to Jim's office.

"What can't you do?"

"I can't—I'll kill them all."

"Scotty or Gaila?"

"Scotty," Gary admits. "He's like—I don't even know! And McCoy keeps dropping these really fucking unhelpful observations about how you would do something and it's ten months to lift-off and Imma choke a bitch."

Jim rolls his eyes over Gary's head and Shras smiles a little before going off to do whatever ze does before ze has to deal with Jim's insanity.

"Yes, I have staff, I'm running a war, Gary, I need staff. And Scotty—you know how to manage Scotty, you just abuse him and expect the impossible. Gaila is always like this the first three months of shore-leave and then she settles down. And if you were charming and less abrasively sexual people might like to do nice things for you too."

Gary gives him a look of deep hate. "Plus Sulu is stealing Pavel."

"It's good for Chekov to have friends, Gary, we talked about this."

"Well, what about McCoy?" He's being belligerent now, pouting into his hot chocolate as though the entire universe has wronged him. Honestly, give the man a ship and he falls to pieces.

"I'll talk to Bones, but tell him to shut up, you're captain and if he has a problem maybe he should talk to me about it and not bother you with his insecurities and pining."

"Yeah, I'm not saying that to him."

"Gary, it's time to consider the fact that you're going to need to grow a bigger set and deal with your irrational fear of Bones."

"It's not irrational. He stabs people for fun and he yells all the time."

"Wow, you are so crazy right now."

By the time Jim gets to bed that night, he's exhausted. The scale goes to eleven.
He's in the middle of undressing when he realizes that Spock is standing and watching him with that you aren't going to like this expression.

"Now what?" he groans.

"We need...to talk."

"It can't wait?"

"No, I don't think it should."

"So it can, you just won't let it," Jim clarifies, and Spock gives him a look. "What, it's true. What is it?"

"We need to discuss children."

"In a hypothetical abstract?"

"Jim."

Jim realizes he's twisting his tie around his hand and lets it fall. "I thought—" Jim starts, and then rephrases that to: "Why is this such an immediate issue right now?"

"Our situation is still tenuous at best," Spock says, even like he's rehearsed it. He's looking at the space behind Jim's left ear, posture a mockery of parade rest. Great, this is—this is going to go really well. "A child would give us a sense of security that has been eroded with you—" he breaks off, but Jim knows the rest of the sentence: having been out there—you were gone and all the good we got out of the wedding went downhill, and now we have to have a kid to fix it all.

Oh good, Jim knew this was going to be his fault.

"With me out there," Jim finishes, rubbing the back of his neck. "This is such bullshit, I'm here now."

"Jim—"

"No, really. I'm here, I'm in this and now—and that's not enough? Who the fuck thought this up? T'Pring? Because she's insane, and not always right, Spock—"

"It is...It wasn't just T'Pring," Spock says, and fuck there's probably a signed petition and an act of parliament. "This isn't—we don't have the luxury of being selfish right now, this is for—"

"What about the kid? We're not having it because we want it but because it'll get us some quick political capital and goodwill—"

"You know as well as I do—"

"What it feels like to be the poster kid for something," Jim finishes flatly, because he does. They both do, for months after Tarsus—and Spock should—

"My parents had me before they were ready to for this same reason. It's time to grow up—"

"You asshole."

"I'm right," Spock insists. "And just because this isn't coming to us organically doesn't mean that we can't love this child. I've put this conversation off for half a year already, and I wasn't the one
who told you to stay away for a year and a half—"

"That isn't fair—"

"That's not the point!" Spock snaps, and then runs a hand through his hair, pacing away before turning back to Jim. He looks, oddly, like Jim's punched him or maybe like he expects it and Jim kind of wants to: wants to rage against this physically because then he can at least beat it. "I—it's your choice, I can't force you into anything, I don't think there's anyone in the universe, less the galaxy, who could manage that. So I'm asking you. As my husband, I'm asking you to do this."

And fuck.

Fuck. Jim doesn't have an argument against that, he really doesn't, and he doesn't have anything to dredge up against the defeated look on Spock’s face.

"I need—" he breaks off and walks, down to the war room and his office in the back, with star charts and battle plans and violence fucking everywhere.

His argument, to himself, about kids has always been that it's not fair—kids get left by parents and it's...you never know when they're not coming back. Jim looks at Sam and thinks that he couldn't do that to a kid: decided at a really young age that he never would.

It's different now that he's here, but the world is a terrifying place, the galaxy. The price the Klingon Empire has on Jim's head would pay for two star systems, and Jim's intercepted seven attempts on Spock's life since he's been back; Skelev's dealt with countless more.

Which is a null argument, he admits, because Jim's never been so afraid of the consequences that he hasn't run after what he wanted with both hands open. See: his whole fucking relationship with Spock for reference.

He doesn't know if this is something he wants, though. Doesn't know if it's something he could grow to want, but it's something that Spock wants. It hangs, intensely hungry, at the base of Jim's skull where the bond rests, now that he knows what it is. Spock desperately wants this kid and has put off talking about it because he was afraid of Jim's reaction. Which makes Jim officially the asshole in this relationship, but that's not the point right now.

"Okay," he says, walking into Spock's office. T'Pring looks between them and Uhura watches Spock carefully. Spock stands up.

"Okay?" he repeats, something like incredulous hope on his face and jesus fuck, Jim is an asshole.

"After dinner. I have—" he jerks a thumb over his shoulder and Spock nods.

"I will...see you then," he agrees.

It's unobtrusive, the Artificial Gestation Unit, when Jim gets into their room and sees it set up in the corner. He gives T'Pring a look because he's pissed at her, too. She hid this and pushed it and he doesn't give a fuck if it's not rational, she's on his list.

There's nothing about it that screams baby-maker anywhere, just...smooth with frosted-glass (probably frosted transparent aluminum, but Jim'd have to get Scotty to look at it to know for sure). It looks, strangely, like a lava lamp. A squished, fat, three-foot high lava-lamp with its own power-source. Jim swabs the inside of his cheek and puts it in and thinks, this is all it takes to make a kid?

"Thank you," Spock says, like it's been dragged from his voice over broken glass, thick and rough.
“Yeah,” Jim agrees, and gets ready for bed. He sleeps, because Jim's always believed that you get sleep where you can get it, and he's never been a fan of the philosophy that you shouldn't go to bed angry. He curls up on his side and ignores Spock and sleeps.

When he wakes up, the bed is empty and cool—Spock's been gone for a while. He consults Spock's schedule for the day, then glances over at the AGU, and exhales and comms Tagrev, tells her he wants Leonard McCoy and Montgomery Scott here five minutes ago and he doesn't want excuses. She gives him a look. "Force if necessary?"

"I want them whole," Jim says, and she smirks and heads out.

"Motherfuck, Jim," McCoy sighs when he's brought into Jim's bedroom. Jim is sitting in a chair reading reports sent over from Starfleet on the very most opposite side of the room from the AGU, which glows thoughtfully every few minutes. He's been left alone all day, but that may or may not be because he told Tagrev to guard the door even from his husband or his frightening Lord Chamberlain.

He gave Shras the day off, and ze looked at Jim with so much concern that Jim spent twenty minutes assuring his head of staff that no, he's not going to file for divorce, goddamnit.

"We're having a kid," he blurs, and Bones stills and gapes at him and Scotty looks vaguely at the hip flask in his hand, and then accusingly at Bones.

"…Run that by me one more time. You know, in a world where it makes sense," Bones says, sitting down hard on the couch.

"There isn't a world where it makes fucking sense. It's just—We're having a kid and I can't—" he shuts himself up and waves at it.

"This it?" Scotty asks, crouching beside the AGU.

"Yeah, if there's something wrong just turn it off, we can start over," Jim says flatly, hand wrapped around the cold cup of coffee in his hand. "At this point it's a blob of cells."

Bones raises his eyebrows.

"Wouldn't do for the heir to come out warped because of some mechanical failure," Jim sneers, and both of them know it's not directed at them, not at all. "Not good for morale."

Scotty throws him a look, and then his flask. "You need that, and more," he says, shaking his head and tossing it over before tinkering away.

"From the top, Jimmy," Bones instructs.

So Jim explains and Bones and Scotty listen before Scotty says,

"Well, it'll be healthy, but he's gonna have blue eyes and blond hair."

"You're psychic now?" Bones demands, heaving himself up. "Fucking ectogenesis, goddamnit, Jim."

He crouches beside Scotty, and Jim stares up at the ceiling before—"He?"

"Aye. Next time might try for a lass, but this time he's gonna have his da's ears and his pop's colorin'."
"You can't possibly—" Bones begins, and then, scrolling through the readouts, "Huh."

"That's—" Jim leans against Bones as they cram around the AGU, viewing screen showing in 3D cells splitting. "Chances for viability?"

"This is top of the line," Scotty says, running a reverent hand along the smooth curve of the panels. "Not that I'm an expert, but I can't find a damn thing wrong with it. Vulcan?"

Jim nods. "Apparently it was a wedding present. Funny how this is the first I'm hearing about it in almost three years."

"I gotta call our esteemed captain," Bones announces, levering himself up and using Jim's line. "Gotta fucking delay take-off."

Jim looks at Scotty. "What," Scotty chuckles, a warm friendly press against Jim's side, "you thought anyone else was gonna be Junior's first doctor?"

"No," Jim says, though he did, he supposes. He wanted Bones to look—check, reassure him that this was all right because whenever things go to shit, Jim's called on his crew. Jim's good at fighting, and he's good at marshalling other people's talent; recognizing it and trusting it. He wasn't going to keep them here.

"You always were a bit daft," Scotty says fondly.

"He doesn't want children," Spock says.

Sybok shrugs. "He's kind of still a kid himself."

"That's not helpful in the least," Spock informs him.

"Wow, so you guys had a fight," Sybok realizes, and then puts down his toast. "What'd he say?"

"He did it—we're—we're going to have a child, he's just…unhappy. Doesn't want it, and I don't have it in me to be a single parent. Look at Father—"

"You're not Dad. If anything you're much more Mandy, and Jim's just…sulking or something. It'll be fine. It's you guys—this isn't the thing that breaks you. I'm pretty sure that that's gonna be like..." Sybok considers. "I don't know, all the stars exploding at once or something. Not this kind of stuff."

It's comforting in its own way so Spock nods, and drinks his tea. He has meetings all day today, and he didn't sleep well and he hates that Jim deals with fights by ignoring that they're happening, pulling into himself and leaving nothing but ringing, sullen emptiness in the back of Spock's mind.

He gets through his first seven meetings with little fuss, but as he's breaking for lunch and trying to explain to Sybok that T'Pring will actually kill him if he goes in for a surprise kiss, Nyota comes in and says, "Leonard McCoy and Montgomery Scott are here."

Spock's first thought is that Jim is panicking, and that they are overriding all the controls and shutting down the machine: those are the two men who could do it. It's not a fair thought, but he thinks he can be forgiven for it, pinching Tagrev into a heap and bursting through the door. He's
not clear on how he got from his office to here, there is something like blind panic welling inside him and when he skids into their bedroom he sees—

Scott and Jim sitting against the wall by the AGU, pressed together with Scott talking fondly and Jim's eyes closed, head tilted back and a faint smile on his mouth.

McCoy lifts his eyebrows at Spock in the most scathingly unimpressed expression Spock has ever been on the receiving end of, and then says, "Jimmy."

Jim waves a hand and says, "Tagrev, just—"

"Jim," Spock manages, and Jim's eyes snap open, smile vanishing like Spock's wrenched it off.

He glances around and Jim's lips twitch, like he knows exactly what Spock thought and finds it funny.

Spock flexes his hands. He could choke him.

"We're having a boy," Jim informs him blithely, and Spock thinks that Jim Kirk is actually going to be the death of him, still sprawled so casually against the wall as though this is nothing; as though they haven't fought and Spock didn't spend last night staring at him resentfully, hating that Jim could sleep when Spock was so wretched he couldn't even entertain the idea. "And we're not naming him after anyone in either of our families."

Spock stares at him, and then glances at McCoy, who nods.

Jim laughs and crosses the room to him, pulls him in and presses Spock's face into Jim's neck.

"Breathe," he commands.

Spock does, hands tight on Jim's hips and breathes, breathes, breathes.

"Bones is insisting that he's going to be our primary babydoctor, and Scotty wants to come in every week to check that everything's running all right," Jim says soothingly, and it's not really relevant but Spock thinks he's being distracted with information so he'll continue to interact.

"Pediatrician," Spock sighs, and feels Jim's laugh more than he hears it, and holds on tighter because sometimes he has this irrational fear that Jim is going to stop laughing.

"Whatever. I'm just saying. I might suck at this," Jim murmurs.

Spock kisses his neck and holds on because he has no great faith in his abilities to parent, but he thinks...he thinks that they can wing it. They're both pretty good at improvisation, and Spock runs a federated empire that spans multiple star systems and a third of the galaxy and Jim ran a ship and now a war...they should be able to do this, and if they're not perfect, well. Like he said. They can fake it.

At some point McCoy and Scott slip out and Jim explains how they know it's going to be a boy ("No, seriously, nothing that rhymes with cock, okay? Or dick. A nice, non-mockable name"), and how they can predict that he'll have Jim's blond hair and blue eyes and Jim shows him read-outs that mean nothing to him (and he suspects mean nothing to Jim) and gestures vaguely.

"You have no idea what that means," Spock says.

"None, get Bones or Scotty to tell you," Jim replies cheerfully.
"He's going to take after you," Spock sighs: he knows what Jim was like as a child.

"If it makes you feel better, Sam was a good kid," Jim offers, laughing as he flops onto the bed. He pats the space beside him and Spock slides down, realizing how tired he really is.

"Comparatively," Spock points out. It's three in the afternoon and he's sprawled out in bed with Jim curled around him and he is supremely disinclined to move.

Later, McCoy tells him he's an ass, and Scotty gives Spock a long look before shaking his head and cheerfully asking how he feels about baby showers and whiskey fountains.

T'Pring's smile when he brings the concept of a baby shower up (he was joking) is frightening, and he wonders if he can make Jim go to them all.

The again, Spock can only kill people in theory: Jim is still licensed to do so and is usually carrying some kind of weapon on his person, because some paranoia lingers and he abuses his position of power.

Which raises interesting questions about the first time their child—son, they're having a son—comes to sleep with them in bed and Jim pulls a phaser on him.

…Spock's going to need to work on that.

*

His father stares at him and then, strangled, offers congratulations. He says his mother would have been proud, which is unusual enough that Spock stays in the conference room alone for a long time after, thinking about her and wondering if she would have told him to have children now or enjoy having Jim to himself for a while longer.

Winona Kirk smiles and tells Jim that she's sure he'll be a great father—George was—and says next time she visits she'll bring along some of the junk from the attic she saved for "fuck knows what reason." Jim goes very quiet for a few hours—not bad or distraught, just quiet, sitting and looking at a holo of George Kirk holding Sam and laughing and Spock can feel the longing and determination and fear and comes in, and promises Jim, "You won't do that."

Sybok, once assured that everyone is fine, responds by decorating their entire suite with obnoxious YAY BABY COMING decorations which he claims (and Spock believes) he custom-ordered. T'Pring gives him a long, long look and Sybok says he'd had them stored for the day she knocked him up, but he was slowly giving up hope.

When she kills him, Spock will not be surprised.

Sam spends long hours waxing poetic about the horrors of newborns and then sighs and admits that Aurelan is pregnant again. He accuses Jim of holding out about the AGU and then Spock has to explain to Jim's very annoyed older brother why he didn't tell Jim that they had received it as a wedding present.

Sam Hepburn, for all he may bruise like a peach, is actually terrifying when mad, Spock realizes.

The entire crew of the Enterprise drop in, and McCoy and Scott are in at least once a week, but they do get a bump in approval ratings, and Nyota tells Spock that their image has been softened: that it's hard to believe that your sovereign and his husband are hardened warmongers when they're
having a child.

Spock finds himself sitting next to the AGU, a hand resting on the frosted windows and talking—nonsense, mostly, reassuring the baby that he's loved, that Spock won't leave him anything more strenuous than dealing with politicians, which, he admits, is aggravating, but not nearly as troubling as maneuvering Klingons on the warpath and coy Romulans.

Jim reads stories, and makes lists of names in his spare time. What time that is, Spock doesn't know because the Antares is back out and Pike is being particularly provoking.

"T'Pring, I—" he starts, walking into her office and frowning at the curriculum she's drawn up for his son.

"Don't you knock?" Sybok demands, and Spock stares at them, T'Pring sitting on her desk with her back to him, Sybok between her legs, glaring at Spock over her shoulder—

"I will in the future," he promises, closes the door, and laughs so hard he thinks he's going to damage something.

"She's using me for sex," Sybok laments later over dinner.

"Nah, I'm pretty sure if she just wanted penetration and orgasms she's got toys for that," Jim dismisses, and Spock has one of those moments where he realizes he's having a child with this man and wants to die a little.

Sybok looks heartened, though, so maybe Jim knows what he's doing. "That's true," he says, and is much more cheerful as he demolishes dessert.

*

His Royal Highness, Crown Prince S'chn T'Gai Sorrin Kirk, Prince of America and Vulcan, Duke of Shi'Kahr, Duke of Washington, Earl of Seattle, Heir Apparent to the throne of the Federation of Planets is born October 26, 2257.

He is squished and greenish and it's Jim who takes him from McCoy, glaring the whole time as McCoy laughingly grumbles things like "Goddamnit, I just have to check he's got all his fingers and toes" and "Jim, we gotta get him cleaned off" and "Seriously, what even is this thing you're doing?"

When Spock was born, his father lifted him in his hands and said, "So human." It was a story that circulated, was, Spock thinks (knows) meant to make him feel less than accepted.

It took a long time to get over that, and so when Jim brings Sorrin over, cradled close, Spock has a moment of blind terror that he'll say something wrong.

But then Jim's transferring him to Spock's arms (Jim, Spock remembers, was good with children on Tarsus), adjusting his hold, and Spock looks down at this perfect baby and smiles helplessly down at him. Sorrin looks at him, so quiet and watchful ("Is that normal?" "Jim, I will stab you with this, don't think I won't"), and Spock says, "Hello, Sorrin."

It's stupid, small and insignificant but it feels like it's bigger. He examines the tiny fingers with their tiny, perfect fingernails and the curl at the tips of his ears and then Sorrin opens his mouth and begins to wail, a pitiful sound that brings Spock almost to his knees and Jim laughs, takes him back, and fumbles his way into feeding Sorrin.
It becomes a pattern: Spock is so afraid of getting something wrong that he studies and prepares, whereas Jim learns by trial and error, completely fearless and Spock loves him so much for it, for calling McCoy and his mother and once, memorably, T'Pau (who had told Jim how to cope with their small touch-telepath—raise shields, project love and security—she didn't say it like that, but Jim translated).

They spend a week secluded before they are forced to debut Sorrin, and then there's a ceremony to name him Crown Prince and Heir Apparent and then a parade, which makes Jim nervous (more nervous), one arm tight around Spock and the other curled around the phaser he cannot be talked out of holding. T'Pring had tried to explain that there were snipers and everyone was taking all the precautions necessary and he could have one in the carriage but not actually hold one. Jim had given her a small, cheerful smile and said, "Yeah, no, that's not gonna work for me" and dug in his heels about everything until he got his way.

"Spoiled," Nyota had observed, but Spock had shrugged and said,

"They still want Jim dead, and now we have a child."

There were no incidents, but Jim had held Sorrin for hours after, hands shaking, and Spock wonders what Jim knows that rattles him so badly—what he knows that he doesn't tell Spock.

Jim holds Sorrin (whose eyebrows slant and make him look disgruntled all the time, which Jim finds hilarious far too often) and frowns at the projections. Spock points out that there are nannies, and willing hands to take Sorrin but Jim gives him long looks and then turns around to yell at someone else. Jim, Spock has realized, doesn't actually yell. He's just completely scathing and projects over everyone else, and it cows people.

There are cradles and swings in both of their offices, in T'Pring's office, in Nyota's, and Sindari comes to see him and looks at him somberly before looking up at Spock.

"I am pleased for you," she says, and Spock bows.

"You honor us," he says, and Jim smiles beatifically and says,

"Now stop being fucking cowards and back us in the offensive."

Sindari smirks at him and raises her eyebrows and says, "I am sure I have no idea what you are talking about."

Of course, it's not all charming. Sorrin is an infant and has no control over his mind and is, McCoy suspects (and Spock agrees) a little empath. So when he projects, it affects everyone, most of all Jim.

"Are you happy?" Spock asks Jim, one night when Sorrin is particularly disgruntled and simply will not settle and they are both exhausted (Jim gets up more, though Spock wakes up faster—Jim insists it's because he can go with less sleep, and he can fall asleep easier. Spock knows both of those things are true but some absurd part of him suspects Jim of trying to be the favorite parent).

"Yeah," Jim exhales.

When Spock wakes up Jim is asleep, propped on the pillows from chairs and sofas, and Sorrin is sleeping on his chest and Spock thinks, Me too. I'm happy.
"Just, stand there," Spock says, and then, "and don't say anything."

Jim wants to know what Spock thinks Jim's going to do—stand on the desk and do a leisurely strip tease?—but he leans forward and kisses Spock in a reasonable facsimile of an obedient husband (there was nothing in their vows about obeying, thank you). "Don't worry so much."

"I'm about to give the Romulans an ultimatum," Spock points out, adjusting his collar before flexing his hands by his thighs. "I am allowed to worry. Just...not allowed to let her see it."

Jim knows. He—it's his plan. He's ready—they're ready. All he needs to know is whether he can count on the Romulans or not—if it's going to be Plan A or Plan B. They're going to war either way—the Enterprise is in the sky, Sorrin is sleeping through the night—they're going to war.

Empress Mnheia flickers into the screen and lifts her eyebrows. "This is most unusual," she observes.

"I do not have time for circumlocution so allow me to be direct: by the end of the is year we will be at war with the Klingon Empire. I need to know where the Romulan Star Empire stands," Spock says, and Jim, tucked against the wall, glances over to see her reaction. There is very little, but Jim can see the surprise there.

"We stand together now or we fall apart separately," Spock says flatly. "I do not have time to cater to the Romulan Star Empire's insecurities, and I am through. I am willing to recall my delegation; we will fight this."

The Empress considers him, and Jim thinks that he sees capitulation there. "My sister informs me that you have been developing a plan which you believe will defeat the Klingons."

"We have," Spock says flatly.

"How likely is it to succeed?"

Spock doesn't hesitate. "Our best military mind has been on the matter for years. He says that it will work: I cannot but believe what he says to be true."

"You speak of James T. Kirk," she says, lifting an eyebrow and Jim raises his back, safely tucked away.

"I do."

"I am to believe you are not biased?" she snorts.

"James T Kirk is responsible for clearing the Nimbus III and VIII regions," Spock says, because he's biased, and Jim's fucking brilliant. "He is unparalleled. You will join us or we will stand alone, but we will be making this last stand. I expect your decision no later than tomorrow."

He exhales when it goes dead, and then looks over at Jim.

"Will she?" Jim asks, coming over and letting Spock run a thumb along Jim's cheekbone before replying.

"She will."
When Jim was on Tarsus, he did a lot of brow-beating. He was a skinny, plain-looking kid whose hair was too long and who was all elbows and knees, but Jim's always managed to be the loudest—and if not the loudest, the one who's heard. These days he's Prince Consort, father of the Crown Prince, and a Fleet Admiral. The only person who outranks Jim is Spock, and he's not desperate and shaky, afraid for his life in the same way. He's still having flashbacks now, remembering the frustration of yelling at people to do something that's in their own best interests and having them balk; slamming himself up against the devil-they-know, offering them the angel they don't.

Spock has quieted parliament; on the eve of war Jim thinks that there is no-one who is going to step up against Spock and challenge him, not with the way Spock looks lately. Spock's support numbers are absurdly high, which Nyota keeps commenting on in bemusement, running more and more polls because their luck can't hold, it can't last. They will, at some point or another, dip. The other shoe has to drop.

He rubs his eyes: they're burning, he can't remember the last time he went to bed, but Scotty's just waking up and he thinks he's found a way to polarize photons to find targets even when misfired. Jim's…not sure that they could get the photons not to destroy the ships they're fired from, but he's willing to hear it out.

"Here," Shras says, handing him coffee. "His Majesty is concerned for you."

"His Majesty is touring with our son to gain more popular support," Jim points out, and then narrows his eyes at Shras. "Are you ratting me out?"

Ze rolls hir eyes at him. "You won't sleep!" ze points out in exasperation. "I have to tell someone. Tagrev just says it's an example of your warrior spirit."

"Well."

"She's a Tellarite, her argument is invalid," Shras says flatly.

"That's racist."

"It's true."

Jim looks at his coffee, yawning and then accusingly: "Shras."

"I have written permission," Shras says earnestly, long blue fingers guiding Jim's face down to the table.

Clearly it's a conspiracy.

* 

When it clicks, it's in July of '58. The Romulans are on board and Jim's been talking to Sindari and their tacticians relentlessly. The nice thing about Romulans is that they don't irrationally hate you: they appreciate your skill. Jim admires them, they admire him, it's a beautiful, slightly hostile, mildly abusive relationship.

It turns out that the Romulan's general is the Queen's Prince Consort, and he and Jim share a moment of acknowledgment of their bond before ripping into the other's strategy.

When it comes together it looks like this: they'll catch the Klingons in the middle, use the cloaking device they found on Nimbus XI to separate the Klingons from each other, and turn the whole thing into a clusterfuck. Scotty figures out the photons, and Gaila and Uhura somehow get to
talking and manage to tweak frequencies.

It might not be enough—Jim knows it's a gamble, but it's a gamble either way, and they're going to have a drawn-out fight with actual battlefields, and Jim would rather those be the Neutral Zone than occupied space with casualties.

Spock leans in the doorway, watching, and then says, "Done, then?"

"You can declare war tomorrow," Jim agrees, turning to look at him. Spock nods and presses their foreheads together.

"Jim—" he starts, and Jim kisses him, bottles the words up.

"It'll work, Spock," he murmurs, and pulls him closer.

Spock is actually relieved to declare war, when he finally does so.

For the past seven months Jim has taken up residence in the war rooms, and he hasn't been to their bed in weeks. Spock's not worried about the lack of sex, it's that McCoy, Mitchell and Keenser have all separately informed him that when he gets like this Jim decides that sleep is a fallacy, and usually requires sedation (or, according to Mitchell, a blowjob, which reminds Spock that yes, Mitchell and Jim were together once and that no, he's not allowed to have people killed for that fact, especially not war heroes).

"I don't want to see it," Sybok tells Spock on the morning of the offensive. He's standing in the doorway, rubbing his thumbnail with the pad of his other thumb, a nervous gesture Spock hasn't seen in years. "I can't."

Spock raises an eyebrow at him, curious.

"I don't—So many people are going to hurt," he says, haltingly. "I just can't, Spock."

"Watch Sorrin," Spock says, and Sybok nods in relief and takes the baby, who gives him a long look before deciding that that's fine and begins babbling away at him. He has a few words at ten months, but he's realized he can communicate just as effectively without them, and Spock and Jim haven't really had the time to work on that.

Another reason to get this over with.

Nyota is waiting for him outside the room. "T'Pring says she can handle anything that arises, she and the Deputy Prime Minister. We'll take a few pictures, but they'll be done by an internal photographer and archivist and we'll select which images get disseminated."

He nods, touches the crown. She looks at him. "This could last decades."

"It already has," he points out, and then, because she looks anything but comforted, adds, "Jim won't stretch it out."

She nods, and walks in behind him. Jim has a policy of keeping out useless people, and so even now there's only Prime Minister Rocheleau (Pike's chosen heir, when he was finally term limited last year), Spock, and Nyota. Jim is in shirtsleeves (rolled up) and bare feet, his waistcoat hanging
open and his lip chewed into a red swell. He reaches for the PADD Shras already is handing him, murmurs something to T'Rena, and then looks over at one of the Admirals. He has a comm in his ear, and he pauses every so often.

"Romulans?" Spock asks Nyota, who nods.

Spock's gut clenches, just a little, when he sees them all arranged like chess pieces. He's terrible at chess; sacrifices all of his pieces, and for a moment—just a brief moment—he thinks this is a mistake.

Jim glances over at him and smiles, stretching it over his face, dark circles under his eyes almost fading when he grins like that.

Jim is excellent at chess, and likes winning enough that even after three years of marriage and five years of knowing each other, Jim won't teach Spock. Jim plays to win, or he doesn't play, and that's comforting where nothing else is.

"Got them in sights," Mitchell's voice reports.

"Keep shields raised, drop half," Jim instructs, and Spock stands and watches as the Romulan birds of prey uncloak suddenly to begin firing, the Klingon warbirds caught in the middle and firing uselessly at ships in front of them, no room to maneuver to return fire behind them. One tries, and burns out hugely against the hull of HMS Jimmy Carter.

There are voices layered over each other, Admirals speaking to specific ships, clearly, but Jim seems to be listening to all of them, checking read-outs and snapping, "Hold" in Romulan, and someday Spock will stop being surprised by what Jim can and can't do.

"Hold," he repeats in Standard, and there's a moment of stillness that stretches like the entire galaxy has ceded control to Jim for the longest of moments. Finally, once everything is perfect both in data and in accordance to his gut (Spock will never believe that Jim doesn't function at least 45% on instinct in these situations), Jim says, even and somehow terrible, eyes locked onto Spock's, "Do it."

There's a moment where everyone seems to exhale.

And then the Enterprise fires.

Part VI, Epilogue

"No, seriously, how are you still so bad at this?"

"Technically, I can have you killed."

"Fine, you raise them alone."

"…I take it back."

As though to prove Jim's point, they are interrupted by their four-year-old:"Sa'mekh, I am going to kill Sorrin."
Spock sighs and looks down at T'Laris. She looks back at him, blue eyes very serious, dark hair piled high on top her head. He's going to regret asking this, he can just feel it, but still..."Why, T'Laris?"

"For the good of the kingdom," she replies, far too earnest for her age, even for a child who's been taken under T'Pring's expert tutelage. 'I've come to the conclusion that his rule would be a disaster."

Jim sucks on a cheek to twist his smile into a thoughtful grimace, the traitor, and contemplates the board. Somewhere Sybok grunts and there's a crashing sound. Jim glances at the door, and then clearly decides it's not worth it to see what Sorrin's doing and moves his rook. At seven, Jim was already destroying property—if Sorrin's just bruising Sybok, they're both willing to put it in the win column.

Sorrin is every inch a wild child, so Kirk-like that Spock sometimes squints to find hints of himself in Sorrin's personality, much less his features. Sorrin runs and thinks he can fly and all of Spock's grey hairs are Sorrin's fault (not true, 25% of them are Jim's, maybe more).

Sorrin stared in wonder every time Jim had taken him to see the Enterprise, and when his cousins come to visit Sorrin is the one who is loudest, dragging Peter and Julian behind him while T'Laris sits with a book in her lap and tells them all that they're going to end up dead and she's not going to do anything about it.

The Enterprise's crew have all furnished the children's suite with tokens from new worlds. Sorrin has a plush kehlant he refuses to sleep without courtesy of Gaila, and they've been reading from a book of fairytales that Sulu brought back for T'Laris. Jim, to Spock's eternal surprise, is very good with languages. Of course, for all Spock knows Jim could be making all of it up as he goes along and none of them would ever be the wiser.

T'Laris is calmer with a wicked sense of humor, would rather sit and read than run, though she's been known to tear through the castle and slide down banisters (in fact, Spock suspects that the time they decided to slide down the banisters standing up was all T'Laris's idea, he just can't prove it). One day, despite how things stand now, Spock thinks she will make a great Queen, and Sorrin will be yet another Kirk who rules America without really ruling it.

Jim shifts uncomfortably, squeezing the biceps of his left arm behind T'Laris' back. Spock makes a note to call McCoy over from wherever he is to see how its healing.

There is peace, but it's not necessarily peaceful. Jim is still hated by Klingons, above and beyond the vitriol they have for Spock, whom they call the Conqueror Tyrant (Nyota insists it's poetic in its own way, especially for Klingons. T'Pring informs them that it's misleading, and should be changed, as though any of them can influence these things). A week ago a Klingon sympathizer got to jump on Spock, but only got Jim's arm—the would-be-assassin had been paste on the ground after Chekov, Gaila, and Madeline all finished with him. The only reason it's still an issue is that Jim has presented a new allergy McCoy is working out.

Spock turns back to T'Laris, who has Jim's eyes and now has them widened for full effect, clearly feeling that he's ignoring her and that that is unacceptable. Sorrin would be yelling, T'Laris just makes them feel like complete failures as a parents.

"I think that fratricide should be an absolute last resort," Spock informs her somberly. "Perhaps start with suggesting abdication, and we can discuss other options as they become necessary."

She considers this, and then, apparently satisfied, slides off his lap and tears across the room.
"SORRIN I AM ABDICATIONING YOU!" she shouts, and Spock winces, not just at the brutal murder of the language.

"The hell have we done?" Jim asks mildly as Sorrin yells something incomprehensible back at her and a door slams in the distance.

"Clearly the only option is to live forever," Spock decides.

"That's why you're king," Jim says earnestly, taking Spock's queen. "Your ability to make the hard, yet executable, decisions."

End Notes

So this is, at long last, Spectoria, the very strange hybrid of the Young Victoria and AOS, and the longest single story I have ever written.
This literally would not be here without screamlet, who when I watched The Young Victoria and said "I'm going to K/S that shit", laughed and went along with it. She's held my hand every step of the way, endured horrifying typos and whining and kicked my ass into gear when I listed by the wayside, and then, when I refused to write the wedding, wrote it her own damn self. It is not an exaggeration to say that this would not be here if not for her, so: all my love, babe.

It should be noted that if you find the pornographic content excessive, you should bitch at leupagus. Just be forewarned that neither she nor I will care, but she was the one who wouldn't let me cut anything, so if I'm gonna get complaints, she should too.

Finally, I think I have to thank my flist, who, when I started talking about this, all had a collective moment of shared madness and encouraged it. To the point where there was artwork and music supplied before I'd even decided to Big Bang this. You should all check out jones6's art here, which still makes me laugh months later.

Works inspired by this: One Seek Find Yield (Fan Art) by theimperialpurple

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!