Something Rich and Strange
by jouissant

Summary

In another universe, captaining a starship is Jim Kirk's first, best destiny. In this one, he's just been laid off from a soulless office job, he's struggling to make ends meet in New York City, and the closest thing he has to a love life is a strange fixation on a Shirley Temple-drinking regular at his new bartending gig. But when he forges a connection with this compelling stranger and begins unraveling the mystery of his father's death, Jim stumbles onto a secret that will change his life forever.

Notes

Endless gratitude is due Vellum, my amazing beta. I would have given up or settled for less so many times without your help, your tough love, your wielding of em-dashes. Thank you for making this story the best it could be. Thanks also to daphnie_1, everyone at the sbbsupport community on LJ, and my flist. And to Star Trek fandom: Thank you for being amazing and inspiring me to come out of lurkdom and write. The last ten months have been a blast. Keep on with your bad selves.

Also, if you think you recognize something, you probably do. There are a couple shoutouts to Watchmen and The X-Files lurking. Several plot points are shamelessly adapted from the Enterprise episode "Carbon Creek".
Jim set his keyring down on the front desk with a dissatisfying clink. It had already been stripped of the keys to the conference room and supply closet. He'd locked up his office one last time, noting that aside from the nearly obsolete desktop computer there wasn't a whole lot to merit security.

"Well, I guess this is it. Do I get to keep my ID card? It's a better picture than the one on my drivers' license." It was true, but not by much. His drivers' license made him look like an ex-con.

Ellen from Reception bit her lip and looked up at him with a preemptive wince, like a kid about to pop a balloon. In the background, he could hear the soft whir of the HVAC system and the gentle click of fingers on keyboards. If he sat up here it would lull him half to sleep in five minutes.

"Unfortunately, you need to turn in all identification before you leave the building."

"Oh. Okay."

So that was it, then. Three-and-a-half years and he was out on his ass without so much as a laminated ID card as a memento. He didn't even have a last paycheck to cash, courtesy of direct deposit. Perfect.

"Human Resources will be in touch within the next three business days for your exit interview, and—"

"Do they give you an exit interview if you've been laid off?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr…" Her eyes darted to his ID. "Mr. Kirk. I didn't realize…"

"Hey, it's okay. Don't worry about it." He grabbed a mint from the little glass bowl next to her tray of business cards.

Out on the street, it was starting to rain. Pedestrians dashed for awnings, for the subway, but Jim felt like walking. The leaves were just starting to turn; he hoped the impending storm wouldn't be too violent. Last year they had one big downpour that stripped the trees bare a full three weeks early, and it never quite felt like fall.

He made it five blocks down Fifth before turning on his heel and making a hard left into a bar and onto a barstool. It's been awhile, he thought to himself. It's been awhile, and it's been a shitty day. His back hurt. He sighed. The bartender looked askance at him, and he shook his head. "It's a long, sad story," he told her. "Don't really feel like explaining."

And he didn't. So when his shaky left hand sloshed a little Scotch onto the Brooks Brothers-clad arm sitting next to him, he stayed quiet. Not-so-dulcet tones demanding what the fuck he thought he was doing made him feel even less like explaining. And in the milliseconds before the fist collided with his cheekbone, Jim Kirk concluded that this had, in fact, been a really shitty day.

***

It was the weirdest thing, but the voice sounded like it was everywhere and nowhere at once. "What
"Did you do to yourself?" it asked teasingly. Then, "He's good? You've got him?" to someone Jim couldn't see. He couldn't see much, in fact.

"There you go, buddy, try the left eye. That's it. Jeez, you're lucky that idiot didn't have better aim or he'd have collapsed your eye socket."

"Ow," said Jim.

"Yeah, very 'ow'." The face that came slowly into focus was female. He blinked. Female and blonde. He tried to smile. The look on her face told him he probably wasn't especially successful.

"Your name's James? That's what your ID says. I'm Christine. I'm a second-year resident here, and we're a little short-staffed today, so I'm getting you cleaned up. Then we're going to take you up for a CT scan, okay?"

"Hey, Christine," he said dizzily. She was trying not to laugh at him. He could tell. "You shouldn't laugh at your patients. S'not very good...bedside manner." She looked nervous at that. "I must look like shit or you guys wouldn't be hustling me to the CT scan."

"It's a routine procedure. But in my medical opinion? You do look like shit."

"You sound like Bones."

"Bones?"

"Friend of mine. Leonard McCoy? He's actually a doctor here, I was going to meet him..."

"Goddammit, Jim, I'm ten lousy minutes late and you go and get your face bashed in?"

"...in the lobby after his shift." He looked pointedly at McCoy, who stood over him glowering menacingly. "But I decided to get a drink first, and then some Upper East Side meathead decided to OW BONES WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!!"

"Giving you a shot of antibiotics. I'm sure Dr. Chapel did it already, but bar floors are dirty, dirty places that should be avoided at all costs. Like we talked about, right, Jim?"

McCoy looked over at Christine, who was watching them with a look on her face that was equal parts curiosity, amusement, and horror. "You've been on the last, what, thirty hours?"

"Thirty-six. I'm almost off shift, but it's not-"

McCoy shook his head. "Nah, do yourself a favor, get out of here. I'll take him up."

She smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem. Now git, before another attending finds you something to do."

With another grin at McCoy, she straightened her scrub top and dashed off in the direction of the elevators.

"Hey, thanks for poaching, Bones. She's cute."

"I know she's cute, Jim. We're having coffee tomorrow afternoon. Besides, you haven't got a chance. You're the one who almost got her saddled with a new case when she's so tired she can barely see straight."
Jim rolled his eyes. "And you?"

"I'm the one who got her out of it," McCoy grabbed a wheelchair and patted the seat. "C'mon, scoot. Let's go make sure there aren't any skull fragments impaled in that pea brain of yours."

After the CT scan came back clear, McCoy hustled Jim out of the hospital and onto the subway. Just as the drugs wore off and his face started throbbing, Jim found himself staring down half a pepperoni pizza and a beer in their cramped living room. "You're a good friend, Bones," he said around a mouthful of cheese.

**

Jim leaned up against the wall, hands wrapped around a cup of coffee and a cigarette in the October chill. He'd raided Bones' stash again; if the good doctor thought Jim didn't know about his habit, he was sorely mistaken. He had considered a lecture on the evils of nicotine, but three quarters of McCoy's doctor friends smoked, and right now Jim didn't have much room to talk.

With the doctors, it mostly happened when they got drunk. They were all so damn tired all the time that Bones' parties looked more like a zombie movie, if all the zombies just stood around sipping beer, hypnotized by the glow of the TV screen. At least they were quiet. Jim was startled out of his reverie by a flurry of motion at the corner of his eye.

"It is freezing out here. I can't believe it's only October." Gaila clutched at her coat, drawing it tightly around her.

"Oh, hey. You on break?"

"It's intermission. We're doing the number with the gold pasties next, you should come in and watch." She leaned forward to give him a flash of cleavage. Gaila was probably the only environmental engineer in the known universe who danced in a burlesque troupe on the side.

"Thanks but no thanks. I just came out for a smoke. You got a light?"

She rolled her eyes. "If you came all the way down here and stood around in the cold waiting for me to come along and give you a light, it's probably a sign you shouldn't be smoking in the first place."

She fumbled in her purse, red hair wild.

"I know I've got one in here somewhere…it always goes straight to the bottom and this damn bag is like a cavern." She knelt on the sidewalk, muttering to herself as she combed through the mess inside.

She produced the lighter and held it out to him. "So I heard you got fired."

"Laid off."

She shrugged. "Same difference. Either way you're out of a job, right?"

"Yeah, Gaila, thanks for clearing that up."

"Oh, shut up, Jimmy. I'm teasing you. So what's next for Jim Kirk? More adventures in the world of consulting? What even is consulting, anyway?"
"You know, three years and I'm not sure I know the answer to that question. But no, no more consulting. I've got a month's rent saved up, so I guess I've got at least that long to figure it out before Bones kicks me to the curb."

"If you need some cheering up, I'm having a party tomorrow night."

"Is it a party or a party, Gaila?"

"Well, it's BYOT. T stands for toys. I provide the condoms, lube, and booze. So, whichever kind of party that is."

"I don't know how you haven't been evicted by now. If we were having wild sex parties every week, I don't even know what our landlord would do. He freaked out when we fed a stray cat outside the building for a month last winter."

"It helps if your landlord's invited."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Of course. But hey, thanks for the invite. I'll try to scrape up some change from under my couch cushions and chip in a bottle of Mad Dog."

She didn't reply, looking past him into the red glow of the bar's OPEN sign. Gaila had the look on her face that meant she was plotting. The last time he'd seen that look, Jim had found himself exchanging niceties with a budding indie porn star over cookies shaped like little penises. Gaila threw ridiculous parties. She was also not subtle.

"Funny you should mention spare change," she said finally. "You may be having this quarter-life crisis, or whatever it is, but you're going to need something to pay the bills. And I've got this friend…"

Gaila always had a friend. This friend owned a bar uptown. Way, way uptown, thought Jim, packed into the E at rush hour like the proverbial sardine. He consulted the directions he'd scrawled on a piece of paper. It's in Morningside Heights, Gaila had told him. Lots of Columbia students. Which meant lots of puking, spilled drinks, and shitty tips, thought Jim. He'd tended bar before.

College students were the worst.

"College students are the worst," said the girl behind the bar, hand on her hip.

"I don't need your editorializing, Nyota," said Scotty. "I do need another server. So keep a lid on it, okay?" He turned back to Jim, rolling his eyes in the girl's direction. "Meet Nyota Uhura," he said. "Thinks she's so high and mighty. You know who's the worst? Grad students. Get them drunk, they're either belligerent or maudlin."

Uhura didn't look up from the cutting board full of limes she was chopping, but Jim heard her mutter something under her breath.

As it turned out, Gaila's friend was a Scottish doctoral student in physics who had been all-but-dissertation for the past seven years. "Kept inventing things," he explained to Jim. "Couldn't help it if they were more interesting than my thesis." Jim wasn't clear on whether he was still actually enrolled at the university, and for his part Scotty didn't seem overly enthused about discussing his academic career. Jim let it go.

"So, when can you start? We'd need you here five to close on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. The rest of the week you're off at ten. We serve a lot of drinks, beer, wine, coffees. There's a small menu, as well: students stick around longer if they're fed."
Sound good?"
"Sounds great, man," said Jim, extending a hand. Scotty shook enthusiastically.
"Cool, cool. So, tomorrow at five, then? Any questions?"
"Yeah, how do you know Gaila again?" Jim smirked. This was his favorite part of Gaila's attempts at networking.
Scotty's ears turned a fetching shade of tomato, and Jim heard a snort from the other side of the bar.
"Nice meeting you, too, Nyota."
She looked up, brandishing a paring knife covered in neon green pith. She smiled dangerously.
"Don't call me that."

***

Jim had to hand it to Gaila. She'd come up with her fair share of schemes over the years, which was part of why Jim liked her so much. But with this gig, she'd outdone herself.

It was tactile, physical in the exact way the office job wasn't. The rote motion of the bar was all heft, bending and lifting cases and kegs, bags of ice, boxes of limes, jars of luminescent red maraschino cherries.

Jim moved constantly, filling orders, restocking the bar back, clearing empty plates. At close, he was exhausted. Bones' shifts were haphazard these days, and the coffee date with that resident Chapel had obviously gone well, because there were fewer half-empty takeout boxes in the fridge.

The bar wasn't the most aesthetically appealing place Jim had ever been, not by a long shot. Jim's first night, Scotty explained that by no means could his meager stipend ever have paid for the place. "My gran died about five years ago and left me a bit of cash," he said. "I kept it socked away for a rainy day, which eventually came." Jim surveyed the small, dank room. There were a few stray posters on the wall, musicians and sports teams with no apparent relation to one another. The floors were sticky, the bathrooms beyond questionable. Jim took to holding it and running to the bodega down the block on his breaks.

"She's not much, but she's mine," Scotty sighed, sounding almost fatherly. Jim wasn't sure dining establishments were typically gendered female, but he didn't have the heart to say anything, so he just clapped Scotty on the back and returned to his post behind the counter.

It was a Thursday, still early, so the room was a quarter full, mostly students hunched over laptops and a couple guys in suits nursing beers. There was someone holed up in a corner booth, maybe a regular, maybe a drunk, Jim couldn't tell. He appeared to be scribbling in a notebook, a glass of water sitting untouched at his elbow.

"It's actually pretty quiet a lot of the time," said a voice beside Jim. He glanced sideways to see Uhura drying a glass. "And college students are the worst, but most of the really crazy stuff happens in the actual bars. These guys just take up table space for hours and strew French fries all over the place."

"You go here for undergrad?"
"Columbia? No way. Couldn't have afforded it. Shit, I can barely afford it now. My family's from Nairobi originally, but my parents split and my dad moved to the States. I went to college over here."

"What are you studying, anyway?"

"Linguistics."

"So you're African?" She nodded, slowly, as if Jim were a small child.

"Is that why you don't let me call you by your first name? Is it, like, a cultural thing?"

She shot him a look that was equal parts pity and annoyance. "Did you seriously just ask me that? No. It is not 'a cultural thing'." She gave a little shake of her head and gratefully met the eye of one of the suits, who brandished his empty bottle in her direction.

"It's because she doesn't like you," said another of the regulars. Jim thought his name was Gary.

"But you just met me!" Jim called as she moved off down the bar.

It was a slow night, which Jim found surprising. Apparently midterms were the following week, and Columbia students took their work seriously. The students that were there committed Uhura's cardinal sin of ordering the cheapest side order on the menu and drinking endless free refills on coffee. Jim supposed that there'd been students at Iowa that were similarly diligent, but he hadn't met them.

After prepping an entire night's worth of lemons and limes, hauling a keg and several bags of premium-roast coffee beans up from the basement, and reorganizing Scotty's meager wine selection by vintage, it was still only ten o'clock. The initially sparse population had further dwindled to about seven people: a few tables chatting quietly, and that guy in the back. He was still bent over whatever it was he was working on, and he'd had maybe three sips of his drink. Not that Jim had been watching or anything.

But there was no way that beer wasn't warm right now, so as a lover of alcohol and a man dedicated to his craft (even if that craft wasn't strictly bartending), Jim felt obligated to ask him if he needed anything else. Also, he was bored, and for an expert on languages Uhura wasn't the best conversationalist, which Jim tried and failed not to take personally.

The man looked up at Jim's approach. The first thing Jim noticed was his eyes. They were brown, and he wore a pair of wire-rimmed glasses that did a bad job of disguising their deep set and the dark circles beneath them. His face had a greenish cast to it, and he looked faintly ghoulish in the dim light of the bar. Dark hair curled over his ears; the look might have been cool on someone else, but he just looked like he badly needed a haircut. It was actually sort of endearing.

Jim wasn't sure why his mouth was so dry.

"So…all-nighter?"

The man seemed surprised to be spoken to. "Pardon?"

"You look like you're working hard. And you look tired."

The man opened his mouth and shut it again, apparently constructing a reply.

"I have frequented this establishment on a regular basis for the past three-point…ah, since the beginning of the…semester. This is the first time a member of staff has engaged me in conversation."
"Oh. Well, I'm new."

"Indeed." He looked up at Jim expectantly. Jim could practically see him calculating the seconds he was wasting 'engaging in conversation'.

"I didn't mean to bother you. I just noticed you'd been working on that for awhile and wanted to see if you needed a refill. More ice or something." He indicated the mostly-full water glass at the man's elbow. The stranger raised an eyebrow.

"Thank you. If it is not too much trouble, I would like to order a…I have difficulty recalling the name. A child film actress from early in the twentieth century?"

"A Shirley Temple?" Jim supplied. You want me to bring you a Shirley Temple?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Jim felt strangely relieved to be able to do something for this man other than stand here and distract him from whatever it was he was working on.

"Okay, great, so one Shirley Temple. Did you have a tab, or…"

The man pushed a neatly folded bill across the table. "I believe this is more than the beverage costs. It is not necessary to return the extra currency."

Keep the change, Jim translated. Columbia kids were weird, obviously. Back at the bar, he opened the register, unfolding the money. A twenty.

He made the drink, taking care to get the ratio right. Sweet enough, not too sweet. The grenadine unfurled in the clear soda like a flower. He wiped the moisture gently from the outside of the glass and carried it to the table. The man glanced up from his work again. "Thank you," he said tonelessly.

"I gave you extra cherries," said Jim. "When I was a kid, I always asked for extra cherries."

He was aware of the back booth for the rest of the night. He knew the man wasn't watching him, but he felt an odd prickle at the back of his neck anyway. He spent the rest of his shift studiously not-looking, and when he finally indulged himself and glanced back to the corner, he found the man was gone.

On his days off, he walked. He walked through the park to the Met as the temperature dropped and the leaves changed. The wet grass squeaked beneath his fee and the steps were slippery. He slapped a quarter on the counter at the admission desk and smiled apologetically at the clerk. Twenty dollars was the suggested donation.

He walked through the turnstile, past the gift shop, and let the museum swallow him up. The creamy stone floors shone softly, patches of blurrily-reflected paintings dabbing them with the occasional burst of color. Jim's footsteps echoed in the hallways, and in the brief moments in which he couldn't see anyone else around, he imagined he strolled through the halls of his own personal collection.

He usually started in the Modern galleries and fanned out. Today there was a group of school kids in front of Autumn Rhythm, milling and whispering. They dove, giggled, veered too close. They gave the guards heart palpitations and made Jim nervous by proxy. He turned his back on a spaceship-smooth Brancusi and walked back the way he came. He'd find some Byzantine textiles or something. Somewhere quiet.
Jim liked having jobs that didn't require a lot of thinking outside of work hours. The consulting job had been that way. Hell, it hadn't required a whole ton of coherent thought during the workday, either. And the bar? It was the same way. Jim had fallen into a role there pretty quickly. In fact, he was beginning to believe that Scotty had hired him for the sole purpose of acting as Uhura's foil. She was the hot, surly, untouchable one and he was…nice. Accessible. Ready with a smile. It was easier that way, Jim thought, and besides, in this city it usually came as a surprise.

It suited Jim, being surprising.

That's just what it had been when he left four years of stupid, small-town petty crime behind, put his head down, and got through Iowa State with a 3.8 GPA. When he announced that not only had he not majored in agriculture, or animal husbandry, or whatever would have enabled him to take over the floundering farm from Frank one day, but that he'd majored in art history, art history, for god's sake, surprise had been an understatement.

And the day he loaded up his truck, kissed his mother goodbye, and drove east? That day, Winona and Frank hadn't been so much surprised as struck dumb.

***

Before Jim knew it, it was November. On a rainy Tuesday morning, he woke up blissfully late and logged into his email account to find two messages of note. One was an extremely incriminating photograph of Jim from an especially debauched night at Gaila's, threatening immediate distribution to the entirety of her address book if Jim didn't agree to buy her a drink and fill her in on the new job. The other was from his mother.

The noise Jim made must have been louder and more strangled than intended, because before long McCoy leaned around the doorframe, rubbing his eyes.

"What in the ever-loving fuck are you doing sounding like a dying cat at…what time is it, anyway?"

"It's 10:00. And my mom sent me an email."

"Ah. I guess it's November already, huh?"

"Yeah. Some people have pumpkins or falling leaves or, I don't know, crisp autumn air to remind them the holidays are fast approaching. I have a one-woman email marketing campaign."

"Well, not just the one woman, right? Didn't your sister-in-law get involved last year?"

Jim made the dying cat sound again. "I don't know why they think I'll listen to Aurelan. I think they think I'll be polite because we're not actually related."

"So you're rude to her?"

"Of course I'm not rude, Bones. I just delete her emails without writing back."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "But your stepdad--Frank--he's out of the picture now, right? So what's keeping you now?"

"Life is just full of mysteries, isn't it, Bones?" Jim said brightly. "So! How're things with Christine?"
McCoy didn't look any less chagrined at the change of subject, but he slid down the wall and came to rest comfortably on the floor as if settling in. "Things are pretty damn good, Jimmy. And I'll leave it at that."

"Ha. What, McCoys don't kiss and tell?" He received a glower in return.

"Something like that. Anyway, I'm bringing her lunch today."

"Wow, venturing into the heart of darkness on your first day off in two weeks? Must be love." He dodged an incoming pillow.

The first thing Jim noticed when he got to work that night was the dark-haired man hunched in the back booth. Humming to himself, he grabbed a tumbler from the shelf and set about making a perfect Shirley Temple, extra cherries. He delivered it to the booth with a smile. The man rewarded him with a blank, appraising stare.

"I did not order this," he said in a clipped tone.

"I know," replied Jim. "It's on the house."

The man gave him a long hard look that made Jim patently uncomfortable, like he was conducting a cost-benefit analysis on the merits of accepting the drink. Finally, he nodded carefully, and Jim slid the glass across the table. It left a dark streak of moisture on the old wood.

"Jim, get a coaster! Were you raised in a barn?" Scotty tossed a cardstock disc at him on his way down to the stockroom. He'd found a special online somewhere and had several thousand promotional coasters printed up with the bar's logo, a drunk-looking owl with bulging eyes. Jim caught the coaster neatly and slapped it down on the tabletop.

"There you are. Wasn't so hard, then, was it? Hiya, Spock," Scotty called over his shoulder. The other man blanched a little, as if uncomfortable hearing himself called by name.

It was an opportunity, and Jim wasted no time in seizing it.

"Spock, huh? Interesting name."

"It is…a family name."

"You don't happen to be related to that famous pediatrician, do you? My mom swore by his books, and--"

Spock cut him off in a tone that indicated Jim was not the first, or even the fiftieth, person to ask the question. "No relation."

"Okay. Do you have a first name?"

Silence.

"Okay. Never mind. So, what are you in here working on, Mr. Spock?" Jim felt the sudden, inexplicable desire to get under this guy's skin. It was always the stiffness who were the most fun to undo completely. He'd had a lot of practice over the years.

"It is…classified."

"Classified? I didn't know homework generally warranted a security clearance."
Spock sat up straighter, if that was even possible. "Do you habitually harass the clientele at this establishment?"

"Habitually? Not really. But I haven't been working here that long." Jim grinned at him obnoxiously. "Well, I'll let you get back to your secret project. Let me know if you need a refill."

Spock raised his glass and took a careful sip of Shirley Temple. It was probably a ploy to avoid further discussion.

After that, Jim paid a lot more attention to Mr. Spock. He took to asking around. Uhura seemed disinclined to answer him on principle, but as it turned out, she didn't know very much at all.

"He's been coming in since the end of August, I think? Scotty knows him somehow, some physics connection, maybe. I don't know, he's quiet and polite and he pays his tab. That's all that matters to me." With that, she turned back to a wheedling blonde who was evidently concerned with the number of calories in a shot of rum. "Look, I can give you Diet Coke, but there's no nutritional information on this bottle of Bacardi," Uhura said with a grimace. The girl looked placated. Jim, however, was far from it.

"Spock, huh? Why are you so interested in Spock?" Scotty asked.

It was 1:45 and the last patron had straggled out fifteen minutes earlier. They had finished cleanup and were strewn around the room, sipping bottles of beer. Jim had cajoled Scotty into turning the grill back on and making him a grilled cheese. Uhura counted out tips, grinning triumphantly. Good take for a Wednesday, and Bacardi Girl had apparently appreciated her nutrition lesson.

"I don't know, maybe I'm trying to get to know my customers, Scotty. Isn't that what good wait staff do? Aren't we supposed to be a happy little family in here, where everybody knows your name?"

"This isn't Cheers, Kirk," Uhura said from her perch on the bar. "And if you have a crush on this guy, you could just come out and say so."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Nyota." She made a face. "Anyway. So this guy's into physics?"

Scotty tried unsuccessfully to stifle a look of amusement before continuing. "Yeah--he's…not from around here. He's in New York working on a project. It seems like some kind of international physics think-tank, and they use the labs at the university, but it's all very hush-hush. Not sure why, or what exactly they're working on, but I know Archer knows something about it. He was my advisor before…well, you know." Scotty didn't like to talk about his erstwhile academic career.

"You said he's not from the city. Do you know where he is from? He sounds like he learned English vocabulary from a thesaurus."

"Y'know, I knew a Dutch kid once who learned English exclusively from watching action movies," mused Scotty. "His vocabulary was pretty interesting."

Uhura rolled her eyes at this. "Seriously, you guys? He's a little stilted, but that's common for non-native speakers. English is a ridiculously hard language to learn, not to mention the fact that it's almost impossible to learn regional idioms by rote. He talks like someone who hasn't had a ton of practice conversing. It's probably part of why he's so quiet." She looked at Jim pointedly. "Or maybe he just doesn't like you."

Jim snorted at that, but as the days passed, he found himself dangerously close to accepting it as a possibility. Spock seemed genuinely put out by Jim's attempts at interaction, which begged the
question of why he continued them in the first place. Even Jim wasn't exactly sure. There was just something…riveting about Spock. He seemed out of place, as if someone had plucked him out of another century--somewhere in the distant past or future, Jim couldn't tell which--and plunked him down at a back booth. It was bizarre.

***

"I don't get it, man," Jim said between swigs of his beer. "I'm a good guy, right? I'm not a weirdo. He's the weirdo. Huge weirdo."

McCoy made a show of raising an eyebrow at Christine, who sat next to him on the couch. Jim threw a bottle cap at him. It bounced off Christine's knee and onto the floor.

"Jim, apologize to the lady." McCoy wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Sorry, Chris."

She smiled. "Not a problem, Jim. So, what makes you so interested in this guy, anyway? I mean, you're not a bad looking guy--Ow! What, I'm being honest!" She deflected McCoy's elbow.

"Don't do it, Christine, it'll just go to his head."

"As I was saying. You're not a bad-looking guy. I'm sure there are plenty of people you could pick up in that place if you wanted to."

"Geez, why is everyone so sure I'm after a hookup? First Scotty and now you two."

"Oh, I don't know, Jim, maybe because you haven't gone on a single date since you started working at the bar and mooning over this Spock character. What kind of name is that, anyway?"

"It's a family name. And for the last time, I'm not mooning, I'm interested."

"Sure you are. Interested in getting in his pants."

"So help me, Bones, I will pour this beer on your head."

If Jim felt a little flushed when he saw Spock at the bar the next night, it was only out of embarrassment for Bones at his ridiculous assertion that Jim had any sort of prurient interest in the man. After all, he was practically a stranger. Their interactions had been limited to Jim fetching Spock drinks and Spock fending off Jim's attempts at conversation.

And if he full-on blushed when he turned around to see Spock belly up to the bar right in front of him? Then that was just because it was so damn weird.

"Uh." Jim's mouth went completely dry. Spock raised an eyebrow querulously.

"I would like to inquire as to whether you carry a certain alcoholic beverage at this establishment."

"Um. Yes, sure. What are you looking for?"

"I would like a glass of port."
Port and Shirley Temples. Who was this guy?

"I'm not sure if we have any; college kids don't exactly have sophisticated palates. But I'll check, okay?"

"Thank you."

"Port, port, port," Jim muttered to himself, kneeling behind the bar. There was a long, glass-fronted cabinet running the length of the back wall. It was full of dusty bottles, Scotty's experiments in house-made flavored vodka, and ingredients picked up here and there to make obscure cocktails that no one ever ordered. He found what he was looking for between a bottle of chartreuse and something that claimed to be absinthe, although Jim was pretty sure that was illegal.

"Gotcha," Jim said, brandishing the bottle.

"It's seen better days, and I doubt this is the right glass, so let me know if it tastes okay." He poured out a measure into a wine glass.

"I have not actually indulged in port before," said Spock. "It is made for export in my…country of origin, but we do not typically consume it ourselves."

"So you're from Portugal?"

Spock proceeded as if Jim hadn't said a word. There was the mysterious stranger he knew and… well.

"What is the cost?" Spock indicated his overfull glass. Jim had no idea what an appropriate pour was for port, but let it not be said that Jim Kirk was stingy with alcohol.

Jim looked askance at the bottle. It had been sitting around for at least a decade, he was pretty sure.

"You know, I have no idea. But since this is an experiment for both of us, because I'm seriously questioning whether or not this is safe to drink, let's just call it one for science this time."

"I find it highly illogical that you should persist in providing me with food and drink without requiring payment," Spock said. "The goal of a business establishment is to make a financial profit, is it not?"

The fact of the matter was that Jim spent about half his tips on keeping Spock in Shirley Temples, but as he didn't have a good answer for why exactly that was, he decided to follow Spock's example and change the subject.

"So, how long have you been in the city?"

Spock looked uncomfortable again, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "I have been in New York for one year." He took a sip of port, and once again Jim got the impression that it was an effort to forestall further questions rather than a genuine desire to drink.

"How's the port?"

Spock swallowed. "It is…interesting." He looked at his hands, rubbing his index finger absently against a groove in the wood, worn shiny and smooth by time. He seemed disinclined to say anything else.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, then. Enjoy."
Spock was obviously a quiet drunk. At least, Jim assumed he must be drunk, because it was one-thirty in the morning and Spock had been putting away glass after glass of port since he’d first sidled up to the bar around eight. And he hadn't said a word after Jim's awkward attempt at engaging him in conversation. Abruptly, Spock stood up, apparently deciding it was time to call it a night. He removed a bill from his wallet, folded it neatly, and slid it across the bar. Then he picked up a shiny black briefcase Jim hadn't noticed before and walked out the door. For a drunk, thought Jim, he moved with surprising ease.

But then, the man seemed to move like a ghost all the time. Jim rarely saw him enter or leave the bar; he was always just there.

It was a quiet night. Uhura had begged off all week for some major end of semester project, and most of the students had moved their operations to the library. It was the week before Thanksgiving, and though it hadn't snowed yet, the air smelled of it. Jim had an inbox full of emails from Winona, Sam, and Aurelan and not one good excuse for why he wasn't planning on going home for the holidays. He was composing replies in his head as he knocked on the office door, waved goodbye to Scotty, and walked out onto the street. It was a wet, raw night, and Jim drew his coat around him as he made for the subway station.

He didn't make it very far, though, because there was someone sitting on the curb in front of the bar, and that someone was all too familiar.

"Spock?"

Spock didn't look up.

"You okay there? You should get up off the curb, one of these cars'll pull out and nail you. You want me to call you a cab?" Jim kneeled down next to Spock on the sidewalk. The concrete bit through his jeans; it was freezing. Spock's teeth were chattering.

"You're cold," Jim said. He laid a hand on Spock's shoulder, but the man shrugged away from the touch as if it burned.

"You excel at stating the obvious," Spock said in a low voice. He blinked into the neon glow of the bodega across the street. "The residual effects of port are fascinating."

"You're drunk," Jim said.

"Yes," Spock replied. "It is most unanticipated. I believed myself immune to the effects of alcohol. Such immunity is hereditary, from my father's side of the family. But it would appear that my mother's blood has won out." His mouth twitched in an approximation of a smile, as if he had just told a joke. On his face, the expression seemed out of place. Jim felt a frisson of fear run up his spine, but he couldn't say why.

"Do you know why I came to the bar tonight, Jim? Why I asked for the port?"

Jim shook his head. I don't know anything about you, he thought.

"I told you that port is manufactured in my country of origin," Spock continued. "I have never tasted it before, as I also told you. But I thought… I thought that were I to taste it here, now, it might taste like home. That is a ridiculous idea, isn't it?"

"Not so ridiculous. I used to do that with corn," Jim said quietly.

"Corn?" Spock raised an eyebrow at Jim.
"They talk about Iowa boys being corn-fed, you know?"

Spock evidently did not know, because he gave Jim another blank look.

"It's a stereotype, right, because we grow corn in Iowa. But I really did grow up on a farm, and we really did grow corn. Tall green fields, as far as the eye can see. They look like the ocean. But anyway, corn fresh off the stalk, in season? It's the sweetest thing you've ever eaten. Can't beat it. So when I moved out here I used to buy corn at the grocery store like every day, and I used to cook it up and put it on a plate with a big pat of butter on top, and think this, this will be the one that tastes like home. But it never did."

He patted Spock on the shoulder again before he could stop himself. Spock flinched, but didn't shy away this time.

"Truth is, grocery store corn pretty much sucks. Just like that dusty bottle of port. But I'm sure if you get Scotty some details he can source the good stuff for you. He's into things like that."

Spock looked sharply up at Jim then. "I do not believe that would be possible." He exhaled, his breath a silvery cloud in the cold. "I must go."

He rose shakily. Jim leapt up beside him, reaching out a hand to steady Spock, but he batted the hand away.

"Are you sure you can make it home okay? Let me walk you to the train."

"My apartment is within walking distance."

"Then let me walk you home."

Spock didn't respond, but turned and started off down the sidewalk. He didn't say anything when Jim followed, which Jim took as tacit agreement. He walked quickly, veering back and forth in a way that made Jim want to take hold of his arm to steady him.

They came to a stop in front of a nondescript building and Spock turned to face Jim. The streetlight overhead was on the verge of going out. It winked on and off schizophrenically, the odd lighting lending Spock's face a greenish cast.

"This is my building," he said.

"You're sure you're okay? You...you might not feel so hot tomorrow, if you've never been drunk before," Jim offered. "You want to drink a lot of water and take a couple aspirin before you fall asleep."

"Thank you," Spock said simply. He turned and went inside. Jim stood watching the door for a long time. The streetlight buzzed above him, an insistent whine, and finally went out.

***

Thanksgiving morning dawned clear and cold. By some miracle, McCoy had the day off, and Christine got off at noon. Jim bummed around the apartment with his phone on silent, avoiding the call from Winona that was sure to come. By three o'clock McCoy had had enough of whatever pathetic reality marathon Jim was watching on TV and insisted that it was Thanksgiving, Goddammit, and he was going to eat a goddamned turkey if he had to cook it himself. Jim dug
through a pile of paper on his desk and produced an invitation printed on lurid pink cardstock.

"Jimmy! You came! And you brought friends!"

"I did indeed. And--," he held up a can, "--I brought cranberry sauce. But before we come in, I have to go on record as saying they're in a monogamous relationship. Very monogamous. Uh, just those two, not the cranberry sauce."

"Aw, I won't hold it against you," said Gaila, laughing. She gestured wildly in the direction of the open door. "Come in, come in, it's freezing out here!" Christine nudged McCoy and smiled, and he grinned back. Jim caught her eye and she smiled at him too, a little sadly, Jim thought, although he couldn't imagine why.

A burst of light and warm air hit Jim as he stepped across the threshold into Gaila's apartment. He had to hand it to her. Somehow she crammed a fifth floor walkup in Brooklyn with enough cheer and hominess to make anyone thankful. Apparently the other guests agreed, because Gaila's Thanksgiving potluck was an annual occurrence, and every year it was jammed.

Jim barely had time to nod at McCoy before the little sea of people in the living room swept him into the kitchen. There was food stacked everywhere. Turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes—all the usual Thanksgiving suspects, but they were juxtaposed with a tray of tamales, some baklava, and a large tureen of neon pink borscht studded with tiny white potatoes and flotillas of sour cream. Jim took a little bit of everything and waded back through the living room to Gaila's tiny balcony.

Brooklyn lay before him in the dying light. An old woman was walking a little black dog in the park across the street, but otherwise the neighborhood lay still, dormant. Jim didn't like that about holidays. It's quiet...too quiet, he thought.

"Jim?" came a tentative voice from the doorway behind him.

"Spock? Hey!" Jim tried and failed to school his features into matching the other man's nonchalant look. "How'd you end up all the way down here?"

"I met Nyota and Mr. Scott while procuring groceries yesterday evening, and they inquired as to my plans for this afternoon."

"Nyota? Damn. She lets everyone call her that but me."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. So they dragged you to Gaila's Thanksgiving party. Well, it's a cultural experience worth writing home about, I'll give it that. Did you try the borscht?"

"That was the fluorescent pink soup? Indeed. It is similar to a dish my mother often prepares. I have not had it for quite some time."

"So you got that taste of home after all," Jim said. Spock shifted uncomfortably and drew his coat around him. He seemed to be cold more often than not. Come to think of it, Jim couldn't recall a time when he'd seen Spock without the black knit cap he wore pulled down around his ears.

He suddenly looked very small and alone, silhouetted against the open doorway, the fray inside the apartment. Jim had the urge to reach out and touch him. He spoke instead.

"It's crazy in there. Do you want to go somewhere else?"
Spock hesitated for a long moment, and the words hung in the air between them.

"Yes."

Jim felt a grin spread across his face, unbidden. "Awesome. Just give me a second and I'll get my coat."

It seemed to take Jim a solid ten minutes to weave through the press of people in the living room, extricating himself from almost as many conversations as politely as he could. He retrieved his coat from the pile of outer layers and purses on Gaila's bed, and made his way back to the balcony. Halfway through his return trip he found himself pressed up against McCoy, his friend's plate of pumpkin pie shoved indelicately under Jim's nose.

"So, I ran into Spock. I think we're going to get out of here," he said. Bones raised an eyebrow in a disconcertingly Spock-like gesture. "Shut up" Jim said in response. Bones spread his hands in an "I didn't say anything" gesture and melted back into the crowd.

When Jim got back to the balcony, the sliding glass door was neatly shut, and Spock was nowhere to be found. Jim stood awkwardly by the door for five minutes, ten, fifteen. When it became apparent that Spock wasn't coming back, Jim sighed heavily, admitted defeat, and consoled himself with an overlarge piece of pie.

***

Spock wasn't at the bar the next night, or the night after that. The night after that, Jim was off, and he couldn't think of a good excuse to ask Scotty or Uhura if they'd seen him. No, he decided, he had to chalk it up to a good old-fashioned brush off and leave it at that. Whatever it was that was so repulsive about the idea of spending time with him, he'd probably never know, because Spock continued to stay away.

"Social awkwardness," offered McCoy, stabbing his fork at the air to make his point. "He got freaked out."

"Maybe he's just straight," said Christine. "What? Is that so weird?"

"Come on, Chris, unless he's from another planet, he had to have known that Jim was asking him out."

"I was not asking him out. Not really, at least."

After dinner, McCoy got up to walk Christine to the train. He clapped Jim on the shoulder as he left. "Ah well. Move on, kid."

At the beginning of December, he let Gaila set him up with an artist friend of hers. She described him with a wink as tall, dark, and handsome, and Jim rolled his eyes at her but secretly decided the tall and dark part sounded promising. Unfortunately, the guy talked nonstop about the new 'project space' he was planning to open in Red Hook and seemed primarily interested in finding financial backing. Jim realized that, aside from the occasional excursion to the Met, he hadn't looked at art in months, and thinking about that was just depressing. After the date and one too many overpriced martinis he came home and dug his honors thesis out from a dusty file folder. He started at the title page for a long time and reread his advisor's enthusiastic evaluation, then typed a few lines in Word
before shutting down his laptop and tossing the sheaf of papers back from whence it came.

On December 22nd, his last day of work before Christmas, he woke up early and took a walk through the park, his boots crunching in the frosty grass. He drank a cup of coffee on the steps of the Met before it opened. The modern galleries were deserted now, school out, too early for tourists. Jim sat on a bench across from Autumn Rhythm again and fished a pen out of his pocket. He rummaged in his bag for some paper, and doodled on the front of an envelope. When he was done, he looked down at a man's profile peeking cautiously out from behind the stamp.

He crumpled the envelope, made his way home, and opened his laptop.

It still hadn't snowed in New York yet, but Jim's flight into Iowa City on Christmas Eve was the last one to make it in before the airport shut down. His cab pulled out of the parking lot under a leaden sky. It felt like an omen. They beat the snow into Riverside, but just barely, and as they pulled up the long, winding drive it began to fall in fat flakes. The cab pulled in next to Sam's rusty truck. Jim paid, grabbed his duffel, and ran up to the house through a slow-motion deluge of white.

Winona stopped dead with the door half-open. She was drying her hands with a reindeer-print dishtowel, calling something back over her shoulder into the house, and then she turned and whatever else she'd been about to say died in her throat.

"Hey, Mom."

She attacked him with the dishtowel. "Goddamn you, Jimmy, you never, ever call!" she half-yelled between swats. Somehow the attack became a hug, and Jim found himself swallowing past a sizeable and unforeseen lump as he returned it, her head tucked under his chin.

And he smiled. That was unexpected. He smiled through dinner; through Sam's ribbing about how he was a city guy now, and too good for Iowa; through Winona's mother-hen routine.

Jim shrugged. He couldn't explain why, but the angry itch that usually crept over him the second he walked through this door was strangely absent. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, maybe, he thought.

He got up from the table and stretched. It was late. Aurelan had herded the kids to bed an hour ago. Sam and Winona started a tipsy game of cards that rapidly devolved into Go Fish. His face was flushed and there was a syrupy taste in the back of his throat. "I'm beat," he said. "Too much wine."

Winona nodded, smiling. "The boys are in your old room," she said apologetically. "But I've fixed up the attic, so we'll put you up there. You'll like it, Jimmy, it's nice and quiet."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm sure it'll be great."

As it turned out, "fixing up the attic" meant clearing out a little canyon in the mountain range of boxes Winona kept up there. It was just large enough for a full-size mattress. The tiny, square window wouldn't shut all the way, and it was drafty as hell. But the mattress was made up neatly, with an extra quilt folded at the foot, and Jim smelled snow and cedar as he drifted off.

He woke early. It was still mostly dark outside, the cold, silvery light of winter dawn creeping up over the horizon. Jim slid out of bed and dressed in the shadows. Leaving the quilt in a rumpled pile on the mattress, he descended the attic stairs slowly, wincing at every creak.

Once downstairs, he started a pot of coffee, then shrugged into his coat and stepped out onto the porch. The storm had quieted overnight, leaving a pristine expanse of white in its wake. The cars looked like generously iced cakes, thick layers of snow on every surface. It was dead quiet. Jim
stood watching a deer foraging out behind the barn. The door groaned behind him as it opened, and the deer bounded away.

His mother pressed a mug of coffee into his hand. "Merry Christmas," she said quietly.

"You too," Jim replied.

They stood in silence for a long moment, watching as the wind sent a little flurry of accumulated snow down from the trees lining the driveway.

"Your father and I spent our first Christmas all by ourselves in this house," Winona said at last. "There was this incredible storm forecast, so we told everyone we didn't want to risk driving, but it was just an excuse. Christmas morning was just like this, so still, and we stood out here on the porch and talked about how much trouble we were going to be in, and we took the phone off the hook and went back to bed and stayed there all day."

She swallowed and reached for Jim's hand.

"After he…afterwards. I wasn't here for Christmas for a long time. But now it feels right, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it does."

"I'm glad you came back, Jimmy. It's been too long. The kids miss you."

"Mom, Peter hasn't seen me since he was two, and George wasn't even born yet."

"Well, anyway. We all miss you."

"I think Sam just misses giving me shit."

"Jim, he's your brother, and you know he loves you. It's been hard, you know. Crop yield's been bad; it's hard to compete with the big factory farms. That takes its toll. And I think we all thought we were going to have you here to help, and it's been hard to get over that."

"Mom, it's been four years."

There was a muffled bang from inside the house, and the sound of Sam yelling.

"Sounds like Christmas morning," Jim said, grateful for the disruption.

Winona wiped at her eyes. "Sure does. I'll go get breakfast going."

It wasn't until much later that day --after he'd eaten way too much turkey and too many Christmas cookies and was nearly catatonic on the oversized armchair in the corner of the living room-- that Jim let himself think about Spock. Not that there was much to think about: he'd cornered Uhura in the kitchen after Spock's disappearance from the Thanksgiving party, but she shrugged and apologized for not knowing where he'd gone. She'd been polite for a change, but maybe she was just drunk, Jim reasoned. He wasn't sure what it was about him lately that seemed to garner so many sympathetic looks from the women he knew. It was like Christine, Gaila, and Uhura had weekly conference calls about how pathetic he was or something.

He wondered where Spock was right now. He remembered the night in front of the bar, how lost he'd seemed, and hoped that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he felt better than he had that night.

He managed half a turkey sandwich for dinner and washed it down with a beer. Then Sam and
Winona dragged out a Scrabble board, and Jim rolled his eyes at Aurelan across the table. He got the impression that this was something of a Christmas tradition, and Sam's wife looked grateful to have someone else there for moral support. He was right.

"Thank god you're here," she said, sotto voce. "They're so competitive it's scary. Last time we played I thought Sam was going to throw the dictionary at her."

"Oh, this is nothing," Jim said, rolling his eyes. "You're lucky we're not playing Pictionary. This one time, I was on Sam's team, and—"

"Ahem," broke in Winona. "You two? Care to draw letters so we can get this show on the road?"

Aurelan was right. Sam, Winona, and Scrabble were a dangerous combination, and adding alcohol to the equation was ill-advised at best. The game dissolved rapidly after Jim played "baleen" and Sam challenged.

"No way, man, no way that's a word."

"Sam, whales. It's how whales eat. They're like giant teeth, kind of, and they strain plankton through it, and..." he made a weird swooping motion in approximation of a feeding whale, and Sam cracked up laughing. Beer spurted out his nose and onto the board, and Aurelan seized the opportunity to pause the game in the name of "disinfecting" it. She swept off the letters gingerly and headed into the kitchen. Winona followed her.

Sam recovered and took another sip of beer. Swallowing, he fixed Jim with a knowing look. "So, Jimmy, how's life in the Big Apple treating you?"

"Can't complain."

"Oh yeah? Mom said you were back tending bar again. Didn't know you had to move so far away to take a job you had when you were 17," Sam drawled back.

"You know, I'm pretty sure tending bar under 21 is illegal in Iowa," Jim said with false brightness. "I guess dating the cocktail waitress helped." Don't engage, he thought. Just don't engage.

But Sam had a special knack for pushing Jim's buttons, probably because he'd gotten so much practice over the years. "What happened to your fancy office job? Oh, that's right, you got fired, didn't you?"

"Laid off," Jim said through gritted teeth.

"Whatever," said Sam. "I don't know why you're wasting your time in that bullshit city when you could be here helping your family, doing real work. If Dad could see you—"

"That's it," Jim said, pushing his back his chair. "I'm done. I haven't had nearly enough to drink to deal with you invoking Dad to make your argument for you. I'm going to bed."

He took the stairs two at a time. He paused on the rickety attic ladder, listening to Winona shrilly admonishing Sam, then hauled himself up and sat heavily on the mattress.

He sat until his pulse slowed, until he stopped wanting to break something. He leaned back against the wall and sighed. He'd been cold up here before, but now he unbuttoned his collar. Icy air filtered in through the partially open window and raised the hairs on the back of Jim's neck.

He sat until he saw the box.
It was a cardboard moving box, just like the rest, warped and lumpy with age. He noticed it because of the label. Winona was a compulsive organizer, and the year they bought her the label maker for her birthday was a banner one. But before she'd taken to neatly printing the contents of her craft bins and jam jars in laminated block capitals, she'd stuck handwritten labels on everything. She always used the same ones, white with a navy blue border. He thought she got them free from some catalog or other.

The one on this box read George, A.F., 78-81.

He got up, ducking away from the low ceiling, and crossed the room to the box. He extricated it from its pile and wiped away a prodigious coating of dust. The box was sealed with tape, but the years had rendered it brittle and worn away the adhesive so the tape flaked off with a touch.

Inside were pictures. Jim knew his mother kept photographs of his father. Most of them were in the thick albums on the topmost bookshelf in the living room. He and Sam spent hours with those albums once, cradling the faux leather and paging through shots of the people who would one day be their parents. The albums were carefully curated: here was his mother frosting a cake. There was his father holding a can of beer, smiling a frozen smile. The pictures in the box were pictures Jim had never seen before.

There were planes. No, jets, and squat hangers in a line along a western horizon, dun colored mountains rising in the background. "Academy graduation banquet, '78" was written on the back of a shot of his father looking stiff in Mess Dress, one arm around his mother. He recognized Winona's handwriting.

The next picture made him stop. It was something about their faces. Most of the other group shots were like the ones in the albums, taken at birthday parties or barbecues, their subjects laughing or smiling. These men--and they were all men, all fifteen of them--there was something dark behind their eyes, a deeply etched sense of tension. They looked like they were watching a storm blow in and waiting for it to hit.

George Kirk Senior was standing in the back row, second from the left. He stared straight at the camera and there was something about the set of his jaw that said, Let's get this over with and get back to work. His hand rested lightly on the shoulder of the man in front of him. The man was thin, almost gaunt, and he needed a haircut. He reminded Jim of someone, but he couldn't think whom. He flipped the photo over. Written in smudged ballpoint pen were the words "C.C. Project, Summer 1981".

The summer before he died, Jim thought.

He looked through the rest of the pictures, but there weren't any more of the stern group of men. Without really knowing why, Jim leaned over to his backpack and dug for the novel he'd brought to read on the plane. He opened the book to the middle and placed the photograph carefully inside.

His cab came early the next morning. The wheels crunched on the gravel of the driveway and the brakes squealed in protest as the driver parked. He smoked a cigarette with the window cracked and watched expressionlessly as Winona clung to Jim in a tearful hug.

"Are you sure you can't stay another day?"

"I've got to get back. Work," he explained lamely.

"All right," she sighed. "Well, I made you a couple sandwiches for the plane, white meat the way you like."
He smiled, taking the tinfoil packet. "Thanks, Mom."

The cab driver, whose name was also Jim, nursed his cigarette halfway to the airport. He drove with one hand on the wheel and the other pressed up to the frosted glass, column of ash dangling precipitously. He coughed.

"Good visit?"

"Yeah, okay, I guess."

"I remember you, you know," the other Jim said.

Jim's mouth went dry. It was an old feeling, that creeping dread of recognition. He swallowed. "And here they told me they took that Wanted poster down."

"You're that kid that drove the car into the quarry." Other Jim hooted with laughter. "Took 'em a week to haul that thing up out of there."

Jim sighed. "Yeah," he said. "You got me."

He let himself in to the apartment late in the afternoon to find McCoy and Christine asleep on the couch in the glow of a rosemary bush wrapped in Christmas lights. The end credits of It's A Wonderful Life were rolling on the television.

Jim dumped his stuff on the bed, feeling at loose ends. He removed the stolen photograph from his paperback and wedged it into a frame on his desk over a picture of himself and McCoy on Halloween. His father stared out at him. Time to go back to work, his eyes said.

Jim wasn't on shift until the night after next, but he took a shower, ate a bowl of cereal, and went in anyway. He found Uhura balefully eyeing the window full of assorted holiday decorations.

"Didn't you go home for the holidays?" he asked her.

"Are you kidding? Ticket prices are insane. Didn't you go home to America's Heartland, or wherever it is you're from?"

"Iowa, thanks. And yeah, I did. But I'm back."

"Obviously. Well, as you can imagine, it's pretty slow in here. Wanna help me get some of this crap down? If it's not boxed up soon Monty will decide it gives the place atmosphere and want to leave it up permanently." She grabbed the end of a strip of tinsel and yanked it free.

"Is that why there's a giant rubber bat in the men's room?" He grabbed the Tupperware tub she offered him and started plucking ornaments off the slightly lopsided fake tree standing at the corner of the bar.

"So, 'Monty', huh? When did you two get so cozy?" He thought back to Spock's story about running into them before Gaila's party.

She ignored him. If the next ornament she threw into the tub veered disturbingly close to his head, he was sure it was purely coincidental.

Jim would have been lying to himself if he didn't admit that he'd come in early because of Spock. Partially. Okay, more than partially, he thought to himself as the clock above the bar struck midnight. Spock was conspicuous in his absence, and Jim felt correspondingly deflated.
"He hasn't been in," Uhura said, sidling up next to him and leaning heavily on her elbows.

"Oh, you're talking to me now?"

She rolled her eyes. "Taking pity. Sitting over there watching you stare at the door with moony eyes is too depressing."

"Why the hell does everyone thing I'm mooning? What does that even mean? Oh, and I have no idea who you're talking about, by the way."

Uhura snorted. "Yeah, right. And mooning means either you've given things a shot and failed miserably, or you can't muster the balls to give things a shot and you're torturing yourself over it."

"It could be neither, you know," he said.

"How's that?"

"What if I kind of gave things a shot, but I'm not sure whether or not I failed miserably?"

She looked at the clock, looked around the empty room, and then leaned down and grabbed two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator. She popped the tops, handed one to Jim, and took a long sip of the other. "Okay," she said, swallowing. "I'm going to need more details. And keep in mind I'm only doing this out of pity. Don't go getting any misguided ideas about our awesome bromance or whatever."

"Fine. No ideas, we aren't friends. Got it. So remember when I came up to you at the Thanksgiving party?"

"Mmm hmm." She took another sip of her beer.

"Well, about fifteen minutes before that I ran into Spock out on the balcony and asked him if he wanted to go someplace else. He seemed a little…overwhelmed by the whole thing. So he says yes, I go get my coat, and when I come back he's vanished into thin air."

She was quiet for a minute, considering. "Sounds to me like you freaked him out," she said. "Look, I don't know him. I know he lives in the neighborhood, is some kind of physics wunderkind, and drinks Shirley Temples when he's feeling decadent and mineral water the rest of the time. Oh, also, he's a vegetarian, but I only know that because I tried to offer him the Thursday special once." The Thursday special was a BLT.

"Anyway, that's about it. But I do know that in all the time he's been coming in here, I've never seen him interact with another person any more than he absolutely needs to. Except for you."

Jim considered that for a minute, taking a swig of his own beer. "So is that your version of 'go get 'em, Tiger'?"

"I'm just saying, I think there's probably a reason he took off."

"Even if there is, the likelihood of me ever finding out what it is is slim to none. Because he's apparently stopped patronizing this establishment."

Uhura didn't respond to that. He looked over at her. "What?" he asked at the slightly guilty look on her face. "What?"

"No, he hasn't," she said. "Not entirely. He was gone for a while, yeah. But he came back right
before Christmas, on your off day."

"Uhura, wanna switch shifts tomorrow?"

She sighed. "Sure, Jim."

"Thank you! What, no high five?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, okay, I see how it is."

He excused himself to wipe down the back tables. He thought he heard her laughing to herself as he went.

***

If Spock was surprised by Jim's presence at the bar the following night, he didn't show it. He paused for a beat, then continued to his back booth a produced a slim laptop from his briefcase. He did not order anything to eat or drink. Jim wondered if Uhura ever hassled him for it the way she did the college kids. Somehow, he doubted it.

He wondered if Spock was watching him. He refused to look. Instead, he made a show of diligently cleaning a shelf's worth of glasses and prepping the bar back for the night. He continued cutting limes and lemons, inhaling the tang of citrus, even as a shadow fell across the counter in front of him and he felt a prickling sensation at the crown of his head. When he finished the last lime, he looked up.

"Can I help you?"

Spock looked…well, not contrite, exactly. He looked as blank as he always looked, but tonight he had a tentative way about him, as if he was anticipating a loud noise.

"A bottle of mineral water, please."

Not feeling decadent today, then.

"Sure, that'll be $2.75."

Spock handed him three dollars and Jim opened the register and slid a quarter across the bar to him. Spock reached out for it with long fingers, tracing the perimeter of the coin.

"Are you…well?" he asked.

"I'm okay," he said. "It's the holidays, right? I'm merry."

Spock looked at him quizzically. "You returned home," he said. It wasn't a question. Jim wondered if Uhura had been less than forthcoming about her interactions with Spock.

He took his time answering, feeling a little like a petulant kid. He took a glass from behind the bar, filled it with ice, then unscrewed Spock's bottle of water. The carbonation hissed to the top and threatened to bubble over. "Lime?" he asked Spock. He shook his head.
"So yeah, I went home."

"Where is home?"

"Riverside, Iowa. It's just outside Iowa City."

Spock nodded. "Was it… cold there?"

"Colder than New York. We get these crazy blizzards and everything just kind of grinds to a halt, and it's so quiet…you'd hate it."

"What leads you to believe I would hate it?"

"You just seem…cold a lot. Your hat," he offered, gesturing at Spock's head. "And your coat."

Most people stripped their layers off and made use of the coat rack near the door. Spock, in contrast, had been inside for the better part of two hours and was still wrapped in the same charcoal gray wool pea coat he wore every time Jim saw him. Even in October, when the lows were in the high forties at the coolest.

"Ah," Spock said, glancing at the hand not teasing the quarter. It was deep in a pocket. "You are correct," he said grudgingly, as if he were conceding something to Jim. "I prefer higher ambient temperatures."

"My mom used to say 'cold hands, warm heart'," Jim said without thinking. He felt color rise in his cheeks as he realized how that sounded. "Uh, I mean…"

Spock changed the subject. "Nyota tells me there is a large celebration planned here in three days' time?"

"Oh, right. New Year's Eve. Columbia's still closed for the holidays, so Scotty says it ends up being mostly friends and some neighborhood people. It's nice, means we don't really have to work. You should come. I mean, I doubt you'll be able to get much work done, but it'll be fun anyway."

Spock shook his head minutely. "I have already attended one such event. I believe you called it a 'cultural experience'? In any case, I have concluded that one such experience in the course of a lifetime was quite enough."

Jim realized Spock was talking about the Thanksgiving party. Well, here was his in, if he wanted it. He really, really hoped Uhura was right. He took a deep breath.

"Spock, about the party, I…"

And at that moment, a particularly large group came in, letting in a blast of cold and chattering loudly about the freezing temperatures and how good it felt inside and how they were going to need to get plenty drunk to be warm enough to walk home.

In the time it took for Jim to look over at the door and register the entrance of the crowd, then back to Spock, the other man had taken his glass of water and returned to his table. He'd left the quarter.

"God dammit," muttered Jim to himself. Irritated, he took the group's orders and set about making eight Irish coffees. At this point, he thought, it might occur to most people that it was time to give up. Social awkwardness, avoidance, discomfort in the presence of awesomeness of this magnitude--whatever the reason, it was obvious that Spock wanted nothing to do with him. So why did he care? It was a nagging feeling, like a piece of fabric catching on a nail. There was something about this
man, something in the quiet diligence he projected, in the air of mystery that hung about him. There were things to know about Spock, Jim was sure of it. More sure than he'd been about anything in a long time. So if Spock wanted to reject him out of hand, then fine. But he'd have to come out and say it. No more of this lurking around in corners and leaving shitty tips. He palmed the quarter. His hands were sweaty and he smelled the metallic scent of the coin.

He served the coffees and wiped his hands on his jeans. Then he walked straight back to Spock's table and slapped the quarter down next to Spock's laptop.

Spock closed the computer. "I do not need change," he said, without looking up.

"And I don't need your 25 cents," Jim said. "Look, I had something to say before, and you snuck off before I could say it. So I'm just going to." Spock turned and looked up at him then, face perfectly and infuriatingly blank. There was a single strand of Christmas lights left above the bar in Uhura's concession to the 'holiday spirit', and they twinkled undeterred in Spock's glasses. It made the moment seem heady and magical.

"I'm…I want to know you. I guess you could say I'm…interested. In you. And I might be coming on too strong or freaking you out or being culturally insensitive or whatever, but it's just the way I am. So I just wanted to ask you to give me one night. Hang out with me for one night, and if it sucks and it's awkward and you couldn't care less about ever seeing me again, then fine. Mea culpa, I'll leave you alone. Deal?" God, he probably sounded crazy. He was also probably going to get fired, because this was totally inappropriate.

For his part, Spock looked like someone had just dumped very cold water over his head. Jim saw his Adams' apple bob up and down in a reflex that might have indicated nerves on someone else, but this was Spock, so there was really no telling.

"That would be acceptable," Spock said finally.

"Wait, what? Oh. Well. Great! That's…that's great." He hadn't really thought much further than Spock's inevitable rejection and his subsequent removal from the premises, but Jim Kirk was nothing if not quick on his feet.

"How about New Year's Eve? I mean, if you're free?"

"I am available," said Spock. "May I suggest we meet at my apartment?"

Jim didn't bother repressing his grin. "Sounds great," he said. "Eight o'clock okay with you?"

Spock nodded. "I trust you recall my address?"

Jim nodded back. The incongruity of drunk Spock had seared that night into his brain.

"Yep, I do. I'll bring the champagne." He sighed as the tension drained out of him, replaced with a disturbingly warm and fuzzy feeling. "Okay, duty calls," he said, indicating the bar. "I'll see you on the 31st at eight. It's a date." He slapped the table in emphasis and Spock flinched, raising an eyebrow at Jim's retreating back.

***
"Jim, so help me God, if you don't get the hell out of that bathroom and quit preening right now, I'm going to come in there and shoot you up with a tranquilizer that'll knock you on your ass until next Tuesday, not to mention put you out of commission for your little love connection. Now unlock this goddamn door!"


"Well, he's not the only one trying to look half decent tonight, and if I'm going to shave without nicking my jugular and bleeding out all over this godforsaken apartment, I need a decent-sized reflective surface to do it."

"Out in a second!" he called through the door, ignoring the increased volume of Bones' grumbling. Changing clothes three separate times was not conveying the air of nonchalance Jim was going for, but at least he was getting it out of his system early and among friends.

"Aw, you look so great!" Christine crowed as he shrugged into his coat. Truth be told, he didn't look much different from normal, but according to both Christine and his mother, green did good things for his eyes. Bones had snagged reservations at some swanky new place uptown, and he looked slightly uncomfortable in his suit.

"All right, all right, let's move out," he said. "It's going to be a royal pain in the ass to catch a cab in this weather."

It was like someone had been listening in on Jim's description of Iowa winters, because the forecast for the greater New York area this New Year's Eve called for snow, and lots of it. Jim grinned as he stepped out into the white silence. It seemed as if the entire city had slowed in deference to the elements. A frosted limousine glided up the street, icicles hanging like stalactites from the wheel wells.

"You want to share a cab partway?" Bones asked.

"Nah, I'm going to walk to the train. You guys have a good night, okay?"

"You too. And Jim? Good luck."

Jim dithered over the champagne selection at the liquor store and tried valiantly to tamp down the spring in his step, but regardless, he arrived at Spock's with a full fifteen minutes to spare. He stood in the darkness, watching snowflakes drift through the yellow circles of light from the streetlamps. The flickering lamp opposite Spock's door still hadn't been fixed and it gave the snow an odd stop-motion quality. He looked at his watch. 7:52. He decided to hope Spock wasn't overly concerned with exactitudes and let himself into the foyer before realizing he didn't know Spock's apartment number. He ran his fingers over the cardstock labels above the mailboxes; the names were written in ancient felt-tip and the letters had feathered and faded over time. He assumed Spock was a last name, but it wasn't listed anywhere. He took his phone from his coat pocket and flipped it open only to realize he didn't have Spock's number, either.

He leaned against the wall, a sick feeling creeping into his stomach. If he was being stood up, this was certainly a creative way of doing it. But then he heard the scrape of footsteps coming down the stairs, slipping slightly in the mire of snow and dirt tracked in by previous travelers, and then Spock was ducking around the corner and the foyer suddenly felt very small.

"Jim? You are six minutes early," Spock said, sounding slightly perturbed. "I had intended to wait for you out on the street."
"Sorry," Jim said, running a hand through his hair nervously. It came away damp with snow. "I guess it took less time to get here than I thought it would. I brought the booze." He hoisted the bottle of Veuve Clicquot like it was an offering. Spock was unmoved.

"Please follow me," he said, then turned and jogged back up the staircase. Jim followed, up one flight, then the next, then the next. Finally, on the eighth floor, they stopped in front of a narrow door marked 8A, Jim gasping for breath and Spock barely winded.

"You weren't on the mailbox," Jim gasped.

"I am subletting."

"Oh."

"Please, come in. I have taken the liberty of preparing food. Do you like lasagna?"

Jim nodded dumbly as he took in Spock's apartment. It was a small studio with a cramped galley kitchen. The layout matched countless apartments Jim had lived in and visited in his time in the city, but there was something about this one that seemed strange. It was preternaturally tidy, without a hint of dust or an object out of place. Spock had curtained off what must have been the sleeping area with a length of gauzy red material; Jim could see the corner of a mattress or futon behind it.

There was a threadbare brown armchair and ottoman in one corner, nestled next to a bookshelf. Next to the door was a conspicuously blank space, cleaner and lighter than the surrounding wall, as though a large object that had been there for some time had recently been moved. There was a strange smell about the place, an odd spice Jim couldn't name. Maybe the cooking; Spock was in the kitchen, gravely contemplating a pot bubbling on the stove.

A small table and chair sat by the window, made of pale, cheap-looking wood. Spock had set the table for two. Jim crossed to the window and opened it, breathing the cold fresh air, then plunging the champagne bottle into the nest of unadulterated snow that had collected on the sill. Noticing his host out of the corner of his eye, he ducked back inside and slid the window shut.

"Just needs to chill a bit," he said. "I like your place. It's very…neat."

"Thank you," Spock said. "It is sparse, but I have come to appreciate it."

"So you're a cook?"

"I enjoy cooking, yes. I have found that preparing a meal is not unlike conducting an experiment, albeit on a smaller scale. It is often…difficult for me to see progress in my daily work. To come home and prepare food for myself, to follow a recipe to a successful end…I find that it provides me with a small measure of satisfaction."

"Small victories," Jim said.

"In a manner of speaking." Spock carried two small bowls to the table, returning for a larger serving dish and a bowl of salad greens.

"Please sit," he said, indicating the small chair. He dragged the shabby ottoman over and placed it opposite Jim at the table. The ottoman was low, but Spock's height made up the difference, and the two of them sat eye to eye.

Jim looked down at the bowl in front of him, startled by the electric pink liquid it contained. "You made borscht? I guess Gaila's party made an impression."
Spock's mouth formed a subtle moue of distaste at the mention of the party. "I told you then that this dish is reminiscent of one my mother used to prepare," he said. "I have since learned it is eastern European in origin. A colleague of mine furnished me with what he claims is an authentic Russian recipe."

Jim took a bite, the earthy taste of beet tangy and sweet on his tongue. "Cold soup in the winter," he said, swallowing. "Interesting choice for someone who's freezing all the time. Which reminds me, I'm pretty sure the champagne's chilled by now." He retrieved the bottle from the windowsill, closing the window quickly when he noted Spock's shudder.

"You got glasses?"

Spock started to rise. "Please, allow--"

Jim waved him away. "No, no, stay. I can find them."

He padded into the kitchen, opening a cabinet that looked promising. To his surprise, it didn't hold glasses; there was a strange sculpture inside. It was barely small enough to fit, and the edges of the metal bit into the soft wood of the cabinet walls. Weird, Jim thought. Wonder why he keeps this here. Unless he didn't, and he shoved it in here when he realized I was coming over. Which was also slightly weird, but it wasn't as if Jim hadn't rid his apartment of a few dubious decorations before receiving visitors. A large water bong and an oversized poster of Monet's water lilies sprang to mind. He reached inside and touched it. The metal was smooth and warm.

"Jim?" Spock called from the table.

"Uh, got 'em," he replied, looking around frantically. Luckily, the next cabinet contained a mismatched assortment of glasses, probably accumulated over the course of various tenants. He selected the two that most resembled champagne flutes and returned to the table.

"Here we go," he proclaimed. "It's not exactly the crème de la crème of champagne, but it'll do. Oops, watch it!" he popped the cork free, ducking reflexively, and a cascade of creamy bubbles followed it out of the neck of the bottle. Spock watched them pool on the tabletop with a slightly strained expression.

"Sorry," said Jim. He filled a glass and handed it to Spock.

"No, thank you. I do not wish to replicate my experience with the port."

"Come on. Just a little bit? Besides, champagne drunk is like a whole other realm of drunkenness. It's great. Um. Not that you have to get drunk, or that I'm trying to get you drunk--"

"I will try the champagne," Spock said hurriedly.

"Cheers," Jim said when their glasses were both full. "A toast to...to New Year's in New York. And to new beginnings."

Spock raised an eyebrow, and Jim flushed a little. Okay, so it was a cheeseball toast. Whatever.

They began to eat. Spock was characteristically quiet, but Jim was content to carry the conversation. He told Spock old stories and newer ones, about working in the bar and about his crazy boss back at the consulting firm. They were the neutral kinds of stories people tell about themselves when they first meet, when they're reluctant to reveal too much, but they came easily to Jim, and he wasn't comfortable sharing silence with Spock just yet. The conversation ebbed, and Jim took his last bite of lasagna.
"So," he said. "You mentioned your colleague? Is he Russian?"

Spock took a small sip of champagne and gazed out of the window for a long moment. When he turned back to Jim, a guarded look had fallen over his face. It reminded Jim of the first few times he'd encountered Spock at the bar.

"Jim, I am not averse to becoming better acquainted with one another, but I must insist that under no circumstances do we discuss my work. That is a necessary condition of our continued involvement."

Okay, definitely weird.

"You know, the worst way to deal with someone's curiosity about something is to tell them that under no circumstances can they discuss that thing," Jim said. "But, okay, I'll bite. Fine. I won't ask you about your job."

"I understand if you also wish to declare a topic off limits for discussion," Spock said. "I believe it is only fair to allow you to reciprocate."

"Not a problem," Jim said. "I'm an open book. So I guess it's verboten to ask you why you can't talk about it?"

Spock's closed expression was answer enough.

"Fine, fine," Jim sighed. "So what's for dessert?"

Spock, as it turned out, didn't have much of a sweet tooth. Jim settled for another glass of champagne. He leaned back in his chair, glancing around the room. His gaze fell on a chess board set up on a small end table next to Spock's arm chair.

"Hey, you play?" he asked.

"Yes," Spock answered. "Do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," he said. "If you can believe it, I was in the chess club in middle school." Spock shot him a look that indicated that he did not, in fact, believe it. "Well, it's true," Jim said. "I think it was supposed to be some kind of gambit to keep me out of trouble, get me using my powers for good instead of evil, that kind of thing."

"I have been playing chess since the age of three," Spock said matter-of-factly. "In my...family, chess is commonly utilized to teach children to employ logic."

"Not sure how much logic a three-year-old needs, but okay," Jim said. "How about it? You up for a game? The scrappy small-town kid against the classically trained grand master? This has epic written all over it."

Three games and the rest of the bottle of champagne later, the room was uncomfortably warm, condensation fogging the windows. Jim began feeling light headed.

"You," he indicated Spock, "were not holding up your end of the deal on the champagne. Do you want to get some air?" He peered out the window. "I think the snow is letting up."

Spock looked at him inscrutably. It was frustrating, thought Jim. There was obviously something going on behind those dark eyes, but he had no idea what. Spock could be bored out of his mind and Jim wouldn't know it. Now, he seemed to be weighing something. He gave a little nod as if deciding on a course of action and stood up, gesturing for Jim to do the same.
"There is something I wish to show you," he said.

Spock moved toward the door and put on an oversized grey sweater, followed by his coat. He plucked a pair of gloves from the pocket and put them on, then drew his hat further down until it covered his earlobes. He looked ready for a stint on a glacier, and Jim couldn't help but laugh softly at him.

"The temperature outside is distinctly inhospitable," Spock said, sounding affronted. "I am merely ensuring my own comfort."

"You don't have to come out, you know," Jim said, but Spock had already opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. Down at the end of the corridor, he removed a key from his coat pocket and unlocked another door. "This is the uppermost floor," Spock said, disappearing up a short staircase. Jim followed.

The stairs led to another door that unlocked with the same tiny key. This one opened onto the roof. The first thing Jim noticed was the utter silence; it felt as though they were a hundred stories up instead of just eight. All the sounds of the city seemed to melt into the thick blanket of snow that covered the roof of the building. Someone had strewn Christmas lights across an exposed pipe, suffusing the rooftop with a surreal glow. It felt like another world.

They moved gingerly out into the field of white. Clumps of snow clung to Jim's pant leg, and his footsteps made a satisfying scrunching sound as he walked. They stopped in the middle. Spock craned his neck back and looked up at the sky, hands deep in his pockets, and his breath made a little cloud around his face with every exhalation.

"It's beautiful," Jim said. "Did you put the lights up?"

Spock shook his head. "I found them here," he said. "I often come up here in more temperate weather to look at the stars."

"Can you see much? The ambient light is pretty bright in the city."

"It is," Spock said. "But there are stars to be seen, albeit faintly."

Jim looked up as a patch of cloud shifted to reveal velvety black. Sure enough, he could see a bright cluster of stars there. He glanced at Spock, and was shocked by the look on the other man's face. His expression was neutral as ever, but Jim detected a hint of softness around his mouth, his eyes. It was subtle, but he got the feeling that Spock was feeling wistful.

Spock's eyes darted back down then and caught Jim looking, and suddenly the moment was over, Spock again wearing his habitual guarded look. Jim gave him a careful smile and took a step closer, their shoulders nearly touching.

"You like it up here, huh?" he said.

Spock nodded.

"My mom used to travel a lot when I was a kid," Jim said softly. "She was in the Air Force. She used to leave us with my grandmother. Anyway, she'd call, tell me all these things about the places she visited, air bases all over the world. When I'd get upset, she'd tell me to go outside at night and look up at the sky, and know that she was looking at the same stars."

"That is contingent upon her location," Spock said. "Were you on different hemispheres, her words may not have been strictly true."
Jim snorted. "Thanks for that, Spock. Remind me not to let you comfort any six-year-olds anytime soon. Anyway, it made me feel better at the time."

"Thank you," Spock said quietly.

Impulsively, Jim reached out a hand and touched Spock's wool-clad arm. He ran his fingers down to the end of the sleeve, then reached inside past the thick layer of sweater to brush his fingers over the thin skin at Spock's wrist, above his glove. He felt a shudder run through Spock at the touch. A cheer rose up from the sidewalk.

"Happy new year," Jim said.

He leaned in, close, then closer, so that he could feel Spock's breath on his cheek. It stuttered and then stopped.

Jim kissed Spock lightly on the mouth.

He felt Spock tense, then acquiesce, returning the kiss. His lips felt hot and dry and insistent against Jim's, but when he tried to deepen the kiss, Spock pulled away. "It is cold," he said, looking down. "We should return to the apartment."

"Okay," said Jim, exhaling. "Okay."

When they went back downstairs, Spock stood just inside his doorway, making it clear Jim was not invited in for whatever might count for a nightcap in Spock's world.

"I wish to thank you for this evening," Spock said. "It was most…enlightening."

Jim ran a hand through his hair. "That's one way of putting it," he said. "Can…can I see you again?"

"I do not believe your vision has been affected by tonight's proceedings," Spock said.

"It's a figure of speech, Spock," Jim said. "It means--" He stopped when he caught the look in Spock's eyes. He couldn't say why or how he knew, but something told him this was the closest Spock came to a laugh.

"You know what it means, don't you?"

"Good night, Jim."

***

Something had begun. Jim had the odd sense that cogs were set in motion somewhere he couldn't see. If he listened, he fancied he could hear their happy whir, speeding him and Spock toward something he couldn't name. Later, he would look back and realize, and marvel. But for now, he looked across the bar and caught the eye of the strange dark-haired man, and felt deeply, inexplicably glad that a mid-sized Manhattan consulting firm had chosen the fall of 2011 to downsize.

As it turned out, not much changed between Jim and Spock now that the two of them were…whatever they were. He wasn't sure what he'd expected. Maybe for Spock to reveal the entirety of his past, his dearest hopes and dreams, in a series of heartfelt conversations preferably featuring candlelight and bottles of red wine. But Spock wasn't much of a drinker, and it didn't take Jim long to realize that he didn't really do heartfelt.
It wasn't that Jim didn't try. One Saturday morning, after he'd brought Spock tea and himself coffee, and they'd sat for a few minutes in a silence that was rapidly becoming companionable, Jim took a deep breath and asked Spock where he was from in stilted Portuguese. He'd been planning it ever since the night Spock got drunk. But the answer was not Portugal. The answer was not an answer at all.

"It is very far away," he said, and took a neat bite of multigrain toast. (Another thing Jim was learning about Spock was that he was disturbingly healthy.) It was clear that Spock intended that to be that. But Jim watched Spock in silence as he finished his toast and tea, as he rose and carried his cup and saucer into the kitchen and bent over the sink, the basin awash in hot water and foam.

_Who are you?_ Jim watched him and bit his lip to keep from speaking the words. It was almost a companionable silence, after all.

Later, Spock read the newspaper from his preferred perch on the old armchair. After the first few weeks of slightly uncomfortable chess games, a second chair appeared in the living room, and Jim was curled in it now, reading a terrible spy novel he should probably be hiding behind a copy of _Ulysses_. But Spock didn't seem especially judgmental when it came to Jim's intellectual pursuits, for which he was grateful. Now, Spock lingered over the front pages of his paper, pulling the sleeve of his lumpy grey sweater down over a hand.

"I like your sweater," Jim said. The truth was, he found it endearing. It looked warm, and it didn't fit very well, which somehow made it about a hundred times more appealing.

"My mother made it," Spock said without looking up from an article about a sunk Japanese whaling boat.

"She knits?"

"She attempts it." Jim could hear the warmth creep into Spock's voice, the way it always did when he thought Jim wasn't paying attention. When he talked about home.

"This sweater was her first foray into producing an adult garment," he said, dropping the paper and holding his arms out perpendicular to his body. The sleeves were too long by about five inches. They sprawled past Spock's hands, big floppy cuffs drooping towards the floor.

"It looks great," Jim said, barely suppressing a fit of laughter.

"It does not," Spock said quietly. "It is ill-fitting and the fiber is scratchy. It is illogical to persist in wearing it." But he made no motion to take it off; in fact, it seemed to Jim that he snuggled deeper into it as he turned the page and snapped the paper open with a flick of his wrist.

***

By mid-February, Jim knew a few things for sure about Spock. First, the food thing Uhura told him about--Spock was indeed a vegetarian. Second, Spock seemed to be allergic to sex. Or to the idea of sex, because Jim hadn't really gotten further than doing things that might, in some universe, potentially culminate in sexual activity. In fact, since the kiss on New Year's Eve, the only contact the two of them had was frequent handholding. He wasn't complaining--when Spock took his hand, something deep inside Jim unfurled like a flower opening toward the sun. It was the same as the strange little whirl he heard in the back of his mind. He couldn't explain it. It just felt right. But that feeling was a little distant after their near-nightly chess games, when Jim was unceremoniously
kicked out into the cold. They'd play one game, then two, then: "Best out of three?" Jim would say. Then that, and like clockwork Spock rose, straightened his shirt, and made for the door. Jim usually made a half-hearted effort to stall--packing away the board, pouring himself a glass of water--but it generally only served to delay his departure by five or ten minutes at the most.

Jim was determined to break the cycle. As it turned out, his opportunity arrived sooner than anticipated and before he had a chance to formulate a plan. It was a chilly, rainy night, and Jim had a cold. As a result, he wasn't exactly on his game, and Spock was wiping the floor with him at chess. Finally, Spock paused, one hand on his rook, and looked up at Jim.

"Your mind is elsewhere," he said.

"I'm sorry," Jim replied. "I took this cold medicine before I came over and it feels like my head is floating about a foot off my shoulders."

"Would you prefer to discontinue our game?"

"I guess so," Jim said. "I'm not exactly a worthy opponent tonight." He also wasn't in the mood to make the trek home, but Spock didn't seem inclined to ask him to leave, either.

"It is early yet," Spock said. "I will prepare you a cup of tea."

Spock grazed Jim's fingers with his own as he pressed the steaming mug into Jim's hands. As if realizing what he was doing, he jerked back and put his hands in his pockets. "This is a traditional herbal blend," he said. "It contains a natural decongestant."

"Thanks," Jim said, taking a sip. The herbs and spices were strange on his tongue. They tasted vaguely familiar, but Jim couldn't put his finger on where he might have run across them before. "It's good," he said. He could feel the pounding in his sinuses beginning to abate.

He set the cup down on the side table and settled into his chair. Spock picked up a book and began to read, pausing every so often to look at Jim appraisingly. Jim's head was heavy, and the air hung thick and close--why was it always so warm in Spock's apartment, anyway?-- and before he knew it, he was beginning to nod off.

He awoke to a hand on his shoulder and Spock's low voice in his ear. "You have been asleep for one hour and 35 minutes," he was saying.

"Oh. Sorry," Jim said, rubbing his eyes. "I'll go. Just…give me a minute to wake up."

Spock shifted his weight from one foot to the other, clasping and unclasping his hands. "I suppose…that is, it could not hurt to…would you prefer to remain here tonight?"

"Are you sure?"

"You are unwell," Spock said, "and the weather is inclement. It would be illogical to suggest you expose yourself to the elements and risk worsening your condition."

Jim was fairly certain that it was a myth that cold weather actually caused colds, but he wasn't about to get into a debate with Spock on the germ theory of disease. Not when a warm bed beckoned. "Thanks," he said instead. "I'm pretty beat."

Spock drew back the gauzy red curtain to reveal a full-sized futon. Jim took off his sweater, undershirt, and jeans. He left his boxers on in the interest of obscuring his somewhat prurient interest in the notion of sharing a bed with Spock.
"I will join you shortly," Spock said, pulling back the duvet and gesturing for Jim to get in. He did so, drawing up the covers to his chin and settling back onto the pillow, and watched Spock walk into the bathroom. The door closed, and Jim heard the shower come on, the sound of it lulling him into a doze. He was jostled awake when Spock slid into bed next to him a few minutes later. Jim curled into him, resting his head on Spock's chest.

"You never smell like anything," he murmured, rolling back a little so his head was level with Spock's armpit.

"You are delirious," Spock said dryly.

He carded through Jim's hair with his fingers, and Jim gave a little moan of pleasure as the nerve endings in his scalp tingled. "You can do that as much as you want," Jim said.

"Noted."

"Tell me something," Jim said. "Anything you want. Tell me your favorite thing about the city."

Spock was silent for a minute, thinking. He kept running his fingers through Jim's hair, which was so pleasant that Jim found he didn't care if Spock said anything ever again.

"I enjoy Central Park," he said. "I have been apprised of real estate prices in the greater metropolitan area, and based on the cost of living directly adjacent to the park, it is not entirely logical that 800 acres should be devoted to green space. However, I find that I…understand the impulse."

"Yeah, it's pretty great, having all that right in the middle of the city. There's a pair of hawks that live there, did you know that?"

"I did not."

"It's true. People go nuts trying to spot them. Tell me something else."

"Go to sleep, Jim," Spock said.

Instead, Jim leaned up and kissed Spock on the neck, sucking just hard enough that he'd leave a mark. Spock twitched and made an irritated sound in the back of his throat, but he didn't pull away. Rather, he rolled on top of Jim and kissed him soundly on the mouth. Their bodies pressed flush against each other and Jim couldn't help but grind their hips together, sliding his hands up to cup Spock's ass, thumbs hooking under the waistband of Spock's briefs. Spock was indisputably hard, and the realization filled Jim with a curious sense of warmth.

So you're not made of stone, he thought. But then Spock was rolling off of him and scooting to the edge of the bed, leaving a several inches of space between them. He brushed his fingers across Jim's forehead one more time, then pulled his hand away.

"Go to sleep," he repeated.

Jim tried to think of a form of protest that would paint him as any less than a complete asshole. He failed. He was sweaty now; the damn apartment was stuffy as hell. He yanked down the duvet and allowed himself the indulgence of an irritated sigh. So you're not made of stone, he thought. But then Spock was rolling off of him and scooting to the edge of the bed, leaving a several inches of space between them. He brushed his fingers across Jim's forehead one more time, then pulled his hand away.

"Go to sleep," he repeated.

Jim tried to think of a form of protest that would paint him as any less than a complete asshole. He failed. He was sweaty now; the damn apartment was stuffy as hell. He yanked down the duvet and allowed himself the indulgence of an irritated sigh. Beside him, Spock curled onto his side and turned away. In a small act of rebellion, Jim tangled his feet with Spock's and was gratified when he didn't move.

When he woke up the next morning, Spock was up and dressed. Something seemed different about him, but Jim still felt fuzzy with sleep and couldn't put his finger on what it was.
"I have prepared a pot of the same medicinal tea I brewed for you last night," Spock said. "Please stay here as long as you wish." He put his coat on and nodded at Jim before leaving the apartment. It wasn't until the sound of footsteps faded down at the end of the hall that Jim realized Spock had been wearing a turtleneck. He grinned and leaned back on the pillow. No harm in sleeping in a little longer.

***

There was a third thing Jim knew about Spock. He knew where he worked. It happened by accident. He was on his way to Mt. Sinai to meet McCoy for lunch after his shift. Suddenly, he saw Spock walk out of the park and dart across the street without a glance in his direction. Jim opened his mouth to call after him, but something made him stop. Instead, he cut across the street himself and followed. You're crazy, he said to himself. This is not what normal people do. Normal people have conversations with their…with their partners. Or whatever he is. Normal people don't meet freaking secret agents in bars and get into undefined relationships with them. Normal people--he pulled his inner monologue up short, because Spock appeared to have arrived at his destination.

It was a towering red brick building. It also had no windows. Well, none that Jim could see, anyway. From his vantage point across the street he could just make out the sunlight glinting off glass at least ten stories up. Closer to the ground, the building was surrounded by a matching brick wall topped disconcertingly with concertina wire. A guard sat in a little glass booth in front of a door in the wall. Spock walked up to the booth, looked around him as if by force of habit, then presented a small white ID card to the guard. The guard ran it through some kind of reader--Jim inferred this by the way his arm moved, just once, up then down-- and waved Spock through.

When he was gone, Jim crossed the street and walked slowly across the building's façade. The guard in the booth watched him. On the right side of the wall was a bronze plaque, greenish brown with patina. It read 'Rockefeller Military Research Center' in block capitals.

McCoy rolled his eyes and called Jim an idiot, but Jim was fairly certain he'd have had the same reaction to Jim winning a Nobel Prize, so he tried to discount it.

"Only you," McCoy said. "Only you could fall on your ass for a spy who only wants to hold hands. This is some kind of cosmic retribution, you know." He looked up at the sky, raising his arms.
"Thank you! Thank you."

"Yeah yeah, ha fucking ha," Jim said. Privately, though, he felt ill at ease. He stuck his tongue out at McCoy and went into the kitchen for a beer. He popped the top off and took a long swig. When he put the bottle down, Christine was sitting on the counter looking at him thoughtfully.

"What?" he asked, sighing.

"Nothing," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just…it's strange. Maybe Bones is right, maybe this is some kind of weird cosmic joke. But the funny thing is, I've never been that much of a horn dog. Somehow I got this weird reputation. I mean, yeah, I like sex. I like sex a lot. But it's not like I sleep with anything that moves, unlike some people--," he raised his voice and leaned into the living room, "--some people think.

"I don't know. Maybe I give off some kind of weird vibe and Spock's picking up on it."
Christine looked at him appraisingly. "Well, if it makes you feel better, I don't get any weird vibes from you. I think it's more likely that this is about him, honestly. I mean, you've been doing the heavy lifting in this relationship. You initiated it. You're the one that keeps coming back, even though you know nothing about him and he's not exactly forthcoming with information. Yet he never told you no, never said he wasn't interested, and continues to indicate that he is interested. So yeah, I think there's something going on there. Not to mention whatever he's doing in that research facility."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"The only thing you really need to ask yourself," she went on, "is how long you're going to put up with it before something has to give. Because he's not going to be able to keep this mystery act up with you forever, and I don't care what's in his job description. Because if he does…I have access to a lot of sharp, pointy instruments." She smiled at him a little sadly, reaching over to give his shoulder a squeeze.

Jim smiled back. "Thanks, Chris."

"My pleasure."

Jim did ask himself Chris' question. Trouble was, he'd come up with an answer, a deadline, and then Spock would do something that made Jim's heart leap and screwed his deadline completely. Jim thought this must be Zen, this relationship. The way a tiny, inconsequential thing could flood him with warmth--Spock's hand in his, a quirk at the corner of his mouth that could have been a smile, the way he kicked off his shoes and curled his feet under him in the threadbare armchair instead of sitting stiffly the way he used to. It was either Zen or addiction, because these days Spock, being with Spock, was all Jim thought about.

And if he lurked in the trees off of 5th and followed Spock back to work again the next week, and the next, it was only because he couldn't resist the thought of all that Spock behind the brick barricade, a workday's worth of mannerisms and personality, of truth. He fancied that Spock shrugged off his inhibitions and secrecy with his coat when he walked through the revolving glass door and left the street, and Jim, behind. Like maybe there was something inside the building, in the rarefied, recirculated air that made Spock Spock. Like if Jim could get inside, if he could just see…but these were the thoughts of a crazy man, Jim decided, shaking his head to clear it. He looked at his watch. He needed to get to work. As he turned and left the building behind, he couldn't shake the idea that the red brick prewar hulk at his back somehow contained multitudes.

The next week, he came early. This time, he wanted to watch Spock leave. It was a mistake. He realized it as soon as he saw the second figure emerge from the revolving doors. It was chilly, the beginning of March, and Spock was still wearing his coat and hat. The slender figure behind him wore a uniform of some kind. He did not wear a hat. His hair was a mop of blond curls, and he looked very young. Jim thought uncharitably that he looked like a lankier version of the putti, the ridiculous chubby angels that hung out with Mary and baby Jesus in Italian Renaissance paintings. The overgrown putto was talking animatedly to Spock, gesturing wildly with his hands. Jim couldn't hear what he was saying, but his voice trilled up in a question and he fell silent. Spock nodded in reply and opened his mouth to speak.

Jim couldn't explain why the sight of Spock talking to this angel-faced boy filled him with inchoate rage, but the fact remained that it did. It was something about the ease the two seemed to have with each other, or maybe the fact that Jim was sick to death of feeling like everywhere he went with Spock, the floor was strewn with eggshells. He wanted to yell at them, to see something crack in Spock's perfect face when he recognized Jim. At very least, he wanted to follow them. But he hung
back, raising a hand to the wall of the building at his back and digging his fingernails into the cement. He waited with this tenuous grasp on reality until the Spock and the angel-faced boy walked around the corner and out of sight.

They had a date that night, or whatever they were calling the things they did together. Jim swallowed the bile in his mouth and took Spock to the Met. The first fall he lived in New York he walked around with a Frank O'Hara poem in his head and had depressing fantasies that were not about sex at all but about taking someone on a date to the museum, perhaps passing a flask of something fiery back and forth on the steps and spinning half drunk through the galleries. Instead, he brought Spock a vegetarian burrito, explained the concept of refried beans, and sat him down in front of Pollock.

"You studied this?" Spock asked. He gestured at the room, at the whole building.

Jim nodded yes.

"Why?"

"The first painting I ever really noticed was in this book I checked out from the library," he said. "It was about Van Gogh. It wasn't a kids book at all, just a monograph of his paintings. I think it was published by the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam or something.

"Anyway, it had Sunflowers on the cover and it made me think of our fields in the summertime. I think school had just started and I was pissed about it. Anyway, I would look through the book and look at the paintings and make up these stories about them, and I came to this one, and it was a painting of these two crabs. Just these two red crabs on a green background, like he'd pulled them out of the water and flopped them onto the grass. And I couldn't come up with a story for those crabs. I just couldn't. It made me wonder about the guy that painted them, if he had a story about them. So I went back to the library and found a book about Van Gogh and I read about the ear and all that. And I just...I thought everyone who made art probably had a story to tell, and I wanted to know what it was."

Spock was quiet for moment, looking. He stood and leaned over the wall text, reading. "This man's biography states that he was a violent alcoholic," he said.

"Yeah, and that painting changed everything about 20th century art," Jim said. "Not bad for an alcoholic who died in his forties."

Spock remained standing with his back to Jim, staring at the painting.

"Spock?" Jim said.

He turned.

"Who was the other guy?"

"Pardon?"

"The other guy today. In front of the Military Institute." The words were out before he could think. He wanted to see Spock's face crack. Instead, he swallowed tersely.

"I asked you to refrain from prying into my personal affairs."

"Spock, we've been…we've been. For three months. And I know nothing about you." He stood up and reached for Spock's arm, but Spock stepped deftly away.
"Following me was inadvisable," he said.

"Oh, yeah? Was it? So what are you going to do about it? Threaten me? Sic your military goons on me?"

Spock had the good grace to look like Jim had slapped him. "Hardly," he said. "Do you really believe, Jim, that this has been a game to me? That it has been pleasant? It would be considerably easier to tell--" He bit off the sentence, raising a hand as if to stay himself.

"Tell me what? Spock, come on, please..." he trailed off, not entirely sure what he was asking for. "We've been dancing around whatever is going on with you, and maybe if I just knew what the hell it was we could figure this whole thing out somehow."

Spock shook his head. "That is impossible," he said. "This was a mistake." Jim fancied he sounded tired, but probably not.

"Goodbye, Jim," Spock said.

"Seriously?" He gestured between them. "You're just going to walk away from this like it was nothing? Spock, it wasn't nothing."

Spock gave Jim a look then, a single pleading look, and for a moment it almost seemed as if he was reconsidering. But then he squared his shoulders, turned on his heel, and stalked away.

Jim sat unmoving for a long time, trying to assimilate the emotions storming through him. He felt like Spock had kicked him in the gut, but there was also a growing sense of relief, like some of the accumulated crap that had built up over the past three months of excuses and rationalizing and making do was starting to leech out of him. When he finally stood, he felt weak and wrung out, but lighter too.

When he got home, McCoy was sitting in the living room reading a book. Jim sat down on the couch wordlessly, and leaned back to rest his head against the wall. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them there was a bottle in front of him on the table, a tumbler next to it.

"Bones, this is your wedding bourbon," Jim said. It was from McCoy's father, and was the only thing Jocelyn-related McCoy hadn't smashed the day they filed the papers. "Some things are sacred," he'd said, like that made sense at all. But it was really good bourbon, and Jim knew better than to argue with McCoy when he got sentimental.

Now, McCoy produced a second tumbler for himself, and moved to open the bottle. He waved a hand dismissively. "I always thought it might be cursed," he said. "But I don't guess that matters now."

He poured their drinks, and raised his glass. "To love."

***

Jim walked into the bar the next night looking about the way he felt. It was raining, and he was soaked to the skin.

"What's up with you?" Uhura asked him as he walked in. Jim just shook his head.
"So, Spock's not here," she said. "Can I get a nod if that's your problem?"

Jim obliged her. No reason not to, really.

"Well, shit," she said. "Want to talk about it?"

Jim shook his head. He started shaking, because the fans were on in the bar and he was wet and fucking freezing.

She gave him a long look. "You look pathetic," she said kindly. "Scotty's in the basement. I think he got some shirts made awhile back; maybe there were extra."

The shirts were bright pink and featured the same weird owl that was printed on the coasters. Which was just perfect, really, because he definitely wanted to look like a complete idiot in a fluorescent shirt so bright it could be seen from space while he served people drinks and tried not to think about how much he'd just fucked up his not-relationship with a man he was probably never going to see again.

"Ah, it looks great on you!" Scotty said. "I'll never understand why those things didn't sell like hotcakes."

"No idea," Jim said, tugging reflexively on the hem of the T-shirt. The gesture reminded him of Spock.

Later, a girl came in to the bar with a date and ordered a Shirley Temple. He gave her extra cherries just to prove to himself he wasn't bitter.

***

It must have been addiction, he thought, because withdrawal was the only explanation for what he was going through.

"This is fucking ridiculous," he said, after the fifth night in a row spent camped out on the couch with Gaila.

"What's ridiculous?" Gaila yawned. "Hey, I was comfy!"

Jim had leapt off of the couch, leaving a shower of breakup detritus in his wake. He wiped at his pants, surveying the assorted candy wrappers and crumpled cans with dismay and a bad taste in his mouth.

"I can't keep sitting here watching *Friends* marathons or whatever, eating crap, and not feeling any better for it."

"Well, thank god," Gaila said. "Welcome back to the land of the living. Want to have sex?"

"No. Uh, no offense, Gaila. Sorry."

"No problem, just thought I'd offer. It always makes me feel better after a breakup, is all."

"I didn't know you actually broke up, ever," Jim said.
Gaila rolled her eyes, stretching her arms over her head. "Ugh, I think I'm starting to melt into this couch," she said. "Anyway, yes, of course I do. And just because I'm not a huge fan of monogamy doesn't mean it can't be a huge fucking bummer to end things with someone you like. Especially if it wasn't your idea in the first place." She gave Jim a pointed look. "Or if you fucked up."

Jim groaned. "Yeah, I kind of did, didn't I?"

"I mean, the stalker act was borderline, Jim. But confronting him? It's like breaking into someone's email. You violate trust like that, you have to take your lumps when you find something you don't like."

"I know, I know." He looked up at the ceiling and let out a long breath. "I need a hobby or something," he said. And just like that, he remembered the boxes. He looked back at Gaila and felt a grin spread across his face.

She grinned back. "Why am I smiling? Why are you smiling? Did you change your mind about the sex thing?"

Jim shook his head. "Nope," he said. Then he turned, crossing the living room in three big strides and yanking his bedroom door open. "I've got to call my mother," he called over his shoulder. Gaila growled and turned the TV back on.

He didn't have Winona send all the boxes. "Just a couple," he told her on the phone. "I'll just...dive in and see where it leads." He sat on the edge of his bed, watching the pink neon from the Laundromat across the street puddling on the floor.

His mother sounded like she was thinking about something else. "Okay, honey, but I'm going to have to get Sam to help me get them down out of the attic, so it might take a few days. Why are you interested in this stuff, anyway? It's just a bunch of old junk, might as well be centuries old by your standards."

"Aw, c'mon, Mom, don't pull that 'kids these days' act on me," Jim groaned. He flopped backwards onto the bed. "I've seen your blog."

She laughed. "You'd be surprised how many people are into knitting," she said. "I get a lot of hits."

"Seriously, though, aren't you interested in what Dad was working on?"

"I know what he was working on, Jim. He was a test pilot, for God's sake. He flew shiny, expensive, top secret crap he couldn't even tell his own wife about. He used to come home and lock himself in the bathroom for a full hour before he would come out and talk to me or play with your brother. It wasn't healthy." She sighed, and he heard her take a drink of something.

"Mom--"

"No, hear me out. Jim, I kept all that stuff because I didn't have the heart to throw it out, to throw him out. But...I've left it behind, honey. Do you know, I've lived almost twice as long as your father? It's awful, Jim, it's criminal. But I was so young then. And in some ways, it feels like it was someone else's life.

"Anyway, there won't be anything interesting in there. That was all classified back then. It's just a bunch of old paperwork and notes he took."

"Where did you get it in the first place?"
"Someone sent it to me. I guess it was about a month after the accident? They must have been cleaning out files or something like that. I can look on the boxes, but I don't remember there being a return address. It was a long time ago, Jim."

"All right, so I won't bother you about it. Look, Mom, I've got to go." He looked out the window. It was starting to rain, and the pink light reflected in the glass began to drip and run.

"I'll talk to you soon. I love you."

"Bye, Mom."

The boxes came Express two days later. There were two, and Winona hadn't bothered to repack them. She'd just reinforced the tape that was already there and addressed them to Jim. When he opened the first box there was a piece of clean white notepaper sitting folded atop the yellowed old documents. He plucked it out of the box, flipped it open, and read it.

_I hope you find what you're looking for._

"I hope so too," he told the empty room. "I just wish I knew what it was."

Several hours later, he wasn't any closer to finding out. There were more pictures, but Jim didn't find anything else especially interesting. There was one thing, though--another photograph of the stern looking dark-haired man from the picture Jim found in the attic at Christmas. It was tucked into the papers along with a few other pictures of scenery. The man stood in profile, staring out over a plain. Jim felt disquieted by the scene, but he couldn't say why. It was something in the man's face, some vague sense of foreboding.

Most of the papers were old dot matrix computer printouts, some with handwritten additions. Others were scribbled notes, some in English, some in another language Jim couldn't identify. Regardless of the language, the contents were unintelligible to him. They seemed to be technical specifications, equations, schematics. The printouts were long pages of numbers and letters in meaningless combinations. Whatever it was his father had been involved in, it was way beyond Jim's ken. He sighed, tossing a sheaf of papers back into a box.

"This was a waste of time," he muttered to himself. He checked his watch. Time to go in to work. Sun was streaming in through the windows, the days getting longer. Jim did not allow himself the indulgence of thinking about what Spock was doing right now. Well, maybe a little bit. He liked to walk through the park when the weather was good, even though it was illogical to take such an inefficient route when there was a subway stop 3.5 blocks from his--okay, enough, Jim. Jesus.

It was Uhura's mood that gave him the idea, probably because it was good for a change. She'd gotten a research grant, which she told Jim about breathlessly while they prepped the bar back. He stopped listening halfway through her rhapsodizing about glottal stops, though, not deliberately but because the wheels were starting to turn in his head again. He smacked the counter.

"Language!"

Uhura gave him a disgusted look. "Yes, Jimmy. Language. That's what linguistics is all about. Say it with me now--"

"No, listen. This is important. Uh, not that your grant isn't, just--gah, okay--"

"Spit it out, Kirk."

"If I had some documents in a language I'd never seen, or maybe in some kind of code, do you think
you might be able to translate them for me? Or at least tell me what language they're in, so I can find someone who can?"

To his surprise, she actually looked interested. "Maybe," she says. "I mean, probably." She straightened and grinned audaciously. "You busy tomorrow, say early afternoon?"

He shook his head.

"Why don't you come by my office hours and I'll see what I can make of them. What are they?"

"Just some old papers of my father's."

She nodded and went back to work, humming something to herself.

After shift, she waved to him on his way out the door. "See you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Definitely," he replied. "And hey, thanks, Uhura."

She smiled back, waving her hand dismissively. "Least I can do."

Uhura's office suited her. The bar suited her too, or maybe it was just the whole surly waitress thing, or her blatant abuse of power when charged with the alcohol intake and credit cards of college students. (Jim had seen her serve straight Coke instead of Jack-and- to a wasted kid more than once.) The office suited her in a different way. She seemed settled there, at home, like maybe her ready supply of disparaging looks was just part of a uniform she wore to deal with the rest of the world.

He got there early, and waiting in the hallway he could hear her explaining something to a student in low tones. Chairs scraped against the floor, and the girl rose, swinging a backpack over her shoulder. "Thanks, Ms. Uhura," she said. She nearly collided with Jim on her way out of the office, jumping back just in time with a startled, "Oh!" She flushed, freckles consumed by the bloom of red, and then she ducked away and down the hall out of sight.

"That girl never looks where she's going," Uhura said. "I think it's chronic."

"So how're office hours?" Jim asked. He gestured to the chair across from Uhura's desk, and she motioned for him to sit down.

"Ah, the work of the T.A. is never done," she said. "The intro class has a test next week; they're slowly realizing that spending every class until now texting was maybe a poor life choice."

"Ah," he said. "I wouldn't know anything about that."

"Of course not," she said. "So what've you brought me?"

Jim showed her. They fanned the papers over her desk. She was most interested in the notes. They were scrawled in--well, Jim was assuming it was a language.

"I'm fairly sure it is," Uhura said, tracing a long spiral down the page with her finger. "These characters, here and here and here--they're repeated, see? But this is nothing modern, Jim. In fact, I think it's more likely that it's either completely made up--some kind of code--or a premodern script." She gave the graceful whorls of ink a stern look. "I don't know. But if you leave me with a few of these, I can ask around the department."

By the time he left her, the afternoon had clouded over and the office was dim. She was sitting in a yellow circle of lamplight, arms curled protectively around his father's papers, copying the script onto
While Uhura was asking her colleagues for help identifying the script, Jim did some research of his own. He'd found another photograph in the first box, this one a shot of deep green woods in summer, but unlike the group shot there was no clue written on the back. He did some searching on the Internet on weapons testing in the eighties and was predictably flooded by a series of conspiracy watchdog websites. One actually seemed to have promising information, until the guy running it asked if they couldn't maybe meet at this rest stop off of I-95, because he was pretty sure the government was both bugging him and monitoring his ISP and he really didn't like communicating via phone or email. Jim didn't reply, but he did download a bunch of scans of documents that looked a hell of a lot like the ones in the box.

Unfortunately, neither Jim nor Uhura got very far. "I'm sorry, Jim," she said, handing back his sheaf of papers. "I'm pretty sure this is a language, like I said before. But that's all I can come up with."

Jim thanked her, and stacked the boxes in the corner of his room along with all his research. He left the picture of his father and the other men out on his desk, where they could stare at him grimly.

Outwardly, Jim supposed he must be projecting the image of someone totally over his breakup. Gaila and Christine stopped giving him pained looks and treating him like he might crumble at any moment. McCoy restricted access to his bourbon stash again. Privately, however, Jim had to admit that the reason he wasn't completely freaking out in some weird shame spiral or whatever (well, aside from the basic fact that he was Jim Kirk, and a shame spiral didn't really become him) was that he was not entirely disabused of the notion that he could go hang out in front of Spock's work one last time.

He just…he just wanted to see him. Even if it was from across the street and halfway around the corner, even if he did wear sunglasses and a ridiculous John Deere hat that Bones got him as a gag gift shortly after he found out Jim grew up on a farm.

It was just Jim's luck that when something actually important went down he looked like a secret agent under really bad cover, or a paparazzo scouting out a movie set.

This time, he staked out the red brick building at closing time, or at least the time he knew Spock generally left the office, or whatever work environment was actually located behind the revolving door. He weaved back and forth through the crowds on the sidewalk, down the block and back again, until his watch read 6 o'clock and, just like that, Spock walked out the revolving door, nodded to the guard, and set off headed south. He'd made it about halfway down the block when a black Town Car slid up to the curb and two men in black suits got out of the front and back passenger side. One was tall and slim, the other short and stocky. A perfect pair of government goons, Jim thought. They started briskly down the sidewalk, following Spock.

Jim wasn't sure exactly how he knew what they were after, but something, some prick of fear, made him cross the street and head in their direction. Up the street, Spock glanced over his shoulder and did a double take at his pursuers. Then he started to run.

The men followed, and then they were all running, flying down the street, dodging pedestrians in a way that might have looked ridiculously harum-scarum had Jim been watching it in an action film.
The men were gaining on Spock, but Jim was gaining on them in turn. The park, he thought. Turn and cut over to the park. You can lose them. Spock hit the corner and it looked like he was planning to do just that, but then his nearest pursuer raised something small and silver and Spock crumpled to the sidewalk.

"Fuck!" Jim cried, and then he was on them, yelling, fists everywhere. "Hey! Hey! What the fuck do you think you're doing? Get the fuck away from him!"

Stocky turned to Jim, sneering, raising the little silver thing. It was shaped like a gun, Jim registered breathlessly, only…not somehow. Slim knelt on the ground over Spock, then leapt up upon seeing his colleague threaten Jim. "Hey," he said. "Don't." He gestured at Jim. "This assignment's compromised," he said. "And this one'll bleed out before Mr. Good Samaritan can get him anywhere."

The car screeched to a halt next to them and the driver leaned across the passenger seat and flung a door open. "Get the fuck in," he called. "That's a direct order."

Slim looked pointedly at Stocky. "You heard him. Leave it! That fucker's dead, and Control will take care of the body. The tracker--" he stopped himself and shook his head, getting into the car.

Stocky gave Jim and Spock one final sneer of disgust. "You'll leave him if you know what's good for you," he said. "Walk away."

And then he swung down into the backseat. The car pulled away before his door was shut.

Jim didn't bother watching them pull away, or wondering about what the fuck they'd been talking about, why the guy told him to walk away. "Spock!" he cried. "Spock, are you all right?" But Jim knew better. Whatever that weapon was, it dropped Spock like a stone from 50 meters. He had curled in on himself like an animal, and his breathing was labored and watery. Jim's hand on his side came away wet.

"J-Jim. You should…you should leave me."

"Yeah, that's what your friends thought, too. Not going to happen."

He looked frantically up the street, heart leaping in his chest as he saw the smear of yellow. "Taxi! Taxi!" He looked back down at Spock. "Where are you hit?"

"Ah…abdominal cavity. Jim, you…you cannot take me to a medical facility. Please…take me to my apartment."

Jim hauled Spock up by the shoulders, grimacing as he saw the look on his face. He was pale as parchment, a greenish scrape across one cheek where he'd fallen. Jim took off his jacket and wrapped it around Spock, then bundled them both into the cab.

"Is he bleeding?" asked the driver incredulously. "Has he been shot? I am not transporting criminals in my cab."

"Look, please. It was an accident. He--we were attacked. I need to get him home. Please." He grabbed for his wallet. He had a hundred folded in the back, for emergencies. He pulled it out waved it at the driver. "Fuck, take it. Just drive! Fucking fast, if you can."

The driver cursed, but pulled out into traffic. It was the worst drive of Jim's life. Spock drifted in and out of consciousness, murmuring words Jim couldn't understand. It sounded like he was speaking in tongues. Jim stared at his hands. The cloying stench of copper filled the cab, and Jim stared down at
his hands, dumbfounded. They were soaked in clotting blood, warm and sticky. But his hands, his arms up to the elbows, his shirt- they weren't red.

They were bright emerald green.

***

Bones, bless him, gave Jim and Spock exactly one incredulous look before he swung into action. Christine, to her credit, only gave them about two.

"Okay, Jim, I need you to listen to me. I need you to put him down on the floor, and then I need you to step away."

Jim's vision was starting to tunnel. He could hear Bones as if he was very far away, telling him to get clean towels, water, his medical kit.

"Goddamit, Jim, why the fuck didn't you take him to a hospital?"

"He…he said not to. I thought…it seemed important."

"Well, I'm guessing the fact that he's bleeding fucking green blood has something to do with it."

"Yeah. Yeah, maybe." And then he was laughing, and he couldn't stop.

When he woke up, he was on the couch, covered in one of Bones' quilts. His mouth was dry, and flakes of green crusted under his fingernails. "Bones?" His voice was hoarse, like he'd been screaming.

"Hey," said Christine. She was standing in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water. Her hands were shaking. "Len's asleep," she said. "It's late. You were out, and…we got him stabilized. He lost a lot of blood, though."

"What did you do to me?"

She laughed joylessly. "You were really upset. We gave you a sedative."

"Always knew he was after an excuse to shoot me up with horse tranquilizers or something."

Christine set her glass down on the coffee table and sat down on the couch next to him. She was wearing a white cotton nightdress. Her blue eyes were huge in her narrow face, and her hair was pulled up in a messy ponytail. She looked like a little girl.

"Jim, there's…we found something. When we were working on Spock."

"Something besides the green blood?"

That harsh laugh again. "Yeah. Jim--his heart. It wasn't…it wasn't where it was supposed to be."

"What--What do you mean, 'wasn't where it was supposed to be'? How is that possible?"

"It's just what it sounds like, Jim. There's no heart in that man's chest. But there was something like a heart--far as we can tell, we weren't about to do exploratory surgery in your living room--at his side, where his liver should have been. It felt like a heartbeat, anyway."
"So…so there has to be some kind of medical explanation for this, right? Something you've read. Some study somewhere."

"That's just it, Jim. There's really not. And there's something else."

She stood up, gesturing for Jim to follow, and led him into his own room. The lights were dimmed, and Jim could just make out Spock lying in his bed. He looked very small and frail, somehow, and Jim had the sudden urge to crawl into bed with him.

Christine crept up to the bed. "Look," she said, gesturing at Spock's head. His hair was sticky with drying blood. "We cleaned him up as best we could," she said. "He can wash it when he's recovered a bit." It occurred to Jim that this was the first time he'd ever gotten a good look at Spock's hair. Christine reached out and brushed a gummy clump of black hair back from Spock's face, behind his ear. His pointed ear.

"Holy shit," Jim breathed.

"Exactly," said Christine. "Either he's a human that's mutated to the point that he shouldn't even have lived past infancy, or… shit, Jim, I can't believe I'm even thinking this, but--"

"Or what, Christine?"

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes had gone cold. "Or he's not human at all."

"One reason," McCoy snapped the second he saw Jim was conscious. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't go straight to the authorities with that…that…green-blooded freak. For god's sake, Jim, he could be anything. He could be genetically engineered. He could be some kind of biological weapon. It's a wonder that blood of his didn't kill us all."

"Copper," Jim muttered. "It smelled like copper."

"That's probably because it's copper- instead of iron-based," McCoy said. "You know, logically speaking." He gave Jim a nasty look. "Like a mollusk," he spat.

"Len, that's really not helpful," Christine cut in. "There is very little that's logical about this. Jim, if this all happened the way you say it did, there are people out there that want Spock. They'll be… they'll be looking for him."

"The skinny guy on the street--he told his partner that they'd come looking for his body. If he…if he didn't make it. And they didn't expect him to."

"I can't even tell what they shot him with," said McCoy, vitriol gone for the moment. "The wound was in his abdomen, but there was no bullet. You said he went down like he was shot?"

"Yeah. I mean, I've never seen a human--a person get shot before, not for real anyway, but yeah. It was just like a gun, but there was no sound, no shot."

"And no bullets, so it wasn't a silencer."

Jim shook his head. "This has to do with his work. I know it. That's why he was so secretive about it."

"Well, he's into some serious shit, that's for damn sure," McCoy said. "And people are going to be looking for him. We've got to get him out of here. "
"Bones, he can't move yet. He hasn't even been conscious since this happened. Fuck, for that matter, how do you know he's going to wake up?"

If McCoy noticed the way Jim's voice caught at the end of that sentence, he didn't acknowledge it.

"His vitals are good. We sedated him, but...it's strange, it almost seems like he's in some kind of coma, but nothing really supports that. His heart rate is drastically reduced, especially if you consider the whacked out pulse rates we were getting when you brought him in. Jim, do you realize his heart rate was over three hundred beats per minute? That's..." McCoy shook his head. "That's amazing. Jim, if he's not human...think of the implications! The opportunities for study would be--"

"I know, Bones. But he's not a specimen, okay? He's a...a person. And I know things were messed up between us when this happened, but I care about what happens to him."

Christine moved to stand next to McCoy and put a hand on his arm.

"We know, Jim," she said, looking pointedly at McCoy.

"We know," he echoed.

Jim exhaled a long breath he didn't know he's been holding. "Okay," he said. "We'll wait 'til he wakes up. Then we'll figure something out."

Spock slept for two more days. Well, 47 hours, 35 minutes. Jim knew because he sat with him for most of it. He didn't know anything about comas, so maybe Spock was comatose, but it looked to Jim like he was very deeply asleep. He moved sometimes, and made little sounds. Jim sat at his desk chair, sifting uncomfortably. Finally he reasoned that Spock wasn't conscious anyway, so it didn't matter where he passed the time, and he settled on the floor.

He was dosing when it happened. He half-dreamed of a hot, dry place, of red cliffs and blue sky. There was something familiar about it, though he couldn't remember ever having been there before. When he woke up, Spock was talking.

He was speaking in tongues again, although Jim had the grim suspicion that there was more to the words than nonsense.

"Wilat..." Spock muttered. "Wilat...where am I?"

Jim leapt up and sat on the edge of the bed. He felt a stab of guilt as he saw Spock wince at the shift in weight.

"Jim?" Spock said. "Where am I?"

"Hey," Jim said. "You're in my apartment. You were...I had to bring you here. You said not to take you to a hospital, and Bones is a doctor, and--"

Spock sat up, eyes wild. "You--someone else has seen me?"

"It's okay. He's not going to tell anyone."

Spock looked around the room as if expecting someone to materialize out of thin air. "We are not safe here. I should be dead; they will know by now that I'm not. None of you are safe..." He moved as if to get out of bed.

"Hey, hey. You need to stay put, okay? You're not well, not yet. We're going to get you out of here,
but…you need to tell me what's going on. You need to tell me where to go."

Spock looked at him warily. "You…you know what I am? And you still wish to help?"

"I do. I mean, no, I don't know what you are, exactly. But I do know that…that you're my friend. I care about what happens to you, Spock, hard as it may be for you to believe. I'm not going to just throw you to the wolves without a fight."

Spock was quiet for a long moment, his brow knitted in thought. Finally, he seemed to relax, some of the tension draining out of his face, though his back was still ramrod-straight against the headboard. "Thank you," he said finally. Carefully, he reached out his hand and placed it atop Jim's on the quilt.

"Spock…" Jim started. Just then, the door opened and Christine poked her head around the doorframe.

"Hi," she said. "I heard voices, and I thought you might be hungry." She brought in a tray bearing two steaming bowls of soup.

"Thank you," Spock said. "You and your partner have been most generous with your time and abilities. It was…unnecessary."

She gave him a hard look. "It was absolutely necessary. We're doctors. We don't just let people bleed to death on the floor without a fight." She set the soup down on the desk and left, closing the door behind her.

"She is angry," Spock said with a little sigh.

"She just doesn't understand why you'd write yourself off so easily," Jim countered. "You would have died if I'd left you on the street, or if I'd taken you home."

"It would be illogical to expect you to risk your lives for me. You hardly know me," Spock said.

"You're right," Jim said. "I don't know you at all." He looked down at his hands. They sat in silence for a long time, Jim watching the play of light that filtered through the blinds onto the floor. He couldn't stand Spock's blank stare any longer.

"You must believe me when I say I never intended to cause you distress. I believed your motives to be…other than they are. Perhaps closer to my own. I was mistaken. Do you not see, Jim, that there was no way for me to explain? Would you have attempted it, were you in my position?"

"I'm not sure exactly how you explain to someone you're dating that you're not human," Jim said, acquiescing.

"Precisely."

"Why even get involved, then?" He ran a hand over his eyes. "Fuck, I cannot believe I'm sitting here having a relationship discussion with a...um, what *are* you, anyway? I'm sorry, that sounds bad, but--"

"Alien," Spock said, voice clipped. "I am an alien."

Jim laughed. He couldn't stop himself. It had the same hysterical edge as his laughing fit out in the living room, before Bones sedated him.

"I don't know what to say to that," he admitted. "Talking about our 'relationship' when you're from
another planet strikes me as kind of…"

"A non-sequitur?"

"Exactly."

"I am sorry," Spock said.

"It's all right," Jim said. He still felt dangerously close to laughter or tears. He wasn't sure which, and that made him feel even worse.

"Perhaps there is one way I might begin to explain," Spock said carefully. "I could tell you the story of my people, of my home. But I think…I think perhaps I would prefer to show you."

"How can you do that?"

"It is not an act that is typically undertaken casually," Spock said as if to himself. "But I think in this instance it may be the most logical course of action." He looked back up at Jim. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Should I?"

Spock looked momentarily exasperated, and Jim felt another laugh bubbling in his chest. Possibly the good kind, but he bit it back anyway. "Yes, okay. I trust you."

"Very well. You may wish to make yourself more comfortable," Spock suggested, eyeing Jim's awkward position on the edge of the bed.

Jim settled cross-legged on the mattress across from Spock, a pillow in his lap.

"Please lean forward," Spock said, and then before Jim could hesitate, he reached for Jim's face. He placed his thumb and forefinger at two precisely-chosen points. "My mind to your mind," Spock said in a murmur. "My thoughts to your thoughts."

Jim's first thought was that he was falling off the bed. But then the floor never came, and he was flailing in black space, waving his arms in a futile effort to right himself. He felt funny. No, he felt like this was funny. Wait, no he didn't. This wasn't funny at all, it was fucking scary. And then Jim realized that the thought hadn't come from him at all.

Jim, please remain calm, said the voice in his head.

"What the--what the hell is this? Where am I?"

It is not necessary to speak aloud. Our minds are one.

You're in my head? He felt panicky, like child with a messy room. Can you read my mind?

That would be impolite.

And in that moment, Jim believed Spock completely.

The blackness dissolved and Jim found himself standing on a vast red plain. The air was thin and dry, and he could feel the sun on his face. Spock was next to him, though Jim wasn't sure how he knew this to be true, because he couldn't see him. They were looking toward a city, huge buildings clinging to towering cliffs. Jim didn't need to be an architect to know their construction was impossible.
Spock's voice was everywhere. It was infused with a warmth Jim had only heard once before. *This is my home. This is Vulcan.*

*But where are we?*

*We are 16.3 light years from Earth, in the Vulcan system. Our planet is named for the system in which it is located. Specifically, we are on the outskirts of the city of Shi'Kahr, where I was born.*

*How are we breathing?*

*We are not literally on Vulcan, Jim. Our bodies are still in your bedroom, breathing Earth's oxygen. Incidentally, were we actually on Vulcan, you would have no difficulty breathing. Vulcan is an M-class planet, like Earth. Our atmosphere is thinner, but still capable of supporting life.*

A flurry of movement to the left caught Jim's eye, and he turned.

*Uh, is that...is that you?*

A tall, slightly gawky young man sat in the shadow of a rocky outcrop about fifteen yards away. He gave no indication that he was aware of the intruders. His attention was focused on the hulking creature curled on the sand next to him. It looked for all the world like a massive teddy bear. It yawned and stretched lazily in the sun, revealing a nasty set of fangs. Jim shuddered.

The young man's shoulders were slumped, though his face bore no expression Jim could see. He was unmistakably Spock.

*That is indeed me. This is my memory of the afternoon preceding my first morning of advanced study at the Vulcan Science Academy.*

*Sounds fancy. What's with the giant bear?*

Spock straightened. *That is I-Chaya. He was a sehlat, a native predator. He was domesticated.* He sounded miffed.

*Was?*

*He was killed in a fight with a le-matya while attempting to protect me.*

Jim didn't bother asking what a *le-matya* was. If it could take down a giant fanged teddy bear, he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

*You seem sad.*

Spock was quiet for a while before he answered. *Sadness is an emotion.*

*Yes, and? You're telling me you don't feel?*

Spock didn't respond, but the scene before Jim dissolved, replaced by a dimly-lit room. The floor and walls were curved like a bowl set into the ground. Jim could see an opening over his head and had the sense of a vast space opening out beyond it. Jim had the odd sensation he was inside a gigantic aquarium populated by strange deep-sea creatures.

*This is a classroom,* Spock's voice offered before Jim could ask.
It is here that Vulcan youth begin official instruction in the teachings of Surak. Prior to embracing Surak's philosophy, learning to prize logic above all, Vulcans were a race ruled by desire— for pleasure, for conquest, for revenge. Our unchecked emotion nearly brought us to our knees.

The idea of Spock overcome by desire was not entirely unpleasant, Jim thought. He felt a strange warmth prickle over him, like a mental blush.

*There's nothing embarrassing about desire, Spock.*

*I do not expect you to understand.*

The classroom melted into blackness and abruptly Jim became aware of physical sensation again. He was draped over Spock on the bed, their bodies pressed flush together. Jim's right arm was asleep. He scrambled off of Spock, who groaned at Jim's weight.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, am I hurting you?"

"I am unharmed. The wound is slightly sore, but I believe the doctors will be quite impressed with my capacity for recovery," Spock said. He leaned back and raised the hem of Jim's borrowed t-shirt. Jim gasped. The wound was nearly healed, a thin green line that looked as if it might not even scar.

"How is that possible?"

"I was not merely unconscious for the past 47 hours, 35 minutes. I was in, for lack of a more accurate descriptor in your language, a healing trance. My heart rate and metabolism slowed to 52.8% of normal functionality so that my body might devote maximum energy to healing itself. As you can see, it was quite effective."

Jim leaned against the wall. He felt dizzy and exhausted.

"Vertigo is a common side effect of the meld on low-psi individuals," Spock said.

"Was that what that psychic connection thing was? A meld?"

"A mind-meld. Vulcans demonstrate pronounced telepathic abilities, perhaps second only to Betazoids."

"Wait. Betazoids? You're telling me you aren't the only little green men out there?"

"I believe myself to be of above-average height, Jim. Additionally, while my blood may appear green when exposed to oxygen, I am not—"

"Okay, okay, don't be so pedantic."

"Vulcans and humans are by no means the only sentient life forms in the universe. Your species' insistence to the contrary has always struck me as particularly audacious."

"I don't know. I mean, I guess humans are pretty damn arrogant in general. But I never gave much thought to aliens and ghosts and all that woo-woo stuff. Not that there aren't tons of weirdos out there that do. But I guess I'm the weirdo now, huh?"

Jim got up off the bed and walked over to his desk. He plucked the old photograph out of its frame by the corner, careful not to smudge the surface.

"I mean, for instance, I tried to find information on my father, on his Air Force career, and I kept pulling up all these crazy conspiracy theory websites. Something called the Carbon Creek Project,
and 'Alien technology used to make doomsday weapons!' Just crazy stuff. There are people who devote their whole lives to this shit. This one site, *The Lone Gunman…* Spock? What's up?"

Spock's eyebrows shot halfway up to his hairline. "May I…examine that photograph?" he asked.

Something in his voice made Jim hesitate. He had the crazy thought that maybe he could still tell what Spock was thinking, some aftereffect of the mind-meld thing. He passed Spock the picture, and Spock stared at it. Jim noticed for the first time that Spock hadn't worn his glasses since before the attack. In fact, Jim wasn't even sure he'd bothered to pick them up at the scene. Another cover, he guessed, like the hat. Spock's eyebrows were definitely interesting, though Jim couldn't say he'd ever thought about what extraterrestrial eyebrows might look like.

"Spock? What is it?"

Spock blanched. "This man, here." He pointed to George, looking irritated in the back row. "This man is your father?"

"That's him."

"And he is deceased?"

"He died in a plane crash. On my birthday. I told you all this, remember? My tragic past? The source of my chronic existential malaise?"

Spock looked up at Jim, dark eyes wide. "Your father did not die in an airplane crash. I do not know precisely what killed him, but if he is in this picture, with these men, he did not fly airplanes."

"And how do you know this?"

"Because I know the men in this picture."

Jim slid to the floor and dropped his head into his hands. "I have a feeling that the back story on this is going to take another mind-meld," he said.

"We do not have time," Spock said. "Do you have a telephone?"

"Of course."

"Please call Mr. Scott," Spock said.

"Scotty? As in, my boss Scotty?"

"Affirmative."

"You know, 'yes' will work just fine," Jim said.

"Jim," Spock said.

Jim grabbed his cell from its charger on the desk and dialed the bar.

"Night Owl," Uhura said with a sigh. She hated the bar's name.

"Uhura?"

"Oh my god, Jim? Where the hell have you been? You didn't show for shift yesterday and you haven't been answering--"
"I'm fine. I can't explain right now, but I'm fine. Is Scotty there?"

"Sure, hang on."

Jim could hear her mutter his name to someone in the background, and then Scotty was on the line.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, hey, Scotty."

"Are you all right?"

"Uh, yeah. Look, not that I really want to bring this up, but why all the concern for my safety? Why aren't you reaming me out for the no-show?"

"Is Spock with you?"

"What the--why?"

"Is he with you, and is he all right?"

Jim glanced over at Spock, who seemed to intuit the question. He nodded.

"Yes, and yes."

Scotty sighed. "Good."

"I get the feeling I'm not supposed to ask you how you knew he might be in trouble."

"Uh, affirmative."

"Do you...want to talk to him?"

"That'd be helpful."

Jim handed Spock the phone. He felt like he was on one of those awful hidden camera shows.

Spock nodded in agreement at whatever Scotty was saying. It struck Jim as a very human mannerism, and he felt a corresponding clutching sensation in his chest. He felt a creeping sense of calm wash over him, and he decided he'd better find Bones and get an official medical diagnosis of shock before he decided to drink himself stupid in an attempt to pass out and wake up from this utterly cracked dream. Then Spock finished his conversation with a clipped, "Thank you. Spock out," and snapped the phone shut.

"We must leave here as soon as possible," Spock said.

"We?"

Spock looked at him for a long moment. "I apologize," he said at last, stiffening. He tugged on the hem of his shirt. "I thank you for your help, Jim Kirk. I will remove myself from the premises pending assurance of my safe passage out of New York."

"You talk like a thesaurus when you get upset," Jim said. "I think it's a defense mechanism. Very human of you."

"I see no reason to remain here and be insulted."
"Oh, lighten up, Spock. Of course I'm coming with you. I have to make sure you get out of here alive."

"You are under no obligation to do so," Spock said, though some of the stiffness had drained from his tone.

"I know that. I'm doing it because I want to."

"It will be extremely dangerous. There is an 87.7% chance one or both of us will be killed at some point in the next few days. It's not logical to risk your life unnecessarily," Spock said.

"Well, then fuck logic," Jim said. "Now where are we going, and how do we get there?"

***

As it turned out, Christine was the proud owner of a 1992 Toyota Tercel. "It's kind of a lemon," she said, "but I had to get it fixed up to pass inspection a couple months ago, so it shouldn't break down between here and Philly. Where are you going in Pennsylvania, anyway?"

"Carbon Creek," Jim said. "I know, I'd never heard of it, either. According to Spock it's an old mining town."

"It is fifteen miles northeast of the city of Scranton, in Lackawanna County," Spock said, stepping out onto the sidewalk. "Anthracite mining was the backbone of the town's economy beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, the recent demise of the mining industry has precipitated a period of decline."

"Sounds like a real garden spot," McCoy said. "I'm jealous."

"Yes, the surrounding area is quite rural," Spock said.

"I was being--"

"So, we about ready?" Jim said. He loaded their bags into the trunk and slammed it shut.

"I must ask that we briefly return to the apartment," Spock said. "I require a few moments of Dr. Chapel's time before we depart," Spock said. "There is a simple medical procedure I require assistance with."

"Christine? Why?"

"I was not entirely lucid during triage, Dr. McCoy. However, I did notice that Dr. Chapel has a demonstrably lighter touch with a scalpel."

"Wait, what?" Jim cut in. "What the hell do you need a scalpel for now?"

"Jim, do you recall my attackers' reason for leaving us?"

"Yeah, they said that you were going to die, but even if you didn't they'd...know somehow."

"Correct. I have a sub-dermal implant located here," Spock said, gesturing at his right forearm. "It is a tracking device. During my recovery, I was able to modulate my life signs in order to confuse it. It
is likely inconclusive data that has prevented them from attempting to remove my body from these premises."

"So they--they know you're here?"

"If they do not know now, they will soon," Spock said. "Once we leave here, I will no longer be able to fool the device by remaining at rest, and they will realize where we are going."

"So what do you need me to do?" Christine asked.

Spock looked matter-of-fact. "I need you to cut it out."

Back inside, Jim steered clear of the bathroom, which he was sure was definitely not a sanitary place to conduct a surgical procedure, no matter how simple or routine Spock claimed it was.

"There is nothing routine about removing a goddamn tracking device from your arm," McCoy said.

"If you don't stop pacing like that, I'm going to start thinking you're worried about him," Jim said. McCoy glared.

"I wouldn't say 'worried' is exactly what I'm feeling about this utter farce of a situation, Jim. I'd say 'shit scared' is a little closer to the mark. Are you honestly going to get in that car and ride off into the sunset into whatever the hell is waiting for him out there?"

"Yes. I am. And don't make that face, Bones, you know as well as I do that if it was Christine who was in danger, who they were tracking, you'd jump at the chance to help her, and you'd do whatever it took."

McCoy looked at him. He looked like he was chewing on something he wanted to say, but then he let his shoulders drop with a sigh and looked away. "You know, the bitch of it is, I'm pretty sure you're right," he said with a slow shake of his head. "You want to know why that is?" He waited a beat, turning to examine a battered movie poster hanging on the wall. It was a promo poster for some French movie Jim had won in an eBay auction. A blonde actress stared down at them from it, the twitch of a secret on her pursed lips.

"Bones?"

He shook his head again. "It's because I love her, you idiot," he said. "And if I were planning on running away with her, I'd probably tell her. Might get some more action that way."

Jim stepped closer and punched him in the arm. "I'm not going to lie," he said. "That felt pretty good."

***

Spock was quiet as they left the city, and Jim was grateful for it. He hadn't been behind the wheel in awhile, and driving in Manhattan was trial by fire. Finally, they left the city behind and the country began to open out around them. Night was beginning to fall, and Jim felt the tension that had dogged him on the city streets began to melt away. There was a fresh bandage on Spock's arm, and the falling dark gave the illusion of invisibility. It wasn't entirely called for, but Jim began to relax.

"I believe we should take an indirect route," Spock said, looking out the window at the rising moon.

"That's probably smart," Jim said. "Should we go south, find somewhere to stay the night? Then we can cut back up north in the morning."
"Yes," Spock said. He sounded distracted.

"So now that we're alone in this car, are you going to explain any of this? Or am I going to be killed in my sleep by ninja paratroopers without knowing anything?"

"Do not make light of the situation," Spock said. "I have done all I can to divert suspicion, but we remain in grave danger."

"Yeah," Jim said. "I know."

He fought rising tension as a car passed them on the left. It was a highway patrolman. Jim fought the instinct of a kid who'd learned to drive at fourteen on deserted farm roads and stuck to ten miles under the limit.

"The year was 1957 on the Terran calendar," Spock said abruptly. "My father's name was Sarek. He was an officer on a four-man survey vessel, the Nakarat. They strayed close to Earth's orbit, where they witnessed the launch of the satellite Sputnik as a disturbance in the planet's atmosphere. Shortly thereafter, the Nakarat experienced a technical failure and was forced to make an emergency landing on Earth."

"Let me guess," Jim said. "They landed in a godforsaken mining town in the middle of nowhere, Pennsylvania."

"Correct. They were stranded in Carbon Creek for months. They landed in the forest and attempted to remain there undetected, but were eventually forced to venture into the human settlement in order to obtain food.

"They came to believe they would not be rescued. They were far off course and in dire straits when they broadcast their distress call. As time passed, they had every reason to suspect they were trapped on Earth forever.

"My father was a scientist by nature. He effectively continued his survey of Earth, albeit from an increasingly anthropological perspective. He found humans fascinating--all that rampant emotionalism, anathema to Vulcans, but so integral to the human experience. His fellow officers were revolted. They maintained a bare minimum of contact with the townspeople and believed Sarek's behavior aberrant. They worked tirelessly to repair their communications equipment using the rudimentary Terran technology available to them. At last, they succeeded in retrieving a message from a rescue ship. Their distress call had been heard.

"Sarek found that when presented with the opportunity to return to Vulcan, he did not wish to leave. He had the overwhelming sense that he had stumbled into contact with a civilization at a crucial moment in its history. Thrown into relief, he examined his former life on Vulcan and found it wanting. On Earth, he felt…desire. Passion. A sense of adventure. On Vulcan, he had not realized that these emotions even had names. He realized that a life on Earth offered him these things, and that he was willing to risk his very life--everything he had ever known--in order to experience them."

"So what happened? Did he stay on Earth?" Jim asked.

"He did. He remained in Carbon Creek for a time, then traveled north. He wished to see as much of Earth as he could, so he traveled across the United States and then the world, stopping as necessary to earn money. What he saw was a world in turmoil, a world he believed to be in grave danger of destroying itself. He knew then that he did not wish to live out his days as an interplanetary tourist, living and eventually dying as a human. He prepared a report, a survey. And when he had finished, he contacted the Vulcan High Command and revealed that he had not perished on the Nakarat as his
crew reported."

Jim snorted. "So how'd that go over?"

"I did mention he risked his life, did I not? The High Command was difficult to convince, but Sarek managed to do so. He presented the council with a compelling argument for humanity's inherent intelligence and ingenuity. But he warned that what amounted to petty provincial concerns risked destroying your entire civilization and rendering your planet uninhabitable. He posited that perhaps the revelation that humanity was not alone might inspire a greater degree of prudence in matters of violence.

"He proposed that the High Command initiate a small-scale First Contact, placing himself in the role of an ambassadorial intermediary between Earth and Vulcan. He believed that his familiarity with humans would enable him to forge a union between worlds. And it did, for a time. We introduced elements of Vulcan technology in hopes of promoting exploration, survey missions to new worlds not unlike the mission that brought Sarek to Earth."

"For a time?" Jim asked.

"When Vulcan decided to make contact, my father recommended appealing to the United States government. It proved a fateful decision. The government developed a sense of proprietorship, housing the project in military facilities, providing personnel. Eventually, this faction could no longer restrain the temptation to consider the…defensive capabilities of Vulcan technology," Spock said in a dark voice. "We continued despite these elements for years. It now appears that we can no longer ignore them."

"So why didn't you just take your toys and go home?"

"The High Command has long recommended total withdrawal from Earth. Knowledge of the project was never widespread; it would not be difficult to simply withdraw with the majority of Earth's population none the wiser. This project is infinitely more important to Earth than to Vulcan. I do not know if there are any Vulcans outside the project itself or the High Command that know of it. I myself have often questioned the project's worth."

"Why are you still here, then? Why did you come in the first place? You said you were raised on Vulcan."

Spock stared at his hands. A flush crept over his cheeks as if he were discussing something very personal. "I was raised on Vulcan," he said.

"And you chose to come here. Sarek didn't have a choice," Jim said.

"As a child, I embraced my Vulcan heritage wholeheartedly. It was difficult for me to comprehend Sarek's youthful…indiscretions. However, in time, I found…I wished to. That wish fueled my motivation to come to Earth."

"I'm sorry if this is an obvious question, but couldn't you just have some kind of heart-to-heart with him?"

The look on Spock's face told Jim that he had probably just stuck his foot in his mouth in monumental fashion. Spock did not disappoint.

"I regret that such a discussion is not possible," he said. "My father perished in a shuttle crash in my tenth year of life. I frequently note the dramatic irony that the same mode by which Sarek effectively gave me life was also the instrument of his demise."
"He does seem to have been awfully prone to crash landings," Jim said. "But then again, so was my dad, apparently." He sighed. "I'm sorry, Spock."

"It is of no consequence," Spock sniffed. "I was not close to my father, not by human standards. He conducted the project on Earth while my mother remained with me on Vulcan. As such, mourning his death beyond the appropriate ritual period would be illogical."

Jim glanced across at Spock. He was staring out the window. One hand twitched at the hem of his shirt. He'd borrowed one of Jim's, a dusty blue, and it made his skin look translucent in the low light.

"Look, I know you say you don't feel emotion, or whatever, but I know what it's like to deal with not having a father. No matter what you say, or how many times you tell yourself that it doesn't matter, that you never knew him anyway--it takes a toll."

"I assure you, it has taken no such toll on me," Spock said.

Jim sighed. He caught a flurry of motion out of the corner of his eye. A deer foraged on the verge at the side of the road. Please, Jim thought. Please stay where you are. He tapped the brakes, and the deer leapt onto the highway.

Jim's arm shot out reflexively, reaching across Spock's body and checking his forward motion. The brakes screamed and it seemed to take minutes for the car to grind to a halt in the middle of the road. The deer scrambled across the lane and leapt into the underbrush. Jim could hear it crash away over the sound of his own breathing.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Spock?"

Spock gripped his seatbelt with both hands, his knuckles bloodless. The streetlight caught the wet shine of his lip where he'd bitten it. "I am unharmed," he said.

"Okay," said Jim. "I think we've gone far enough for tonight. We should find a motel and get up before daybreak tomorrow, make the rest of the trip then."

"That is acceptable," said Spock. Jim wondered if he imagined the slight quaver in the other man's voice.

The next exit promised gas, food, and lodging, so Jim pulled off the highway and into a Travelodge parking lot. "Stay in the car," he said. Spock nodded.

The man behind the desk moved slowly, swiping Jim's credit card and activating the room keys. Jim drummed his fingers against the counter and bit his lip to keep from snapping at the clerk to hurry up. He was suddenly very tired.

"Anywhere good to eat around here?" Jim asked. "Uh, anywhere with vegetarian food?"

The man raised an eyebrow and shook his head.

"Figures," Jim said, exasperated.

"You know, now that I think about it, my daughter went through a phase last year," the man said. "The Shell station on the corner has bean and cheese burritos that are okay in a pinch." He slid the key cards across the counter to Jim.

"Thanks," Jim said. He felt a rush of guilt. "I'll give it a shot."
"Enjoy your stay," said the man.

Spock had piled their bags in a neat stack beside the car. He leaned against it, arms crossed, staring at a cloud of bugs swirling around a streetlight in the parking lot. Jim handed him one of the keys.

"We're in 222," he said, hoisting a bag.

The room was primarily decorated in dusty purple and smelled of lemon with a strong chemical edge. Jim dropped his duffel on the bed and sat next to it, leaning back onto his hands. Spock followed suit, although his back remained poker straight.

"You have the best posture I've ever seen," Jim said. "Are you hungry? I think I'm going to go down the street and forage for sustenance."

"I saw several dining establishments prior to our arrival at this hotel," Spock said. "I doubt foraging will be strictly necessary."

"Now I know you're feeling better," Jim said with a grin. "Pedantic as ever. I'll try to find you something edible."

In the end, Jim returned with two microwave burritos, a bottle of water for Spock, and a candy bar for himself. Something told him Spock didn't have a sweet tooth. When he got back to the room, Spock was stretched out on the bed, fingers steepled over his chest. He looked tired and pale against the riotous floral bedspread. Jim felt a stab of sadness he couldn't explain.

"I brought you a burrito," he said. He wasn't sure what he wanted to say to Spock, but it wasn't that. "Are you…okay?" Better.

"I am tired," Spock said. He sat up a little, retrieved the foil package Jim had tossed onto the bed, and began to unwrap it. "I do not believe I am entirely recovered from the blood loss I suffered in the attack."

Jim settled onto the bed next to him, scooting close enough that their legs were touching. Spock was wearing a pair of Jim's jeans, the ridiculous skinny pair Gaila made him buy to wear on the date with the vapid curator. They didn't hang right on Spock's lean frame, and it made Jim want to force-feed him about a million more convenience store burritos. He realized he could count on maybe two hands the number of times he'd seen Spock eat.

Jim finished his own food and lay back against the headboard. "Your mother," he started. "She's human, isn't she?"

He felt Spock tense beside him. "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"You never mentioned your father before today, but you talked about her. And in the car, you said something about Sarek's 'youthful indiscretions', about what he found so compelling here. I just kind of guessed."

"He met her at an academic conference," Spock said. "She taught linguistics. When he confessed his origins, she was silent for a long moment. Then she asked him to teach her Vulcan. She embraced Vulcan culture wholeheartedly. It fascinated her, and I believe it continues to do so."

"She sounds pretty cool. And she obviously knits a mean sweater, too, so…"

"She knit that garment for my father," Spock said. "She kept it in a trunk in her sleeping quarters. The night before I boarded the shuttle to Earth, I stole into her quarters and took it." His face was...
flushed again, and he worried a loose thread on the duvet between thumb and forefinger.

"You wanted something to remember her by," Jim said.

Spock looked away. "It is an inanimate object. To ascribe anything more to it is an illogical concession to sentimentality. However...I will admit to curiosity regarding my parents' relationship. They chose to raise me on my father's home planet. As a child, I embraced Surak's teachings and viewed rampant emotionalism with some measure of...distaste. I found this difficult to reconcile with my father's obvious predilection for humanity."

He turned to look at Jim again, bright spots of color on his cheeks. "I have struggled with this contradiction throughout my life. I find myself beginning to understand it now."

Jim felt warmth flood him, chasing away the twinge of pain he'd felt watching Spock earlier. He swallowed past a lump in his throat.

"The project--it's over, isn't it? I mean--we're going to Carbon Creek because you're leaving."

"I no longer believe that I can remain on Earth unharmed," Spock said quietly.

"Listen, I...I need to tell you something. That night at the museum, before the attack. I wanted to tell you that I followed you to work because I was worried, worried and angry. I wanted...I wanted to know you. And I didn't understand why I couldn't." He laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of the explanation for Spock's secrecy.

"This whole thing--this is crazy. And me being here right now? You were right, it's not logical. Not at all. But...like I said before. Fuck logic." And he leaned over and kissed Spock on the mouth.

Jim felt Spock tense, and for a moment he was certain he would pull away. But then the tension melted out of him and Spock returned the kiss enthusiastically, reaching behind Jim to card long fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. Jim reached for Spock's hand and Spock moaned into this mouth.

"I've wanted to do that--really do it-- for a long time," Jim gasped when they broke apart. "How do...is it like this, for Vulcans?"

"If you are referring to sexual intercourse, the mechanics are similar," Spock said in a disturbingly matter of fact way.

"I...Uh. Yes, that," Jim said.

Spock pressed a kiss to the corner of Jim's mouth. "However," he said, "this is not the way Vulcans kiss."

"Oh. Really?" Jim squeaked, his voice jumping an octave as Spock reached out and twined their fingers together. It was a simple action, but Jim found himself struck by the tenderness of it. The moment felt stolen somehow, like kissing someone with eyes left open. Jim supposed that that was exactly what he was doing. Spock's face softened, his eyes fluttering closed. His mouth parted slightly, and a flush of green rose in his cheeks again. He gasped.

"Vulcan hands are...very sensitive," Spock said.

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really?" He set to work, taking hold of Spock's right hand and turning it over in his own. He trailed his index finger over Spock's palm, tracing the lines there, moving out across each finger as if drawing rays on a child's picture of the sun.
"Do you like that?"

Spock murmured something Jim couldn't quite hear.

Jim pressed his thumbs into the fleshy spot under Spock's own thumb and worked at a knot of tension he found there. Spock hissed. Jim raised the hand to his mouth and kissed it, tongue darting out to taste salt and cayenne.

Spock moaned aloud, and Jim grinned wide. The room was suddenly too much, too full of sound and light. The news anchor was talking about the weather, unseasonable heat in the South, a ten-car pileup on the interstate.

"I want to…hold on. Just wait one second, okay?"

Spock didn't answer. He lay on the bed, chest pumping like a bird.

In the bathroom, Jim filled his palm with cold water and splashed his face, patting it down with an ugly lavender washcloth. The person who looked back at him from the mirror was wild and strange. He tried to remember the last time he'd shaved. He turned and went back into the bedroom, clicking off the television as he went, then the overhead light for good measure. Spock moved to extinguish the lamp on the bedside table, but Jim waved his hand away.

"I want to see," he said, reaching for Spock again. Spock flinched, shifting over on the bed. It was deliberate and economical, like everything Spock did, and Jim couldn't miss its point. He sighed. "No?"

"You should rest," Spock said.

"What? Why?"

"We do not have time to waste on physical indulgences." Spock looked away. "Jim, please understand--"

Jim waved his hand. "No, no. You're right."

Spock slid a fingertip under Jim's chin, tilting his face up so their eyes met. "I am not prevaricating when I say that I wish our schedule were not so regimented," he said, glancing down at the crotch of his jeans. Jim followed his gaze and was gratified to see that Spock was indeed telling the truth. He smirked at him and got a raised eyebrow and another brief kiss in return.

"I swear to God," Jim said. "The second we get some time…” He stretched out on the bed, crossing his arms behind his head. The stress and adrenaline of the day began to ebb out of him, and he drifted off to sleep with Spock warm at his back.

***

Spock woke Jim a few hours before dawn. "We should leave," he said. Jim nodded. He took a shower, leaning back against the slimy tile and letting the water run hot over him. He closed his eyes and thought about Spock gasping into his mouth. He reached down to take himself in hand, already half hard at the memory, but it felt dishonest somehow to do this with Spock in the next room. He twisted the faucet and released a blast of cold instead.
Spock was sitting on the edge of the bed when Jim emerged from the bathroom. He was reading a map. Jim dropped his towel and sat next to him, leaning in for a kiss. Fat drops of water fell on Spock's map, spreading like meteor craters drawn to scale across the landscape. Spock hummed with pleasure or annoyance, Jim couldn't tell which. He pulled away.

"We should leave," Spock repeated. "We should be on the road before daybreak."

"Mmm. I guess you're right."

Out in the parking lot, the sky was just beginning to lighten in the east. Spock stilled, one hand on the car door, and looked up to the west where the sky was still velvety black. He raised an arm and pointed. "That is the constellation humans call Camelopardalis," he said. "Just beyond it--there--is the approximate location of Vulcan and her sister planet T'Klut."

Jim looked. It was dizzying. He stared into the sky until it began to swim before his eyes. Jim's Boy Scout astronomy reminded him didactically that planets did not twinkle, so he imagined Vulcan shining out steadfast in its corner of the black, waiting.

"It's beautiful," Jim said.

"It is impossible to differentiate from this distance," Spock said. "But I assure you, it is beautiful."

They were an hour on the road when Spock glanced in the rearview mirror for the tenth time in as many minutes, eyes narrowed. He pursed his lips and gave Jim a sideways look before he spoke.

"What method of payment did you use at the hotel yesterday evening?"

"Credit card. Why?"

"I believe we are being followed," Spock said. "It is likely they were able to determine our location based on the use of your card."

"They can do that?"

"Most assuredly."

"Shit," Jim said. "Okay. What do you want me to do? I've never had to, uh, lose a tail before." Reflexively, he pulled off at the next exit, gliding through a yellow light. The dark sedan floored it through the intersection behind them and followed the Tercel back onto the highway.

"Huh," said Jim. He sped up. It was a grey morning as patches of low-hanging fog obscured the tops of the trees that lined the road. There were no other cars on the road. Of course, thought Jim. Of course we're stuck out here alone with whoever the hell is after us. Oh, and also I think I'm in love with an alien.

"What about one of those side roads?" he asked. "Do you think if we pulled off quickly enough..."

"I do not believe it will be possible to lose them," Spock said. "I selected this route specifically for its unpopularity; there is a faster route utilized by most commuters that bypasses the smaller towns."

He looked out the window again, then bent down to retrieve something from the bag at his feet.

"How does one open the window in this vehicle?" he asked.

"Uh, see that crank thing next to you? You turn it."
Jim thought he heard Spock mutter something under his breath, but he couldn't make it out. He rolled the window down.

"Please continue at our current rate of speed," Spock said, then knelt on his seat and leaned out the window, brandishing something small, shiny, and familiar.

"Hey," Jim said, struggling to keep his eyes on the road. "That's that gun thing the goons shot you with!"

"This, Mr. Kirk, is a phaser." He shut one eye and aimed.

Behind them, their pursuers' front passenger tire exploded in a puff of smoke. Jim winced as the car spun out across the lane, hubcap spewing sparks.

"Are they going to be okay?"

"I find that I do not care," Spock said. He did not return the phaser to the bag. Instead, he laid it in his lap, stroking the barrel with his index finger.

"So, I guess that's one of the weapons the military were so hot to get ahold of," Jim said. He must still be in some kind of shock. That was really the only explanation for why Christine's car was still on the road right now.

"It did appear markedly difficult to maintain focus on a global mission of peace when one had ready access to such an efficient killing device," Spock said.

"Yeah, we do like our weapons of mass destruction," Jim said. "Does it even need bullets? I'm guessing not, since Chris and Bones had a hell of a time finding one in you."

"It fires a nadien particle beam, the intensity of which dictates the damage the weapon will cause when fired at a target," Spock replied. "For example, just now I set the weapon to 'disintegrate'."

"So why did you live when they shot you before? If it's just a matter of adjusting the setting, there doesn't seem to be much margin for error."

"I don't know," Spock said. "The weapon my attackers used may have been a prototype, or perhaps stuck between settings. At any rate, I have dispatched our pursuers, with the unfortunate consequence of alerting them to my relative state of health."

"Do you think they'll be sending out reinforcements?"

"I do not know that, either," Spock said. "In any case, it is imperative that we reach Carbon Creek as expeditiously as possible."

The rest of the drive passed interminably, Jim looking out the window for the inevitable black helicopters and Spock drumming his fingers against the barrel of the phaser.

"Can you put that thing away? I'm afraid you'll disintegrate Christine's car by mistake. Then not only will I die a slow death by scalpel, we won't make it to Carbon Creek at all." Spock said nothing, but he stopped fondling the gun, which made Jim feel a little better.

***

They passed back over the Pennsylvania state line and Spock sat up a little straighter. By the time
they reached Lackawanna County his head was practically grazing the roof of the car. The knot in Jim's stomach began to loosen and he let himself smile.

"Excited?" he asked Spock.

"Vulcans do not get excited," Spock replied. "However, I will admit to some measure of relief at our proximity to our destination."

Jim decided against pointing out that Spock had seemed plenty excited last night, and looked out the window instead. It turned out that Carbon Creek looked pretty much like any other smallish town. There was a little museum on the main street next to a coffee shop with the unfortunate name of "Undergrounds", and then they were passing a CVS and a Stop'n'Shop and really, they could have been anywhere.

"Turn here," Spock said.

The road they took turned west and wound uphill into deep woods. They drove for a long time. The road was shady and dark under a web of trees and the low-hanging clouds, and for the first time since they'd left the hotel that morning Jim felt hidden, secure.

STATE FOREST, read the road sign. And twenty minutes later the fence sprang up on the left side of the road, tall enough to keep out deer but crowned with concertina wire that could keep out much bigger things.

"This is the eastern perimeter," Spock said. Jim reached across to the passenger seat and brushed his fingers over Spock's sleeve.

They drove for another five miles before they reached a break in the trees and what was unmistakably a guard tower. It reminded Jim of a deer blind out in the middle of the road, walled in with glass and more razor wire. A man dressed in fatigues stepped out of the booth and walked up to the car.

"Identification?"

Spock leaned across Jim, brandishing a badge. The guard looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. He glanced at Jim. "What about this guy?"

Jim fumbled with his wallet and pulled out his driver's license. "Uh, sorry about the picture," he said. "No one should have to see that." He laughed nervously. The guard ignored him, and Jim thought he heard Spock sigh.

"You're the only one cleared for access to this facility, Mr. Spock," the guard drawled. "I'm going to need him —," he gestured at Jim, "— to turn this car around immediately."

"Please contact Colonel Pike and relay the information on Mr. Kirk's identification card," Spock said.

The guard leaned against the frame of the window and sighed as if they were merely the next in a long line of trivialities conspiring to ruin his day. "Look, I'm not sure what you're trying to pull here, but I have my orders, and they are--"

Spock lunged across the driver's seat and caught hold of the guard's wrist. "Do it," he said.

The guard jerked away, shaking his thick, purpling wrist. He stalked into the booth without a word. Jim could see him dialing a telephone. A minute later, the red and white striped barrier swung up and
open, and the guard waved them on, a dark look on his face. Jim smiled and waved.

Then the trees closed in again, and they drove in silence until the road opened out to a vast meadow. There was a low concrete building directly in front of them, and Jim could just make out what looked like airplane hangars and a runway beyond it.

"They fly planes here? In the middle of the forest?"

"Not typically," Spock said. "Most of the test flights take place at the bases in Nevada. Regardless, I told you before that 'planes' is perhaps not the appropriate term." He indicated a large structure that appeared to be a parking garage. "Park the car over there."

"Ah, good to see that even secret government facilities have ample employee parking," Jim said. He pulled up to another booth and pressed a button for a ticket. "Display in full view on windshield," he read. "Hey, six bucks an hour? What the hell?"

"I believe we can have the ticket validated," Spock said, in a tone that suggested parking fees should be the least of Jim's concerns.

"I'm not sure why they need to charge for parking at secret government facilities anyway," Jim grumbled. "I mean, how does that show up on your credit card statement, exactly?"

Spock ignored him. They parked and walked up to a glass door, which slid open silently. The first thing Jim noticed about the building was the smell--it smelled like a doctor's office, or the inside of a freezer. Then there was a blur of movement, followed by a shout, and then Spock was against the wall, held there by the angel-faced kid from the Rockefeller Institute back in New York. He had Spock by the shoulders and the look on his face was one of surprise and joy, although to look at Spock you'd think the kid was attempting assault with a deadly weapon.

"Mr. Spock! You are alive!"

"It would appear so, Mr. Chekov. If you would kindly…" Spock squirmed in the boy's--Chekov's--grasp.

"Oh, yes, of course. Sorry, sorry." He turned to Jim. "It is difficult to remember the ways of these Vulcans, yes?"

"Um, yeah," Jim said. He looked askance at Spock, but he was preoccupied with straightening his clothing following Chekov's enthusiastic greeting.

"So, you two…work together?"

"That is correct," Spock said.

Chekov held out his hand. "Pavel Chekov," he said.

"Jim Kirk," Jim said. Chekov's eyes narrowed at the name, and he gave Jim a curious look, then shrugged and turned back to Spock.

"We dismantled the lab in New York as soon as Scotty told us what happened," Chekov said. "It was…?"

"It was as we suspected," Spock said.

Chekov cursed. "Pike will want to see you," he said after a moment.
Spock nodded. "That is to be expected," he said, turning to Jim. "Mr. Pike is the director of the Carbon Creek Consortium. I believe he will also wish to meet you. If you would accompany me?"

The building was nearly deserted. It was huge, full of bright white light and shiny, smooth metal. There were large labs on either side of the hall; they had the strange suspended-animation look of rooms that had been vacated in a hurry. A stray coffee cup and a half-eaten apple sat on an empty desk in an office. A shiver ran up Jim's spine.

"It's quiet in here," he said.

"They're shutting it down," Chekov muttered. Jim wasn't sure whether he was meant to hear him, so he didn't reply. He led them down to the end of the hallway to an unmarked door. There was a dark rectangle in the center of the wood, as if the rest of the door had faded around a sign or a nameplate.

The look the man behind the desk gave Spock was one of undiluted relief; he looked like he wanted to give Spock a bear hug. Jim wondered if the raw emotion evident in the man's expression made Spock uncomfortable, and he felt a twinge of resentment he couldn't quite explain. "Thank God you're all right," Pike said. "I called everyone I could down from Rockefeller as soon as I heard."

Spock nodded, not quite meeting Pike's eyes. Then he glanced at Jim as if suddenly remembering he was in the room. "Christopher Pike, I wish to introduce Jim Kirk," he said, gesturing at Jim. He stepped forward, hand extended. "Sir," he said.

Pike gawked. To his credit, it was only for a moment, but Jim didn't miss the way his eyes went wide and flicked up to his face, over his body, as if checking Jim was actually there. Jim swallowed nervously, feeling a little like a specimen. "What?" he asked.

Pike's arms dropped to his sides, and he wheeled himself out from behind the desk. Jim's stomach dropped; he hadn't noticed the wheelchair before.

"Well, I'll be damned," Pike said. "Spock, where the hell did you dig him up?"

Spock was concentrating intensely on a dark stain on the carpet. Pike rolled his eyes. "Whatever the story is, I'm impressed," he said. "Jim Kirk," he said, shaking his head. "Last time I saw you, you were bald as a cueball with ears out to here."

The hair on the back of Jim's neck stood on end, and he ran a hand over it reflexively. "I'm sorry, sir, but have--have we met?"

"You wouldn't remember it, but yeah, we've met," Pike said. "If it weren't for a bullshit accident that should never have happened, chances are pretty good your father would be here in this office today." He glanced down at his wheelchair. "Well, there were a couple of bullshit accidents," he added with a wry grin.

Jim's stomach lurched. He felt weak in the knees, and had the sudden impulse to sink onto the nearest available flat surface. He checked the urge, straightening in counterpoint. "How...how could you possibly know my father?"

Pike turned to look at Spock, who was still studying the spot on the floor. "You haven't told him?"

"Told me what?" Jim looked back and forth between Pike and Spock. "Spock, told me what?"

Spock's eyes darted up to meet Jim's, then away again. Jim had the impression of something dark and slippery wriggling away, and he fought the urge to grab Spock by the shoulders and shake him. Instead, he clasped his hands behind his back in the pose Spock so often adopted himself.
Spock opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "The photograph I saw in your--at your apartment, prior to our departure," he started. "I told you then that I recognized the men with your father." Jim nodded.

"I recognized them--recognized your father--because I have seen many such photographs, and heard the stories that accompanied them. There was a man standing near your father in the picture, Jim. A man with dark hair. That man is my father, Sarek. He knew your father well. In fact, I believe he considered him a…friend." Spock bit off that last word quickly, as if it was something vaguely distasteful he wished to dispense with at his earliest convenience.

Jim's head swirled. For the second time in the last ten minutes he had the strong desire to lie down. If this were some kind of Victorian drama, now would be an appropriate time to swoon. He imagined Spock offering smelling salts, or perhaps mouth-to-mouth. It didn't sound half bad, actually.

Jim glanced around the office. Pike and Chekov were studiously avoiding each other's eyes, and Jim had the infuriating sense that one or both of them was about to laugh.

"Mr. Chekov," Pike said in a strained voice. "I have the results of those tests we ran the other day. They're over in Lab V, if you don't mind…?" He nodded at the door.

"Tests, sir? Ah, yes, tests. Those tests. Certainly, sir." He bobbed his head at Jim and Spock and ducked into the hallway after Pike, fairly running out of Jim's field of vision. Jim turned back to Spock, who had moved to sit on the edge of Pike's desk, hands knitted together in his lap.

"So? When exactly were you planning on divulging this information, Spock?"

"I had hoped to avoid provoking an emotional response much like this one, when I have neither the time nor the inclination to deal with it," Spock said, sounding curt.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I apologize for having a perfectly natural and human response to the revelation that, all this time, I've been surrounded by people who apparently knew my father a hundred times better than I ever did, and who were perfectly happy to just, I don't know, stand idly by while I chased my tail looking for some scrap of something to explain his death."

Spock swallowed. "I wish to remind you that I am not, in fact, human, and as such--"

"As such my ass, Spock, you knew what this would mean to me. You may be married to your precious logic--which, I might add, is not necessarily the polar opposite of emotion--but you spend a hell of a lot of time with humans. You knew how I would react. How long have you known I was his son? How long? When we first met?"

Spock placed a palm flat on the top of the desk, as if grounding himself. "Jim, you must believe me. I did not know with any certainty until I saw the photograph. I admit that…once you told me of your father, of your search for information about his disappearance and death, I began to suspect. But I did not believe that disclosing my knowledge would serve any logical purpose."

"And you couldn't find it within yourself to see past logic? Just the once?"

Spock didn't answer.

"Just--there's one thing I don't understand. Why even start this? I mean, I know I'm a pain in the ass, but you could've told me to fuck off at any point. Why didn't you?"

"Initially, I had no intention of pursuing a personal relationship with you," Spock said. The declaration went right to Jim's gut, but he just nodded silently. There was a note of honesty in
Spock's voice, but there was also…something else, something deeper.

"You were, however, incredibly persistent, and over time I found myself considering the relative merits of becoming intimately involved with a human."

"What do you mean, 'merits'?" Jim raised an eyebrow at Spock suggestively.

"I assure you, prurient interests were not factored into my decision," said Spock, deflating Jim's attempts to keep the mood light. "I was becoming increasingly concerned for my safety. I was…alone, and I knew no one unbound by the secrecy of the project. I thought, were to disappear, to be eliminated, it might be preferable to have at least one person aware that I had existed at all." Color rose in Spock's cheeks, as it tended to do at the mention of anything Jim would categorize as 'only human'.

"Perhaps my motivations were a concession to emotion," Spock said stiffly. "Perhaps I was--am--illogically attached to the idea of being remembered. But in any case, that is why I sought you out, in the end."

Jim swallowed. "So, essentially--I was a warm body. There to, I don't know, bear witness to this whole fucked up situation." He clenched and unclenched his fists where they hung at his sides. He wanted to grab something solid, maybe throw it. He sighed. "Whatever. It's done now, right? Let's just…focus on getting you out of here in one piece."

"Jim, I am sorry."

"It's fine," Jim said. "Don't worry about it. But you know, what you did, just so you know? Totally human." He shot Spock a tight smile, ignoring the tightness in his chest.

"Based on my limited knowledge of humans, I find I cannot refute that statement," Spock said, sounding chagrined. The edges of his mouth quirked upwards just slightly.

"Well, it's…it's not an insult," Jim said. If anything, knowing Spock's motivation was liberating. For the first time, Jim felt like he could actually relate to him, like the playing field was somehow leveled. "Because, yeah, that was selfish as fuck, but so are most people. And if being the only one of your kind on a planet didn't make you at least a little bit selfish, I'd probably be worried about your sanity."

Spock looked like he wanted to argue that point, but he just shook his head slightly, and looked up at Jim. "We should find Pike," he said.

Pike and Chekov were in an empty lab a few doors down, poring over what looked to Jim like star charts. They appeared to be arguing, Chekov wildly gesticulating and Pike shaking his head slowly as if awed by his enthusiasm.

"How old is that guy?" Jim said, listening to the technical gibberish Chekov was spouting.

"He arrived in the United States at the age of thirteen and graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in three years," Spock said. "I have come to understand that that is an impressive accomplishment, although I completed my tenure at the Vulcan Science Academy a full two Terran years ahead of schedule with a more rigorous curriculum."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Of course you did," he said.

"I only state facts, Jim."
"Spock, Chekov here thinks we can make it to the rendezvous point in three days," Pike said. "I told him he was dreaming."

"Sir, I believe the craft is fully capable of achieving warp," Chekov said. "I have spoken to the test pilots at length and we agree this should be possible."

"But nothing we've developed has come close yet," Pike said. "Warp is a pipe dream and you know it."

Chekov looked between Pike and Spock nervously. "I do not believe so," he said. "I...have a contact. He is military, a test pilot, high security clearance. He read a paper I published at university and we have...corresponded. We have been discussing the flight data from our last few tests. He also mentioned...he has heard of another prototype."

"Another...what?"

"At Groom Lake. Top secret clearance only. He is the best pilot they have and they...he has been approached about a test flight."

Pike turned to Spock. "Is this possible?"

"I have studied my father's notes repeatedly," Spock said. "I found no reference to any attempts to develop a craft capable of interstellar propulsion. I do not believe Sarek thought it possible in the current technological climate."

Jim stepped forward. An idea was beginning to take shape in his brain. "Yeah, but--and stop me if I'm overstepping my bounds here--wasn't that technological climate, well, awhile ago? Spock, when exactly did Sarek...pass away again?"

"Euphemisms are unnecessary, Jim. Sarek died when I was ten."

"And he split from the military before that, right?"

"That is correct."

"What if they kept working on his projects afterward? I mean, we know that the project kept going with some tie to the military," Jim said, gesturing at Pike. "What was my father flying when he died? You keep saying he didn't die in a plane crash, but I found the autopsy reports, and they're consistent with some kind of impact at seriously high speeds. What if they've been working on it this whole time?"

Pike's brow knitted together, and he was silent for a long time, staring off over Jim's head.

"It's possible," he said finally. "But it would mean...I'm not really sure I like what it would mean."

"It would mean that you have been played for a fool for the past two decades," Spock said.

Pike's face was dark. "Exactly," he said. "And it explains why they weren't exactly happy with you being here," he added. "If they couldn't woo your father over to their side, better to get rid of you than have you working for the competition."

"The competition? Aren't we all playing for the same team here?" Jim asked. He gestured at Chekov. "I mean, even Chekov here. It's not the 50s anymore. The Cold War's over."

"For these people, anyone outside the immediate agenda is the competition. Most people aren't
overly concerned with things like doomsday machines or world domination. I was recruited for the project with your father, Jim. I was a skilled pilot and I liked flying the crazy new stuff. I was young. But I stayed on after George died, after my discharge, because I believed what Sarek did. That his arrival here on Earth was a gift, that we could use Vulcan technology to speed exploratory missions that would foster a sense of global community and responsibility for our planet. And I knew that the military didn't exactly see it our way in terms of priority, but this..." he paused, shaking his head. "This goes higher than military. Hell, it could go higher than just our government."

"So what do we do?" Chekov asked.

"I'm assuming Spock here isn't exactly jumping at the chance to say here permanently," Pike said.

"I would prefer to return to Vulcan, if it is determined that remaining here is too dangerous," Spock said.

"Um, you were gunned down on a street in broad daylight," Jim said. "I'm going to go with 'yes' on that."

"He's right," Pike said. "I didn't sign on to watch people die. We have great people working for us, Spock, great minds. It would have been fantastic to keep them all working in the Consortium, but not at that price. We're getting you off the planet."

"I will contact the High Command," Spock said. "With luck there will be a craft relatively nearby."

"Until then, you're welcome at my place," Pike said. He nodded at Jim. "Both of you."

***

"….And you should have seen Win's face," Pike gasped, wiping his eyes. "I thought she was going to change the locks on us!" It was the third or fourth such story Pike had told them. This one involved his father, Pike, and an ill-conceived bachelor party for a fellow cadet that had apparently involved whipped cream, chocolate sauce, and a pair of faulty handcuffs. Part of him was profoundly embarrassed, but the rest was rapt, chin in hands, eating up stories of George Kirk at his age. Pike's wife laid a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

"Don't forget to eat," she said. Later, in the kitchen, she cornered Jim at the sink and forcibly took his dirty plate, scraping it into the trash and leaning over to put it in the dishwasher. Her dark hair fell over her face in a glossy wave. Jim watched it catch the light and settle back on her shoulders when she stood up and faced him, smiling.

"Thank you," she said. "I haven't seen him laugh this much in years."

Pike was still chuckling to himself as he cleared the last of the plates. "We made up the guest room," he said. "There's only the one bed. I guess you can flip a coin for it if you don't want to share. The living room couch isn't bad. One's, ah, firmly suggested I bunk on it a few times."

One raised an eyebrow.

Something in Pike's tone implied he didn't think the coin flip was likely, and Jim got the feeling he should probably be embarrassed at this too, but curiously he couldn't muster the strength to care. The look in Pike's eyes was warm, and he obviously cared what happened to Spock. That much was clear from the sheer number of Pike's work stories that ended up being jokes at Spock's expense. Spock gave as good as he got, though, and Pike got no quarter from his acid tongue.
The guest room was on the second floor of the house, and Jim was about to follow Spock up the stairs when he heard a throat clearing behind him.

"Jim, can I talk to you a minute?" Pike asked.

"Sure thing," Jim said. He jumped off the bottom step and followed Pike out into the darkened living room. Pike gestured at the couch, and Jim sat heavily. They sat in silence for awhile, Pike staring out the window at his reflection in the glass. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

"I need to be straight with you, Jim," he said, turning back to look Jim in the eye.

"Sir?"

"This business with Spock, everything breaking down. This isn't a coincidence. Look, I know you know next to nothing about all of this, and that up until, what was it?"

"Um, yesterday, sir."

"--Up until yesterday, you were just a regular guy with regular problems. But if I'm right about this, Jim, everything is about to change.

"The military isn't just building science fair models here. Everything--everything is about weapons development. I've been hearing whispers for years, and not just about weapons either. There's evidence of another program, an offshoot of Carbon Creek, maybe, or maybe some fucked up shit they thought up all on their own. Human experiments, Jim. Tweaking the genome, selective breeding-- they're creating a race of super soldiers."

Jim gaped. "But for what?"

Pike shook his head. "I don't know. But I think your father did. Jim, I've had my suspicions about this for a long time, but I'm more sure than ever now that what happened to George may not have been an accident at all."

"The boxes," Jim said suddenly.

"What?"

"My dad's stuff," Jim said. "There's a pile of boxes in my mother's attic. I don't know what it is--photographs and papers. I found a photograph of him with Spock's father. It's how I first found out about the project. I had Winona send me some of it, but it's all in some kind of code. A friend of mine tried to help me translate it, but she didn't have much luck."

"It's been sitting here all this time, right under our noses," Pike said to himself. "How the hell did he get it all off base?"

"He didn't," Jim said. "I mean--my mom doesn't know where it came from. It…it just showed up in a crate one day, addressed to her."

"Someone was trying to get the truth out," Pike said. "Someone from inside. Jim, we have to get to this stuff. This could be everything--everything we need to bring them down, to bring the truth to light."

"Well, that's great, right? Um, I don't know that we can do anything right this second, but I'm sure if we call up Winona and explain, we can get her to send it out--"
Pike shook his head. "No," he said. "Sitting in that attic is the safest those records have ever been, and we need to keep it that way. When you get back, we'll pay Win a visit, and--"

"What do you mean 'when I come back'? With all due respect, sir, I didn't sign up for anything here. I'm seeing this thing through with Spock because I--because it's the right thing to do. But I have a life back in New York."

Pike gave Jim a hard, appraising look. "Do you?" he asked. "Whatever it is you're doing, is it more important than, oh, I don't know, preventing World War Three? Because that's the scale we're talking about here."

Jim sighed. "When you put it like that…" He ran a hand through his hair absently. "I'll think about it, okay?"

Pike nodded. "Please. It's all I ask."

Jim stood, back still protesting from too many hours in the car. "Look, if that's all, I think I'll go find Spock and get some sleep," he said.

"Of course. Early start tomorrow, all right? And Jim?"

"Sir?"

"It's impressive, the way you've landed on your feet with all this. Your father would be proud."

Jim swallowed. "Thank you," he said. "Good night."

He took the stairs slowly, running his hands up the smooth old wood of the banisters after him. When he got to the guest room, he found it reminded him of the farmhouse back in Riverside, though he couldn't say why. He thought of the smiling faces in those old pictures in his mother's attic. He could almost see them, noisy ghosts gibbering and chattering in his mind's eye. Spock sat on the edge of the bed, flipping through a magazine he must have picked up from the stack on the bedside table. He looked up when Jim walked in, and Jim flopped down next to him with a sigh.

"Are you all right?" Spock asked. He looked tired, too; his shoulders slumped ever so slightly and the skin under his eyes was smudged greenish grey.

"I'm okay," Jim said. "It's just…well, it's been a day, huh?"

"We have indeed had an eventful 24 hours," Spock agreed.

"I can go back downstairs if you want," Jim said. "You take the bed. You're probably still sore."

Spock didn't respond, staring off into space. He pressed his lips together in a thin, bloodless line, then turned to Jim. "I…would prefer it if you remained here," he said.

Jim had already hopped off of the bed and reached for his bag. "You…wait, what?"

"I would prefer it if you stayed."

"But I thought--I thought this whole thing was a matter of emotional security."

"Jim, what I told you earlier today was true. However, I neglected to tell you that I believe my feelings on the matter have evolved." He spoke the words slowly, almost awkwardly, as if reading words in a language he didn't understand.
Spock moved closer to Jim on the bed. Jim heard the blood roaring in his ears, and he shook his head, trying to clear it. "Spock, what are you trying to say?"

"I do not know," Spock said in a low voice. "I feel… I find it difficult to describe." And then he leaned in, and in one smooth motion he wrapped a wiry arm around Jim's shoulders and pulled him closer.

"I want…" he said against Jim's mouth.

"Then do it," Jim said, heart pounding. Spock did.

The kiss was fierce, all teeth and then hot tongue. Spock nipped at Jim's lower lip, encouraging a bloom of pain and then sucking to draw it out. Jim moaned and Spock hummed with pleasure in response.

Without thinking, Jim scooted up the bed to rest against the headboard. He shrugged off his shirt, then lifted his hips, unbuckling his belt and sliding his jeans down to his ankles. His eyes never left Spock's face. Spock was watching him with an expression almost disturbing in its intensity, eyes wide and dark. They swept over Jim's body. He felt exposed, like a specimen. No, like some ritual object Spock was particularly admiring of. It was a strange feeling, to be so present with another person. Jim had gotten good at fucking in a drunken haze. It wasn't really ideal, but it just seemed to work out that way a lot of the time.

Spock brought him back to the present again when he stripped off his own clothes, and then there was no looking away from his lithe form. At times Spock seemed impossibly thin, but naked he was all wiry strength, muscles tensing and releasing as he knelt in front of Jim and then leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together. His breath came in gasps, hot against Jim's cheek.

Jim reached between their bodies to take Spock in hand, but Spock grabbed his wrist and moved his arm aside. "Not yet," he said, bringing his other hand to Jim's face. "May I…" he started, and Jim remembered the strange trip he'd taken through both their minds. The meld.

"Yes," he said. Spock gave a low moan of anticipation and moved his fingers into position on Jim's face. "Our minds grow closer," he said, speaking the words like an incantation. "Our minds are one."

It helped, this time, knowing what was happening. But the mind Jim fell into seemed different somehow. They weren't in a memory; instead Jim's consciousness hung in a vast, textureless black space. He got the impression of a box, like he was walled into a corner. Spock? he thought. And then the walls fell away, and Spock was everywhere at once. Jim could sense a deep current of emotion pulsing somewhere off in the distance, still constrained by Spock's controls. And then the memories--Spock sitting on the curb, half drunk, embarrassingly maudlin and furious with himself for lacking the control to hide it from Jim. The rooftop, surrounded by snow and cold and then Jim, so warm, so dangerously pleasant. A growing sense of security and calm warring with logical analysis. Fear, and creeping warmth that felt a lot like…

Love, Jim thought. Around him, Spock's consciousness seemed to twitch, gathering itself up as if to withdraw. No, wait, Spock. I... He couldn't lie, what would be the point? They were here, together. Spock had said it--their minds were one, and there was no choice, no point in anything but telling the truth. He thought of the attack, the shot of horror and pain through his heart when he saw Spock fall to the pavement. The relief when he woke up and saw Spock asleep in his bed, alive. The same warm feeling, seeping out and around all his thoughts of Spock. See? Jim thought again. This is what it feels like. I love you.

Somewhere far away, their bodies shifted against each other and Jim felt a shiver of pleasure run...
through him. He wasn't sure if it was his or Spock's, and he found he wasn't overly concerned with figuring it out, because they were moving now and it was happening again. He felt the barest tinge of guilt riding the edges of Spock's mind like oil floating on the surface of water. _No one will ever know_, he thought. _No one but me, and I like this_. Spock swept the guilt away and ground into Jim again. Concentrating, Jim brought his awareness of their bodies into sharper focus, running his hands down to Spock's ass and holding him in place, writhing against him, worrying the smooth, sensitive skin at Spock's neck with his teeth and knowing exactly how close those seemingly minor actions drove Spock to the edge.

Then Jim remembered about the hands, and caught Spock's free hand. Bringing it up to his face, he turned he head slightly and sucked three of Spock's fingers into his mouth, swirling his tongue up around the pads and all the way down to pluck at the webbing between each digit. Spock rewarded him with a wordless pulse of feeling and Jim couldn't help but gloat a little as he realized that the most awesome part of this whole thing was probably the fact that he could deep throat Spock's hand and talk dirty to him at the same time. _You like that, don't you?_ he thought. _God, your hands are so fucking sensitive, it's incredible. You like this as much as you would fucking me._

Predictably, there was no answer, but Jim could feel a coil of pleasure beginning to tighten in Spock's belly as surely as if it was his own orgasm building there. He pulled off Spock's fingers and heard him gasp as wet skin hit cold air. The temperature shift barely had time to register before he plunged back down again. Spock cried out and shuddered against Jim, scraping his teeth across Jim's neck. His orgasm shivered like the stars, a thousand tiny points of light in the black behind Jim's eyes, blasting into him like a shockwave and then suddenly Jim was gone too, pulling off of Spock with a cry and kissing him hard on the mouth. He didn't know if it was real or not until his lungs screamed in protest and he gasped for air, chest burning, and then Spock's fingers slid off his face and he was along in his own head again. He flopped back against the pillow, limp and sweaty.

"Fuck," he said.

He rolled over into Spock, licking impulsively at the curve of his shoulder. It was dry, cool even. "How are you not dripping right now? I'm so hot," he said.

"Vulcans do not have sweat glands."

"Oh," said Jim. "It's so weird," he continued. "Just looking at you, you look…like me. But you're so…different, at the same time. All these things…"

Spock began to turn away. Jim grabbed his shoulder and held him. "I like it," he said. "It's…it's you, you know? You wouldn't be you any other way." He leaned down and kissed Spock again, slowly and sweetly this time. Jim felt his cock twitch. They kissed for a long time, and Jim found that if he concentrated he thought he could get hints of feeling that weren't his. It was like a muted version of the meld.

"Vulcans are touch telepaths," Spock murmured without waiting for Jim to ask the question. "It is possible you have some innate psi-abilities yourself, enabling you to sense my thoughts also."

"Mmm. So what am I thinking right now?"

Spock carded his fingers through Jim's hair, sending a delicious shudder down his spine. "You wish to continue physical contact for the duration of your obligatory refractory period, at which point you wish to resume sexual congress."

Jim whimpered just a little, burying his head in the curve of Spock's neck. It was sort of mortifying, having his thoughts laid bare this way. But thinking about resuming sexual congress was also totally
hot, so he decided to let the embarrassment go. "I like it when you talk like that."

He felt rather than saw the raised eyebrow. "Accurate word choice is only logical."

Jim grinned. "Can't argue with that." He rolled on top of Spock, grinding his hips in a slow circle. "Now, about that sexual congress…"

Spock deftly shifted his body weight so that Jim rolled off of him again. "You have not completed a satisfactory REM cycle in the past two days," he said.


***

In his dream, he was back in space. It was the same frozen blackness he remembered from the meld, and he was drifting there, pleasantly weightless. Earth hung below him, a massive ball of brown and green and blue, and huh, it really did look like a marble made of milky glass. It was so quiet out here in the dark. The stars pulsed in concert, flaring bright and fading slowly out again. *I'm not breathing*, Jim thought. *But I guess that's okay.* It was a good dream. It would have better with more sex, but that was true of most things. So Jim was mildly irritated when the starscape tilted wildly back and forth, his whole body shaking with it. Shaking…

*Mr. Kirk?*, said a voice. *No one knows my name up here*, Jim thought. And then the dreamworld was blurring, losing focus, and he was opening his eyes into a sliver of yellow light that gradually resolved itself into the hallway beyond the slightly opened bedroom door.

"Mr. Kirk, Spock. You need to get up, now."

Jim barely had time to register One's fuzzy form in the doorway before she was gone. He groped for his clothes, cursing himself for falling asleep in someone else's guest bedroom without the foresight to at least pull on a pair of boxers, because apparently he had kicked the sheets off at some point during the night. Spock was already across the room, pulling his shirt over his head. Goddamn it, he was always cool as a fucking cucumber.

They pounded down the stairs, old wood moaning beneath their feet. Pike and One were on the porch, his arm around her waist, just staring. They didn't need to ask why Pike had woken them before dawn. To the west, above the jagged black stand of trees across the road, an orange glow hung in the sky.

Jim gulped. "Is that…"

"The labs," Spock said in a dull voice. His hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Goddammit!" Pike yelled, slamming a fist into the arm of his chair. "All that research, fucking years worth. God *fucking* dammit." Beside him, One flinched but didn't move away. Her face was as inscrutable as Spock's.

"Do they believe we were inside?" Spock asked Pike.

"I don't know. I don't think so, I mean, it's early and they know where I live. But this was sure as hell a message. It's done, any ties, any support or protection we had--it's over now. We can't wait for Vulcan, Spock. We need to get you out of here now, today."
"Regrettably, that is not possible. You said so yourself, we do not yet have access to a craft that can take us where we need to go with any haste."

"Maybe not," Pike said. "But that contact of Chekov's, that pilot--it got me thinking. Maybe if we can get you out to Groom Lake--"

"That's a lot of maybes," Jim said. "Uh, sir," he added at Pike's sharp look.

"Well, it's all we've got to go on right now," Pike said. "I'll get Chekov on the phone, see if we can get a name for this guy."

The guy's name was Hikaru Sulu, and he was fucking crazy. Jim decided it was stealth crazy, because on the surface, Sulu seemed pretty together. But the things he talked about--alien technology beyond even Spock's wildest dreams, fighter jets that could dive in and out of earth's atmosphere like it was nothing, whole towns out in Nevada burned off the map for the whisper of a security leak--those things were fucking nuts. In the end, Jim looked over at Spock, tracing the curve of his right ear with his gaze, and decided he should probably stop trying to explain things to the small part of his brain that still valued rationality. He thought about Ellen from Reception, cutting up his ID card with one slice of her scissors. He thought about sharing a smoke with Gaila out front, when the nights first started turning cold. Those things might have happened centuries ago for all they mattered now. Except for the part where they'd been the catalyst for…this.

At the moment, "this" was a mad dash from Pike's place, ducking down in the back seat of his Tahoe, pressed between Spock and Chekov like a sardine. Spock smelled like that weird spice tea he used to brew all the time, and Chekov smelled like worn cotton and laundry detergent and fear. At the wheel, One was calm under fire, responding to Pike's terse directions with sharp staccato nods.

The dirt road was etched with thick grooves of dried mud, evidence of hunters' trucks and ATVs. The truck listed back and forth at teeth-clattering speed. They were meeting Sulu at a landing strip 20 miles out of town.

"They can't burn that down," Pike said.

Apparently they could try, because when the road dead ended in a field the predawn air was thick with oily smoke and the ground covered in tufts of flame. There was a pale smudge at the far edge just along the tree line, a small figure waving. As they got closer and the clouds of smoke parted, Jim could make out a battered Cessna and a thin man leaning against it looking entirely too calm.

"Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu," he said, extending a hand to Pike as he wheeled his chair away from the car. "Good to finally meet you, sir. I've heard a lot about the project over the last few years."

"Not all good, I'll bet, not in your line of work," Pike said with a wry smile.

Sulu grinned back. "No, sir." He nodded at the plane. "Hope you don't mind, I brought my weekend rig. Couldn't exactly commandeer a black helicopter, though I do appreciate a dramatic entrance and exit."

"Does it fly?" Spock asked. Sulu opened and closed his mouth like a fish, then nodded. Jim knew exactly what he was thinking. Spock gave him a measured look. "Then it is acceptable," he said.

The flight was bumpy, and they had to stop to refuel at a series of frighteningly middle-of-nowhere airstrips and a night at a sketchy as hell motel, but finally they broke out of the clouds outside Rachel, Nevada. Jim gasped as the dusty vista spread out before him, brown mountains rising in the distance, and he had the dizzying realization that a view like this was probably the last thing his father ever
saw. Without thinking, he reached over and squeezed Spock's arm. He didn't move away. Jim glanced toward the opposite window and saw Chekov watching them; his gaze darted away as soon as Jim caught him looking, but not before Jim saw the flash of a smile.

"I'm going to put us down outside town," Sulu said, yelling over the drone of the engines. "I've got a friend with a ranch out there; it'll be safer than risking base picking us up on radio. They'll already see us on radar, but they shouldn't have a reason to suspect we're anything special."

"Aren't you missing from work?" Jim asked. It was a Friday, after all.

"Nah, I'm supposed to be on leave in San Francisco right now. For my sister's wedding. Besides, I usually work nights. We like to do things under cover of darkness, if you know what I mean."

Sulu's friend was nowhere to be found. Jim supposed you got good at turning a blind eye out here, where a shoestring of dilapidated strip centers, ranches, and bleached-bone houses ran from the middle of the desert to what he supposed was the base. All he could make out was the jut of a guard tower at the end of a dusty road that unspooled behind a ten foot fence topped with more standard-issue razor wire. They passed it in Sulu's truck on the way into what passed for a town.

"We'll go back to mine and clean up," Sulu had said. "Then I'll go over the plan."

Sulu rented a room from an old woman who didn't look up from her clothesline as they trooped through the yard. She looked right at Spock as he ducked under a white cotton bedsheets, but she just blinked and bent to grab something from her laundry basket. Somewhere along the line Spock had dispensed with his usual disguises. There was something about him that seemed lighter, more relaxed, but Jim found it disturbing anyway. It felt a whole lot like nothing to lose, and Jim had seen where that got people. It was why he spent too many years fighting Sam for the covers on his grandmother's rollaway bed, waiting for his mother to call.

"She doesn't ask a lot of questions, does she?" he asked Sulu.

"Asking questions doesn't get you too far out here," Sulu said. "I paid six months rent up front. We stay out of each other's way. Besides, I'm on base most of the time anyway. That's my official place of residence, or it's supposed to be."

Sulu's room was off the garage. Chekov dropped his bag in the dusty kitchenette and bent to grab a beer from the mini-fridge with the ease of someone who knew it was there to begin with.

"Ah, Hikaru, your fish!" he exclaimed, leaving the beer on the table to bead with moisture in the heat. He crossed the cramped space in a single stride, leaning over the sink to get a look at the bowl placed carefully on the windowsill, filled with lurid blue gravel and a single perturbed betta.

Sulu shifted uncomfortably, as if aware that Chekov was about to totally show his hand and at a loss for how to deal with it. "Uh, Chekov thought the place needed some atmosphere," he said. "They were selling them at Wal-mart the next town over."

Spock looked askance at Jim. "Is it common practice on this planet to entrap other species for personal amusement?"

"You've obviously never been to a zoo," Jim replied.

"I do not believe I will regret it."

"I believe he is happy," Chekov said. "Look at the way he swishes his dorsal fin. He was not doing that at the Wal-mart, Hikaru."
"Okay, okay, enough about the fish," Sulu said, rolling his eyes. He pulled Chekov away from the windowsill. "We need to talk about what's going to happen tonight," he said.

"There's an unmarked shuttle bus that leaves the base at 7:00. If I don't have a night flight, I'm usually on it. Now, the guys on that bus are the guys that rent cheap apartments in town. Other people have families to get back to, at least theoretically. These guys, the guys on my bus--I know them. They're just thinking about which Stouffer's frozen dinner they're going to nuke before they pass out watching porn in bed."

"You paint such a rosy picture of government work," Jim said. "It sounds so fulfilling."

Sulu shrugged. "Not everyone's like that. But these guys, they mostly check out when they're off the clock. And the method by which they do so is not atypical of a bunch of overgrown science fair winners who get their rocks off on Star Whores or whatever. That's all I'm saying. And their driver, he's been making the milk run on and off base since the Carter administration. My point is that I've thought that shuttle was a weak point for a long time, and tonight that's how we're going to get in."

"What are we going to do with the guys in the shuttle? You think they're just going to let us hijack their ride home?"

Sulu looked at Spock. "Pavel says he can take care of that."

Jim gave him a querulous look, but Spock just inclined his head and then nodded. "It should not present a problem."

Sulu exhaled. "Good. Now once we're inside, here's how it's going to go down."

***

"Is something amusing about our present circumstances?"

Jim had just made a sound halfway between a choke and a laugh. He shook his head, squinting into the waning light as the sun dipped below the mountains.

"Not really. I'm just…I'm still a little taken aback at the fact that I'm currently crouched in the desert waiting to break into a secret military installation. With, like, co-conspirators. Oh, and an alien." Another laugh bubbled up, this one disturbingly high-pitched. He was about to commit what probably amounted to treason. He didn't think he should be this punchy.

Spock straightened his shirt reflexively. They were all wearing black, but it made him look especially menacing. "I suppose it is only logical that you should find these events overwhelming," he said. "I forget that you are a civilian."

"Hey, according to you and Pike, I was involved in this before I was even born. In a weird way, it's as logical for me to be here as it is for you."

Spock just shrugged.

A little ways down the road, Sulu rose partway from his hiding place behind an especially bushy prickly pear. He gave a long whistle, then pointed off into the distance. Jim looked. A billowing cloud of dust was moving slowly but steadily towards them.
"That must be it, then," Jim said.

A few minutes later, there was no question. Jim could see the black van edging closer to the gate. As the gate swung open Jim stepped into the road. The van braked. Across the broad swathe of asphalt, the guard crumpled in his booth. Sulu was a good shot. Jim shuddered. *Stunned,* he thought, patting the weapon on his new belt holster reflexively. *Whatever these things are, they're not set to kill.* But he couldn't think about that now. He waved at the van.

The front passenger window rolled down. A doughy-looking man with round glasses squinted into the sunset. Good, thought Jim. He probably can't see much.

"This is a controlled access facility," the man said.

"Oh, really?" said Jim. He stepped up to the van, leaning against he door. "I just, uh, went for a run. Got a little lost."

The man looked him up and down. Jim knew he was taking in his pants and boots. "Get his ID, Bill," said someone from inside the van. The man opened his mouth, but Jim never knew what he was going to say, because at that moment Spock pulled open the driver's side and yanked the unconscious driver out onto the road. Then he leaned across the console and took hold of Bill at the juncture of his neck and throat. The man's eyes bulged and he dropped like a stone.

"Pull him out," Spock said. Jim stood in the road, gaping like a fish.

"Jim," Spock said. His voice was even, but Jim could barely detect the tension running under the surface.

Heart pounding, Jim yanked open the door and dragged the man out, hopping in to take his place. The van's passengers were scrambling for cell phones, scrabbling at the doors, but Chekov and Sulu had the van surrounded.

"What the hell is this?" one of the men exclaimed. He swiveled around in his seat. "What the…is that Sulu? Motherfucker."

Jim shot him in the chest, and he slumped over his seat. His buddy leaned over him, feeling for a pulse, and Spock dispatched him with the same miraculous pinch to the neck he'd used on the driver.

"Okay," called Sulu. "Let's get them out, strip them, and dump them behind the guard tower. How long do we have?"

"I am not entirely certain," Spock said. "I have not had occasion to observe the effects of the stun setting on humans. However, an adult Vulcan male would regain consciousness in approximately two hours. They will be disoriented for some time afterwards."

"Okay, that'll buy us some time. It's not perfect, but…"

"We did not wish to use lethal force," Spock said.

"You might come to regret that," Sulu said darkly. "I hope not. Okay, switch clothes, then let's get going."

Jim and Chekov got lab coats, which was good for Chekov, because he looked at home in his. Jim's coat was a little small, and he yanked the sleeves down compulsively. It didn't help. Spock, the lucky bastard, got some kind of military uniform that looked impeccable. He brushed a bit of sand off the sleeve with distaste, then noticed Jim looking and raised an eyebrow at him.
"Yes?" he said.

Jim shook his head, grinning at Spock. "Nothing. Just enjoying the view." Spock gave him a perplexed look, and Jim grinned wider.

Darkness fell as they turned the van around and headed back in the direction of the base. According to Sulu, they were looking for one of the test hangars. "We're supposed to be going up tomorrow night," Sulu said. "They should have it mostly prepped. I think we can handle the rest, right, Pavel?"

"Uh. Yes, of course. It will be a piece of pie."

"Cake, Pavel. A piece of cake."

"That is what I said. A piece of cake, Hikaru." Sulu just shook his head.

A flash of light in the rear view mirror caught Jim's eye, and he turned around. "Uh, guys? I think we've got company." Sure enough, there were two pairs of headlights behind them, and they were gaining rapidly.

"Shit," Sulu said. "Hanger 18 is at the far end of base. Okay, hang on." He floored it, making a hard right in between two low outbuildings.

"What are you doing?" Spock said, just loud enough to be heard over the roar of the van's overtaxed engine.

"Trying to get us some cover," Sulu yelled back. "We're going to have to run for it. 18's about a half mile from here. The hangars are labeled in order, but 18 should be pretty obvious."

"How's that?" Jim asked. He squinted against the glare of headlights; their pursuers had turned the corner after them.

"It'll be the giant one with the metric shit ton of guards. Alright, here's the deal. You guys need to get the hell out of this car. I'm going to turn that corner there. You bail out and get to cover. We meet at 18."

Jim wasn't sure that splitting up was the best plan, but what did he know about breaking and entering, anyway? Sure, there was the time he and Ellie Morris had snuck into the Riverside Community Pool to go skinny dipping in tenth grade, but something told him the stakes were a little higher tonight.

"Here we go," Sulu called. He made a hard left around the corner of a building. Jim could see the dark hulks of shipping containers. "Make for those containers," said Sulu. "Now go!"

Jim barely had time to think before he had the door open, and then Spock's hand was on his back, shoving, and they were falling over each other and rolling over the asphalt. Jim leapt to his feet, pulling Spock up after him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Chekov leap up and brush himself off, half his face a wash of blood. Road rash, Jim thought. Abruptly, he became aware of his own hands, stinging with pain.

Then they were running

"You okay?" he called to Spock.

"Minor abrasions," Spock said. "Mr. Chekov?"
"I'm all right," Chekov yelled.

They made it to the shipping containers just in time, diving into their shadows and ducking down low as the military jeep turned the corner and cruised past them in the darkness. Jim could hear its occupants talking and the crackling of a radio, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. There was no way to tell if they'd caught Sulu, if they had any idea if they'd split up.

The jeep slowly moved down the row of containers, away from them, and the voices died off in the night air.

"What now?" whispered Chekov.

Jim turned to Spock. Spock raised an eyebrow at him. A greenish bruise was already spreading over Spock's cheek, and Jim had to repress the urge to touch it. Spock suddenly looked very out of place, and it occurred to Jim that this wasn't what Spock had signed up for when he came to Earth. Not at all. Jim felt a profound sense of disappointment. There was a lot to critique about humanity, to put it mildly, but Jim had never considered the perspective of an entirely alien sentient species. He was painfully aware that humanity was not exactly recommending itself to Spock right now.

"Jim?" Spock was saying. He put a hand on Jim's shoulder and shook him gently. It was the first time they'd touched in what felt like days. Jim sighed.

"Sorry," he said. "Am I really the resident expert at cloak-and-dagger stuff?" No answer. "Okay, then. I think that our best hope is that Sulu's leading them on some kind of merry chase right now, that they still think we're together. So we stay down and stay hidden. And we make our way to 18."

He left off the more pressing question, which was what the hell they were going to do when they got there.

It was slow going. Jim was loathe to take them into the open, so they skulked around one hangar after another, the long, squat buildings like iron ingots in their path. Narrow windows just below the rooftlines shone yellow-green, and Jim wondered what was going on inside. Every few minutes an engine roared to life somewhere in the middle distance, people shouted, and Jim gestured wildly at them to get down. They waited in the shadows, behind parked vehicles, barely breathing, and then the sounds faded into the distance again and they moved on.

After what felt like hours, Jim made out the number 18 stenciled in black on the side of the next hangar. They knelt under a tanker truck parked parallel to the building, and peered around it carefully. At the far end of the building, there was a guard leaning up against the wall smoking a cigarette. The smoke curled Jim leaned in close to Spock and gestured for Chekov to move in too. He nodded toward the figure. "What do you think?"

"I believe if we can draw him away from the building, I can dispatch him without significant risk of attracting attention," Spock said.

"I can provide a distraction," Chekov said, a little breathlessly. Jim stifled the urge to say something very inappropriate.

"Um, sounds good," he said instead. "What are you--" Before he could finish, however, Chekov bolted upright and shot out into the open, yelling something in Russian. Spock shot Jim an exasperated look--so much for not attracting attention--and crossed from the tanker to the hangar wall, moving along it quickly. Jim followed. In front of them, the guard stepped toward Chekov and raised his hands; Chekov looked up at him and gave a small cry of surprise. Spock had nearly reached them now, ready to "dispatch" the guard, but then Chekov called out "Wait!" and the guard
whirled around to face Spock with a slightly deranged grin.

"Hi," Sulu said. He looked like he wanted to bow, and he looked oddly dapper in the stolen uniform. He patted Spock on the shoulder. "I appreciate the skill, I do," he said.

"Where is the actual guard?" Spock asked, stepping neatly out from under Sulu's hand.


"I might have set a little fire across base earlier," Sulu said. "That's what I call creating a diversion." He turned to Chekov. "No offense. So what you think? Wanna get a look inside? The suspense is killing me."

The hangar bay was dark. Jim shoved the side door open hard enough to send it crashing into the wall behind it. He flinched at the sound. Red safety lights pulsed, glinting off of something shiny. Jim fumbled along the wall for the light and flipped it on.

There, sitting in the hangar, was a UFO. It was like every bad movie Jim had ever seen. Well, not exactly—it wasn't a disc; it was more of a diamond shape. It looked like some strange hybrid of a fighter plane and an ocean liner. It was made of metal, but no metal Jim had ever seen. It was opaque, and seemed to pulse in the low light like something alive, moving from deep red to black like an organ flushed with blood.

Behind him, he heard Sulu curse. Chekhov whistled in amazement. "This is amazing," Sulu muttered. "I mean, I'd heard about it, but this…I had no idea they'd gotten this far."

Spock looked pale. He swallowed, and looked at Jim as if he wanted to say something. He appeared to think better of it, turning to Chekhov and Sulu instead. "We do not have the luxury of time to merely stand around and appreciate feats of engineering," he said.

"He's right," Jim said. "How do we get on board?"

Sulu pointed to a hatch on the far side of the craft. "There," he said. He pushed past them and ran down a flight of steps to the hangar floor, crossing to the base of the craft. Jim, Spock, and Chekov followed.

Sulu was running his hands over the smooth surface of the ship. "Where is it, where is it," he muttered to himself. Then: "Aha," he said, fitting his palm over a barely-perceptible hollow in the metal. A glowing panel lit up behind his hand, and Sulu dropped it as if burned. The panel resolved itself into what looked like a touchscreen, colorful icons lined up in rows. It looked for all the world like a video game console, or a smartphone.

"Let's give this a try," Sulu said, biting his lip.

"Identification?" said a cool female voice. Why are computers always girls? Jim wondered. He glanced over at Chekov, staring wide-eyed at the screen, and thought perhaps he understood.

"Sulu, Hikaru; Alpha-Delta-Foxtrot-Zero-One-Nine-Nine."

The computer paused. Searching, said the screen.

"Level four security clearance required. Please enter clearance code."
“Shit,” said Sulu. "I'm not cleared for this, and if I key in the wrong code the whole system could lock down." He wiped his palms on his pants.

"Please enter clearance code," the computer said cheerily.

Suddenly, the room plunged into darkness, and a siren began to wail.

"They figured out why those guards weren't checking in," Sulu said. "Dammit! The ship'll have its own auxiliary power systems, if we can get on board. I need a fucking code."

"Who needs a code, then?" said a familiar voice from behind them.

Jim whirled. "Scotty?"

"In the flesh."

Sure enough, Scotty stood behind them, dressed all in black. He was flushed from running, breathing hard, but his face was split in a massive grin. He looked like he was having an entirely appropriate amount of fun. Beside him, hands on hips, stood a stony-faced Uhura. She looked like she was having decidedly less fun.

"Nyota?" Spock said, stepping forward.

"Yes, Nyota, what are you doing here?" Jim asked. "I mean, is everyone in my life in on this?" He pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. His head was starting to hurt.

Uhura rolled her eyes. "Yes, Jim, because this is all about you," she said. "If you must know, I'm here for him."

"She's being modest," Scotty said. "She's been working with me. I've been doing a bit of a consulting project," Scotty said, patting the ship's flank with something like affection in his tone. "Turns out someone was interested in my dissertation after all. Only they didn't know about my diverse range of acquaintances."

"When we found out what happened to Spock, we knew what we had to do," Uhura said, giving Spock a tight smile.

"Please enter security code," the computer said again.

"And what we need to do right now is get on this ship before the cavalry gets here," said Sulu.

"Right," Scotty said. "Now let's just see if this works." He cleared his throat. "Uh, manual override. Repair code seven-five-beta-three."

"Reason for manual override?" The computer sounded slightly piqued.

"Engineering defect," Scotty said.

"Please describe nature of defect," said the computer.

"Nice try," said Scotty. "That's not required. Seven-five-beta-three."

Jim could have sworn the computer sighed.

There was a high-pitched chime, and a panel the size of a door lit up on the side of the ship. It slid open with a rush of air.
"Bloody computers," Scotty muttered. "Think they know everything. All right, then, you there with your mouth hanging open."

"Sulu," said Sulu.

"Sulu. You know how to fly her?"

Sulu straightened. "I can figure it out."

"Great. I'll just pop down to engineering and check out the lay of the land."

"Have you been on board this ship?" Spock asked.

"Well, not exactly, no. But I did draw up the blueprints, so I think I can blunder my way through. Put me on shipwide comm, eh, Nyota?"

Uhura looked blank. "Scotty, I have no idea how any of this shit works," she said.

Scotty waved his hand at her. "You're a genius. Figure it out; you'll be fine."

Uhura muttered something under her breath, but she was smiling to herself as she turned away. She studied the bank of workstations along the far wall of the bridge. "Comms, comms," she murmured. "Ah! Here." She sat down at one of them, fiddling with some buttons.

"You actually know what you're doing?" Jim asked her.

"I've studied his blueprints," she said, fingerling the touchscreen in front of her. It lit up, and she snatched her fingers back as if burned. "But, uh, not exactly, no." She squinted at the screen. "Jim, look at this. Look at these characters--this isn't English. "This looks like...like what we found before."

"Let me look at them," Spock said from over Jim's shoulder. He was standing very close, and Jim felt a shudder run up his spine. But then Spock stepped around him and leaned over Uhura, staring at the screen. His lips moved, as if sounding out the strange characters, but no sound came out.

"Can you read it?"

"For the most part, yes," Spock said. "It is an mixture of Vulcan and some kind of pictography--a code." He stepped back, rubbing at his temples as if he had a headache.

"Spock?"

Just then there was an explosion of gunfire from the far end of the hangar.

"Shit," said Sulu. "Okay, we need to get out of here now. Scotty, you on?"

"Hello? Yep, here I am."

Sulu began flipping switches and pressing buttons. Jim had the vague sense that he should sit down.

"Alright, engines should be coming online."

"Roger that, engines online."

There was a massive roar from underneath them, and the ship began to shake.
"Engaging external inertia dampeners," Sulu said to no one in particular. The ship lurched, and Sulu grinned. "Pushing back," he said.

Jim glanced over his shoulder. "Uh, Sulu, sorry if this is painfully obvious, but the hangar door's still closed."

"Fuck it," Sulu replied. "If she can't take on this tin can, she doesn't deserve to get off the ground."

"Hey!" said Scotty over the intercom. "I heard that." Sulu shook his head, but didn't reply.

"Everybody sit down and strap in," said Sulu. "Chekov, you're up here with me. I need someone to show me where the hell we're going once we get out of here."

"Attention on board! You are completely surrounded. Cease launch sequence immediately and come out with your hands up."

"Like hell. We're getting out of here right now."

He yanked back on a lever and the ship shot backwards. The hangar doors fell away like they were made out of paper, and suddenly they were outside. Jim could see headlights on the viewscreen in front of him, and there was a crash and the sound of rending metal as the vehicles surrounding them scrambled to get out of the way. There was more gunfire; Jim could see the explosions of light from the barrels glaring against the night, and he prayed to God guns were the worst things they'd had time to think about shooting at them. He flinched as bullets ricocheted off the side of the ship. He supposed the outer skin was probably bulletproof, but he flinched anyway.

The ship pitched to one side, sending Jim flying into a bulkhead. Pain shot through his arm, and he heard his sleeve rip. "Fuck," he hissed, clapping a hand to his shoulder. It came away bloody, but he could still flex the shoulder and get a full range of motion.

"You okay?" Uhura asked, gesturing at the blood.

"Yeah, just scratched it on something. Not a big deal," he called back. She looked unconvinced, but they had bigger problems to deal with.

He could hear people yelling, whoever was on the loudspeaker telling them to stand down right fucking now, Sulu not listening. Sulu was cackling madly, pushing levers and buttons like the ship was some kind of Rube Goldberg contraption. Spock's knuckles were drained of blood as he gripped his arm rest, and for some reason that was all Jim could see as they shook again and again, and then suddenly the jeeps and guns were retreating--no, falling away--and they were going up and up and up and Sulu was yelling and Chekov was slapping his console in wild glee.

"Let's get the fuck out of here, Scotty," Sulu called.

Scotty was yelling unintelligibly, but the general gist seemed to be positive. Jim shot a glance at Uhura, who had a smile on her face. She shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe this is happening," she yelled to Jim. He just shook his head in reply.

"Gaining altitude," Spock said, peering at the altimeter on his viewscreen. "Reaching low-Earth orbit."

Earth was brown and green and patchy, the sandy brown of the west coast against the deep blue of the Pacific, a vast blackness beyond, studded with stars. Beside him, Uhura stood up and took a step toward the viewscreen, captivated. Even Spock was staring out at the view with a look on his face that was somewhere close to reverence.
"Good to be back up here?" Jim asked him.

"It is a start," Spock said.

"Will they follow us?" Chekov asked.

"They can't," said Sulu. He shook his head slowly. He looked pale, as is he couldn't quite believe he had pulled it off. "Once we warp, that is. We're as good as gone." Spock looked up at the word.

"Mr. Scott, what is the warp capacity of this ship?" he asked.

"She's got the nacelles for Warp 4, 5 if we push it," Scotty replied. Spock looked impressed.

"Struck dumb by human feats of engineering, are you?' Scotty said. Spock did not reply.

"So where are we headed now?" Jim asked.

"There is a meeting point located on the far side of the moon," Chekov said. He turned to Spock. "You have contacted the High Command?"

"I have sent a message," Spock said. "If it was received, the nearest Vulcan vessel should be dispatched to the rendezvous point. Now that we are in orbit, I will attempt to contact them again using the ship's communication system."

Jim sat up. "So we're in orbit right now? Uh, what kind of contact do we have with the surface?"

"What exactly are you asking?" said Scotty over the intercom.

"Can I make a telephone call?"

***

"I don't even want to know, Jim," Bones said as soon as he picked up the line.

"What? How'd you know it was me?"

"You're the only person who ever calls me at three a.m. Except this time I don't think you're wasted and calling from your room to tell me how much you love me."

"No, I'm a little further away than that," Jim said.

"Like I said, don't even want to know. Are you…Christine wants to know if you and Spock are okay."

Jim smiled. Then he flushed, even though he knew Bones couldn't see him.

"Tell 'Christine' we're fine. A little banged up, but none the worse for wear. Bones, look, we're…I'm going to be away for awhile. And I'm not sure when I'm coming back. And you…I don't want you, or anyone else down there to worry about me."

McCoy sighed. Jim winced, thinking about the sheer number of times he'd been on the receiving end of that sigh and the pained expression that was inevitably on Bones' face.
"I hear you. Just don't make me have to call your mother and tell her something's happened to her kid."

He laughed. "I'll try. Look, Bones, I just want to say thanks. For everything."

"Good luck, Jim." Then the receiver clicked, and McCoy was gone.

And suddenly, the communications station was gone too, dissolved in a haze of black static. Jim wheeled, off balance. He bashed an elbow against something that was probably very important and very expensive, and definitely hard as a rock. "Ow," he said, rubbing at his arm as if to ward off the pain. He could hear Uhura shouting something, and then Spock was there, hauling Jim up and draping on of his arms across a slim shoulder to take Jim's weight.

"He is exhausted," Spock said. It sounded like he was very far away. "He is also bleeding. Is there a medical bay on this vessel?"

Jim abruptly felt as though he was made of cement, and his shoulder throbbed. It was as if Spock's words had called the corresponding feelings into being. Jim heard Scotty's voice over the intercom, saying something about blueprints again. He let his head loll over to one side, the side where Spock was. Something deep in Jim's lizard-brain told him this was a very good thing, and he smiled through the pain.

Spock pronounced the medical bay 'woefully inadequate,' but he directed Jim to a low examination table and removed his shirt anyway. Jim gasped as he dabbed at the wound with a cloth drenched in some kind of foul-smelling disinfectant. Spock paused, long fingers hovering just over the angry gash.

"I am not experienced in wound care, but I believe it to be relatively clean," he said. "It appears you have merely grazed your arm. I will bandage it."

He finished his ministrations and stepped back, clasping his hands at the small of his back as if unsure what else to do with them. He stood in silence for a long time watching Jim expectantly. "Are you all right?" he asked at last.

Jim snorted. Then he dropped his head to his hands, massaging his pounding temples.

"I...I'm in shock, I think? I don't know, Spock. I need to sleep. I need to try to find some way to assimilate a completely mind blowing three days into something vaguely resembling real life."

"That will, perhaps, be impossible. For better or for worse, Jim, your life has changed irrevocably."

Jim let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Tell me about it," he said.

"It is illogical to even consider it, but were it within my power to...change that, I would do so," Spock said, looking at the floor. He shook his head as if trying to dispel the thought.

"Would you? I wouldn't." Jim reached out a hand, palm up, and Spock drew a hand out from behind his back. He brushed his fingers against Jim's carefully, like he was afraid they might burn.

"You require rest," Spock said, clasping Jim's hand and pulling him to his feet. Jim didn't have the strength to argue. He pulled his shirt back on, and let Spock lead him down a cramped corridor to a series of cabins. Stopping in front of one of them, Spock pressed a button set into the smooth white wall. A door slid open to reveal a narrow room outfitted with a desk and cot. Jim stumbled over to the cot, stretching out on a blanket woven of a thick woolly fabric. It was harsh and scratchy, but he was too exhausted to care. Spock murmured something, and Jim felt a prickle of awareness as he
He woke to find he hadn't moved at all. He was still curled on his side on the narrow cot, and by the feel of his neck it had been a few hours at least. He sat up, blinking in the low light, rubbing at his protesting muscles. Spock was sitting at the desk, fiddling with a small touch screen the size of a magazine. The screen lit up, and Spock punched in a sequence of numbers. The pad chirped, and the glow died away.

"Hey," Jim said. "You get any sleep?"

Spock shook his head.

"I believe this ship was designed to emulate a survey vessel not unlike my father's," Spock said. "It includes facilities for a modest crew. There is a primitive refresher adjacent to this room, as well as what is described rather quaintly on Mr. Scott's blueprints as a 'galley'."

"They have any astronaut ice cream?"

"The galley contains a modest selection of nonperishable food items, as well as potable water."

"Well, that's boring," Jim said. "Did you bring me anything?"

Spock produced several foil packets, which were disconcertingly rectangular and hard, despite the fact that they were labeled Beef Stew, Rice, and Banana Pudding, respectively. Jim made a face. He opened up the banana pudding and broke off a piece.

"Hmm, not bad," he said. "Once you get over the fact that you're supposed to chew it."

"I have contacted the High Command," Spock offered. "There is a Vulcan vessel within close range. They should reach us within the next ten hours."

"Wow," Jim said. "That's...that's not very much time at all."

"It is not," Spock said. "Have you given any thought to--"

"To what I'm going to do when this is over? I don't know," Jim said. "Spock, the other night, when we were at Pike's, he told me that he thinks this whole thing goes a lot deeper than anyone thought. Pike thinks someone's spoiling for war. He wants me to help him with some kind of resistance movement or something. All that stuff of my dad's I was working on earlier--it's all connected somehow. Pike thinks someone smuggled that information out of a secure facility."

"Sarek, perhaps," Spock murmured. "He may have had some foresight into the direction they were taking." He looked up at Jim. "And what have you decided? Will you join Pike?"

"I...I don't know. I mean, I have to, right? I can't just dump all this in Pike's lap. Now that I know all this, how could I just go back and live my life knowing what was going on?" He shook his head. "I can't do it, Spock. I didn't choose this, any of this. But it's happening, for better or worse."

"If Pike's assertions are correct, 'worse' is more likely," Spock said. He rose from the desk, crossing the tiny room to sit next to Jim on the cot. Their legs pressed together, and Spock took Jim's hand in his.

"Is this where you tell me to leave it all behind and run away with you?" Jim asked. "Because that sounds pretty good. I mean, if you wanted to do that whole neck pinch thing and kidnap me. Take free will out of the equation."
"It is tempting," Spock said. "But I do not delude myself that the small matter of my happiness is worth the potential destruction of a planet."

Jim nudged Spock with his shoulder. "Are you actually admitting I make you happy?"

"I will say no more on the subject," Spock said, but Jim noted with a measure of smugness that his ears were tipped in green.

"What's everyone else up to?" Jim asked.

"Sleeping, mostly. Mr. Sulu is at the helm. I believe he is still reliving his daring escape."

"It probably made his life. That guy is something, huh?" Jim ran a finger over the inside of Spock's wrist. "So remember what you were saying about…what was it…our schedule being less regimented?"

"Yes?"

"Well, as long as we're just hanging out here waiting for your ride…"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I believe I take your meaning," he said. He turned so that they were face to face, staring at Jim with naked anticipation on his face.

"Come here," Jim said. He yanked his shirt off, hissing as the fabric caught on his bandage. He patted the mattress, pushing Spock down and tugging on the hem of his shirt. "Off," Jim said.

Spock complied. "Lights," he called, and the lights in the room dimmed.

"How did you know that would work?"

"A guess," Spock said.

"I still want to see you," Jim said, aware of the pout creeping into his voice.

Spock made an irritated noise. "Lights at 50 percent," he said. "Is that better?"

Jim grinned. "Much." He stretched out over Spock, holding himself up on his arms. Jim skated his palm down Spock's pallid chest, through the dark hair that sprung up in contrast. He leaned down and kissed Spock on the neck, reaching for his hand as he did so and tangling their fingers. His mouth trailed up to Spock's jawline, feeling for the beat of a pulse and failing to find one. "Our circulatory systems are not analogous," Spock said as if he'd guessed what Jim was thinking.

"Mmm," Jim said by way of response, because Spock had followed his statement with a kiss, lips warm and dry on Jim's, hot tongue pressing insistently inside. As the kiss deepened, Jim lowered himself flush onto Spock's supine form, rolling his hips lazily. Spock pressed his own up to meet them, and Jim was again gratified to note Spock's obvious arousal. He hooked a thumb around the waistband of Spock's black cotton briefs and tugged them down.

He would never say so to Spock, but Jim had to admit to a certain measure of relief that Spock's anatomy was indeed similar to a human's. He wondered if this was another genetic concession to Spock's human DNA, but that was a question for another time, because Spock was mostly hard and flushed with green, not red, and Jim wanted to taste him.

He was rewarded with a gasp, and Spock bucked up off the bed, thrusting into Jim's mouth. Jim laughed around Spock's cock. There was something so perfectly subtle about Spock. Jim was
beginning to feel like human expression was bull-in-a-china-shop hyperbole, a too-sweet taste of sugar after abstaining. Jim was learning to read Spock like music, every quickening of breath, each cant and twist of the hips. He could feel the glow of Spock's pleasure bleeding through his skin. Spock liked it a little rough, a scrape of teeth followed by a swipe of tongue, and if Jim kept going it wouldn't be long before… Jim pulled off him with a pop, suddenly thinking better of it.

"Not yet," he said. "Not like this. We haven't--it hasn't been enough yet."

He scrambled up the bed and took Spock's face in his hands. "What do you want?"

"You," Spock said. His eyes were like a snake's.

"Yeah," Jim said. "Anything." He knelt between Spock's legs again, biting at the inside of a thigh, then licking his way lower. He waited for a hint of hesitation, but Spock arched into Jim's tongue, sending a jolt of desire through him at the intimacy of it. He pushed the tip of his tongue inside, then followed it with first one finger, then another.

"Do you like that?" he murmured into Spock's thigh. Spock didn't respond verbally, but Jim felt a sudden frisson of pleasure not his own. Not only did Spock like Jim's fingers, he liked to hear him.

"I like doing it," he said, grinning darkly. "And I like talking to you, too." He drove his fingers in deeper, scissoring them. "You're so fucking tight," he said. "It's going to feel amazing when--"

"Do it," Spock said in a choked voice.

Jim swallowed. His mouth was dry. "Are--are you sure? We don't have anything--"

"It's all right," Spock said. "Vulcans boast…ah…superior muscular control. Also, I admit to a certain preference for--"

Jim grinned. "You like it rough, Spock?"

Spock flushed, then nodded, and the look on his face almost undid Jim right then and there. He spat on his hand, thinking vaguely that it was far from optimal, but under the circumstances it would have to do. And fuck, condoms, but he had a feeling Vulcans were probably fastidious about sexual health.

He knelt between Spock's thighs, flustered. He folded Spock's legs back like wire and lined himself up.

"You are shaking," Spock said.

"Shut up," Jim said, and then he pushed in. Just the head at first, and Jim leaned on his hands, planted at either side of Spock's head. He closed his eyes and breathed deep and for the love of all that was holy tried not to come right then and there, because fuck did that feel good.

"Are--are you all right?"

Jim nodded. "Yeah. I just need to--" Before he could actually decide what it was he needed to do, Spock shifted back on Jim's cock, taking him all the way in.

"Oh god, that," Jim gasped. "I just needed to do that, obviously."

He leaned in, Spock meeting him halfway to kiss him hard, nipping at Jim's lower lip. Jim felt electrified, and he shuddered as Spock ran a hand down his spine, scraping fingernails across his
skin. Jim began to move, slowly at first, hands drifting up to tangle in Spock's hair and pull his head back, exposing a long white expanse of throat.

He dragged his teeth over the tender skin, worrying it, sucking hard and then licking the pain away. He had the crazy thought that if he was going to send Spock on his way in nine point whatever hours, he was going to leave with something to prove that this--that they--had happened.

Spock moaned as if in understanding, leaning his head back further to allow better access. He was fucking himself back onto Jim shamelessly now, eyes screwed shut, and Jim felt like he was in two places at once, spinning off his axis. He stopped his assault on Spock's throat and came to rest with forehead against Spock's, hands on either side of his face, tangling in his hair, kissing Spock's mouth, his jaw, his ears, his eyelids.

What did I do, he thought to himself. What did I do, what did I do.

Spock opened his eyes then, and Jim had the uncanny feeling that Spock's brain had found the sad little spark Jim had just identified and laid it bare. His legs were hooked over Jim's shoulders; he was folded like origami and it had to hurt, didn't it?

"I am flexible," Spock said, and Jim laughed. Spock opened his mouth again, probably to say something about Vulcan versus human joints, but Jim kissed him instead, and the words dissolved on Spock's tongue.

Jim circled his hips, pulling out languidly and then slamming home so that Spock's body slid up the bed. Spock did something with his hips, settling deeper onto Jim and squeezing him along his entire length. He could feel Spock's whole body pulsing around him with his heartbeats.

He thrust again, working his hips like a piston and picking up the pace, nerve endings on fire. He buried his head at the juncture of Spock's neck and shoulder, worrying his clavicle, and suddenly the strange dissociated feeling was gone, replaced with a feeling of completeness shocking in its contrast. Jim felt by turns minute and vast, losing all sense of scale. He might have been falling through space, falling or floating, and it was a wonder he still had any sense of control over his body. But he must, because somewhere far away he could still feel himself moving, feel Spock moving under him.

Jim could feel the beginnings of his orgasm begin to hook him just blow the navel, a gradual tightening, like circling a drain. Spock could sense it too, his breath coming in gasps, his cock leaking and sticky between them. Jim pulled back a little, wanting to see. He brought his hands up to Spock's face again, running a thumb over his cheekbone, tracing a stray bead of his own sweat.

It was suddenly very important that Jim said something, but the words wouldn't come. "Spock," he said. And again, "Spock," until he was chanting a litany, one syllable over and over, meaning a thousand other things or maybe only one and hoping to God Spock understood.

Spock scraped his way down Jim's spine to clutch at his ass, grinding them together, and then his breath was hot on Jim's ear, gasping his name once. "Jim." And then Jim was gone, Spock's hands scrabbling over his face, calloused fingers like brands at the meld points just in time to explode Jim's orgasm twofold. Spock shuddered under him, muttering something unintelligible, then stilled. Pleasure rolled through Jim in waves, gradually ebbing, and then Spock slid his hand down Jim's face to rest at the nape of his neck.

He kissed Jim on the forehead, and Jim found himself surprised by the intimacy of the gesture. He exhaled, rolling off Spock. He came to a rest against the cool wall, feeling limp and spent.

Spock looked at him curiously. "'Fuck'?
"How'd you guess?" Jim groaned. "That mind-meld thing is intense."

"The telepathic component is standard among Vulcan sexual partners," Spock said.

"Oh," Jim said, feeling strangely crestfallen.

Spock settled next to him, reaching over to take Jim's hand. "Perhaps I spoke too generally," he said. "Most Vulcan sexual relationships occur within monogamous pair bonds."

"That's what you tell all the girls."

"No," Spock said quietly. "I do not." His tone had shifted, and he had a strange expression on his face.

"Wait," Jim said. "What do you mean?"

"I had not melded with another in this manner prior to our previous encounter," Spock said.

Jim couldn't help smiling at that. "I guess it's illogical for that to make me happy," he said.

"Highly."

Jim laughed, stretching out on the bed. He didn't remember falling asleep, but sometime later he opened his eyes to find Spock pressed flush against his back, one arm splayed over Jim. His breath rose and fell in the steady rhythm of deep sleep. Jim lay quietly and listened, counting Spock's breaths as the minutes and hours ticked down to nothing.

He woke again to Spock's hands on him, and he rolled over so they were face to face.

"Hey," he said.

Spock didn't reply. Rather, he moved closer to Jim and kissed him, snaking a hand between them. Jim moaned into Spock's mouth, almost fully hard again. Spock's kiss was mostly teeth, and he made choked little sounds as he worked them both. Jim submitted in a dreamy haze, closing his eyes and biting at Spock's lips. Spock's technique lost any of his earlier finesse. He was all tension and desperation, and when he came with a cry and spilled over his hand Jim followed suit with a sob of pleasure that felt wrenched from someplace deep inside.

They lay gasping for long minutes, sweat cooling on Jim's skin until he shivered and moved closer to Spock.

"I…apologize," Spock said in a choked voice.

"Are you serious?" Jim said. "That was amazing."

Jim could just make out Spock's face in the dark. His eyes glittered. "Yes," he said. "It was."

Jim propped himself up on an elbow. "Spock, I--"

There was an explosion of static and muffled cursing from the intercom system, then Sulu's voice filled the cabin.

"Shit. SHIT! Is this the shipwide comm button? Hey people! Looks like we're being hailed."

"That'll be for you, I guess," Jim said.
"Yes," Spock said reluctantly. "We should make ourselves presentable."

***

Spock terminated his communication with the other ship and slumped into the nearest chair, looking as close to stricken as Jim had ever seen him. They were back on the bridge, Sulu fairly gleeful at the prospect of executing another elaborate maneuver.

"I was under the impression I would be retrieved by the nearest survey ship," Spock said. "I was mistaken. They have dispatched a representative of the High Command."

"And?"

Spock just shook his head slightly. "I suppose they are attempting limit exposure to humans," he said as if to himself.

Scotty led them to a door marked Transporter Room, rubbing his hands together excitedly. "I can't wait to see if this works," he said. Jim looked at Uhura, but she just shrugged.

Spock shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another, raking fingers through his unkempt hair. He looked like he wanted to look in a mirror.

"You're fine," Jim muttered. Suddenly, a high-pitched sound filled the room, and a shimmering cloud appeared before them and resolved itself into three robed figures.

Jim had to conclude that Vulcans were scary motherfuckers. When he got a look at the crew of the other ship, he had a sudden burst of clarity regarding Spock's earlier reticence.

A woman stepped forward, flanked on either side by two large men Jim took to be guards. She held up a hand, parting her fingers in a gesture Spock mirrored.

"Spock, son of Sarek," she said. "Greetings."

Spock inclined his head in a gesture of deference. "Greetings, T'Pau," he said.

T'Pau looked around at the motley group of humans who stood in a loose semicircle around the transporter platform.

"We do not relish traffic with outworlders," she said. "However, you have endured great personal risk in assisting one of our own. For this, we thank you."

Jim cleared his throat. "It wasn't especially logical," he said.

T'Pau raised an eyebrow. "No," she said. "It was not." She gestured at Spock. "Come, Spock," she said.

Jim was torn between the urge to grab Spock in some horribly overwrought goodbye and an unwillingness to let T'Pau see him sweat. He looked at Spock, then, face perfectly void, and he stilled. No, he thought. He owed it to Spock to face this head on. So he braced himself, ready to let him walk away.

Spock took a step forward, then hesitated, as if considering something. He shot a look at Jim,
expression unreadable, but something inside Jim gave a little leap anyway. Then Spock straightened, folding his hands at the small of his back.

"T'Pau," he said. "With all due respect, I wish to inform you that I will not be returning to Vulcan."

Jim grabbed Spock's shoulder. "Spock, are you crazy?"

"Jim, please. If you will cease manhandling me--"

"Silence!" T'Pau raised her arm again, palm out. "Spock, explain."

Spock shrugged Jim's hand off of his shoulder, but stepped closer so that their sleeves just brushed together. He cleared his throat, and gave Jim a sidelong glance. Jim nodded in what he hoped was an encouraging manner, and Spock began to speak.

"As you well know, my father conducted his research on Earth without the full endorsement of the High Command. However, he did not act in a vacuum simply because Vulcan was disinterested in his work. He became involved with a network of humans who assisted him, supported him, and furthered his interests even after his death. He developed…personal relationships with many of them, most notably my own mother."

One of the guards seemed to bristle at this, as if Spock had said something wildly inappropriate, but T'Pau raised a hand, stilling him, and Spock continued unchecked.

"Mr. Kirk has apprised me of a…situation developing on his planet as a direct result of Sarek's influence there. I understand that the Command has chosen to sever all ties with Earth until such time as a full-scale First Contact becomes appropriate." Spock paused, looking around the room. "These humans are my friends. I cannot --I will not-- do the same."

T'Pau considered Spock's monologue. "You name these outworlders…friends?" Her mouth seemed to twist on the last word. Beside Jim, Spock dropped his gaze to the floor and took a breath. Then he looked back up again, straight at T'Pau. "Yes," he said.

"Wait a second," Jim said. "Miss…um…T'Pau, if you'll excuse me for just a second. Spock, can I have a word?"

T'Pau nodded, then made a gesture of deference, turning to her attendants. Spock looked chagrined, but moved closer to Jim, who attempted to curb the urge to shout.

"What the hell are you thinking, Spock?" he hissed. "You can't come back with us; you'll be killed!"

"The statistical probability of my death is no greater than that of yours, yet you have also chosen to return," Spock said neatly.

"Well, where the hell else would I go?"

"You would be well within your rights to request amnesty of the High Command, as would the rest of you," Spock said, gesturing around the room. "Additionally, it would not be difficult to simply dispose of this craft immediately upon your return to Earth and effectively disappear."

"I hear the Caribbean's nice this time of year," piped in Scotty. "But no, I'm not keen to bide my time sipping cocktails while we wait for World War Three to start."

"Neither am I," Uhura said, stepping forward to link arms with Scotty.
Jim grinned at them. Some of the chill was beginning to seep out of him, replaced by warmth that started in his stomach and worked its way up and out. He turned to Chekov and Sulu. Chekov was beaming, and began nodding enthusiastically.

"I will come," he said. "I want to help."

Sulu folded his arms across his chest, looking determined. "Fuck yes," was all he said.

Spock gave Jim a superior look.


"Very well," T'Pau said. "Spock, your decision today is based in emotion, not logic. As such, it is difficult for us to comprehend. However, it is not…incomprehensible." She looked between Spock and Jim, and Jim had the uneasy feeling he was being read like a book.

"Spock, son of Sarek, you go forth with the blessing of the High Command."

Spock nodded. "Thank you," he said simply.

T'Pau raised an eyebrow. "Do be careful," she said. She clapped her hands. "Sarlah!" she said sharply. "Come." She gestured to her attendants, who joined her on the transporter platform. She flipped open a communicator, hailing her ship. "Live long and prosper," she said. Then, "Energize." The three figures dissolved in a sparkling haze.

"That will never stop being cool," whispered Scotty.

Spock dropped his hand slowly, turning to Jim. "That was…unexpected," he said.

"You're telling me." He sighed, and reached for Spock's hand. To his surprise, Spock brushed his fingers lightly against Jim's. "Thank you," Jim said.

Spock's eyes were warm. "You are most welcome," he said.

"Get a room, you two," said Sulu. "What?" he said at their incredulous looks. "I mean, no offense, but Spock's not exactly sanguine. Public handholding is a big step. Besides, we've apparently all signed up for another potential suicide mission. We should probably come up with a plan."

"Okay, okay. Point taken," Jim said, face hot. "Bridge in five minutes?"


"Captain," Jim said. "I like the sound of that."

Spock sighed. "You will be insufferable," he said, but he didn't let go of Jim's hand.

END