Red

by walkandtalk

Summary

Luddy IV, "Red"
Previously uninhabited Class M planet
Settlement population: 412 beings, 94% Human, including one James T. Kirk
Culture: Agrarian, strict adherence to primitive 20th-century practices

Spock is assigned to study the geology of the planet while also providing his services as Teacher to the youngest colonists. Rule number one: hands off the leader's young protege.
Jim was bone burning tired. It was almost first sundown and he’d finally finished the northern field. He jumped off the harvester, gratified that Bones was standing on the porch waiting with a plate of food for him. Jim didn’t even bother taking it to the table, just sunk to the steps of the old porch and dug into the vegetable stew and bread. He finished it in moments and accepted a second plate and glass of sweetened water with a grunt of appreciation.

“Cool today,” the doctor said, leaning up against the porch post.

Jim nodded. “Good.” It bode well and made harvesting easier. It wouldn’t stay that way for much longer. “I can get most of the east field done by second sun.”

“The east field will have to wait. The Teacher contacted me. His shuttle overshot to the other side of Sandy Ridge and he’ll need help navigating back to the Settlement.”

Jim startled. Nothing waited for harvest. They were one man down on their tiny homestead, leaving all heavy labor to Jim. The weather was a gift that couldn’t be squandered.

“Surely one of the Settlement kids could…” Jim started, but Bones shook his head. Either they were too young or married off. It had to be Jim.

Bones leaned heavily on his crutch, his face full of understanding. “Can’t be helped, Jim. If you start now, you’ll be home before moon-up.”

Jim chewed silently, tamping down his dismay at being so inconvenienced. One helped one’s neighbor. One did not rebel against the trials one was given. One took up all work joyfully.

Dammit.

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Spock stood on the ridge, looking down into a small ravine attempting to collect geological data with his tricorder. His brow furrowed in confusion as he read the data.

“Those won’t work here,” a voice called from behind his left shoulder. He spun around to see a young Human, certain it was his guide from the colony on Luddi IV making his way toward Spock and his damaged shuttle. He shut the tricorder and made his way back from the ridge.

Spock and the man met at the destroyed shuttle’s doors. From this distance, he could ascertain that his rescuer was a bit younger than his own twenty-six years, dressed in plain trousers and a rust-colored cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. His felt hat covered sun-bleached hair that fell around his ears and he wore sturdy work boots.

“Red scrambles everything,” the man said, gesturing to Spock’s hip where his tricorder rested. “That’s why you’re getting haywire readings. I bet it sent your shuttle into a tizzy.”

Spock agreed silently. What should have been a standard computer-managed landing very quickly turned into a near-death experience. “Red?”
“The planet, Luddi IV. We call it Red.” The man gestured vaguely at the shady surroundings. “For obvious reasons.”

Upon exiting his shuttle after the crash landing, the landscape recalled that of the Appalachian range of Earth, a place Spock visited on a camping excursion he had taken as a child, although the soil here was tinged with muddy red, as were the leaves of most of the trees. The river that ran through the ravine he was observing sparkled on the edges with a garnet shimmer along the banks. Spock found himself surveying the immense oak-like tree beside him, its bark a brilliant gold licked with red streaks.

“I was aware there were geological anomalies, but I will have to study this further,” Spock conceded aloud. The Human nodded tentatively, as if unsure what Spock meant by his comment.

“I’m Jim,” he said, breaking their brief awkward silence.

“Lieutenant Spock. I have several cases of science equipment that will need to be transported at the earliest convenience.”

Jim glanced over his shoulder where several containers were stacked neatly inside the damaged shuttle and made a low whistle. “I’m afraid we’ll be short on convenient times for a while, Teacher. You’ve come in the middle of Harvest. I’m to take you back to the Mission House and we can see about the equipment. It’s a hard hike back, so it’s best we carry smart.”

Spock nodded, anticipating as much. He lifted the small satchel he had packed for himself and Jim nodded approvingly. They started the walk back together without comment.

It was not an uncomfortable walk. As soon as Jim appeared to recognize Spock’s stamina and strength, they kept up a quick pace and Jim supplied anecdotes and answered questions about Red and the Settlement not found in the database.

When Spock was first assigned to the small settlement in the Luddi system, he had read all the literature on the planet. Previously uninhabited Class M planet. Settlement population: 412 beings, 94% Human. Agrarian society. The planet was marked for colonization and secured by Enid Winter-Perez and the first wave of colonists broke ground seventeen years ago. Winter-Perez and her followers called themselves Azzunites, after Pablo Azzuni, moderately infamous for his role in the anti-android movement of 2088. Ten years ago Winter-Perez’s colony opened their borders in response to the OSD, taking eleven survivors. Spock had read everything from Winter-Perez, from her undergraduate essays on post-First Contact ethics to her speech on the “Death of Humanity” she made just before her death two years ago.

“We don’t have tricorders, not that it would matter,” Jim commented, pointing to the fungus that ran along the sides of the trees near the ravine they followed. “That’s what you need to look for, the green creepers, they’ll show you where potable water is. Only when they’re flush and green. The red ones are a slow death.”

After three hours, they broke through the treeline onto fields of dusky red grains.

“This is the Sulu farm,” Jim explained, waving a hand high to a large mechanical harvester. Spock had never seen anything like the noisy machinery slowly making its way across the field. The farmer operating it waved back. “Their property is adjacent to the Mission’s property. We’re not far.”

They continued on a worn path along the fields where Jim answered questions about red grain, its life cycle and uses. As they made it to a small crossroads Spock heard the rustling and thumping of footsteps.
“Jim!” a small girl cried, bursting out of the shoulder-tall grass. “Jim, wait for me!”

“Zippy, what are you doing in the fields?” Jim asked, allowed the young girl to swing off his arms for a moment before depositing her back on the ground. She wore a nearly identical outfit to Jim’s, save her being barefoot and hair in long dark braids.

The young Human girl, no more than 7, furtively glanced up at Spock. “I thought you needed my help.”

“You mean you wanted to see Teacher,” Jim said knowingly. Zippy blushed. “Teacher, this is Zipporah Sulu, your youngest pupil.”

Spock felt at ill ease in the presence of such a young student but nodded in polite acknowledgment. Jim crouched at her level, tugging a braid. “I am thankful for the help, but my tasks have been productive thus far. I would not want to prevent your own achievements today.”

Zippy blushed again, squeaked a small goodbye to Jim and “Teacher” and ran off, this time along the road back to the Sulu home.

“There’s ten Sulu kids,” Jim said as they started walking again. “But only six of them will be in school, so you’re lucky there. The last Teacher had nine Sulus at once.”

Spock squinted up at the narrow home at the end of the lane, imagining ten children raised there. “Are you in school?”

Jim scoffed. “Me? No, I finished before the Federation started the post here. Bones mostly taught me. I mean, Doctor Leonard McCoy, he’s what we have for a--”

“Yes, I’m aware of Dr. McCoy’s work.”

Jim blinked. “Oh, yeah?”

Spock ignored the poorly worded question. “Who lives at the Mission?”

“Just me and Bones, and now you. We had more, but they grew up. Sometimes the kids from the outer homesteads will winter here for school, but I don’t know if they’re sending any this year. Haven’t heard, but we’ll know after Harvest.” Jim smiled, brightening. “You’ll be here for the Harvest Festival. We’ve never had a Teacher come so early and be able to stay for the festival. Should be educational.”

Typical agrarian celebration, Spock assumed. They passed in companionable silence for two more miles until Jim pointed off in the distance between two hills. Spock could barely make out the two story building, it’s white roof gleaming dusky pink in the setting sun.

“We’re home.”

As they walked through the fields of red grain, the suns were starting to set. “It’s a four hour night,” Jim had warned him. “It takes some getting used to.”

“You were not born here,” Spock inferred.

Jim nodded his head. “I came when I was ten. Took me a while to adjust to something dirtside, and the nights threw me off. Bones called it sun sickness, took me months to get over it.”

“Vulcans only sleep for five hours.”
Jim looked over to him, both impressed and curious. “I’ve never met a Vulcan before.”

“I am half-Vulcan,” he admitted. “My mother is Human.”

Jim did not appear surprised by the unusual admission.

“People here are going to be mistrustful of anything Starfleet,” Jim cautioned. “I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“I do not.”

As they approached, a man hobbled out of the residence, leaning on a crutch. Jim grabbed his hat and started to wave it.

“Bones crushed he leg in a harvest accident,” Jim shared. “He’s homebound for the next few weeks. It’s making him cranky, so don’t take it personally. Although, to be honest,” Jim rubbed the back of his neck when he replaced his hat, “he’s always a little cranky.”

“I will still not ‘take it personally.’” Jim grinned.

When they reached the path, Jim made a wide formal gesture toward the man leaning heavily against a garden fence. “Teacher, this is Dr. McCoy. Bones, meet Teacher.”

The doctor, known to be in his late 30s, looked older. His eyes, a few shades darker than Jim’s brilliant blue, peered out over sun worn brow that hadn’t seen a sterile laboratory in years.

“Lieutenant Spock, welcome to Red. We’re mighty glad you landed in one piece.”

“Landed may be an incorrect term,” Spock admitted. Jim snickered. “However, most of the equipment is undamaged.”

“Good fortune,” the doctor said. “Jim, let’s help our guest get settled in the bunkhouse.”

Jim made a strange face. “But, we’ve got-”

“You’ll have to fetch the sheets from the upstairs cupboard,” McCoy interrupted, barring no argument. Jim's face fell, but he ambled up the stairs into the Mission house.

McCoy looked over Spock for a long moment.

“You’re younger than the others,” he observed. Spock didn’t comment. “When they said they were sending a Vulcan, I expected someone a bit…”

He could see why Jim was so concerned he would take the doctor’s words ‘personally.’ “Yes?”

“Less like you are.” McCoy started to hobble toward the porch stairs, passing Spock and making his way to a small garden. “That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps you’ll outlast your predecessor. This way, Lieutenant.”

McCoy escorted him to another white wooden building, a simple one story with pane windows and a large covered porch with a lean-to, a single bench and several dusty barrels.

“The boys used to live here,” McCoy said. “Should be comfortable enough for you, your own space for your equipment and such.”

It was more than was promised in the installation agreement with Starfleet, and Spock said so.
“If one has, one gives, joyfully,” McCoy said, quoting something Spock was unfamiliar with. He opened the door (no locks, mechanical or otherwise, Spock noted) to show him a large servicable area with two bunk beds, chairs, a table and a simple chest of drawers. The doctor pointed to the heater in the corner. “Fueled by redrock, so you’ll want to keep a supply of it. Nights are short but cold.”

Jim appeared in the doorway, arms full of linens and a pillow. “You’ll be okay, out here?” He took three long strides and dropped the linens onto the bottom of the far bunk bed. “There’s a shower in the lean-to, but all the water is hand pumped out here.”

“It is more than sufficient,” Spock decided, already planning where his lab equipment would be.

Jim grinned, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Supper,” McCoy announced, and hobbled his way back through the vegetable garden to the Mission house, leaving Jim and Spock to trail behind him. Jim pointed out what was planted, what would be harvested this season and Spock shared a bit of his own knowledge of herbs and Terran vegetables he had learned from his mother, who had kept a small garden on Vulcan.

Gardening and harvesting maintained their conversation through dinner, which was a simple meal of nutty purple bread and cheese (“tastes just like mozzarella, but it’s pink, so I can’t wrap my mind around it”). Throughout, McCoy was quiet, contemplatively so. When their meal was done, McCoy let Jim clear the table as Spock and he sat out on the front porch, cooler breezes starting to pick up. The doctor started to whittle something, surgeon's fingers deftly forming shape out of wood.

“After harvest we can spare the people to help bring your equipment back to the Mission house. Until then, it’s just us and our simple life.”

Spock nodded. “I will attempt not trouble you beyond what was outlined in the agreement.”

“I hope so.”

That night, when Spock had loaded the stove with redrock and dressed in his regulation sleepwear, which was woefully inadequate for the sharply bitter night. He slipped into his bottom bunk and looked up to see a something scratched into the wood of the bunk above. He reached out, tracing the words in the darkness.

Jim was here.

Chapter End Notes

Gentle readers,

I've had this story in my head for a while, affectionately referred to as "Space Amish" but based roughly off of some post-war Luddite-like movement. I hope you enjoy!
“It’s how they do things here, Teacher,” Jim called out for the sixth time that day, dropping his tools into the bag Spock was holding after they adjusted the cylinder speed on the combine. He wiped his greasy hands across the front of his dark coveralls.

“I would have volunteered to do a different job had I realized my skills with your harvester was inconsequential.”

“It’s all simple machines,” Jim pointed out cheerfully, donning his felt hat again. “Basic mechanics, something you learned in Vulcan nursery school, I bet.”

Spock nodded, although that fact did not mean his education easily translated to what was necessary on Red. His first few days he had done whatever was asked of him, which kept him busy from morning to night. Most days he carried out simple menial tasks given by Dr. McCoy or followed Jim around the farm. On the third day, McCoy had declared Spock was “a fine example of Vulcan industriousness” which, judging by Jim’s expression, was high praise from the gruff doctor. He then launched into a long and winding explanation of the parallels to Azzunite philosophy and Surakian logic.

How things were done on Red did not make much logical sense, but Spock kept his opinions to himself.

They did not use basic sanitation protocols for water, there was not a single sonic diffuser on the planet.

They did not use an osteo-compound to heal Dr. McCoy’s broken leg in minutes, as the doctor was surely used to when he was a director of a modern medical facility on Earth.

They had no relay communication, although Jim insisted they could contact the Sulu or Chekov farms quickly if they needed to.

“It’s how they do things,” Jim would say. They, not us. As if Jim stood apart in some indefinable way.

“After second meal, I’ll show you how we-”

Jim paused, then lifted a finger to his lips to quiet Spock. He turned his head as if hearing something in the distance. Spock heard it too but hadn’t recognized it. Birds chirping.

Red didn’t have birds.

“It’s Ben,” Jim said, standing up and brushing the red dust off his pants. “He’s coming for second meal.”

Jim lifted his fingers to his mouth and started to trill a series of complicated whistles. Four notes rang clearly over the field, making Jim grin. “He’s bringing Zippy.”

“The whistling…” Spock started, understanding not forthcoming.
“Old language, adapted from Greece. You'd have to learn it the old fashioned way, I think, because there’s no universal translator setting for it. Not that they use UTs here.” Jim hoisted himself up on the harvester, offering a hand out to Spock, who declined for reasons of Vulcan modesty, not that Jim would be aware of that faux pas.

“I think we’ll finish today,” Jim commented as he started the harvester, Spock wedged uncomfortably into his side. Jim hitched his arm behind him, giving Spock’s shoulders more room.

“Finished?” Spock was eagerly looking forward to the inevitable end of harvesting so that he could then retrieve his supplies at the abandoned shuttle.

“We’re never finished,” Jim admitted. “With all seasons of joyful life, there is work.”

Another Azzunite quote, Spock assumed. Perhaps he needed to start reading McCoy’s library if he was to carry on a conversation with his hosts.

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When they brought the harvester back and deposited its precious grain, hooked the harvester in its solar charging station, checked on Bluebelle the nanny goat, (still hadn’t kidded) and washed up, Dr. McCoy was already sitting on the porch with a young man with dark hair and an easy smile. Seven-year-old Zippy was sprawled out on the steps but leapt to her feet as soon as she spotted Jim and Spock.

“There they are,” McCoy called, good-natured. “How was the morning?”

“Southern field is finished,” Jim said, bounding up the stairs beside Zippy, tweaking her braids. "Hullo, Ben, good to see you."

“A season to be thankful for,” the man said, standing up. “I’ve come to offer my help.”

Jim grinned, slapping Ben on the back. “Oh, I see, running away from your new home. Zippy, are you running him down to the bone out there?”

Ben elbowed Jim back. “The old man can’t keep an eye on you like I can,” he shot back, quickly glancing at Spock. Jim’s ears pinked.

“I’m limping, not hard of hearing,” McCoy said, taking his crutch and swinging it threateningly. Ben and Jim laughed. “Straighten up, you want to make a good impression on Teacher.”

Ben’s attention hadn’t really left Spock, but simply sharpened. “We’re grateful you’re here, Teacher. I’m Ben Sulu, and my sister-in-law, Zippy,” he gestured to the girl, who was staring at Spock avidly. “I heard your arrival was a bit more perilous than your average shuttle landing.”

Spock nodded. “Although the most important cargo is undamaged and secure, thankfully.”

“That’s why I’ve come, to offer my help transporting it,” Ben said, eyeing the doctor more than Spock, waiting for his approval.

Doctor McCoy nodded. “Glad to hear things are going so well with Aiko’s harvest, with all the new responsibilities of a bigger herd.”

“Oh, you know Sulus, they’re just prodigious multipliers,” Jim teased. Ben casually kicked Jim in the shin, making him wince a bit.
“Boys,” McCoy sighed. “Miss Zippora, what was today made for?”

“To share in work and joy so that tomorrow we may do the same,” Zippy recited, taking McCoy’s offered hand as he limped into the house.

“Then let us share in a meal,” he announced, and the others followed.

They gathered around the table, Jim and Ben squeezing together amicably on the low bench with Zippy, while McCoy and Spock got chairs to themselves. Second meal was always the largest, this time cooked quinoa and zucchini, roasted chickpeas, flatbread and the berries Zippy had picked on the way to the Mission.

Ben offered twenty minutes of non-stop news, peppered with Zippy’s comments. Who had lost sheep in the last storm. How the newest potato crop venture had faired. If Nana Wendell’s heart medication was taken consistently.

Spock gathered that Ben used to live at the Mission with Jim, but had left to become the husband of Hikaru Sulu, one of the aforementioned nine Sulu children and Zippy’s older brother. Hikaru had just started a project of tending a herd of barely domesticable native “Red Boars.”

“They’re monstrous, but sweet, most of the time,” Jim said. Ben snorted.

“They need huge amounts of land to forage, so we suspect we don’t really have all the resources they need to be productive on the farm,” Ben explained.

“Hikaru and Ben want to move out,” Zippy said.

“Zippy, hush, that’s not for you to talk about,” Ben scolded. He glanced reluctantly at Dr. McCoy.

“Is that true, Ben?”

The man squared his jaw. “Yes, sir.”

“I see,” the doctor said. “Jim, Zippy, why don’t you go check on Bluebell?”

Without question, Jim and Zippy pushed back from the table, not making any eye contact with Spock, who felt a little lost.

“I imagine it’s a little crowded at home? Ten Sulus, and a baby on the way.”

Ben nodded emphatically, but still awaited some sort of blow.

“You’ve thought about a homestead?”

“Hikaru wants to try south of the shale, but I’m not sure.”

“You want to stay on Sulu land,” McCoy inferred.

Ben shrugged. “Hikaru wants to try more animal husbandry. He thinks the shale might be good.”

“And this is you, asking my opinion?”

“Both of us, sir.”

McCoy leaned back, considering the young man across the table. “I say it is good,” the last syllable visibly diffusing the tension across Ben’s shoulders. “Hikaru is right, we need more work with the
Boars.”

Ben nodded, quietly pleased, glancing up at Spock curiously.

“Time for you and Teacher get going, I suspect,” McCoy said. “Jim can finish storing the grain, and I’ll need Zippy to help me around here. If you and Ben start now, I imagine you can still be back by second sun.”

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The first order of business was to plan how many kilos of supplies would make its way back to the Mission. Help came from an unlikely source. Ben led Spock back from whence he had come days prior, through the Sulu homestead, and introduced him to his husband’s pet project: the Red Boars.

Monstrous didn’t describe the creatures accurately. Easily thousands of kilograms, they were the size of a Clydesdale, shoulder to shoulder with Spock, its girth enormous. Shaggy mahogany hair covered its body with two intelligent eyes peering out at them, with the fangs of a deep sea angler fish. Four of them, one buck and three sows, had free reign of the woods that outlined the west side of the pasture but currently enjoyed the shelter of a barn.

“This is Sully, the leader of the herd,” Ben said, patting him on his flank. “He’ll be coming with us.”

Amazingly, Sully navigated the rocky terrain with surprising ease with hooves the size of dinner plates, setting a comfortable pace with the occasional snacking, a travois rigged across his back. Ben was also an easy companion on the hike back to the shuttle. He was even chattier than Jim but didn’t expect Spock to participate, which suited them both fine.

He learned that horses didn’t do well on Red. Neither did chickens or any other Terran bird (Ben hypothesized the magnetic fields were too disruptive for them to flourish). Alpaca, sheep and Tellerite Wixo provided most of the product for cloth, most people kept a few goats for milk, and Hikaru had a desperate desire to try oyster farming in the saline lakes several kilometers away.

Ben and Hikaru had married last Harvest Festival, which was “a surprise to everyone who knew I was sweet on Eva Chekov and didn’t even give that dopey kid a second look, and then next thing I know, he’s still coming to school, but I left years ago, which is how we do things here, and he still hanging around the Bunk House, bugging me and Jim, and then it wasn’t bugging anymore, yeah?”

Spock nodded but didn’t quite follow.

“So just as I was thinking maybe I should ask his parents if we could start visiting, formally, the way we do things, he asked McCoy permission to start courting me.” Ben laughed, keeping the pace ahead of Sully. “Like it was a done deal. Which is was to him, I guess. He said he knew what he wanted when he saw me, but he was willing to wait. We visited for a month, and then courted for three, and sat together at the community meeting just a week before the Harvest festival. How do they do things on Vulcan?”

“Very differently,” he hedged, and Ben blithely picked up the reigns of the conversation, this time on family life with the Sulus. There were nine children: Juniper, Yui, Hikaru left school and Spock would have the pleasure of teaching May, Akari, Sara, Hiroshi, Zipporah, and Kaito. At least twelve other families typically sent their children to school, although it depended on how well the Harvest went and what the general community feeling was about Teacher.

“We’ve never had a Vulcan here,” Ben said. “Some people may not want to send their kids to school, but I wouldn’t take it personally.”
“Jim has advised similarly.”

Ben smiled, nodding. “It took them years to warm up to me and Jim, so we would know. They’re used to outside people wanting to change things, to suit themselves.”

“You’re from the OSD,” Spock said, finally feel comfortable to speak what he had suspected since he met Jim.

Ben nodded.

The Orphan Ship Disaster, one of the great diplomatic and humanitarian catastrophes since the Federation’s inception. Eight thousand colonists lived on newly established Tarsus IV, and in less than a year less than four thousand survived the blight and subsequent genocide executed by Governor Kodos. Less than one hundred children survived, seventy-two were orphans. Those orphans were placed on the *USS Quixote*, which was later attacked by Klingon raiders defending the border near the Tarsus system. Only one crewman and a few children were recovered from the wreckage.

“Eleven of us, Jim and I were the youngest.”

Jim had to have been twelve at the most.

“They didn’t trust us at first. Enid had the bunkhouse built, allowed the school, let other families send their kids if they wanted. I’m not sure what she expected to happen. I was a mess, but Red grounded me, you know? I learned to share the work, and eventually share the joy. Tarsus was about excess and power, but you can’t create that on Red. It’s hard living, but no one goes without. We will never needlessly starve. But hey, it's not for everyone, right? The oldest kids, Tommy and Lauren, they hopped the first starship they could and haven’t heard from them since. Three years ago Kali did too. But the rest of us have integrated, married and settled down. Except for Jim.”

Ben stopped, finally taking a breath. "But Jim’s different from the rest of us, yeah?"

Spock nodded because he knew that Jim was different, but he didn’t understand.

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Several hours later, they reached the bunkhouse, Sully laden with more advanced equipment than Red had since since Arrival Day all those years ago. Ben and Jim helped Spock carry the cases in, setting them down in a chaotic pattern only Spock understood. When the last was in, Ben bid him farewell and headed home, Sully behind him.

Jim stood in the middle of the room, eyeing the boxes curiously.

“It’s a lot of stuff,” Jim commented as Spock started to open the two largest cases, containing parts of an interphasic compensator.

“Yes. I can explain, if you would like.”

The war across Jim’s face was evident. “I would not want to keep you from your personal productive work. It would not be... proper.”

It’s the way *they* do things here. Spock had been listening and learning. “I have lost many days to prepare for the school session,” Spock admitted, pleased to see Jim light up a little, anticipating his next offer. “I would value your assistance.”
“I’d be happy to share in your work,” Jim said, taking a tentative step towards one of the already opened cases.

“I am assembling the interphasic compensator along this wall, but if you can lay out the instruments in that case, I can organize them later.”

The worked in comfortable silence for many minutes, and when Spock looked over at Jim’s work, he was momentarily speechless.

“You organized them already.”

“Isolinear to duotronic,” Jim said. “I just assumed.”

It was more than that. He organized them like a surgeon’s table, each tool and device spaced apart for the maximum ergonomic benefit. “Excellent work.”

“Thank you, Teacher.”

Spock leveled a considering look at Jim, who turned pink under his gaze. “What do you know about dualitic inverters?”

Chapter End Notes

Gentle readers,


Looking forward to sharing with you soon, walkandtalk
It was a Jim said, every season of life on Red came with work. Grain had been stored, half of the vegetable garden was harvested and canned, the rest would wait for winter. In the few days since Spock’s laboratory was set up, Jim could spend an hour or less watching Spock set up. He never asked questions, but Spock took it upon himself to narrate aloud what he was doing, and Jim listened with rapt interest and assisted everytime Spock asked.

It was unusual. But Jim was unusual.

He was also notably intelligent, although denied any previous Teacher thought so. It was obvious that he had some engineering training on Tarsus or his life before the doomed colony. Spock never had to repeat an instruction and the Human could infer next steps without assistance. He could be an excellent assistant if only Dr. McCoy wasn’t opposed to Jim spending even more time with Spock.

However, once the preparation for the Festival started, there was no time for anything else.

Jim and Spock moved twenty backless benches into the space between the Mission house and the barn. Three fire pits were made ready, one large one and two smaller ones out in the fields. Jim pointed out where tents would be pitched because the festivities stretched overnight as well. Barrels of potable water were gathered. Tables set up. All the linens washed and hung to dry. Occasionally neighbors would come with pie and grains, bushels of corn and game they hunted, dressed and ready to be roasted.

"Just when you think you have enough food, they'll be bringing three times as much, and it's all gone by sunrise,” Bones explained as Spock single-handedly moved a giant cauldron to the main fire.

The morning of the festival, McCoy was walking around better than he had been, now wearing a lighter cast and walking without the wooden crutch. He found Spock and Jim finishing with the animals while it was still cool.


“Onry,” Jim reported, slowly making his way to the fence where McCoy stood. “She’ll have her kids when she’s good and ready, which will be the most inconvenient time ever, I’m sure.”

As if offended, Bluebell took that moment to bound around the paddock, knocking into Jim and sending him sliding into a patch of mud. Jim groaned, rolling over and picking himself up.

“She told you, and now you stink,” McCoy said ungenerously. “Go shower in the bunkhouse. I’ll get first meal ready.”

Jim shrugged, tugging at his filthy shirt. “Yeah. Spock, my clothes are laid out on my bed, would you mind fetching them?”

Spock nodded and followed the doctor to the Mission house.

“First door up the stairs,” McCoy directed, fidgeting with the redrock stove.
Spock walked up the stairs and opened the first door, creaking loudly in the near silence. Jim had a sparsely appointed room, whitewashed board walls and puncheon floors, with a single narrow bed with a red woolen blanket. There were no pictures or personal items, save his toiletries lined neatly on top of a chest of drawers. On the bed lay a pair of navy trousers and a recently pressed blue shirt, obviously laid out in preparation for the festival. Spock noticed that Jim would need socks and the shoes he wore in the evenings. The brown shoes were easily found at the foot of the bed, but Spock had to go rummaging through the chest of drawers to find socks.

What he found, instead, was bundles of wires. Wires and capacitors and what looked like part of a phase coil resonator. It was a hodgepodge of equipment, too old to have come from Spock’s laboratory. He traced the edge of a hyper spanner and then gently closed the drawer, finding what he needed in the next one.

“Find everything?” McCoy asked, hovering over a griddle of pancakes.

“Yes,” Spock said, making a beeline back to the bunkhouse.

When he reached the bunkhouse, he could hear Jim in the lean-to ringing out his dirty clothes and whistling an unfamiliar tune.

Spock unnecessarily cleared his throat. “Your clothes.”

“Thanks, Teacher.” Jim’s extended his hand through the crack in the door, exposing an arm and shoulder, pale and well muscled, more skin than any Azzunite would show. Spock handed him the clothes and waited for Jim to dress in the modesty of the lean-to.

When Jim stepped out, Spock was forced to quietly admit his gaze lingered a moment longer than necessary on his young host.

“I know, I don’t often wear my Sunday Best,” Jim said shyly, the old colloquialism lost on Spock. “But today is special.”

In respect for his host’s traditions, Spock wore his officer greys, which regulation dictated were to only be worn at significant events of hosting cultures. Jim was silent a moment, and then asked questions about the pips at his collar, but didn’t mention the drawer. McCoy rolled his eyes when they arrived at the table.

“At ease, Lieutenant,” he drawled. Spock had come to learn this was what McCoy did when he was amused.

As predicted, as soon as the first meal dishes were washed and dried, families started to pour in, all carrying tent poles and pies, tools and canned goods. Babies were swaddled between skeins of wool and cans of soup. Dozens of children started to fill the yard carrying sacks of grain or sticks, shrieking and laughing and filling the typically quiet Mission with more noise and life than Spock thought possible.

Jim and McCoy were swept away by the crowd within minutes, needing to tend or direct one thing or another, and Spock felt adrift as clusters of people ambled up the drive to the Mission house. He understood and tolerated the curious stares, expected the whispers, but did not anticipate feeling so alone in a sea of people. It was similar to his first day at Starfleet Academy.

Half an hour later, McCoy grabbed Spock by the arm and deftly maneuvered him to where a small group of elders sat, each in the three backed chairs that typically sat at the Mission table, now arranged at the best spot by the communal fire like thrones.
“This is Teacher, Lieutenant Spock,” the doctor announced. They nodded in acknowledgment, the eldest, an Andorian with her white hair braided in intricate patterns around her antennae, gestured for him to come closer until she could peer directly into his face.

“A Vulcan,” she declared in a weak, warbling voice. “We’ve never had a Vulcan join us before.”

“They’d rather think in circles and call it productive,” the other woman beside her snarked, dusting nonexistent lint off her plain green jumpsuit. The man, dressed in red woven suspenders and a wide-collared white shirt, made no comment.

“Spock has been lifted a great weight off my shoulders and bore it like no visitor has,” McCoy said generously. “No worse time to have broken my tibia, but Starfleet sent Teacher to us early.”

“Good fortune,” the Andorian woman said, patting Spock’s arm absently. “I imagine you’ll be getting more permanent help around here soon, Leonard.”

McCoy glanced at Spock briefly and then away, frowning. “Not this season, I think, Beda.”

“Your young charge has no plans for a helpmate?” Beda asked, blinking owlishly.

“He’s focused on the Mission and too young to settle just yet.” McCoy's mouth set in a stubborn mein.

“I was two years younger when I pledged my troth.”

“Good comes in its own time, folly is rushed,” McCoy recited. “Jim will have his own time, I won’t stand for anyone trying to lure him out the door prematurely.”

“Next year, perhaps,” Beda mused. “It would be nice to have some little ones running around here again, eh, Leonard?”

“In its own time,” McCoy echoed, smiling a little wistfully.

“Do you think it will it be a busy festival, Leonard?” the elder man asked.

McCoy shrugged, looking over the assembled crowd, already over 200 people, milling about and visiting in groups. “I suspect the Rollands will be by soon. David and Khadija have been sitting together in the last Meeting.”

“My Annalise's youngest daughter and the Xi girl have been courting,” the woman in green added. “I’m sure you’ll be hearing from them soon.”

The conversation went like this for a few minutes more, updates and gossip. Spock got to see McCoy as he had never seen him before: an unofficial leader, of sorts. After the death of Enid Winter-Perez, an informal council formed, but McCoy's role was undefined. It seemed, as the day wore on, McCoy wore the hat of doctor, arbitrator, and justice of the peace. Before second meal he had fielded a negotiation of resources between three neighbors, settled a dispute between two brothers and agreed to officiate two marriages.

“It is often like this?” Spock asked when the crowd around McCoy had finally dispersed.

“No, it’s usually worse,” the doctor groused. “Everyone has their role in this dance, we take it up joyfully. Oh, good. Second meal.”

Someone had rung the dinner bell, a large gong on the side of the Mission porch that had been
unused until today. As if the seas had been parted, some members of the family started to make their way to the large tables and sit, while the others stood back. McCoy grabbed Spock’s arm again and escorted him to the table.

“Guests sit first,” McCoy explained. “And the elders. Everyone gets a turn, the kids eat last, and I will know if anyone disturbs the natural order because that entire brickle cobbler has my name on it,” raising his voice at the end, making several of the children behind him giggle.

Spock sat at one of the long benches, thankfully at a corner where he only had the doctor at one shoulder. At least five dozen fit at the first table, dressed in pressed shirts, cotton jumpsuits, gingham dresses, straw hats, and braids. Another table sat parallel, and beyond that was the barn, where Jim leaned against a fence with a few other youths. He caught Spock’s eye and gave a wave.

“Dear friends,” a strong voice carried out, the woman in green. “We gather joyfully.”

“We gather joyfully,” the crowd echoed.

“To plant, to harvest, to share, and now to join again.”

“Good fortune,” they answered back.

“And good fortune to you. Bountiful harvest, health, and season renewed.”

The standing Azzunites immediately gathered platters and pitchers and began serving the people seated. Before he could object, Spock’s plate was piled with roasted potatoes, squash, beans, and yeasty bread, more than he would typically serve himself.

“Casserole, Teacher?” each one would offer, serve him before he could answer and left before he could understand what was piled onto his plate.

Jim walked among the other young men and women, moving slowly to greet and chat with the other Azzunites seated. By the time he reached Spock, his plate was only half cleared.

“There’s no third meal during Festival,” Jim warned him. “Nothing but roasted corn and whatever leftovers you can sneak out of the camp kitchen, so you better eat now.”

“I think I will be sated,” Spock said, but Jim deftly spooned chestnut stuffing onto his plate. “For several days, at least.”

Jim grinned without comment and moved onto the next person.

The buzz around the table continued as they left their seats for the next groups, younger and younger until the youngest children sat. Spock watched with interest as he surveyed the school-aged children, at least eighty of them, eating the last of the feast.

“Most of them don’t come to school. They get their reading and arithmetic lessons at home,” Jim said, taking a seat on the fence at his elbow.

“Is it sufficient?”

Jim shrugged. “They seem to think so. You don’t need quantum physics to plant a crop or raise a barn. Less than a dozen families want their kids trained in the classics.”

“I received the approved curriculum.”

“What did you think?”
“Very Terran centric,” Spock admitted.

His companion nodded. “Created by the second Teacher we had. A little xenophobic. Looking back on it, I think she imaged Red would be some sort of pre-Contact paradise. She didn’t last long, but her legacy remains. Every single one of The Bard’s works, even the sonnets, all year long, every teacher, for the last six years. Donne was too risqué. Rowling was too fantastical.”

“I appreciate most of Shakespeare’s works,” Spock admitted to Jim’s surprise. “My mother had an extensive library of Human literature. However, I have received permission to update some of the texts.”

Jim nodded knowingly. “It was a big topic of conversation at the last Meeting: can we acknowledge the invention the replicator and include Tellerite epic prose, or should we ease into it?”

“I was gratified the elders agreed with my pedagogical rationale.”

“They didn’t,” Jim said cheekily. “But Bones tired them out.”

Before Spock could request Jim to explain, two youths came skipping up to the fence where Jim sat, tugging on his arms.

“Jim,” one exclaimed breathlessly, tucking her curly dark hair behind her ear, “we’re picking teams, you’ll be on ours?”

Jim glanced over at Spock, helpless and regretful. “I…”

“We need you,” the shorter wheedled. “You’re the oldest and strongest, and you need to balance the other teams out.”

“Please, Jim?”


“For what, precisely?”

“For what I’m about to do next.”

Chapter End Notes

This will be fun, I said. Only a few thousand words, I said.

Lies, gentle readers, all lies. I’d rather share this bit of the chapter now, knowing that it’s true was McCoy says: good comes in its own time. I can’t find it within myself to rush pastoral space romance. I don’t think this will be an epically slow burn, but I hope you feel like sticking with me.

Haystacks next chapter. Promise.
“Ah,” Dr. McCoy hummed, joining Spock and a growing group of lookers-on on the side of the recently plowed field. “The traditional Azzunite mating display.” The dry comment earned a few huffs of embarrassed laughter from the small crowd.

Academically, it made sense. Most cultures used feats of skill and strength as part of their mating rituals. In this harsh environment, one would want a partner that had dexterity, strength, and cunning. He watched as Jim hoisted a log four times his height and sent it flying across the field, impressed by the strength wound in his lean arms and shoulders.

“It’s called caber toss,” McCoy said over the cheers and hoots of the teams and audience. “Some of the families brought it from Earth, Scotland. They’ll do some races, wrestling, Red Boar tipping and the like until they’ve worn themselves out and declare a champion. It’s tradition that the unmarried folks participate.”

“You are not married,” Spock commented.

“I am, technically,” McCoy said in a clipped tone that invited no further comment.

There were several rounds of log throwing, Jim only bested by one other participant, making his team groan in disappointment.

“Races,” announced one of the girls who begged Jim into the games. “We’re still uneven.”

“I can sit out,” Jim immediately offered, making several on his team object.

The pause in the games made the growing audience restless as several people. “You aren’t married,” McCoy shot back to Spock, clamping a startlingly strong hand on his shoulder, propelling him forward. “Teacher can.”

The group of assembled young people turned, surprised. From the back, Spock could make out Jim’s inviting grin.

“Teacher?” the girl with the dark curly hair asked, shock written on her face.

Spock shot a sidelong glance at McCoy. “I was not planning on participating in all the local traditions,” he said, gesturing to his dress uniform.

“C’mon, Teacher,” Jim called out. “We promise to take it easy on you.”

Spock did not splutter, but he did start to unbutton his dress coat, gratified he had undergarments suitable for athletic participation, to the titters of the adolescents. As he walked out to where the small line was forming, a few of the bystanders started to clap.

“Over here, teacher,” one said, an Orion girl with her hair bound in wide braids. “Hope you’re fast.”

“I possess significantly more muscle mass than a typical Human.”

“Yeah,” the young woman grinned, “but can ya run?”
“Why do you ask?”

“’Cus you’ve gotta outrun Jim.”

When the whip cracked, it became apparent why that was the only strategy given. Jim took a quick and startling lead within a few seconds. He was agile, comfortable in bare feet on the strangely soft terrain of Red. Spock found it easy to catch up, but not without surprising strain. It wasn’t until the third bend in their informal track that Spock was able to overtake the other man, and only then by a few arm lengths.

Spock’s newly adopted team cheered, although a little too shy to thump him on the back, but that didn’t stop Jim, breathless and rosy, from bracing his arms on Spock’s.

“You got me,” he declared. “You’ve ended my four-year winning streak.”

The girl who warned Spock of Jim’s speed ran up, beaming. “Teacher, you’ve got to stay on our team,” she gushed, almost bouncing out of her boots.

Jim caught Spock’s eye and inferred Spock’s discomfort with the idea. “Naw, not this round, Gaila. Teacher and I will sit this one out.”

The young woman paused, treating Spock with a long, speculative look. “Save me a dance, Jim.” She turned on her heel, leaving them to walk back to where the bulk of the merrymakers were. McCoy handed them cups of water, which they gratefully took, Jim downing his in one go.

Someone passed a flagon around to refill cups and Jim snagged it as it went through the crowd. “Red Grain? It’s tradition.”

Spock nodded, noting that McCoy became eerily quiet at his elbow as he watched Spock offer Jim his cup to fill and take a sip. The drink was a bitter fermented alcohol, not dissimilar to Scotch mixed with coffee grounds.

“Interesting,” Spock commented, making McCoy snort.

“It’s not tradition, Jim, it’s torture,” McCoy complained.

Jim shrugged. “Not like I’d know any better, tastes normal to me. Bones says it tastes like Red.”

“The bitterness derived from carnallite and shale,” Spock deduced, now more interested in the drink.

“I can show you how, if you’d like,” Jim offered. McCoy gestured them towards the barn as his attention was drawn towards a conversation about next season’s Trading Day.

Jim led him back to the lee side of the barn, where the food had been long cleared away and now many adults were hunched over tables, talking excitedly. Several barrels were out and cups for the potable water. He pointed out the makeshift distillery, making Red Grain “fast and dirty. No need for a long fermentation period if you get some of it set up beforehand. I think it’s the grain’s properties,” Jim explained. Spock asked a few more questions, resolved to investigate more of the flora when time allowed.

Several people were passing flagons and pitchers around while the smallest children were bounced on knees and kept busy with wooden toys, their older siblings running between the games in the fields and up to the fires to beg some cake or roasted nuts from whoever was tending them at that moment. A few of the younglings had taken a dowel rod and a homemade bean bag to play some facsimile of the Terran game cricket.
“Do you play?” Jim asked, gesturing to a group hovering over cards.

Spock shook his head. “I’m unfamiliar with these games.”

“We play Kadiš-kot and Rummy, sometimes,” Jim said, walking through the groups until they found Ben and his husband Hikaru sitting at another table with two other players. “Gaila taught me e’Krit, and Hikaru is the colony’s chess champion.”

“Chess, yes,” Hikaru agreed, deftly moving a rook. “But don’t let him pretend he hasn’t beaten me across this board more than a few times. You want to play winner?”

Jim shook his head. “Not me.”

“Teacher?” Spock politely declined, content to sit and watch the game. Several others walked by, offering slightly warmer greetings to Spock as the day progressed. At one point Jim abandoned him for some reason and Ben managed to entice him into a conversation about the geology of the plot of land he and Hikaru were considering to raise their Red Boars.

The afternoon passed and second sun started its hours-long descent, casting the sky into lilac and gold. Spock assisted Jim and the others in setting out roasted corn into the large communal fire for simple meals and more flagons of Red Grain came out of the never-ending rapid distillery and McCoy eventually made his way back, Jim giving up his seat at Spock’s side immediately. Several people brought instruments out, small woodwinds and string instruments, one had a drum the side of a wagon wheel and the musicians began to play along, low note, casting a hush upon the crowd. McCoy and Jim immediately perked up, watching as the four elders Spock had met that morning stood and the crowd gathered around them.

“We gather joyfully,” Beda, the eldest Andorian, called.

“We gather joyfully,” the crowd of four hundred called back, a bit more enthusiastically after hours of celebration and games.

“There is no greater joy than to give what one has,” she recited to the enthusiastic murmurs of the crowd. “The gift of life. The gift of time, of work. The gift of love. Who among us is prepared to give such a gift today?”

The crowd seemed to hold its breath, and Spock’s head swiveled when two people moved to the center, and then another couple. They were all blushing, each holding hands and grinning, to the applause and whistles of their friends and family.

“You come before your community today to take a partner, your life’s helpmate. Who here shares an objection?” A perfunctory silence followed, and Beda continued. “So be it.”

Beda reached into her pocket and withdrew two small stones, handing one to each couple, who then clasped hands around it. “This is the weight of the burdens and joys you bear, and together you will carry.” She withdrew several strips of cloth, holding them out to the other elders, who began to wind and braid the colors around the couple’s clasped hands and forearms. “These are the ties of marriage, family, and community. They will support you together, all your days. As you cannot drop the stone, you cannot forsake each other, nor your community, nor the work you share without rejecting the most fundamental bonds that brought you here today. Do you accept these bonds, and pledge to honor your helpmate in all things.”

“We do.”

“We do.”
“Then it is done, for all of eternity, good fortune on all your days,” Beda called, and the couples unwound themselves, still grinning.

“Good fortune,” the group called back. Spock had attended only one Terran wedding ceremony, on the first vessel he had ever served on and was a little surprised the ceremony was not sealed with the traditional Human kiss.

The group still cheered and hooted for the four newlyweds, and the musicians started up again with a jaunty tune, calling several couples and groups to the unofficial floor. People milled about, sharing their blessings and felicitations to the two new couples and watching the folk dancing.

“Do you dance, Teacher?” one of the men asked. Spock noticed several heads swiveled in his direction, Jim’s included.

“No, I do not,” he admitted.

“Vulcans do not dance, as I remember,” McCoy added.

“Not traditionally, no,” Spock agreed. “Although I was trained in the Vulcan Lyre.”

Jim perked up. “I didn’t know you could play music.”

“You’ve been holding out on us, Teacher,” McCoy said.

Spock was about to agree when the man who asked him about dancing held out his hand to Jim. Jim looked over at McCoy who nodded indulgently, and Jim took off to join the other couples and groups in an athletic looking reel.

“The dancing is the only thing that isn’t part of formal courting,” McCoy explained idly. “Gives them a chance to mix, under our eyes.” He leaned in closer, “as Teacher, you’ll have to keep a sharp gaze, you understand.”

Spock nodded wordlessly, following Jim as he stepped and turned adeptly through the crowd with his new partner.

The evening continued like that through three songs, as Jim changed partners and then made his way back to the benches were Spock and McCoy stood. “Does anyone want to steal some butter cake before it’s gone?”

McCoy shook his head, waving his cup of some unidentifiable liquid, but Spock stood, suddenly weary of the crowds and looking forward to being anywhere quieter. Jim led him back into the Mission house where it was almost deserted, except for a few younglings darting out the door, carrying butter cake and berries in their fists.

“The best part of being one of the Mission’s orphans was Festival,” Jim confided. “We were the only ones who knew where the last butter cake was hidden.” He opened a tall cabinet and revealed an untouched pan and cut out two large slices. It was the first time Jim spoke openly about how he arrived on Red.

“Was it difficult, when you first came?” he asked, accepting the cake, still sticky from the honey brought that morning.

“No,” Jim smiled sadly. “You know-- you know, before.” Spock nodded. “After, this was the closest to safety I could think of, as a kid. Bones was the first adult who ever made it known my safety and security was his priority and followed through with it. It’s harder when you mature, I think. You
Spock wanted to voice his question, the one he thought since he witnessed Jim’s eyeing the science equipment in the bunkhouse. *Would you leave Red to find it?*

They left the Mission house out the back door, twilight rapidly falling and several fires casting unusual shadows upon the sparse buildings. Spock ate the entire slice of butter cake, surprising himself, and finding that he could not, in fact, process Red honey any better than Terran honey. Jim would, perhaps, call him tipsy, if he wasn’t also a bit himself. They walked along the low path around back, the sounds of the crowd thankfully dampened, but Jim swung away from the empty fields and back towards the crowd.

Spock could make out the faintest of giggles and whispers in the distance. Jim chuckled at Spock’s expression.

“I wouldn’t back there unless you wanted to see something you’d have to report before school even started,” he said wryly. “They think they’re being sneaky, but everyone knows it’s a harvest tradition to get your first kiss behind the Mission haystacks.”

“Did you?” Spock asked before he could stop himself.

Jim’s mouth popped open and then snapped shut. Even in the moonlight, Spock could see Jim’s cheeks go pink.

“No, nothing like that.”

Spock could palpably feel the awkward silence descend, regretting his forward question.

“Mine was at a Starfleet ball.”

“Huh?”

“I was escorting Nyota Uhura at a Starfleet formal function, and I had misunderstood her romantic overture. I thought she was whispering something, I was mistaken and she kissed me. I thought it was an accident.”

Jim chuckled, which gratified Spock. “Doesn’t sound romantic.”

“I have since ascertained the pleasure comes from the reciprocated meaning of the exchange.”

Jim snorted again, tension diffused. “I say guess so.”

“Jim?”

The man paused, his face shadowed in the moonlight, and Spock strained to see his expression.

“Yes?”

“I would like to kiss you.” Spock held his breath, sure that Jim was doing the same. The Human’s hand twitched as if about to reach out, and then went still.

“I can’t,” Jim sighed. “It’s not that- I just can’t.”

Spock nodded, a small pang of regret. “I understand, you do not need to explain. I will not speak of it again.”

“No, I mean,” Jim’s shoulders hunched, and he swayed on his feet. “You could talk to Bones. If you
“Dr. McCoy?”

“Yes, talk to him and maybe we could sit together at dinner.”

Spock paused, trying to decipher the string of sounds that spilled out of Jim’s mouth. “We sit together at dinner every night,” he pointed out, uncomprehending Jim’s meaning.

“But it would be different. If you asked him.”

Spock puzzled on what he said, still not understanding, and said so.

“Jim!” McCoy’s voice called out from the Mission house.

“I have to go,” Jim whispered. “Think about it.”

That was all Spock had time to do. Think about Jim. Jim and his brilliant mind, his unlikely situation, his more impossible customs. He returned to his bunkhouse alone, listening to the sounds of the lute, drums and laughter muffled by the barn, the vegetable garden, and several haystacks that secreted lovers from watchful eyes.

When the answer finally revealed itself, Spock felt more foolish than when Nyota Uhura pecked him on the lips at the Academy Ball.

**Jim wanted to be courted.**

Chapter End Notes

Dear gentle readers,
I hope you enjoyed this chapter! personal fact: the handfasting ceremony is based loosely on my own wedding and I look at our cords every time I sit down to write. Next chapter: Spock sits down with Bones for a real heart to heart. Or something.
The next day was filled with cleaning and preparing the schoolhouse. It left Jim and Spock little time to talk more and Spock and McCoy none at all until after third meal where Jim abruptly excused himself upstairs, leaving Spock and the doctor alone.

“Dr. McCoy, may I have a word with you, before you retire for the evening?”

McCoy looked at the stairs where Jim had disappeared, suspicion written on his brow, and cleared his throat meaningfully, leaning away from the table.

“May I interest you in a bit of Red Grain, Spock?”

“No, thank you.”

The doctor smirked. “I’m no fan myself. It’s vile but easy to make,” McCoy said. He fished out a flask and offered it to Spock. “I get a little Kentucky bourbon on Trading Day.”

Spock took a small sip and offered it back. McCoy did not partake, which made Spock think he failed some unwritten test.

“So, Lieutenant. How may I assist you?”

“I have been advised to speak with you.”

McCoy sat silently, his expression a perfect bedside neutral.

“I am interested in initiating a romantic relationship with Jim,” Spock explained. “He indicated that he would prefer that I use the traditions of this culture to proceed.”

McCoy blinked, moving his gaze beyond Spock’s head in thought for a moment, and then returned, not a facial muscle giving away what the man was thinking.

“I understand I am not a desirable Azzunite partner, but I wish to give Jim the opportunity to know me under the familiar and comfortable customs with which he has been raised. To make his own choice.”

McCoy looked sharply at that. “And what if he doesn’t choose you, would you accept that with no argument and complete your assignment on Red, honorably?” Spock nodded solemnly. “And what if he does?”

Spock would not lie, he had thought that far ahead. Had thought about joining his life with Jim, about the probability of such an event, what options would be open to them. He had thought of a few dozen scenarios and the paperwork and Starfleet bureaucracy that went with each. Fantasies, his mother would call them. Idle wishes for the future thought in the rare slow moments on the Mission.

“I do not know, but Jim and I would decide together.”

The doctor’s face lightened infinitesimally.

“Thank you for speaking plainly with me, Lieutenant. I’ll let you know when I’ve made a decision.”
Spock knew a dismissal when he heard one, and made a hasty retreat back to the bunkhouse, stealing a look over his shoulder to Jim’s window, where he could see the man’s figure in silhouette looking down the yard the separated them.

--

For most families, the time after Harvest was a slower time. Time to pickle and cure, time to send the children to school, and not much else, but at the Mission they had all that and more.

The first day of school arrived just a scant few days after the Harvest Festival. Bluebelle decided to go into earnest labor the night before. Jim and Spock at the edge of the barn, waiting patiently for the first signs of the new kids to arrive. Spock spent the wee hours of the morning assisting Jim in delivery and wrapping three baby goats in blankets before they were ready to totter over to Bluebelle for their first breakfast a half hour later. By the end, they were exhausted, but happy, Jim leaning against the stall, shoulders purposely touching Spock’s.

“You did well,” Jim commented. “A regular goat midwife.”

“I have assisted in birthing once before,” Spock shared, which then led to him telling the story of being trapped in space anomaly with Ensign Brown and delivering her fully grown anomaly-affected daughter in the back of the shuttle, technically seven months premature.

“That’s amazing,” Jim said, awe painted on his face. “You all aged months in an instant.”

“Presumably,” Spock agreed. “We were grateful we were rescued before Ensign Brown’s daughter started teething.”

Walking out of the barn he was surprised to see a neat line of children lined up outside the schoolhouse. They stared wide-eyed as they saw their Teacher, dirty and worn from a night of kidding Bluebelle, walk out of the barn with Jim, holding dirty blankets.

“I see you’ve already made a first impression,” Jim observed ruefully.

“I will be late,” Spock observed.

“I’ll take care of this,” Jim said, indicating the line of students. “You go get cleaned up.”

Spock to the offer gratefully and strode down to the bunkhouse. When he returned, the children were already inside, sitting in an organized fashion. Heads whipped to the back of the room were Spock entered, awe and interest painted on their faces.

“Teacher, I thank you again for sharing in the work this morning,” Jim said, obviously having filled in the younglings of the morning’s adventure. “Good fortune to have you here.”

Spock nodded gratefully and took his place at the front of the class.

“Have a good day,” Jim murmured and took off to the Mission house.

Spock looked around the room, forty-three pairs of eyes stared at him expectantly.

“Welcome. On my desk are learning surveys, please select the one that best fits your needs, and we will begin.”

--

Spock had read several texts on the education of the developing Human brain and the history of
education on Earth and had planned to use an optimal blend of Terran and Vulcan education practices and felt adequately prepared for the task of educating Azzunite young.

He was not prepared.

By the time second meal was announced, Spock was suffering from a slight tension headache and still could not figure out how to properly organize the youth into groups for mathematics lessons based on his initial proficiency assessment. When he dismissed them, the children scrambled out the door, eager to secure the best spot for their outdoor lunch, leaving Spock surveying the organized chaos in their wake.

“How was it?” Jim asked from the doorway, holding a tin box.

“Productive,” Spock admitted. “They are keen to learn. I hope I am suited to the task.”

The man shared a pleased smile and held out the box. “Bones made okra gumbo and bread.”

Spock gestured him inside, but Jim shook his head. “Sorry, Teacher. It wouldn’t be proper,” he said, not budging from the doorway, in plain sight of the children eating under the redash trees. As if anticipating Spock’s next logical question, “When work necessitates, the rules can be bent, but this is a bit different. For now,” he said in a quieter voice, “until we have approval.”

Spock couldn’t look away from Jim’s face, flitting from bashful empathy and something undefinable. “I understand,” he replied, walking from his desk to the back where Jim stood. He took the handle of the tin box, laden with food, but Jim didn’t let go right away.

“I’m glad you’re doing this,” Jim said, before he hustled out the door into the barn, leaving Spock wondering if he meant teaching or courting.

He stood, a little dumbfounded until he heard a chorus of giggles outside. He snapped to attention and quelled the chitters with a look and took his lunch to his desk and ate in contemplative silence.

--

When Spock finally walked up to the Mission house, Jim and McCoy had already finished the barn chores and third meal was ready.

“In the first week of school I usually do a brief check up on the students,” McCoy explained while ladling soup into three bowls. “Most of these children were born on Red without the modern neonatal interventions, so the health screenings are even more important.”

“Zipporah Sulu appears to have moderate myopia,” Spock commented.

McCoy looked up from his soup. “Oh?”

“She avoids reading and squints any text further than her desk. I’m given to understand it’s an easily correctable procedure for Humans.”

McCoy nodded, unperturbed. “Send her to the mission house after second meal tomorrow, I’ll take a look.” A beat passed and before Spock could ask, “I can put in an order for the corrective lenses before Trading Day.”

“Lenses?” Spock asked, unfamiliar with the medical application.

“Glasses, Human have used them for centuries. There’s still a need for them, for the rare patient who
can’t or won’t undergo the modern corrective procedure.’’

“Would not the corrective surgery be of more utility?” Spock asked.

“Humans have had bad eyes since the dawn of time, the lenses remind us of the work we do to care for our bodies,” McCoy pronounced, which marked the end of that conversation.

“Medicine is a sore subject with him if you haven't noticed,” Jim confided quietly that evening, in a passing moment before Spock left for the bunkhouse.

“He was trained as a Starfleet doctor,” Spock observed.

Jim nodded. “Something happened before I arrived. I can’t talk about it, but I thought you should know it isn’t you.”

“I understand the sentiment.”

“I know it doesn’t make much sense,” Jim said, gesturing around himself, an expressive wave of his hands meant to encompass the whole of Red. “But it’s been one of the few things that seemed safe and made sense.”

“I wish to understand,” Spock said softly.

“I know,” Jim said, smiling. “Goodnight, Spock,” he said in a louder voice, eliciting a snort behind Spock’s shoulder.

“Goodnight, Jim. Dr. McCoy.”

“Goodnight, Spock,” the doctor drawled, allowing Spock to pass him on his way back to his bunkhouse, alone.

--

More than a week had passed, and a new rhythm established itself. Spock introduced an ecology unit to their studies that most found fascinating and so long as Spock didn’t include any modern technology, McCoy, and the elders had given it their enthusiastic blessing. That meant every afternoon they went hiking and learned scientific principles, which had the added benefit of assisting with Spock’s biogeographical understanding of the planet.

Jim would give him ideas to set up observation stations but otherwise carefully kept his distance and spoke even less to him than ever before. No more late night calibration of scanners or discussions about the experiments Spock followed prior to his assignment on Red. Spock didn’t feel lonely, but was aware of Jim’s presence and lack thereof acutely.

“Ahem. These are the rules,” McCoy said abruptly after they had finished clearing off the table. “No socializing unescorted.”

“What?” Jim looked hopefully at Spock. “But we haven-” Jim started, but the doctor raised his hand, halting his words.

“If this is going on under my roof, with someone not accustomed to our ways, I need to be explicit. No socializing unescorted. Keep your words to each other respectful, nothing you wouldn’t want to say in front of Meeting for all to hear.” He ticked off fingers as he went. “If you want to exchange notes, you exchange them through me. No sealed envelopes. No closed doors. You have half an hour every night to yourselves where you are within ear and eyeshot.”
He paused, leveling Spock with a stern look. “Keep your shirts and your pants on at all times.”

“Bones,” Jim hissed, blushing furiously.

“You wanted to play by our rules. Those are the rules.”

Jim, still redfaced, nodded and met Spock’s eyes questioningly.

Spock nodded. “I agree.”

“Well then,” McCoy said, leaning back in his chair and patting his full stomach, satisfied. “You kids have fun now.”

Chapter End Notes

Dear gentle reader,

I could write Jim and Spock being sweet on each other forever! Thank you for reading :-)
Jim and Spock stood outside, with the door wide open and the curtains pulled back from the windows, affording Dr. McCoy a clear view of the two men facing off as if about to duel. Spock backed up two steps to allow Jim a seat on the porch swing. Spock took the seat beside him, leaving a wide gap between them.

Jim’s jaw worked over a few times as if trying to replace his tongue to its normal place, not quite smiling but looking up at Spock’s unwavering gaze and quirking his lips in a pleased sort of way, then looking back outside. He kicked out his feet and Spock allowed him to swing the chair gently, the ensuing silence felt peaceful and intimate after a long day.

“Do you have any siblings?” Jim finally asked, surprising Spock with the simple question.

“An older brother,” Spock said. He had sharp yet scant memories of a man more than twenty years his senior. “Sybok. We are not close.”

“I have a brother, too, five years older. His name is Sam. We were close when we were little,” Jim frowned. “He ran off just before I was sent away to Tarsus. He’s a biologist and married, with a baby on the way.” He paused, scratching the back of his neck. “Actually, the baby’s probably already been born. I guess that makes me an uncle. I’ll usually get letters on Trading Day from him.”

“I have not heard from my brother in 22 years.”

“Do you miss him?”

“No.” Jim appeared to take the answer at face value and didn’t comment. “However,” Spock felt compelled to add, “I have wondered what it would be like to have a sibling growing up, to have someone I could converse with who was not an adult.”

Jim smirked. “I had ten foster siblings. There was no conversing, only squabbling, fighting for the shower, pranking and running away like mad. You know the black stain in the corner of your bunkhouse?” Spock nodded. “One time, Ben and I wanted to scare Kali. She was a few years older than us, always bossing us around, you know? So we got some of Bones’ medical supplies and rigged what we thought was going to be a stinkbomb, and then we--”

“Ahem.”

Spock looked behind him, where Bones had stuck his head out the door.

“Why do I recall you swearing on your life on penalty of six weeks of extra chores that only Ben was involved in stealing my medical supplies?”

Jim’s eyes widened, and Spock could easily imagine how Jim got out of so many scrapes by his charm alone.

“Perhaps,” Spock suggested, “the statute of limitations has run out.”

Jim gaped a little incredulously at the Vulcan and Bones chuckled indulgently.
“Time to say goodbye to Spock,” Bones announced, turning on his heel.

Spock moved to his feet at the same time Jim did, both of them rocking forward and lurching back, as if fighting the magnetic pull between them.

“Goodnight,” Jim murmured.

“Goodnight.”

--

The next day Dr. McCoy stopped by to conduct physicals for the school children. He spent a long time watching groups of students prepare various samples from the shore of the river that ran to the north of the Mission property.

“Industrious,” he commented, earning the prideful beaming of the youngest group, holding up their samples of various seeds they had collected. “Tell me about your work.”

One of the oldest students, sixteen-year-old Pavel, explained his group’s hypothesis about the saline qualities of the banks and how it could affect keystone species. The youngest displayed their diagrams of the biomes near their own homesteads and their surveys of the domesticated and native flora.

Pride, Spock knew, was illogical. However, at that moment, he was quite illogical.

It took McCoy three days to complete all the physicals. It was the largest group of children to come to the school, McCoy noted and was especially pleased to have more than half of the colony children in school and available for a yearly physical. Weights, heights, blood pressure and reflexes were all recorded with ancient looking tools Spock may have seen in a history book as a child.

“It’s as you suspected,” McCoy said during lunch recess when he and Spock were guaranteed to be free of young ears. “Zippy does need some glasses, and Pavel’s braces are ready to come off. Otherwise, they’re a healthy group.”

Spock nodded, surprised when the doctor reached into his back pocket and withdrew a tightly folded square of paper and dropped it on his desk.

“Have a good day, Teacher.”

He waited until he couldn’t see McCoy’s retreating back and then opened the note, surprised to see a long list of writing in Jim’s distinctive hand titled “Questions To Ask Spock.”

1. Did Spock have a hobby? (lyre? get him to play it for me?)
2. Does he have someone waiting for him back home?
3. What was Spock going to do when he returned to Starfleet?
4. What is his favorite food?

And the list went on and changed to much more personal items around question twenty-three.

25. Does Spock want kids?
26. Where does he want to live?
The paper was then torn at the edge, the end of that sentence lost.

Jim had written the questionnaire, could be inferred he started the list long before Spock had broached the subject of courting. Despite the late night hours in Spock’s lab and their precious half hour after dinner, perhaps Jim had difficulty asking Spock to reveal his mind as Spock did, although for different reasons. He withdrew a lined sheet of composition paper from his desk and started to write.

--

Jim had spent the day at the Sulu farm helping Ben and Hikaru with the Red Boars, getting them ready for winter foraging. When Spock had finished his day teaching and entered the Mission house for supper, he was surprised to see that Jim had already returned and McCoy was rummaging in a large wooden cabinet.

“Juniper Sulu is in the throes of childbirth,” Dr. McCoy announced. “Normally the Sulus would have a birth well in hand themselves, but this is her first child and it’s not coming along.” Foreign metal contraptions wrapped in plastic were placed in a surgical bag on the kitchen table and Jim assisted in organizing vials with practiced ease. “I suspect we’ll be back in the middle of True Night.”

“May I be of any assistance, Doctor?”

McCoy shook his head gratefully. “The joyful work is well at hand, thank you. I’ll be taking Jim with me. He’s helped in childbirth before, and you’ll understand if you two can’t be eating supper together alone.”

“If I may,” Spock interjected, withdrawing a neatly penned note of his own and passing it across the dinner table to the doctor.

McCoy opened the note, gave it a cursory glance, and passed it over to Jim, who refolded it hastily and slipped it into his pants pocket. “Thank you,” Jim said, heat rising in his cheeks.

“Let’s go, lovebirds,” the doctor groused, “babies wait for no one.”

Spock watched Jim and McCoy make their way over the hill towards the Sulu farm. He stood on the porch until the pair made it to the top of the hill and Jim turned and waved and stopped for Spock to wave back.

--

Spock was still awake and working on his lab samples in the bunkhouse when Jim and McCoy returned. There was a quiet knock on the door and he was surprised it was Jim alone, not the doctor, who came to his door.

“The baby didn’t make it,” Jim said quietly, his face lined with sadness. “He was stillborn, well before we got there.”

Spock reached out, his hand firmly on the man’s shoulder. “I grieve with thee.”

“Bones went to bed, I think. But I thought I should tell you.”

Spock nodded, not removing his hand, feeling the sadness rolling off of Jim in waves.
“Sit,” Spock said, not quite an invitation or a question, but Jim took the two steps inside his makeshift lab and took the seat he had always thought of at Jim’s, and sat next to him, shoulder to shoulder, like they had sat in the barn after a long night after Bluebell had her kids. Jim wiped his eyes several times and then sighed, leaning on Spock quite deliberately.

“We will say our goodbyes formally at the next Meeting,” Jim said. “It’s their way.”

“In a Vulcan funeral the mind, the katra, is moved to a safe location, if possible. It is believed that with the loss of an infant, their katra lives within the mother and passed onto the next child as a protection.”

“That’s beautiful.”

Spock nodded. “I agree.”

--

Spock walked Jim part way back to the Mission house in the moonless True Night. When he turned back, he made a slight detour.

Doubtful that the doctor wanted Jim to know where he was, Spock felt it was necessary to see why McCoy was in the grove of trees behind the school.

“You’re as quiet as an Orion Ox,” the Doctor wryly, sitting on a tree stump, a small lamp next to him.

“I apologize for interrupting,” Spock said. The doctor had changed shirts, but he looked just as worn as Jim.

“No, I understand. I’m okay. Just needed to check on someone.”

He suspected it was McCoy and not the school children who had worn a walking path to this spot in the trees. There was no one there, but a single stone marker, the writing indiscernible in the lamplight. The doctor rubbed the top of the marker fondly, taking some comfort from the stone.

“We buried my daughter here.”

Spock took a few more steps, noticing the carefully tended wildwood flowers and violet starpetals.

“What was her name?”

“Joanna.” Bones sat, head bowed over his hands for a long moment. “Our third year on Red we had a virus sweep through the colony. The onset was quicker and more vicious than anything I’d ever seen. It hit the children the hardest and Joanna was just a baby and asthmatic. She didn’t react to the treatment the way we anticipated. By the time we sent the distress beacon, it was too late.”

“I grieve with thee,” Spock intoned quietly, Bones nodding his acknowledgment of the Vulcan condolence.

“My wife left after that. She thought if we were on Earth, Joanna would still be alive. Maybe she would have, maybe not. I still lost a lot of patients when I practiced modern medicine. I learned that there are no easy solutions or shortcuts when it comes to protecting and preserving life.” McCoy sighed. “I don’t claim to know the answers. I just know what is here before us.”

“Kaiidth.”
“What is, is.” McCoy translated, his lips quirking as if remembering something humorous. “Yes, essentially. A very Azzunite sentiment.”

Spock looked again at the gravestone, redrock that McCoy likely chisled himself. “I shall leave you to your meditation.”

“Thank you. And Spock?”

“Yes, doctor?”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice Jim sneaking into the bunkhouse.”

“Of course not, doctor,” he replied quickly, too agreeable by half.

“Don’t misunderstand. Jim’s never trusted anyone enough to grieve, long before he came to Red, I think,” Bones patted the gravestone again. “He needs someone who will be there for him.”

He considered the man’s words. “I believe I could be that person for him.”

“Maybe you already are.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello gentle readers,

Sorry for the long delay. I hope you are still enjoying the story.

On a personal note, this week I had a profound experience with the cost of neglecting what we put aside to help, love and support others. Many of us don't make sure we take time to "fill our own cups before we start pouring into others" and I was thinking that writing this story and sharing it with you is one of those things that fills my cup, I should really get back to it! And lo and behold, Owyheewinds was gently checking in, seeing if all was well and if there might be another chapter. It was meant to be.

My cup is filled (I'm envisioning warm hot chocolate or tea) and hope you feel it too.
“There are three dangerous forces on Red,” McCoy proclaimed one morning as Spock was about to leave the first meal to start class. “A lightning storm, the sea tow, and gossip.”

He paused, looking over to where Jim had vacated minute before.

“Be prepared,” the doctor said slyly. “I overheard some giggling by the school while milking Bluebell.”

Spock left, armed with lesson plans and a compendium of Bajoran poetry, wholly unprepared to have the entirety of his classroom abuzz with the news that “Jim was sweet on Teacher.”

He refused to dignify or distract the class with any comments, but could not help but hear the comments. At lunch, while he kept to his desk, the windows were open and the conversation, bordering on shrill at times, crept into the empty schoolhouse while the children ate outdoors.

“I think it’s his eyes,” one of the girls said. “Don’t you think the eyes are the window to the soul?”

The group giggled their agreement. “And he’s so strong and helpful.”

“He carried an entire shuttle over the ridge.”

“Just the cargo.”

“Doesn’t matter, it was a lot.”

“And the games at Harvest, did you see?”

“Jim is the luckiest,” one of the boys sighed and the group dissolved into such loud giggles Spock ended lunch two minutes early and called the children in.

If he changed the afternoon lesson to skip all the Bajoran sonnets that contained the word “love,” only he would know.

--

After third meal, McCoy took a seat on the porch swing to whittle, giving Jim and Spock the opportunity to slowly walk around the winter garden in front of the Mission house. Jim kept his hands in his pockets, occasionally bumping elbows with Spock as they meandered in a slow circle.

“Akari and Sara started it,” Jim decided after Spock shared his impressions of the day. “They have the biggest mouths. Also, they were the only ones there when I was talking to Ben.”

Jim blushed pink as soon as he realized what he had said.

“Talking to Ben,” Spock repeated.

“Yes.”

Spock knew Jim was allowed his secrets and his curiosity would only be rewarded if Jim desired it to
“Beige can’t be your favorite color.”

“You are referring to my response to your questionnaire.”

Jim shrugged in acknowledgment. “I started the list weeks ago. Bones said Vulcans didn’t do much small talk. I thought the list might help me.”

“Not all of your questions fell into what one would consider small talk.”

Jim blushed deeper. “I suppose not.”

When it was obvious Jim was not going to expound upon some of his personal questions, Spock continued. “I admit, I do not have a strong preference for a single color, but it is the color I chose to decorate my personal quarters on the Excelsior.”

“The Excelsior, the last ship you served on before coming here,” Jim remembered. “Is that where you’ll be after this?”

Spock shook his head. “After serving my mission here, I hope to obtain a post at Starfleet Academy on Earth for several years. They had commissioned a new flagship and named a captain. I am applying as First Officer when the post opens in twenty months.”

Jim nodded, looking visibly taken aback. “I am amenable to changing my short-term goals,” Spock added, still uncertain where Jim stood on the issue of remaining on Red, and decided the quickest answer would be the most direct. “Would you prefer to remain here?”

“No,” Jim said immediately. “If it was for the right reason, I would leave.”

“My commission will end, at the earliest, in four years. If you find Starfleet unappealing, I believe we could find somewhere not on a starship.”

Jim frowned, “No, it’s not that, exactly. I just didn’t think…” he trailed off, showing no sign of picking up where he left, his thoughts unreadable.

Spock stopped, waiting for Jim to turn and face him.

“I want to know what you think,” he said solemnly. “I want to know your opinion, even unsolicited, in all things. I share my judgment and knowledge, unfettered, in hopes of better understanding and supporting you. I hope you feel the freedom to do the same.”

Jim’s gaze sharpened, pleased by Spock’s offer, and started to walk again. “The Azzunites pick partners as lifelong helpmates in work. Like should call to like. A spouse compliments the work of another and carries the burden joyfully,” he recited. “You are not a farmer or a toolsmith.”

“No,” Spock conceded. “Nor will I remain on Red in any profession. But neither would I expect you to join Starfleet. Many Starfleet officers have partners with varied occupations, living arrangements, and family dynamics.”

Jim climbed on the wooden garden fence, straddling the rail and facing Spock, who was now eye to eye with the man. “Both of my parents were in Starfleet until they died.”

Spock didn’t bother to hide his surprise. He had erroneously hypothesized Jim’s family were colonists on Tarsus.
“My father was a First Officer,” Jim shared. “There was a freak attack. He bought my mom and I time to escape and he died at the helm. She died twelve years later, trying to rescue me on the Quixote.”

He was holding his breath, illogically disbelieving he had enough data to infer what much certainly be true.

“And you want to be a First Officer, just like him.”

“As I said,” Spock said softly, “I am amenable to adjusting my career to better facilitate a shared objective of a fulfilling relationship.”

Jim nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t know how I feel about it, exactly. When I was a kid, Starfleet was all I ever wanted to do. And then after I came to Red I thought that as soon as I was old enough, I’d hop the first transport that would take me on Trading Day and never look back.”

“What changed?”

Jim looked up at the stars. “I realized that I didn’t know what I’d be trying to prove out there. You could spend a whole lifetime just chasing stardust. It can’t be all space phenomena and amazing discoveries like your stories.” Jim smiled at Spock’s puzzlement, “Sometimes I listen to your classroom lectures.”

“When I started at the Academy, I was given some advice,” Spock recalled. “I was told not to focus on what I wanted to do, but to follow what I wanted to become.”

Jim hummed in agreement, “Bones says something like that too. Do you know what it means?”

“Not particularly,” he said, making Jim laugh. “But I believe that Humans have a curious habit of obscuring what they find fulfilling with thoughts of fear and distrust, making them sensitive to not seeing the most obvious solutions for the moment at hand.”

Jim sighed, looking up again and letting himself lean a bit in Spock’s space.

“In this moment, I want to be...” Jim gazed at Spock thoughtfully,”...understood. I want you to understand me.”

“As do I.”

--

A short ten minutes later, when the doctor started to make his way inside, signaling their evening courting activities were to draw to a close, Jim and Spock made their way back to the Mission house.

“I’m going to think about what you said,” Jim said quietly, mindful of the doctor’s ears. “And I will let you know.” He reached out, gently taking Spock’s hand and squeezed it. “Soon.”

Spock nodded, his mouth too inexplicably dry and tongue wooden in his mouth to explain how provocative a thing Jim had committed. Surely an oversight, one that need not be expounded upon infront of McCoy.

A brief glance at the doctor's sharp expression verified that it had not, in fact, gone misunderstood. It seemed Jim was the only one at the Mission unaware of Vulcan erogenous zones.

“G’night, Spock.”
When Jim went upstairs, Spock stood watching McCoy contently whittle what appeared to look like a bird, a foreign and misplaced animal never seen on Red. “Something you wish to say, Teacher?”

“Jim is Jim Kirk,” Spock murmured, finally finding his speech.

McCoy stopped whittling and looked up sharply. “When we took the kids from the OSD, they could choose their names and start anew. Jim became just Jim. No one needed to know.” Or needs to, went unsaid.

When Spock walked back to the bunkhouse, he looked up at the second story window out of habit, unsurprised to see a figure peering down at him. When he got to temporary quarters, he opened a PADD and started to search on the meager database he had and formed a brief communication.

He couldn’t fathom why, but Starfleet had hidden George Kirk’s son on Red and sent Spock to intercept his path.

Chapter End Notes

Dear Gentle Readers,

Awwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww.

That's how you make me feel.
When the children were released from their mathematics instruction for lunch, Zipporah Sulu lingered in the room, almost vibrating out of her seat with excitement. The students were more distracted than ever in anticipation of Trading Day. A group was playing a jump rope game, chanting rhymes that seemed to have no end.

“My mother gave me a string,
I trade it for a ring.
Your mother gave you lye,
You trade it for a pie.
On Trading Day, Trading Day,
Make a deal on Trading Day!
My father gave me quince,
I trade it for a….”

“Yes, Ms. Sulu?” Spock inquired. Zippy dove into her school satchel and pulled out a blue gingham printed handkerchief package. He recognized the handkerchief immediately.

“Jim wanted me to give this to you,” she announced, holding it out for Teacher to take. Spock dutifully received it, testing the knot at the top, tied tightly and not revealing its contents easily.

“What is it?”

“I do not know,” he replied archly, making no move to unwrap it.

“Are you going to open it?” Zippy asked, bouncing a bit on her heels. “It’s a courting gift, isn’t it? I remember Ben sneaking gifts to Hikaru behind Ma’s back and-” she clapped her hands over her mouth. “Am I going to get in trouble with Doctor McCoy?”

“No, Ms. Sulu. You are not.”

“It’s so romantic,” Zippy sighed, head propped on one hand where she sat, with no apparent intention of leaving.

“Perhaps you would like to join your friends for lunch,” Spock suggested delicately. When the young Sulu started shaking her head, obviously having found something far more interesting, a someone cleared their voice at the back of the room.

“Jim!” Zippy exclaimed. “I delivered your gift.”

“I see, my thanks for your work,” Jim replied, grinning, his work shirt damp from his morning work on the barn roof. “Zippy, I think Sara was calling for you.”

“I didn’t hear her,” Zippy said, head tilted as if to enhance her auditory perception.

“Why don’t you go and find out?” Jim encouraged pointedly.

“Why doesn’t she- oh,” Zippy stopped abruptly, her eyes round. “Okay.”

And with that Zipporah Sulu scampered out of the school, braids behind her, giggling and ready to
share something with her classmates that Spock was sure to regret after lunch.

“Sorry,” Jim said, amused and not entirely apologetic. “I hoped I could see you open your present. I know you said you didn’t celebrate birthdays, and neither does Red, but I wanted to.”

“Thank you.” Jim leaned against the doorframe, careful not to step a toe within the vacated schoolhouse. Spock carefully opened the handkerchief wrapped bundle, extracting the small contraption within.

“It’s like a soldering iron,” Jim said when Spock didn’t respond right away. “The batteries are solar powered, and it gets hot enough to work with those alloys you were studying last week.”

“Fascinating,” Spock said, twisting the pencil-thin device between his fingers, examining the rough but thoughtful design. Jim smiled, unrestrained and Human, at the honest praise.

“It’s an improved design, one of the Ferengi ships visits Wakul, and they have metalsmiths who need something that can safely be operated within the veins in their precious metal mines,” he explained, now very excited. “They need to work the metal before it’s brought to the surface, and this is the only design I could come up with that is stable at the necessary temperature, but yours I needed to reconfigure...” Spock listened, cataloging Jim’s creative leaps in the construction of the tool until he spotted three tufts of hair along the porch.

“Barnaby, Alec, and Juan,” Jim announced, not even turning around. “If you need to talk to Teacher, go on ahead.”

All three boys shot up from their hiding place, running straight to Zipporah Sulu. Jim stood and stared at them, unimpressed, until the giggles quickly died down and the group slunk away from the school.

“The children look up to you,” Spock observed.

“I’m not to be a Teacher, if that’s what you are insinuating,” Jim said.

“Hikaru too,” Spock pointed out. “You have a talent with inspiring others into action.”

Jim’s turned his face down, shielding it from Spock, an unseen storm brewing upon his brow.

“Thank you, Jim,” Spock said, turning the conversation. “This is a most ingenious gift I have ever received.” Spock opened a drawer with plans to use it after school dismissed for the day.

“Really?”

“I am not prone to hyperbole.”

Jim beamed. “You’re welcome. Happy Birthday.” He was already starting to climb down the porch steps when he stopped and turned around, sheepish. “I almost forgot. Bones wants to know if you can send another batch of messages for Trading Day.”

Trading Day, which came only three times a Red solar cycle, was regarded as the most important day of the year. Spock had arrived on Red with a transmitter that Dr. McCoy was gratefully using in preparation, as a large lightning storm from was projected to arrive in the traditional place and would have ruined the day. He and the elders were still attempting to reposition the meeting point.

“Yes, of course.” Spock didn’t tell Jim he was checking on the communication equipment more than ever, hoping for a response from Starfleet about any files pertaining to Kirk that had yet to come.
“My gratitude for your work. Have a productive day, Teacher” Jim said, tipping his hat and giving a jaunty wave before jumping off the porch steps in one bound, making the children giggle.

When Spock was done for the day and ready to send another batch of messages from Dr. McCoy, he headed into the Mission house to see Jim and the doctor hovering over a paper map.

“We’ve found the spot. It’ll be hell getting back but I don’t see any other way, Jim.”

“The east salt marshes,” Jim explained. “It’s a ways out, but it’s the largest and safest place for the ships to land.” It was were Spock should have landed the first time, Jim kindly avoided saying aloud, but instead landed in Sandy Ridge, overshot by kilometers. “It’ll be a half day of travel past the sharp ridge but two days back with the supplies because we can’t use the shortcut with the Red Boars laden with all the supplies.”

McCoy wrote out his message with coordinates with sharp spiky handwriting and handed it to Spock. “My thanks, Teacher.”

Spock took the scrap of paper and was about to return to the bunkhouse, when McCoy said, “well, that’s almost all the work for today, Jim. How about after you finish with packing, you take the rest of the day to rest?”

“Rest?” Jim repeated as if he’d never heard the word before.

“Yes. Relax, however you see fit. You’ve earned some time for yourself. Take care of any personal business you might have before we leave.”

“Oh,” Jim said, not quite understanding. “Oh!” and left the table, almost running Spock over in his hurry upstairs.

When he arrived in his bunkhouse, Spock was pleased to see that Starfleet finally replied, but there was not one but two messages, one for himself and one for Doctor McCoy. Just as he was about to open the first, there was a knock at his door.

He opened it to find Jim, dressed in the same shirt he last wore at Harvest day, a blue that brought out the clean azure of his eyes.

“Hello,” Jim said, tucking his arms behind himself.

“Hello.”

“Would you be interested accompanying me on a walk?”

Spock glanced at the makeshift communication system, knowing that whatever was there could wait an hour. “Yes, I shall join you.” He took his Starfleet issued jacket, now that the weather was cooler, and closed the door behind him. He started to walk toward the Mission house, where their courtship-approved area was for their habitual walks when Jim reached out to take Spock’s arm and lead him on a path through the grove of trees towards in the general direction of the Sulu farm, out of sight from the Mission house. Jim merely gave him a small smile of understanding at Spock’s raised eyebrow but kept silent until they reached a tree.

“This,” Jim said, gesturing to the tree, “is where I thought I would live when I was twelve. Ben and I found it and agreed it would make a perfect house.” The trees of Red did not grow to be very large, and the trunk’s girth was barely larger than adult Jim, making the idea of it serving as a shelter for two humanoids more absurd. “It didn’t happen, obviously.”
Spock nodded, “As a child, I entertained moving alone to the desert outside Mount Seleya.”

“Sounds miserable.”

“It was not a plan founded in logic,” Spock admitted.

“Ben and I would escape here and imagine what we would do if we didn’t have to be on Red. Ben wanted to be an architect. He heard his mom was one, and he had all these plans about how he would get a position on Luna City or Mars or something and bring me with him. He talked about that for years,” Jim reminisced. “And then he didn’t anymore. His plans changed. And then Hikaru.” He rubbed the trunk, worn in a spot where Spock imagined feel scrambled to climb up it.

Jim straightened and then solemnly took Spock’s hands in his and looked earnestly into his eyes.

Again, Spock’s mouth dried and his heart sped up and for the life of him, he could not move his hands out of Jim’s.

“I do not know where I am supposed to be, but I wanted you to know that I am interested in learning more about what it would mean to leave Red and be with you. I would be honored to formalize our courtship tomorrow.”

Spock’s fingers twitched along Jim’s palms, soaking in what little sensation he could allow himself to feel without completely debasing himself.

“Spock?” Jim tentatively asked, obviously expecting an answer.

“Jim,” Spock croaked, “I must tell you—”

Thankfully, Jim dropped Spock’s hands, and some of the Vulcan defenses returned. Jim, however, was blatantly hurt.

“It is not you,” and the clarification appeared to wound Jim even more, “it is my hands.”

Jim frowned and looked down. “Your hands?”

“To touch them as you did, that is, for Vulcans, an act reserved for intimate relationships.”

The human gaped in horror. “I’m sorr—”

“It was not unappreciated,” Spock quickly clarified, “but I would be remiss not to tell you, as I have been under the impression that physical acts are undesired.”

Jim huffed a laugh, frustration laced in his tone, “Not undesired. For gods’ sakes, I’m not,” he stopped, struggling for the word, “a prude. It’s about respect, and consent, and I-- I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Spock paused, parsing the words. “In truth, neither do I.”

Jim squinted, disbelieving. “You’ve had more experience with relationships than I do.”

“Vulcans do not court. I had an arranged marriage which was dissolved before I entered adulthood. That is the entirety of my experience with romantic partnered relationships. We are forging our own path, between cultures. You wish to formalize our courtship?” Jim nodded. “As do I.”

“Do Vulcans have formal stage before marriage?”
“No, not as such.” Spock thought for a moment. “Perhaps we should create our own.”

Jim perked up, following Spock back towards the Mission house, taking the long way around and past the barn.

“We have arrived.”

Jim looked around quizzically. “Here? What is special about here?”

“It is a haystack.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“It is a haystack behind the Mission house,” Spock clarified, hoping Jim would understand why he was standing close enough to see the lightest of freckles across Jim’s nose.

Jim smiled, a little exasperated. “Do you have an emotional attachment to the haystack?”

“You said there was a tradition.”

Jim’s eyes widened with comprehension and then darted to Spock’s lips. “Oh.”

“.and as a show of respect of the other’s culture-”

“Yes.”

“-may I-”

“Yes,” Jim repeated, reaching for Spock’s face and drawing him into an enthusiastic kiss. Spock had to gentle it, slowly moving his lips across Jim’s, drawing surprising sparks of physical and psionic sensation that Spock chased deeper until he pulled back to see Jim breathless and grinning, hands still cupping Spock’s face, fingers tracing the tips of his ears and sending warm rippling sensations to his spine. He could feel the green flush across his cheekbones, which Jim rubbed with the pad of his thumb, mesmerized and leaned forward, a centimeter from Spock’s mouth.

“That,” Jim proclaimed, licking his lips, “was worth the wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Gentle Readers,

I hope it was worth the wait. Just two more chapters, outlined and some dialog already fleshed out.

Does Spock have an emotional attachment to that haystack? You bet your sweet Vulcan ears he does.

Much love and gratitude for sharing in this story, walkandtalk

p.s. Thank you WingittoFreedom for sharing this cute little depiction of the last scene!
They left before first sun when Red was at its coldest. Hikaru, Ben, and two other Sulus had brought several Red Boar with traverses carrying tents and scant provisions for their short journey. Before dawn, they would reach the Chekov homestead and the rest of the Azzunites tasked with trading and form a convoy to the east marshes.

Spock wrapped himself in several layers, but still accepted the woolen scarf and hat to wear on top of his Starfleet issued clothing. They walked slowly behind the Boars, Jim walking shoulder to shoulder with him in the dark pre-morning silence until the lights ahead signaled that they had joined the rest of the convoy on the far eastern corner of Chekov land.

Several of the older children were joining the Trading activities, laden with empty packs and lanterns. A few of them were Spock’s students, who hailed him with an excited “He’lo Teacher!” before running up and down the convoy to find their friends. They walked for hours only stopping once mid-day for the Boars to drink and for a quick meal. McCoy dug into a leather bag to pulled out several squash and mushroom hand pies, still warm from the hot redrock stones wrapped in flannel at the bottom of the bag. A flask of Red Grain and another of steaming tea was passed around. Spock drank from both without comment.

It was several hours more until they reached their destination. The barren salt marshes, with burnished water and glassy soil, were transformed in the winter. The water dissipated into the southern sea, leaving nothing but shiny opalescent ground, like untouched snow. The children of Red had no memories of snow, as what little precipitation fell on this part of Red never became snow, rather hail and rain. Still, they delighted in the dry marshes, running and making lines in the salt, creating piles and drifts of it with their feet, before the adults could divy out the tasks to set up camp.

“Tomorrow this will be filled with ships,” Jim explained as they carried crates and bags to where they would sleep for the night, eager to set up before the early dusk light waned. “Mostly runabouts and the tiniest of freighters.”

“As well as one Starfleet vessel,” McCoy announced. “The USS Chatelet will be sending down Captain Pike.”

Jim stopped, a thunderstorm upon his face. “Pike.”

McCoy nodded. “That was the message we got.” He set down the bag containing the tents on the edge of the marsh, seemingly unaware of the storm within Jim’s mind. “This looks like a good spot. You set up,” and left them to assist the families behind them.

Jim worked quickly without comment, the tension upon the mention of Pike still thick in the air.

“Do you know Pike?” Jim asked, finally breaking the silence.

Spock nodded. “I have served with him and was a student in his command class at the Academy. Do you know him?”

Jim didn’t comment, just shrugged and fixed another one-person tent, leaving Spock to his suspicions.
Slowly a small city of tents and popped up, much as the Harvest celebration, with fires of redrock being lit and meals being brought out to share. The Red Boars were penned in a salt field with bags of grain and the youths of the procession were sent to get water that had to be desalinated by the bucketful for the entire camp.

When Spock and Jim had set up the tents they made their way to a space in the center McCoy had kept clear, a communal area of sorts where a few had started to play on pipes. As Spock followed Jim through the crowd he was surprised to be greeted warmly by so many, mostly families of the students he taught.

“Good fortune for such warm weather, don’t you think, Teacher.”

“Teacher, good fortune after such a journey, won’t you share in some Red Grain?”

“You’ve gotten popular,” Jim observed quietly, accepting the draft of Red Grain from Spock’s hand and taking a hearty swig.

“Teacher!” a reedy voice called. “I thought it was you,” the community’s elder Beda declared, leaning on her walking stick. “I have heard nothing but praise for the work you have provided our community.”

Spock bowed his head, aware her eyes were darting between himself and Jim thoughtfully.

“We are indeed grateful to have our young people benefit from your presence,” she said, causing Jim to stand a little straighter. “I have also heard other things as well, but gossip is idle,” she intoned solemnly. “Will you be sitting with young Jim tonight?”

Jim froze, eyes wide.

“Yes,” Spock agreed.

“Ah! I see. I see,” Beda brightly, nodding. “Good fortune to you, then.”

Spock allowed Jim to herd him through the main throng of people to a more quiet spot. “I’m sorry,” Jim said, but his sly smirk said the opposite. “I should have warned you. Declaring to sit next to me, that’s about as official as it gets. You’re smitten with me.”

“I was aware of the cultural implication,” he admitted.

“Oh?”

“You are not the only one who speaks to Ben Sulu about your courtship plans.”

It startled a laugh out of Jim, who found a chest serving as a bench near the fire. There they sat together, the first time in public. Spock caught a variety of gazes as he listened to the music and stories, able to discern a mix of curiosity, approval, and criticism.

Jim simply tucked his arm around him (“brazen as you please” one voice muttered) and ignored them all.

When the crowd died down, they took time to walk around the campsite. Several other couples were taking advantage of the allowed freedom of socializing within eyesight of the community. When Spock admitted how unused he was to such weather, Jim grabbed his hands and started to breathe
onto them, his breath hot and wet, lips brushing against his sensitive fingers, the sensation almost too much to bear. Spock swallowed tightly but did not say a word.

The spark in Jim’s eyes said that he was now aware as to the daring nature of his act.

Spock took Jim to check on the Boars and snuck into the grass to spend minutes kissing and Jim attempted to try (and failed) to figure out the buttons on Spock’s Starfleet issued shirt. Spock’s fingers had gone numb again in the cold of night, or he would have assisted himself, but nonetheless enjoyed swallowing Jim’s frustrated groans and good-humored growls between more kisses.

They meandered back before one of the children could happen upon them, finding their little trio of tents still deserted, McCoy likely still visiting with other families. Jim drew two shallow cargo containers closer to the small pile of hot redrock to enjoy the ambient heat and company for a little while longer.

“You asked about Captain Pike,” Jim said suddenly. “I didn’t answer. I don’t want there to be secrets between us, but I was surprised that he reached out of the blue to send Bones a message.”

“I also received a message from Captain Pike,” Spock admitted, unwilling to let a technicality become a lie of omission between them. “I had enquired about a particular file, which alerted Starfleet, which is why I believe Captain Pike is coming to Red.”

“You inquired into Starfleet about me?” Jim asked, the hurt plain in his voice.

“No,” Spock denied. “I wanted access into my own academic records.”

Confusion colored Jim’s brown while Spock reached for a PADD inside his personal satchel and brought up a file and handed it to Jim. “This was my final thesis upon graduating from the Academy.”

Jim looked at the mundane title and skimmed a few paragraphs. “You did your thesis on my dad?”

Spock nodded, uneasy and unsure of Jim’s reaction. “I researched George Kirk and analyzed the battle, the command decisions that led to the crew, and you, escaping. I did not research beyond the boundaries of the restrictions on your or your family’s data files. I erroneously assumed it was to protect your privacy, to shield you from the fame of being George Kirk’s son.”

Jim shook his head. “Mom sent me to Tarsus to give me… time, I think. I was an angry kid even before I got there, and then…” Jim paused, remembering. “Pike was a security officer on the Quixote, the ship that rescued us. He was there to tell me mom died rescuing me. I told him I wanted to disappear. I wanted to find a corner of the universe that didn’t know Tarsus or the Kirks or Klingons or anything. So Pike found Red.”

Spock was silent, allowing Jim to gather his thoughts, obviously reliving memories long buried.

“I don’t know what he did, exactly, but it was all arranged. He talked to Enid, the colony founder, made her build the school. He convinced Bones to take us in. One day was were quarantined on a space station, the next day we were on a shuttle for the edge of nowhere.” Jim smiled sadly. “I hated him.”

“Pike?”

“I hated Pike for living when my mom wasn’t. I hated everyone, actually. But Bones, I hated him the most. I tried to sabotage everything he made us do. I purposely broke our tractor about twenty different ways, and he would make me fix it every time. He wore me down with Azzunite proverbs
and work and when I was worn out from yelling and fighting, he made me talk. Every damn day, the work and the talk, until it was a pattern and I realized that Bones wasn’t leaving. He wasn’t leaving me alone and he wasn’t leaving me. He wore me down until I realized he wasn’t trying to wear me down. He was building me up.”

Spock sat silently, more grateful than ever for the doctor’s presence.

“I worry about him,” Jim confided. “He was alone before he took us all in, and not in a great place after his wife left. I can’t live my life worrying about what he will do without me, if I-- well, the future, you know.”

“You are the last bird to leave the nest,” Spock said, remembering a phrase his mother said frequently when Spock was preparing to enter adulthood.

Jim smiled sadly. “So you see why it’s so hard, it would hurt him. I can’t ask him for anything more, Bones spent ten years raising all these messed up kids he didn’t ask for.”

“And I’d do it again,” a gruff voice said. Jim turned, not visibly surprised that the man was listening to his confession.

McCoy placed a hand on Jim’s shoulder and shook it, growling fondly “Shut up, kid.” He held it there a moment more before Jim looked up and pulled the doctor into a hug, earning him a surprised yelp. When he regained his composure, he leaned in and whispered something in Jim’s ear. Jim visibly relaxed and sat down, more contemplative when the doctor started walking to his tent.

“I’m going to bed,” McCoy announced. “I expect you two to be, as well. I’m keeping both ears open while I sleep,” he warned.

Jim and Spock watched the redrock glow for minutes more in silence, the camp now the quietest of murmurs.

“Are you well, Jim?” Spock asked when they could hear the soft snores of McCoy.

Jim smiled genuinely, his face lighter. “Yeah, we’re good.”

Chapter End Notes

Just one more chapter (I think), dear readers!
Waiting Until Spring

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Azzunites had placed their order for most items six months in advance, during the last Trading Day. Parts to harvest machines, raw materials to make clothes and nails, medicines, supplies for a possibly harsh winter with no guarantee that a ship would be nearby to notice a distress signal if something went wrong.

With surprising efficiency, the ships landed and the salt marshes turned into an exotic bazaar. Books, the paper bound kind, were hauled off in boxes and lined up for families to peruse along side bottles of home remedies, exotic herbs, and protein supplements. Pneumatic doors of smaller cargo ships opened to display tablewares, cloth, a veritable display of home goods laid out. Merchants hawked their goods and greeted repeat customers.

Beda perched on a large rock, handing out letters to families. “Jim, one from your brother,” she said, waving a piece of real paper. Jim accepted it, tearing it open to find several letters tucked inside, as well as a small holo display. Jim turned it on to reveal a trio of humans, a man who looked a good deal like Jim, a woman, and a baby.

“I'm an uncle,” Jim announced to McCoy and Spock. “They're calling him Peter, and there's another one on the way already.”

The doctor declared he needed to escort Zipporah Sulu to collect the lenses he had ordered, leaving Jim and Spock to explore on their own.

“Rare jewels,” one man called out, displaying a box of “very nice for a special someone, eh?”

Jim declined and turned on his heel, obviously looking for something specific. However, one caught Spock’s attention.

“Ah, a Vulcan with a keen eye,” the merchant said. “Demetite, very rare, very valuable.”

“Not so rare,” Spock commented, knowing the stone qualities very well.

“I won’t argue with a Vulcan,” the man replied.

Jim stopped, looking sideline to Spock. “Its disdyakis triacontahedron quality makes it valuable in many energy conducting processes. I thought you might find it valuable to experiment with your metalworking devices.”

Jim smiled and shook his head, “you don't need to do that,” making the merchant frown.

“The metalworking iron was a courtship gift, was it not?” Spock questioned.

Jim frowned. “Yes, but there’s no reason why--”

Spock passed his credit chip to the merchant. “Courtship gestures, as viewed by evolutionary biology, are thought to provide one of the most primitive purposes of mating, allowing a partner to prove their worthiness as a mate. However, I believe there is value in the symbolic meaning, a way for the gift giver to associate traits, perhaps not easily explored in the confines of a courtship.”
“So you’re saying that gift giving is… logical.”

Spock nodded. “Under certain circumstances, it is both an efficient and productive means to an end.”

Jim looked at him, uncertainty coloring his brow.

“Also,” Spock added, voice lowering, “I wish to give it to you.” Jim blushed a little, giving in graciously.

Spock accepted the velvet bag from the merchant, informing Jim he would bestow it at a more appropriate time, which Jim immediately deemed “illogical.”

“I strongly disagree,” Spock objected.

“Where is your evidence?” he teased.

“You will simply have to wait—”

“Jim!” Ben Sulu called. “Spock! Jim!”

Jim looked over the heads of the crowd to see Ben and Hikaru on the edge of the crowd near a shuttle with a Starfleet insignia. Jim duck and wove until they both arrived, the two men beaming from ear to ear.

“Meet our daughter,” Ben declared, touching the glass where a human fetus was curled in the meter high tank, glowing amber and pink.

“Congratulations,” Jim offered. Spock noticed more than one tank was ready and waiting outside, and one of the couples from the Harvest Festival offering their genetic material to a nurse. “When’s the due date?”

“Officially, two weeks,” Hikaru replied. “Doctor McCoy said it would be safer to get home and have her, but they offered to decant her now, but we can’t risk…” Hikaru stopped, looking where his family waited, one of among them being his Juniper, still grieving her own child.

“These are the vaccinations she’ll need a few weeks after the birth,” the medical staff member said, handing them a PADD. Hikaru looked at it, genuinely puzzled, but Ben accepted the list and glanced over it.

“Thank you, kindly, but we will decline.”

“Decline?” the nurse replied, puzzled. “She’s been receiving a series of vaccinations and supplements in fabricated-utero as part of the incubation series thus far, why decline the last round?”

Ben smiled tightly and handed back the PADD without comment.

“They’ll accept the tech that made the baby, but not the vaccines to keep her alive,” the nurse muttered angrily, unaware or uncaring of the Azzunites who overheard.

“It’s just how they do things here,” Jim muttered, mostly for Spock’s benefit.

“Just the two I was looking for,” a voice said behind their shoulders. “Jim, Lieutenant Spock. A pleasure to see you both.”

Jim blinked hard, his mouth pressed into a firm line. “Do you have business here, Captain?”
The man gestured to the Starfleet runabout with some irony. “Step into my office?”

Spock was relieved when Jim looked back and asked, “come with me?”

Pike’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t comment when Spock followed them into the tiny runabout, standing behind Jim’s chair.

“You’re looking well,” Pike commented idly. “Has it really been six years since we last spoke? Another Azzunite day of trade, right?”

“Checking up on me?”

“Spock’s field notes are consistently cursory and clinical when it comes to his hosts. I admit, I was intrigued by what little he did write, and looked up your file. Your aptitude tests were off the charts.”

Which was apparently the wrong thing to say. Jim’s body posture straightened to his full height, a line of anger perceptible to those who knew him.

“I survived Tarsus, didn’t I?” Jim replied calmly. “Those scores were the only thing that kept me on this side of the dirt when the Governor started slaughtering colonists if you remember.”

“I haven’t forgotten. I have a hard time believing you survived all that shit to lead a less than ordinary life.”

“Maybe I love it?”

“You telling me or asking me?”

Jim didn’t respond.

Pike leaned forward, unflinching. “Jim, you’re twenty-two years old and apparently no closer to choosing your way than the last time we spoke. If I thought for a second you wanted to stay here, I’d leave you alone to live out your days in this backward paradise. Spend your days farming knowing you can’t truly survive without warp capable ships and the protection of the Federation, and die of the common cold, it would be your choice. Or do you feel like you were meant for something better? Something special?”

“Down on your recruiting quota for the month?” Jim drawled.

“Things have changed, and not for the better in my opinion,” Pike conceded. “You could be an officer in four years, your own ship in eight.”

“And be like my parents?”

“I’m daring you to do better,” Pike shot back.

Jim was silent, the affronted wind apparently taken out of his sails. He changed tactics. “Why did you send Spock here?”

“Spock has an interest in geology and needs more field instruction experience before his commission at the Academy.”

Jim snorted. “Bullshit.”

“Only partly. Did it work?” Pike waited for a beat, realization dawning. “I see now. You didn’t mention this development in your field report, Lieutenant,” the captain commented archly.
“It’s none of your business,” Jim said, but Spock knew that was only partially true.

“You don’t need to convince me, Jim,” Pike empathized. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t change my primary purpose for being here, which was not to catch up with you. Lieutenant Spock, you’ve been reassigned.”

“Captain?”

Jim whipped his head around, staring at Spock in alarm.

“As I said, Jim, things have changed. Upper brass is moving the commission of the Enterprise up two full years. I need my future First Officer on Earth now.”

“I understand, Captain,” Spock said, relying on his training before he could process the tangle of emotions within his mind. “I would need several days to return and process my lab--”

“I am afraid we have precious little time, thanks to this damnable planet’s atmosphere. You are to report to the Chatalet tonight with me and we will send a team to collect your laboratory equipment in the spring.” Pike leaned back in his chair. “If you know a better solution, please inform me.”

---

Jim stood outside, obviously cold and shivering, facing the setting first sun, hands in his pockets. They stood that way for many silent minutes.

“I feel like I’ve lied to you,” Jim finally admitted. “The orders are written, it’s time for you to march out, and here I am, not ready.” He turned, his eyes bright with emotion. “What do you want me to do?”

Spock shook his head. He had already planned on taking Jim to meet his parents, to travel to the deserts of Shi’Kahr, to bond them as sa-telsu at the appointed place and paint his brow with oils. If he was being honest, he had a great many plans, but now only one desire. “I want you to make your choice freely, unencumbered by pressure. I would never ask you to decide now, regardless of the promises we had made each other. It would not be your true choice, Jim.

“You have never lied to me. Neither of us was prepared for Captain Pike’s orders,” Spock observed, well aware that his voice was covering the emotional pain he was only just now beginning to unravel. Jim’s face remained stony, but he leaned toward Spock still shivering in the wind.

“If Pike’s trying to force my hand and join up, this is the worst play possible. I can’t just leave today, Spock. I could never return. Bones needs me still, and I need...” he threw up his hand in frustration.

“Time,” Spock finished. “Jim, you do not need to make a choice today, and I have declared my willingness to help secure you a civilian position or to leave upon the end of my commission, and I will.”

“You are leaving today,” he mourned. Spock felt an echoing pang of regret and helplessness.

“I leave Red, but I am not leaving you.” He offered a gloved hand, which Jim clasped immediately. “I will have a great deal of personal time saved. In the spring, I am certain I can join the team on Red to retrieve my laboratory.”

“I’m not leaving you either,” Jim said, squeezing Spock’s hand as if willing resolve into it. “I’ll be ready. Soon.”
The news spread throughout the camp and before midday Spock was overrun with colonists expressing their regret over his hasty departure and wishing him good fortune and a pleasant journey to Earth.

Zipporah Sulu, in particular, sought him out, carrying a rucksack. “You can have my ecology project since you don’t have any minerals to take with you,” she explained.

Spock knelt, accepting the bag of samples she had collected from their journey to the salt marshes. “That is exceptionally selfless, Ms. Sulu. I accept with deep gratitude.”

“Also, there’s no Teacher, so no one will grade it,” she added helpfully.

“Nonetheless, it should not deter you from honing your mind as a scientist,” he could not help but admonish. Zippy nodded, waving a sad goodbye.

Bones found him next.

“Jim explained,” he said quietly. “I’m not going to say I like it, but I understand.”

“I regret the situation,” Spock said mechanically for the twentieth time today.

“Oh, cheer up, Spock,” Bones said nonsensically. “I knew long before either of you came moon-eyeing to my door asking to court that you were made for each other.”

Spock blinked, unsure of how to respond to the surprising revelation.

“And I knew what kind of life Jim would be living if he hitched it to your ship. He’s far more suited to it than life dirtside, even now. And I know Jim, and once he’s set in his mind, he doesn’t give up. We’ll see you in the Spring, then. Live long and prosper, Lieutenant.”

Bones turned without another word, leaving Spock and Jim alone for the first time since Jim’s decision.

“I will come back,” Spock promised.

Jim nodded, a stiff smile on his face. “In the spring. The weather will be better, and you know the way, even if you crashland again.”

“I will write, although you are unlikely to receive it before I arrive in the Spring.”

“You know I know how to operate your laboratory equipment, including your tiny comm system.”

Spock raised an eyebrow, knowing it would amuse Jim. “Then you will write.”

Jim nodded. “Every day.”

“And then I will return, and you will give me your answer.”

“Yes. I will be ready.”

--

Spock arrived with nothing but the clothes he was wearing, his satchel, and a precious rucksack of minerals. Captain Pike did not comment on the lack of Jim at his side. “The Chatelet will be docking
at Deep Space Two for repairs,” Pike explained when the shuttle docked. “From there, we report to headquarters. I’ve recommended you for promotion to Lieutenant Commander.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“Excellent. Dismissed.”

Spock turned to head to his assigned quarters.

“And Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“As captain, sometimes it means you can’t say you’re sorry. You make the best decisions you can, they affect every member of your crew, knowing they’d lay down their life on your word, and you must live with the outcome. But, for what very little it is worth, I am sorry.”

Spock nodded, taking his leave and walking down the almost deserted corridors to his quarters.

He set his bag at the foot of the bunk, removed his shoes and laid in the bottom bunk. He looked up out of muscle memory over the long months, refusing to acknowledge he had looked for what had been the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes these past months: a messy carved message letting the universe know Jim Kirk had existed.

--

Two days later there was a hail at his laboratory door.

An unannounced visitor, especially at a particularly delicate stage of his sampling, was most unwelcome. He ignored it, but a second hail came.

“Come in,” he instructed, eyes busy studying the screen for patterns to reveal themselves.

“Hello.”

Spock looked up, dumbfounded, unable to comprehend how Jim could possibly have materialized on the space station. He could not attempt to cobble together a single hypothesis. Jim was still dressed in his clothes from yesterday, pressed white shirt and dirty brown boots, freckled from years of sun exposure. He looked as foreign on a spaceship as Spock did on Red.

Spock was certain he had never seen anything so fascinating.

“You are here.”

Jim smiled. “Very accurate observation, Teacher.”

“Why?”

“You said it was my choice,” Jim said, his voice thick, hands steady at his side but the sharp tick to his grin belying his uncertainty. “You said it like I had a choice.”

Spock frowned, still uncertain and trying to understand the parameters of the situation. “I would never--”

“No,” Jim said, softly, holding out a hand. “You would never break that promise to me. As soon as you left, I knew I made a mistake. It was never a choice then, I’d already made it, you see? Bones
helped me board the first freighter headed to Deep Space Two, it just took a while to catch up with you.

“I looked up at the stars and realized what I was meant to be chasing up there.”

Spock placed his hand in Jim’s, relishing the gentle warmth that chased up his fingers. Jim stuck his hand deep within a pocket and pulled out a length of cloth, burnished and worn.

“Bones gave it to me, told me to make an honest man of you before too long,” he whispered.

Spock watched Jim finger the cloth, threadbare and precious.

Spock turned and plucked a bag off of his desk, unopened but he had not the heart to store it away when he arrived. He dumped out the contents into Jim’s palm, the Demitite gem he had bought on Trading Day, and covered it with his own.

“This is the weight of the burdens and joys we bear, and together we will carry,” Spock said over their joined hands, the memory of the words intoned at the Harvest Festival fires still fresh in his memory. Jim squeezed his captured hand in acceptance and clumsily wrapped the red ribbon around their joined hands with the other.

“This is the tie of marriage, family, and community,” Jim continued. “It will support us together, all our days. As we cannot drop the stone, we cannot forsake each other, nor the work we share without rejecting the most fundamental bonds that brought us here.”

“I accept these bonds and pledge to honor you in all things.”

Spock reached out to Jim, who stepped neatly into his arms, their bound hands between them. He looked down into Jim’s eyes, uncertain of what he was looking for in the man, but knew when he found it.

Jim chose Spock.

--

Spock led him into the mess hall, only half filled with crew and visitors, only a few eyeing them with curiosity. He found an unoccupied synthesizer and gestured for Jim to go first.

Jim stood facing the wall, uncertain.

“I remember them,” Jim said. “The energy they needed was too great to have in a home or average starship when I was a kid.”

“This starbase can support its use, but Starfleet will likely have them installed in every ship in the next seven years.”

Jim looked up, curiosity written across his face. Spock ordered anwoa sprouts, allowing Jim to place his order. “One cheeseburger, medium well, with french fries.”

They found a quiet table shielded by hydroponic ferns. Jim chewed and swallowed his first bite. “This tastes like crap,” he pronounced, regret written across his face.

“The bread is weird, sweet,” Jim said, poking at it. “I think Red changed my taste buds.”

“Most crew report that synthetic food fails to replicate the complexities of the chemical complexities of the acids and salts inherent to their home planet.”
Jim ate the french fries, declaring them adequate, and eyed the other crew.

“What if I said I might be interested in Starfleet?”

“Captain Pike’s offer to enroll at the Academy has not been rescinded.”

“How many years until you take your commission on the Enterprise?”

“Three.”

“And how long before I could be an officer?”

“Four years.”

“I’ll do it in three.”

Chapter End Notes

The end.

Gentle Readers,

I’ve really enjoyed sharing this story with you! It has been fun and exciting to hear that many of you appreciate this strange little AU, bucolic setting, and gentle manners. I appreciate the kudos, comments, and encouragement, thank you for being a reader!

Best wishes, good fortune, and live long and prosper - walkandtalk

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!