### But I Love You

**Summary**

A mission went wrong. Kirk was replaced with an android duplicate and stranded, alone, in the ice caves of Exo III. For seven months. When he was finally rescued, he finds that everyone is wary of him, his command has been taken away, and all his friends hate him now. Also, Spock and Bones are dating now, and Jim has never felt more alone, rejected by his best friend, his brother, his loves.

Basically, a racist android ruined Kirk’s life and now he's scrabbling to pick up the pieces.

(Either work can be read as a stand-alone. Part 1 is where things fall apart, part 2 is where they get patched back together.)

### Notes

There's a rewrite of the sex pollen episode in this, just fyi

On a completely related note, there are a couple Spock/Bones sex scenes in this but none with Kirk, so you have come to the wrong place if you're looking for threesome smut

Female Vulcans go through pon farr just like the men do, that’s literal canon, and I am very sick of seeing fics that say otherwise
Okay so it happens in canon but I'll give a warning anyway: mirror spock forces a mind meld on Bones. I also included some non-con kissing in that scene, because it ended with Mirror Spock leaning in like he was going to do exactly that

They take him to medbay.

Bones looks him over, grim-faced and silent, and it's really, really unnerving him. He doesn't joke, doesn't tease, doesn't call him an idiot. He doesn't even stab him with hypos. He administers them gently, like some sort of a normal doctor who is not his best friend.

"I'm not dying, am I?" he blurted out.

Bones finally looked up at him. "No."

"Then why are you treating me this way?"

He put his hands on his hips. "This way'? What, like a professional?"

"Yeah!"

He shook his head, looking back at his instruments. "I'm just doing doing my job, Kirk."

"Did you just call me Kirk?"

"Alright. You're all fine physically, you're a real human for sure this time. Now it's just your psych eval. Now normally, that's just a few fairly simple questions to make sure you're fit for duty, you know your name and where you are and all that. But Starfleet Command has asked me to do a complete reevaluation of your entire psychological profile instead. Should take about three and a half hours. If you cooperate."

"What?!" he asked. "Bones, what the hell is going on here?"

He shook his head. "Briefing you is Sulu's job. And I don't wanna tell you anything that may affect your answers."

"Can you at least tell me how Sulu got to be captain? What happened to the chain of command? Shouldn't Spock have been promoted when you realized I was an android?"

"Jim, Sulu didn't get promoted when we found out about the switch. He was already captain before that. You got removed from command, demoted to an ensign. And Spock wasn't promoted because he was no longer First Officer. Your counterpart demoted him."

Kirk paled.

"Now, I want you to answer as honestly as you know how. First question. Do you know what your name is?"

"James Tiberius Kirk," he said softly.

"Well?" Sulu asked. "How's he check out, doc?"
"Completely sane and normal. Evidence of trauma, but that's to be expected. High command aptitude and no indicators for xenophobia." He shrugged. "I don't understand it."

"Alright. Well, maybe he can explain. Send him in."

McCoy nodded and left the briefing room to fetch him. Sulu and Spock took seats side by side at the conference table, and seconds later, Kirk walked in, looking unduly nervous and hesitant.

"Have a seat, Kirk," Sulu said. He obliged.

"Bones said I'm an ensign now?"

"We'll discuss that later. For now, why don't you tell us what happened on Exo III."

"Alright," he said. "Okay, so Christine and I beamed down to an entry point just inside the caves, but Dr. Korby wasn't there, even though he'd said he'd be. I commed the ship to ask Spock to beam down two security officers. I told Rayburn to keep a post at the beam-down point and Matthews to come with us. Someone approached, who Christine identified as Dr. Brown, Dr. Korby's assistant. She rushed off to meet him, and I went to hold her back, and during that time, Matthews fell off a cliff behind us. I later came to suspect that he was pushed.

"I immediately commed Rayburn to tell him that Matthews was dead and to comm the Enterprise and have a full security team on standby. I told him to comm me at hourly intervals and if either of us missed a check-in, the other was to immediately comm the ship and have the security team beamed down.

"Dr. Brown led us to Dr. Korby's inhabited cave areas. I tried to comm Rayburn and couldn't make contact, but when I made to comm the Enterprise, Brown pulled a phaser on me. I then shot Brown in the gut and a bunch of wires and circuitry spilled out because apparently he was an android. Then another android called Ruk came in and disarmed me. He was able to imitate my voice perfectly and comm the ship, tell Spock there was nothing to worry about.

"Korby confirmed that Ruk killed both security officers, but insisted that it was against his wishes. Anyway, then he took me to some weird room, had me strip down naked at phaser point, and then tied me down to this table thing. Then the table started spinning, and by the time it was done, there was an android across from me. But apparently that was only the physical pattern. He was going to duplicate my mental pattern too, make it so perfect that the android could replace me without anyone ever knowing.

"So I put in a safeguard. A single phrase, one I would never in a million years say. I repeated it over and over while he copied my brain into that thing. Then the table started getting weird, okay? He said he wanted to mass produce androids to selectively replace key members of society. He's basically talking wide-scale kidnapping and replacement, and he wants the androids to have thoroughly infiltrated society before the big reveal. Apparently he thinks this will prevent hysteria.

"Then I attacked Korby and bolted out of the lunch from hell, so Ruk started chasing me through
the caverns on a quest to kill me. And then he tricked me by imitating Christine's voice! So I
attacked him with a dick-shaped rock. It did not go well for me.

"I was able to convince Ruk that serving illogical, emotional humans was actively dangerous for
him, and he tried to kill Korby for bringing me there, so Korby shot him.

"I attacked Korby again, and he got his hand injured in a sliding door, and it turned out that he was
an android too. Which really makes the whole android takeover of the universe thing make a lot
more sense. He started saying stuff about how he had been dying in the snow? It didn't really make
any sense, and Christine was wary at first, but eventually he convinced her. And then they both
beamed back up to the ship with all their equipment and notes. And I was alone for seven months,
living on just nutrient cubes and water 'cause their replicator couldn't make anything else. Really
sucked, by the way. Thanks for rescuing me."

Kirk had seemed to gain confidence and become more like his usual self as the tale progressed,
Spock noted. Though he supposed he had no true frame of reference for what Kirk's 'usual self'
was.

He was behaving more like the android had, however. And the android had been outfitted with a
perfect copy of Kirk's thought patterns. It had had all his opinions, ideas, memories. Everything
needed to fool even his closest friends.

"So you're telling me that the Federation is slowly being taken over by androids from the inside out
and it's all based at Midas V?" Sulu asked.

"Yeah. You should definitely do something about that."

"Uh-uh. Androids taking over the universe is way above my pay grade. Pike'll read it in the report
and then probably sic Section 31 on them," he said. "You said you put in a safeguard?"

"Yeah, isn't that what tipped you guys off?"

"Uh, we only found about the switch when your double got in an engineering accident."

"What?" Kirk said. "So it didn't work at all?"

"What didn't work? What was supposed to be the safeguard?"

"Mind your own business, Mr. Spock. I'm sick of your half-breed interference."

Neither Spock nor Sulu said anything. Kirk started to look hesitant again.

"...What?" he asked. "What is it? What am I missing? Did the android actually say that?"

"Affirmative," Spock said. "Twice, I believe. Upon your initial return from Exo III, it was one of
the very first things you said to me."

Now Kirk just looked puzzled. "Why didn't you immediately send down a security team? You had
to know that wasn't me, right, Spock? I'd never say something like that."

Sulu looked desperately like he wished he could leave his own briefing, that he had called, as the
actual captain here.

"Ensi-- Mr. Kirk. At that point in time, I had only known your acquaintance for 1.9 months. I had
no reason to believe that this behavior was out of character for you."
"This behavior," he repeated. "Not 'this statement'? You don't misspeak, Spock. I know you that well. What else did the android do?"

"A complete summation would take a great deal of time."

"I've got it."

"Um--" Sulu started. Kirk cut him off with a glare.

"I have a right to this information. It's relevant to the briefing," he said. "Mr. Spock, I would like a full report on every xenophobic remark or action that the android made on my behalf. I want to know what all I have to apologize for."

"It is illogical to apologize for actions you did not take."

"I didn't ask for your opinion, I asked for your report, Commander."

Spock arched an eyebrow. Very well, then. He resolved to hold nothing back.

"Upon your return, you made the aforementioned comment to me that you intended as a safeguard. In the weeks that followed, you ceased all nonprofessional off-duty association with both myself and Lieutenant Vro. She eventually invited you to play cards with her and Commander Scott. You reprimanded her for failure to address you by your title, and then said that she was an Orion whore only good for a fuck. Commander Scott demanded that you apologize, and in doing so, you addressed Lieutenant Vro by her former slave name.

"Weeks later, you informed me that all Vulcans were savage animals playing at a pretense of civilization, and that I especially only pretended to abide by Surak's teachings. You alluded to extremely personal information in a manner that I found threatening. This was during an encounter with a ship called the Fesarius of the First Federation. When the alien ship became damaged and weakened, with death imminent for the being aboard, you ordered his capture and vowed that he would pay for his crimes and never see his homeworld again.

"It should be noted that you frequently made small comments which are difficult to summarize and were near-constant. Our next mission involved a troupe of actors, and I highly recommend that you read the report of it in full, and while in private. It was during this incident that you made use of the safeguard phrase a second time, this time while on the bridge. The actors were connected to a string of murders that I became suspicious of, but you forbid me from investigating it on pain of insubordination charges.

"After this incident, you invited me to a sparring match during which I sustained multiple fractures in the bones of my right hand and face, as well as minor damage to my heart. You only ceased your assault when Dr. McCoy called for security forces. He later forced you to apologize.

"There was an encounter with a Romulan ship at the Neutral Zone in which you expressed a grave desire to kill many Romulans in order to 'even the score.' You then insinuated that my father was a Romulan spy and double agent, while simultaneously expressing a belief that 'all Vulcanoids look the same.' I assure you, Mr. Kirk, many Romulans were killed that day.

"Prior to the crew's first shore leave, you expressed deep pity for my mother, for having to live on Vulcan for so many years. You called Vulcans inanimate objects, akin to computers, and incapable of providing for the human need for love. You were about to make a comment that I believe was going to insinuate that Vulcan men were abusive to women when I interrupted you. We had a brief discussion regarding another matter, and at the conclusion of it, you called me a 'goddamn
biological mistake' and then walked away.

"Shortly following shore leave, you made a surprise inspection of the science department. You made a fairly crude remark about my sexual habits in front of the entirety of Lab 14, and then further implied that interspecies relationships were inappropriate. There was an upsurge in insubordination towards you following this, possibly unrelated, and it was discussed at the next department heads meeting. Lieutenant Uhura suggested that it was due to your xenophobic nature. You dismissed this out of hand, as you firmly maintained that you were not xenophobic. Four days later, you called me into your ready room in order to inform me that no human or Vulcan would ever desire a real relationship with me, due to my hybrid nature. Though you phrased it less... diplomatically.

"Following the next mission, Chekov suggested that I be included in your weekly poker games. You disapproved of this idea, and became entangled in a debate with Dr. McCoy over it. You claimed that he was too invested in the discussion, and could only be so if he and I were involved in a sexual relationship. You again called me a half-breed, and he immediately struck you. Captain Sulu also became involved in the fight. I then neck-pinched everyone. I now realize that the android merely pretended to fall unconscious in order to maintain the illusion of its humanity.

"Commander Scott wrote you up for hate speech and ethical misconduct, claiming that the attack was provoked. Admiral Pike put your command under review and came aboard the Enterprise to investigate for some weeks. At one point, you killed a representative of a species we had never contacted before. You were soon removed of command and I had no further contact with you to witness any additional xenophobic acts. Those were what I believed to be the most obvious points of interest. Sir."

Kirk sat there, face pale and dumbstruck. Sulu's eyes widened. "I didn't know half of that shit. You should have reported him for some of that, Spock."

"Wait, the android did all that and you didn't report it once?" Kirk asked; new, horrified life taking over his features.

"Negative," Spock said.

"Why?"

"I did not think it pertinent."

"But Spock, that was outright hate speech. And didn't the android demote you too? I could never imagine myself doing that. You're like, the world's most perfect First Officer. That was pretty much the definition of discrimination."

"Negative. I found the android's reasoning for my demotion to be sound, as I had failed thoroughly as a commander, thus disgracing myself, the crew, and Starfleet as a whole."

There was beat of silence.

"...You're not a disgrace," Sulu said awkwardly. "I think you're a great First Officer."

"As you say, Captain."

Kirk's head snapped up, eyes widening and face paling even further. It hit him like a gut punch. He was an ensign now. The Enterprise was no longer his.

When Spock said 'Captain,' he was addressing someone else.
They had a vidcall with Pike.

"Okay. So I talked with the other admirals--" Pike's face twisted slightly as it always did when he was forced to associate with the other admirals, despite literally being one of them, "--and we've decided that you don't deserve to have your command stripped for actions you did not, and apparently would not, take. Well, I said that. The others were basically worried that you'd go to the press with this, and then the 'Fleet would be screwed to hell and back. So! Congrats, Kirk. You're a captain again."

"Of the Enterprise?" he asked. Sulu shot him a look.

"Um," Pike said, looking between the two of them. "Either that or the Excelsior. We figured one of you could stay on with the Enterprise, and the other could take command of that new ship. I was really hoping that you two could work that out for yourselves. Rock paper scissors or something."

Sulu and Kirk looked at each other.

"Is the Excelsior ready to go?" Sulu asked.

"Not exactly. She's got about a year and a half left. Whoever took her would have to take a ground assignment until she's ready for takeoff."

Kirk had gone very, very still. Sulu looked at him again, categorizing.

"Tell you what, Admiral," he said. "Kirk can keep the Enterprise and I'll stay on under his command for the rest of this mission. You'll keep the Excelsior waiting for me, and in the meantime I start recruiting my command team and all the crewmembers I want. Also I'm not going back to being a lieutenant. I'm a commander now."

"That's fair," Pike agreed hastily. He had clearly expected this to explode in everyone's faces and create a giant PR disaster. "Anything you want, Commander Sulu."

"I want a bigger botany lab."

Pike shrugged, but took it in stride. "Okay. Don't go letting this go to your head though, okay kid?"

"Of course not, sir," Sulu said.

Pike signed off the vidcall and Sulu turned to Kirk, grinning. "You realize I'm going to steal Chekov from you, right? And maybe Uhura and Spock, too. What do you say, Spock? You wanna ditch Kirk and come be my First Officer on the Excelsior?"

He arched an eyebrow. "I shall consider it. You have proved yourself to be an adequate and capable captain, however short-lived your command was."

"Ooh, high praise," he said, still grinning. "Think about it for real though, okay? A brand new ship, bigger and better labs, cutting edge equipment. And it's not too late to request that specific modifications be made."

"The exact same opportunity you already had with the Enterprise, who is barely a year old," Kirk said, frowning.

"Yes," Spock agreed. "I did make a similar pledge to serve under Admiral Pike, before he was promoted."
"I promise I won't skip straight to the admiralty," Sulu said. "I plan on being a captain for a long time."

"So do I!" Kirk said. "You agreed to be my First Officer, Spock; I held the position open for months specifically for you."

Spock raised an eyebrow, and Kirk cursed himself internally. He sounded petty and childish. As if Spock needed any more reasons to hate him. Now he was going to leave with fucking Sulu at the first opportunity to go sail the stars together for the rest of eternity, and Kirk would be left alone and sad.

Fuck that. Spock was supposed to stay with him forever, at his side always, until they both became old, fat admirals and died when the universe ended. And Bones would be there too, as a grumpy old man with a beard. He had seen a quick glimpse of it in the meld with Spock Prime, and it had seemed eminently right. He probably sat on a porch on lazy evenings, drinking sweet tea. All three of them could retire down in Georgia together at Bones' old family house and fix the place up. Only Spock and Bones didn't like each other, like at all, so it would take some convincing to get them to agree to it, but Kirk was sure he could pull it off.

And Spock would probably get cold even in the heat of the south and need to be wrapped in blankets, which would be fucking adorable, and god, Bones might have grandkids by then and they'd come over sometimes, and Jim would finally meet Joanna and find out if she looks just like her dad or not, and...

None of this was going to happen, because Spock was leaving him for another, cooler captain who had never disrespected him and had a fucking awesome sword and shit. God, Jim couldn't even blame him.

Spock ignored his stupid emotional outburst and walked out the door side by side with Sulu, as if they were the dream command team of destiny and Kirk didn't even matter.

Jim decided to summon a meeting of the Alpha bridge crew, because they were all his friends and deserved to be told in person.

"Hey, guys!" he said cheerily, and was met with silence. "So as you may know, I was replaced with an evil robot for seven months, and yes, its programming was based on my thought patterns. What you may not know is that I would never say or do any of the things that evil robot me did. It is to my understanding that he was pretty racist, and I guess I overestimated how well we all knew each other. I intentionally messed with its programming to include that as a... distress signal, of sorts. It was the only way I could think of tipping you guys off to the switch. I thought I could just make the android say something I would never in a million years say, and you would instantly realize that couldn't actually be me. It didn't work, clearly."

Nobody said anything.

"Um. I'm... deeply sorry if anything the android did or said hurt any of you. It wasn't my intention for it to take it that far. I didn't know it would do that. I honestly thought it would take one sentence and be over in an hour."

"Permission to speak freely captain?" Nyota asked, clear challenge in her voice.

"Permission granted," he said.

"Why would any of us, upon seeing our new captain act racist, assume it wasn't really him?"
"Because... Because I thought you guys assumed better of me. I thought I had earned your respect, and so naturally I must have done something to deserve it."

Nyota folded her arms, leaning back in her chair. "You cheated on a test and then happened to be in the right place at the right time to get important intel. Your personal relationship with Pike made you first officer, and then you screamed at Spock on the bridge in front of everyone about how him being Vulcan meant he couldn't love his mother, in order to become captain. You happened to make a good call when Spock made a bad one, and because of that, they gave you a ship."

"I, uh," he laughed shortly. "I'm sorry? Look, I realize I'm new at this. But I need you guys to trust me. A ship can't run if her officers don't respect the captain."

"Us respecting you was never the problem."

"That wasn't me though," he said. "It was an android. An evil android programmed to take over the world. And yeah, it said some shitty things. And yeah, it had my face. But I feel like everyone is forgetting that it was not actually me."

"In fairness, sir," Sulu said. "Two months ago, I saw that android punch the doc's face in and then hold him down on the ground and start choking him. I hit and kicked him with everything I had, and he didn't even notice. Like water off his back. It was only when I threw a chair at him that he finally turned around to face me. He hit me so hard I went flying into the wall and messed up my spine real bad. I was in a neck brace for three days, off duty for seven. That kinda thing is hard to forget."

"You--" Kirk swallowed, face pale. "Bones?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

Leonard rolled his eyes. "No, genius, I died."

"Okay. Well, um... Should probably make an announcement to the crew. Tell them to please disregard the last eight months and all that. Inform them that I'm captain again," he said. "Were they ever told why I was removed from command? That it was for bigotry?"

"No," Nyota said. "No official story was ever given. There are rumors. And I think quite a few people suspect."

"Ah. Great," he said.

So to summarize, all his friends fucking hate him and the crew thinks he's a raging bigot who doesn't deserve an ounce of respect. Great. Just great.

Jim was still on medical leave for two more days, and he was supposed to be resting, but like hell was he going to sit cooped up in his quarters after spending seven months trapped in a sealed labyrinth of caves.

He did stay in there for a while, though. As sort of a peace offering/apology for Bones. He slept for twelve hours straight in his warm bed in a properly heated room, and then he woke up and replicated fresh coffee and a breakfast fit for a king. He almost cried with joy.

Then he started reading through eight months' worth of mission reports.

Pseudo-Earth populated solely by centuries old children, all infected with plague. Balok and the inescapable cube of death.
He stared at the report. He read it four times. He took deep breaths. He told himself it was for the best. That it was good that he didn't have to relive that trauma. That now Bones and... everyone knew without him having to actually tell a soul, to actually put it into words.

God, Bones knew.

He had redacted just about everything pre-Starfleet from his medical file. His entire adolescence was one great big blank slate. Bones had asked him about it once, when he first became his primary physician and was given access to his records. Jim had flipped out on him and told him it was none of his business and if Bones had a problem with it, then he would just go see a different doctor.

Bones had never asked again. Jim calmed down to a reasonable level around him three days later.

He supposed he should give him access to that information now. It was technically relevant to his care and treatment. Bones could probably infer most of it on his own though. Just the words 'Tarsus IV' were loaded with implications.

But even though he would never admit it, Bones was a nitpicky scientist who went into a fit when anything wasn't precise and exact enough to meet his standards. He was a details man, and something of a perfectionist when it came to his work. He would want that information.

Jim pulled up his file and declassified the information for Starfleet medical personnel ranked commander or above to access. He figured Bones wouldn't notice until his next quarterly physical, if then. Jim didn't make a habit of getting injured often.

Immediately after that he went to go bug Bones in sickbay, because what else would he do with his time. What that really meant was dicking around in a spinny chair while the good doctor examined patients.

Bones was steadfastly ignoring him. Jim started drumming a steady beat on the arms of the chair. Every three minutes or so, he would purposely screw it up, miss a key beat or two, create a long pause in a space that demanded a note.

It was steadily driving Bones crazy. Jim could tell. His right eye was twitching occasionally, and that vein in his forehead was popping out a bit.

He finished wrapping Ensign Majewski's sprained ankle and then whirled on him. "Jim," he hissed. "Do you have a medical issue?"

He snorted. "Bones. Do you really think I would willingly come to medbay if I had a medical issue?"

"Will you please get out of my medbay then?"

"What, can't I annoy my favorite doctor, Bones?"

"Some of us are actual adults with actual jobs to do."

"Clear me for active duty and I could be one of them."

He scoffed and started reorganizing his perfectly organized med cabinet. A nervous tic of his.
"Bones?" Jim asked.

"Sorry. Sorry, it's just... Towards the end there, the android and I weren't exactly on speaking terms."

"Because of the fight?"

"Because of what started the fight."

Jim thought back to the horrible debriefing Spock had given him. God, there had been so much said in it. Some things stuck out in his mind and he knew he'd never forget them. Others blurred into a white haze of nothing, as if his brain couldn't accept them, or was trying to protect itself or something.

"Sorry... You're, uh, going to have to refresh my memory."

Bones' jaw twitched. "You called Spock a half-breed," he said flatly.

"And you hit me over that?" he asked, brow furrowed. In all the time he had known him, Bones had never once gotten in a fight, much less started one. He took his oath as a doctor seriously, going to almost Vulcan levels of pacifism. Jim couldn't imagine him ever hitting anyone, much less Jim, without at least as much provocation as Spock had the day Jim emotionally compromised him.

"Get the fuck out of my medbay," Bones said, voice terribly, tightly controlled. Like he was just holding back from hitting Jim a second time.

"Bones? What's--"

"Now!"

Jim scrambled out of the chair and hurried out.

He supposed he still didn't quite get it until lunch the next day.

He took the empty seat across from Gaila automatically and she stiffened up impossibly.

"Hey, Gaila," he said, as if everything was normal. "Long time no see."

She swallowed. "Yeah."

"So it's probably all over the ship by now, but just in case you haven't heard, that android that replaced me? I changed its programming. It wasn't a perfect duplicate. I meant to make it... like that, as a warning sign, but I guess it backfired. I heard that it said some stuff to you, and I just wanna say I'm sorry. I never meant for that to happen. I just-- I'm sorry," he said. "You know I would never do that to you, right?"

"Right, of course." She nodded rapidly, eyes wide. Jim's lips twitched.

And that probably would have been enough on its own but what really rammed the message home was when Jim accidentally sort of hit the table and Gaila nearly jumped out of her skin, going pale celery green, breaths shallow like she was on the verge of a panic attack. Jim started apologizing, but she was throwing out a lame excuse and high-tailing it out of there.

It was clear, now, suddenly.
Jim hadn't offended his crew.

He had terrified them.

"You seem troubled," Spock said. "You have agreed with everything I have said in the past 8.41 minutes."

McCoy sighed. "Sorry, Spock, it's just-- I had a comm with T'Oseley earlier today."

"I assume it was unpleasant."

"It was and it wasn't," he said. "It was actually great news, really. She's giving me back full custody of Joanna."

"Then your displeasure stems solely from the act of contact with her?"

"No. It was... She's giving me Joanna back because her clan doesn't like her. Apparently her control isn't freaking flawless, so they don't even want her on the planet. She's fucking nine; let a kid be a kid, I say." He stabbed his salad with a vengeance. "You know what her exact words were? She said that 'as the child failed to conform to social decency standards and thus garner me favor, I have no further use for her.'"

"That is... logical," Spock said. "As a kolinahru without any bonds, she is incapable of feeling anything, including affection or love. I believe you mentioned before that she wanted full custody solely for the sake of appearances, did she not?"

McCoy shook his head. "I just can't believe it. She was a great mom until she wasn't. We both loved little Jo to death. And then one day, T'Oseley just... snapped," he said. "And then Joanna's mother left just two years in for Gol, broke their fucking bond, and then dragged her away from all her friends to go live on Vulcan just before she was going to start kindergarten. God knows how she's been treating her this whole time. Kids can tell when they aren't wanted, you know."

"Indeed," Spock said. "The Enterprise should be a significantly healthier environment for her to grow up in."

"The hell it is! Space is a petri dish of disease and danger. You know how many firefights this damn ship gets into? Nevermind how few children are on it, for a good goddamn reason, by the way. I really do think livin' on New Vulcan is what's best for her. And if that means my little girl embraces logic and starts... you know, talkin' the way you do, then so be it. I'll support her the whole way."

"You do not believe your own care to be superior to that of T'Oseley's?"

"No. Well... Goddammit. I just want my little girl to be safe, Spock. Safe and happy. Or contented or pleased or all those synonyms for happy that you Vulcans think don't count as emotional."

"I believe she has a better chance of that on a starship than she does on New Vulcan."

"What are you talking about? It's New Vulcan, for cryin' out loud. Planet of vegetarian hippie pacifists who preach IDIC and actually know shit about controlling telepathy and all that. Kids her own age. She has to have made friends there by now, and she'll probably resent me for dragging her away from them. She's spent the last four years learning how to be logical and that emotions are an icky human weakness, Spock. What's she gonna think of her over-emotional human father?"
"Leonard," Spock said, and McCoy's eyes widened astronomically. It was the first time Spock had ever addressed him by name. Spock had precisely three people in Starfleet who he would willingly address by their first name: Uhura, Gaila, and Pike.

And now apparently McCoy.

"I assure you your daughter will not resent you for your lack of emotional control. To do so would be illogical. You proved an adequate father before, and I am sure that situation has not changed, and certainly not as drastically as you fear."

"Adequate?" he snorted. "Spock. I didn't know jack shit about raising a little Vulcan kid. T'Oseley left when she was still in diapers, and I learned the hard way why Vulcans are so persnickety about their vaunted control. Joanna had the worst tantrums of any kid I've ever seen. Her emotions were a hot fucking mess, and her telepathy was completely out of control. I tried researching what I could, but there ain't much information out there. When she was four, I finally caved and put her on telepathic dampeners. Poor thing had no clue how to shield and almost any physical contact would push her over the edge. Trust me. When T'Oseley took her away, I hated it with every fiber of my being, but at the same time, I knew it was for the best."

Spock considered that. "I concede to your more nuanced understanding of the situation," he said. "But perhaps now that she has been taught to control her emotions and telepathy, she will appreciate a more human environment."

"Why? If anything, she'll hate it now. New Vulcan is some logical paradise, and then we have this hot mess of a ship. Yesterday I spent an hour treating an ensign who managed to shoot themselves in the ass with their own goddamn phaser."

"I believe you have a distorted view of Vulcan society. It is far from a utopia," Spock said. "Especially for those with mixed heritage."

"What?" Leonard said. His brain slowly worked, trying to parse out what exactly that meant. He kept running into the same conclusion, but he didn't like that. He didn't like the idea of that for Spock, of that for his little girl. Hell, he didn't like the idea of that, period.

Spock continued to pick slowly at his own salad, and the conversation was dropped.

Maybe Joanna coming here was for the best after all.

Pike slated them for two weeks of star mapping as a nice, easy way to ease back in.

Naturally, it didn't play out that way.

Jim had his blues attending him, one on each side of the captain's chair, with the ease of a well-practiced routine. It was new, but Kirk very much approved. McCoy got there milliseconds before Spock did, and so he got to give his report first. The information was scant. 60-70 bodies aboard, heart rate averaging four beats per minute, no other signs of respiration or life. And then Spock detailed the damage, age, and make and model of the ship-- the Botany Bay-- but was unable to find it in the registry.

"Records of that period are fragmentary. The mid-1990s was the era of your last so-called 'world war.'"

McCoy nodded. "The Eugenics Wars."
"Of course. Your attempt to improve the race through selective breeding."

"Oh, now just you wait a minute, not our attempt, Spock-- a group of ambitious scientists'. I'm sure you know the type-- devoted to logic, completely unemotional--"

"Doctor, I feel it is my duty to inform you that you are also a scientist. I confess I have never met a being so ignorant as to--"

"Alright, alright, that's enough," Kirk said. "Girls, you're both pretty. Chekov, lock a tractor beam onto that vessel. Spock, you have the con. Care to join the landing party, Bones?"

His eye lit up. "Well, if you're actually giving me a choice--"

"I'm not."

"Figures."

McCoy went to check on his patient, the first to be revived from the sleeper ship. He had been changed into somewhat skimpy scrubs, which was still an improvement from what they found him in-- a modified loincloth and covered neck to feet in gold fishnets. Now, McCoy knew the 1990s had been a strange time for fashion. But he really can't believe that people ever walked around dressed like that. It was damn indecent.

The man was still sleeping and McCoy went to pull back his eyelid and check pupil response when suddenly a hand was around his throat and an antique scalpel pressed against his jugular.

Shit. Figures keeping those antique surgical tools mounted on the wall would come back to bite him in the ass eventually. And great, there's going to have to be an incident report about this, which means Spock will find out, and the damn hobgoblin's never gonna let him live this down.

McCoy looked at him evenly. "Well, either choke me or cut my throat. Make up your mind."

"English," the man said. "I thought I dreamed hearing it. Where am I?"

"You're in bed, holding a knife at your doctor's throat."

"Answer my question."

"It would be most effective if you would cut the carotid artery, just under the left ear."

The man stared intently, then released his throat. The scalpel was no longer touching him, but he still used it to gesture. "I like a brave man."

McCoy took the scalpel from him calmly, pointing it away. "I was simply trying to avoid an argument. You're aboard the United Spaceship Enterprise. Your vessel is in tow."

A private dining room was set up extravagantly and the high-ranking officers were told to attend in dress uniform.

"Very impressive," McCoy said. "Are we expecting a 'Fleet admiral for dinner?"

"This was Lieutenant McGivers' idea to welcome Khan to our century," Kirk said. He pulled his friend aside. "Just how... strongly, is she attracted to him?"
"Well, there aren't any regulations against romance, Captain."

"My interest isn't personal, Bones, it's professional."

"Well, he has a magnetism, almost electric-- you felt it-- and it could overpower McGivers with her preoccupation with the past."

Kirk nodded. It was a sad, pitiful scrap, but at least there was one thing he and Bones could still agree on: Khan was hot.

Kirk decided early on to use his charm and good food and easy company to lull Khan into a false sense of security, and eke information out of him without him even knowing.

Unfortunately, Spock had other plans.

"Forgive my curiosity, Mr. Khan, but my officers are anxious to know more about your extraordinary journey," Kirk said, smiling as the wine was poured.

"And how you managed to keep it out of the history books," Spock said bluntly. Kirk repressed a wince.

"Adventure, Captain, adventure. There was little else left on Earth."

"There was the war to end tyranny. Many considered that a noble effort," Spock said.

"Tyranny, sir? Or an attempt to unify humanity?"

"Unify, sir? Like a team of animals under one whip?"

Khan opened his mouth, then looked to Kirk and thought better of it. "I know something of those years, remember. It was a time of great dreams, great aspirations."

"Under dozens of petty dictatorships."

"One man would have ruled eventually. As Rome under Caesar. Think of its accomplishments."

Kirk honestly should have seen this coming. Spock had extremely strong morals and fucking loved to argue. Not really what he had had planned, but hey, he couldn't argue with the guy's results.

"Then your sympathies were with--" Spock started.

"You are an excellent tactician, Captain. You let your second-in-command attack, while you sit and watch for weakness."

"You have a tendency to express ideas in military terms, Mr. Khan," he said. "This is a social occasion."

Khan laughed lightly, lifting his glass of dark blue alcohol. "It has been said that social occasions are only warfare concealed. Many prefer it more honest, more open."

"You fled. Why? Were you afraid?"

Khan smirked. "I have never been afraid."

"But you left at the very time mankind needed courage."
"We offered the world order!"

And there, Kirk had him. A confirmation, a confession. "We?"

Khan shook his head, smiling. "Excellent," he said. "Excellent."

"Hey, Bones," Jim said. "Um. You put in a request to transfer to family quarters?"

"Yep," he said.

"Okay. Can I ask why?"

"Joanna's coming on board," he said. "I already cleared it with HQ. Ex-wife's giving me back full custody."

"What? That's great!"

"Not for Jo. Her ma's doing it 'cause she doesn't want her anymore."

"Yeah, well she's a bitch," he said. "Hey, this means I get to meet your family finally! There are so many things I wanna know. So far I've been picturing Joanna as a tiny female you, and let me tell you, that is a very weird picture."

"A damn inaccurate one too. Little girl looks just like her momma."

"And another thing! I wanna meet Jocelyn and give her a piece of my mind."

"That's a bad idea, Jim."

"No it isn't. It's a great idea. You're my best friend, Bones. I have to defend your honor."

"Jim, I don't want you meeting my ex-wife."

"What? Why?"

"Because... She's not what you're picturing, kid. Trust me. She makes Spock look warm and fuzzy."

Jim snorted. "I'm gonna tell Spock you said that."

"I don't want you to meet my daughter," he blurted out.

"What?"

"I thought we had a pretty good arrangement going on earlier. I don't ask about your family, and you don't ask about mine."

"That was before your family came to live on the ship. What the fuck, Bones? Why don't you want me to meet your daughter?"

He looked at him somewhat helplessly for a moment. Then he shook his head. "Forget it. You're right, she's gonna be on the ship. You'll have to meet her eventually."

"You aren't... Are you afraid I'll like, do or say something inappropriate to her, or...?"

"Not... in that way."
"Good." Great. It's not every day that Jim has to confirm that his best friend doesn't think he's a sick fuck who says creepy things to children. God, it didn't even occur to him that that could ever be a concern. He likes to think that he's a decent guy, that his friends think he's a decent guy.

And it suddenly occurs to him that there must be some other reason Bones doesn't trust him around his nine-year-old daughter, and Jim feels lower than dirt.

"So... So then why--"

"Forget it, kid. Forget I said anything."

"No. No, I mean... Bones, if I'm doing something that isn't right, I-I wanna know."

"It's not..." He sighed. "You'll figure it out soon enough."

They had been heading to Starbase 12 before they encountered Khan's ship, and they continued there now, after dropping him and his crew off of Ceti Alpha V, along with former Lieutenant Marla McGivers.

Bones beamed down to meet T'Oseley and Joanna at the spacedock. The two Vulcans stood, stiff and formal, wearing ornate robes in dreary colors.

Leonard's breath caught. Joanna had grown. The holopics he managed to coerce out of T'Oseley didn't do her justice. She was so much taller now, with her daddy's amber hazel eyes and freckles across her face. T'Oseley had cut her hair in that traditional Vulcan bowlcut, and it looked horrible, and made the kid seem awkward as hell. Her pointed ears stuck out just slightly, and the haircut made it really noticeable.

She was openly scowling and Leonard beamed.

He walked up to her, barely resisting the urge to run and scoop her up in a giant hug. His little girl was a Vulcan and didn't like to be touched all that much. He fought hard to keep the broad smile off his face. He held up a ta'al instead.

"Hello, little darling. It's been a long time. You've been growing like a weed, I see, gettin' more beautiful every day."

A faint green blush colored her cheeks, but Joanna kept her mouth firmly snapped shut. T'Oseley placed two suitcases on the ground.

"These are her things. Please refrain from contacting me again unless absolutely necessary. I do not require updates on her growth or status. Her pediatrician is Sivond, and he can be reached at the New Vulcan colony."

"I can handle my own daughter's medical care. I have two doctorates in xenobiology, and even if I didn't, the Enterprise has a Vulcan expert on board."

T'Oseley did not react in the slightest. Her face could have been carved out of marble.

She abruptly turned and started walking away. Leonard was incensed.

"You ain't even gonna say goodbye? She's your daughter, you heartless..." He trailed off, looking over at Joanna, who was pulling a super-Vulcan act that Leonard had seen on Spock enough times to last a lifetime. He had never thought he'd see it on his daughter, though.
"You don't mind her. She doesn't know what she's missing. *I* love you, and that's never gonna stop, okay kid?"

Joanna nodded mutely. She then tried to take both her suitcases, which were about as big as she was, and Leonard instantly started fussing and insisted on carrying them himself. Only it turns out that he actually couldn't, but he managed to get a tiny grin out of Joanna while he embarrassed himself trying.

So he took one bag and she took the other and Leonard was further embarrassed to realize his kid was now officially stronger than him. She would never need him to open her peanut butter jars ever again. But she looked back at him with sort of a mocking smirk, and he decided he didn't really care.

They beamed back aboard and got Joanna's things settled into their new quarters. And then Leonard dragged her off to the rec room with him so that he could brag about her and introduce her to everybody.

Spock and Uhura were putting on a little concert when they walked in, Uhura singing melodiously and Spock playing the ka'athyra like an expert. They waited respectfully for the song to end, and then the entire room burst into cheers. Uhura grinned and gave an over-dramatic bow, she and Spock returning to their seats.

Sulu, Chekov, and Scotty were there too, and they all converged on a large table in the back.

"Hey!" he called as he got close enough. "Everyone, this is my daughter Joanna, or T'Jo'ni. She's gonna be living with me on the Enterprise from now on."

All the humans showed varying degrees of shock, but Spock, of course, was the picture of placidity. Leonard took his seat anyway, figuring they could all just get used to it, and Joanna hesitantly followed his lead.

"Ton'peh," Spock greeted, holding up the ta'al.

"T'nar jaral," Joanna said, showing the ta'al in turn.

And then Leonard saw Spock somehow smile using just his eyes and it was the strangest thing he had ever seen and also made his heart do silly things.

"There is no need for such formality, young one," he said. "Tell me, do you prefer Joanna or T'Jo'ni?"

"Usually Vulcans call me Joanna and humans call me T'Jo'ni, except my mom and dad, who do it backwards." She shrugged. "Either is fine."

"So are you excited to be moving onto a starship?" Uhura asked. "I've got to say, you really lucked out. The Enterprise is the coolest one of them all."

"Really?" Joanna asked dubiously.

"Oh yeah, definitely," Sulu said. "We go on adventures all the time. We've only been in space for a year and I've gotten in a swordfight with a samurai twice."

Joanna's eyes widened, mouth dropping open slightly, and Sulu grinned and told her the story.
Eminiar VII and Vendikar had been at war for over 500 years. To preserve their culture and civilizations, the war was fought theoretically, entirely with computers, and the casualties were ordered into disintegration chambers to commit ritual suicide.

The entire crew of the Enterprise were declared casualties.

The landing party was led into a fairly nice waiting room and placed under guard, which was a really nice change of pace. Never let it be said that the Eminians were inhospitable, even to those they were holding captive.

"Are you sure you can do it, Spock?" Jim asked.

"Limited telepathic abilities are inherent in Vulcans, Captain."

What he doesn't say is that the ability to initiate a meld is rare and held only by a small minority. What he doesn't say is that telepathy in any form other than a bond is extremely taboo. What he doesn't say is that his brother is the strongest telepath Vulcan has seen in centuries, that it runs in his family and Spock himself is not far behind.

Very little is commonly known about Vulcans. If Kirk should assume that this is a standard ability to have, well, kaiidth.

"It may work. It may not," he said instead. Even for him, such a feat would be a stretch.

"Do your best," Kirk said.

Spock walked up to the wall. He traced his fingers over and across the door gently. He finally found the correct place, as close as he could get, and latched onto the guard's consciousness like a leech. He implanted an easy suggestion: it was logical to check on the prisoners and make sure they weren't up to anything.

The guard opened the door, weapon drawn, and the entire landing party pounced on him at once.

Spock burst into the war room with the entire landing party in tow, expecting to find Kirk tied up, hostage, in a chair.

Instead, the high council and their guards were huddled in one corner and Kirk was leaning against a massive desk lazily, pointing two disruptors at them.

"I had assumed you needed help," Spock said. "I see I'm in error."

"No, I need the help," he said. "Mr. Spock, in the room to my left there are several massive, complicated computers from which this entire war is fought. I want you to tie 'em all together and break them."

Spock nodded and set to work.

"Death. Disease, destruction, horror. That's what war is all about, Anan. That's what makes it a thing to be avoided. You've made it neat and painless-- so neat and painless, you've had no reason to stop it. And you've had it for 500 years. Since it seems to be the only way I can save my crew and my ship, I'm going to end it for you. One way or another."

After Spock finished his work, Kirk shot the computer room to hell, which was immensely
satisfying and also a legal act of war.

"Do you realize what you've done?!!" Anan 7 screeched.

"Yep," Kirk said. "I've given you back the horrors of war. The Vendikans will now assume you've broken your agreement and that you're preparing to wage real war with real weapons. They'll want to do the same, only the next attack they launch will do a lot more than just count up numbers in a computer. They'll destroy your cities, devastate your planet. You'll of course want to retaliate. If I were you, I'd start making bombs. Councilman, you have a real war on your hands. You can either wage it with real weapons, or you might consider an alternative-- put an end to it. Make peace."

"There can be no peace! Don't you see? We've admitted it to ourselves. We're a killer species. It's instinctive. It's the same with you and your General Order 24."

"Alright. It's instinctive. But the instinct can be fought. We're human beings with the blood of a million savage years on our hands, but we can stop it. We can admit that we're killers, but that we're not going to kill today. That's all it takes-- knowing that we're not going to kill today."

Spock looked at his captain curiously. He saw in his mind's eye Kirk stabbing the Gorn in its throat, its dark blood splattering on his face.

He wondered if that was something the android had changed or if the decision to kill or not day to day was a flip of a coin to him. He wondered how often Kirk lost the battle to fight that killer instinct.

Jim was not avoiding Bones.

He just wasn't seeking him out. And so what if that was a bit petty and childish? It actually shouldn't count as that, really, because it was exactly what Bones wanted.

It had been nine days since she came aboard and Jim had yet to see Joanna even once. This had nothing to do with him finding alternative routes around the corridor where the family quarters were. She could be in other places. There were other kids on board. Jim had no clue where they spent their time, but he knew they were there, somewhere. Maybe she was with them.

What he didn't count on was the kid seeking him out.

And to be honest he was confused as fuck when some unknown Vulcan child showed up outside his quarters one day.

"Captain Kirk?" she said.

"Um?" he said, intelligently.

"I'd like to talk to you," she said, and oh my god, he thought he heard a slight twang in her voice, and if that wasn't the last thing he'd ever expected.

"Uh, sure, sure. Come on in," he said. He's mentally running through a list of crewmembers this kid could possibly belong to. Spock and T'Rena are the only Vulcans on board, and he's never heard anyone else mention having a bondmate--

"My daddy talks about you all the time," the kid says. "He said you're his best friend, like a brother. Vulcan has a word for that, but it's special, and I don't think humans get to use it."
"Thy’la, Jim thought, but didn't say. Mystery kid would probably be offended by that.

Then his brain caught up to her words.

"You're-- you're Joanna?!"

The kid scowled, and oh, this was definitely Joanna, alright. "Of course I'm Joanna. Who did you think I was?"

"I have no idea," he said.

She gave him a dry look. "Yeah, I know. I'm Vulcan, it's shocking. The fourth successful hybrid ever."

"You're half-human?"

Now she was just straight up judging him.

"I mean-- It's just-- I mean... Your dad never mentioned a Vulcan ex-girlfriend."

"Ex-wife. And are you sure? Because my daddy sure does love to complain."

Jim's brain slowly worked. "But... he told me he was married to a human woman named Jocelyn, and he had a daughter named Joanna with her. So..."

Joanna frowned. "I just came to say thank you for taking care of him when he was lonely. I know he got real sad when Mother took me away. I'm glad he has friends."

Seemingly satisfied, she nodded, and then slipped out the door. She had a father to confront.

"Daddy, why did you lie about me?" she asked plainly.

"What?" Leonard asked.

"I talked to Mr. Captain Kirk, and he thought I was a human. An all-human. And that Mother's name was Jocelyn."

"Oh," he said. This sure was an unfortunate topic of conversation. "Well, Jo, some people... they don't like it when people from different species get married to each other. Your human grandparents were some of those people. So when I first started courtin' your mother, I told them she was a human and that her name was Jocelyn."

Joanna's eyes bulged. "You lied?"

"Yes. No, that doesn't mean that lying is okay. It's still wrong. But sometimes, if you or someone else might be in danger from telling the truth, then a little white lie is fine."

"So..." she started. "So you thought Captain Kirk was dangerous? That he might hurt--"

"No! No. I, uh... Well, I'll be honest, darling. I was scared. I'm ashamed of it now, but back then I didn't have much 'cept you and Jim, and so when he finally asked about my ex-wife, I panicked and fell back into old habits and I lied. And that was a wrong thing to do and I'm real sorry about it. Listen, darling, I don't want you to think I'm ashamed of you, because that couldn't be further from the truth. I am so, so proud of you, and I love you with my whole heart and soul, you hear?"
"Good," he said. "C'mon, let's go on down to Spock's place. He's making bertakk soup, and then I'm gonna teach the two of you how to play Chinese checkers."

"Actually, Mr. Sandoval, we didn't come here because of your silent radio," Kirk said.

Sandoval grinned and grabbed him by the shoulders. "It makes little difference, Captain. You're here. We're happy to see you. Come! Let me show you our settlement."

He took off jauntily.

"Pure speculation-- just an educated guess-- but I'd say that man is alive," McCoy said.

"Captain, this planet is being bombarded by Bertold rays as our reports indicated. At this intensity, we'll be safe for a week if necessary," Spock said. "But--"

"But that man shouldn't be alive."

Leila Kalomi was a straight woman in love with a gay man. Contrary to Spock's dearest hopes, she had not forgotten about him over the past six years, and neither would she leave well enough alone.

She put a hand over Spock's chest, where a human's heart would be. "There was always a place in here where no one could come. There was only the face you allow people to see. Only one side you'd allow them to know."

He physically stepped away from her. He could see the doctor smirking at him a few feet away, and he shot him an accusing look. The man was far too amused by this.

"I would like to know how your people have managed to survive here," Spock said bluntly. He had been trying to get her to answer this question for over ten minutes.

"I missed you," she said.

"Logically, you should all be dead."

McCoy snorted out a laugh, and Spock spared him a glare.

"If I tell you how we survive, will you try to understand how we feel about our life here? How we feel about each other?"

"...Emotions are alien to me. I am a scientist."

"The hell does that have to do with anything?" McCoy muttered.

"Someone else might believe that. Your shipmates, your captain," she shook her head. "But not me. Come."

She extended her arm to him, and Spock paused.

"Well, go on, Spock, be a gentleman. Don't deny the woman," McCoy said, badly repressing a smirk.
"Doctor," he said tightly. "Do not leave me alone with--"

"Spock? Sweetheart, are you coming?"

He grimaced, and McCoy laughed and linked their arms together. He called out to Leila ahead of them. "Thanks for the tour, Ms. Kalomi. Hope you don't mind us making a date of it."

She frowned, but recovered quickly. "Uh, no, of course not. I, uh, I didn't realize--"

"Oh, it's no problem," Leonard said. "Spock's a private fella, after all."

He patted his arm affectionately, and Leila watched them with just a bit of sadness in her eyes. She shook her head as if confused, smiled brightly, and led them on.

Spock felt a surge of relief that the doctor's implication had seemed to work. He was, indeed, a most treasured friend.

"I was one of the first to find them. The spores."

"Spores?" Spock asked. And then he got shot in the face with a cloud of spores.

"Spock!" McCoy rushed over, choking and coughing as he inhaled spores. Spock shoved him away to try and minimize contamination.

But it seemed to late, as already a strange, dazed state was coming over the doctor, a lazy smile spreading across his face.

And then Spock cried out in agony and fell to the ground as his Vulcan control was torn to shreds.

"It shouldn't hurt. Not like this. It didn't hurt us," Leila said.

"I am not like you!" Spock shouted. "Go! Go away! Leave me and do not return!"

His sentence ended on another pained cry and he curled in on himself, muscles tightening of their own accord.

"Go!" he shouted again, and now Leila listened, taking off and running back to the settlement.

The pain started to ease and Spock was able to uncurl slightly, letting out a shuddering breath. Pure, giddy joy suffused his mind. He stretched out languidly on the grass, muscles loose and pliant.

The doctor laughed as if overjoyed. "See, Spock, it ain't so bad. Feels mighty good, doesn't it?"

Spock smiled warmly at him, sitting up and leaning back on his hands. "You are beautiful," he said. "I have thought this frequently. I don't know why I never said it. You should know that you are beautiful."

He giggled. "And you are too, Spock-o." He scooted forward in the grass until he was kneeling right before Spock. "I wanna touch your ears."

"You should touch my ears," he agreed.

"Good," McCoy said. He pushed Spock back down into the grass and lay down next to him, caressing a hand along his face until it caught on a pointed ear and he started playing with it. It was
so much more sensitive than a human's would be, and soon enough, Spock was purring as loud as a jet engine. McCoy draped himself on top of him to feel it rumble through his chest. He kissed Spock sweetly, and the Vulcan returned it with enthusiasm. Leonard grabbed onto his other ear in turn, teasing the hell out of both of them while very thoroughly kissing Spock.

Spock broke away from the kiss, starting to squirm slightly. "Leonard," he said, and Leonard shushed him, reaching down to tug his shirt off.

"Wanna touch you all over, Spock. You feel so good, I just never wanna let you go. I never wanna leave this planet. Let's just stay here, forever, and I'll kiss and touch you all the time and we'll get a house everything will be just perfect, Spock, let me show you."

"We should," Spock gasped as Leonard bit down on his neck. "We should stay here."

"Good," Leonard said, working on removing his own clothes. Spock similarly took care of the rest of his. "God, look at you. And I thought you were beautiful before."

"As I you," he said, eyes dark.

He reached down and grabbed Spock with one hand, beginning to stroke in time with his words. "You're so sweet like this, Spock. So perfect. I want this all the time. I wanna touch you and make you come and drive you crazy. Keep you with me forever. You're so beautiful, letting me touch you, letting me do whatever I want, and you love it. Don't you love it, Spock?"

"I-- Yes! Yes, Leonard!"

McCoy laughed brightly and swallowed his words with a kiss. He sped up his hand, and Spock's purrs were practically vibrating the ground beneath them now, his breath coming in quick pants. He tensed up and came in McCoy's hand.

"I'm not done with you," he promised. "I'm just getting started."

Spock took maybe a minute to just relax and enjoy the sensation in the grass. Then he grinned devilishly and shoved McCoy back so that he was on top, and that was all the warning he gave before he sucked him down.

"Spock!"

"Yes, Captain, what did you want?" he asked impatiently. He was very busy kissing McCoy at the moment.

"Spock, is that you?"

"Yes, what did you want?"

"Where are you?"

"I don't believe I want to tell you," he said, punctuating the statement with another kiss, long and promising.

"Spock, I don't know what you think you're doing, but this is an order. Report back to me at the settlement in ten minutes. We're evacuating all colonists to Starbase 27."

"No, I don't think so."
"You don't think so, what?"

He rolled his eyes. "I don't think so, sir." Leonard snorted, and Spock grinned and shushed him.

"Spock, report to me immediately."

He decided the communicator was entirely uninteresting at this point and dropped it to the ground, in favor of more fully kissing his fiance.

Kirk and Sulu found them eventually, and they were thankfully back in their clothes by this time. Spock and Leonard had found a very pleasant grove of trees and were planning to build a house in their midst, and raise Joanna there, and live happily ever after together. But first, they had to test all the trees and make sure they were good for climbing.

Spock let go of a branch so that he was hanging completely upside down, suspended only by his legs.

Leonard laughed. "You look like a opossum."

"Spock, are you out of your mind? You were told to report to me at once," the captain said.

"I didn't want to, Jim," he said.

"Yeah, I can see that," he said. "Bones, what the fuck is wrong with him?"

"Nothing's wrong with him, Jim-boy," he said. "He's finally got his head screwed on straight."

Spock giggled. "My logic is gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, it's gone?"

"It is not there, Jim. As if it never existed," he said. "I can see now what I have been missing all my life. Everything is clear now. There will be no evacuation, Jim, no one will ever leave this planet. Leonard and I plan to marry and build a house among these trees."

"What?!"

Leonard nodded, reaching up and tangling his fingers in Spock's, smiling so wide his face hurt. "I've never been so happy in my life, Jim. We're in love. We're always going to be in love. Everything's going to be perfect now, don't you see?"

Jim didn't take his eyes off of him, his face solemn in anger. "Mr. Sulu, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy are under arrest for desertion and they're in your custody until we get back to the Enterprise."

Leonard sighed and rolled his eyes. Spock dropped out of the tree and landed with cat-like grace. "Very well," he said. "Come with me."

Even Kirk could admit that this was not his best plan. But if it had worked once, then maybe it would work again.

He tricked Spock into beaming back up and greeted him on the transporter pad with a metal pipe in his hands.

"Alright, you mutinous, disloyal, computerized half-breed, we'll see about you deserting my ship."
"The term half-breed is somewhat applicable, but computerized is inaccurate. A machine can be computerized, not a man."

"What makes you think you're a man? You're an overgrown jackrabbit, an elf with a hyperactive thyroid."

Spock just laughed at him. "Jim, I don't understand--"

"Of course you don't understand. You don't have the brains to understand. All you have is printed circuits."

Spock paused, for just a moment, but after that moment, his voice regained its normal emotionlessness. "Captain, if you will excuse me--"

"What can you expect from a simpering, devil-eared freak whose father was a computer and his mother an encyclopedia?"

"My mother was a teacher. My father, an ambassador."

He gestured with his metal pipe. "Your father was a computer like his son. An ambassador from a planet of traitors. A Vulcan never lived who had an ounce of integrity."

"Captain, please don't--"

"You're a traitor from a race of traitors! Disloyal to the core, rotten like the rest of your subhuman race, and you've got the gall to think you're good enough for Bones, for a human. Any human."

"That's enough," he said darkly.

"Does he know what he's getting, Spock? A carcass full of memory banks who should be squatting in a mushroom instead of passing himself off as a man? You belong in a circus, Spock, not a starship," he said. Spock was turned away from him, fists clenched, but he still wasn't doing anything about it, he wasn't quite there yet. "Or maybe he only says he'll love you now because you let him fuck you like the animal you are."

Spock whirled around and slammed his fist into the pipe so hard that it bent in half, and then the fight began.

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Spock stopped just short of bashing Kirk's head in until it was a bleeding pile of bone and brain. He lay on the floor completely helpless-- prey captured and caught.

"Had enough?" Kirk asked. "I didn't realize what it took to get under that thick hide of yours."

He hopped up from the ground. "Anyhow, I don't know what you're so mad about. It isn't every first officer who gets to beat up his captain. Several times."

"You did that to me deliberately," Spock said. He refused to look in his direction.

"Believe me, Mr. Spock, it was painful. In more ways than one," he said, rubbing his shoulder.

"So we should probably talk," Leonard said.

"Indeed," Spock said.
"So how do you-- What are your... thoughts?"

"Are you really going to make me say this?"

"Well. Sorta the point of talking, isn't it?"

"Perhaps you should talk first."

"Really?"

"Indeed."

He sighed. "Fine. Alright. So the sex wasn't a big deal, okay? We were both pretty high at the time, and humans have casual sex all the time."

Spock said nothing. Just waited for him to continue.

"It's all the stuff we said that we have to talk about," Leonard clarified. "But like I said, we were both high."

An easy out if Spock wanted to take it.

"Vulcans do not lie, Leonard."

"I happen to know a nine-year-old Vulcan who lies about brushing her teeth all the damn time, but if that's your way of saying you meant what you said--"

"I did."

"Okay. Great! See, this is how talking works."

"I am aware of the mechanics of speech."

"Are you? Because I'm pretty sure it shouldn't be this awkward," he said. He blew out a breath. "Well, turnabout's fair play, I guess. I meant what I said too. Aside from all the crazy bits about mutiny and staying there forever, of course."

Spock was silent for a moment. "It would be appear that we have skipped some steps in the normal progression of a human romantic relationship."

"Well, I wasn't saying we should get married on the spot. I'm just thinking maybe we, y'know, try things out."

"I would be... most amenable to that."

Leonard grinned. "Oh, most amenable, eh? Well, if that ain't just a ringing endorsement."

"Indeed, it is not," Spock said primly. And then Leonard finally got to do what he'd wanted to do for months now: he leaned in and kissed that proper stoicism right of his face, with his full wits about him, and was kissed back in return.

Jim was fully aware that he was an idiot and had possibly just screwed things up irrevocably. He set out to apologize at the soonest possible opportunity.

He showed up at his quarters later that day and rang for entrance. The door slid open to reveal
Spock in his thick meditation robes, the air heavy with heat and incense. Jim cringed.

"Sorry. Did I interrupt your meditation?"

"It is of no concern. Is there something you require, Captain?"

"I just wanted to talk, but if this is a bad time--"

"It is not. As my meditation has already been interrupted, now is as good a time as any," Spock said, and stepped aside to allow Jim entry. He tugged at the collar of his undershirt a bit awkwardly.

"What do you desire to discuss, Captain?"

"That stuff I said today, in the transporter room. You know I didn't mean it, right?"

Spock arched an eyebrow silently, which Jim took to mean that he absolutely thought Jim had meant it. He cursed himself mentally.

"I would never say any of that. I don't believe a single word of it, Spock. I'm not xenophobic."

"For someone who is not xenophobic, you certainly do a convincing impression of it."

"Yeah, but that's just it, Spock: an impression. I just had to get you made enough to break the spores' control. It was the only thing I could think of."

"It does indeed seem to be a defining part of your life," he said. "It is truly amazing how you were able to so quickly think up xenophobic beliefs that you claim not to hold."

"That was all just stuff I'd heard other people say before."

"You attacked both of my parents specifically, and my mixed race heritage, insulted the entirety of the Vulcan race, and then made demeaning remarks about my sexuality. Again. At one point, you called me a subhuman animal."

Jim floundered.

"I realize it can be disconcerting to be forced to acknowledge negative traits within oneself. But I truly believe everyone would benefit if you made an effort to recognize your own xenophobia. Only then can you hope to eliminate it, if that is truly something you wish to work towards."

He walked Kirk back towards the door and directed him out of it, standing in the doorway for one last moment. "I am gratified that you have not asked for my forgiveness, as I am incapable of granting it to a man of your unrepentant behavior. Good evening, Captain."

"Wait, Spock--"

The door swished closed.

James Tiberius Kirk's Ultimate Plan for Dealing With Xenophobia:

1. Hug Spock so hard
2. ???????
3. Profit (=Spock feels loved and safe)
Only Spock was clearly unaware of the plan, and that threw a serious kink into it.

He invited Spock to play chess with him every day, despite the continued daily rejections. He took an active interest in the science department, and tried to pretend he didn't notice how uneasy the ensigns were whenever he walked in. He thanked Spock for every simple order followed, praised his brilliance with every calculation.

Spock ignored him.

Jim had been pretty busy since he came back to the ship. He had been physically and mentally rehabilitating for a while, getting back into the swing of things after spending almost 3/4 of a year stuck in an ice cave. He'd had to deal with Khan and almost suffocating to death for his first mission back, and since then he's been dealing with drama, first with Bones and now Spock. And it still takes him a while yet to review every single mission and every single report the android made on his behalf, all the personnel complaints from that time, get caught up who's transferred on and off the ship. He has an eight-month long paperwork backlog to work through. He's had three meetings with the admiralty about Exo III. Apparently Section 31 took the android and is doing god knows what with it, and they sent a task force to Midas V to halt the operations and arrest Chapel and the Korby android.

Point is, it's a really long time before he is able to just relax and take his dinner in the mess with his bridge crew.

Conversation grinds to a halt when he sits down. He smiles weakly. "Hey, guys."

Uhura gets up briskly, takes Gaila by the arm, and walks away.

No one talks for the rest of the meal. Kirk scarfs down half his food and is the first to leave. He all but sprints back into his quarters, then slumps against the door and breathes out shakily. He keeps his eyes scrunched closed tight and he doesn't cry.

They were on the Janus VI mining colony which produced pergium to sustain the life-support systems of dozens of colony planets. So far, over 50 miners had been killed.

Spock insisted that they were being killed by a theoretical silicon creature. McCoy insisted that Spock was spinning fantasies and the existence of such a creature was physiologically impossible, especially in an oxygen environment. It was an ongoing debate between them that didn't really matter, because either way, there was some sort of a monster creature killing people down here and Kirk gave a security team orders to shoot to kill on sight.

Then Spock proved that the life-form was silicon based and he didn't even get a chance to be insufferably smug about it before it killed a redshirt.

Both he and Kirk shot at it with their phasers locked to max, and it made the creature scurry away, at least. It ate through the ground to do it.

They discussed possible strategies for how to finally kill this thing and Kirk sent Giotto off with tips to give to his team, at least. And a warning that there was nothing more dangerous than a wounded animal.

"I've run a complete spherical check on all life-forms, Captain, radius 100 miles. I've located our people-- all of them-- and I've located one creature moving rapidly through native rock, bearing 201, and that is all," Spock said.
"One creature in a hundred miles?"

"Exactly," he said. "Captain, there are literally thousands of these tunnels in this general area alone, far too many to be cut by one creature in an ordinary lifetime."

"Then we're dealing with more than one creature, despite your tricorder readings, or we have a creature with an extremely long lifespan."

"Or it is the last of a race of creatures which made these tunnels. If so, if it is the only survivor of a dead race, to kill it would be a crime against science."

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said carefully. "Our mission is to protect this colony, to get the pergium moving again. This is not a zoological expedition. Maintain a constant reading on the creature. If we have to, we'll use phasers to cut our own tunnels. We'll try to surround it. I'm sorry, Spock, but it has to die."

"I see no alternative myself, Captain. It merely seems a pity."

Spock mind melded with the rock monster and instantly started screaming about unbearable pain. He nearly passed out in Kirk's arms. The creature seared 'NO KILL I' into the rock and Kirk ordered McCoy to beam down.

Kirk ordered Spock into another meld and kept his phaser trained on the Horta while he approached.

And Spock was screaming in agony again. Something about time and monsters and vengeance. It wasn't very coherent, but it was clearly pained, each word wrung out of him forcefully.

McCoy ran into the cavern with his medkit, staring at Spock for a long moment before flicking his eyes up to Kirk. "And just what is Spock doing?"

"It's wounded, badly. You've got to help it," he said, ignoring the question.

"Help that?"

"Go take a look at it."

McCoy shook his head and went to run a scanner over it briefly. "You can't be serious," he said. "This thing is practically made out of stone."

"Help it. Treat it."

"I'm a doctor, not a bricklayer!"

"You're a healer. There's a patient. That's an order."

Spock was still speaking in incomprehensible crypts, near tears in pain. Kirk told him what info to relay and what questions to ask, and he was a vessel of communication, a comm device come to life.

The Horta started wishing for death with Spock's voice and Kirk told him to break the meld. He saw then that he hadn't been near tears-- one had snuck out, fallen from the corner of his eye. It hit Jim like a gut punch.

Spock had suggested the first meld, light and from a distance, but Jim had ordered to do another,
deeper one. And he had hurt him in the process.

They brokered a peace/mining treaty between the Horta and the human colonists.

"It sounds alright if it'll work," Vanderberg said.

"Except for one thing," Spock said. "The Horta is badly wounded. It may die."

"It won't die!" McCoy shouted. His hands were covered in some sort of pale green goo. "By golly, Jim, I'm beginning to think I can cure a rainy day."

"Can you help it?" he asked.

"Help it? I cured it!"

"How?"

"I had the ship beam down 100 pounds of that thermal concrete. You know, the kind that we use to build emergency shelters out of? It's mostly silicone. So I just troweled it into the wound and it'll act like a bandage until it heals. Take a look. It's as good as new."

He seemed remarkably pleased with himself. As he should be, Spock thought. He had just performed emergency surgery in a dimly-lit mining cave on a creature whose entire organic composition was considered theoretical until about an hour ago.

"You know, the Horta aren't so bad once you get used to their appearance. That's about it, Kirk. Thanks for everything," Vanderberg said.

"Our pleasure, Chief. Kirk out."

"Curious. What Chief Vanderberg said about the Horta is exactly what the mother Horta said to me. She found humanoid appearance revolting, but she thought she could get used to it."

McCoy braced himself on the captain's chair and leaned forward, across to Spock. "Oh she did, did she? Tell me, did she happen to make any comment about those ears?"

"Not specifically. But I did get the distinct impression that she found them the most attractive humanoid characteristic of all. I did not have the heart to tell her that only I have--"

"She really liked those ears?" Kirk asked doubtfully.

"Captain, the Horta is a remarkably intelligent and sensitive creature with impeccable taste."

"...Because she approved of you."

"Really, Captain, my modesty--"

"--Does not bear close examination, Mr. Spock. I suspect you're becoming more and more human all the time."

Spock's lips pursed. "Captain, I see no reason to stand here and be insulted." He marched back over to his science station. Kirk's face fell.
Kirk decided to consult an expert: Uhura.

She surprisingly let him into her quarters and didn't even outwardly insult him, even though she clearly thinking about it.

"You understand that I am not a therapist?" she asked.

Kirk nodded hurriedly. "I know. But you are a communications expert, and I have a communications problem."

"Which is?"

"Everyone hates me. I don't understand why, nor do I think it's warranted."

She steepled her fingers. "You came to me to have someone explain to you, in clear and concise terms, why you are deserving of hate."

"Yes, but in a less masochistic-sounding way. I just... I would like to know what, precisely, I did wrong and if possible, hear any suggestions you have on how to fix it."

"Okay," Uhura said. "First, there was the android thing."

"But that wasn't even me! Do people not get that or something? It was a distress signal!"

"Kirk, if you wanted to alert us to the fact that it wasn't really you, all you would have had to make it say was 'I love salad' or something. But no, you chose to make it racist. And because of that choice, this ship became absolute hell to live on for seven months. It took one conversation to fracture Gaila's self-worth and give her even more trust issues than she already had. Nevermind the constant stream of abuse you channeled towards Spock. Honestly? I think that's one relationship that you're never going to be able to fix."

Kirk paled.

"You need to understand something," Uhura continued. "Leonard has a half-Vulcan daughter. You called Spock a half-breed in front of him, and then you nearly killed him. Spock told me that Pike asked you why you thought he took offense to that, and you replied that Bones doesn't fuck aliens. And yeah, it wasn't technically you who did all that. But we all thought it was, and that's a hell of a mindfuck. Trust is hard to earn and easy to break, and you have a lot to come back from."

"But honestly, this is you we're talking about. You probably could have done it in a few months, easily. We were all ready to believe that you were nothing like the android. But then Omicron Ceti III happened and somehow the entire ship found out what you said to Spock. I think it was Joanna, but some people say there was a leak in the security feed earlier to the ship's intranet. It doesn't matter. Point is, now everyone's convinced that you're just as racist as before and only using the android thing as a cover-up so you can keep your job."

"But I'm not," he said. "I'm really, honestly not."

She shrugged. "You have a whole ship to convince, Kirk. Telling me that in my quarters is one thing. But actions speak louder than words. And you sure said a lot of racist words."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying you're going to have to provide a whole hell of a lot of evidence to the contrary if you want to change people's opinions about you," she said. "It's going to be slow. It's not going to
happen overnight. You may never clean your reputation spotless and you may never completely
win back some people's trust. It may actually take years."

The way she said it, it felt insurmountable.

She must have read that in his face, because then she said, "If it's too much, you can always just
apply for a desk job." And Kirk felt a spark of fire light up in his chest.

He doesn't believe in no-win scenarios.

---

Organia was a primitive world in disputed territory between the Federation and the Klingon
Empire. The Enterprise was sent to go win them over and generally offer protection from the
looming Klingon invasion. Unfortunately, said Klingon invasion happened a bit ahead of schedule.
Eight of their ships appeared in orbit, and the Enterprise was forced into retreat, leaving Kirk and
Spock stranded on the planet below.

The Council of Elders gave them native clothing so that they at least wouldn't be in Starfleet
uniforms when the occupying forces arrived.

A Klingon wearing a gold sash strode into the council chambers, flanked by a guard on each side.
"This is the ruling council?"

"I am Ayelborne, temporary head of the council. I bid you welcome," an Organian said politely.

"No doubt you do," the Klingon said. "I am Kor, Military Governor of Organia." He looked over at
Kirk sharply. "Who are you?"

"He is Barona, one of our leading citizens," Ayelborne said.

"And he has no tongue?" Kor asked.

"I have a tongue," Kirk said.

"Good." He circled Kirk predatorily, eyes freely wandering. "You will be taught how to use it.
Where is your smile?"

"My what?"

"The stupid, idiotic smile everyone else seems to be wearing." And he probably would have
questioned further, but he happened to look to the side right then and catch sight of Spock.

"A Vulcan," he said, clearly pleased at his discovery. "Do you also have a tongue?"

"I am Selek, a dealer in kevoss and trilium."

"You do not look like a storekeeper." He never took his eyes off him. "Take this man. Vulcans are
members of the Federation. He may be a spy."

The two guards drew in around Spock and pointed disruptors at him.

"He's no spy," Kirk said.

"Well," Kor drawled. "Have we a ram among the sheep? You object to us taking him?"

"He's done nothing. Nothing at all."
"Coming from an Organian, yours is practically an act of rebellion."

And then Kor launched into his evil monologue about the glorious oppression the Klingon Empire offers. At the end of it, he didn't that he didn't trust anyone who smiled too much and he appreciated Kirk's honest hatred for him. So he made Kirk the official liaison between the civilian population and the occupying forces.

The two guards dragged Spock away to the "examination" room.

A Klingon clipped Jim across the shoulder purposefully."Out of the way, Organian." And Jim sort of lunged forward as if itching for a fight before Spock interrupted.

"I'm sorry, sir. We did not notice you."

"Next time, keep your eyes open. Or I'll shut them permanently."

He put a hand to Spock's chest and shoved him backwards into Kirk. They both stumbled before Kirk could steady them.

"Captain, I strongly suggest we direct our energies toward the immediate problem-- accomplishing our mission here."

Kirk reluctantly released his grip on Spock and let the Klingon disappear into the crowds. "You didn't really think I was going to go beat his head in, did you?"

"I thought you might."

"You're right," he said. It had been just minutes since he'd gotten Spock back from being subjected to the Klingon mind sifter. Only his Vulcan shielding techniques had kept his identity secret and prevented him from being killed. Klingon bastards had set the thing to Force 4, and Jim knew just what kind of damage that could do to a human.

Klingons had tortured Spock, his First Officer, and Jim had decided that he was allowed to stay pissed about that for however long he wanted. Also, he really wanted to punch a Klingon at some point in this mission.

He frowned, suddenly remembering something from the meld with Spock Prime. A very, very long time in the distant future, Klingons had killed David while Kirk sat helpless on the Enterprise up in orbit. He had never forgiven them. And then an even longer time after that, Spock had become an ambassador working for peace with the Klingons, and Kirk had gotten dragged into that assignment against his will and it created something of a rift between them for a while-- an old married couple having a spat that was completely forgotten about after the events that followed.

Kirk wasn't sure exactly how or what happened-- he had a brief flash of a young Vulcan woman with really bad hair and a sour look on her face-- but he ended up accused of assassination, with his well-known hatred of Klingons used against him. For some reason Bones was convicted too, and then they almost died on Rura Penthe-- a Klingon prison world known as the Alien's Graveyard.

He didn't know everything about that universe. But he knew the big major events that happened. And the entire Klingon debacle was definitely a major event.

Basically, every iteration of Jim Kirk ever has always had issues with the Klingons and one day it's apparently going to come back to bite him in the ass, hard, if he doesn't get over it.
So he resolved to get over it. He could think peaceful thoughts about Klingons. One day, Spock is going to be so nice and polite to them that they become the Federation's friends, and Jim only has a handful of decades to get used to that idea, so he'd better start now.

The Organians paralyzed both sides' star fleets and made everyone's weapons and instruments inoperable. Everyone's. They said the Empire and the Federation would have to make peace if they wanted their starships back, and that they would someday be friends in the future, which Kor scoffed at.

And then their bodies dissolved into beautiful glowing light because it turns out Organians are incorporeal beings of pure thought and energy and everything they had seen on this planet was an illusion.

Spock, at least, was fascinated, and Kor ended up asking him just as many questions as Kirk did, which like. Get your own science officer.

And then the Organians politely asked that they please leave immediately because the very presence of physical beings on their planet was painful to them.

So they all beamed back up to their respective ships with a new peace treaty and a decided lack of war.

As her daddy had always put it, Joanna McCoy was one smart cookie.

As she was being homeschooled aboard a starship, she required individual instruction. Spock had volunteered to be her teacher on a number of subjects he was familiar with in his free time. He modified his schedule marginally to allow for it. Leonard thanked him profusely.

"After many years of observation, Vulcans then elected to make First Contact with Earth following their independent development of warp-capable ships. It should be noted that while Vulcan was Earth's First Contact, Earth was not Vulcan's. Vulcan's own First Contact experience was with Tellar Prime many years beforehand, in--"

"Are you dating my dad?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

"What led you to this hypothesis?"

"Well," she said, readjusting in her chair. "You two sure hang out a lot. And sometimes you come over here and I have to go to bed before you leave, and I think you do that so you can kiss Daddy without me looking. I'm nine, not stupid. And that time you and Daddy had a sleepover, I saw you finger-kiss him at breakfast, and you thought I didn't, but I did. I saw."

"Your conclusions are logical," Spock said.

"Thank you," she preened.

"I have entered a romantic relationship with your father."

"Do you have a bond?"
"Negative. I am bonded to another."

Joanna openly frowned, and Spock could not help but think how strange it was to see such emotion on a Vulcan face. "I don't like that," she said. "You're human-dating my daddy while Vulcan-dating someone else?"

"That is... Vulcans do not date, T'Jo'ni. I have had a preliminary bond to T'Pring since I was seven. Surely your mother explained to you the necessity of such things."

"Sort of," she said. "I have a preliminary bond to a boy named Solev. He's not nice though, and I don't like him. But Mother said I had to have a bond because when I'm older I'll go through the Time of Mating. She said I would have to mate with someone or else I'd die. I don't really know what that means but she didn't want to talk to me anymore after that."

"I see," Spock said. "I believe that is a conversation you should have with your father. To refer to our original topic, bonds are necessary for Vulcans and yes, they are lifesaving during pon farr. I have no romantic intentions toward my betrothed. Neither of us have broken our bond as a mere safeguard. We both intend to keep it in place unless another mate can be found."

"Like my daddy."

"Indeed."

"So why don't you just break your bond and make a new one with him?"

"Your father has expressed no interest in bonding with me, T'Jo'ni. Human romantic relationships are very different from that of Vulcans. They lack the absolute surety of compatibility that telepathy grants us, and so they determine if a mate is suitable over a prolonged period of testing. Human mates must continually prove themselves worthy, often for years, before a commitment is made."

"But that's so stupid," T'Jo'ni said. "You're compatible, aren't you? And you're in love. So you should just get married already."

"Your father desires to take things slow, T'Jo'ni. He says we are 'trying things out.'"

She huffed. "Yeah, well he doesn't know what he's talking about. You can't marry some T'Pring lady just 'cause he's scared of getting married again."

Spock arched an eyebrow. "You are unusually perceptive for one so young."

She looked at him imperiously. "I know everything, Mr. Spock. And if you're gonna bond with my daddy-- which you are-- then you'd better accept that pretty quickly."

Jim's life was very routine now. Every morning, he woke up, replicated a cup of coffee and maybe a quick breakfast, worked Alpha shift, invited Spock to play chess, went down to the gym to work out his frustrations for a few hours, went back to his quarters, and plowed through his paperwork with a vengeance, and then maybe read a good book, if he had the time.

He had never been so on top of paperwork in his life. Pike was wary and asking if he was okay. Komack accused him of making Spock do it all and then putting his own name on it.

Overall, Jim had very little social interaction. Because, y'know, all his friends hated him. So really, it was perfectly understandable that he didn't notice anything had changed until his quarterly
physical in medbay.

Bones wasn't even going to be the one to look him over, but M'Benga was busy at the moment and he couldn't get out of it. Jim pretended he didn't see him try to anyway.

"You know, we're actually pretty swamped right now. Why don't you come back in a week or so?" Bones suggested.

There were five people in medbay and three of them worked there. Jim suppressed a wince and gave a tight smile instead.

"You aren't that busy," he said. "I'm free now, Bones. Let's get this over with."

He nodded gruffly, and Jim went to go sit on a biobed. It was the single most strained physical he'd ever had. Bones was distantly professional, respectful, gentle-- like he was doing an impersonation of M'Benga or something. And Jim was the model patient, quiet and obedient and pliable throughout the whole exam.

Spock walked in towards the end.

"Doctor," he said. "I see you are busy. I shall return later."

"Nah, Spock, it's fine. What do you want?"

"I wished to inquire whether or not you are busy this evening. It is our one month anniversary and it is to my understanding that humans commemorate such occasions. I would like to take you on a walk through the arboretum and then to dinner in my quarters."

Bones smiled at him. "Well now, how can I say no to that? I'll just have to get a sitter for Joanna first. Maybe she can stay over at the Speisers' place and we can make a night of it."

"That would be most pleasurable," Spock said, his expression soft and as open as it ever was. He held out two fingers, which Bones met with his own, and it hit Jim like a punch to the solar plexus.

Spock left and Bones made professional, unemotional advisements about changes to Jim's diet and he didn't even hear it. His blood was roaring in his ears. Everything was wrong, so wrong. He nodded along to Bones's comments and left medbay on numb feet, the world around him distant and unreal.

He got to his quarters and laid down on his bed. And he just stared at his ceiling for hours.

It wasn't fucking fair.

"Spock," he said, trying to keep his voice even and not-broken sounding. "Can we talk?"

Spock gave a curt nod and admitted him into his quarters. Jim felt unexpectedly nervous. What the hell was he doing here? He couldn't seriously have expected this to go well, could he?

"What do you desire to discuss?" Spock asked.

"Um," Jim said. "So-so I don't know if you know this, but in that other universe-- and I'm pretty sure in this one too-- we're t'hy'lara."

"Indeed."
And fuck if Jim wasn't completely unprepared for *that*.

"So, you *know* I'm your 't'hy'la and you still won't even give me the time of day?"

"I am aware that a different James Kirk was 't'hy'la to a different Spock, under vastly changed circumstances from ours. I have determined that this is not the case in this universe. And even if it were, only one of the definitions of such a relationship would need to be fulfilled, not all three. Contrary to popular belief, it is not necessarily a romantic relationship."

He tilted his head slightly, looking at Jim curiously. "Did you come here to attempt to persuade me to abandon my chosen mate and accept you instead?"

"No!" he said. "No, I'm not-- I would never do that. I just wanted to know if you knew. I mean, I have a soulmate who won't even speak to me as a friend. Humans get kinda hung up on that sorta thing."

"Captain, a 't'hy'la is not a soulmate and you and I share no such bond, I assure you."

"Yeah, I got that," he said. "Uh, sorry for bothering you, I'll just-- I'll get out of your hair."

He left as if the room was on fire.

This was good, he told himself. This was a good thing. He wasn't being completely and utterly rejected by his soulmate. Spock was just another person who happened to dislike him. It was hardly an unusual opinion to have. And you know, Jim had been upset over that at first, because he thought he didn't deserve it, but he was starting to understand now. He was starting to realize just how badly he'd hurt everyone, how much damage he had done to his crew, his friends, his family.

*The term half-breed is somewhat applicable.*

He squeezed his eyes shut against tears that threatened to fall.

God, he'd hate him too.

Jim missed Bones like he missed water, like he missed air. His best friend was gone and left a giant hole in his heart where he was meant to be. It was a horrible, yawning emptiness that seemed to grow worse and more painful every day.

Jim missed Bones like he was a vital part of that was gone.

He was still around, of course. He even still came up to the bridge. To see Spock. Tease him endlessly and argue about philosophy. He'd chat with Uhura and Scotty too, make jokes and bets with Chekov and Sulu. Even stand around the captain's chair if Spock was there too, or if he had to give a report.

Seeing them together was the single most painful thing in Jim's adult life.

And he was starting to realize that he wasn't sure who he was jealous of. He wanted them both. *Needed* them both.

And they very clearly did not need him.

He saw them everywhere together, now that he knew. He couldn't believe it had taken a month for him to notice. He would see them in the corridors, walking far too close together. Bickering in the science labs even as they worked side by side. Bones giving Spock wicked grins and the occasional
beaming, genuine smile. The way that Spock's lips softened and his eyes were warm and tender around him, when they weren't sparkling with mischief, anyway. They still argued, of course, but it struck Kirk as different now, or maybe he was just seeing it different. The tone of their arguments varied from 'old married couple' to 'playful teasing' to 'verbal foreplay completely inappropriate for the bridge.'

He saw them in the mess one day, with Joanna, eating together and looking like a perfect little family. Complete. Happy. Bones had said something to Spock that made him turn green and Joanna snort with laughter. Spock retaliated instantly, pressing a kiss to McCoy's lips, quick and chaste but in full view of everybody, and McCoy choked and sputtered and turned red in the face, and Joanna openly laughed at them both.

Jim couldn't get the image out of his head. He kept replaying it, over and over.

He was so, so screwed.

He was a complete idiot to think he was screwed before he got stuck in the 1930s with Spock. On a mission to rescue Bones. Jim could already see exactly how this was going to play out, and it wasn't going to be fun for him.

He climbed down a fire escape, a bundle of stolen clothes in hand. "I think I'm going to like this century. Simple, easy to manage. We aren't going to have any trouble explaining--"

"Ahem," a police officer said.

They stood there dumbly.

"Well?"

"You're a police officer," Kirk said, intelligently. "I recognize the traditional accouterments."

"You were saying you'll have no trouble explaining it," Spock challenged.

"My friend is obviously Chinese," Kirk said. "I see you've noticed the ears. They're actually easy to explain."

He looked to Spock for help, who was looking at him like he was a disappointment, again. No doubt over the obviously racist statement. It was the 1930s though, what was Kirk supposed to say? Racist caricatures were a good explanation; aliens from outer space were not.

Spock eventually deigned to help him. "Perhaps the unfortunate accident I had as a child."

"The unfortunate accident he had as a child! He caught his head in a mechanical... rice picker."

The explanation went downhill from there. And that was how, after being there for less than ten minutes, they ended up running from very angry police.

They took cover in the basement of the 21st Street Mission, and the police passed them by. Kirk sighed in relief and began sorting through the pile of clothes he had stolen, Spock doing the same.

"You were actually enjoying my predicament back there," he accused. "At times, you seem quite human."

"Captain, I hardly believe insults are within your prerogative as my commanding officer."
"Sorry," he said. He closed his eyes and cursed himself mentally. "Sorry. You know when I say stuff like that I don't mean I see you as less than Vulcan, right? I mean you seem... relatable."

"It is concerning that you require humanity to relate or empathize with another being," Spock said succinctly, and Kirk gaped.

"I didn't mean it like that!"

"How did you mean it?"

He groaned in frustration. "I don't get it, Spock. You let Bones tease you about that stuff all the time. Why am I different?"

"I rest assured that Leonard bears me no ill will and intends no insult or harm to come from his remarks. In addition, he mainly takes up with how Vulcan I am and my devotion to logic-- neither of which I find insulting nor have I ever been discriminated because of those traits. Prior to meeting your android duplicate, of course. You are quite different, Captain."

"Spock," he said, frowning. "I never mean to hurt you with anything I say or do. You have to know that, okay? I-I respect you. I feel affection for you as a friend."

He arched an eyebrow. "We are not friends, Captain."

A big lump wedged itself in Jim's throat. He couldn't say anything even if he could think of a reply.

"I have a few questions I'd like to ask about you two," Edith said. "Oh, and don't give me that 'questions about little old us?' look. You know as well as I do how out of place you two are around here."

"Interesting," Spock said. "Where would you estimate we belong, Miss Keeler?"

"You?" she said. "At his side, as if you've always been there and always will."

God, Kirk wishes.

"And you," she said. "You belong... in another place. I don't know where or how. But I'll figure it out eventually."

She was brilliant enough and so ahead of her time that Kirk believed her completely.

As if just living together in a one-room apartment wasn't bad enough, at some point, Spock's computer array took over one of the beds and they were forced to share the other.

Spock was stiff as a board next to him, as far away from him as he could get without falling off the bed. Kirk felt sick.

About 2/3 of the time, he woke up wrapped around him like a sad, affection-starved monkey and had to apologize profusely. Spock was always completely unaffected and said his apologies were unnecessary. Jim felt like a gross, icky, over-emotional human. He was sure that Spock could see straight through him, knew exactly how he felt. The guy was a touch telepath, for pete's sake, and they were sharing a bed.

He asked one day if he ever got any impressions from him while he slept and Spock got offended and said that he did not make a habit of violating unwilling minds and had sufficient shields to
prevent accidental transference.

They found McCoy and Edith died and Jim was numb, numb to everything.

Naturally, things immediately got so much worse after that.

Sam Kirk lived on Deneva as a research biologist. He had a wife and three sons. Jim beamed down with the landing party and only found Aurelan and Peter alive.

Peter was a small eight-year-old, gingery kid. He looked horribly small and pale laid up in a biobed. Aurelan was soaked in sweat and screaming and sobbing in the bed next to him, and the sedation was doing jack shit. She managed to gasp out a half-coherent explanation before the shock of the pain killed her.

"My brother's son?" he asked.

McCoy shook his head a bit, probably subconsciously, face drawn and pale with a sort of mute horror. "I'll do everything I can, Jim, to save him."

The creatures got Spock.

"Nurse," McCoy snapped. His nurse handed over a tool, adjusted the anesthesia. "That's the second time he's come out of it. Either he's fighting us, or something inside of him is."

"Doctor, the readings have never looked like that before, not even on Mr. Spock."

He pursed his lips, looked down at his partner laid open on the operating table. Cut open, by McCoy, with the searing blade of a laser scalpel. "Let's prepare to close."

The nurse frowned deeply and did nothing, just stood there.

"Nurse!"

"Doctor, that's not all you're going to do...?"

"Mr. Vasquez--"

"Doctor, there is more of it in him, entwined all through his body!"

"Mr. Vasquez, if you cannot assist me as required, call another nurse in here. But do one or the other now."

"You'll need a host for the next step in the test. To determine whether the creature can be driven from the body. I am the logical choice," Spock said.

"Do you know what one million candlelight per square inch can do to your optic nerves?" McCoy asked.

"There's no other way, Bones," Kirk said. "We have to duplicate the brilliance that existed at the moment the Denevan declared himself freed."

Spock was still twitching with controlled pain and McCoy swallowed at the sight of it. "Alright. I'll rig up a protective pair of goggles."
"There will be none on the planet's surface, Doctor," Spock said.

"I agree completely," Kirk said.

"Vulcans have a third eyelid," McCoy said desperately. "'Cause your sun's so damn bright and hot. That should protect your eyes, right?"

"I am only half-Vulcan, Doctor," Spock said. "Should I possess such a third eyelid, I have never seen any evidence of it."

"Wait, wait," McCoy said. "Don't just..."

He grabbed Spock by the shoulders, face agonized, and Kirk excused himself to the other side of the lab. He heard them talking to each other indistinctly, whispers and murmurs. He made a point of flipping through lab notes. He really didn't need to see them kiss.

"Okay," McCoy said, at normal volume. "Okay, Spock."

Kirk walked back over and Spock entered the testing chamber. McCoy gave him one last, long look as he closed the door.

"Spock, are you alright?" Kirk asked.

"The creature within me is gone. I am free of it. And the pain," he said. "I am also quite blind. An equitable trade, Doctor. Thank you."

They helped him into a chair. His bright, emotive, human eyes stared blank and unseeing straight ahead. Vasquez rushed in with the test results from the creature, handing them off and halting when he caught sight of Spock.

McCoy barely had to look at the padd.

"No," he breathed.

"What is it?" Kirk asked.

"I threw the total spectrum of light at the creature. It wasn't necessary. I didn't stop to think that more than one kind of light might have killed it."

"Interesting," Spock said. "Just as dogs are sensitive to certain sounds which humans cannot hear, these creatures evidently are sensitive to light which we cannot see."

"Are you telling me that... that this didn't need to happen?" Kirk asked.

"I didn't need to throw the blinding white light at all, Jim," he said quietly. Heartbroken. "Spock, I-"

"Leonard, it was my selection as well. It is done."

"Bones," Kirk said. He had so many things he wanted to say, absolutely none of them appropriate. "...Take care of him."

He walked away before he could do something stupid. He had a ship to run, a million Denevan colonists to save.
"It would appear that my Starfleet career is quite finished."

Leonard laughed hysterically. "If I had just waited for the damn test results..." he said. "You should press charges. Medical malpractice. I deserve to have my license taken away."

"Illogical. You save lives through your work, Doctor. To prevent you from continuing because of a mere mistake which I had a hand in would be unthinkable," he said. "The end of my career need not be the end of yours. I will not allow you to martyr yourself for me."

"You should," he said. "God, you should."

"Leonard," he said. "My regard for you is as unchanged as it always will be. I swear this to you. I will not abandon you over this nor anything else, permitted you will still have me."

"You think I would leave you over this?" he asked. "God, Spock, what am I, a monster?"

"Negative. I am merely aware that I may not be as desirable to you as--"

"Shut up," he said. "You shut up about that. You will always be desirable to me, you hear? I love you. I love you so goddamn much. And wherever you go, I will go. Without you on this ship, I've got no reason to be here. We can go to New Vulcan, or Georgia, or San Fran, or any place in the whole damn Federation that you want, Spock."

"You do not need to do that for me."

"I want to," he said. "I want to be with you. I don't ever want to lose you, Spock, and if I could, I'd stay with you forever."


Leonard cupped his face in his hands with awe. He saw it the moment that Spock's focused, settling on him, drinking in his features.

Neither was sure who moved first, but they were kissing in the next moment.

Spock and McCoy walked onto the bridge.

"Spock!" Kirk called out. He turned to look at him.

_He turned to look at him._

"You can see," he said.

"The blindness was temporary, Jim. There's something about his optical nerves which aren't the same as a human's," McCoy said.

"A hereditary trait, Captain. The brightness of the Vulcan sun has caused the development of an inner eyelid, which acts as a shield against high-intensity light. Totally instinctive, Doctor. We tend to ignore it, as you ignore your own appendix," he said with a smirk.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said. This was something of a risk. But hell, if Bones got to tease Spock, then so did he. "Regaining eyesight would be an emotional experience for most. You, I presume, felt nothing?"

"Quite the contrary, Captain, I had a very strong reaction. My first sight was the face of Dr. McCoy
bending over me."

"Hm. It's a pity your brief blindness did not increase your appreciation for beauty, Mr. Spock," Bones said.

"If you gentlemen are quite finished," Jim said, before Spock could make some comment about appreciating Bones's body just fine.

They set a course for Starbase 20.

Joanna had a sleepover with her friend Michelle that night, which didn't really change their nightly activities much in a world of privacy locks and soundproofed bulkheads, but it did mean they could be as nauseatingly romantic or annoying with each other as they wanted without a nine-year-old gagging at them over the dinner table.

Plus, Joanna had very much not enjoyed her foray into Vulcan culture after spending half her childhood on Earth. She had taken being on a starship surrounded by humans as meaning that she could be as loudly and obnoxiously emotional as she wanted now. So she had Vulcan-strength emotions and made no efforts to control them at all, shucking away practically everything her mother had taught her. She was basically a little terror right now. Leonard hoped it was a phase. If not, then he was going to have to carefully explain that even humans find public temper tantrums inappropriate in a nine-year-old.

But for now, she wasn't here and Leonard was gonna make the most of it while it lasted.

By doing things like shoving Spock up against a bulkhead and making out with him like a teenager.

He let himself be manhandled, because Spock was good like that.

"Why're you always picking fights with me, Spock, huh?" he asked, mouth teasing at Spock's oh so sensitive ears. He traced his tongue up its length, and Spock shivered. "You wanna know what I think? I think it's 'cause you love it. You love getting a rise out of me. You love knowing you're the only one who can elicit that strong an emotion."

He bit the tip of his ear, and Spock gasped. Leonard suckled on it apologetically. "And I know about Vulcans, Spock. I know what you really think about emotions. So improper of you. It's damn indecent, what you do to me, and on the bridge of all places."

He reached down, grabbed his ass, and squeezed. "I'm almost starting to think you want an audience, Spock. Why, in your culture, you practically debauch me in front of the whole crew. All those things you say. You'll do anything to get me to react, to make a show of myself."

Spock grabbed his head to pull him in for another kiss, rough and claiming. Leonard snaked his hands up from his ass and into his shirt, tugging it off and exposing him. Spock latched onto the base of his neck to suck a bruise there, and Leonard grabbed one of his hands and put his fingers into his mouth, sucking hard and sudden. Spock keened, head knocking back against the wall, and Leonard wrapped an arm around him to take him to bed, still keeping his fingers in his mouth.

"Strip your clothes off," he said, already doing the same himself. Spock obeyed, because again, he was good like that. And then he got on the bed and spread his legs enticingly, arching that damn eyebrow and looking at Leonard with challenge in his eyes.

He crawled on top of him and kissed him until his face was anything but smug, letting his hands rove wherever they may, turning Spock into a squirming mess beneath him. He lubed up his
fingers and teased one around Spock's hole, pushing in achingly slow.

"Look at me," he said. "I want you to look at me, Spock. Keep them pretty eyes open."

He slipped a second finger in, scissoring him open, making him ready to take Leonard's cock. They were both achingly hard, Spock's breaths quick and shallow while Leonard fucked him with his fingers, but he kept his eyes open, never straying from his lover's.

Leonard finally lined himself up and pushed in slowly, watching Spock's pupils blow wide before he tossed his head back. Leonard rocked into him, taking his time and drawing it out. Spock squirmed impatiently, then started thrusting back himself, and Leonard took the hint, fucking him faster and harder and deeper. Spock liked things on just this side of rough. Sometimes Spock rode him while Leonard dirty talked him, and it was always the most intense sex Leonard had ever had.

But this wasn't that.

He fucked him hard and stroked him in time to it, and Spock was a writhing, mewling mess.

"You're so beautiful like this, Spock. Oughta keep you like this always, on my cock and in my bed. All flushed green and so hungry for it. 'S like you were made for this. Made perfect for me."

"Leonard," he hissed out.

"Yeah, darlin'?"

"You talk too much."

He grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him down into a hungry, bruising kiss. Spock thrust his tongue into his mouth, and Leonard immediately sucked on it, drawing out this needy groan from him.

He grabbed both of Spock's hands and pressed them down into the mattress, dragging his fingers across his in long strokes while he nailed his prostate on every thrust. Spock went wild with it, fucking himself back onto Leonard's cock in a frenzy, kissing him hard enough to hurt. His body tensed up underneath him, and he came in long spurts, coating both of their stomachs. Leonard wasn't far behind, barely lasting five more thrusts after seeing that.

He buried himself deep and came, and Spock arched up at the sensation. Leonard pulled out, panting, and flopped onto the bed beside him.

For a while, they just sat there and breathed.

Spock got up and went to the bathroom for a wet towel to wipe them both off with, clean freak that he was couldn't stand being messy for five minutes. Leonard took the towel from him almost instantly, making the act of cleaning up a lot slower and more caring than Spock's efficiency would.

His lips were shiny with a smear of red blood, Leonard noticed. He pulled him in and licked it away, kissing him tenderly now and tangling their fingers together.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Spock asked.

"Well, I should certainly hope so, Spock. Shoot."

"Earlier today, during my temporary blindness," he said. "You spoke of forever."
"Yeah," he said. "And how do you feel about that?"

"I am aware that humans often say things they do not mean in moments of heightened emotionalism."

"I don't make promises I don't intend to see through, Spock. And that's exactly what that was: a promise," he said. "I'll stay with you for as long as you'll have me, in any circumstances that come our way. We could both be blind, deaf, and missing half our limbs, and I'd still love you 'til the end of time, Spock."

Spock arched an eyebrow, bemused. "Your words bear a striking resemblance to human wedding vows."

But his tone wasn't quite teasing so much as it was so cautiously hopeful.

"I suppose they do," he said. "In sickness and in health, 'til death do us part. A vow is just a fancy word for a promise. Would that be something you'd want?"

"I believe I already gave you my answer earlier."

"Good," Leonard said, and kissed him again. "Because it's something I want too."

"You are not frightened by the prospect of marriage?"

"Not with you, no," he said. "You are not T'Oseley, Spock. You are nothing like T'Oseley. If all the bullshit life's thrown at you so far hasn't pushed you to kolinahr, then nothing will." He smirked. "I can trust you not to break my heart, can't I?"

"I would never betray your trust, Leonard," Spock said solemnly. "There is another matter I must discuss with you."

"More serious than marriage?"

Spock hesitated. Leonard froze.

"You aren't dying, are you?"

"Negative. Not in any immediate sense," he said. "But there is the matter of Vulcan bonds."

"Oh," he said. "Oh."

"Indeed."

"You won't want to marry someone you can't also bond with."

"You are aware of pon farr, correct?"

"Yeah."

"That is fortuitous. As you know, it requires both mental and physical release. A fully completed bond beforehand can prevent the onset of the plak tow entirely. If you will not bond with me, I will be unable to fulfill the expectations of a monogamous relationship. I do not say this in any effort to coerce or manipulate you. I will fully understand if you do not desire a bond. I realize the severing of your bond to your former mate was deeply traumatic, as well as physically painful."

Leonard looked askance and a bit helpless, so Spock quickly amended, "I do not require an
immediate answer. My first pon farr is still many years away."

Leonard nodded, looking relieved. "Right," he said. "Right. We've got time."

Spock was in pon farr.

He thought he was doing an excellent job of hiding it. He had a plan, an extremely logical plan: he would lock himself down into his quarters and die. He wrote his reasoning down on a padd using simple words so that he could refer to it over the course of his madness and not make the biggest mistake of his life.

It was a single, simple sentence: 'Leonard does not want you.'

Even his lust-addled brain would be able to see the logic in hiding away when faced with that. He would not take the unwilling. Leonard did not want a bond, feared the very idea.

The plan was foolproof, really.

It did have some minor complications, however. Spock was forced to cut off all contact with Leonard due to an overwhelming desire to throw him to the ground and fuck him senseless whenever he came within sight of him. This, unfortunately, did not go unnoticed.

"Spock!" Leonard called down the corridor. Spock quickened his pace. "Spock, goddammit, I'm trying to talk to you!"

Spock hurriedly keyed in the code to his quarters. His fingers trembled, and he typed it wrong. He snarled a Vulcan curse and tried again.

Leonard was rapidly gaining on him.

The door open, and Spock bolted inside. He breathed a sigh of relief, only to realize that Leonard had stuck a hand through the door before it fully closed, and the sensor reopened it to admit him.

And now he was in Spock's quarters, his hands on his hips, smelling and looking delicious, Spock wanted to ravage him, push him up against that door and take him right there, again and again, until Leonard was weeping from oversensitization and coming dry--

"Spock," he said, snapping him out of it. "What the hell's going on? Why are you avoiding me? Is this about that bond thing?"

"Negative. This has nothing to do with that," Spock lied.

"Really? Because it started almost immediately after that conversation."

"A mere coincidence. The cause is unrelated."

"What cause?"

"...Nothing."

"Spock," he said. "Just tell me what's going on so that we can deal with this and put it behind us."

Spock stared at him and valiantly tried not to imagine him naked and absolutely covered in come. It did not work.
"I am terminating our romantic involvement," he said.

"What?" Leonard asked, and now he looked hurt. Spock felt guilt wash over him like a wave, wrap him up and consume him.

This was for the best, he reminded himself. This was for Leonard's own good. He would understand soon, in just over a week, actually. Eventually he or the captain would use their override to enter his quarters, after his comm went unanswered, after he failed to report to duty. They would find his dead body, rigid on the meditation mat where he intended to spend his last hours.

Leonard would mourn him, he realized, and felt new, worse guilt.

Perhaps not. Perhaps he could make him hate him before then. Spock would be horrible, he would be worthy of scorn and resent, and his passing would cause Leonard very little pain.

"Spock, what's going on? Talk to me. Please."

"There is nothing to discuss," he said.

"Why are you breaking up with me?"

"I fail to see how that is any of your business."

"The hell it isn't my business! It directly affects me and my life, Spock, that is the definition of my business. What, are you pissed that I won't bond with you? What happened to giving me time to think about it? I never even said no for sure, it's not like this relationship is going nowhere, Spock. I just don't want to rush into things."

Spock's head swam, light and fuzzy. Leonard did not know what he was saying. He did not desire a bond. Certainly not right now.

Or he did. And he knew exactly what he was saying. He was doing all of this to inflame Spock's blood, to goad him into taking him right then and there, into placing a bond right in that brilliant mind of his and never leaving, keeping that sharp-tongued wit and overwhelming kindness all to himself, wrapping his very essence around it and hoarding Leonard like a dragon hoarded treasure. And that was what Leonard really wanted, wasn't it, he was just begging--

Spock blinked and tried to root himself in reality. He had missed the last several seconds. "My apologies, Leonard. What were you saying?"

He looked at him strangely. "I want you to come down to medbay," he said. "You aren't looking good. You're out of it, you're unfocused, your behavior is out of character. Something's wrong."

"That is false. Nothing is wrong with me," he said. "I am perfectly well."

"You're flushed too, and it's even hotter in here than it normally is. Are your eyes bloodshot? Okay, you're coming down to medbay."

Spock snapped. "You will cease to pry into my personal matters, Doctor, or I shall certainly break your neck."

McCoy's eyes widened. "You're in pon farr."

He went willingly to medbay, as all was already lost at this point. Resistance was clearly futile. Spock would not be allowed to die. Instead, a bond would be forced on the most perfect human
Spock had met, because Leonard cared too much, and he would sacrifice himself to save Spock's life. And Spock would be bonded for the rest of his life to a man who did not want him in that way.

Even that was a selfish concern. Leonard was too good and Spock was abysmal. It was Leonard who would truly suffer from this arrangement, not Spock.

Leonard completed his examination and then walked him back to his quarters, told him to try to eat something or at least lie in bed and rest for a bit, even if sleep was elusive. Spock nodded mutely, thoroughly hating himself and how wonderful his chosen mate was.

And then Leonard went to go talk to Jim.

"Captain, you've gotta get Spock to New Vulcan."

Jim looked at him strangely. "Well. Um, I have no problem granting him leave, but right now we're on route to Altair VI with absolutely no time to spare."

"No. It has to be now, right away. If you don't him to New Vulcan within a week, eight days at the outside, he'll die. He'll die, Jim."

"What? What do you mean, he's dying? What the hell's gonna kill him eight days from now?"

"...I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Are you a doctor or aren't you?"

"There's a growing imbalance of bodily functions, as if in our bodies huge amounts of adrenaline were constantly being pumped into our bloodstream. If it isn't stopped, the physical and emotional pressures will simply kill him."

"Okay, well how do you stop it?"

"Um. It's something only his planet can do for him. He needs to see a mind healer."

"But what is actually wrong with him? What happened? If his telepathy is on the fritz, there has to be some sort of root cause."

"You know, there actually is something called doctor-patient confidentiality, Jim. I've told you all you need to know, okay? Now just get Spock to New Vulcan."

"Hey, Spock," he said, entering Spock's private room in medbay cautiously. "Um. Why are you in restraints?"

"I requested it."

"Ah. Any reason?"

"There is some fear I may attack crewmembers as the madness worsens."

"Madness?"

"Indeed."

Jim hummed in awkward acknowledgement. "So I brought you some plomeek soup."
Spock glared at him. "I do not want your soup," he hissed, as if Jim had just insulted the honor of his clan or something. He nodded in understanding and set the bowl on the side table.

"So, um. What's wrong with you? Bones gave me his assessment of your medical condition, but he didn't actually say much. Just that you're... dying."

"Captain," Spock said urgently. "You must kill me now."

He paled. "What?"

"Before we reach the colony. You must choose: my life or Leonard's."

"What? Spock, what the hell is going on? What does Bones have to do with this?"

Just then, the man himself walked in to check on Spock. Their conversation dropped instantly, and Jim looked between his two friends with extreme fear and suspicion.

"Everything alright, Jim?" Bones asked. "You aren't looking too good yourself."

"I'm fine, Bones," he said gravely, staring at him with the utmost severity.

Leonard sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Spock, what'd you tell him?"

"Nothing that would impinge on either of our propriety, Doctor."

"The fuck does propriety have to do with this," Jim said tensely.

"Fuck-all, Jim. Now listen, I don't know what Spock just said to you that's got you lookin' like you just seen a ghost, but whatever it was, it's bullshit and I want you to ignore it. I'm gonna be fine. We're gonna be fine."

"He said that I had to choose between your life and his. He asked me to kill him."

"Really?" He turned to Spock. "You goddamn drama queen. I'll be fine, dumbass. And you will too. I'm not backing out of this."

"Backing out of what?" Jim asked.

"Leonard, you will not be fine. There is a 100% chance of injury. You will likely sustain numerous contusions, minor wounds, dehydration, exhaustion, the beginnings of hunger, and possible tearing. Death is not unheard of."

"What the fuck?"

"Spock, those instances of people dying only happened with Vulcans who entered the plak tow, and there's no way in hell I'm letting it get that bad. We'll take care of things well before it gets to that point."

"Take care of what?" Jim asked, desperate for any scrap of information at this point.

Spock's muscles all suddenly tensed up and he arched off the biobed. "Leonard, I must request that you fuck me now!"

Bones just rolled his eyes as if this were normal or something. "We're in medbay, you're restrained to a biobed, and Jim is standing right there."
"It matters not."

"Yeah, I'll bet it doesn't," he muttered. "Jim, care to give us some privacy here?"

He gaped at his best friend in horror.

Bones scowled. "I'm not gonna--! Goddammit, man, seriously?! Pick your mind up out of the gutter. I just wanna talk with my fiance alone for five minutes."

"Fiance?" he asked quietly.

He rolled his eyes. "What do you think we're going to New Vulcan for?"

"From what I've gathered, a ritual sacrifice."

"No," Bones said. "This is the standard progression of a typical Vulcan wedding."

"Spock goes mad and you both might die?"

"I will die right now if I am not immediately fucked," Spock hissed, and Jim was sure his face had never been redder.

"No, you will not. Good lord. Having sex now will only make your fever worse. You need to wait until we get to New Vulcan and can have a priestess establish a bond."

Spock growled. "Nash-veh ket'lio."

"I know, darlin', just a little while longer. Jim's gonna take us to New Vulcan, and then you and I are gonna get off and I'm gonna take care of you, alright?"

This, weirdly enough, seemed to work and placate Spock for the moment. He settled back down, almost docile. "You will not challenge?"

"I won't challenge."

A loud purr erupted out of him, and Spock closed his eyes. Bones quickly ushered Jim out of there and shut the door, explaining that Spock had probably been too stressed to sleep for the past few days.

Jim ignored explicit Starfleet orders and got them to New Vulcan within three days.

"Is there some sort of tranquilizer you can give him that'll abate the symptoms until we get down there?" Jim asked, as Bones undid Spock's restraints.

"Sure thing," he said, and leaned down and kissed Spock soundly. The Vulcan seemed to melt under the attention, and purred in return.

Bones looked at him smugly. "Jim, if there were some sort of anti-pon farr miracle drug, every Vulcan ever would carry a hypo of it in their back pocket. What he needs is his bondmate, plain and simple."

"Ah," Jim said, shifting awkwardly. No one had yet to explain what precisely was happening, except for the existence of a wedding, but Jim was starting to piece things together. There were only so many conclusions that could be drawn here, after all.
Leonard helped Spock out of the biobed, but Spock refused to let go of him even after he was steady on his feet. He immediately latched onto Bones, burying his face in his neck, a quiet rumble of purring still emanating from him. Bones gently shushed him and disentangled himself partway, enough for both of them to be able to walk to the transporter room.

Gaila and Uhura were already there and waiting.

Spock almost seemed to be back to his usual self by then, except he wouldn't stop stroking his fingers up and down Leonard's. "Ladies. There is a thing that happens to Vulcans at this time. Almost an insanity, which you would no doubt find distasteful."

Gaila outright laughed at that. "Will I?"

Nyota gave her a disapproving look and elbowed her in the side.

"Then would you beam down to the planet's surface and stand with me? There is a brief ceremony."

"Is that allowed?" Nyota asked.

"It is my right. By tradition, the male is accompanied by his closest friends."

Nyota took Gaila's hand in her own. "We would be honored, Spock."

The four of them stood on the transporter pad and Jim gave the order to the tech. His friends disappeared in clouds of light.

He stood there for a moment, after they were gone. This was it. It hadn't been a fling or a sex-pollen-induced one time thing. Spock and Bones were getting married, now.

And he wasn't even invited to the wedding.

"This is our place of koonut kal-if-fee," Spock said.

"That means 'marriage or challenge,'" Nyota whispered to Gaila. "In ancient times, Vulcans killed to win their mates."

"Well, there'll be none of that happening today," Leonard said.

Spock walked up to a small platform and banged a gong.

"The marriage party approaches," he said. "I hear them."

"Marriage party?" Gaila asked. "Isn't everyone necessary sort of... already here?"

"Negative. There remains T'Pring, my wife," he said. "It is unfortunate that pon farr struck so suddenly after the destruction of Vulcan. Had we more time, we could have severed our bond less violently."

"Less violently?" Leonard asked.

"I intend the challenge. My blood burns for no other but yourself. I will either die in ritual combat, or die in the fires of pon farr. Either way, I will not have T'Pring, and she will not have me. We both prefer our own gender."
"Lesbian married to a gay man. Can't get more logical than that," Leonard muttered. "Spock, you aren't going to die. I'm going to bond with you. We agreed on this, remember?"

He shook his head, frowning deeply. "No. No, we agreed while I was mad. I will not take the unwilling."

"First of all, I'm not unwilling. Second of all, you are no less mad now than you were earlier. You've just decided to be in a self-sacrificing mood. Which doesn't make your ideas any less crazily illogical."

Spock hissed. "You are illogical. I must die, Leonard. I must claim your body on these sands and then die."

"Yeah, okay."

Spock rushed up to bang the gong again just in time for the marriage party to enter. It was a bunch of hulking Vulcans in ceremonial armor. They were ringing sheets of bells and ominous drums. Servants carried in an elderly woman on a throne, and Nyota whapped Gaila on the arm excitedly.

"That's T'Pau," she whispered. "The only person ever to turn down a seat on the Federation Council."

Gaila's eyes widened appropriately.

T'Pau's throne was placed on a dias and she held up the ta'al. Spock repeated the gesture even as he rushed over and kneeled before her for a light meld. She withdrew, and he rose.

"Spokkh," she said. "Are our ceremonies for outworlders?"

"They are not outworlders. They are my friends," he said. Leonard got the feeling that 'outworlders' had a less than polite translation in Vulcan. "I am permitted this."

The non-Vulcans drew up to the throne as gestured. "This is McCoy," Spock said. He gave a slight bow, a formal greeting.

"And thee are called?" T'Pau asked.

"Nyota Uhura, ma'am. And this is Vrokar Gaila."

"Thee names these outworlders friends. How does thee pledge their behavior?"

"With my life, T'Pau."

"What they are about to see comes down from the time of the beginning without change. This is the Vulcan heart. This is the Vulcan soul. This is our way. Kah-i-farr!"

Spock walked back over to the gong and picked back up the hammer, just as T'Pring was rushing over to it as well.

Then Spock threw the hammer to the ground. "Kal-if-fee!"

"T'Pring, dost thee accept challenge, according to our laws and customs?"

"I decline. The challenge would be my choice as well." Her eyes never left a Vulcan woman who stood off to the side.
"Very well," T'Pau said. "Step forward, young ones, for the dissolution of your bond."

The young couple knelt in front of her throne and she placed a hand on each of their heads. They rose almost instantly.

"T'Pring, choose thy mate," T'Pau said.

"As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I make my choice," she said. "This one."

She pointed at the woman who was obviously her girlfriend.

"T'Milu. Dost thee accept claim?"

"I accept," she said.

The women all three touched each other's meld points for a few moments. "It is done," T'Pau declared.

T'Pring grabbed her new wife around the waist and led her out of the open temple thing they were in, heading off to a small building just outside. T'Pring was half running the whole way, and got impatient halfway through, scooping her wife up to carry her inside.

"Spohkh. Choose thy mate."

"As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I make my choice," he said. He stood in front of Leonard, eyes burning with intensity. He placed a hand on the human's chest, a proprietary move if there ever was one. "This one."

"Mahkhoy. Dost thee accept claim?"

"I do," he said.

Spock touched Leonard's meld points and T'Pau connected both of them.

And then they were falling.

This meld was nothing like Spock's first meld with Leonard on Beta III. Leonard's mind was free and untethered in all its glory. It was beautiful; a perfect, exact opposite to Spock's, but not truly so different on closer examination. He was bright and shining and full of warmth and love and compassion, freely given to all who ask. A study in humanity, his emotions pure and unrestrained. Brilliance unrecognized, wit and good humor bubbling on the surface. Charm and strong values and sheer, inviolable resilience to any hardship life might throw at him. A man who refuses to be cowed.

Leonard felt his admiration-- such a pale word for what Spock was experiencing-- and his laugh jingled through the meld. He showed Spock himself through Leonard's eyes. He saw shocking, unparalleled intelligence, a sense of humor no one else knew, and the most tender gentleness towards all that Leonard had ever seen in another being. Austere, graceful beauty that knocked his breath away. A good dose of sass that Leonard loved.

T'Pau made her presence known in the meld and drew them back to the present, out of their little mutual adoration fest. She knitted their minds together efficiently, drawing them even further into each other, closer than Leonard had thought was possible. A thrill of pleasure pulsed through him at the sensation, and Spock preened.
The meld broke, and they were plunged back into the physical realm.

"The consummation chambers are otherwise occupied," T'Pau said. "Thee will have to complete thy bond elsewhere."

In light of recent events, Jim had decided he had nothing if he was nothing if he was not honest with himself. So he could freely admit that his feelings for Bones had never been *fully* platonic. A few nights of drunken sex at the Academy had fully cemented that and fueled a lot of unwanted fantasies. But Bones had always laughed it off in the morning, and Jim had joined in and agreed to write it off as one too many drinks and forget about it.

He had not forgotten about it. He had vowed never to make it weird for Bones, though. And so he had taken his pain and longing and stuffed it down deep inside himself, reminding himself firmly that Bones was his friend.

It worked really well, for the most part.

M'Benga wrote Bones and Spock off for five days of medical leave-- three for... business, and two for rest and recovery. Joanna was being bounced around between Nyota and Gaila and the Speisers, who had a little girl she was best friends with. God knows what explanation she had been given, if any.

When Bones and Spock had beamed back up, they had immediately rushed off to Spock's quarters, Spock already impatiently tearing at Bones's clothes and nipping at his skin. They hadn't left the room since.

Jim was doing fine ignoring his own pathetic misery and pretending he didn't know exactly what was happening just on the other side of his bulkhead. Really. He was fine. Spock and Bones were having a Vulcan honeymoon of sorts right next door, and Jim was fine.

Then he walked into their shared bathroom and saw Bones leaning up against the sink, buck naked, and looking completely and utterly fucked out. His head was tipped back, exposing rows and rows of hickeys and bite marks. Similar marks and bruising littered his body all over. He was slick with sweat, his hair a messy lost cause.

There was come dripping down his legs. Not that Jim noticed, but there was come dripping down his legs.

And then Bones looked at him, amber eyes searing like fire, as if he could see straight through him. Jim's mouth went dry.

"Hey, Jim," Bones said, casual as you please, as if he wasn't actively ruining Jim's life. "Sorry, I'll get on out of your way. Spock's asleep, so I figured I'd come in here to get out of the heat for a bit. Bastard's got it set to ninety degrees in there. It was at a hundred and ten earlier, then he decided it was logical to lower it for the comfort of his mate."

The last few words would have sounded mocking if he could have said them without a slight smile on his face.

"Nah, it's fine. You can stay. I'm just gonna brush my teeth anyway," Jim heard himself saying. He instantly cursed his own stupidity.

Bones replied with one of his slow, sly smiles that melted Jim's bones. "Thanks."
"No problem," he said. Bones moved away from the sink, and Jim set about brushing his teeth, studiously not looking at his friend. His married friend. "So how's the marriage going?"

See? Look how mature he was.

But Bones didn't seem to get what a great act of maturity that sentence was. "Well, Jim," he drawled. "So far we've been married for about sixteen hours, Spock hasn't returned to sanity yet, and we've been having nonstop sex."

"Ah," he squeaked.

He resolutely brushed his teeth in silence. Bones leaned back against the door to the shower and sighed.

"So you're probably the last person I should be saying this stuff to," he started. "But I'm actually worried how this is all gonna play out once pon farr is over."

"What?" Jim said. He put away his tooth brush. "What are you talking about?"

"Spock... Before, when he went blind, we talked about bonding. My last one didn't exactly work out so great," he said wryly. "And so I was a bit reluctant towards the prospect. We thought it didn't matter, because logically, Spock should have had years left before his first pon farr. I should have had years to warm up to the idea. But the Va'Pak apparently kickstarted all Vulcans' biological drives."

"So, in medbay, when Spock asked me to kill him--"

"Our resident drama queen thought he was forcing himself on me. Apparently the only logical solution was death." He rolled his eyes.

"Did Spock want a bond, earlier, before pon farr hit?"

"I don't know. He seemed to? But then, he was mostly talking about how bonds are a biological necessity. I just... I'm worried that I'm the one who forced myself on him."

Jim laughed, and he was pretty sure it didn't come out pained. "Don't be ridiculous. Spock loves you. He loves you so much it's crazy. I can't imagine him not wanting to be with you forever. And if he actually wasn't ready for marriage, well, it's a simple matter to get it reversed, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. I just-- he had to choose between marrying me and death, and he wasn't even lucid when he made that decision. I don't like the situation. And I don't like that it'll hurt him if he wants to get out of it."

"What?"

"It hurts to break a bond, Jim. It feels like someone reached into your head and tore out part of your soul. My divorce was the most physically painful thing I've gone through in my life."

"Oh," he said. "Hey. Um. So-so you don't have to answer this, I'll definitely understand if you don't want to, but... Why'd you tell me your ex-wife's name was Jocelyn?"

He hesitated. Jim was suddenly struck with how vulnerable he must feel in this moment, completely exposed physically and emotionally. Neither one of which was new for the two of them, but both at the same time seemed... intimate.
"There are things I didn't tell you, about my life back in Georgia. Things I don't really tell anybody. I wasn't a good person, Jim. I've worked hard as hell to change who I was since I was a teenager. But sometimes old habits are hard to kick. The way I was raised wasn't right."

Jim frowned. "Bones, what are you saying?"

Bones sighed, muttered a curse, staring down at the bathroom tiles. "My dad was in the HFL."

Jim froze. Then understanding lit up his face.

The Humans First League.

"So... Are you saying you were... ashamed, that your ex-wife wasn't human?"

"Jim. Think about the situation for two goddamn seconds. My dad was in the HFL and my highschool sweetheart was Vulcan. I lied. Every goddamn day for years, I lied to my parents about who I was seeing. I was fucking terrified of what they might do. Then I get a fresh start in Starfleet and I meet you and I don't know a goddamn thing about you 'cept that you're the only person there who'd give me the time of day, and we get to talking, and I call my ex-wife Jocelyn instead of T'Oseley. I didn't even think about it. Damn stupid of me. If you'd had a problem with it, I wouldn't have stuck around with you anyway. But I was just so completely alone back then, I didn't even want to find out one way or the other."

"And then the android came along," Jim said.

Bones nodded. "And then the android came along and every other human I'd gotten close to in life had turned out to be a raging bigot, so why not you too? I didn't even question it. Just figured I'd been too stubborn to notice it beforehand."

"And now?" he asked. His heart felt small and tight and sickeningly hopeful in his chest.

He missed Bones like a drowning man missed air.

Bones looked him over perusingly, assessing. "Now I'm not gonna make any assumptions. Everyone shows their true colors eventually, kid. Even you," he said. He glanced back at the door to Spock's quarters. "Spock's starting to wake up. I better get back in there before he does and sees I'm gone. He'd flip out and prolong his condition."

"Right, right," Jim said. "Well, any time you wanna talk--"

"Sure thing." The door shut behind him and Jim was alone.

Leonard could tell when the fever started to break.

Spock was thrusting into him, but it wasn't harsh or violent. His pace started to slow even as he went. Digging nails and bites became tender caresses and kisses, unspoken apologies in every move. He changed the angle, cradling Leonard to him, breathing in his scent and breathing out apologies into his skin.

"It's alright," Leonard said. "It's alright, Spock. I'm fine. You didn't hurt me. You didn't take anything I didn't give you."

"There is a bond--"

"And I wanted it," he said. "I was scared at first, but you won't hurt me, Spock. I trust you
implicitly."

"Leonard," he sobbed.

"Shh, darlin'. It's alright now. We're gonna be just fine, you hear?" He wrapped his legs around Spock's waist and drew him in closer. "Gonna be just fine."

Spock came stutteringly, and an immediate lassitude washed over his muscles. He collapsed on the bed, burying his head in his arms in apparent shame.

"Hey, now. Let's not have none of that," Leonard said, gently coaxing him to look at him. "I love you. Always will, okay? And if breaking the bond is what you want, then I'll do it in a heartbeat."

Spock just looked at him in confusion, the new emotion adding to the distress flowing through the bond.

"I realize that-- that this probably wasn't what you wanted--"

"I would not have been driven to claim you if a bond was not desired," Spock said. "My concern is solely for feelings of coercion on your part. I know you would not let me die were it at all within your power to prevent it, even at the expense of your own comfort and wellbeing."

"Well, don't you go worrying about that, Spock. It's like I said, I'm fine. It was just sudden, is all. I was never against having a bond with you, I just needed some time to get used to the idea."

"You do not hate the bond?"

"No. Why the hell would I hate the bond? The bond is just unrestricted access to you, Spock, and I happen to love you."

"I love you as well," he said. "May I kiss you?"

Leonard chuckled and leaned in to kiss him preemptively. "We're married, Spock. You can pretty much kiss me any time you like."

"I will not make you uncomfortable."

"No," he said. "You won't."

Leonard kissed him again, and they stayed like that, kissing languidly in the bed for long minutes. It was slow and sensual and caressing rather than sexual.

"I have been remiss in my duties as husband," Spock said. "Your pleasure has been neglected these past few days. I intend to make up for that, in full."

And then he did exactly that and then some and Leonard decided he could get very, very used to pon farr.

"Captain, that thing's a giant hand," Sulu said.

Kirk stared at it. For all intents and purposes, it looked like a giant, glowing green hand was reaching out to them from an uninhabited planet.

"What is it, Mr. Spock? Is it a... a hand?" he asked.
"Negative, Captain. Not living tissue."

"A trick, then? A projection?"

"Not a projection, sir. A field of energy."

It was getting closer. It was definitely trying to grab the Enterprise. God knows what would happen then.

"Hard about," Kirk ordered.

Yes, Starfleet's mission was contact with strange new worlds and civilizations. But sometimes those worlds were too strange and frankly alarming, and it was within the captain's prerogative to decide when running away was better than First Contact.

"We can't seem to get away from it," Sulu said.

"It's trying to grab us," Uhura said.

"Reverse all engines," Kirk said.

But The Hand just got closer and closer. It latched on, and the entire ship rocked.

"We're dead still, Captain," Sulu said. "Helm doesn't answer."

A disembodied, human-looking head appeared floating in space and said strange things to them. Kirk threatened it.

It then clenched its hand slightly to demonstrate its terrible power, and further demanded obedience.

"It's becoming critical, Captain! We can't handle it!" Scotty cried.

"Alright! Whatever you're doing, turn it off," Kirk said. "You win."

"Pressure is gone, Captain. Space normal on hull," Scotty said.

"That was your first lesson. Remember it. Captain Kirk, I invite you and your officers to join me. But do not bring that one, the one with the pointed ears. He is much like Pan, and Pan always bored me. No sad faces. This is a time to rejoice, not to fear. You are returning home. Let your hearts prepare to sing," he said, and then faded away.

"Let's go, Bones," Kirk said, hopping out of his chair.

"You sure this is a good idea, Jim?"

"If we don't accept his invitation, we'll have a crushed eggshell where this ship used to be," he said. He turned to Spock pointedly, awaiting his judgement.

Spock flicked his eyes to the now-blank screen. "Verbose, isn't he?"

"Insulted, Spock?" he asked.

"Insults are effective only where emotion is present," he said primly.

"Good." Jim smiled. "We'll tackle him together. We already know the questions. You're the best
man to find the answers."

He left confidently with Bones in tow.

Both Chekov and Bones were surreptitiously scanning the alien being while he monologued and Kirk asked the occasional question to steer the monologue along.

"I am Apollo," he said.

"And I am the czar of all the Russians," Chekov snorted.

"Chekov," Kirk whispered.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I never met a god before."

"And you haven't yet. Readings, Doctor?"

"Simple humanoid, Captain."

"Evidently not so simple."

And then Apollo made a pass at the A&A officer and told them they would all stay there forever in eternal worship of him.

"None of your toys will function," Apollo announced, as the away team inspected their useless phasers. He turned back to Lieutenant Palamis. "Yes. You are a beauty, but like Artemis, the bow arm should be bare."

He waved his hand and her uniform disappeared into the folded dress of the ancient Greeks, though much more revealing than anything Jim had ever seen from a genuine historical source, and also made of sparkly, bright pink fabric.

"Yes," Apollo said. He walked over to her, eyes speaking of clear intent, and took her hand. "Come."

"She's not going with you!" Scotty yelled, and rushed him.

Apollo threw up an arm and Scotty went flying backwards, thunder cracking in the sky. "He shall learn the discipline of the temple. So shall you all." He turned back to Palamis. "Come."

Jim leapt into action, but Palamis cut him off. "It's alright, Captain," she said. "I'll go."

"No," Jim said. He did not like this. He did not like some seemingly all-powerful being just coming and taking one of his officers, in a situation where consent was not asked for and would be dubious even if it was. He was holding the entire ship hostage, for crying out loud, and had shown he was perfectly okay with using violence to keep Palamis with him. He had disabled all of their tech and made sexist comments to Palamis that she had said nothing to.

Apollo had just swooped in and assumed he was entitled to her and like hell was Jim going to leave one of his officers in that position.

Apparently none of them were allowed to say no to Apollo, but he could be given another option.

"You spoke of the beauty of Earth's women," he said. "What of its men?"
Apollo turned, amused, and then looked Jim over, his gaze lingering and appreciative. And hey, Palamis was blonde and blue-eyed. Maybe Apollo had a type. Jim jutted his hips out just slightly, looking up at Apollo through half-lidded eyes.

"I have found humans to be pleasing in all of their forms," Apollo said. "There is something to be said for the virility, the strength, of a warrior man. Your form, especially, seems worthy of perusal. I should like to examine it further."

He waved his hand again and suddenly Jim was in a skimpy, short toga like he was, but made of sparkling pink fabric like Palamis's dress thing.

"You shall come with me," Apollo commanded, holding out his hand, and Jim obliged.

Jim seduced information out of their captor and then Spock effected an efficient, logical rescue from aboard the ship. Jim had the disturbing sense that that would become a pattern.

"Hey Spock, wanna play chess later?"

"Captain, why do you continue to ask me that?"

Jim was thrown for a minute, caught off guard by any response that wasn't 'negative, Captain.'

"Because I want to be your friend," he said.

"You are aware that our relationship is not the same as that of the other Kirk and Spock's?"

"Yeah, I'm aware. I'm not trying to blindly copy what they had, Spock. I want you to be my friend."

"Why?"

Jim floundered. "Well. You're... interesting. And you seem nice. And you're really smart and I think you're, um, cool." He cursed himself. He sounded like a middle schooler with a crush. Which he pretty much was, but Spock didn't need to know that. "And you're my First Officer and I think it's important that the command team aren't strangers to each other. I think we need to have a good understanding, to trust and respect each other when push comes to shove and lives depend on it. I think that's important. I think knowing you is important, to me and to the ship."

Spock considered that. "Your logic is sound," he said. "Very well."

"What?"

"I believe you asked for a game of chess, Captain. Are you not coming?"

Spock had moved into Bones and Joanna's quarters as a now permanent part of their family. Jim didn't know if he had adopted little Jojo yet. He didn't feel like he should ask.

He set up the chess board while Spock made tea and coffee. He was straightening every pawn to be in perfect alignment when Spock brought the drinks back to the table. He gave him a quick smile and a murmured thanks, and pretended the silence wasn't suffocating.

Spock made the first move and they, unsurprisingly, played in silence.

Jim was about to burst with nervous energy. This was not how he had wanted this to go.
"So anything new with the science labs?" he asked.

"Ensigns Maltrovik, Gomez, and Chen are conducting an experiment on the possible effects of ion interference in beaming technology. They expect to have their paper published within the month," he said. "In addition, Ensign Min's hypothesis was proven correct. I have recommended her for scientific commendation."

"What was her experiment on?"

"...She was studying the effects of empathic projections on plant growth. She has projected that proper application of the research can increase crop yield on colony planets by up to 14%.

"That's amazing," Jim said. "Guess that explains a lot about Betazed's agricultural history."

"Indeed. Historians are already attempting to connect periods of famine with those of political or social upheaval. The results have been mixed, however, to say the least. It is possible that smaller and more tight-knit communities, where experiences are more often shared and emotions more often unitary, will show the most extreme results. Cities are often... tumultuous."

"Ah, but cities don't have much in the way of farmland in the first place," he said. "So those small, tight-knit farming communities should probably be the baseline anyway. Hey, have you heard of Dr. Grevind's theory on social isolation in rural areas?"

"Yes, and I found it far too assumptive. She used so-called 'feral children' as an extreme example of the effects of isolation, and while it is true that it can come to that on the individual level, I believe it has absolutely nothing to do with the rise of rural subcultures."

"Yeah, that's probably true. Everybody knows everybody in a small town. It'd probably be easier to study social isolation in cities. But then, rural areas present a unique case. If someone gets expelled from their community there, they have nowhere else to turn to. Total, complete isolation, Spock." He moved a rook. "In a way, a starship is a bit like a small town. Back home, Riverside only had a few hundred more people than the Enterprise does. Dr. Grevind's work and theories could probably very easily be applied to deep-space psychology."

Spock arched an eyebrow and offered his opinions on that.

By the time Jim left his quarters, he was grinning, Spock invited him back next week.

Their next chess game proceeded much the same as the first, but they somehow ended up discussing classical literature instead. Spock, it turned out, had a secret fondness for the emotional lyricism of poetry. He liked Andorian writings and the works of pre-Reform Vulcan, which were practically impossible to find, but Spock offered to loan some of them to Jim and he practically fell at his feet in worship.

Jim was trying to sell him on either Mark Twain or Shakespeare's comedies when Bones walked in.

Bones arched an eyebrow-- how dare he-- and pulled a third seat up to the table. He studied the board, came to the conclusion that he knew nothing about chess, and then gave Spock a Vulcan kiss in greeting.

"So who's winning?" he asked.

"I am. Checkmate is in five moves," Spock said. Jim scoffed. Then he looked down at the board a bit worriedly.
Bones smirked, then looked back at the board. "You should move the horse-looking one. That pointy thing is right in front of it. I think it's in danger."

"It is not, and it has no viable moves," Spock said.

"Ah. Well, I tried," he said.

"I could teach you chess, should you desire to play."

"Oh hell no. Jim tried the exact same thing back at the Academy. I have seen how both of you play, and I'm not coming anywhere near that with a ten-foot pole."

"Bones doesn't do anything fun, Spock. He only likes Joanna and stabbing people with hypos."

"Damn straight."

"Hey, how is Joanna?"

"She's doing good. Doing great in science, but not so much with language arts. She's decided Gaila is her favorite aunt now, because she gave her Orion wine while she was babysitting and let her try on all of her clothes." He shook his head.

"How's she taking the new marriage? I mean, it's gotta be a bit of a shock. You guys have only been together for... about three months."

"Adult Vulcans do not typically court for long periods," Spock said. "Once compatibility has been assured, it is illogical to postpone bonding."

"Spock honest-to-god would have married me three months ago if I hadn't insisted on taking it slow."

"This is taking it slow?" Jim asked.

"There were mitigating circumstances," Bones said. "We took it slow-ish. Slow by Vulcan standards, at least. That's gotta count for something."

"Alright," Jim laughed. "Far be it from me to judge. You guys seem... really great together. I'm happy for you."

Jim was not happy for them; Jim was screaming inside. But he hypothetically wanted to be happy for them, and it's the thought that counts.

"You have my gratitude," Spock, seeming somewhat pleasantly surprised. Jim smiled and moved his king.

A small probe tried to kill them and very nearly succeeded before contact was made and Kirk gave the standard 'we come in peace' speech. The probe responded in kind and requested to be beamed aboard and view their star charts.

It got very excited when it realized they were from Earth.

"You are the creator, the Kirk," it said. "The sterilization procedure against your ship was unnecessary."

"What sterilization procedure?" he asked. 'Sterilization' often had bad and murder-y meanings
when translated. You could definitely never be too cautious during a First Contact, and Jim had decided to treat this as one.

"You are the creator, the Kirk," the probe repeated. "You programmed my function."

"Well, I'm not the Kirk. Tell me what's your function," McCoy said.

"This is one of your units, Creator?"

"Yes, he is," he said.

"It functions irrationally."

Jim pretended to consider that. "Sometimes," he agreed. "But tell him your function, nevertheless."

"My purpose is to probe for biological infestations, to destroy that which is not perfect. I am Nomad."

Ah. Of course. Well, this could only go horribly from here.

Jim told Lieutenant Singh to babysit the probe but it ran away the second his back was turned. It wandered onto the bridge to ask Uhura why she sang.

And then it wiped her brain and killed Scotty when he tried to defend her.

Nomad didn't appear to like Jim being upset with it and offered to 'repair' Scotty. Spock had the computer flash-read Nomad all the info on human anatomy it would need.

Nomad brought Scotty back to life but said Uhura's amnesia was permanent.

Jim put Nomad in time-out in the brig. It got bored there and broke out, killing the two redshirts who had been assigned to guard it. It continued in its eager exploration of the ship, heading down to engineering next. It decided to repair the matter/anti-matter release valve to be more efficient.

Then Nomad decided their speed was inefficient and threw them headlong into Warp 11. Kirk had to be called down personally to talk some sense into it before it blew up the ship. He was the only lifeform Nomad was willing to listen to to any extent. It apparently liked Spock, but even he couldn't get anywhere with it.

Nomad killed two more redshirts and then made allusions to returning to launch point in order to sterilize Earth. Kirk informed it that it was wrong about him being the Creator, which made it imperfect. It killed itself.

"The destruction of Nomad was a great waste, Captain. It was a remarkable instrument," Spock said.

"Which might have gone on destroy billions more lives," Kirk said. "It's good that it's gone. Besides, what are you feeling so badly about? It's not easy to lose a bright and promising son."

"Sir?"

"Well, it thought I was its mother, didn't it? Do you think I'm completely without feelings, Spock? You saw what it did for Scotty. It would've made an amazing doctor. My son, the doctor," he said.
Spock was looking at him like no one had ever said anything more illogical in the history of the universe. Jim put a hand over his heart. "Kind of gets you right here, doesn't it?"

"Y'know, my kid never murdered anybody," Bones said.

"Well, I never said Nomad was perfect, okay? It tried its best."

"Captain, it was quite stubborn and refused to listen to anybody but yourself. Towards the end, not even that," Spock said.

"Well geez, I didn't realize it was a competition," he huffed, folding his arms. "Though I guess, in a roundabout way, maybe Joanna would win."

He couldn't quite hide his grin as he said that and Bones rolled his eyes.

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Spock meditating was so abundantly peaceful that Leonard swore some of his calm washed out over the entire room. He was probably just picking up stray serenity from the bond, but still, that's what it felt like. He didn't have to do a thing himself and he would be granted almost shocking clarity of mind.

Joanna had taken to meditating along with him more and more. They had lots of quiet nights in like that, the two half-Vulcans meditating while Leonard put herculean effort into paperwork or studying the latest research. Then they would finish their meditation session, and Spock would join Leonard in his work, and Joanna would read or do her homework.

Leonard was starting to get an almost Pavlovian reaction to candlelight, to warmth, to the smell of incense.

He would not mind spending the rest of his life like this. Not one bit.

He stroked his fingers down along Spock's and placed a kiss on the top of his daughter's head and decided that this was perfection.

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A week later, Bones asked Jim to watch Joanna so he and Spock could have a date night and he was floored.

It was such a simple, little thing. But it meant too much to him to ever be said. Bones trusted him with his daughter, his daughter who was his world. A few months ago, he hadn't even wanted him to meet her. He had thought Jim was too terrifyingly xenophobic to even mention her half-Vulcan heritage. And now, he was putting his daughter in his care, even if it was only for a few hours.

Jim was floored. He was honored. He also knew a test when he saw one. And he was going to be worthy of Bones's trust.

And now he and Joanna were sitting across the former chess table, staring each other down.

Jim had no clue what the fuck he was supposed to do with her and he was pretty sure he was being judged.

"So Joanna--" he started.

"T'Jo'ni," she said.

"What?"
"You may call me T'Jo'ni," she said. "It is my Vulcan name."

"Oh. Okay," he said. "So, T'Jo'ni, how're you liking the Enterprise?"

She shrugged. "It's alright."

"By 'alright,' do you mean it's the coolest ship ever in the history of the universe?"

She gave him a dry look. Jim cleared his throat awkwardly.

Jim eventually came up with the brilliant idea to replicate watercolors and pseudo-paper. When Bones came to pick his daughter up a few hours later, he was given a stack of eight crude-but-detailed paintings.

He smiled beatifically and sat down on Jim's couch, going through the paintings one by one. Joanna excitedly explained each one and launched into her personal commentary about them, and Bones would nod along and offer his praise. She also showed them to Spock and he said 'she had great attention to detail that would serve her well in life and offered vast potential in a number of future careers.'

Joanna blushed and tried to hide a smile.

As they were leaving, Bones lingered behind, a soft smile on his face. He seemed to be smiling a lot more lately. He seemed... happier, than he had at the Academy.

"Thank you, Jim," he said. He rested a hand on his shoulder briefly, and Jim looked up at him, so damn hopeful it hurt.

"Wasn't a problem, Bones. I'll be happy to babysit for you anytime you want," he said. "T'Jo'ni's a little doll. A pistol, and just like her old man, but she's a great kid."

"Just like her old man," he repeated, teasing. "You say that like it's a bad thing, kid."

"No way, Bones. That's a compliment of the highest order."

Bones laughed, and it was almost like old times, except he looked like he wanted to touch Jim affectionately, but refrained when he never would have before. Jim swallowed and kept his smile on and showed his friend to the door.

The first thing Jim noticed in the mirror universe was that Spock looked extremely hot with a beard in an evil, pirate-y sort of way, and in his modified uniform. He wasn't going to forget about that.

The second thing he noticed was Uhura's modified uniform and the fact that she apparently had a six pack and was hotter and superior to him in every way.

Just when he was thinking that maybe this was all a wet dream, Spock decided that the landing party's rough beam-up was unacceptable and calmly stated this. The transporter tech started begging, fumbling for his words and pleading for mercy, and Spock ignored it all, completely unfazed. He attached a device to his chest and pushed him up against the wall even as he was electrocuted, even as he cried out in pain and whimpered and fell to the floor in a heap.

The first thing that mirror Kirk did when he arrived in the wrong universe was order Sulu to program a phaser barrage of Halkan cities. The second thing he did was grab Spock and kiss him
roughly, then slap him across the face.

"Who the fuck told you you could shave your beard?" he asked. "I like the way it feels against my skin. Agonizer, now."

Spock stepped back abruptly, and Kirk's eyes darkened even further. "Sir?"

"I gave you an order, Commander. Hand over your agonizer. I'm gonna put it on your chest and keep it there until you finally scream."

"Lieutenant Kyle, call for--"

Kirk shoved him. "You think this is some sort of a fucking joke? I oughta throw you in the booth! When I tell you to do something, you do it, Spock."

Spock reached up and instantly neck pinched them. The other members of the landing party all tensed up and reached instinctively for weapons that were not there.

"Lieutenant Kyle," Spock said. "Alert security. The captain has been replaced with a duplicate, possibly the other members of the away team as well. I want them all thrown into the brig until the situation is clear and resolved."

McCoy ran his thumb over Kirk's bottom lip, and he repressed a shiver. "What's this?"

"It's called blood," Jim said. "Watch your step. The officers move up by assassination. Chekov tried it on me."

"Mr. Sulu is Security Chief, and he runs it like the ancient Gestapo," Scotty said.

"And my sickbay is a chamber of horrors," Leonard said. "Two of my assistants were betting on the tolerance of an injured man, how long it would take him to pass out from the pain."

Jim grimaced. "Report on technology."

"Mostly variations in instrumentation. Nothing I can't handle," Scotty said.

"Star readings?"

"Everything's exactly where it should be, except us."

"Let's find out where we stand," he said, sitting down at his desk. His quarters had the exact same layout in this universe, but they were decorated sort of like a doctor's office, in shades of spring green and with the occasional potted plant. Decidedly weird. "Computer."

"Ready," it said, in a synthesized 'male' voice. Jim frowned. He didn't even have his flirty, inappropriately affectionate female computer system in this universe? God, this Kirk must have no fun.

He interrogated the boring, correctly-functioning computer. It confirmed what they had already suspected: transporter accident in an ion storm landed them in an alternate universe.

Then he found out more, things he wished he hadn't.

This Kirk had killed Pike to gain command. He had committed genocide against the Gorlan people, destroying their planet the way Vulcan had been destroyed. He had killed 5000 colonists on Vega
IX, and Jim cut the computer off there. He didn't need to know any more. This Kirk of this universe was another Nero, Kodos, Khan. Executioner of untold millions, destroyer of worlds, harbinger of destruction. He was a monster.

Kirk felt something go sick inside him at the idea that that was a possibility for himself.

He wondered how much damage the other Kirk was doing back on his ship. God, the racist android had been bad enough, but now a genocidal maniac from an alternate universe? At least Bones would know the truth.

And you know, maybe Spock was just destined to hate him.

Marlena-- Jim's woman, apparently-- walked over to a wall panel and touched it seemingly at random. It slid up to reveal a hole in the wall, containing a small screen and some controls.

"I hate this thing," she said.

"It's not that bad," Jim said. Whatever it was, it seemed pretty important to his alternate self. He should probably appear to like it.

"Of course not. It made you captain. How many enemies have you simply wiped out of existence with the touch of a button? Fifty? A hundred?" She laughed. "Now, I always thought that was funny: the great powerful Captain Kirk, who owes everything to some unknown alien scientist and a plundered laboratory."

"Well, if you don't take advantage of your opportunities..."

"You don't rise to the command of a starship," she finished. "Or even higher."

She arched an eyebrow, and Jim had the sudden, horrifying insight that she looked like a female version of Spock. The sharp, angular features. Dark eyes and jet-black hair. Hell, she was even wearing science blues.

The other Kirk had it bad. And apparently if he couldn't have Spock, he had found the next best thing. It was... a strange situation. Jim had gotten the distinct impression that ranking officers on this ship often ordered subordinates to their bed, and he certainly wouldn't put it past his counterpart. But if the way Spock had threatened him a few minutes ago was any indication and then warned him about the kill order, he didn't feel one way or the other about the whole situation, couldn't care less about Kirk as long as he stayed alive in order to maintain the status quo.

Jim just wanted to leave, to get out of this place and forget it even existed. He wanted to crawl into Bones's bed and let the other man hold him while he slept for days, the way they had done on bad days back at the Academy. He wanted to inhale his scent, woody but with that trace of formaldehyde that never went away, and feel his arms around him and let the sense of utter safety wash over him.

He wanted a drink.

Marlena expertly queued up the controls, and an image of Spock sitting at his desk appeared on the screen. "That magnificent mind of his. But it can't protect him from this." She twirled her finger over a large button. "I press it and he dies. Now?"

Jim lashed out and grabbed her arm to pull it back. His heart was beating a mile a minute. He turned off the device forcefully.
Evil alternate version or no, no one was killing any Spocks on his watch.

Marlena arched an eyebrow again, and Jim decided he absolutely hated the gesture on her. "You really mean it. Huh."

Jim was messing around with the transporter controls when the doors whooshed open.

"You'll please restrict your movements, Captain," Spock said. Jim didn't have to look to know he had a phaser drawn, and he didn't have to see the settings to know it was on kill.

Spock stepped over to him and plucked the weapons from his belt. "What are you doing?"

"Are you gonna shoot me now, Spock? I thought I had 'til dawn."

"I shall make that decision," he said. "Since your return from the planet, you have behaved in a most atypical and illogical manner. I want to know why."

"Shoot me. You're wasting time."

"I shall not waste time with you. You're too inflexible, too disciplined once you've made up your mind. But Dr. McCoy has a plenitude of human weaknesses-- sentimental, soft. You may not tell me what I want to know, but he will."

That was definitely a threat and yeah, shoot Jim now. Apparently even in an evil alternate universe, Bones was still a good, kind man. Whereas Jim was some sort of tyrant dictator who proudly committed mass murders on the regular.

Jim wanted to leave.

"You're running a big risk, Spock."

"I have the phaser, Captain, and I do not intend to simply disappear as so many of your opponents have in the past. If you please, medbay."

Spock walked in, the phaser still at Jim's back, and looked at the three other occupants of the room.

"Yes, of course. The entire landing party," he said. "Captain, stand over there. Doctor, it is time for answers."

Jim whirled and punched him.

Spock took on all four of them at once and they were only able to keep the fight going by continually distracting him with their numbers, before Kirk got lucky and slammed a ceramic something down on his head, knocking him out. McCoy knelt down next to him.

"Help me get him on the table," he said. Nobody moved. "Well, come on! Help me get him on the table. He'll die without immediate treatment."

They did.

"Come on, McCoy. We're taking a chance of not getting back home," Scotty said. They had less than fifteen minutes before the universes closed themselves off again for at least the rest of the century.
"We'll get home," Bones said. He was simultaneously scanning and reading the monitor. "This won't take long."

"Fourteen minutes. We've got to go!" Scotty said.

"Will you shut up? I can save his life," he said. "Do you want me to stop, Jim? It'll only take a minute."

He shook his head. "You've got that minute."

"A little time, he'll live."

Sulu walked in with three security officers then. He informed them that Spock will succeed in killing Kirk, as Kirk will kill Spock in the resulting fierce battle. And then, alas, Sulu will be captain.

Jim could honestly go the rest of his life without ever hearing the phrase 'Captain Sulu' again.

Then the security officers disappeared one by one until only Sulu remained. He brandished his dagger like it was a sword. Taking him out was easy after that.

"Cap'n, we've barely got ten minutes!" Scotty shouted.

"Let's go, Bones," he said, taking his friend by the arm. Bones shrugged him off.

"I can't let him die, Jim. Look, you get down to the transporter room. Make sure it's clear. I'll be there in five minutes."

"No longer," he said.

"I guarantee it."

Jim gave him one last lingering touch on the arm, and then he led the others out.

Leonard injected Spock with a hypo, keeping a close eye on the read-outs. So he didn't notice when his eyes open.

His wrist was suddenly ensnared in a vice-like grip. "Why did the captain let me live?"

Leonard said nothing, and Spock kept backing him up until he was against a wall. He shoved his free hand onto Leonard's meld points.

"Our minds are merging, Doctor. Our minds are one. I feel what you feel. I know what you know."

They were already practically chest to chest, but then Spock leaned in further. He pressed into him and bit at his lips, ravaging through his mind as he did so, taking what he would and absorbing it all, relishing it. He had dreamed of doing this for so long, but the McCoy of his universe was far too paranoid to ever be alone in a room with Spock.

This human was not the one he truly desired, but he was close enough and his mind was delicious. The human was terrified, stiff and paralyzed with fear against him. Perfect, too scared to resist.

Spock finally pulled back and gave him a slight smirk. "You are so very good, Leonard."

He continued to hold onto him as he led him to the transporter room. Leonard was numb and silent the entire time.
"What I don't understand is how you were able to identify our counterparts so quickly," Jim said.

In truth, he was practically bursting with pride at the idea that Spock had recognized the difference between him and his evil counterpart almost instantly. He had been so sure that he would return to his own universe only to face a repeat of the android debacle. Spock had caught on this time. He hadn't expected Jim to behave like the scum of the Earth, and had recognized that that was irregular.

It was so utterly implausible to assume that he had been replaced with an evil version of himself for a second-- no, third, technically-- time, and yet Spock had jumped straight to that conclusion. Hadn't assumed he was just in a foul mood or having an off day or even infected with alien spores. No, he had instantly known that this was not Jim Kirk.

Jim was going to be brimming with happiness and pride over it for at least a solid week. He felt like he was on cloud nine right now.

He felt like he was getting somewhere. Like he finally had proof that he was getting somewhere. Earning Spock's trust, making him see him as at least a fairly decent person.

"It was far easier for you, as civilized people, to behave like barbarians than it was for them, as barbarians, to behave like civilized people. I assume they returned to their Enterprise at the same time you appeared here?" Spock said.

"Probably. However, that Jim Kirk will find a few changes, if I read my Spocks correctly."

"Jim, I think I liked him with a beard better. It gave him character. Of course, almost any change would be a distinct improvement," McCoy said, just a little bit too fast.

"What worries me is the easy way his counterpart fitted into that other universe. Of course, I always thought Spock was a bit of a pirate at heart," Jim said, grinning.

"Indeed, gentlemen. May I point out that I had an opportunity to observe your counterparts here quite closely? They were brutal, savage, unprincipled, uncivilized, treacherous-- in every way, splendid examples of homo sapiens, the very flower of humanity," Spock said. "I found them quite refreshing."

Jim opened his mouth, closed it. Paused. "I'm not sure, but I think we've just been insulted."

"I'm sure," McCoy said. Spock arched an eyebrow at his husband.

Leonard had resolved not to mention it. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't anything Spock needed to concern himself with. It would just drive him crazy with guilt, and that was stupid, and Leonard didn't want that.

Naturally, it came up anyway, and in the stupidest way possible.

Spock was pressing him down into the bed, biting and nipping at his lips, and Leonard closed his eyes because it would be fine this way, really. He brought a hand up to cup Spock's jaw, to remind himself of who he was with.

"Envisioning a beard?" Spock asked, and Leonard gave a short, brittle laugh.

"It did make you look all kinds of devilish, Spock," he said. "But I gotta say, I prefer my
hobgoblins clean-shaven."

"Good," he said. "As I prefer my doctors naked."

He tugged up at his shirt and yanked it off of him, tossing it carelessly across the room. They made quick work of each other's clothes after that, and then Leonard rolled them over so their positions were reversed and he was on top. He gave Spock a dangerous, challenging grin, then bent down and sucked a nipple into his mouth. Spock arched up into the touch, one of his hands coming up to the side of Leonard's head, resting near his ear.

Leonard froze ice cold and went completely still and tense.

Spock pushed his shoulders back immediately. "Ashayam? What is wrong?"

"Ah, nothing, it's just... It's nothing."

But Spock ignored that and pulled away out from underneath him, sitting back up on the bed. Leonard sighed. Great. Just great.

"Something is wrong," Spock insisted. "You are frightened. My actions have caused you fear. I can feel it through the bond."

Stupid bond, Leonard thought, but regretted it instantly as he felt Spock's dejection through said bond. It was quickly clamped down on, of course. But not quite quick enough.

"Spock, I don't hate the bond, okay? Stop worrying. I just don't want to talk about this."

"Talk about what?"

"Well clearly, I don't want to talk about it, Spock, so I'd appreciate it if you'd shut up and respect that," he snapped. "Sorry. It's just... How about we just go to bed, okay?"

"Leonard, I would like to know what is troubling you," he said. "If I must wait, then so be it. But may I suggest that it might be easier if we were to engage in a meld?"

"No!" he shouted. "I, uh... No melds. Um. Not right now, anyway."

Spock looked so damn concerned and hesitant and unsure of himself.

"It's nothing, Spock, really. I've just had a long day. It was a weird mission, to say the least. Let's just go to bed and forget about it. We can talk about things later."

"If that is what you wish."

"It is." He forced a weak smile, stroking two of Spock's fingers with his own. Spock still looked at him uncertainly, but he reached down and pulled back the covers for them to crawl in.

Leonard held his husband close and tried to will himself into calmness.

Jim knocked on the door to Gaila's quarters. It opened almost instantly, but she looked instantly guarded and wary when she caught sight of him.

"Hey," he said. "You don't have to invite me in, don't worry. I just wanted to give you these."

He held out a plate wrapped in tin foil and she took it hesitantly.
"They're Orion cookies. I baked them myself, they're not replicated or anything. I'm not sure how good they turned out, though," he said. "It's a peace offering. I'm-- I'm really sorry for everything involving the android. It was shitty of me to do that to you, to everyone. I really didn't need to make the thing racist. I should've put in a different flaw, that wouldn't hurt all my friends in the process. So I'm sorry."

He gave her a wry smile and walked away before she felt obligated to answer.

Spock was not a fool. He was perfectly capable of observing discrete facts and finding a connection between them, and from there, drawing a logical conclusion.

His mate returned from a parallel universe where he interacted with another version of himself. Upon his return, Leonard exhibited acute distress when Spock touched the side of his face. His distress turned to outright panic when Spock suggested a meld.

It was clear to him what had happened.

His counterpart was very lucky indeed that the barriers between universes prevented Spock from reaching him.

Leonard had been wary of Spock's telepathy even before this. Pain and violation at the hands of another telepath-- a stranger with his husband's face, no less-- was the last thing he needed. Spock felt sick, knowing that his mate had been used in such a way, knowing that he carried the memory of such trauma.

Leonard did not speak of it, even in the barest of allusions, and Spock was loathe to bring it up. His mate seemed determined to carry on as before, as if nothing had happened and he was completely unaffected, when Spock knew for a fact that this was not true.

A week passed, and then half of another. They ate dinner together with perfect joviality and normalcy, and then T'Jo'ni left to go play with her friends for a few hours, and she took the lighthearted mood with her, leaving the table feeling oddly somber and dark.

Spock set his fork down, incapable of eating any more. "There is a Vulcan technique called Fulara," he said. "It is ancient, little used in modern times, but I am easily capable of employing it. It is the complete removal of a memory, along with all emotions connected to it."

Leonard just stared at him.

The table was silent for long minutes, and Spock felt like he was failing, like he had somehow managed to ruin the best thing that had ever happened to him. He was completely inept in the handling of his bondmate's trauma. Leonard would not even speak to him about it. Perhaps they had moved things too fast. Spock was fully aware of his mate's unpleasant experiences with Vulcan telepathy, and they had been forced by circumstance to rush into a bond that Leonard had not felt ready for. And now, with his new trauma, he would likely want it removed, and that would cause him even more pain.

Spock was failing him, had failed him, and he felt it keenly.

"I don't want that," Leonard said. "Good or bad, my feelings are my own. They're what makes me who I am. I don't want anyone going into my brain and snipping out parts of my life and my experiences just 'cause they aren't the greatest. Feels too much like mind control to me. I need to rest assured that all my mental faculties are in order, that I can trust my perceptions and my judgement. That the way I remember my life playing out is the way it actually happened, with no
interference, no alterations to affect my decisions or what sort of person I am."

"Of course," Spock said, shame coursing through him. "I apologize."

Leonard waved that off. "It was just a suggestion. You just wanted to help. I get that."

"I realize it is not my place, but..."

"You're my husband, Spock, it's not out of line for you to offer ideas. Spit it out."

"Perhaps seeing a therapist would be beneficial," he said. "There are a number of highly qualified psychological counselors within your department. Dr. Singh is an expert in traumatic counseling and has received many awards and commendations for her work."

He fell silent again.

Spock pushed a bit further. "I know it is what you would recommend for one of your own patients."

Leonard nodded. "You're right," he said. "You're absolutely right, Spock. Okay. I'll go talk to Dr. Singh tomorrow."

Spock's breath left him in a sudden gush of relief and gratitude. He held out two fingers across the dinner table, and Leonard met them with a small, soft smile.

Jim had no clue what was going on. He knew that Bones had been jumpier lately, nervous almost. Spock had been acting weird too. For a few days there, he had been practically connected to Bones's hip, weirdly gentle with him and overly protective, not even getting in any of their usual arguments. It had resulted in Bones being extra prickly and snapping at everybody and trying his damnedest to get a rise out of Spock, who refused to take the bait.

That behavior continued for four days before it stopped suddenly, Spock going back to normal and Bones too, subsequently. Everyone was relieved. Jim figured Bones had finally told Spock to knock it off.

Jim knew something was going on, but he didn't know what, and he wasn't sure he had the right to ask.

So for now, he worried from a distance. He offered his friendship and babysitting services, easy jokes and banter on the bridge. He still didn't hang out in medbay anymore, or take his meals in the mess. But he thought he was getting there. He was earning his crew's trust back, earning Spock and Bones's trust back.

He worried and he watched Bones and he wished he already had it, wished he had so much more.

Gamma Trianguli VI was apparently a paradise world that contained flowers that shot poisonous darts. Hendorff was killed within three minutes of beam-down.

Then Spock picked up a strange rock and gushed about how interesting its mineral composition was. He broke it in half easily to examine its cleavage, and tossed one half away.

The rock exploded on contact with the ground.

"Would you mind being careful where you throw your rocks, Mr. Spock?" Jim teased.
"Obviously highly unstable, Captain. This could be a find of some importance. In large quantities, it could be a considerable source of power," Jim's favorite nerd said.


Spock set the other half of the rock down carefully.

"What's that?" Jim asked.

"Some of the thorns like those that killed Hendorff," Bones said. "See the stuff on the end? It's like Saplin, only it's 1000 times stronger."

"Peculiar stuff to find in paradise."

"Jim!"

Spock shoved Jim into Bones, subsequently pushing both of them out of the way. A spray of thorns stuck out of the center of his chest.

"Spock!"

His eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed to the ground.

The entire away team rushed to him, Jim and Bones kneeling, one on each of his sides. "Security alert," Jim snapped, and his crew dispersed. Leonard was already readying a hypo from his medkit.

"Is he alive?" Jim asked tersely.

Leonard stuck the hypo in Spock's arm and depressed it with a hiss.

"I filled him with enough Massoform D to make the whole crew turn handsprings, and he's not responding. We've got to get him back to the ship, Jim."

He whipped out his comm. "Kirk to Enterprise."

The transporter was out. Beam up was impossible. Jim refrained from cussing Scotty out solely because it hadn't been his fault and he was the only one who had any hope of fixing it.

He restricted himself to swearing up and down in his head and cursing Gamma Trianguli VI to hell and back.

And then, miraculously, Spock sat up, seeming completely fine and like himself again.

"Are you alright?" Jim asked.

"Dr. McCoy's potion is acting like all of his potions-- turning my stomach. Other than that, I am quite well."

"Well, if it weren't for your damn complicated hybrid physiology, you wouldn't have an upset stomach. Can't use Vulcan or human medicines on you," Leonard said, apparently satisfied that he was fine. Jim had a moment of blinding jealousy over their psychic bond. They could just know how the other was feeling, as easily as they could interpret their own body's signals.

"Just what do you think you were trying to do?" Jim asked.
"I surmised that you were unaware of that plant, so I--"

"Stepped in front and took the thorns yourself," he accused.

"I assure you, Captain, I had no intention of doing that. It was merely my own clumsiness which prevented me from moving out of the way."

Uh-huh, and now Spock was blaming his nonexistent 'clumsiness' instead of his obvious martyr complex.

"I see. Well next time, just yell. I can step out of the way as quickly as the next man."

Spock nodded agreeably. "I shall do so."

"Trying to get yourself killed. You know how much Starfleet has invested in you?" he asked, because he was still pissed.

"122,22--"

"Nevermind!" he said. He let out a shaky breath. Bones gently helped Spock to his feet. "But... thanks."

Mallory stepped on one of the bomb-rocks, and they didn't get to him in time.


"Jim, you couldn't have stopped any of this," Bones said.

"His father helped me get into the Academy," he continued. He walked away from the rest of his landing party, and Spock followed.

"Captain," he said. "In each case, this was unavoidable."

He shook his head. "I could've prevented all of it."

"I fail to see how."

"A walk in paradise, among green grass and the flowers. I should've beamed up at the first sign of trouble."

"You are under orders to investigate this planet and this culture."

"I also have the option to disregard those orders if I consider them overly hazardous," he said. "This isn't that important a mission, Spock. Not worth the lives of three of my officers. I drop my guard for a minute because I like the smell of nature, and now three people are dead, you almost were too, and the ship's in trouble."

"No one has ever stated that Starfleet duty was particularly safe. You have followed the correct and logical course, done everything a commander could do. Self-recreminations--"

He never finished that sentence, instead alerting Jim that he could sense one of the natives watching them. Spock can always tell when he's being watched, it's come up on multiple missions. He can somehow sense it in a way that humans can't. Jim suspects that he's able to feel the presence of nearby minds.
He had Spock and Chekov create a diversion and snuck around, giving the spy a surprise punch. But then the native just started crying silently, eyes fixed down on the ground and reminding Jim of a child being abused and just enduring it, and wow, he felt like shit now. He immediately started apologizing and saying he won't hurt the man again, he promises.

Spock also got zapped walking into a force field and then struck by lightning before that mission ended. Almost the entirety of his back was covered in second degree burns. Bones didn't have a regen in his medkit, so he did what he could, but mostly Spock just had to suffer.

Then Kirk violated the hell out of the Prime Directive and destroyed Vaal, who was a god to the natives.

Jim crawled out of a Jefferies tube later and caught the tail end of a conversation just outside of medbay.

"Well, I don't agree with you at all, Spock."

"That is not unusual, Doctor."

"Hey, Jim! I want you to hear this," Bones called out, and his two blues fell into step with him.

"Captain, I am not at all certain we did the correct thing on Gamma Trianguli VI," Spock said.

"We put those people back on a normal course of social evolution," Bones insisted. "I see nothing wrong in that."

"Well, it's a good object lesson, Spock. An example of what can happen when a machine becomes too efficient, does too much work for you."

"Captain, you are aware of the biblical story of Genesis."

"Yeah. I know that Adam and Eve ate an apple and were driven out of paradise for it."

"Precisely, Captain, and in a manner of speaking, we have given the people of Vaal the apple-- the knowledge of good and evil, if you will-- as a result of which they too have been driven out of paradise."

Jim stopped in the middle of the hallway. "Bones, am I hearing this right?" He put an offended hand on his chest. "Are you casting me in the role of Satan?"

"I believe there is a human saying: if the shoe fits--"

"Is there anyone on this ship," Jim said loudly, speaking over him, "who even remotely looks like Satan?"

Both humans circled around him, and Spock folded his arms. "I am not aware of anyone who fits that description, Captain."

"No, Spock, of course you aren't. As you were."

He grinned and walked away. Bones lingered for a moment. "Don't take it too hard, Spock," he teased. "He likes 'em a bit devilish." He tweaked a pointed ear and leaned in close. "So do I."

It wasn't clear when things had changed between them. Jim doubted that any of the three of them
could pinpoint when, exactly, that change had taken place. Maybe Spock knew, or would know hypothetically, if he had a better understanding of how humans and their emotions worked.

Somehow, a working lunch with his senior officers gradually turned into a genuine social invite for Jim to join them. Jim was added into Joanna's regular rotation of babysitters. Chess with Spock and drinks with Bones merged fluidly into Jim's first poker game in months when time got away from them and he was still there when Scotty and Sulu showed up. It happened two more times after that before Jim was hesitantly given a real invite to the weekly poker matches.

Gaila was there, for his first real game, and they didn't speak to each other directly, but she slowly relaxed and they both participated in the group conversation. Nyota only called him an asshole for various things twice, creamed them all at poker, and then asked casually if he was coming to the next game too.

She stopped by his quarters the next day and said that he had done good, but if he hurt her friends again, she'll never forgive him.

The ship was starting to feel like home again and the ever-present loneliness wasn't soul-crushing anymore. Jim felt lighter and more hopeful than he had in months. He could do this. Really.

He saw Spock let Joanna examine him while she played doctor with her daddy's antique tools and borrowed lab coat, and his heart clenched. He ignored it firmly.

Leonard was not a stupid man, nor was he unobservant.

He probably figured it out before Spock did.

He saw the longing looks on the bridge. Jim had always been like that, that was nothing new. But Spock returning those looks was.

Leonard didn't doubt his husband's love for him, or his loyalty. Not once. He could feel it every second of the day, pouring through the bond, how much Spock loved him. But he felt his feelings for Jim too, and they could hardly be called platonic. He wondered if Spock realized.

He saw Spock watching him too, watching him call Jim 'kid' and understand him easily in a way no one else did and touch him with casual affection. Leonard hadn't realized how often he did that until Spock noticed, and it made him notice too. He touched Jim almost whenever he was near, which was quite often.

He supposed it wouldn't be fair to force Spock to admit anything if he wasn't willing to be honest with himself first. So he took a good hard look at how he regarded Jim.

Leonard may be old (though Spock insisted 32 was not old by the standards of either of their species) but he wasn't dead, alright? And he could freely admit that Jim was easy on the eyes. And yeah, he was attracted to him. A handful of drunken nights at the Academy had more than confirmed that. But almost everyone who met Jim was attracted to him, and this was such common knowledge that Leonard hadn't thought anything of it.

Leonard had always given Jim an easy out on the morning after because, well, Leonard had been drunk and lonely, and Jim had been drunk and had no standards. Seriously. The first year Leonard had known him, Jim had bragged about never having had a bad date, with his only criterion for a good first date being that it ended in sex, no matter how horribly the rest of the night had gone. It was sad. Kid didn't have many second dates.
Leonard liked to think the change in pattern in the next two years was due to a growing sense of self-esteem, but then, you can never really know with Jim.

Either way, the kid had broadcasted loud and clear that sex with him hadn't meant anything, and so Leonard always wrote it off the next morning for both of their sakes. Calling it a drunken mistake that'll never happen again and meant nothing got harder and harder as it just kept happening, no matter what Leonard swore to himself after every time, but Jim apparently didn't see any problem with that.

Kid was clearly new to this whole 'feelings' business. He could give Spock a run for his money.

Dimwits, the both of them, and they'll be the death of Leonard.

So he thinks about it and he thinks about how much it sucked when he wasn't speaking to Jim and he thinks about how his perceived betrayal had felt a lot similar to his divorce-- minus the searing physical agony of a broken bond that landed him in the hospital for a week, of course. And he thinks about it, and about how nice it would be to have Jim around even more, about those times they had shared a bed after one of his nightmares and Leonard learned that Jim was just the cuddliest little thing and that was... nice, about how soft his hair is and how blue his eyes are, about how he inspired Leonard so much that he followed him out to the stars, about how wrecked he would be without him.

He remembers holidays spent in their shared dorm room, drinking and pretending they weren't two miserable souls, alike in their loneliness.

He remembers being dubbed 'Bones' and given a new name to match his new life.

He remembers Jim moaning that confounded nickname and the sound he makes when he comes.

He thinks of the way Jim looks at Spock and wonders how long the kid's been looking at him that way too, how long Leonard has missed this for.

He meets Spock's eyes, both of them standing on their respective sides of the captain's chair while Jim blathers on about how cool space is. Neither of them say anything, not even through the bond, but they both agree they have to talk.

Leonard already knows exactly how that talk's gonna go. It's not even a decision, really.

Spock and Leonard have a plan.

It's not much of a plan, really, Leonard is no tactician and Spock knows nothing of wooing. It's more of a general idea of what they want and a strong urge to do something about it. It could be worse, though, and at least they have that.

They probably should have discussed it a bit more, but what really happened was they each said their piece, Leonard proposed a solution, Spock eagerly agreed, and then they had really happy, excited sex.

The plan's ambiguity made it remarkably easy to implement.

Spock found Jim in the observation deck and they watched the stars whiz by. They spoke of particle physics and warp theory and science so theoretical it was borderline convoluted for hours.

Leonard made a faux-casual comment how he's really been slacking off in his annoyance of the
medical department lately. He asked if he had to drag Jim down for a physical for him to deign to drop by. His presence in medbay became regular again, and Jim spent the rest of the day with a skip in his step.

Spock brought Jim a brownie for lunch, saying that Nyota had baked him a batch and he wanted to share them with him. There was a moment where Spock almost fed him a bite, but Jim grabbed the fork himself at the last second.

Leonard lets Jim hang out in his office and they knock back drinks and Leonard opens up about his life back in Georgia, about his previous marriage, about all those things he was so scared to tell Jim at first but seem so stupid now.

Joanna braids flowers into Jim's hair everywhere she possibly can one day, and he proudly leaves them in for the rest of the afternoon. Leonard laughs when he sees him, calls him a fairytale prince and dramatically kisses his hand, but the way his eyes look reminds Jim of the meeting in the bathroom during Spock's pon farr.

Jim decimated Spock in a chess match where Bones had habitually distracted Spock by playing with his hand, keeping him in a perpetual green blush as Bones teased him and Spock put a valiant effort into pretending to pay attention to the game. They either thought that Jim didn't understand the gesture or that he didn't care. Jim had let Bones walk in on him having sex at the Academy countless times, though, so it was most likely he thought Jim didn't care.

Maybe this was revenge.

Bones caught Jim's eye, smirked a bit, and ran his nails over Spock's sensitive fingers, making him give a quiet gasp and arch straighter in his seat. Jim's jaw dropped.

He was being played. Bones fucking knew exactly what he was doing, that asshole.

He captured Spock's king two moves later and made his excuses, bolting out of there.

Jim had a problem.

He paced the length of his quarters, stopping periodically to drink crappy synthehol. He wished desperately he had something stronger, but his stash had run out long ago and he had just been drinking with Bones ever since.

Okay. So, he was pretty sure Bones had done that intentionally. He knew it would arouse Jim. But why the fuck would he want that?

Scenario 1: He wanted Jim to be attracted to him. Bones is a cheating bastard.

Scenario 2: He wanted Jim to be attracted to Spock, who was the one actually put on display in that moment. Somewhat fucked up and completely illogical, makes no sense.

Scenario 3: He knew Jim was attracted to one or both of them and was mocking him, rubbing their relationship in his face. Outright malicious, but understandable, at least.

Honestly, not a single one of them sounds like something Bones would do. He's a good person, through and through. He would never cheat, and he isn't needlessly cruel. He doesn't need to warn Jim off. Jim would never make a move on either of them. He would never try to come between his two best friends like that.
But does Bones know that?

The planet was covered in mountains with strange, sheer valleys and inexplicable fog everywhere. Practically a labyrinth of rock.

Then the ghostly emanations of three witches appeared floating in the air and started wailing. Floating heads, really, with faces aged and gnarled with strange protrusions, their hair straw-like and horribly tangled.

"Captain Kirk!" all three of them wailed.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Go back! Go back! Remember the curse! Wind shall rise and fog descend so leave here, all, or meet your end."

They cackled and disappeared in the mist.

"Spock," Jim said. "Comment."

"Very bad poetry, Captain."

"A more useful comment, Mr. Spock."

"What we've just seen is not real."

Jim looked up at him sharply. "That's useful."

"However, on Asmet 24, at just over 100 meters, there are definitely lifeforms. Erratic, confused, but definitely registering."

"Then that's where we go."

They found a castle that was only probably real. They went inside, and suddenly they were chained up in a dimly-lit dungeon with a skeleton, and then just as suddenly they were in a strange throne/dining room with a being named Korob and a cat he treated like a person.

"That cat," Leonard said.

"Yeah. That cat," Jim said.

"There are ancient Earth legends about wizards and their familiars," Spock said.

"Familiars?" Bones asked.

"Demons in animal form sent by Satan to serve the wizard," he explained.

"Superstition," Jim said.

"I do not create the legend, Captain. I merely report it."

Korob made his presence known again from across the room. "You are the different one, Mr. Spock. You do not think like the others. There are no colors to your patterns of logic. There's only black and white. You see all this around you, and you do not believe."
"He doesn't know about trick-or-treat," Bones said.

"I do not understand that reference, therefore it also is of no importance," Korob said. "Gentlemen, I can be most hospitable."

He tapped his wand to the table, and it lit up with a flash, and a full banquet appeared.

In a completely transparent move, the cat left the room through a doorway that a woman appeared in seconds later. She was clothed all in shimmering black and wore the same crystal necklace the cat had had as a collar.

"Gentlemen, my colleague Sylvia," Korob said. Sylvia introduced herself, greeting each of them in turn.

"You wanted to know what we did to your men," she said. "Actually it's a simple matter for us to probe the minds of creatures like yourself."

"Mind probing?" Spock asked. "Hypnosis?"

"You like to think of yourselves as complex creatures, but you're flawed. One gains admittance to your minds through many levels. You have too many to keep track of yourselves. There are unguarded entrances to any human mind."

"Telepathy," Spock clarified.

"No, telepathy doesn't imply control, and I assure you that I have full control over your friends."

"I would advise you to cooperate, Captain," Sylvia said. "Forcible extraction of the information we wish from you is not complicated, but it is extremely painful, and it has a certain draining effect."

"We have nothing to discuss," he said.

"Take them to their cell," Korob said. Scotty readily took a phaser from him, turning it onto the rescue party. The three of them started to walk out.

"Wait," Sylvia said. "The doctor will stay."

Spock went completely still and Kirk walked towards in a way distinctly threatening.

"Your turn will be next, Captain. It makes little difference," she said. "Take them out of here."

Spock gave his husband one last look as Scotty and Sulu ushered them out. The bond was thrumming with mutual panic, Leonard's distinctly sharper and edging towards too sharp. Spock projected wave after wave of reassurance and love and safety, giving rapid-fire instructions on rudimentary shielding techniques. He cursed himself for not teaching his mate this earlier, for leaving defenseless against such an attack a second time.

Leonard looks terrified as Spock is forced out and he hates himself, knows he has failed as a mate.

Jim got ahold of Korob's wand and smashed it. Everything vanished.

So the castle hadn't been real, after all.
Bones, Sulu, and Scotty's minds returned to them, as if nothing had happened, as if they hadn't been reduced to perfectly obedient, empty husks just minutes ago.

Sylvia and Korob were tiny bird-like creatures and they fried on the rocks within minutes.

Spock spent hours and hours and hours teaching Leonard how to shield the next week, until his mental barriers were impenetrable, unassailable. It was slow going. One or both of them stormed out of the room no less than five times. There were two days when they both flat-out refused to speak to each other.

But it got done and they worked it out and Leonard's shields could rival any Vulcan's. He took his trauma and he buried it, kept it locked up behind a shield that he would never, ever let down.

Spock was dismayed. He supposed he should have expected this. But if this was how Leonard desired to employ his new skill, then so be it. That was his choice. Spock would never dare to voice any objections. Of all things, Leonard needed his mental privacy respected.

And Spock held on to the hope that he would trust him fully with that one day.

Jim didn't know about the incident in the mirror universe with the alternate Spock.

He knew that Bones was acting strange again. That both he and Spock had withdrawn. That the last mission and the mind-wiping had affected Bones in a way that it hadn't Sulu and Scotty.

Bones begged off that week's poker game and Spock found excuses to cancel their chess matches. Jim saw them take their meals silently and tersely in the mess hall. Joanna required babysitting from someone almost every night, for reasons unstated, and even she was being weirdly quiet.

Spock was curt and snappish on the bridge and with his subordinates. Bones asked Jim to leave when he visited medbay, claiming to be busy and then tired and not in the mood for talking when Jim pointed out how un-busy he was.

They were having problems. It was clear as day to anyone.

And Jim was pretty sure he knew why.

Jim waited patiently in Bones's office for him to get done working, even though his shift had ended well over a half hour ago.

The man finally left the main area of medbay and entered his office. He sighed. "Listen, kid, I'm not really in the mood to--"

"This is important, Bones," he said. "I know what's been going on with you and Spock."

"You do?" he asked warily.

"Well, you weren't exactly subtle." Bones paled. "And I just want to tell you that you have nothing to worry about from me."

"Wh-- Well I should certainly hope not."

Jim nodded. "I would never do anything to come between you and Spock."
Bones just looked confused, so Jim continued, and maybe he was babbling now, but hell if he could stop. "It's just, you guys are both my best friends. I don't know what I would do without either of you, and I could never hurt you in that way, believe me, Bones. You guys are... so good. You really deserve each other. I really hope I haven't screwed things up between you. The last thing I want to do is cause both of you even more problems."

"So I'm not sure if I'm understanding this right," Bones said. "But you're... taking credit for Spock and I being on the outs?"

"But I'm really, really sorry about that."

"What exactly do you think that you did that's causing us problems?"

"Um..." Jim fidgeted. Was it possible that he had misread things? "I just... I was worried that maybe you thought that I was trying to steal Spock from you. Which I'm not! I'm definitely not."

"I never thought that, Jim."

"You didn't? Then... I'm confused."

Bones nodded. "That much is obvious," he said. "Spock and I aren't even really fighting."

"What?"

"He's been teaching me shielding and it's going crappy. Turns out I don't really have the patience for practicing hours-long Vulcan mental disciplines. That's literally it. And actually, we just finished up with that yesterday. Things are fine. We aren't having trouble."

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry."

"What for now?"

"For-- for bothering you."

Bones rubbed his forehead tiredly. "Jim. You aren't a bother. Well, I mean, you are, but I've accepted that and made my peace with it. If you haven't annoyed me away yet, you're never gonna. Calm down."

"Oh," he said. He beamed at his friend, and went around the desk to give him a hug, burying his face in Bones's neck. "That's good, because I'd die without you, Bones."

"Don't I know it," he groused.

Jim pulled back, still smiling like the sun, and practically skipped out of his office. Bones shook his head.

Leonard leaned down to give Spock a kiss, and then kissed T'Jo'ni on her forehead too.

"Alright, I'll be back in an hour, you two. Try not to burn the whole ship down," he said.

"Can we burn half the ship down?" Joanna asked.

Leonard huffed and ruffled her hair. She had been growing it out, and it was starting to resemble a human pixie cut. "Sure thing, darlin'. Keep your Uncle Jim on his toes."
He gave her one last kiss and headed out the door.

Spock and T'Jo'ni were playing kal-toh, which she had a surprising preference and aptitude for. The rods hovered in intricate geometric forms. Spock moved one, and the entire shape changed, the pieces rearranging and reassembling themselves into an entirely new structure.

T'Jo'ni made her move almost instantly, the figure reshaping into something even more complex. Spock's eyebrows shot up. She was definitely going to win.

"Why does Daddy go see Dr. Singh so much?" she asked. "Is he sick?"

"Your father suffers from no physical ailment, T'Jo'ni."

Her eyes narrowed. "But something is wrong. It's not like when Daddy talks to other doctors. These are real appointments."

Spock made his move in silence and T'Jo'ni kept talking.

"And he gets sad and quiet sometimes and you all think I don't notice, but I do. Something is wrong with my Daddy. I wanna know what." She folded her arms and frowned up at Spock.

"I recommend that you ask your father himself upon his return," he said. "I must warn you, however, that there are some things which adults do not take pleasure in discussing. If your father refuses to answer some of your questions, please respect his need for privacy. I assure you, it is no reflection on you personally or the depth of his love for you."

She frowned, but nodded slowly.

Joanna pounced on him the second he got home from his therapy appointment. Spock sent an apology and explanation through the bond.

Joanna asked questions a mile a minute and Leonard sighed and led his family out to the sitting area of the livingroom, telling them both to make themselves comfortable. He sat down heavily on the couch, feeling the weight of every year he had lived on his bones.

"Dr. Singh is a psychological counselor. I see her because she's my therapist," he said.

Joanna frowned. "Why are you in therapy?"

"A little over a month ago, I went into a parallel universe on a mission, remember? Well, while I was there, I met a Vulcan. Now, this Vulcan was a very bad man, and he mind melded with me without asking permission first."

"I don't get it," she said.

"Let's hope you never do, kiddo."

"Why would that make you sad though? Mind melds aren't bad."

"The type you do certainly aren't. Don't you worry about that," he said with a smile. Joanna was a natural melder, it turns out. Apparently her mother had left her with the impression that she should be ashamed of that, or maybe Vulcan society as a whole had pushed that idea on her. Spock was now teaching her how to use that ability, and she was slowly getting excited over it. Maybe even secretly proud, Leonard hoped.
"You will remember your instruction on telepathic etiquette," Spock said. "It is a crime of the gravest sort to enter another's mind without express permission."

Now Joanna looked concerned. "Are you okay, Daddy? Did the other Vulcan hurt you?"

"I'm alright, sweet pea, I'll be fine. I just have to go see Dr. Singh once a week to talk things over. It's nothing you need to worry yourself about. Alright?"

She still looked deeply troubled. But maybe she knew her daddy was almost as stubborn as she was, because she decided to forego arguing to attack him with a fierce hug instead. Leonard laughed lightly and pulled her more comfortably into his lap.

"I'll protect you from all the bad Vulcans ever, Daddy, don't you worry," she promised.

"Of course, kiddo." She snuggled up against his chest, and seemed content to stay there for the rest of the evening.

"Mornin'."

"Doctor."

Leonard stopped in the hallway to stare after the passing crewman, and Spock stopped with him.

"Something wrong?" Spock asked.

"Yes. There's something odd about that man, and I can't quite pinpoint it."

"Perhaps you are making a rather hasty judgement. Mr. Norman has only been aboard 72 hours."

"Well, I know when something doesn't strike me right, and he doesn't."

"Specifics, Doctor. Labels do not make arguments."

"Alright. There's something wrong about a man who never smiles, whose conversation never varies from the routine of the job, and who won't talk about his background."

"I see." Spock started to walk away, and Leonard repressed a groan, tagging along after him.

"Spock, I mean that it's odd for a non-Vulcan," he said. He smiled. "The ears make all the difference."

"I find your argument strewn with gaping defects in logic," he said, hands clasped behind his back, clearly bemused with his illogical human antics.

"Maybe, but you can't evaluate a man by logic alone. Besides, he has avoided two appointments that I've made for his physical exam without reason."

"That is not surprising at all, Doctor. He is probably terrified of your beads and rattles."

Spock gave him a slight smirk and walked away before he could retort, that asshole.

Norman turned out to be an android. A traitorous android who committed mutiny and took over the ship, taking them on a four-day trip to an uncharted planet in the middle of nowhere. He destroyed all override controls and made it so that any attempts to change course would blow up the ship.
Then he just stood in the middle of the bridge and turned himself off, and he stayed like that for four whole days. It was weird and creepy to have to work around him.

Norman then suddenly woke back up and ordered a landing party to beam down to the planet. It was Class K, bright yellow and faintly glowing. They beamed down into a system of habitable caves under the surface.

This was all starting to get very, very familiar and Jim didn't like it.

And then they were brought into a throne room occupied by four identical female androids and Harry Fucking Mudd.

Jim had a number of problems with his entire crew being stranded down here, and the biggest one was that no one but him and Spock seemed anxious to leave. The androids are apparently capable of placing a human mind in one of their compatible bodies, and thus offering eternal beauty and functional immortality, and Uhura considered it. Bones went nuts when he saw their research facilities, saying he could spend his entire life in those labs and never get bored. Chekov sat on a throne with two androids pouring drinks for him and somehow got in a discussion that seemed to be about their ability to have sex. They gave Scotty an unlimited engineering workshop with unheard of technologies.

"Alright, here we are, birds in a gilded cage. Question is, how do we get out of here?" Jim asked.

"I don't know, sir. But it's a very nice gilded cage," Chekov said, smiling broadly.

"It is a very pleasant place, Captain," Uhura said.

"What did they offer you, Uhura?" Scotty asked.

"Oh, nothing really important, just... immortality," she said, leaning back luxuriously into the cushions around her.

"Alright, we're getting back to our ship and don't you forget it," Jim said, pulling Chekov off the bed thing he was lounging on. "Straighten up! This may be a gilded cage filled with everything you always wanted, but it's still a cage. We don't belong here. We belong on that ship up there."

One of the Alice androids walked in. "Do you require something, my lord?"

"No. Yes. My ship."

"I am not programmed--"

"--To respond in that area, yes, I know."

"Is there anything any of you require to please you?"

"Alice, give us back our ship to please us," Jim said. "Return us to our ship, because we desire it."

"We are programmed to serve. We shall serve you to your best interests to make you happy."

"But we're unhappy here!"

"Please explain 'unhappy.'"

"'Unhappiness' is the state which occurs in the human when wants and desires are not fulfilled,"
Spock said.
"Which wants and desires of yours are not fulfilled?"

"We want the Enterprise," Jim said.

Alice's necklace started beeping and flashing. "The Enterprise is not a want or desire. It is a mechanical device."

"No, it's a beautiful lady and we love her!" Jim shouted.

"Illogical. Illogical. All units relate. All units. Norman, coordinate," she said. She paused, then turned back to Jim. "Unhappiness does not relate. We must study this."

Kirk sat on the throne and summoned two of the Alices. Bones and Scotty put on a duet using imaginary instruments while Uhura and Chekov ballroom danced across the room.

"What are they doing?" an Alice asked.

"Celebrating," Kirk said.

"What are they celebrating?"

"Their captivity," he said. "You like the music?"

"Music?"

The waltz finished and Chekov saluted his 'musicians.' "Thank you, gentlemen. And thank you, lovely lady. You dance divinely."

"Thank you, kind sir." Uhura gave a deep curtsy and finished it off with a flourishing slap across Chekov's face, knocking him to the ground.

"Why does she strike him?" an Alice asked.

"She likes him," Kirk said. "Mr. Chekov! The floor is no place for an officer. Attention!"

He snapped to his feet, and the other officers straightened up a bit too, possibly subconsciously.

"Now stand absolutely still," Kirk said.

"Yes, Keptin!" He struck a pose and began jumping up and down.

"That's much better, Mr. Chekov."

"...It is illogical," Alice said.

"Your statement is illogical."

The two androids continued beeping for a moment and then went into shutdown over failure to compute.

Spock was much more efficient about it, of course. Or perhaps it was merely that him being illogical was infinitely more confusing to the androids than the humans doing the same was.
"Of course. Your computations would inevitably lead to a total description of the parabolic intersection of dimension with dimension," he said.

"Mr. Spock, you have a remarkably logical and analytical mind," an Alice said.

"Thank you," he replied. He then attempted to neck-pinch one of them. Twice.

"Is there some significance to this action?"

Unfortunate that that they did not, no matter how unlikely its success had been.

"I love you," he said. He turned to the other one. "However, I hate you."

"But I am identical in every way with Alice 27."

"Yes, of course. That is exactly why I hate you. Because you are identical."

They both shut down.

"Fascinating."

Then they went for the big guns, the control center: Norman.

Scotty and Bones were doing a synchronized impression of still, unemotional robots.

"You offer us only wellbeing," Bones said.

"Food and drink and happiness mean nothing to us," Scotty said. "We must be about our job."

"Suffering, in torment and pain, laboring without end."

"Dying and crying and lamenting over our burdens."

They turned to each other and spoke simultaneously. "Only this way can we be happy."

Then they both made a strange bowing motion with a finger on their chins. The Alices in the room were beeping incessantly, but Norman was unaffected.

"That is contradictory," he said. "It is not logical. Mr. Spock, explain."

The androids had taken to repeatedly turning to Spock for insight into human behavior. He had been acting as a sort of emotional translator for them.

He grabbed Norman by the arm and pulled him close, as if to impart a secret. "Logic is a little tweeting bird chirping in a meadow. Logic is a wreath of pretty flowers which smell bad," he said. "Are you sure your circuits are registering correctly? Your ears are green."

Scotty started wailing and clutching at his chest as if in great pain. "I cannot go on! I'm tired of happiness. I'm tired of comfort and pleasure. I'm ready. Kill me! Kill me!"

The entire landing party made finger guns and little pew-pew noises to imitate phaser shots. Scotty fell to his knees.

"Goodbye, cruel universe!" He collapsed dramatically. Bones knelt beside him grimly and took his pulse.
"He's dead."

"You cannot have killed him. You have no weapons," Norman insisted.

Kirk fell to the ground and clung to Scotty's body. "Scotty's dead. He had too much happiness. But now he's happier he's dead, and we'll miss him. Let's hear it for our poor dead friend."

They laughed loudly for five seconds, then came to an immediate halt.

Things got far more ridiculous from there, and Spock and Harry mimed playing a game of catch/gulf with a grenade, but it was Harry's blatant lying beyond the point of all logic that finally shorted Norman out.

"Well, you must be very unhappy, Mr. Spock," Bones said.

"That is a human emotion, Doctor, with which I am totally unfamiliar," he said, as if he hadn't just explained unhappiness in clear terms to people genuinely unfamiliar with it not even a few hours ago. "How could I be unhappy?"

"Well, we found a whole world of minds that work exactly like yours-- logical, unemotional, completely pragmatic-- and we poor, irrational humans whipped them in a fair fight. Now you'll find yourself back among us illogical humans again."

"Which I find eminently satisfactory, Doctor, for nowhere am I so desperately needed as among a shipload of illogical humans."

"Ah, touche, Bones," Jim said, grinning.

"Kirk, what have I told you about lying on reports?"

"Pike, I swear, I'm not making any of this up."

"Oh really?" he asked. "Because at one point in your report, Spock starts singing poetry about logic. Now, you realize I've met Spock, right?"

"That happened! I was there, I saw it with my own eyes! The whole bridge crew saw it!"

"Uh-huh, and I suppose if I call Spock in here right now, he would confirm all this?"

"He would," he said.

"Get Spock in there now, Kirk."

Jim immediately pressed the button and commed him to his ready room. Spock appeared within moments, and took the seat beside him.

Pike asked him to confirm every unbelievable detail of the report, one by one, with painstaking thoroughness.

"Alright, well what happened to this Harry Mudd character? Is he in your custody?"

"Negative. We paroled him to the androids."

"...You left him on the planet with 200,000 beautiful android women whose only desire is to wait
on humans hand and foot? Spock. He's a wanted criminal and an escaped convict. He needs to be punished."

"Respectfully, sir, he is being punished," Jim said. "We reprogrammed the androids before we left. They aren't mindless servants anymore. They're going to set to work on cultivating the planet."

"Kirk, he needs to be in jail--"

"Admiral, the captain's reasons for leaving him there were compelling," Spock said. "He provides the androids a prime example of the type of human they are to avoid from now on. In addition, Mr. Mudd came to keenly regret his actions almost immediately. Before leaving, we arranged for the creation of 500 android duplicates of his ex-wife."

Pike blinked. "What."

"Harry had an ex-wife," Jim said, a slow grin spreading across his face. "She apparently hates him as much as he hates her. So we made 500 copies of her, specially programmed to nag him for the rest of eternity."

"Spock, you're dismissed," Pike said. He immediately rose and left the room, requesting no explanation.

Pike just stared at Jim for a few moments, probably intentionally to make him squirm.

"Kirk, you are a terrible influence and you're corrupting Spock. I don't think anyone would have been able to talk him into breaking regs like that even just a few months ago."

Jim froze.

He was going to take Spock away. He was going to transfer him, or assign him to someone else, probably Sulu, and Bones would go with him, and Jim would cry, but no one would care because he would be alone--

"That said, I think you're good for him," he continued, and Jim remembered to breathe again. "It's nice to see him loosening up a bit. Tell me, does he have any friends on the ship? He always had this self-imposed isolation under my command. I really worry about that kid."

Conversation has now officially taken a turn for the weird.

"Uh... yeah. Yeah, he does. He's friends with Uhura and Gaila and me, I hope. And he's da-- married to Bones."

Pike's eyebrows shot up. "Oh," he said. Then his eyes narrowed. "And how did you take that?"

"Didn't you receive notice? Of a formal relationship between two ranking officers, on a ship under your purview?" Jim asked, avoiding the question.

Pike waved a hand at that. "I don't read those. They're just in case something goes south because of it. And don't think you're getting out of that question, Kirk. What have you said to them?"

"Nothing, I swear! Just that-- that I'm really happy for them and they seem great together," he said. His voice went quiet, somewhat wistful. "They're in love. Anyone can see that."

"Kirk, I swear, if you do or say anything to try and break them up, I will take your command away so fast it'll make your head spin." He held up a hand. "Before you go getting all defensive, I realize
"You aren't the android. But the android did enough shit to Spock to last a lifetime. I don't need you adding to it. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," he said.

"Good," he said. "Pike out."

"You know that plan we had, where we were gonna woo Jim?" Leonard asked.

"Indeed," Spock said. "I was under the impression it was put on hold for the time being."

"Yeah, but before that, it was going spectacularly badly," he said. "I talked to him about a week ago, and he thought that I thought that he was trying to steal you away."

"Fascinating," Spock said. "He mistook your attempts at courting for territorialism towards me."

"Yeah, he's real stupid like that sometimes."

"Did he notice my efforts at all?"

"Dunno. If he did, he didn't say anything to me," he said. "I was thinking. Maybe we should revisit that plan."

Spock hesitated. "I believe focusing on your recovery should take precedence over all else."

"The thing with Sylvia just gave me a little flashback, is all. It wasn't even that similar. Spock, I get that recovery is important and all, but I don't want to put my life on hold for months because of one measly flashback."

"You are trivializing the matter greatly," he said. "It would be a grave mistake to rush these things. I do not want us to move forward at all until you are truly ready, Leonard."

"I am," he said. "I'm fine, Spock. Honest."

Spock still hesitated. Leonard sighed.

"Two more weeks, okay? How about that? As a compromise?"

"It is agreeable."

"Good," he said. He gave him a quick peck. "I'm glad."

Jim had been slowly but steadily introducing T'Jo'n'i to twentieth century Earth movies. She always had endless questions about them. She was willing to try out the black and white ones, but she drew the line at silent films. And no matter what, she would give searing commentary about the old-style special effects, despite Jim's insistence that they gave the movies character.

She also ate her popcorn with a pair of chopsticks, declaring that it was gross and wrong to eat food with your hands. She gave Jim such a dirty look when he did that he ended up using chopsticks too.

Only he didn't really know how to use chopsticks, so he tried substituting both a fork and a spoon, and learned the hard way that it is impossible to eat popcorn with either of those utensils. T'Jo'n'i got a good laugh at his expense, though, and he liked to think that he was slowly getting better with the chopsticks.
"Uncle Jim?" she asked.
"Yeah?"
"This movie is terrible."
"Traitor," he accused. "It's a classic. You just haven't given it a chance yet."
"It's almost over."
"It grows on you with time."
She shook her head. "I don't think so. I think you just like bad movies."
He huffed indignantly. "Well, shows me for expanding your cultural horizons."
"I get to choose the next one. We're gonna watch Swan Lake."
"Again? T'Jo'ni, you've picked Swan Lake the last five times."
"I'll stop picking Swan Lake when you stop making me watch movies from three centuries ago."
He glared at her, and she glared right back, and man, Vulcans sure could glare. It was all in the eyebrows, Jim was sure of it.
"Fine," he caved. "Swan Lake it is."
She preened, and he pulled up the movie.

They were transporting a Federation commissioner back to the Enterprise via shuttlecraft when a strange space cloud drew them inexplicably onto a planetoid.

A supposed human started running towards them, shouting excited greetings.
"Are you real?" he asked. "I mean, I'm not imagining you, am I?"
"We're real enough," Jim said.
"You speak English. Earth people?"
"We're from the Federation."
"The F...? Well, it doesn't matter. I'm Cochrane. I've been marooned here who knows how long. If you only knew how good it is to see you." His eyes wandered over to the commissioner. "And a woman. A beautiful one, at that."
"I'm Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the Starship Enterprise. This is my First Officer, Mr. Spock."
"You're a Vulcan, aren't you?"
"Correct."
"Doctor," Cochrane greeted.
"Pleasure," he nodded.

"Oh, and excuse me, Assistant Federation Commissioner Hedford."

"Ma'am," he said. He kept staring at her. "You're food to a starving man. All of you."

As if that last sentence made the one before it any less creepy.

And then he ran over to their shuttle, gushed over it, and told them it would never work again.

Cochrane was apparently Zefram Cochrane of Alpha Centauri, discoverer of the space warp, who had died as an old man over 150 years ago. His life had been saved and his youth restored by the ion cloud that had brought them all here. He called it a companion.

Also, the commissioner was dying rapidly and had hours left of her life if they didn't get her back to the Enterprise's medical facilities. Right now, McCoy was mostly restricted to scanning and fussing and telling her to lie down and rest, which she ignored completely.

Then Cochrane confessed that they had been brought here to keep him company. He had told the Companion he would die of loneliness, in a last ditch bid for freedom. Instead of releasing him, it had brought him more humans.

They were to be kept as pets, essentially.

Leonard went back to shuttle to check on Spock's progress, and found him lying prone among the rocks.

"Spock!"

He rushed over, helping his bondmate sit up and keeping a balancing hand on him. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," he said. He brushed dirt off his uniform aggressively. "Quite alright, Doctor. A most fascinating thing happened. Apparently, the Companion imparted to me a rather quaint, old-fashioned electric shock of respectable voltage."

"It attacked you?!" he asked, outraged. He swears up and down that Spock gets in even more bullshit scrapes than Jim does. He doesn't know why he puts up with either of them.

"Evidently," Spock said. "Unquestionably, a large part of its substance is simple electricity."

A somewhat malicious grin spread across his face, unsettling on the doctor's usually kind features. "I'm not a scientist or a physicist, Spock, but am I correct in assuming that anything that generates electricity can be shorted out?"

"Quite correct, Doctor," he said.

Electrocuting the Companion mostly made it angry. It tried to kill Kirk and Spock before Cochrane called it off.

McCoy suggested a different approach. Spock modified the UT, Cochrane called the Companion telepathically, and Kirk attempted to negotiate with it. It did not go well.
But they did come to some interesting conclusions.

"The Companion loves you," Spock said.

"Do you know what you're saying?" Cochrane snarled. "For all these years, I've let something as alien as that crawl around inside me, into my mind, my feelings?"

"What are you complaining about? It kept you alive, didn't it?"

"That thing fed on me, used me. It's disgusting."

Perhaps his views would seem more understandable if he had not held such a high degree of affection for the Companion before being informed of its romantic regard. His problem was not truly with the Companion. It was with the idea of being in a relationship with it.

Leonard scowled. "There's nothing disgusting about it. It's just another life form, that's all. You get used to those things."

"You're as bad as it is."

"Your highly emotional reaction is most illogical. Your relationship with the Companion has for 150 years been emotionally satisfying, eminently practical, and totally harmless. It may, indeed, have been quite beneficial."

"Is this what the future holds?" he asked. "Men who have no notion of decency or morality? Maybe I'm 150 years out of style, but I'm not going to be fodder for any inhuman monster."

He stormed out, presumably to go stew in his own bigotry.


Leonard huffed. "That's a diplomatic way of putting it. You know what a better one is?"

He launched into one of his infamous rants, and Kirk and Spock listened and occasionally commented dutifully, and the rant never actually ended, but it got cut off when Hedford called for attention.

"You regard the man only as a toy. You amuse yourself with him," Kirk accused.

"You are wrong," the Companion said. "The man is the center of all things. I care for him."

Fucking why, Kirk wanted to ask, but he refrained.

"But you can't really love him. You don't have the first clue about love, the total union between two people. You are the Companion, he is the man. You are two different things. You can't join. You can't love. You may keep him here forever, but you will always be separate, apart from him."

"If I were human, there can be... love?"

The Companion faded away.

Leonard and Spock approached Jim cautiously.

"What did you hope to gain by that, Jim?" Bones asked.
"Try to convince them of the hopelessness of it. Love sometimes expresses itself in sacrifice. I thought maybe if they loved him, they'd let him go."

"But they are not human, Captain. You cannot expect them to react like a human," Spock said.

"Useless," Cochrane said, shaking his head.

And that was proved way too true because in the next moment, the Companion merged with Hedford into one symbiotic body, now perfectly healthy and not dying.

The being used plural pronouns.

When they approached Cochrane, he jumped back in genuine fear, and the Companion was introduced to the negative side of the human emotional spectrum.

The Companion had been told they could not know love since they were not a human, and so they became a human, for Cochrane. A beautiful, young, female human.

He came to terms with it gradually, liking the idea more and more by the minute, and took her hand in his.

Jim supposed the big takeaway lesson here was that Zefram Cochrane was An Ass and that you should change who you are to impress a man.

But on the plus side, the shuttle was working now.

Spock was attempting to flirt.

He had come to realize that he was unskilled in this area and was grateful that Leonard had not required wooing on his part, as he had apparently developed feelings for him independently and then they were brought together by accident and circumstance through the sex pollen incident. Though Nyota had, on occasion, referred to some of their arguments as veiled flirting. Spock was certain he did not know what she meant.

His first attempt at flirting with Jim thus far had been to invite him to watch a film of his choosing, as he knew humans assigned romantic connotations to such things. Jim had agreed easily, and Spock had been most pleased at his progress. But then Jim came over at the appointed time, picked Joanna up, and left. He had somehow come to the conclusion that Spock was requesting his babysitting services. He left before Spock could explain, and then Leonard had laughed at him.

Spock's next attempt was to present Jim with a botanical specimen for him to analyze. He had a severe allergic reaction to it on the bridge, went into anaphylactic shock, and had to be taken to medbay. Leonard was immediately consumed with righteous anger at his inability to protect Jim from the universe as a whole, and he let it be known, going into an impassioned, overprotective spiel, fussing around with the blankets on Jim's biobed and threatening to keep him there for a week.

Jim then apologized to Spock for inconveniencing him with his sudden allergy to 'the world's ugliest flower, sorry Spock, maybe have one of your ensigns look at it?'

Spock did not.

He decided to forego human gestures after that point, as his attempts to employ them had plunged him to newfound depths of failure. He should stick to what he knew.
The next time Jim came over to play chess, Spock proudly presented him with a glass of pure, clean water. He had accepted it readily, and thanked him, and Spock felt like he was floating on air. But through the bond, he felt Leonard's amusement and exasperation in response, rather than the joy that he had expected. And then after Jim left, Leonard spent ten minutes explaining that Jim definitely hadn't understood the gesture and did not know that he had just agreed to a lifelong bond on the spot.

Spock had just determined that the next logical step was to contact Jim's clan matriarch-- his grandmother Memaw-- and request permission to ask his hand in marriage, when Leonard intervened.

"Spock, dear god, don't call the poor kid's grandmother. He'll never hear the end of it. You're gonna send the guy running for the hills."

"But it is necessary that our union has the blessing of the Kirk clan's matriarch."

"Okay, don't call them the Kirk clan, you make them sound like hill people. And hey," he said. "How come that wasn't necessary with me?"

"You are maat-fam, those of your clan have named you klee-fah-tu. If they will not accept you as family, then neither will I accept them as mine."

"Ah," Leonard said. It was sort of weirdly depressing and also uplifting, to hear Spock call him a clanless unperson by the rites of his people and in the next breath, declare his solidarity. "Well. I hate to break this to you, Spock, but Jim's family is sort of shitty too. I don't know the specifics, but I do know that he and I had a sort of unspoken agreement never to ask about that sort of stuff."

And so they agreed that Spock should stop before his attempts at flirting inadvertently killed Jim or made him consider possibly running away or something. Leonard was taking over from here on out.

And Leonard knew that Jim was about as dense as a sack of bricks, so he made it blatantly, painfully obvious exactly what he was doing.

Jim, naturally, freaked out.

It took him three days to accept that what he was experiencing was, in fact, real and not an alien mind trick/fever-induced hallucination/extended-length dream/him finally reaching his mental breaking point. It took him two days after that to finally confront him, during which M'Benga gave Leonard a full physical and short psychological evaluation that he refused to confirm or deny was at the captain's request.

Jim showed up outside his quarters finally, a clear nervous wreck, while Spock was in the science labs and Joanna was with her friends.

He marched in as soon as Leonard opened the door, not even bothering with a greeting.

"Well, hello to you too," Leonard said.

"Bones," Jim said, deadly serious. "You've got to stop flirting with me."

"Well, now," he said, folding his arms. "Why would I do that?"

Jim's jaw dropped. "Because you're with Spock! Because you're not a fucking cheater and I'm not a homewrecker!"
"Who said anything about cheating?"

Jim looked so painfully confused. "What?"

"I've got no intention of cheating on Spock, darlin'. I'd never do that to him. And I know you wouldn't either."

"Did you-- did you guys break up?"

"No."

"Then... I don't get it," he said. "Are you just fucking with me? Is this a punishment for something?"

Now Leonard frowned. "How exactly would this be a punishment?"

"Because you know that I l-like you and now you're just... showing me what I can never have."

"Jim," he said. "Jim, darlin', I would never do that to you. I'm not a cruel man."

"I know," he said. Then he frowned. "I know that. So what... What's going on, Bones? Why're you doing this?"

"Why am I flirtin' with you?" He leaned back, resting his hips against the edge of his desk. "Why do you think, kid? I want something to come of it."

"But..." he faltered. "But you're with Spock."

"Yeah."

"Are you gonna divorce him?"

"No. I'm sticking with him. I made a vow."

"And you aren't gonna cheat."

"Definitely not."

"I don't get it, Bones," he said. "I'm lost."

"You can be with more than one person, Jim. And Spock and I have decided that we want you."

"Spock and..."

"Yeah."

"Both of...?"

"Uh-huh."

Jim goes completely still, and he stays like that for long moments. A minute. Two.

Then he runs right out of the room.

"Okay, so I might have fucked up," Leonard started.
"What has happened?" Spock asked.

"Jim came by our quarters and talked to me today," he said. "He asked me why I've been flirting with him, and I told him the truth."

Spock's eyes lit up. "How did he respond?"

"He ran. He literally ran away."

"I see," Spock said. "That is troubling."

"I mean, the kid has a right to be scared," he said. "Here we are, two married men, asking him out. That puts a hell of a lot of pressure on a relationship."

"Perhaps it was too much. He may have found the idea overwhelming, quite justifiably," Spock said. "We must assure him that he may integrate himself into our relationship as slowly as he likes."

"And how do we do that? I suppose you already have a plan?"

"Indeed," he said. "I believe it has been made abundantly clear that the captain requires the direct approach in these matters."

"Ganging up on him would probably scare him even more, Spock."

"Not if he is prepared for it," he said. "I propose we send him a message requesting he meets with us tomorrow at 2000 hours to discuss matters."

"Not our quarters. That's too much pressure," Leonard said. "The observation deck. It's neutral ground, it's a romantic setting, he loves the place."

Spock nodded. "Logical."

It's 1956 hours and Jim is pacing the observation deck.

He feels a bit like he might die. He has no clue what he's going to say. He had a whole day to prepare, and it didn't help one bit. He is lost. Bones and Spock are about to hand him everything he's ever wanted on a silver platter, and he can't believe it. He's misunderstanding it somehow. Maybe it's a prank. Maybe it's their revenge for the android thing, he never actually paid his due penance for that. Of course they're still pissed, actually, has he ever even really apologized? Properly? He doesn't think so.

God. He's literal shit. No wonder they want to emotionally torture him. Maybe they'll wait until Jim embarrasses himself with a love confession and then they'll laugh in his face. There are probably cameras somewhere.

Correction. He knows there are security cameras in here somewhere, easily hackable for someone of Spock's skill and clearance level.

He has the brief thought that he's letting his past trauma and trust issues and 'damaged goods complex'-- as his therapist back in Iowa put it-- run roughshod over his brain. Some of this sounds... illogical. Paranoid. He should probably calm down.

Just as he is thinking about maybe starting to calm down, the door opens and in walk Bones and Spock. Jim's breath catches, and his pulse is through the roof.
He doesn't let them take three steps before he starts babbling his apologies.

"Listen guys, I'm so sorry about the whole android thing, I never meant to hurt either of you, I promise. I know I should've just made it say I love salad. Look, I don't blame you for hating me, really, and I promise I'll stay out of your way and stop bugging you--"

"Jim, what the hell are you on about?" Bones asked.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For sending a racist android to harass Spock and almost everyone else for months."

"What--" 

"Jim," Spock said. "That is irrelevant to this conversation. I thought we were very clear in our missive. We wish to discuss our romantic intent with you."

Jim stood utterly still, heart pounding in his chest.

"Hey," Bones said softly. "It's alright. If this is too much for you, we can wait. However long you need, darlin'. And you can just say the word, and we'll drop this entirely. The last thing we want to do is hurt you, or make you uncomfortable."

"No," Jim said. "No. Stay. We should talk about this."

They all three go and sit on the couch, the plush cream one in the center of the room, facing out towards the stars. Jim is fidgeting and can't sit still. Spock and Bones, of course, look perfectly calm.

"We desire to enter a romantic relationship with you," Spock said. "You may set the pace in this regard. There is no need for you to feel as though you must be as involved or committed to us as we are to each other."

"What Spock's saying here is we know that it can be intimidating, us being married and all. But we don't want to put any pressure about that on you. We'll just go slow and take it real natural like. We don't want you to feel pressured or rushed into anything. You can do whatever you want in your own time. Guarantee it."

"This is assuming you reciprocate our regard," Spock said. "We will of course understand if you do not. Should you wish to take any disciplinary action against us for harassment, we will understand and accept this in due course, up to and including a request for our transfers."

Bones glared at his husband. "Or," he said. "We could be sane, rational people about this who don't continually seek out self-punishment and instead promise that this doesn't have to change anything, Jim, not unless you want it to. We'll still be your friends, no matter what you say."

"But you should you wish to excise us from your life entirely due to profound revulsion and horror, we will also understand, as it would be a most logical--"

"Spock. Shut up," McCoy said.

Jim was... buffering. They seemed to finally notice this.
"Jim?" Bones asked tentatively.

He tried to say something, but no sound came out.

Instead, he crawled forward and put an arm around both of them, pulling them close and burying his face in Bones's shoulder.

And the rest, they would figure out later.

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