# AT THE SAME STARS

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Star Trek, Star Trek: Alternate Original Series (Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James T. Kirk/Spock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Spock, James T. Kirk, Christine Chapel, Christopher Pike, Hendorff (Star Trek), Leonard McCoy, Nyota Uhura, Amanda Grayson, T'Pring, Montgomery &quot;Scotty&quot; Scott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe, Slash, Slow Build, Slow Burn, Tarsus IV, T'hy'la</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Summary

First Officer Spock of the USS Enterprise is part of the away team that discovers the survivors of Tarsus IV. Captain Pike assigns him to the curious case of James Tiberius Kirk, who steals one of Spock's sweaters. *There were no sufficient Vulcan poetics to describe the emptiness of the colony as it was found on the morning of stardate 2249.43. The fully-completed residential sector was neither ugly nor beautiful but simply remote; a hollow landscape of metal alloys and sensible architecture, with determined vegetation growing alongside the support beams. They did not flower.*

## Notes

Thanks to mimblebee for once again being a vigorous and intense beta. Without her this would be a big ol' jumble. And to kbabich/pixiepunch for being an enabler. And to everyone who might read this. I really hope you enjoy!
Chapter 1

“We look up at the same stars, and see such different things.” – George R R Martin, A Storm Of Swords

First Officer’s Log, Supplemental, Stardate 2249.42.

Captain Pike intercepted the distress call from Tarsus IV at fourteen hundred Local Fleet Time, which contradicted the history of the regular and positive update bulletins that have been broadcast from the colony for the past six point three two five years.

Upon Captain Pike’s request to verify the broadcast, I executed my orders immediately.

The distress call was crude and employed an archaic Terran system known as Morse code, repeating the three letters of SOS on infinite loop. Captain Pike agreed with my assertion that the probability of the distress call being either a mistake or a prank was low enough that official contact would have to be made with the colony in order to establish the source of the distress signal and ascertain its veracity—or lack thereof.

All subsequent attempts to contact Governor Kodos on Tarsus IV were unsuccessful.

The proper protocol was followed by Captain Pike, with myself as First Officer witnessing. Admiral Marcus of Starfleet Command gave the official order to beam down to the planet at zero six hundred Local Fleet Time. The preparations for an away mission were then made with Captain Pike leading the away team personally.

I shall be accompanying him, with further information to follow in this First Officer’s Log Supplemental.

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There were no sufficient Vulcan poetics to describe the emptiness of the colony as it was found on the morning of stardate 2249.43. The fully-completed residential sector was neither ugly nor beautiful but simply remote; a hollow landscape of metal alloys and sensible architecture, with determined vegetation growing alongside the support beams. They did not flower. There were patches of what appeared to be an unclassified fungal growth appearing on the leaves and stems, a pale and mottled white like frost.

Spock’s tricorder readings were inconclusive.

‘Stopping to smell the roses, Spock?’ Captain Pike asked.

A human colloquialism—Captain Pike employed these in the face of severity in order to minimize its impact on the members of an away team for whom morale and confidence were of utmost importance. Though Spock had only served as Captain Pike’s first officer for two months and thirteen days, he had been presented with ample evidence regarding this tactic.

‘Captain,’ Spock replied, ‘these do not resemble any rose species or hybrids on record.’
‘They’re weeds, Spock.’ Captain Pike shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun off an abandoned sheet rooftop. ‘And it seems like they’re about the only thing this place has to offer, at that. Where the hell do you suppose all the colonists are?’

The most appropriate human colloquial phrase, according to a dictionary that Spock had chosen to consult at frequent intervals—in order to facilitate communication between himself and his human captain—would have been ‘ghost town’.

‘It’s a damn ghost town, is what it is,’ Captain Pike added. ‘Any signs of life at all, Commander Spock?’

‘There are none in the immediate vicinity,’ Spock replied.

No birds above; no local fauna of any kind. The wind whistled through open windows and carried with it the faint scent of ash, of burnt metal cracking and peeling, of brackish rainwater pooling in unventilated areas.

‘There were eight thousand colonists here.’ Captain Pike took out his communicator and ordered a full planet scan for human life-signs from the Enterprise in orbit. ‘And if they’re not here, then I want to know why, not to mention what the hell happened to them. Everybody double up and comb this place over—and while you’re at it, try not to touch anything.’

Spock’s partner in survey and canvassing was Ensign Hendorff, a large man whose male-pattern baldness was early onset. He was not moved to poetry of any kind, Terran or otherwise, when faced with the enormity of the colony’s present state.

‘If those sharp ears of yours pick up anything,’ Ensign Hendorff began, though he did not conclude with exact instructions.

‘You will be the first informed, and the captain second, as per protocol,’ Spock replied.

Hendorff snorted, toeing open an unlocked door and flashing the wide beam of a searchlight into the darkened interior. ‘Nerves of steel,’ he muttered.

It was neither a compliment nor an act of insubordination.

There were several among the ranking officers in Starfleet who experienced difficulty working in close proximity with Vulcans. Spock had anticipated a certain amount of resistance to his ambition. His position as pioneer amidst the largely human-centric organization would ultimately pave the way for other interested parties; however, being the first of anything presented its difficulties.

The complications Spock faced were far from insurmountable. The disparate attitudes of his fellow officers were kept largely in check by their acknowledgment of hierarchy, and sideways glances did not keep him from performing his duties. So long as that was the sum of the tensions, there was no need to address it.

‘Just watch my back,’ Hendorff added when Spock chose not to reply.

The door remained open when he stepped through it, casting a bright square of light across the dusty floor. The building was clearly deserted, but Spock found no fault in Hendorff’s investigative methods. Considering the condition of the vegetation outside, it was unlikely that the colonists would have chosen to hide in the scant forest. According to the readings on Spock’s tricorder, the plant life was not edible.

‘Are you anticipating some form of resistance?’ Spock asked.
It was his duty to accompany a lower-ranking officer, remaining at an appropriate distance from Hendorff to anticipate any threats that might approach them from behind.

‘Scared and hungry ain’t exactly a great combination,’ Hendorff said, ‘and that’s exactly what I’d be if I was living in this place.’ He looked over his shoulder to Spock—careless, but not worthy of formal reproach—before turning his gaze back toward the front. ‘I guess Vulcans don’t jump at the first thing to say boo.’

‘Our uniforms clearly designate us as members of Starfleet,’ Spock pointed out.

‘Just cross your fingers they aren’t the shoot first, ask questions later type.’

Spock made a mental note to research the significance of crossing his fingers at another, more appropriate time.

A peripheral scan suggested they had found themselves in a schoolhouse or other institution of education, judging by the arrangement of tables and chairs and the screen at the front of the room, which Spock recognized as a six-year-old model for basic projections. There was no equipment, the windows either broken or boarded.

There had been no information included in the distress call beyond the distress itself. Spock had requested and received a manifest from the original colonization attempt, a list of passengers and the initial population count. Humans of all ages had been present; it should have been more difficult for human children to hide than adult members of their species, yet this schoolhouse was as silent as it had been in the streets.

There was an open doorway near the back of the classroom. Hendorff reached it first, then nodded Spock through.

‘Phasers to stun, Ensign,’ Spock said. He stepped across the threshold with muted footsteps.

The short, darkened hallway led to a private medical facility, stocked with only the bare essentials. One of the cabinets had been broken into some time ago, considering the layer of dust within. The door swung on a smashed hinge, no medkits on any of the shelves.

They had been taken. These signs of life were unorthodox but unmistakable.

‘All clear down the hall,’ Hendorff called, voice echoing on metal. Beneath that louder noise, the stale air itself shifted. It could not have been a result of the wind as there were no broken windows in the office.

Spock turned in enough time that the hypodermic needle aimed for his throat simply tore the fabric of his science officer blues at the shoulder, the point raking his skin without the plunger depressing. The unexpected point of impact knocked it from the fingers that clutched it, so tight that the grip had become too brittle to maintain. The hypodermic needle clattered to the ground; the male assailant who had managed to take Spock by surprise froze for less than a quarter of a second while they were face to face.

His hair was long but clean. His eyes were bright. He placed both hands on Spock’s chest and shoved him, hard enough that had Spock been human, he would have fallen. Instead, he merely stumbled backward.

Then, the stranger ran.

‘Ensign Hendorff,’ Spock said, ‘I have encountered a human life-form in this facility. Contact
Captain Pike and provide him with this information immediately. I am in pursuit of the subject.’

Hendorff shouted after him, but Spock was already, as they said, on the move.

He chased the sound of the stranger’s footfalls alone, barely loud enough to be heard by Vulcan ears, regulating his breath evenly with his pace. Spock was faster and his legs were longer, but the subject had the advantage of knowledge, and his speed reflected his intimate understanding of every corner and doorway. He did not choose his path randomly. Each direction he took offered an obstacle—a toppled cart; a fallen bookshelf; a door opened into the hallway—that lost Spock precious seconds to overcome.

By the time Spock exited the facility through a back door, the stranger was already more than nine meters into the distance, cresting a hill without once pausing to look back over his shoulder. That was not the mark of one who was inexperienced, who had never been pursued by those quicker and better trained than he.

Spock continued the chase. He gained ten feet, then fifteen more, due to the advantages he was granted on open ground. Yet those advantages would not last, as it became clear the subject was leading him toward a rocky outcropping flanked by sickly forestation, where twists and turns would once again widen the gap.

The probability of the subject escaping was now, however unlikely, seventeen to one.

He moved too quickly to be studied; his hair flashed gold beneath the sun. He wore a leather jacket. He still had not looked over his shoulder even once. These were the observations Spock had, the only evidence he had been given. Spock increased the speed and the length of his strides, dust from the dry ground below rising with every fall of his boots.

The baked, unforgiving earth; the bleached rocks; the dying trees—all were signs of inhospitable terrain. These were not the local statistics that had been listed on Tarsus IV’s official profile. At the time of the colony’s first landing party, it had been classified as an ideal location for Terran settlement.

Something had transpired to alter that ideal. Although the information was not yet sufficient for Spock to draw a reasonable conclusion, he was gathering evidence supporting several distinct possibilities. There was every chance that the individual he was currently trailing would be able to illuminate the blank spaces left in his data. This alone would have provided sufficient motivation for Spock to continue his pursuit.

Where there was one survivor, there should be more. This was not a certainty but an enhanced likelihood based upon personal observation and past precedent. Circumstances on a planet rarely conspired to create an environment that would sustain only a single life.

Spock had discovered one—or rather, one had discovered Spock— which increased the probability that many would follow. It was that simple.

The subject stumbled as he reached the outcropping, shaking loose rock down the shallow slope of the hill. It skittered into the silence, swallowed by the shadows. He was smaller than Spock, with shorter legs, and from a distance he also appeared younger. He would eventually be overtaken, although the single-mindedness of his flight had given him yet another burst of speed.

He was committing himself impressively to the chase. Spock would not congratulate him when he reached him, but it was important to note the specifics of his physical condition in the event that there might be an impending confrontation.
His subject slowed, bending over at the top of the hill as if to catch his breath.

It was this brief pause that allowed Spock to overtake him. He moved swiftly, eliminating the last of the distance between them to grab the young male around his skinny upper arm.

The human turned, lashing out with his free arm, which Spock caught around the wrist. His grip held, despite the ensuing struggle.

‘Cease your resistance,’ Spock said. ‘If you are a colonist of Tarsus IV, then I am not your enemy.’

His captive was red-faced, breathing hard and sweating. He appeared to have experienced a growth spurt recently; this would have explained why his face was too slim for its features, as though all the fullness of his cheeks had been sapped too suddenly for compensation. His eyes narrowed not on Spock’s face but on the blue of his torn uniform and the holstered phaser clipped to his belt.

‘Starfleet?’

The subject’s voice was hoarse and it was yet unclear whether he was suffering from a deficit in language, or whether the question had been truncated for maximum efficiency.

‘I would have thought that was in evidence,’ Spock said. ‘That I am an officer of Starfleet is the most logical assumption when presented with the particulars of my appearance.’

Beyond the outcropping, there was a steep incline that led to a sickly green lake. Judging by the size of the basin, the water level had been receding over a period of years. Its surface was coated in algae that did not resemble the fungus growing on the sparse vegetation. Given the opportunity, Spock would have to examine it with his tricorder in order to discern whether its origins were similar.

Spock returned his focus to the subject—now literally—at hand. The young male’s chest rose and fell and his gaze refused to waver, eyes blinking minimally in order to maintain a clear, unbroken line of sight. His free arm was a matter of concern and would require continuous and close surveillance, as the individual’s resourcefulness could not be disregarded. In response to Spock’s close proximity, the subject had chosen to appear limp, which Spock recognized as a common tactic amongst wildlife when faced with a predator interested in the hunt. However, there remained tension in his posture and in his muscles that suggested he would take any perceived opportunity to flee, or at least attempt an escape.

‘Should you require my full credentials,’ Spock continued, ‘I will list them now, as you are correct in deeming it necessary that I present myself officially so that you may confirm I am who I claim to be. I am Commander Spock, First Officer of the USS Enterprise NCC-1701, serving under Captain Christopher Pike. During our exploration in this quadrant, I became aware of a distress frequency broadcast from this planet, and our superiors gave orders to investigate its source. We shall report our findings to Starfleet Command once those findings are complete.’

The rest was evident. Spock’s tricorder hung from one shoulder to the opposite hip; he had not chosen to unclip his standard-issue phaser from his side, where its setting remained on stun; his communicator was affixed to his belt and the Starfleet insignia was immediately visible on his chest, as were the stripes of rank on his sleeves.

Spock waited. The young male studied him. His uneven pattern of breath began to steady but his wariness had not abated. His recognition of Starfleet and what it represented to him were factors with an outcome that was not immediately obvious.

Spock had never been as troubled by silence as some—Ensign Hendorff among them.
Communication when required was not the same as communication as an indulgence. Comfort was not reason enough for indulgence in ‘little talk’.

‘Regular broadcasts to Starfleet have provided details of this colony that are not corroborated by what Captain Pike’s away team has encountered upon beaming down to the planet’s surface,’ Spock said. The subject’s pulse was muted by the leather between Spock’s fingers and his skin, but it pounded against Spock’s palm nonetheless. ‘It is this landing party’s duty to determine what has transpired here and to locate and assist all surviving colonists.’

The subject tossed his head to remove the hair from his eyes. Spock made no sudden movements and preserved a near-meditative stillness that would not disrupt the young male’s sense of stability or place him on the offensive rather. There was only the wind, rifling their hair and causing the loose strip of fabric at Spock’s shoulder to twist in the breeze.

At last, the subject’s focus shifted to the communicator on Spock’s belt.

‘It is also my duty as first officer to contact my captain and inform him of my discoveries. He will not be able to act in the best interest of both his crew and the locals without consulting all available information. I will now execute that duty.’ Spock reached for his communicator, blue eyes tracking his every motion.

He would have completed that simple task were it not for the sudden commotion from across the flat grounds. Spock recognized Hendorff’s shout and was not surprised by the subject’s response—which was to attempt to wrestle himself free, pulling at his own wrist with enough blind strength that he risked dislocating it.

‘Though he would be better served by the development of his subtlety, Ensign Hendorff is not a threat to those whom he has been tasked to protect,’ Spock said. ‘I shall remain between the two of you. He will not fire upon a superior officer.’

There was a snort from behind him. This vocalization appeared to have a direct correlation with Spock’s statement, although now was neither the time nor the place for him to discern which element specifically had inspired the colonist’s disbelief.

Spock turned, as he had said he would, using his own body as a shield between the subject and the approaching Ensign Hendorff. The latter was not in poor physical condition; however, the extra weight he bore and his self-proclaimed dislike of calisthenics put him below Starfleet average when it came to running speed. As a result, Hendorff was clutching at a stitch in his side as he mounted the hill toward them.

‘Jesus,’ Hendorff said. This was not a statement meant to address Spock, a fact he had learned through experience. ‘Hasn’t Pike told you about running off like that?’

‘Captain Pike has not previously demonstrated any difficulty in maintaining speed equal to my own,’ Spock replied. ‘If he had, I find it unlikely that he would choose to reproach me for performing my duties with maximum haste and efficiency.’

Hendorff had no proper retort prepared for this statement. He punctuated their conversation with a wheeze, doubling over before attempting to straighten. His cheeks were pink, but his distraction was not likely to prevent him from noticing the factors of their current situation.

Spock remained aware of the presence of the colonist at his back. He had temporarily ceased his struggles, appeased by the presence of Hendorff as one he could examine from a safe distance. The advantages of staying in place were currently outweighing his initial instinct to flee.
‘You went tearing off so fast I didn’t even have time to tell you—we found kids in the school. Just a few, not enough for a whole colony. If there’s more, they have to be split up all over the city.’

From behind Spock, the small human gave another ill-timed snort.

‘Think that’s funny, do you?’ Hendorff asked.

He craned his head around Spock, seeking out the additional audience member, the element that did not belong in their conversation.

‘I, too, have located a member of the colony,’ Spock said.

By way of introduction, that would be provisionally sufficient.

‘Yeah, I noticed,’ Hendorff said. ‘It’s not like you to go running off on a wild goose chase, Commander.’

‘I’m a person,’ the colonist said from behind Spock’s back. ‘Not a goose.’

‘There are no documented species of waterfowl either native or imported to the colony,’ Spock added.

‘Yeah,’ the human said. ‘If there were, we would’ve eaten them.’

‘Commander Spock, we went over the wild goose chase metaphor last week, and I know you remember it, considering you remember everything else.’ Hendorff had not lowered his phaser; this was regulation, but it did nothing to assuage the colonist’s mistrust. ‘I also know you know I’m not talking about waterfowl, I’m talking about this kid.’ Hendorff paused, his countenance briefly relaxing. ‘Hey, kid,’ he added. ‘We, uh, aren’t here to hurt you. Answering a distress call. We’re here to help.’

‘Our motive has already been established.’ Spock paused. Though he drew his next conclusion from that which had not been stated outright, he could nevertheless be confident in the accuracy of the hypothesis he was forming. ‘It would seem that the colony on Tarsus IV has suffered from a lack of resources, specifically edible ones. It is likely that the fungus I have observed on the native vegetation was a prime factor in a colony-wide famine.’

‘You have a theory already.’ Hendorff wiped a line of sweat off the crease in his brow. ‘Of course you have a theory already.’

‘A working hypothesis, Ensign,’ Spock replied. ‘One that has to account to a number of key investigations in order to remain viable. For example: if the colony here has suffered from so grave a threat, why is it that its Governor Kodos at no point requested any aid from Starfleet, and sent no indication of this difficulty at all?’

These were inquiries into which the young colonist himself could have offered insight—yet Spock had not concluded his debriefing of Hendorff before the subject exerted a wild and unfocused surge of youthful strength, lashing out at Spock’s shin with a kick, wrenching his wrist free of Spock’s grasp. He stumbled, then righted himself, finding new equilibrium in a wary crouch.

Hendorff started toward him, phaser raised.

Spock held up his hand.

‘Your actions are inexplicable,’ Spock informed the colonist.
‘Inexplicable? Look, the kid’s got a weapon,’ Hendorff said. ‘And in my book, when somebody’s got a weapon, they’re officially classified as a threat.’

Spock had noticed, the subject’s hand inching toward what was in all likelihood a concealed blade, making his intentions clear. Spock held his ground and met the young colonist’s eyes.

With exacting, deliberate movements, even and steady, Spock bent his knees and lowered himself closer to the grimy rock. The colonist did not blink. Neither did Spock. The atmosphere was not without its merciless elements but Spock’s second eyelid allowed him to sustain unbroken eye contact.

‘This colony,’ the colonist said finally, his voice breaking like gravel into dust, ‘has no governor.’

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Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Initial observations.

Chapter Notes

Future chapters will be up earlier in the day, but today there were mitigating circumstances, so I'm sorry for the delay! I hope you enjoy!

First Officer’s Log, Supplemental, Stardate 2249.44.

The exact details of the away team’s discoveries on Tarsus IV have already been enumerated by Captain Christopher Pike of this starship, the USS Enterprise NC-1701. As First Officer, I have been fully briefed on the information in the Captain’s Log in question and can corroborate that which my captain has recorded is true to the extent of my knowledge on this matter.

The survivors of the eight-thousand colonists that once inhabited Tarsus IV number a mere one hundred and seven and of that number, eighty-six of whom are children under the age of fifteen. As Captain Pike has already stated, our inquest into the cause of the overwhelming loss of life on this colony has begun, though it may prove difficult to uncover the full truth of what transpired on this planet under Governor Kodos’ leadership.

The away mission followed protocol to the letter despite the lack of precedence for that which the away team confronted while planet-side. We remain in orbit, conducting exhaustive attempts to identify the survivors and contact their living relatives, wherever they may be.

* 

The Enterprise was equipped with the facilities to care for the extra one hundred and seven bodies that had been beamed aboard, but it was no passenger vessel. Its crew had radioed in to Starfleet for further instructions on how to deal with the growing constraints of the situation. In the interim, they were to make room for the members of the colony of Tarsus IV in the mess hall.

The children were monitored at every meal.

Humans had not developed the coping mechanisms that Vulcans had in their past and when they had been starved, they could not be trusted not to gorge themselves when sustenance was at last before them. The majority of human adults could be reasoned with; those who could not be, learned from example. But children were a different case.

They would not learn despite repeated instances of making themselves ill, eating too much too quickly for a shrunken stomach to compensate, and continuing the damaging trend further at every subsequent mealtime.
It was the height of illogic. Spock did not possess a delicate constitution, but it was a concern to be assigned such a frustrating detail. His initial contact on the planet, the colonist with the blond hair, was older than many of the other colonist children, yet he had not proven himself immune to this behavior. He was clever enough and thoughtful enough to ensure that his companions all had enough to eat before he partook, but once he began, he gorged like the others.

Spock observed him leaving in order to be ill on two separate occasions. Before a third incident could be recorded, an intervention would be necessary.

He jolted when Spock’s hand touched his shoulder, fork clattering to the table as it fell from his hand.

The face that met Spock’s was a match for one on the passenger manifest Spock had run for cross-reference, matching the survivors with the list of people who had arrived on Tarsus IV in the colony’s inception.

James Tiberius Kirk. Born 2233. As a minor, he had been accompanied by his elder brother George Samuel Kirk and his mother Winona Kirk, whose file included a notation about a deceased husband, Captain George Kirk, most recently of Starfleet.

Thus far, there were no facial matches for any of the other Kirks on board the Enterprise. This must have been foremost in James Tiberius’ mind as he was interrupted amidst his third portion of replicated turkey stew. His mouth hung open as he observed Spock. He did not move to retrieve his fork, though he did not release the bread clutched in his hand.

‘Oh,’ he said instead. ‘First Officer Pointy.’

‘That is not a proper appellation,’ Spock informed him.

‘Close enough.’ James Tiberius lifted his thin shoulders beneath his battered leather jacket.

‘You are the first officer.’

‘You have been researching the crew,’ Spock said.

‘I got a lot of spare time.’

‘Yet you lack the resources necessary to conduct proper research.’

James Tiberius paused. Spock had not fully distracted him from the attention he still wished to pay the food left on his plate. After that momentary hesitation, he scooped the rest of the food off his plate with his bread, bringing his face down to table level without taking his eyes off Spock. Somehow he did not lose any of his stew or spill it down the front of his shirt. It was behavior that would better suit a poorly raised child of five to seven, rather than a teenager of sixteen years.

‘Been listening,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Observing.’ His mouth was still full. He barely chewed the remainder of the over-sized bite he had taken and swallowed with difficulty, hiding a wince with a sigh.

‘If you continue to eat in this fashion, you run the risk of doing permanent damage to your digestive system.’

‘Already permanently damaged.’ James Tiberius licked his fingers clean. ‘Food’s good.’

‘Given the rapidity with which you eat, it is unlikely you have been able to taste it fully.’
James Tiberius crossed his arms over his chest, a stance Spock had come to recognize as one that denoted stubbornness and defiance. The former was an already obvious trait James Tiberius possessed; the latter was understandable, given the circumstances that had brought him to the mess hall on the Enterprise. He had developed skills that had ensured his survival on Tarsus IV, but he erroneously believed that immediate satisfaction of his hunger was preferable to a sensible and evenly-paced meal regimen.

‘You would be better served with considerate research into the human digestive system, once you have familiarized yourself with your study of hierarchy aboard the Enterprise,’ Spock told him.

He returned with a meal protein to the census assigned to him by Captain Pike, as the captain had established the importance of his crew adhering to a meal regimen of their own. When the list was finalized, neither George Samuel Kirk nor Winona Kirk appeared therein.

Indeed, seventy-five of the eighty-six total surviving children were the only survivors of their families.

Spock once again observed the behavioral patterns within the mess hall at the appointed hour for dinner, watching as James Tiberius attended those younger than he before taking his favored place at the far corner of the hall with his back against the wall. He began to eat more slowly than at lunch, but after fifty-three seconds it became clear that he was gaining speed.

He was on his third plate when Spock intervened, making no move to sit. James Tiberius slid a protective arm around the remains of his meal on instinct; in response, Spock folded his hands behind his back, fingers of one hand cinched around the opposite wrist.

‘You didn’t find me, you know,’ James Tiberius said, speaking around the food in his mouth. ‘I found you.’

‘That is an accurate assessment of the events as they transpired on the away mission,’ Spock agreed.

Whatever James Tiberius had expected Spock to say, he had not anticipated a frank confirmation of the truth. Human socialization—as Spock had observed its overarching patterns, through his time at Starfleet Academy and specifically during team-building exercises for prospective active-duty officers—placed excessive significance on matters of ego. Perhaps James Tiberius had assumed that Spock would value the comfort of his ego above adherence to fact.

‘However,’ Spock added, ‘it does not address the specifics, in which you attempted to overwhelm me with a hypodermic needle.’

‘Could’ve been a hostile,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Anybody can replicate the uniform. Could’ve been a Klingon in disguise. A Romulan picking up on my distress frequency, coming down to take advantage of the situation.’

‘Your distress frequency,’ Spock repeated.

‘You heard it,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Or you heard me just now. Whatever. Take your pick. Either way, I know you’ve got the ears for it.’

James Tiberius’ tone was brittle but not combative; therefore, this did not seem to be a derogatory remark made with the specific intention of drawing a negative reaction from Spock. Rather, it was a derogatory remark designed to distract with its offensive nature, pulling Spock’s focus from more illuminating points of study.

But Spock had seen through the ruse and it would succeed at neither.
Spock was not so easily influenced and the shape of his ears had always been an easy and obvious target. It was not among humans that he had first encountered an ill-favored scrutiny of his appearance, and thus it was something he had long since accustomed himself to withstanding.

If James Tiberius wished to dissuade Spock from examining that which was pertinent to the discussion—the information that he considered the distress frequency to belong, in some fashion, to him—then he had not accomplished his objective.

What he had done was claim proprietary knowledge of the signal the Enterprise’s chief communications officer had intercepted.

James Tiberius was as careless with his words as any human Spock had encountered thus far, but that did not mean he was worthy of outright dismissal.

‘My sense of hearing is indeed superior, though the shape of my ears is not the only factor in why. As such, it would seem that you were the one to engineer the signal that brought the Enterprise to Tarsus IV,’ Spock said. It was not information that James Tiberius was owed, but it was evident enough that it did not trouble Spock to share it.

James Tiberius raised his eyebrows, which disappeared beneath the too-long fall of his hair. Whatever style it had previously worn, it had long since outgrown its original shape. His appearance was being managed poorly in the absence of a parent or an elder sibling to look after him.

The brief wonder in his expression quickly faded to something less impressed. His mouth quirked to one side, nose wrinkling as his nostrils flared. There was food on his cheek.

‘It did what it was supposed to do,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Just took a while to get there.’

‘The Enterprise is a Constitution-class vessel,’ Spock began, ‘capable of speeds—’

‘Not what I meant,’ James Tiberius interrupted. ‘That was the third signal I engineered. First two wouldn’t hold a power source long enough to accomplish anything and I never got a hit on the first pictures I sent out.’

‘There was visual information encoded within the signal?’ Spock asked.

James Tiberius’ eyes darted from side to side, even though Spock had chosen to employ a tone of voice that would not be overheard by the children at the adjoining tables, who were otherwise engaged with their repast. ‘Not in the last one. They put a lockdown on all outgoing messages. Dampening field. I tried to snap some pics before that—get someone at Starfleet Science to identify the fungus.’

‘I recorded the properties of multiple fungal growths while I was planet-side,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah, ’cause after the first one came into contact with the basic Terran crops we brought along for cultivation, it mutated,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘Really fast.’

‘Your knowledge of the specifics is unexpected.’

‘You mean ’cause I’m too young, so that means I should be stupid and not know anything about anything?’

Spock raised a brow. ‘There was no negative judgment contained in the statement of fact with which I presented you, James Tiberius Kirk. I mentioned it because it would be unusual for an individual of any age to have such a scientific eye without having received post-graduate training in multiple
scientific fields.’

James Tiberius blinked, showing a complexity of emotion on his lean face that deepened the shadows in the hollows of his cheeks. He rubbed the smear of gravy off the corner of his mouth with his knuckle, then licked it off his knuckle without hesitation. ‘Weird,’ he said.

‘Peculiar, strange, uncanny, or unusual,’ Spock confirmed. ‘Though the word itself suggests a broad meaning, I would agree that many of the details surrounding the colony on Tarsus IV are “weird”.’

James Tiberius pursed his lips and blew a flat huff of air that failed to achieve a true whistle. ‘So what’s gonna happen to us?’

The non-sequitur suggested that basic conversation—a point of pleasantry and social subterfuge with which Spock had struggled during his first year attending Starfleet Academy—was a practice James Tiberius had not needed to maintain. The confusion that surrounded Tarsus IV would be clarified with time and Spock was not the ship’s counselor, Christine Chapel, who had already begun the sensitive process of speaking to the rescued children, in order to help them manage their feelings of fear and loss while piecing together a general timeline of events.

The disorganized human mind was even more chaotic in its pre-pubescent years. Spock did not envy Doctor Chapel her undertaking. As he was no expert in the field of juvenile psychology, it was neither his charge nor his place to make similar attempts with a single subject, no matter how unconventional his patterns of behavior might be.

With human children, Spock had no sense of what was average, and therefore had no point of reference. In this area, he was not qualified.

‘A single outcome cannot be ascertained, as we must assume that the variables for many of the survivors will differ on a case by case basis,’ Spock said. ‘To speculate would be to form an inaccurate generalization.’


‘I am a science officer, not a doctor.’

‘That’s obvious.’ James Tiberius paused. ‘And that’s fine, by the way. At least you’re not trying to pretend everything’s fine when it’s not.’

‘To do so would be to lie,’ Spock said, ‘and lying is not a custom practiced by Vulcans.’

‘You mean like you physically can’t lie or you choose not to?’

‘There is no logic in saying that which is false in order to satisfy someone who will derive no satisfaction from that which is not true.’

James Tiberius snorted but said nothing. His eyes remained hidden under the fall of his hair, but Spock knew that they were fixed on him through the shadows.

‘The ability of the fungus to mutate explains the erratic readings given by my tricorder,’ Spock added.

‘It also explains why there was no food on Tarsus IV,’ James Tiberius said.

‘Yet despite the lack of resources, there are one hundred and seven survivors aboard this Federation vessel.’
‘Those odds *suck.*’ James Tiberius stood with a scrape of his chair that made so much noise he froze; though it was brief, Spock saw his white-knuckled grip on the edge of the table, waiting for an unnamed event that did not come. ‘They suck,’ James Tiberius repeated.

It had indeed been outside Spock’s purview to discuss any matter with a human child.

James Tiberius presented an above-average understanding of his situation and the circumstances surrounding the famine on Tarsus IV, but Spock would do well to keep in mind the limitations of his youth and inexperience during any future proceedings.

It was not Starfleet procedure to discuss any ongoing investigation with the civilians involved. It would not prove challenging for Spock to remind himself of the soundness of that particular edict when considering James Tiberius’ unpredictable reactions.

When James Tiberius chose to resume his meal at a more sensible pace, Spock withdrew, returning to his research at the temporary station he had constructed for himself in the opposite corner of the mess hall.

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Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Spock is given a new assignment.

First Officer’s Log, Supplemental, Stardate 2249.45.

The crew has adjusted to the best of their abilities to the additional presence on board the Enterprise, as our current directive from Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco is to remain in orbit around Tarsus IV to monitor the conditions on the planet as well as search for any remaining survivors.

Particularly commendable has been the work of Doctor Christine Chapel, ship psychologist and counselor, in assisting the survivors of Tarsus IV with preliminary rehabilitation efforts.

It is my observation that they prefer to remain together in small groups numbering no fewer than four individuals and no greater than eight. It is also my observation that this remains true of all the juveniles in our immediate care save for James Tiberius Kirk, who migrates among these sub-groups without maintaining a permanent position in any.

I will record my findings on the fungus and its mutations in the Science Officer’s Supplemental after the conclusion of this First Officer’s Log, Supplemental.

* 

In two days’ time, Spock’s rotation left him free of mess hall duty and afforded him the liberty to return to the bridge and elsewhere, as his duties demanded. He spent seventy-nine percent of his time while not on the bridge in the labs for scientific research with the isolated samples of the fungus gathered by the away team for further analysis.

There was an investigative team on the surface of the planet now and another team, including the ship’s counselor, meeting with the survivors and recording all official accounts. The matter of Governor Kodos’ disappearance, as well as the factors leading up to his last days in power, were currently under close scrutiny. Hastily-dug graves had been discovered outside of the main colony; some of the bodies within were badly burned and Starfleet officers were using the data collated about the survivors against those yet classified as missing to begin identifying the dead.

The fungus was Spock’s chief concern. The rest was a matter to be addressed by the captain and the chief of security—and ultimately a court of law, should the evidence present a negative conclusion in regards to Governor Kodos’ actions. However, with the main events of the tragedy all but passed, the only true facts that remained would be found within the presence of a malignant, harmful growth; one that had devastated the crops of an entire colony and left its survivors starving, its population all but annihilated.

They could not risk its spread to other colonies and other worlds. If Starfleet scientists could understand its molecular structure, then they would be able to learn how to counteract it in the future. The incident on Tarsus IV would then be recorded as an anomaly, rather than a precursor to a galaxy-wide disaster.
Spock examined the second of five sealed samples, moving it from the table to the incubation chamber, to test its resilience under heat.

‘Shouldn’t you be wearing gloves or something?’

The voice came as a surprise, but Spock did not jump or jolt, as was the common human response to being startled. A cursory examination of the space over Spock’s shoulder revealed that James Tiberius had found his way into the science facilities of the Enterprise.

Had he been given clearance to enter the laboratory, Spock would have been impressed by James Tiberius’ unique ability to approach him in true silence—another skill that must have served him well when forced to navigate the untamed wilds of Tarsus IV. However, James Tiberius had no such clearance, and praise was neither requisite nor constructive at this juncture.

‘You have not been given clearance to enter this laboratory,’ Spock said.

‘You’re investigating the fungus that destroyed a colony I was a part of,’ James Tiberius replied, making no move to leave and showing no signs of remorse at infiltrating a private location. ‘I’ve got clearance.’

‘That is not the definition of clearance.’

‘I wanna know what it looks like magnified,’ James Tiberius continued. ‘The stuff we had down there was okay but it wasn’t what you get in a Constitution-class vessel’s science lab.’

‘If you do not have adequate “faith” in my abilities to study the samples, a list of my credentials is—’

‘Did I say that? I didn’t say that.’ James Tiberius clenched his hands into fists and did not release them, his knuckles once again tension-white. ‘I lived with the stuff.’

‘I cannot allow a civilian to oversee a sensitive scientific experiment of this magnitude.’

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ James Tiberius said.

He remained in the doorway for thirty-seven minutes and fourteen seconds after Spock turned from him and returned to his research. Spock did not hear James Tiberius leave, but he was monitoring the situation, and was therefore aware of the exact time at which James Tiberius chose to depart.

His reappearance, seventeen minutes and twenty-eight seconds after his departure, was not expected.

‘I brought gloves,’ he said. ‘So I won’t catch anything.’ He held up his hands to show that there were standard-issue medical officer rubber gloves on both.

‘Were those obtained legitimately?’ Spock asked.

James Tiberius stared at him.

‘In any case, regardless of the methods you employed to obtain them,’ Spock said, ‘that you have them now does not permit you to oversee—’

‘—“a sensitive scientific experiment of this magnitude”.’ James Tiberius stepped over the threshold, between the narrow desks, past cultures and diagnostics regarding soil composition and the first three fungus samples’ molecular structures, to stand at Spock’s side. ‘I said I wasn’t going anywhere.’

‘You departed after making that particular claim,’ Spock pointed out.
'And I came back,' James Tiberius said. ‘So you’re not getting rid of me.’

‘I would not “get rid of you”. I would, however, alert security of a breach in protocol.’

‘I can help,’ James Tiberius said.

‘I do not require assistance.’

‘Starfleet officers work in teams all the time.’

They did; Spock did not need to state the obvious, which was that, of the two of them, only one was a Starfleet officer, while the other was not old enough yet to enroll in Starfleet Academy.

‘We’re wasting time,’ James Tiberius added. ‘Time we could be spending on figuring this whole thing out.’

‘I do not intend to waste any time,’ Spock said.

With that conclusion made blatant and irrefutable, he returned to his work. He could not call security, as its members were already strained with the additions to their regular tasks, to deal with the delinquencies of a single civilian. If his demands were not met, James Tiberius’ stubbornness and determination would last to a point, but they would not be sufficient to distract Spock from his duties. Eventually, James Tiberius would tire of a struggle that offered no success, however minor, and he would leave again, this time not to return.

Four hours, thirteen minutes and fifty-two seconds later, James Tiberius had not surrendered. Spock had completed his business, had logged his findings, and would continue his analysis of the recorded data in time to present all conclusions to Captain Pike in a timely fashion.

James Tiberius followed him out of the laboratory. Spock was certain to lock it so that James Tiberius would not enter once Spock had vacated, and by the time Spock reached the turbolift, James Tiberius had broken away, disappearing down a different hall.

The matter was curious, as it was entirely irregular. Spock had been an active participant in numerous away missions and this was not the first of which that had called for the Enterprise to operate as a rescue vessel. He understood gratitude and he understood reactions of displacement—in other words, civilians who displayed atypical interest in the form and function of a Federation starship in order to selectively avoid dwelling on whatever horrors they had most recently experienced. The tactics were not unfamiliar. Spock did not need to be the ship’s counselor to understand the basic principles of human coping mechanisms.

Yet none of these examples had ever produced a case quite like that of James Tiberius Kirk.

It claimed a sizeable enough percentage of Spock’s attention while presenting his findings to Captain Pike that he must have presented signs of distraction. While he did not grow lost in thought as a human might, his efficiency was not unquestionable; it took him three-point-seven seconds longer to arrive at his conclusion than his previous research would have indicated.

The look on Captain Pike’s face as he sat behind his desk—along with the fingers pressed to his left temple—suggested that he was aware of Spock’s distraction, but Spock would not be so bold as to assume sole responsibility for the captain’s troubled expression. There was a wealth of other concerns the captain was currently weighing.

They had not anticipated having to direct an investigation upon entering orbit around Tarsus IV. The matter of the missing Governor Kodos was an ongoing concern, one that only served to stir up
further questions rather than provide any satisfactory answers. Reports were still being processed from the interviews with the survivors, which meant that there was no official statement, and Captain Pike was a sympathetic officer—a fine quality in a starship captain, but one that presented emotional complications.

Spock awaited further instructions.

Captain Pike cleared his throat.

‘You look like you’ve got something else on your mind, Spock.’

Another factor of Captain Pike’s command was that he had an uncanny way of turning Spock’s own observations around onto him. It was not a telepathic ability—the captain was only human, after all—but one that demonstrated keen intuition and insight into every one of his crew. It was worthy of Spock’s respect, and thus it did not trouble him to be dealt that which came close to a personal inquiry.

‘If I may, I would address a topic that falls beyond the purview of my scientific findings,’ Spock said.

Captain Pike nodded, scratching the hair above his left ear where silver threads were most prominent among the darker color of his hair.

‘This is about the kid, right? Your lab assistant?’

Spock had not neglected to include James Tiberius’ presence from his earlier report. He did not intend to be viewed as secretive, even when it came to small matters of protocol. As the first Vulcan officer in Starfleet, it was important to lead by example. He nodded.

‘James Tiberius Kirk,’ Spock said. ‘It would seem he has an interest in our investigation.’

‘Kirk.’ Captain Pike adopted another of his thoughtful poses, in which he rubbed his chin to gauge whether or not he was in need of a shave. ‘Kirk, Kirk… You know, I wrote a senior thesis on a Captain Kirk.’

‘If the subject of that thesis was Captain George Kirk of the USS Kelvin, then James Tiberius Kirk is his second son,’ Spock confirmed.

‘Any other family?’

‘A mother, Winona Kirk, and an older brother, George Samuel Kirk, both of whom are listed on the colony’s manifest, neither of whom are accounted for in our most recent tally of Tarsus IV’s survivors.’

Captain Pike shook his head against the inside of his thumb, breathing against the thin skin, the wrinkles on his brow briefly deepening. ‘Nasty business. You know, that’s a terrible thing.’

Spock allowed this summation of the emotional impact of the situation to pass uncommented upon, as it often proved beneficial for Captain Pike to express his emotions in order to rise above them. They ultimately colored, rather than clouded, his judgment.

‘So,’ Captain Pike continued, as anticipated, back straightening. ‘What about him? Aside from his obvious interest in the scientific side of our operations on the Enterprise, that is.’

Spock had assumed he had made the cause for his concern clear within his official report, but as
Captain Pike was under an extra measure of personal stress, Spock did not mind restating the obvious. ‘His apparent interest in our investigation has led him to assert himself in a manner that, to any other science officer, would prove disruptive.’

‘But not to this particular science officer,’ Captain Pike said. Spock nodded. ‘Just so we’re clear.’

‘He has exhibited signs of above-average intelligence,’ Spock continued. ‘He has also made several statements that suggest the distress signal was one he himself had engineered.’

‘Now, how about that? Sounds like a clever kid.’

‘His cleverness is a matter of fact. His interest is a point of inconvenience.’

Captain Pike leaned closer over his desk. ‘Care to clarify, Mr. Spock?’

‘He is a civilian,’ Spock said, ‘as well as a minor. He lacks the training and the clearance to involve himself in our sensitive research, and given his high intelligence quotient, he should be aware that all distractions provided by himself to those attempting to solve the mysteries of his ill-fated colony will only work at cross-purposes with his desires.’

Captain Pike was silent for a long moment: exactly thirteen point five two seconds. Then, in what Spock could only assume was a reaction to extreme stress coupled with a lack of compensatory rest and relaxation, Captain Pike chuckled.

It was not the expected reaction from a man of Pike’s distinction, though humans did not regularly operate in a logical fashion, wherein cause followed a straight line to effect. He shook his head, rubbed the corners of his eyes, and settled back in his chair without the rigorously upright posture of a Starfleet captain conducting an official debriefing.

‘Makes sense, doesn’t it, Spock?’

‘I must request clarification,’ Spock said.

‘Considering, number one, the kid lived through what it is you’re looking into. Seems to me like he doesn’t just want to know, he wants to be a part of the learning process. Feels like it’s his right. And, number two, for whatever reason, it also seems to me like he just might have taken a shine to you.’

The colloquialism was one that suggested the development of an inexplicable and sudden affection for another individual. The inexplicable and sudden were accurate; the affection, however, was not at all present, and Spock found himself surprised by Captain Pike’s lack of perception where he had been admirably perceptive in the past.

‘From the looks of things, you think your captain’s talking nonsense—don’t you, Spock?’ Pike asked.

‘I would not breach protocol to imply—’ Spock began.

Pike waved his hand. ‘Never mind that, Spock. All I’m saying is, the kid’s been through something neither of us can understand. He may be smart, but there’s a different between knowing a lot and thinking straight. He needs a project to find some equilibrium—there’s no harm in that. That is, if he has somebody to supervise him. Make sure he doesn’t get himself into any trouble.’

‘The aforementioned duties do not fall within the parameters of my job description,’ Spock said. It was not that he believed Captain Pike required the reminder, yet it was within the parameters of his job description to offer his captain guidance and counsel.
Captain Pike raised his eyebrows, the movement creating new creases in his forehead. ‘You’re telling me the best first officer in Starfleet can’t deal with one kid? One human kid, by the way. It’s not like I’m asking you to take on a Gorn hatchling.’

‘I have no expertise in the matters of childcare,’ Spock said.

‘Well, join the club,’ Captain Pike replied. The lassitude of his body language suggested that he was largely unconcerned by Spock’s protests. He sat back in his chair, stretching out a troublesome spinal injury that he had incurred while wrestling with a member of the Gorn species. Chief Medical Officer Puri had referred to the condition as a slipped disc, and had proscribed any further reptilian wrestling in the future.

Spock could not allow his sympathies for a superior officer to distract him from the matter at hand.

He could, however, feel any last vestiges of control over the situation slipping from his grasp. Very soon Captain Pike’s mind would have to be considered ‘made up’, and there would be no further space for negotiation after that point. Spock had to act quickly.

‘Surely there are other crewmen aboard the vessel who have had experience with parenting human children of their own,’ he suggested. ‘Prior knowledge of childcare would recommend such an individual. Perhaps one of them—’

‘You know, Spock,’ Captain Pike said, ‘I never would’ve pegged you as someone who’d try to foist an assignment off onto someone else.’

‘I was not aware of any assignment,’ Spock replied. ‘Merely a suggestion.’

‘Clear instruction,’ Captain Pike corrected.

‘Am I to understand that my assignment is James Tiberius Kirk?’ Spock asked.

‘Yes,’ Captain Pike folded his hands on his desk, leaning forward again for added emphasis. ‘Don’t think you’re gonna get out of this one on a technicality, Spock. I’ve learned from the last time. I know what I’m doing.’

It was evident at all times that Captain Pike was well enough aware of his surroundings to manipulate them in his favor; however, Spock did not comment on the more literal interpretation of this statement. He knew when he had been bested, and when it was proper form to withdraw.

‘Very well, Captain,’ Spock said. ‘I shall endeavor to say the same of my own actions soon enough.’

Spock was well versed in personal methods of deflecting trouble, but he had never attempted to apply these principles to a second individual under the auspices of his care. Only time would tell whether his efforts would be of merit—but he would not contravene the explicit orders of his captain.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Spock handles fungus cultures and a small teenager.

First Officer’s Log, Supplemental, Stardate 2249.46.

I will forthwith commence a thorough chronicling of the process of attending to the specific needs of the subject, James Tiberius Kirk—an individual first mentioned in my First Officer’s Log, Stardate 2249.45, for reference.

As is standard, I disclosed the nature of my newly assigned duties with the specialist previously tasked with the charge of caring for this subject, ship’s counselor Chapel.

Despite her initial surprise—which did not contradict my primary response to the assignment—Doctor Chapel has agreed with Captain Pike’s better judgment, and I shall not question either her expertise or my captain’s in this regard.

I intend to commit myself to this assignment, no matter how unorthodox it may be, with the objective that success is the only acceptable outcome. How this success will be measured shall be based upon the following rubric of my own devising.

One: Scientific education of the subject, James Tiberius Kirk;
Two: A structured environment in which the subject, James Tiberius Kirk, will be able to re-acustom himself to traditional human socialization patterns;
Three: Distraction of the subject, James Tiberius Kirk, from his presumably tumultuous emotional state, in order that he will develop the skills of logic and reason, with which to address that emotional state, with the understanding that without those skills, he will instead succumb to that emotional state.

Additions to or subtractions from the rubric will be noted as they are made.

*

James Tiberius was outside Spock’s cabin in the morning. It was zero-five hundred exactly, thirty minutes before the other members of the alpha bridge crew were to relieve the gamma members, and earlier than most human males of the same age would choose to be awake, based on Spock’s observations of their sleep patterns. Most human males aged fourteen to twenty-one preferred to ‘sleep in’.

‘Who were you talking to in there?’ James Tiberius asked.

‘I was recording a First Officer’s log,’ Spock replied.

Though James Tiberius had gone to extremes in order to initiate conversation, he appeared surprised that Spock had responded to the question. ‘I heard my name a couple of times,’ he said at last.

‘Personnel listening to a superior officer’s private log or log supplemental without permission can be grounds for a court-martial.’
'Fine. Don’t tell me,’ James Tiberius said.

Spock had not intended to tell him.

‘How were you made aware of the location of my cabin?’ he asked instead.

‘Maybe I was just passing by. Could be a coincidence.’

‘To believe in coincidence,’ Spock said, ‘is to believe in luck. I am not an advocate of either.’

‘You don’t believe in luck?’ James Tiberius bit the corner of his thumb, which must have been a habit, as the skin around the nail was raw and cracked. ‘You’re wrong. Bad luck’s real.’

‘If you met me outside my cabin by coincidence, then it is likely you have intended to travel in a different direction,’ Spock continued. ‘With that in mind, I cannot assume that you seek to spend another day attending my progress in the science lab.’

‘I looked it up on the ship database.’ James Tiberius’ habit of answering questions that had not been asked—or questions that had been asked earlier in the conversation, choosing to answer them on his own terms and no sooner—had a chaotic effect on communication. Spock made a mental note to revise his rubric for James Tiberius’ re-education to include the improvement of his interactive skills. ‘Guess I shouldn’t have done that.’

‘Though sections of the ship’s database are not available to civilians, the information you requested is not restricted. No breach of protocol will be reported to the captain in this instance.’

‘You gonna try and ditch me on the way to the labs?’ James Tiberius asked.

‘“Ditch” you,’ Spock repeated.

‘Oh my god,’ James Tiberius said. Spock waited, but this did not seem to be a plea to any human deities either imaginary or present, in the form of an icon, aboard the vessel. ‘You’re all super-smart but you don’t know what that means? How old are you?’

‘At the time of this interrogation, I am nineteen years of age,’ Spock informed him.

As there was no reason to linger and they were both capable of talking while walking, he started in the direction of the science labs. He had been delayed long enough. He did not invite James Tiberius to join him. Whether James Tiberius chose to follow or not would be noted in Spock’s observations, so that he might modify his own behavior in order to perfect his methods.

‘At the time of this interrogation.’ James Tiberius was compelled to quicken his stride in order to keep up. Although he was past the point of the average human male’s teenaged growth spurt, he was evidently still growing, which explained his persistent stubbornness in consuming at an inadvisable rate. ‘So you’d be a different age if I asked later today?’

Spock observed him out of the corner of his eye, long hair tucked behind freckled ears.

‘I’m just saying,’ James Tiberius shoved his hands into the pockets of his battered leather jacket. He persisted in wearing it despite the environmental controls of the Enterprise being adjusted to optimal levels. ‘Sometimes you don’t have to be so specific.’

‘It is my preference to err on the side of specificity,’ Spock replied. ‘There is nothing to regret in being understood too well.’
‘Yeah, but *some* people might think you’re weird.’

‘You speak of an eventuality that has already transpired and to which I have already become accustomed.’

A flicker of a smile passed across James Tiberius’ face. Spock had occasion to observe it before it vanished, dipping beneath the surface like a sliver of white replicated turkey meat in a large bowl of stew.

Something about Spock’s statement had pleased him.

Spock made another mental note of the incident. It was rare enough to be worth further consideration at a later hour.

‘OK, what’s on the agenda for today?’ James Tiberius withdrew his hands to hold them up, mimicking a position of surrender. ‘Don’t think I didn’t look, either, but you don’t update your personal schedule in advance with anything other than the basics. Which is weird, because you said it yourself: you’re a details guy.’

‘The work we are undertaking here can and often must change according to immediate necessity,’ Spock said. ‘I cannot predict with accuracy what I will be attending to in the laboratory on a daily basis, and thus I have not recorded my planned activities for the day.’

‘Except you knew it’d be something science-y in the science lab.’

‘Perhaps it has already occurred to you that, were I to phrase my intended activities in such a fashion, it would not be Starfleet regulation,’ Spock said.

They entered the turbolift alone and were not joined by any other parties on the ascent to their intended floor. Spock continued—he had not stopped—to catalog his observations.

James Tiberius, unlike other individuals his age, did not fidget. He held his body still in a manner reminiscent of the *le-matyas* of Spock’s home planet—not when they sunned themselves upon the rocks at midday, but when they waited in the shadows behind those same rocks at dusk, so still they could have been an unseen and unimportant element of the shadows themselves. They were deadly in their stillness, ruthless in their silence.

Yet James Tiberius was not a beast of prey. There were other affectations of his chosen behavior that dispelled any similarities between his posture and a *le-matyas’:* such as the quick, shifting sweeps of his eyes; his constant awareness of his surroundings not to assert dominance over other living organisms, but to outmaneuver them. Despite a lack of movement, James Tiberius was anything but calm. The tension of his muscles was undeniable. His posture was hard. It did not appear that he, like so many of his peers, found himself able to relax. This was not strictly to his detriment, as the indulgence in relaxation among those same peers was, but its incongruity was worthy of prolonged study.

‘You’re staring,’ James Tiberius said.

‘As a science officer, it is my duty to observe,’ Spock replied.

The turbolift doors opened. Spock stepped out into the hall and followed his customary route to the laboratories with his uncustomary companion.

James Tiberius made no sound when he walked. The clipped stride of Spock’s boot-heels against the floor was muted to human ears by a plethora of surrounding, ship-wide noises, but was stark and
loud to Spock’s senses in comparison to the silence James Tiberius cultivated. It was as though he had gained a second shadow, another half-comparison to the observed behaviors of le-matyas in the wild that was a false equivalency. Similar developmental manifestations caused by dissimilar environments suggested separate, not analogous, instincts.

‘You used to talk more,’ James Tiberius said.

Spock stepped into the science lab and took his place behind the fungus samples. Sample Four had mutated overnight; it had been green-tinged white when Spock last checked, but it was now a blue-tinged, sickly red. Spock made note of the sudden change with interest.

‘That’s stage two.’ James Tiberius had leaned over Spock’s shoulder, his voice close to Spock’s ear before he turned and shifted back, placing a preferable distance of five to six inches between them. ‘I could’ve told you to look out for it. Happens basically right away. You think it’s some kinda frost, so you scrape it off, but next morning it’s inedible.’

‘Stage two,’ Spock said. ‘Are there other, further stages beyond the second?’

‘Five,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘But that’s only if it rains. And it’s not gonna rain in here.’

‘I shall secure a sample and expose it to precipitation in order to follow the effect had on the fungus in multiple climates.’

Spock put on his gloves while James Tiberius watched; he separated the sample in two, while James Tiberius continued to watch; he secured a new observation tank for the secondary experiment, while James Tiberius regularly forgot or simply neglected to blink.

‘The other ones don’t react to rainwater,’ James Tiberius said, just as Spock began the same treatment of the five remaining samples. ‘It’s just, uh—subject four. That’s the one that—that’s the one.’

‘Did you make full use of the schoolhouse laboratory in order to conduct your own study of the samples while on Tarsus IV?’ Spock asked.

James Tiberius licked his dry lips. ‘Yeah, when I could.’

The statement was sufficiently cryptic that Spock raised a brow, but James Tiberius offered no clarification.

‘It’s number four, that’s all I’m saying. I’m trying to save you some time,’ James Tiberius said.

‘A thorough experiment is the only experiment worth conducting,’ Spock replied. ‘Thoroughness is not a waste of time.’

‘Uh huh.’ James Tiberius flicked his long hair from his eyes in order to fix Spock with a gaze that was eloquent in its lack of expression.

Spock moved onto the third sample in question, choosing not to pass it over on James Tiberius’ counsel alone. This was not a personal slight but a decision Spock would have made regardless of the source of the recommendation.

If James Tiberius had anything further to add, he would no doubt see fit to add it with or without Spock’s input.

‘Must be nice,’ he said moments later from five point five inches over Spock’s shoulder.
The third sample was to be moved to a heat-intensive location in order to observe the effects of both ultraviolet and other spectrums of light on the molecular structure of the fungus. Spock had already concluded that his efforts would be better rewarded by keeping his focus on the task at hand, rather than inquiring after James Tiberius’ personal objectives.

‘I mean, telling yourself that you can do things just for the sake of science or whatever.’ James Tiberius crept closer, rising on the balls of his feet to view Spock’s experiment from his less-than-ideal vantage point just over Spock’s shoulder. ‘You can be thorough because you don’t have to think about the real consequences, like people dying. Yeah, it sounds nice to me.’

Spock was preoccupied with a minute adjustment of the specimen under the heat lamp. Some of the white fungus from the third sample had rubbed off on the surface of his glove. He would have to acquire a new pair in order to avoid cross-contamination.

‘Were this a situation in which contagion and quarantine were of the highest level of concern, then it is possible that alacrity would be prized above a thorough examination,’ Spock said. ‘In such a case, the prioritization of preserving life above scientific discovery would indeed be preferable.’

He could make allowance for the variables that came with the employment emergency protocols. Had Spock been one of the colony scientists on Tarsus IV, it was likely that his experiments would have progressed differently.

‘Yeah,’ James Tiberius said again. ‘Well—fat load of good it did everyone, huh?’

James Tiberius’ disagreement did not seem to be a matter of speculative interest nor the precursor to a fresh topic of debate, and thus Spock could not consider their conversation to be one of purely intellectual distinction.

Doctor Chapel had assured Spock that it was essential to understand an individual’s unique perspective before he could hope to engage in rewarding interactions. As James Tiberius was currently in Spock’s care, it was Spock’s responsibility to ensure that communications advanced in a satisfactory fashion.

‘By “fat load of good”, am I to interpret you have intended to convey sarcasm?’ Spock removed the contaminated gloves and disposed of them in the proper biohazard container, replacing them with a new pair. The thin, powdered rubber was not an unpleasant sensation for his sensitive fingertips, merely a pronounced change in textures.

‘Sarcasm,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Sure.’

He said the word ‘sure’ with the same slow inflection he had used to say the word ‘weird’, thereby imbuing the two with comparable implications.

‘I believe I have located the site of the specific molecular mutation that affects Sample Four when exposed to H2O,’ Spock said. ‘If it has been your intention to learn from these experiments and to observe for yourself the scientific principles behind the samples, I would suggest that you do so at this time.’

While James Tiberius peered through the microscope’s viewfinder, which had been set to a magnification of Spock’s specifications, and chewed his bottom lip in thoughtful intensity, Spock recorded the newly collected data in his log, along with the caveat that there was now evidence that the fungus may have been the result of biochemical engineering, rather than a natural, environmental occurrence. The possibility was disturbing, but not beyond the realm of possibility. Whether he was aware of this or not, James Tiberius was transfixed by the magnification: the nodes and globules; the
swift replications and transformations, the unprecedented and virulent growth patterns that operated with scientific precision, like an equation come to life and tinted an opalescent, half-translucent pink-blue.

At last, James Tiberius pulled away from the viewfinder, pushing his hair out of his eyes, mouth twisting as he sucked his bottom lip under his teeth.

‘Nineteen,’ he said.

Spock removed the slide and returned it to its chamber. ‘To what are you referring?’

‘Nineteen’s pretty young to be somebody’s first officer,’ James Tiberius clarified.

He had placed emphasis on the importance of the research they were conducting, yet now sought to shift the subject of conversation elsewhere. His motives were unfathomable because they were illogical. ‘There are only three examples in Starfleet’s history of another officer of my age achieving the same position on a Constitution-class vessel.’

‘You don’t have to brag about it,’ James Tiberius said.

‘Vulcans do not brag.’

‘Everybody brags.’

‘Vulcans do not. A statement of fact is neither condemnation nor praise.’

‘You’re young for a first officer,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Really young.’

‘As I graduated early and at the top of my class and my tests for aptitude placed me in the highest percentile of all candidates recommended for the assignment, Captain Pike selected me to serve as his first officer aboard the Enterprise. I accepted.’

‘You’re bragging again.’

‘I am stating facts,’ Spock replied. He returned to the viewfinder, observing the splitting cells, the fungal sample still—despite the odds—very much alive, and still attempting to propagate. It was as tenacious as the few remaining survivors of the colony it had nearly obliterated. ‘Your choice to interpret the facts as self-aggrandizement is indicative of your perspective, not of mine.’

‘You don’t have any friends,’ James Tiberius said, ‘do you?’

‘I fail to appreciate the relevance of this inquiry.’

‘I bet it’s more fun talking to the fungus,’ James Tiberius said.

That Spock had numerous colleagues and peers—whose private opinions of him did not affect their ability to work with him smoothly as a functioning part of the crew unit—was not a matter of James Tiberius’ concern. If James Tiberius had friends of his own, his decision to spend the day with Spock rather than with any of them was apparent. Given the opportunity to consider this obvious detail, someone of James Tiberius’ intellectual capabilities would soon realize the fault in his logic.

Twenty-six minutes and thirteen seconds of silence passed.

‘Forget I said that,’ James Tiberius said.

‘The Vulcan memory is without flaw,’ Spock replied.
‘Ugh,’ James Tiberius said. He concerned himself with Spock’s PADD and Spock concerned himself with Sample One, the framework upon which the rest of the samples formed their distinct molecular structures.

‘You are dissatisfied with this assessment,’ Spock observed.

‘It’s \textit{way} more personal than that,’ James Tiberius replied.

Receiving unfavorable observations about his personal character was nothing new to Spock, whereas the fungus he was currently analyzing was another matter. It was carbon-based, its content unnaturally high in nitrogen, and it was replicating at an unprecedented rate.

‘I’m gonna crack your password,’ James Tiberius continued, unobserved. ‘These Federation-issue bad boys all respond to the same algorithms. It’s just a matter of time.’

‘You are welcome to try,’ Spock said.

A further sixteen minutes passed.

The system settings of Spock’s PADD had been silenced; however, at the seventeenth minute after the device fell into James Tiberius’ possession, the room was filled with the faint trills of notifications. The PADD vibrated faintly, James Tiberius’ fingers skimming the screen as he flicked and tapped, searching out information and expanding the screen size to zoom in on his discovery.

Spock observed James Tiberius in the field of his peripheral vision, not giving him the benefit of his full attention. Any sensitive information on the PADD was encoded with a Starfleet security cryptogram, as well as Spock’s additional, private encryption. It was not an attempt to distinguish himself from his peers by going above and beyond Starfleet’s usual precautions, but Vulcans were by nature vigilant about their discretion.

James Tiberius was not mining for data. From what Spock was able to glean through basic surveillance, he was researching and monitoring the latest news cycles. The sounds were from the numerous updates arriving vis-à-vis various Federation worlds and major colonies. His eyes met Spock’s in a brief moment of interested overlap. He glanced toward Sample Four, then away.

‘We got cut off, toward the end.’ James Tiberius tapped his finger against the edge of the PADD restlessly. ‘Dampening field, no communications in or out. I just wanted to see… what I’ve been missing, I guess.’

‘Our investigative reports mentioned the discovery of a power generator within one of the colony’s bunkers that would have been suitable to the task of imposing a dampening field. Sabotaging the generator would have been the most viable solution,’ Spock replied. He had not yet reached the point where he could judge with certainty whether it was better to answer James Tiberius’ statements with the pertinent information he required, or whether it was best to ‘keep him in the dark’, as Captain Pike would have put it. The metaphor had little to do with physical lighting conditions; there was nowhere on the Enterprise quite as bright as the highly illuminated research laboratories.

However, as this task had been assigned specifically to Spock, it could be reasonably assumed that his precise attributes would be valued. Most expressly: his honesty.

If Captain Pike believed that Spock’s unique characteristics were preferable for the James Tiberius assignment, then he must also have believed that Spock’s ability to speak the truth without being hindered by emotionality was required when dealing with the subject.

‘That wasn’t an option,’ James Tiberius said.
‘Then there were mitigating factors preventing you from approaching the area in which that power generator was contained.’

‘It was off limits before the fire,’ James Tiberius said.

His jaw hardened. His hands trembled for one point six seconds before they stilled, once again under his full motor control.

‘Our landing party was already aware of the possibility of the event in question, given the evidence,’ Spock said.

‘It’s not about evidence.’ James Tiberius held to the PADD as though he required an anchor—but there had been no shift in the gravitational settings within the laboratory, so the effect on his equilibrium must have been internal. ‘It’s about what happened.’

‘The past leaves only evidence,’ Spock said. ‘Whatever form the evidence takes may be subject to interpretation, but it is evidence nonetheless. This is the language of historical research, similar to the language of equations we employ to understand the stars.’

James Tiberius stood, taking the PADD with him.

‘If you have finished your work here today, you must leave all materials with me before you depart,’ Spock said. ‘To take a PADD assigned to a Starfleet officer’s use is a serious offense.’

The fungus had expanded, upon its contact with moisture, to four times its original size. James Tiberius put the PADD down on the nearest desk, his jaw clenched, then stuffed his balled fists into his pockets. He left silently but angrily, revealing that he had already learned an uncommon lesson for one so young: that true anger was best expressed without making a sound.

*
Chapter 5

First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.47.

I would not question the wisdom of my captain regarding my subsidiary assignment. However, I have found no ‘common ground’ with James Tiberius Kirk upon which we may ‘meet’, as I believe was my captain’s intention in tasking me with the assignment in the first place.

Though I would not make additions to her considerably increased workload, I have scheduled regular appointments with Doctor Chapel in order to gain insight into the events of Tarsus IV. It was at the first of these appointments—conducted at eleven-hundred, Stardate 2249.47, earlier this day—that I was made aware of the fire previously mentioned by James Tiberius Kirk and corroborated by the physical signs thereof on the surface of the planet, Tarsus IV.

I have already been informed that the subject, James Tiberius Kirk, was—according to multiple survivors in Doctor Chapel’s care—a key figure in their survival.

The events as I have come to understand them, having constructed a timeline with Doctor Chapel advising, are as follows:

- Approximately six months following the final shuttle of colonists arriving at Tarsus IV, the destruction of the crops by an unknown fungal growth (consult samples) caused widespread panic regarding resources.
- Approximately two weeks following the destruction of the crops by said unknown fungal growth, Governor Kodos implemented a strict rations policy in order to curtail the panic.
- Approximately one week following the implementation of Governor Kodos’ rations policy, the decision was made, also by Governor Kodos, to safeguard the lives of four-thousand of the colonists with the execution of the other four-thousand.
- The children whom we rescued fled at this time, hence the confusion regarding subsequent events leading up to the fire.

Further information regarding the nature of that escape may be offered by James Tiberius Kirk, if it is to be offered at all.

My human crewmates speak of horror and tragedy as though single words are capable of imparting the meaning they seek amidst loss and destruction.

I have no such words.

* 

In the evening, after the day’s final meal, Spock acquired an unused PADD with limited data access and functionality and returned to his cabin. Thirty-six minutes later, he heard James Tiberius outside the cabin door—not because James Tiberius wished to be heard, but precisely because he did not wish it. The preternatural silence recalled to Spock’s mind the lack of an echo made by James
Tiberius’ careful footsteps. Without a doubt, James Tiberius was once again lurking on the other side of Spock’s cabin door.

Spock could not encourage this habit to develop.

He reviewed his options quickly and quietly.

If he responded to James Tiberius’ presence outside the door, this would no doubt reinforce the behavior through positive results. However, ignoring him might be interpreted as going against a direct order from his captain.

When Captain Pike had arranged for Spock to supervise James Tiberius, perhaps he had not known what a forthright character the subject possessed. It did not seem entirely logical to Spock that the parameters of his newfound job description should go on past the point of operational hours. Yet the fact remained that James Tiberius was a person and not a position aboard the Enterprise with a series of scheduled hours and downtime.

Another point of fact was that Spock had acquired a PADD for James Tiberius to use. It would resemble a waste of resources to hold it past the point at which James Tiberius would still require the information to be found thereon.

‘Enter,’ Spock said in a clear voice.

The door hissed open, almost as quickly as Spock had spoken. The timing was suspiciously close to an overlap, as though James Tiberius had already been in the process of opening the locked door before Spock granted him permission to enter.

‘I was gonna get it eventually.’ James Tiberius stood from a crouch pushing his long blond hair out of his eyes and tucking it behind one ear.

‘Algorithms,’ Spock observed.

James Tiberius used his hands to form the shape of twin phasers in order to imitate firing in Spock’s direction.

‘You got it. Starfleet should really update its systems. It’s way too easy to get into officers’ quarters on this ship.’

‘The engineering department would no doubt benefit from your findings.’ Spock did not rise from where he had seated himself, the new PADD in front of him and an ongoing chess game at the far end of his desk. Tonight he would make his move as black, having moved white the previous night.

James Tiberius had the foresight to close the door behind him when he entered, leaning his shoulders against the solid wall.

‘Yeah, I can see that now: a sixteen-year-old colonist from Iowa’s got a thing or two to tell you about security encryptions. I’m sure it’d go over real well with the guys in red.’

Despite the heavy sarcasm in his tone, James Tiberius did not bother to conceal his interest in Spock’s living quarters. His quick eyes surveyed the bare walls and the narrow bed in the corner. Doctor Chapel had, only the previous week, suggested that Spock utilize some personal touches from home in order to imbue his room with ‘more character’. As of yet, the changes had not been implemented.

‘I have not noted your reluctance in offering me advice on my scientific methods,’ Spock said.
James Tiberius blinked, noticing the chessboard first before turning his attention to Spock. He kept his back to the wall.

‘That’s different,’ he said.

‘Science and engineering departments do indeed have their differences, although they also exhibit significant overlap.’

James Tiberius had moved closer to Spock’s desk—not to the spot at which Spock sat, but to the chessboard, hands no longer in his pockets, despite his fingers remaining curled into fists. He stared at the chess pieces with an intensity that was not unlike physical contact, touching with his gaze what his fingers could not.

‘That PADD’s different, too,’ James Tiberius said without looking up. When he did lift his chin, it was to meet Spock’s eyes with his own directly, as they were of a height, since Spock was seated. ‘The one right there, that’s not your PADD. You take somebody else’s PADD, Spock? Isn’t that against the rules? You said so yourself.’

‘I met with the chief engineer on the Enterprise in order to request a reformatted PADD for personal use,’ Spock replied. ‘It does not have access to the full range of applications, contacts, schedules and data granted an officer of Starfleet, but as the request was filled, the PADD in question is yours, albeit on a temporary basis.’

‘“Mine on a temporary basis”,’ Jim repeated.

‘In order to familiarize yourself with the Federation news bulletins you were denied, due to the effects of the dampening field.’

‘Yeah, but—’

‘It will also allow you access to multiple scientific databases, which will aid you in further research of fungal growth patterns and molecular structures. It will prevent you from accessing confidential Starfleet records and files, but it will prove an invaluable tool for the aforementioned purposes, in which you repeatedly expressed interest.’

James Tiberius rubbed the corner of his jaw with his knuckles. Spock did not bridge the distance still extant between them, as James Tiberius could choose when and how to claim the tool that had been offered to him.

‘If I have misjudged your interest, or you intended to mislead me purposefully regarding the motives for said interest—’ Spock began.

‘I say what I mean.’ James Tiberius’ hand shot out, snatch- ing the PADD off the desk as though he believed Spock was teasing him and at any moment would rescind the offer without warning. As Spock knew he had spent much of his recent time socializing primarily with children, who had the potential to be petty and cruel in their exercises of their so-called ‘humor’, Spock could not blame him entirely for the misconstruction of Spock’s character. He would soon learn the error of his assumptions and would adjust his expectations accordingly.

James Tiberius cleared his throat and muttered something under his breath.

‘There is no need to express your gratitude. I acted as logic dictated I must. Now that you are in possession of a PADD of your own, you will have no future need to borrow mine.’

As he was already engaged in exploring the capabilities of his new equipment, James Tiberius did
not reply immediately, his face illuminated by the glow from the screen. Without requesting permission to stay, he folded his legs underneath him, once more choosing to occupy a tactically advantageous position—this time with his back against Spock’s desk instead of against the wall.

It must have been a conscious decision made to prevent being taken by surprise from behind, so much a function of his psyche that it appeared naturally instinctive as opposed to a method cultivated over time. Not all sixteen-year-old human males operated under these parameters. It was unique to James Tiberius, as was the expression of twisted concentration he wore as he sought to test the boundaries and limitations of the PADD braced against his bent knees.

‘It’s not bad,’ James Tiberius said at last.

Spock had since returned to his end-of-day duties. ‘I would not have offered it if I did not have reason to believe it would prove adequate.’

‘Do Vulcans not have a phrase in their language for saying “you’re welcome”?’

‘Extraneous little dialogue is not regularly employed.’

‘“Little dialogue”?’

As their current topic fell within the confines of that definition, Spock did not answer.

‘You mean small talk,’ James Tiberius said. Then, with a brief pause, he added, ‘There’s no other fungus on file that’s anything like the one back there.’

‘It exhibits anomalous traits,’ Spock agreed.

‘Hell with anomalous, it’s downright malicious.’ James Tiberius’s fingers skidded over the surface of the PADD’s screen, his features twisted into an expression of searing anger, which passed more quickly than San Francisco cloud cover.

It was not the first time Spock had encountered the human tendency to project their emotions and motivations onto inanimate objects, or other similarly inappropriate substances. A fungus could not be held responsible for its actions. At a molecular level it was functionally primitive; it existed primarily to replicate and consume the energy it required in order to fuel its replication.

It held no maliciousness towards the humans it had affected any more than the viable crops it had destroyed sought to deny the colonists their nourishment.

‘Bad luck’ was a specific set of circumstances—inclement weather, incubating temperatures and high moisture content in the air—and it was those circumstances that caused the fungus to mutate beyond control on Tarsus IV. It could not be considered an assault outright, but judging by the look on James Tiberius’ face, it was easier for him to perceive it as an attack with premeditation than to face the truth.

Humans did not often embrace or even accept the spontaneous and random occurrences of the natural world. They tended to require a clear-cut villain, someone to blame when circumstances soured.

James Tiberius had centered his blame on the fungus. It remained to be seen whether these sentiments would last.

There was also a second option: that James Tiberius had deliberately misplaced his anger in order to release it, incrementally, upon a target that he viewed as comparatively safe.
‘My research is principally scientific,’ Spock said.

James Tiberius raised his head, meeting Spock’s eyes with his own before the moment passed. He was not impressed.

‘No kidding.’

‘Therefore I cannot make any comment on Starfleet security’s findings regarding the policies implemented by Governor Kodos in reaction to the dilemma presented by the fungus.’

James Tiberius’ posture had been stiff from the moment he had settled within Spock’s chambers. However, it was this topic of discussion that caused him to draw his knees up flush against his chest, folding in on himself in a defensive position, one that made it significantly more difficult for him to view and operate the PADD at the same time. This suggested that his attentions were elsewhere and that, despite appearances to the contrary, he had never devoted his full consideration to the Federation news cycles.

‘I’m gonna tell you what I told the counselor,’ James Tiberius said. ‘I don’t wanna talk about it.’

This statement seemed demonstrably untrue, and yet Spock was not yet well enough acquainted with the behavior of human teenagers to be able to delve further into the matter on his own.

Chapel had both the education and the experience necessary to broach difficult subjects with those under her supervision and care. As Captain Pike was aware of her capabilities and valued them accordingly, having specifically assigned her to his crew, it stood to reason that Spock had not been enlisted to provide the services under her purview. He was not expected to engage James Tiberius on the emotional level.

‘Your preference has been noted,’ Spock said.

James Tiberius’ ensuing silence was not without curiosity. More than once—seven times, to be precise—Spock felt the weight of James Tiberius’ gaze fall upon him, both accusatory and hesitant simultaneously. The resultant effect was that the two impulses negated one another, leaving simply a young man whose confusion had managed to best him.

‘You’re the first person who’s ever said something like that,’ James Tiberius said at last.

‘As you may recall, Vulcan memory is not easily faulted,’ Spock replied. ‘Having noted your preference, it will not be forgotten. Chapel is an expert in her field; I am an expert in mine. Neither of us would expect the other to intrude upon the other’s duties.’

‘And I’m not a fungus, so it’s not like you’re gonna study me.’

‘That you are both living organisms with tenacious tendencies is the extent of your similarities.’

‘Hey,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Did you just compare me to a fungus?’

Spock had not—albeit, technically, it was true that the comparison had been repeated in order to be disproved, James Tiberius had been the one who had broached the possibility, whereas Spock had been the one to refute it.

James Tiberius returned to his silence. Spock returned to his data. The conversation had been little more than a brief interlude in their more essential proceedings, and while James Tiberius exhibited the tendency to deflect, he was nonetheless capable of maintaining true concentration—if not entirely up to Vulcan standards.
When Spock rose and dimmed the lights at his station, he could once again feel James Tiberius’ scrutiny; a disturbance in the otherwise peaceful and private laboratory.

‘My functions as science officer and first officer aboard the USS Enterprise NCC-1701 experience overlap,’ Spock said, folding his hands behind his back. ‘However, the responsibilities of the latter must always take precedence over those of the former. I will be spending the following six hour shift on the bridge.’

‘Lemme guess.’ James Tiberius stood hastily, PADD tucked under one arm and held against his side by a sharp elbow pressed against equally sharp ribs. ‘I don’t have clearance to be on the bridge.’

‘Civilians are allowed to be given a tour, but only if they have submitted a request in advance, and only if that request has been approved.’

‘Whatever,’ James Tiberius said.

Once in the hallway, he again disappeared, leaving Spock to consider that he did not know where it was that James Tiberius went—whether he returned to the general housing quarters with the rest of his fellow survivors, or if he was determined to be incongruous in all walks of life, and separated himself from his peers. It was possible that not knowing the answer to this question indicated a failure on Spock’s part to gather thorough intelligence on the subject.

‘Mr. Spock.’ Captain Pike nodded from the captain’s chair in acknowledgment of Spock’s arrival from as Spock passed. ‘How’s your charge coming along?’

‘As a scientific pupil, he exhibits promise,’ Spock replied. ‘I will submit my full report concerning his strengths and weaknesses as a student later, in an official capacity.’

‘Huh.’ Captain Pike rubbed his chin, which revealed he had not shaved in at least twenty-four hours. ‘No, Mr. Spock, you know what? That won’t be necessary just yet. How about this: you’ll check in with me once you’ve had a breakthrough.’

‘A breakthrough,’ Spock repeated. ‘Captain, in order to follow your orders to the letter, I must request clarification—’

‘You’ll know it when you have it, Spock,’ Captain Pike said. ‘You might not have faith, but I do.’

Spock’s time on the bridge passed without noteworthy event. This pleased Captain Pike, who suggested that the crew was in need of ‘some peace and quiet for a change’, and the appraisal was not without merit. The lull would boost crew morale and reinvigorate the officers for future tasks.

James Tiberius was sitting on the floor, his back the wall, on the right side of the door to Spock’s cabin, six hours and fifteen minutes after they had separated. His presence did not answer the question of whether or not he had been with his peers during this time—it merely illustrated that he was capable of keeping track of time and remembering minor details, such as the duration of Spock’s shift, mentioned only once in passing.

‘You’re late,’ James Tiberius said.

He did not look up to punctuate his statement with eye contact, preferring to keep his gaze on the PADD in front of him. Yet the light from screen had dimmed, suggesting a certain amount of time had elapsed since his last action.

Spock did not need to consult the nearest time-keeping device to know that he was no later than usual as there had been no egregious delay in the time it had taken him to leave the bridge. There
was no need to defend his actions against an imaginary wrongdoing.

‘You have now broken into my private quarters for the second time,’ Spock replied.

It was not the first time he had observed James Tiberius exhibit the urge to pick a fight, behavior that would have been classified as illogical even by other humans. But to engage in such behavior with a Vulcan was the very definition of futility. James Tiberius would not achieve his goal with Spock, and therefore would be forced to seek a new method of distraction from the tumult of his innermost thoughts.

James Tiberius shrugged crookedly, left shoulder higher than his right. ‘You know what they say. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice…’

‘You are impliciting me as responsible for your break-in.’

‘I’m saying that a genius like you probably could’ve beefed up your security settings between then and now, once you realized all the faults I pointed out.’

‘As I have already informed you,’ Spock said, ‘my duties have to do with neither engineering nor security.’

‘So you’re making excuses for yourself.’

‘I am reminding you of my responsibilities as a Starfleet officer,’ Spock said.

A swift survey revealed that there was nothing out of place in Spock’s sleeping quarters; neither was there a mess by the small, private replicator behind his desk. In fact, Spock was very near to assuming, based on the lack of visual evidence, that there were no obvious changes within the room at all when he noticed that the pieces on his chess board had been rearranged.

Although Spock had not yet had the opportunity to conduct his nightly move, the remaining black rook had already been transported across the board to corner the white queen. It was neither check nor a checkmate, but it advanced the position of the black pieces considerably.

Spock studied the move. It was one of many he had considered earlier, although it had not risen to occupy the top three. His playing style was motivated principally by efficiency, whereas this move held more risk for the potentiality of a higher reward.

James Tiberius was watching him over the edge of his PADD.

‘You gonna get me thrown in the brig?’ he asked, licking his bottom lip when his voice, unexpectedly, wavered. He cleared his throat, another action that sought to explain the superficial reasons behind, as well as distract from, what may have been perceived as vulnerability.

‘Though I have not taken a complete inventory of my possessions, it does not appear that anything has been stolen. If, after I have satisfied myself that my terminal has not been hacked and my computer has not been used without my permission, there will be no foundation for formal charges, other than trespassing.’

James Tiberius rubbed his jaw with his shoulder, tracking Spock’s movements as Spock attended the state of his computer. It had not been powered up in his absence. There was no lingering warmth upon the keyboard from small, quick hands. All was well, save for the uninvited guest in his quarters.

‘I just wanted some privacy, that’s all.’ James Tiberius shrugged with an excessive show of forced
indifference. ‘The ship’s big, but it’s not so big we get our own space.’

‘We are not a transport vessel.’

‘Constitution-class, yeah. I remember.’

‘Yet, it is my understanding that this evening was one in which you were scheduled to meet with the ship’s counselor,’ Spock said. ‘This meeting was slated to commence in her offices at nineteen-hundred. As it is now nineteen-hundred-forty-five, it would appear most likely that you have not attended that meeting as planned.’

‘Guess I’m not the only one who can check up on somebody else’s private schedule,’ James Tiberius replied.

‘My responsibilities as first officer do include familiarizing myself with all potentially relevant knowledge.’

‘Potentially relevant’,’ James Tiberius repeated.

‘Have you informed Doctor Chapel of your intentional nonattendance?’

‘She’s got plenty of other kids to worry about,’ James Tiberius said. ‘As for me, I’m fine. It’s everybody else she should be worried about. She can spend that time looking after them.’

If James Tiberius was under the impression that the human emotional psyche, especially one presented by a subject of his young age, was not easily bruised by traumatic events—such as loss of family and stability—then he was mistaken. Spock had consulted multiple texts on the subject, as recommended to him by Chapel, and while there were divergent schools of thought within the field of psychological studies, they all agreed on key points. Likewise, James Tiberius was too intelligent to allow pride to convince him that he was not affected. If he could not believe that which he claimed, then Spock was even less inclined to do so.

‘You oughta hear ‘em,’ James Tiberius added. His face was hidden behind the rectangle of his PADD, the screen of which had gone completely dark. ‘In the night. All of ‘em having nightmares, waking each other up. Waking me up. You can’t sleep through that.’

‘A difficulty best presented to an individual capable of offering professional insight into the solution for that difficulty,’ Spock said.

‘You’re saying there’s stuff you’re not capable of?’

‘I am a first officer, not a ship’s counselor.’

‘Yeah, and that’s a good thing. You’d suck at it.’

‘If you believe that a statement to that effect is one by which I would be insulted, I must inform you that it is my lack of interest in and aptitude for such a specialization that precluded me from ever considering it in the first place.’

‘There wasn’t any judgment in the statement,’ James Tiberius said. ‘It was just a fact. Facts aren’t good or bad, right? You said so yourself.’

‘Indeed,’ Spock replied. ‘Then we have found a point of agreement.’

James Tiberius huffed. Spock had devoted months of dedicated study to the creation of a lexicon of
human facial tics and cues, but to draw upon that lexicon, he required a visual sample, preferably multiple samples. He could not see James Tiberius’ face; therefore, the lexicon was not presently at his disposal.

It was entirely possible that James Tiberius had purposefully chosen to put distance and a solid obstacle between them in order to prevent himself from being analyzed. His decision not to meet with Chapel corroborated this theory.

‘It is also my duty to inform the ship’s counselor of your whereabouts,’ Spock said. ‘It would be irresponsible to allow her to believe you are missing.’

‘Whatever,’ James Tiberius replied.

‘Whatever’ was a word for which Spock had little appreciation. It offered no clarification, no information, and no prospects for continuance. It might as well have been a mark of concluding punctuation for all that it brought to a conversation.

‘James Tiberius Kirk,’ Spock began.

James Tiberius flinched, the pert tip of his nose wrinkling. From Spock’s distance, it was impossible to discern between freckles and dirt dotting his skin. Whatever his reasons, despite recommendations offered by Chapel to all survivors of the Tarsus IV colony, he had not yet taken advantage of the sonic shower facilities aboard the Enterprise.

The color of his hair had darkened by an entire shade since Spock had first glimpsed him upon the surface of the planet, under the suns of Tarsus IV. One quarter of the variation could be attributed to the difference in lighting conditions aboard the Enterprise, but that was not the sole factor.

‘That’s a mouthful,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Makes me feel like I’m in trouble, First Officer Spock.’

The retaliation did not go unnoticed, but it was not the reciprocal gesture James Tiberius imagined it to be. Spock’s name was not his title, and its employment did not incur associations with poor performance, as Spock had never given Captain Pike nor anyone else reason or the opportunity to question his ability to execute his orders in an exemplary fashion.

‘As you are not a member of the crew, it is unlikely that you will be asked to bear any consequences due to your missed appointment,’ Spock informed him. ‘However, it is courteous to inform someone so that they may direct their time and energies elsewhere.’

‘So you’re just calling me rude.’

James Tiberius blinked, then pushed the hair from his eyes. Unlike when Spock had called him by his full name, he did not seem overly troubled by this starker self-evaluation.

‘I will contact Doctor Chapel.’ Spock had stated his intentions already, but he had found that humans sometimes required at least one repetition in order to understand the basic evolution of actions and their consequences. ‘She will have already noted your absence and sought to allay her concerns by determining your whereabouts.’

‘Well, she’s not gonna find me,’ James Tiberius said.

‘Which is precisely why it is my duty to inform her,’ Spock replied.

‘I thought all your duties were scientific, which is something I’m not.’
A peremptory examination of James Tiberius’ expression revealed his fleeting look of satisfaction. He was not smiling, but there was a distinct aspect of contentment around his blue eyes and in the shape of his chapped mouth that Spock could not discount.

‘Your attention to detail is admirable,’ Spock said.

‘I remember the things you say, if that’s what you’re saying.’

James Tiberius stretched one of his legs out, keeping his right knee tucked firmly against his chest. The relaxation was a matter of minutiae but nonetheless worthy of note.

Spock determined that he was, at the very least, providing—due to James Tiberius’ preference—the distraction initially outlined in his statement of purpose, recorded in his First Officer’s Log, Supplemental on the evening of the assignment. It was yet undetermined if that distraction would prove beneficial, a means of staggering the effects of each new emotion as it was greeted and acknowledged, or if it would merely serve as a temporary solution, such as a mode of refusing to greet or acknowledge any emotion at all.

The effect the experiment had depended on what James Tiberius decided to make of it.

Spock sent Chapel a professional communication from his PADD regarding James Tiberius’ location, to which she replied promptly and cryptically that she had not been worried because she had suspected James Tiberius’ whereabouts might be closer to the first officer’s cabin than not.

While informing James Tiberius of this outcome would have been transmitting the truth without elaboration, it might also reinforce an undesirable pattern of behavior. He could not learn from an unfitting course of action when the action presented a distinct lack of any negative reaction.

‘What’d she say?’ James Tiberius asked.

‘The private communications between officers on this vessel is not generally made available to the public,’ Spock replied.

‘Not like it matters,’ James Tiberius said. ‘I don’t need all that stuff. She should be spending that time with Riley. He could use it, way more than me.’

Spock consulted the survivor’s census he had memorized. ‘Kevin Riley, age eleven and three-quarters, the only member of his family to survive the events on Tarsus IV.’

James Tiberius did not answer. However, confirmation was not necessary, given that Spock’s recollection was not in question.

Spock considered his conversational options at this juncture in their dialogue.

‘Does your expressed concern over Kevin Riley’s emotional state suggest that the two of you are engaged in a bond of friendship?’

‘Riley’s all right,’ James Tiberius said.

‘Your suggestion that he “could use” the additional time with the ship’s counselor contradicts the assessment that Kevin Riley is “all right”,’ Spock replied.

‘No, I mean he’s OK. He’s a good kid. He’s too young for some stuff and he can be really weird sometimes but he’s not so bad.’
‘It may relieve you to learn that Doctor Chapel would not withhold counseling from an individual who required it,’ Spock said. ‘Kevin Riley will not be denied any necessary treatment.’

‘There’s one ship’s counselor to a hundred and seven survivors. I don’t have to be a science officer to know that ratio sucks.’

‘To suck, as I understand it, means that which is not optimal.’

‘It means that which sucks.’

‘Counselor Chapel does not suck,’ Spock said.

‘The situation sucks,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘I didn’t say she sucks.’

‘You did not distinguish,’ Spock said.

Here was the opportunity for James Tiberius to socialize with an individual who was not younger than he, which addressed the first point on Spock’s statement of purpose. It appeared that most, if not all, of James Tiberius’ socialization to this point had been with those, like Kevin Riley, whom he considered ‘too young for some stuff’, whereas Spock could not be sorted into that category.

‘You also did not define “some stuff”,’ Spock continued. ‘What is the “some stuff” for which Kevin Riley was too young?’

‘Looking after things. Covering tracks. Making sure nobody could find us. It didn’t have to do with science, science officer.’

‘My interest in edification extends to all fields of knowledge. It is not limited to my chosen field.’

‘You wouldn’t be interested in this.’

‘I would prefer to make that distinction for myself, rather than to have it made for me.’

‘I already told you, all right?’ James Tiberius’ agitation broke through the carefully cultivated nonchalance of his previous tone and he dug his fingertips into the front of his shin. ‘Looking after things. If you’re gonna grill me like Chapel, why’d I even come here in the first place?’

‘I seek answers that have set parameters,’ Spock said. ‘I am not a counselor and I do not intend to counsel you. I would not be qualified to do so. I would not act in a capacity for which I am not qualified.’

‘I’m not a science experiment, either.’ James Tiberius stood, keeping the PADD between him and Spock as though he believed it would provide a measure of adequate cover—which also implied that he believed he was in need of a shield at this time. Spock had addressed him calmly and rationally; therefore, he should have received the same in response. ‘I’m outta here.’

James Tiberius pounded the motion sensor by the door and rushed out before the door had finished opening.

Given his hasty departure, it did not follow that he would remain outside in the hallway for the next two hours and twenty-three minutes. However, that was exactly what he did.

*
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The Vulcan guide to dealing with nightmares. (Don't have them.)

First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.49.

Progress with James Tiberius Kirk remains limited, so insignificant as to require no graphs or charts. I once again question whether I am the most suitable candidate on board for this position, which continues to require a delicacy of humanistic emotional intuition, a field in which I am obviously lacking.

However, as it cannot be assumed that the difficulty I have encountered stems from a lack of precision in Captain Pike’s orders and the parameters regarding my supervision of James Tiberius Kirk, I am forced to examine other causes—chiefly, my own role in the proceedings.

Logic would dictate that my captain selected me for this operation because of some inherent skill or trait that would be absent in another, more obviously suitable, party. Negligence on the captain’s part is unlikely. Captain Pike has proven himself an exemplary judge of character on more than one occasion.

Consultation with Doctor Chapel reveals that I have at least managed to solicit conversational interactions lasting several minutes whereas she has managed at most monosyllabic answers to questions, to the effect that their interactions more closely resemble an interrogation.

It is entirely possible that James Tiberius Kirk is lacking in the same conversational skills that I myself do not possess and have chosen, for the sake of efficiency, not to cultivate.

Perhaps this shared inadequacy can be used to establish some ‘common ground’ between us.

Further attempts will be recorded for posterity and analysis.

* 

‘Don’t look now, Commander Spock,’ Doctor Chapel said in the mess hall, ‘but I think you’ve got yourself two shadows.’

She gestured carefully with her tray, which bore a warm bowl of plomeek soup. It was not a mealtime offering for Spock but rather her own lunch, as she had expressed taking an interest in Vulcan cuisine two months and fifteen days prior. Although the flavor profile differed considerably from what humans favored and often sought out, Spock had seen no reason to dissuade her.

At the present time, she was attempting to master one dish before she moved on to the next in her alimentary journey.

Plomeek soup was proving a difficult obstacle, but one that Spock trusted would not prove insurmountable.

His own lunch was a simple replicated vegetable and grain matter. He had sought to enjoy it while
contemplating his samples, and he had simultaneously been aware of James Tiberius’ presence behind and to the right of him the moment he entered the mess hall. James Tiberius was two feet and four inches from Spock’s left elbow, placing him just out of range should anyone seek to physically apprehend him.

This was not the first time James Tiberius had demonstrated studied caution where there was no reason for him to do so.

Spock’s notes would eventually amount to a pattern of behavior that could be explained, or so he had concluded.

Yet to form the standard in a study of this scope and magnitude, Spock would have to practice patience—which perhaps explained the elusive reason why Captain Pike had assigned Spock in the first place. His patience was significantly greater than any of his fellow officers, another statement of fact that most believed was a point of self-promotion. It was nothing of the sort.

‘I suspect that you are speaking metaphorically, Doctor Chapel,’ Spock said. ‘Although there are certain conditions of lighting under which an individual may cast multiple shadows, it would appear from your attempt at clarification that you are referring to James Tiberius Kirk, who, though occasionally “quiet as a shadow”, is inarguably a corporeal life form, and not the shade cast by one.’

James Tiberius snorted, then cleared his throat to mask the sound, staring intently at the assortment of food products on his tray. Chapel’s eyes crinkled at the corners, which on her features suggested a cryptic, even archaic, smile.

‘You’re right, Mr. Spock,’ she said. ‘He really is as quiet as a shadow. I keep thinking it’s quite the achievement.’

‘Given the fact that not many human males of his age are as committed to the practice required, I suppose it is a skill worthy of distinctive mention.’

‘Did you know,’ Chapel added, facing James Tiberius directly, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard Commander Spock use a simile to describe someone before.’

‘He also compared me to a fungus,’ James Tiberius replied.

Then, noticing the food that remained untouched on his tray, he clutched it closer to his chest. He left without a word of farewell or any other social nicety that was so important to humans in their daily exchanges.

‘And that’s the most James Kirk’s ever spoken to me,’ Chapel said.

‘He lacked civility,’ Spock pointed out.

He ate his lunch alone. James Tiberius did not join him, nor was he waiting outside the laboratory when Spock returned—once again like a shadow—before letting himself in without first submitting the requisite application for laboratory hours.

However, an hour exactly after Spock resumed his research, James Tiberius entered the room, remaining against the far wall, his stomach making sounds so obscene Spock could not allow them to remain uncommented upon.

‘If you are ill,’ he said, ‘I would advise you to attend the medical bay, where a qualified medical officer will treat your condition.’
‘I’m not sick,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘I just feel sick. There’s a difference.’

The distinction was peculiar enough and unique enough that Spock raised an eyebrow. ‘Then you have not followed my instructions regarding your eating habits.’

‘Just not used to being full.’

‘My instructions had taken that factor into consideration.’

‘No they hadn’t,’ James Tiberius said.

His decision to be argumentative left Spock with the impression that further discourse would be ineffective and therefore illogical. The noises made by James Tiberius’ overburdened digestive system were the only signs of accompaniment Spock received for the duration of the afternoon, which Spock noted in his personal log as a step backward rather than forward.

His duties on the bridge returned him to his regular routine, one that remained uninterrupted by the demands of his special assignment. As he had no new developments to report to Captain Pike, the subject was not broached; though it may have appeared on the surface to be no different from the days prior to the Tarsus IV discovery, Spock did not allow himself to draw the wrong conclusion from a day that presented itself as standard when it was anything but.

After all, there was a seventy-eight percent probability that James Tiberius would be waiting for Spock in his cabin when his shift had been concluded.

When Spock returned to that cabin to see James Tiberius sitting in the same corner of his room—this time in the loose sweater Spock wore while meditating—the probability had to be adjusted, as the pattern had once again been reinforced by another twenty-four hour period in which it occurred.

James Tiberius’ eyes were open above the high collar that obscured the lower half of his face. They appeared to offer a challenge of an incomprehensible nature; he awaited a lecture and punishment with a brittle posture, hands balled into fists beneath trailing sleeves.

‘Captain Pike is busy, as his obligations have quintupled due to the Tarsus IV investigation,’ Spock said simply. ‘Therefore, I will not trouble him with prosecuting a minor who has taken possession of a sweater that does not belong to him, without first seeking permission to do so from its owner. Also, the sweater in question does not fit. It is too big for you.’

James Tiberius lifted his arms. The extra two point seven inches of sleeve dangled loosely past his fingers.

‘If you are to wear it, you must also return it to me in the same condition in which it was borrowed,’ Spock concluded. ‘Those are the terms of this arrangement.’

‘Are they?’

James Tiberius met his eyes, expression defiant over the soft, rolled cowl neck of Spock’s sweater. Despite being noticeably out of place, James Tiberius nevertheless managed to convey the impression that he was entirely comfortable in his own skin. They both knew he did not belong, in either Spock’s clothes or in Spock’s private quarters, yet neither of these things appeared to present him with any outward discomfort.

Spock could not fathom the mindset that would lead one person to claim ownership of another’s belongings, but James Tiberius did not seem to harbor any ill intentions beyond simply existing in Spock’s space.
Fortunately, James Tiberius’ presence was not a fungus, consuming everything in its path—despite what his eating habits suggested. It was more directly comparable to a benign growth that bloomed once, then remained in its place of origin upon the branch.

Spock had come to know enough about James Tiberius’ behavior and personality to understand that he would not appreciate the comparison.

Still, he returned James Tiberius’ gaze with one of his own, tempered by experience, as well as by the patience that he had recently discovered was an asset in this particular agenda. James Tiberius held eye contact for a full minute longer than Spock anticipated he would before breaking away, rearranging his arms to cross them over his chest. This, coupled with his folded legs and the oversized sweater, made it impossible to judge his true size.

Perhaps that was the effect James Tiberius had been seeking to cultivate all along.

‘Pike probably wouldn’t really care if I stole your sweater, anyway,’ he said. His inflection left room for the possibility that he was asking a question, even though he had framed it in the form of a statement. ‘He’s got more important things on his plate.’

‘That is what I said,’ Spock confirmed.

‘And,’ James Tiberius added, ‘it’s not like the sweater actually left your room. Stealing implies I took it somewhere.’

‘It does not,’ Spock said.

‘Sure it does.’ James Tiberius sat up straighter, the lower half of his face remaining obscured by the neck of Spock’s sweater. ‘When you think about someone stealing, what do you think they’re doing? They’re removing it from wherever they found it and taking it with them. No self-respecting criminal’s gonna hang around the scene of the crime wearing his loot.’

Spock blinked, processing this information—which was rife with colloquial expression and personal opinion—to the best of his abilities.

‘I did not call you a criminal,’ he said at last.

‘Not a self-respecting one anyway,’ James Tiberius replied.

‘The phrase alone is a contradiction in terms,’ Spock said. ‘Unless it is meant to imply that the criminal steals because he does not understand morality, and not because he has concluded that his needs outweigh that understanding.’

‘So which one’s worse?’ James Tiberius’ challenges were growing increasingly complex. ‘The criminal who knows what he’s doing is wrong and does it anyway, or the criminal who thinks he’s doing the right thing ‘cause he’s completely messed up inside and doesn’t know what wrong is?’

‘That is a highly philosophical question,’ Spock replied. ‘If you wish to engage in a theoretical debate, it would behoove you to familiarize yourself with the vocabulary necessary to engage fully in such a multifaceted field of study.’

‘Sounds boring,’ James Tiberius said. ‘What kinda familiarization are you talking about?’

Spock stood and approached the small bookshelf, which held the equally small collection of texts he had brought with him upon arriving at his assignment aboard the Enterprise. Captain Pike had expressed a compound reaction of amusement and concern—followed by respectful indifference—
when he saw that the extent of Spock’s personal effects totaled two sweaters, which had been knitted for him by his mother, and a suitcase of antique volumes that had provided him with deeper modes of thought while still enrolled in his Starfleet courses. ‘Is that all you’ve got with you?’ Captain Pike had asked, and when Spock had confirmed that it was, he had shrugged. ‘Well, at least we know you won’t be the reason behind any excess weight we’re carrying around,’ Pike had concluded.

Indeed, Spock had agreed, though it had also been prudent to inform Captain Pike that the Enterprise’s design was such that a minor addition of possessions within an officer’s private quarters would not affect the ship’s stabilization in any significant way.

It had been the first time Spock had heard Captain Pike’s laugh.

James Tiberius was not laughing now, but watching quietly and closely; Spock removed an introductory volume and held it out for James Tiberius to claim with the same swiftness he always displayed whenever he was offered something. Spock had not yet taken anything back and was not someone who would waste time and energies with giving anything only to snatch it away before it was received, but James Tiberius had not yet adapted to this reality.

He remained in a reality that Spock had not experienced. The sum of its histories could be read only in scars, losses, and a mass gravesite located a mere kilometer from the main colony on Tarsus IV. It could be interpreted; it could be granted a chronology; it could be structured by a timeline in an official Starfleet debriefing—but it could not be felt.

‘When you have finished An Introduction to Vulcan and Terran Morality, only then will we be able to commence a more balanced discussion of moral philosophy,’ Spock said.

‘Are you serious?’ James Tiberius stared at the large book cradled in his hands, which were still hidden by the lengths of Spock’s sweater-sleeves. ‘That’ll take forever.’

‘Then you had best begin immediately,’ Spock replied, ‘in order to learn for yourself how you have overestimated the length of time this task will consume.’

‘It’s like you’re giving me homework,’ James said.

‘I am lending you a book.’

James Tiberius groaned, but he offered no further argument. When Spock next checked on him, the book was open against his knees and he was deeply engaged in reading, having progressed through what appeared to be three-quarters of the foreword. While he read, Spock made written notes to the following effect:

Subject exhibits strong argumentative nature;
Subject exhibits above-average reading speed;
Subject exhibits possible cause for concern, regarding: his appropriation of items that do not belong to him;
Subject exhibits qualities that are capable of making him either an exemplary student, or the opposite of one.

Satisfied, Spock saved the changes to his log, to be elaborated upon at a later hour.

James Tiberius read for three hours without betraying any signs of weariness before his eyelids drooped and his shoulders sagged and he tipped forward at a thirteen-degree angle, falling asleep with his cheek pressed against the open book.

According to Chapel, the troubled sleep-patterns experienced by the survivors of Tarsus IV were
She had expressed her concerns that it would not be easy to return these mere children to a state of peace conducive to proper rest, and without proper rest they could not be expected to heal fully. With that in mind, Spock did not wake James Tiberius, although the position and the location he had chosen were far from optimal.

Spock would consult with Chapel at their next mutual convenience in order to determine the most professional means of responding to James Tiberius’ poor choices. Until then, he searched medical forums for similar questions to confirm that he had managed the event appropriately.

There was no precedence for the precise nature of the situation that Spock was now experiencing with James Tiberius. While there were several medical databases that chronicled the incidents and treatments of youths who had undergone recent loss and survived unquestionable trauma, there were none that could compare to the precise experience that the colonists of Tarsus IV had suffered.

Spock had begun to suspect that the events that had transpired there would eventually become a new example for others in the future to consult during their research. As a historical standard, the information gathered by the crew of the Enterprise would be vital to succeeding generations.

That was not knowledge that would help him now, but Spock had sufficient confidence in his abilities to consider himself a valuable asset to the pioneering effort. Together, the crew could ensure that their work at Tarsus IV would benefit other crews on other planets.

Ideally, they would be able to avoid another, similar tragedy in the future.

As the hours wore on, the focus of Spock’s research grew and expanded. While James Tiberius slumbered, beginning to snore due to the compressed position of his airways, Spock found himself reading the security team’s preliminary reconstruction of events. According to all reports, the situation had escalated exponentially after the fungus became a critical infection on the planet’s crops.

The colonists had been divided into smaller, more mobile groups in order to forage for edible resources. There were points of contention regarding Governor Kodos’ method for separating the settlers, marked as an element requiring deeper investigation at a later date.

These reports had been processed and cleared by Captain Pike a full two days prior. While it was not required that a first officer sign off on the same paperwork as their captain, Spock realized that the time he had spent on his assignment with James Tiberius had occupied his mind more fully than he had first anticipated.

It could not be said that it was interfering with his regular duties, but it also could not be denied that certain practices of which Spock had once made a habit had been relegated to a position of lesser importance.

Before he settled into his nightly trance for relaxation and refreshment, Spock made a note in his personal terminal to speak with Captain Pike regarding Governor Kodos’ apparent belief in eugenics and the effect it may have had on the colonists placed within his care.

James Tiberius was still snoring when Spock switched off the overhead light. As no one had come to collect him, it was likely his absence would not be noted for a full rest cycle.

Spock had been meditating for a mere thirteen minutes—he could not gauge the length of his meditative period any more accurately, as meditation required the release of attentions generally reserved for detail—when the first whimper from the corner of the room re-engaged his mental focus.
The meditation alcove in Spock’s cabin was the only personal touch he had given to his quarters. Chapel had a collection of photographs arranged on her desk as well as an antique mirror hung on the wall, and the captain’s cabin boasted numerous ships-in-bottles, contained within transparent, gravity-stabilized mini-chambers, so that no ship turbulence would cause them to slip and shatter. Even Lieutenant Hendorff had a rock collection, for which Spock could not determine the reason, since it did not seem to be gathered for the sake of geological study.

These were human inclinations: decoration and personalization of inhabitable space in order to make it feel more ‘like home’, as though home could be referenced and evoked by the appearance of specific items. It had been Chapel who had clarified the motive for Spock, upon his request, and that clarification had allowed him to conclude that he was not breaking any unspoken Starfleet rule by neglecting to conduct himself in a similar manner.

The meditation alcove, separated from Spock’s bed by a simple, wooden-bead hanging, was not a ‘personal touch’ so much as it was a personal requirement. Meditation had always provided Spock with the benefit of a clear mind and steadied thoughts, offering insight into many unsolved human equations. On the rectangular mat, Spock had meditated on his place within Starfleet; the many unpredictable and peculiar actions of Hendorff; Captain Pike’s commanding techniques and why they were successful—to name but a few. His meditative efforts often arrived at the same point of internal silence: the space between his human and Vulcan heartbeats, a metaphor necessary to describe the divide that defined his inner world.

Meditation had offered no complete answer for it as of yet, but it soothed and restructured any chaos or disorganization that threatened to disturb the truth of Spock’s logic with vagrant emotionalism.

Spock opened his eyes, which quickly adjusted to the darkness. He had not imagined the noise that had disturbed him; he did not imagine that which was not there.

Yet the cabin was silent in its shadows; a quiet chamber of relaxation and rest.

Spock did not close his eyes. Instead, he waited, mapping the periphery of the small form, visible through the fall of wooden beads, currently curled into an ovoid shape by the cabin door.

Two minutes and forty-three seconds passed—Spock was now able to gauge the length of the period with complete accuracy—before the silence was once again broken. James Tiberius’ breathing patterns had become irregular and labored; he rattled the wall when he twitched. Somehow, despite the noise he made, he had not woken himself. He was still asleep, and in sleep he had revealed a facet of his condition into which Spock had never before been granted insight.

While it was clear that James Tiberius did not find the experience pleasant—he was not conscious, but the distress felt by his subconscious was evident—it was less clear what the proper response to this manifestation of distress should be.

Nightmares were, in essence, the random neural firings within the organ known as the brain. They were thoughts unexpressed or hidden. Spock had once studied the scans of a dreaming brain to determine the patterns of activity and understood the scientific principles behind that which human romanticized beyond sensibility in their fiction and poetry.

Again, James Tiberius whimpered.

Spock had every occasion to pose the theoretical question to himself, while contemplating a professional dilemma, of what Ambassador Sarek would do, faced with a similar situation. In this instance, however, Spock’s first thoughts did not lead him to his father, but to his mother. He knew with not insignificant certainty that she would have known what needed to be done.
But Spock’s mother was not here, nor could she be contacted in enough time that her advice could be implemented.

Spock unfolded his legs and rose. James Tiberius could not be allowed to continue gasping and shaking, not simply for the sake of Spock’s comfort, but for the sake of his as well.

It was Spock’s cabin. In order to be of best possible service to his captain, a first officer was required to maintain a regular schedule of rest.

James Tiberius was sixteen years old. His hair was damp with sweat and his arms were tangled in Spock’s sweater. When Spock knelt beside him, James Tiberius showed no signs of notice or recognition—yet his eyes were open. They did not settle; neither did they see. His mouth framed a word repeatedly, which at first could not be heard. It was monosyllabic and involved a rounded ‘o’.

Mom, Spock discovered.

James Tiberius’ voice cracked. ‘Mom,’ he confirmed.

‘No,’ Spock informed him. He kept his voice low, so as not to startle James Tiberius out of the confines of the reality he believed he was experiencing. ‘Your mother is not here.’

He would not lie, but Chapel had indicated on more than one occasion that there were various instances in which the truth could be presented in an alternative fashion, thereby minimizing the damage it caused the human psyche. This was often referred to as ‘letting someone down easily’, although Spock did not understand in strictest terms how being lowered factored in to the situation.

James Tiberius was not being let down. He remained stationary, arms clutched tightly around his legs, as if he was afraid he would come apart if he were not the one to hold himself together.

‘No.’

The sound was soft but sharp, another, single word that conveyed a depth of feeling Spock could not understand. He did not wish to.

‘You are the only Kirk aboard this vessel,’ Spock said, ‘but that does not mean that you are here alone.’

James Tiberius’ eyes flicked to one side at the sound of Spock’s voice. His gaze was unfocused. He still did not appear to see anything in the present.

‘You are currently aboard the USS Enterprise NCC-1701, which is manned at all times by a full crew,’ Spock continued. He did not attempt to establish contact with James Tiberius through touch, although this was what Chapel would have prescribed. The sound of his voice would have to be enough, as Spock did not wish to overwhelm James Tiberius with the input of too many stimuli at once. Neither did he consider it wise to encourage the potential of any transference in the opposite direction. ‘I am Commander Spock, first officer, serving under Captain Christopher Pike.’

James Tiberius’ breathing began to slow. His pupils contracted, replacing the blank, black stare with a more familiar shade of blue. He eased his tight grip on the loose fabric of his borrowed sweater, fingers slackening where had clutched his elbows with white knuckles.

He was not fully awake but a change had occurred, and it was one for the better. Spock could see James Tiberius becoming conscious of his surroundings even if he did not yet recognize them fully.

‘You are James Tiberius Kirk,’ Spock informed him, ‘and you are interrupting the first officer’s rest.’
This was not a statement meant to induce guilt, but rather a continued appraisal of the facts as James Tiberius required them. Just as he would not leave out any detail for his own comfort, he intended to present James Tiberius with all that he might seek to know, in order to be armed with comprehensive knowledge of his situation.

James Tiberius was within Spock’s cabin; therefore, it was Spock’s responsibility to convey what was acceptable behavior within those quarters and what was not.

‘I fell asleep.’ James Tiberius’ voice was hoarse.

‘That much was not in question.’

‘Won’t happen again,’ James Tiberius said.

‘The human body can only function optimally if it receives a daily allotment of—’

‘Not mine,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Trained it to be better. Don’t need as much sleep.’ Using the wall for ballast, he returned to his preferred sitting position, knees against his chest, wielding the book he had borrowed like a weapon. He drew two unsteady breaths that rasped unpleasantly in the cool, dry air. ‘M good. Won’t happen again.’

‘Eventually you will require unconscious rest,’ Spock informed him.

This was a fact that James Tiberius should have already known.

‘I’ll deal with it when I deal with it,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘Go on, get your first officer’s rest. Won’t bother you anymore.’

Spock remained where he was: kneeling at James Tiberius’ side, acutely aware of every rattling swell of air in James Tiberius’ lungs and the tightness of his shoulders beneath multiple layers of fabric. James Tiberius had fixed his gaze on the darkened computer terminal at Spock’s desk, refusing to look at Spock even for less than a second, his mouth shut. As it became clear that he would offer no further conversation, Spock rose and returned to his meditation.

James Tiberius did not betray the promise he had made, and did not sleep again that night.

*
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"Nurse" Leonard McCoy.

First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.51.

Forty-eight hours have passed since my first documented observation of James Tiberius Kirk’s unorthodox sleeping patterns. By my count—which allows for a slim margin of error, given that there have been periods of forty-five minutes to five-and-a-half hours during which James Tiberius removes himself from my company—he has only allowed himself four point six hours of sleep in total.

All medical journals that I have consulted corroborate that this aggregate is not sufficient for anyone, much less an individual of his age and needs. Doctor Chapel, after she was informed of these statistics, has expressed concerns over James Tiberius’ inability—or, more aptly put, his refusal—to engage in this basic and necessary biological function.

Nevertheless, given the events I have myself observed, his reluctance to commit himself to that which makes itself so unpleasant is not surprising. He is unable to control his deeper emotions and therefore minimizes the amount of time he is forced to spend beholden to them.

A change must be made. Medications with a sedative effect are a possibility, yet I concur with Doctor Chapel’s opinion that they should be employed only as a last resort, if no other methods yield positive results.

Though he is not a prime candidate, James Tiberius may benefit from being taught the techniques of meditation.

*

James Tiberius was still wearing Spock’s sweater. Underneath it, he also still wore his leather jacket, but Spock’s sweater was big enough on James Tiberius’ slighter frame that it had not been stretched into a new shape by the unusual bulk over which it had settled.

Spock knew this because James Tiberius was once again waiting for Spock in his cabin when Spock’s bridge shift ended. He did not look up from his book when Spock entered, or acknowledge either of their presences—his own rogue appearance or Spock’s entrance—with so much as a shrug, but that did not mean he was not present.

Spock did not greet him in the absence of formalities, instead conducting his business according to plan. ‘I am now going to change into the sweater of mine you have not seized for your personal use,’ he said, carrying the garment in question to the washroom adjacent.

James Tiberius did look at him then, following him with his eyes until the washroom door hissed shut.

Spock removed his science officer blues and replaced them with softer, more forgiving fabric. He re-entered the main quarters of his cabin to James Tiberius’ continued and unblinking appraisal, during
which time Spock neatly folded his uniform and left it in a crisp square atop the foot of his bed.

‘Looks better on me,’ James Tiberius said.

‘That is a matter of opinion,’ Spock replied.

‘Smells funny, too,’ James Tiberius added. He swiped the rolled fabric of the high collar between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing it thoughtfully. ‘Doesn’t smell like anything else.’

‘Perhaps it is the incense burned during meditation adhering to the fibers,’ Spock said.

James Tiberius shrugged, as though he had not been the one to present the topic originally.

‘Though I do not burn incense aboard the Enterprise, the sweater is one I wore during many meditative sessions both on Vulcan and, later, on Earth,’ Spock continued. ‘Vulcan incense is powerful and is known to linger.’

James Tiberius pulled the collar up over another quarter-length of his face to breathe in the scents on the weave. When he had finished, he made a face, crossing his eyes to stare at the tip of his nose.

‘The scent is not visible,’ Spock informed him.

James Tiberius took his eyes off his nose only to roll them, finally fixing Spock with a look that expressed a substantial lack of appreciation for that remark.

‘Obviously. I was just checking to see whether any of it came off on me. You know, like ashes or whatever.’

There it was again: the ‘whatever’ that did not belong in any successful conversation, either general or personal. It was evident that James Tiberius favored the expression for a reason, although Spock could not fathom the logic of deliberately inserting obscurity into communication between himself and another party. Perhaps Spock’s initial appraisal of James Tiberius—that his conversational skills were lacking—had not been inaccurate.

‘The sweater was clean during the time at which you appropriated it,’ Spock said. ‘Whether or not it remains so now is your responsibility.’

‘You calling me dirty?’ James Tiberius asked.

That had not been Spock’s intention, and yet, while examining the context of his responses thus far, he could see the obvious topical link.

‘I am merely stating the facts,’ Spock replied.

This was not untrue.

James Tiberius watched Spock before nodding slowly, accepting this as an accurate version of events. He blinked, then ducked his head once more to breathe in deeply from the soft folds of the sweater’s cowl neck.

‘So you use that stuff—the incense—to relax?’

‘It is conducive to a meditative state of mind,’ Spock confirmed.

‘Huh.’
‘Huh’ was no more serviceable than ‘whatever’, by Spock’s approximation.

James Tiberius leaned his chin on his folded arms, tilting his head in Spock’s direction. Spock did not require his telepathic abilities in order to understand that he was unimpressed by the information. If there had been something further James Tiberius wished to know, then he would have to inquire with greater precision in order to educate himself.

‘So is it more or less relaxing than the stuff your CMO prescribes?’

‘Chief Medical Officer Doctor Puri has never prescribed anything to aid me in my meditation.’ Spock folded his hands behind his back. It did not trouble him to remain standing, as the position gave him a clear position of authority over James Tiberius, still slouching with his back to the wall.

‘That’s not what I meant.’ James Tiberius sat up, crossing arms over his chest as he moved his knees forward in slight increments. He rubbed his knuckles under his nose, sniffing before he continued. ‘You ever see that junior doctor in there? The one who’s always shouting at everyone?’

Doctor Chapel had a regularly scheduled and mandatory weekly appointment with one Leonard McCoy, one of the newest additions to the medical staff, who experienced a crippling fear of space travel.

Spock nodded. ‘I am aware of all officers aboard the Enterprise by name and rank.’

‘I called him a nurse one time,’ James Tiberius said. ‘He totally lost it. First he was shouting about the difference between a nurse and a doctor, then he started in on how nurses are underappreciated and overworked and I’d be lucky to get somebody as smart and hard-working as a nurse dedicated to my care, and by that point he’d turned pretty red. Thought he was gonna pass out.’

‘His record at Starfleet Academy placed him at the top of his graduating class.’

‘Yeah. I know.’ James Tiberius patted the PADD at his side. ‘I looked him up. Nurse Leonard McCoy.’

The fleeting promise of a smile tugged at James Tiberius’ lips before he again wrinkled his nose, rolling the fabric of the cowl over the tip, so that it was draped over his mouth like an atmospheric-filter mask.

‘If you are aware, as you say, of Doctor McCoy’s position and credentials, there is no reason to perpetuate a falsehood regarding his assignment,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah there is,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘It’s called a joke.’

‘The complexities of human humor rituals elude me.’

‘I already knew that.’ James Tiberius paused. ‘Even though it’s not in your file. It should be. People need to be warned about that kinda stuff.’

‘Such information is not standard.’

‘Personal touches’d make those boring personnel files a whole lot more interesting.’

‘The purpose of cataloguing Starfleet officers’ records—’

‘Commander Spock, First Officer, science division. The complexities of human humor rituals elude him.’ James Tiberius pretend to type something into his PADD, even though the screen was blank
and dark, the power currently off. ‘That’s what I’d write on your file, anyway.’

‘James Tiberius Kirk, age sixteen, born in Riverside, Iowa, to George and Winona Kirk,’ Spock said. ‘That is both what I would put on your file and what is already on your file.’

James Tiberius’ face darkened, brow knit together above the bridge of his nose. ‘You’re missing the point of the exercise.’

‘I was not aware an exercise was currently in effect.’

‘I said something about you that isn’t on your file but should be, then you’re supposed to say something about me that isn’t on my file but should be,’ James Tiberius said. ‘Obviously.’

It had not been obvious. Without Spock’s knowledge, they had been committed to a ritual that offered no clear rules or structure; furthermore, no indication of the ritual’s commencement had been made until after the point when those rules should have been clarified.

‘James Tiberius Kirk, age sixteen,’ Spock repeated. ‘He does not knock before entering a room.’

‘And steals sweaters.’

‘And takes possession of garments that neither belong to him nor fit him properly.’

James Tiberius nodded, briefly satisfied. ‘That’s better. Maybe you’ll get the hang of it with some practice.’

‘Did you insert yourself into my cabin in order to instruct me in the methodology of this frivolous pastime?’ Spock asked.

‘Uh, it’s called having fun,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘Maybe you’ve never heard of it. I guess that should go on your file, too. “Doesn’t know what fun is.” Seems to me like you’re getting some bad feedback on your personnel file, Spock.’

That had never before been a concern—and it still was not, since James Tiberius’ ‘game’ held no official sway.

‘James Tiberius Kirk,’ Spock said, ‘age sixteen. Experiences difficulty sleeping.’

‘Hey,’ James Tiberius said. ‘That’s a low blow.’

‘I did not blow in any direction.’

‘I don’t experience difficulty sleeping,’ James Tiberius added. ‘I don’t need as much sleep as most people. Ask anybody.’

‘Though your fellow colonists may confirm your claim, it remains to be seen whether I would receive a corroborative answer from medical professionals,’ Spock replied.

‘I just don’t need much sleep.’ James Tiberius’ insistence, coupled with his tense expression, suggested that he might have been as aware of the lie as Spock, and the determination to persist in the charade was a constant strain, as much as the lack of rest had proven.

Spock said nothing. James Tiberius frowned.

‘I’m telling the truth,’ he insisted. ‘One, two hours a day—that’s all.’
‘The conditions aboard the Enterprise are significantly different from those on Tarsus IV, to which you have been accustomed,’ Spock said.

‘You think I don’t know that?’ Though he had begun gradually to relax his posture, James Tiberius retreated from this course and drew his knees up to his chest, sinking more deeply into the fabric of Spock’s sweater. ‘One look at this place and it’s obvious. I know where I am. This is nothing like it was down there. You wouldn’t be around to lecture me about stuff if it was. You’d be too busy looking out for yourself or being dead if we were.’

It was the most James Tiberius had spoken about the conditions of the colony to date; his eyes had darkened, and the tenor of his voice recalled to Spock’s mind the rasp behind his words when he had cried out in his sleep.

Spock could not lay claim to possessing the qualifications necessary to probe James Tiberius’ state of mind. To address the emotional ramifications of what had occurred on Tarsus IV without a counselor present would be unprofessional at best and could be harmful at worst. As such, it seemed only responsible to address the facts of what Jim had said, rather than the implications.

‘Death is not a state of being that implies preoccupation,’ Spock replied. ‘One cannot be busy when dead. The two are natural contradictions.’

James Tiberius stared at him from over the uneven horizon formed by the folds of Spock’s sweater, draped around his neck and shoulders. The overall appearance would have been comical were it not for his obvious distress.

He opened his mouth, then closed it immediately after, his expression shifting from something distant to a more present observation, as though he was returning to his surroundings, even though he had not technically left. Spock had observed a similar phenomenon the night James Tiberius had troubled their rest with his disturbed dreams, although this time there was no transitional period between the unconscious and the conscious to explain the shift.

It was possible that the trauma inflicted upon James Tiberius’ psyche was causing him to relive key points of his time at Tarsus IV. Chapel was well-versed in dealing with disorders of post-traumatic stress, as they were a relatively common side effect for Starfleet officers. Yet those officers were adults. James Tiberius was not.

For children, the methods may have called for adjustment.

‘You’re not very sensitive,’ James Tiberius said.

‘On the contrary,’ Spock replied, ‘my senses are considerably heightened, compared to those of a human.’

James Tiberius’ thick eyebrows contracted yet further, heavy for his narrow face. It was not in the service of a frown, but rather appeared to be a manifestation of intense contemplation. He lifted his head just enough that his mouth was visible, lower lip caught between his teeth. He released it in order to speak, hesitating in a manner that was uncharacteristic, a contradiction in personality. These contradictions were nevertheless becoming a matter of course for their interactions.

‘Did you just make a joke?’ James Tiberius asked. ‘Is that what passes for a joke on Vulcan?’

‘I was merely pointing out a potential inconsistency within your statement,’ Spock said. ‘Whether or not the result is humorous is dependent on your perception.’

‘Yeah, well, I perceive that you’re a big weirdo, Commander Spock.’ James Tiberius drew out the
syllables, changing the intonation of the word in order to highlight its absurdity. ‘No one else talks to me like this.’

‘You have made it difficult for anyone to engage in conversation with you at all,’ Spock pointed out.

‘You have a theory about that too?’

‘I am considering three primary postulates,’ Spock said. ‘First postulate: that you prefer an adversarial form of conversation to one that is congenial. Second postulate: that you do not prefer an adversarial form of conversation, but the skills with which you may have once engendered congenial intercourse have atrophied. Third postulate—’

‘No more postulates. You can’t put people under the microscope.’

‘A microscope of the size and scale required for such a task does not exist aboard this vessel,’ Spock said.

‘Ha ha,’ James Tiberius replied. His tone indicated the deployment of sarcasm. It also did not seek to incite a response. James Tiberius glowered in silence at Spock while Spock maintained both the shared silence and the unbroken gaze, James Tiberius’ nose wrinkling where it was pushed against his crossed forearms, which rested atop his bent knees. ‘That counselor’s not all bad,’ he said, after ten minutes and thirteen seconds had passed, during which time he presented no signs of becoming bored or restless. Any other sixteen-year-old Terran male would have succumbed at least seven minutes earlier, given the circumstances. ‘She’s okay, I guess. But I told you before, she should be worrying about kids like Riley, not about me. I’m fine.’

‘Does Kevin Riley experience more difficulty with sleeping than you do?’ Spock asked.

‘I didn’t sleep much then and I don’t sleep much now.’ James Tiberius scratched his nose with the inside of his elbow.

‘The inability to adapt should not be a point of pride,’ Spock said.

‘You think I don’t know how to adapt?’ James Tiberius almost laughed; instead, the reaction presented itself as an abortive snort. ‘I’ve adapted plenty. You don’t even know—you have no idea what it was like.’

‘I have familiarized myself with the reports,’ Spock said. ‘However, I am aware that those reports have been compiled using the references of many individuals who are younger and less perceptive than you. That I do not possess knowledge only you are able to share is due to the fact that you have not shared it.’

‘I’m not gonna write it down like some kinda chart,’ James Tiberius replied. ‘It’s not somebody’s history lesson, all right? It’s nothing like that.’ Realization darkened, rather than illuminated, his face. ‘But that’s what you’ve been doing this whole time, isn’t it? You’ve been trying to work me. Get me to spill the whole story. The counselor couldn’t crack me, so she got you on the job.’

‘In point of fact, I was assigned the task by Captain Pike,’ Spock said. ‘I do not take orders from the ship’s counselor, though I have consulted with her on occasion, due to her expertise.’

‘I’m not a patient.’ James Tiberius stood, his back and his palms flattened to the wall. ‘And I’m definitely not an assignment. Have fun with all the fungus,’ he added hotly, and left more loudly than Spock had ever heard him walk.

Captain Pike had indicated a breakthrough was to be expected.
This had not been a breakthrough.

When Spock once again consulted with Chapel—James Tiberius did not return that night, nor was he present in the mess hall the following morning—she suggested that his defensiveness was ‘entirely understandable’ and ‘not unforeseen’.

‘I had not foreseen it,’ Spock said.

‘No, but then…’ Chapel paused, smiling over her morning grain-cereal, another Vulcan recipe from the replicator. ‘No, never mind. It won’t be straightforward, I’m afraid. Oh, but I did speak to Kevin Riley, just like Jim suggested.’

Jim, Spock repeated internally. The name was better suited to the individual in question than James Tiberius, if only because of the sizes were incongruous. James Tiberius was a large name for someone who made himself small and scarce in the shadows.

‘He doesn’t remember much of it, I’m afraid,’ Chapel continued. She blew on her spoon to cool the steaming contents, then rested the warm metal on her bottom lip. ‘We can’t begin to imagine what they went through, Mr. Spock.’

‘Vulcans do not imagine,’ Spock said. ‘They theorize.’

‘From what I understand, Kevin and Jim were a part of the same group of children sent away by their parents when rumors of General Kodos’ plan began to circulate. After that, they spent months in the wild. Jim took charge—tried to keep them fed. Poisoned himself once on some kind of inedible mushroom testing to see if the others could eat it.’

‘That is not an ideal means of ensuring edibility,’ Spock said.

‘It wasn’t an ideal situation,’ Chapel replied. ‘But then, we all knew that already.’

James Tiberius—Jim—did not reveal himself during regular mealtime hours the rest of that day, but given his relationship with food and the enthusiasm with which he ate, Spock posited that he had chosen to visit the mess hall on its off-hours. If that was so, then it could be assumed that Jim was avoiding the company he had pursued, prior to his outburst.

His absence was the opposite of troubling—or it would have been, had Spock not been uncertain of how he was meant to proceed with the task set to him by Captain Pike when Jim was avoiding his company. The problem was not insurmountable, but it would require additional thought and a modified approach.

‘Not today, Commander,’ said Doctor Leonard McCoy, when they shared a turbolift to the aft deck. ‘I’ve got physicals to conduct on over thirty minors, all kinds of vaccinations to give out, and there’s one little son of a bitch who keeps having allergic reactions to everything I’m prescribing. Pardon my French, but I swear he’s doing it on purpose. Now if I could just figure out how.’

‘It is highly unlikely that any of your patients would have the wherewithal to simulate allergic responses,’ Spock informed him.

In response, McCoy offered a grunt of disgust. His face had indeed adopted the shade of red that Jim had once described.

While alone, for the thirty-second hour without an interruption from Jim, Spock reviewed the facts as he was aware of them.
Firstly, Jim had sought out his company on more than one occasion. He had also avoided his appointments with Chapel, had entertained an altercation with McCoy, and had expressed a slight interest in Captain Pike. He had mentioned on more than one occasion a Kevin Riley, one of the younger colonists whose family had not survived the circumstances on Tarsus IV.

Together, none of these facts demonstrated an obvious pattern of behavior. There was no common link connecting the four separate individuals Spock had recalled and Spock himself, save for Jim’s association. Taking Jim’s other contacts into account, therefore, did nothing to illuminate the reasons Jim would have to seek out Spock’s company in particular.

Spock needed to understand what it was Jim sought in order to provide it: a means to an end, for the sake of the elusive ‘breakthrough’.

Jim’s routine was erratic enough that it was impossible for Spock to map and trace his whereabouts with any kind of scheduled accuracy. In days past, Spock would have garnered better odds of finding him by following his own schedule, as Jim had proven himself more than capable of intruding at random intervals throughout the day.

Jim remained conspicuously absent through Spock’s analysis of the fungal samples he had collected from the botany department, where the science officers were attempting to classify the viral strain that had so devastated the colonists’ food supply. If enough information was synthesized from the samples, they would then be able to pass on the information to whoever had provided the starters for the crops. Ideally, crops that were immune to this particular fungus could be engineered in the future.

However, that work had taken a place secondary to the investigations of the security team, now that it had become clear that the widespread loss of life Tarsus IV was not a result of starvation alone.

The discovery of the mass gravesite and a forensic study of the remains therein revealed causes of death that were incongruous with the loss of bone density that would have indicated prolonged malnutrition. Blunt trauma, the signs of phaser burns, and widespread evidence of physical violence corroborated the information Chapel had been given by her charges.

Spock did not pause to imagine the quality of life on Tarsus IV; he knew what the probability of anyone surviving the odds were, as well as how unlikely it was that human children should be successful fending for themselves in the wild, without assistance, especially during a plague on the colony’s crops. Yet probability was a matter of numbers and statistics, whereas Jim had often stressed the importance of foregoing equations, as though mathematics precluded any opportunity for sympathy.

‘For once, I feel about as serious as you look, Mr. Spock,’ Captain Pike told Spock during their daily debriefing. ‘I tell you, somebody’s going to answer for putting a man like Kodos in charge of an entire colony when this is over.’

‘His credentials gave no indication of his personal interest in eugenics,’ Spock replied.

‘Yeah, I read the damn thing, too. Cover to cover. No indication, sure, but he managed to wipe that colony out all the same. Almost wish the fires hadn’t gotten him. I sure would’ve liked to testify at that court-martial.’

Spock meditated that night on the reports of what appeared to be the vestiges of Governor Kodos, found behind an empty grain silo, along with a number of other charred bodies dressed in the uniforms of local officials. Kodos’ identification card and the preliminary scan of the body’s mutilated features matched what Starfleet had on file, and while it may have been fitting that the man should have been claimed by the very colony he had destroyed, Spock could not forget Captain
Pike’s words—for reasons other than a flawless Vulcan memory.

*
My beta mimblebee said of this chapter, 'First of all, how dare you?'

First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.53.

It has been four days since last I encountered James Tiberius Kirk, who—according to the individual on-board known as Kevin Riley—prefers to be addressed as ‘Jim’.

(Henceforth this personal record of events shall refer to James Tiberius as ‘Jim’ or ‘Jim Kirk’ for the sake of maintaining formality while recognizing his preference.)

He has not attended any of my laboratory hours, nor has he again circumvented the security code and entered my cabin without my permission, though he has proven on numerous occasions that he is capable of engineering this breach.

According to Doctor Chapel, Kevin Riley has made minimal contact with him during this time; therefore, he has not been classified as a missing person. However, he has isolated himself from the majority of social opportunities, behavior that cannot be termed healthy or appropriate. It is also behavior that cannot be allowed to continue.

While I have followed certain principles to this point—having resolved not to interfere with a subject’s natural routine, thereby skewing the results of the experiment—I must now reconsider my methods due to a shift in my data.

It would be preferable to achieve the ‘breakthrough’ of which Captain Pike spoke before we depart from Tarsus IV’s orbit, following the conclusion of our preliminary investigation into the Tarsus IV Massacre.

*

Logically, there were few places Jim could be that would afford him the secrecy and privacy he desired. Therefore, Spock was able to narrow his search to those locations, which would increase his efficiency exponentially.

There was the research deck and library, which were not crowded even when the main crew was not otherwise occupied with a focused mission; there were the science laboratories, which had already been checked and crossed off the list; and there were unoccupied officer’s quarters, eleven in total, empty due to those crew members who had been lost in the line of duty as well as those who had not reported for duty by the time of departure.

That discounted the number of crawlspace, air vents and ducts, and storage rooms that were neither comfortable nor ideal as far as hiding places went, but which Spock would explore thoroughly should his other possibilities prove fruitless.

He began by checking the eleven empty officer’s quarters. The first five he visited offered no signs of habitation, but the sixth revealed three pillowcases filled with non-perishable comestibles, protein bars and powders chief among them. There was also, beneath the second pillowcase, the PADD
with which Spock had provided Jim for research and news updates.

If this was Jim’s base of operations and he had not been found within, then it could only be concluded that he had business elsewhere. Spock determined that the likelihood of this business being conducted on one of the research decks was high, considering he was dealing with an individual of Jim’s intellect and curiosity.

For the time being, he intended to await Jim’s return. Though it was similar to the way in which Jim had awaited Spock’s return in Spock’s cabin in the past, the differences were not to be discounted. Spock had broken no rules, nor had he circumvented any security measures. He was not trespassing, whereas Jim had been.

There was also the matter of Spock’s sweater. In order to reclaim his stolen property, he would have to engender a confrontation sooner rather than later. Having observed the care Jim took of himself, to say nothing of his own personal hygiene, it stood to reason that he would retain a better chance of recovering his garment whole and undamaged the earlier he procured it.

It was not the sweater that mattered, but what it represented. Spock could send away for others from home, but he could not allow Jim to harbor the misapprehension that such behavior would be tolerated.

It was not Spock’s responsibility to provide a replacement for the absence of a living parental figure in Jim’s life. The age differential was insufficient, to say nothing of Spock’s lack of familiarity with what it was Jim needed. However, it would be constructive for Jim to understand that there were still rules and guidelines in place in a world where both his parents were no longer there to enforce them.

Strict boundaries could often help a person come to terms with feelings of meaninglessness, loneliness, and chaos.

Spock prepared his opening remarks while he waited, but none of them seemed expressly suited to Jim’s situation. The last time they had spoken, matters had unfolded poorly, and Spock sought a means to tailor his responses naturally to a conversation he could not predict, rather than readying himself in advance.

He waited just over one hour—seventy-three minutes and forty-four seconds—before the door to the abandoned cabin chimed, hissing open on the last beat.

‘Honey, I’m home,’ Jim said, stepping through the doorway.

It was evident that this remark had been made facetiously, as the look of surprise on Jim’s face when he glimpsed Spock standing beside the far wall indicated that he had expected to be alone within his pirated accommodations.

Spock had taken precautions so as to avoid the appearance of concealing his presence. After Jim’s experiences on Tarsus IV, Spock did not wish to startle him in a place he had come to view as secure, nor did he wish to deliver the impression of an ambush.

‘As you can see,’ Spock said, ‘I am Commander Spock, and not anyone’s honey.’

The tension in Jim’s face dissolved into an expression of confusion before he closed the door, doubling over to lean against the wall.

At first, Spock suspected an episode of gastrointestinal distress. But as Jim began to wheeze, one hand pressed against his stomach, it became clear that he was not groaning but laughing.
Perhaps it was a mixture of both. The cause was distinctly mirth.

‘I was not speaking in jest,’ Spock informed him.

‘It’s just the way you said honey,’ Jim replied, between rapid gasps for air. There were tears at the corners of his eyes and his cheeks were a brighter red than Doctor Leonard McCoy’s when stressed. ‘It was so the opposite of everything honey means. It was funny. Honey.’

‘You believe this to be a situation appropriate for humor?’ Spock surveyed their surroundings to indicate that he was referencing Jim’s incursion on property that was off-limits to civilians. ‘No officers would agree with your assessment.’

‘You gonna rat me out?’ Jim asked.

He was still wearing Spock’s sweater—though Spock had assumed, after Jim had decided to avoid him, that he would not remain attached to the garment, but would forego it just as he had foregone Spock’s company. When Jim caught Spock making note of his attire, he tugged at the cuff of the right sleeve with his left hand, the amusement fading from his face, which left it gray and gaunt in the shadows of the unlit cabin.

‘Cause if you do snitch on me,’ Jim added, ‘I’m gonna tell Captain Pike you were sneaking around, probably stalking me. Maybe you’ll be the one who gets thrown in the brig, but it’s not gonna be me. Even if he did assign you to tail me or whatever, I’ve got rights.’

Jim looked away, but he continued to track Spock from the corners of his eyes. Not unlike Spock, he was capable of focusing on two subjects at once; Spock could allow himself to consider the catalyst for developing such skills had been found in the wilderness on Tarsus IV. Indeed, the barren plains and thick, overgrown forestation on the planet’s surface were far more suitable for someone of Jim’s disposition than the clean and simple backdrop of an abandoned officer’s quarters, where the bed was neatly made and the desk offered no personal photographs or mementos.

‘There are no limitations on rations aboard the Enterprise,’ Spock said. ‘There is no need to stockpile.’

‘For now, anyway,’ Jim replied. ‘Could change. You don’t know what could happen.’

‘That is true, although the probability of constricted rations being implemented are—’

‘Why’re you here, anyway?’ Jim asked.

‘For what reason have you claimed my sweater for your own?’ Spock countered.

Jim shrugged with one shoulder. The sweater did not present any signs of excess wear and tear; for his part, Jim had been taking acceptable care of it. ‘Smelled different,’ he said finally, quiet but confrontational, daring Spock to question him further.

‘We already discussed the reasons behind the unfamiliar scent on the fabric.’

Jim shrugged again. ‘Yeah, and it’s different, that’s all.’

Spock supposed he would make no inroads if he continued to pursue the subject and switched his tactics accordingly. ‘It is my belief that you are in need of a means with which to control your emotions,’ he said.

‘Wow, thanks,’ Jim replied. ‘If you’re looking to diagnose me like everybody else, you’d better get
There was no line. Spock determined the suggestion had been made disingenuously and continued.

‘It is not a diagnosis, as I am not a medical officer.’

‘What does a Vulcan know about emotions, anyway?’ Jim asked, turning to meet Spock head-on, with a keen gaze and a flash of pride. He knew of Vulcan rationalism, but he did not fully grasp the reasons for its development.

‘Vulcan emotions run deeper than you know,’ Spock said. ‘Order over chaos; logic over passion. The presence of the former does not indicate the absence of the latter. Rather, it speaks to the abundance thereof. Where there shines a bright light, there once was great darkness.’

‘What do you get emotional about, then? Fungus that doesn’t do what it’s supposed to? Equations you can’t solve?’

‘If you seek a history of Surak’s precepts and their integration into modern Vulcan society, there are numerous historical titles you may consult at your leisure,’ Spock said. ‘In the interim, it is my opinion that you would benefit from regular meditation, so as to better your control of your emotions and cease to avoid sleep.’

‘So you sniffed me out just to tell me to meditate?’

‘Though my sense of smell is more highly advanced than the average human’s, I employed deductive reasoning to determine your most likely whereabouts. This was the sixth unoccupied junior officer’s cabin I visited.’

‘And what if I don’t feel like meditating?’ Jim asked.

‘I cannot force you to do that to which you have not agreed,’ Spock replied. ‘I have suggested, not prescribed, a course that would be to your benefit, but the decision to implement it is yours and yours alone.’

‘I don’t need to be fixed,’ Jim said.

‘I had not implied that you were broken.’

Jim’s eyes narrowed as he stared at Spock’s face, expecting to find a lie that was not there. He did not lower his guard, but he did drop his arms to his sides, which suggested he had relaxed, however minutely, or had at least accepted Spock’s veracity.

Vulcans did not lie. This was an attribute that Spock had already imparted to Jim as a vital aspect of his character. Therefore, Jim could trust him to remain consistent upon this point. As with the fostering of any new relationship, reliability was highly prized.

It established trust on a universal level, separate from any existing cultural differences.

‘So what’s your problem?’ Jim asked, after passing the maximum allowance for silence that he could bring himself to tolerate. ‘You haven’t got any real friends to occupy your time?’

‘There is no reason to apply an additional modifier to the hypothetical of my associates,’ Spock said.

‘Your hypothetical friends,’ Jim said.

‘Yes.’
'I just wanna be clear.'

‘Clarity of mind is important for the practice of meditation,’ Spock replied.

‘That again?’

Jim’s expression was accusatory, brows dark and heavy over the round shape of his eyes, before his gaze shifted to the pillowcases where he had stored his meal supplements and the place where he had hidden his PADD. If he was attempting to discern whether Spock had disturbed any of his stolen belongings, it would have been simpler to ask.

But Jim did not seem to be in the habit of making things easier for himself. This was a matter for Doctor Chapel to address and challenge, not Spock.

‘I have reviewed several potential methods of quieting the mind to achieve inner peace,’ he informed Jim. ‘This seemed the most obvious solution.

‘That’s assuming I want to quiet my mind.’ Jim slouched against the opposite wall, digging his hands into the loose weave of the sweater at his waist, where the folds formed makeshift pockets. ‘You ever bother to factor what I want into those calculations of yours? A “Jim’s Needs” algorithm?’

Spock considered this. The best solution to Jim’s inner turmoil was obvious to him; he had not given due thought to any alternative. The method—meditation—may have been open for debate, but the goal of the act had never been in doubt. It was anathema to Spock that any individual, human or otherwise, would desire to suffer the turmoil of their emotions rather than seek relief from their onslaught, especially after suffering a traumatic event.

He absorbed this new data, processed the error, and subsequently came to rely upon the most honest response.

‘I did not.’

‘Uh huh.’ Jim nodded, catching his lower lip between his teeth. ‘That’s what I thought.’

It was in both their favors that Spock’s patience was consummate. Though it often seemed as though Jim’s intentions were to frustrate—and if they were not to frustrate, an immediate recalculation would be required—Spock would not be bested in this arena. When he offered no suitably irritated response, Jim expressed brief uncertainty.

‘You want me to get rid of all that stuff or not feel it,’ Jim added under his breath, the words soft but clear. ‘You don’t get it. You don’t get it at all.’

‘My lack of understanding is due in part to your lack of explanation,’ Spock reminded him.

‘You really wanna listen to me?’

‘You conflate desire and duty.’

‘You’re stubborn, that’s for sure. I didn’t know that was a Vulcan thing,’ Jim said.

In Spock’s opinion, which had been formed on the basis of hard evidence, Jim was suggesting the existence of a trait in another that was more abundant in his own personality.

‘By the way, I read your book,’ Jim said. The erratic departure from a more uncomfortable topic was noted, though Spock still had no ready policy for maneuvering Jim’s unpredictable conversational
detours. ‘It wasn’t too boring. Not that I’m gonna debate ethics with you or anything. You have anything else to read or are all the books you read like that one?’

‘I would be able to compile a working list of recommendations,’ Spock replied.

‘Cool.’ Jim tugged at a loose thread, attempting to push it back into place rather than pull it free. ‘That’ll help me sleep a lot better than any meditation stuff.’

‘The “meditation stuff” is not without merit.’

‘I looked it up,’ Jim said. ‘Wanted to know what the incense was. Never smelled anything like it before. Whatever. I’m not gonna do something that’ll take my pain away, all right?’

‘Your stated preference to remain in a state of emotional discomfort is unusual.’

‘You can’t just take something like that away,’ Jim said. ‘Not when it’s the only thing you’ve got.’

His voice cracked; no amount of pointed coughing and throat-clearing could obscure the truth, but Jim committed himself to the act despite how obvious it was that neither of them could believe it. It was foolish, not to mention a waste of energies.

‘Stop staring at me,’ Jim said.

‘Visual contact is commonly favored during social interactions among humans,’ Spock replied.

‘You read that one out of a book, too?’ Jim paused. ‘Oh my God. You did. You had to read about how to talk to people so you’d be better at it. Must’ve been a really bad book.’

‘You seek to distract me vis-à-vis insults,’ Spock said. ‘However, I am not easily distracted.’

‘You’re not gonna run to the counselor and tell her all of this stuff, are you?’ There was a moment in which Jim almost surrendered the futile task of attempting to mend the loose thread in the side of the sweater with no tools other than his blunt and imprecise fingers, but the moment passed. Jim returned with doubled concentration and equally limited rewards. ‘There’s no such thing as civilian-first officer privilege. I know. I looked that up, too.’

‘Your instincts to research when you lack adequate knowledge on a subject is also unusual,’ Spock said. ‘And it is also not without merit.’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘If it is your desire that our conversations remain confidential, then I shall preserve that confidentiality. A Vulcan promise is not made lightly. However, should I believe that you have endangered yourself or others, I will be forced to break that confidentiality.’

Jim chewed the inside of his cheek, then released a breath he had been holding onto for so long Spock was forced to wonder if doing so offered him some form of unseen security. ‘Okay, Spock. It’s a deal.’

Spock nodded.

Jim said nothing more.

The silence was broken only by the very faint sound of fibers being rubbed against callused skin, Jim’s thumb and forefinger pinching a square centimeter of fabric and rolling it between his fingertips.
‘Have you any other confessions to make?’ Spock asked at last.

‘Dunno. Feels weird now. Too official.’

‘Perhaps we should engage in some little dialogue in order to foster a tone of informality.’

‘Small talk,’ Jim said.

‘That is what I said,’ Spock replied.

‘I’m not gonna spill my guts or anything,’ Jim added.

‘That is relieving to know.’

‘Somebody’s gotta be the one to remember everything that happened down there,’ Jim said.

‘And you intend to be that individual.’

‘Who else is gonna do it? Kevin?’ Jim snorted and scuffed his toe along the ground. ‘Hey, you’re not gonna make me return my stash or anything, are you?’

*
**First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.54.**

*I believe I have arrived at an initial ‘breakthrough’.*

*More information will be forthcoming once a complete definition of this ‘breakthrough’ has been compiled.*

**

Spock was preparing for bed, having just stepped out of a sonic shower, when he heard the door to his cabin open through the washroom door, which was shut.

He waited, but was not surprised when no announcement was made. No member of the crew would have entered without express permission from the first officer of the ship, and Spock had not made any acquaintances among their civilian counterparts save for one notable exception.

Jim had already set a precedent of entering Spock’s quarters uninvited. This situation had resulted from the simple fact that Spock had never taken the opportunity to dissuade him while the habit was still being formed. Now, it was evidently too late, and this negligence had led to Jim arriving at a time when Spock was not prepared to entertain.

The argument could be made—and had been, on more than one separate occasion, by fellow crewmates—that Spock was never prepared to entertain company. The humor in that statement was found in the fact that Spock himself was not possessed of an amusing personality, capable of charming friends and coworkers alike.

What most considered a shortcoming in Spock’s character did not seem to trouble Jim, perhaps because he too suffered from a similar deficiency.

Spock dressed as he had planned to for bed, folding his discarded uniform in his arms and only then unlocking the door that led from his private washroom to his less-than-private quarters.

Jim was sitting with his back to the wall, examining the chessboard. He kept his eyes on the pieces, head twitching to one side at the sound of movement from Spock’s end of the room.

‘Sorry,’ he said, in a tone of voice that implied he was annoyed rather than genuinely apologetic. ‘I didn’t know you were—you know. Showering or whatever.’

‘Without a sun, it can be difficult to accurately project rest cycles.’ Spock set his uniform down for cleaning, pausing between the room divider that separated his bed enclave from the other recreational side of his quarters. ‘My duties will not resume for another eight hours, creating an optimal window for respite.’

‘Sure,’ Jim said. ‘Makes sense.’
His responses were short even for him, though Spock did not comment on this deviation from standard. Again, he waited, knowing that eventually Jim’s natural curiosity would overcome his reticence. He had returned for a reason, after all, however unreasonable it may yet prove to be.

Jim reached his fingers out to the board, fingers skimming over a rook. He looked in Spock’s direction, then away.

‘What’s with your hair?’

Spock had not combed it after exiting the shower. It had been a minor detail in the larger picture, when his room had been invaded at an unexpected hour, and yet it was unlike him to allow even seemingly insignificant details to get the better of him.

‘There is nothing “with” my hair,’ Spock replied.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Yet it would not be inappropriate to suggest you practice your clarification skills.’

‘Forget it,’ Jim said. ‘So you’re going to bed now, huh?’

‘Though it is not a section of my schedule that is made public ship-wide, you are correct in your interpretation of the evidence.’

‘Guess I didn’t think of you as sleeping much.’ Jim drew a half circle over the floor with the scuffed toe of his shoe without making a sound. He made no move to depart, now that he had learned of Spock’s plans; neither did he seek to apologize for the inconvenience. ‘I can be pretty quiet,’ he said, after a long silence, which had perhaps been fostered in order to provide evidence that would corroborate his claim.

‘Vulcan sleep cycles are not equivalent to their human counterparts,’ Spock said. ‘Is the quiet you cultivate a result of conditions you experienced on Tarsus IV?’

Jim’s mouth twisted, as it always did, at the simple mention of that name. ‘There was some nasty wildlife, yeah. It was either eat ’em or let ’em eat us.’

‘A rule of the wild,’ Spock agreed.

Jim rolled his eyes. ‘When you say it like that, it sounds like it all makes sense.’

The natural chain of predators and prey did ‘all make sense’, as it followed obvious patterns as dictated by a carnivorous lifestyle.

‘Cleaned out a giant bat warren in some caves,’ Jim added. He rested his forefinger in the basin of a queen’s crown, rolling the piece against the board without disturbing its location. ‘They were high enough the plainstalkers couldn’t get to us up there. Smelled bad, but it stayed dry whenever it rained.’

Spock sat in the chair at his desk, Jim’s back—for once—to open space, rather than pressed to a hard surface.

‘A sensible maneuver,’ he said.

‘Yeah, damn right it was.’ Jim’s shoulders pinched high, then fell. ‘Anyway, somebody had to go down and get food for the kids, water, stuff like that. One time Kevin followed me and stepped in
this plant like an idiot and had a rash for months. Kept itching and crying all night long.’

‘I will make note of the reaction for Kevin Riley’s medical file and transmit the information to the ship’s CMO, Doctor Puri,’ Spock said.

‘Might as well. Kevin probably forgot to tell anyone about it, so.’ Jim crouched so that he was eye-level with the bottom tier of the chessboard, where the black king and the white queen occupied opposite ends, the former flanked by a bishop and a knight, the latter alone. ‘You know when we’re leaving orbit?’

‘Our orders have not yet come through,’ Spock replied. ‘There are still investigations being conducted planet-side, though a transport ship should be arriving within the next seventy-two hours, with the facilities and resources necessary to house the survivors and contact their next-of-kin. Once arrangements have been made, it is only logical that the transport will return to Earth as a base of operations to naturalize the remaining colonists.’

‘Huh,’ Jim said.

It was cryptic, even for him.

‘Don’t have any next of kin,’ he added at last, face completely hidden by the chessboard.

‘That is untrue, though perhaps you are unaware of the family member in question,’ Spock said. ‘Your uncle on your mother’s side, Frank—’

‘Don’t have an uncle,’ Jim said.

‘According to my sources—’

‘I don’t have an uncle,’ Jim repeated. His hands, resting on the edge of the desk, had balled into fists. ‘He’s a bastard. I’m not staying with him. Why do you think we signed up for the Tarsus IV colony to begin with?’

Spock had not considered the family’s motivations in volunteering for the colony program.

‘The individual’s needs and preferences will be taken into consideration as much as possible in the relocation efforts,’ he said. ‘Starfleet and the Federation would not assign a minor to the care of an unfit custodian.’

‘Doesn’t matter anyway, ‘cause like I said, I don’t have an uncle, so I’m not getting on that transport.’ Jim drew a thin breath into his lungs, shoulders twitching as his chest swelled. ‘Besides, you might find some more survivors down there, maybe.’ The likelihood of that eventuality was so miniscule as to be impossible, but Spock did not volunteer that information, given Jim’s expressed distaste for mathematical probabilities. ‘And if you do, there’s gonna have to be somebody who knows a little something about all that stuff to help ‘em, what you said. Naturalize. That means I should probably stay here on the Enterprise, just in case. Can’t be too careful.’

‘You must already be aware that what you suggest cannot be sanctioned,’ Spock said.

‘You seriously don’t get it,’ Jim replied.

‘Revise your educational method,’ Spock said, ‘and inform me of what it is I do not “get”.’

‘You don’t think there’s gonna be any more survivors, do you?’
‘I do not,’ Spock said.

‘Me neither,’ Jim said. ‘I looked. After the fire, I looked.’

‘A one man search party would have to allow for error, based on its limitations,’ Spock said. ‘The population of the colony of Tarsus IV, while comparatively small to other, larger outposts, was nevertheless too large to be comprehensively surveyed by a single individual.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ Jim replied.

‘The scope of that request is too broad,’ Spock said. ‘I cannot comply.’

Jim wrinkled his nose, fixing Spock with a look that suggested he had encountered something unappetizing. It was the same expression Spock had seen on his face when Jim was battling the biological shortcomings of his digestive system—except that this time, it was Spock’s words that had troubled Jim’s gut.

‘I can’t tell if you’re making fun of me or if you’re just really committed to talking like a robot,’ Jim said.

‘There are no android officers among the ranks of Starfleet,’ Spock replied.

Jim’s eyes narrowed, his focus making them appear especially blue. ‘OK. I’m gonna guess making fun of me. But it should be clearer than that, Spock. You’re not doing yourself any favors.’

‘My intent was not mockery,’ Spock clarified. The topic of conversation was rapidly approaching something from which neither of them could hope to benefit. ‘I merely wished to convey that your efforts, while laudable, could not have produced the results for which you may have hoped.’

‘Yeah.’ Jim lifted his head, finding Spock’s eyes above the black pieces ranged across the chessboard. ‘If this is supposed to be a pep talk, you suck at it.’

‘I had not planned to indulge in small dialogue at this interval,’ Spock admitted.

It did not trouble him to admit to his unpreparedness in an area that had caught him largely by surprise. While he had taken pains to correct his own shortcomings when it came to the unnecessary dialogue that peppered so much of human contact, he was not used to engaging so frequently. Nor was he used to being followed into his private quarters, then compensating for the shortcomings of another individual.

When someone wished to engage in conversation with Spock, in most cases it was because they believed themselves able to conduct the bulk of it on their own. In this, as in other situations, Jim had proven himself an atypical representative of human behavior.

He raised his eyebrows, as if skeptical of Spock’s well-reasoned explanation.

‘You’re saying I caught you unprepared.’

‘Exactly that,’ Spock replied, pleased that they had come to a point of understanding, however minimal.

‘You,’ Jim repeated. ‘Mr. Vulcan.’

‘That is not my proper name,’ Spock said.

‘Sure,’ Jim agreed, ‘but it’s what people call you behind your back.’
‘Indeed, I am aware of this—though the objective of utilizing such a moniker remains unclear.’

‘How do you figure?’

‘If those who engage in the practice of calling me by a referential appellation do not intend for me to overhear them, then they are foolishly underestimating the scope of a Vulcan sense of hearing,’ Spock said. ‘If they do intend for me to overhear them, they are foolishly overestimating the impact of their own sense of humor. I cannot take umbrage at a statement that, regardless of the emotion with which it is spoken, is simply the truth.’

Jim snorted, though it was not to clear his throat or obscure any crack in his voice, since he had not spoken. Though the noise it made was creaky with misuse, it was not dissimilar to the laughter he had exhibited earlier in the same conversation.

‘The most likely explanation falls to a third category,’ Spock added, ‘which infers that they are unable to pronounce my full name, and rather than approach the opportunity as one in which to practice their linguistics, they have opted to sacrifice accuracy for ease of communication. There are no other Vulcans aboard this ship; therefore, it is obvious to whom they are referring.’

‘It really doesn’t bother you?’

‘It really does not bother me,’ Spock replied.

On Vulcan, during his childhood, he had been taunted for being too human; on Earth, during his enrollment in Starfleet Academy, he had been taunted for being too Vulcan. The taunts and the perspective from which they were issued may have changed, but the underlying principles had not. When one was considered too much of something and too little of another, then told the opposite was true, one was forced to contemplate the nature of the standards to which they had been unfavorably compared.

Either Spock was too little of either, or he was too much of both.

The paradox, while frustrating, was also comforting. ‘Mr. Vulcan’ was a term that was far from cruel. It simply was, and did not follow Spock home from school in the footsteps he left behind him in the hot sand.

‘That’s good,’ Jim said. ‘Cause humans tease each other all the time. It’s normal. It can even mean somebody likes you—at least it means they’re thinking about you.’

‘Once again, the complexities of these illogical human social rituals are beyond me.’

‘Maybe you should, uh, approach it as an opportunity to broaden your cultural horizons.’

‘I have lodged no formal complaints regarding the breach in protocol with my captain,’ Spock said. ‘My tolerance itself is already a cultural compromise.’

‘It must be weird serving on a ship with you,’ Jim said. ‘Also, you should have more than one chair in here.’

‘Even the one is at times excessive,’ Spock replied.

‘It’s a chair. There’s nothing excessive about places for other people to sit.’ Jim straightened at last to sidestep the chessboard and approach an empty stretch of the desktop. He hoisted himself up and onto the desk backwards, then crossed his legs and tucked them underneath his body. The display was both agile and carefully measured; he did not shake the surface or disrupt the chess pieces, and
the desk itself did not creak beneath his well-balanced weight.

His feet would not have reached the floor had he let them dangle.

Spock would have consulted Jim’s medical records to determine if his growth had been stunted by a prolonged denial of proper nutrients, but he had already learned from Doctor Puri that there were certain members of the surviving group that were not yet ready to undergo a full and invasive array of medical tests. As Jim had no completed diagnostic chart on file, it was safe to surmise that he was among the aforementioned number.

All survivors had been through proper channels of decontamination and given basic inoculations in order to ensure they would not infect members of the crew with any viral or bacterial strain. However, their comfort mentally was equally as important as their physical needs, according to Starfleet regulation. No one would be forced to undergo any examinations that would make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

‘You seem to have made alternative provisions regardless of your resources,’ Spock said.

‘That’s what I do,’ Jim replied. ‘You’re not gonna report my breaches of protocol to the captain either, are you?’

‘My reports are confidential.’

‘So if I keep you up when you wanted to sleep, you might slip something in there about me?’

‘I would not allow a personal matter to affect my professionalism,’ Spock said.

‘Think I could stay here tonight?’ Jim looked up to the ceiling and away from Spock’s face as he made the request, his voice studiously light; the entire affect strained. ‘I won’t do the thing I did last time. Wake you up with all the—you know.’

‘Would you not prefer the company of those closer to you in age and experience?’ Spock asked.

Jim’s shoulders slumped. ‘I asked you, didn’t I?’

‘You did,’ Spock confirmed.

This was not a matter of contention, and yet Spock did not mind the repetition for the sake of review. On occasion it was a necessary maneuver in order to better reinforce even his understanding of the material.

Jim had expressed a preference for Spock’s company. Therefore, it did not trouble Jim that Spock was not a member of his peer group, or that he did not actively pursue small dialogue. As a half Vulcan, his understanding of common social and cultural touchstones was inconsistent at best. All in all, he was an unequivocally poor choice of companion for James Tiberius Kirk, but he was nevertheless the companion Jim had explicitly chosen.

In matters of friendship, it was Spock’s assumption that a person’s expressed partiality, no matter how peculiar, was the main factor for consideration. Indeed, the choice itself seemed to demonstrate that in spite of all the obvious factors that denoted Spock as a less-than-ideal candidate, he had nevertheless done something in order to earn a place of distinction in Jim’s esteem.

‘And you’re saying…’ Jim leaned forward, holding onto the desk on either side of his hips for balance. ‘Look, on anyone else I’d guess the silence meant no, but you’re kind of big on silences that mean a lot of different things. Have ’em all the time. Long, awkward pauses. So I wouldn’t wanna
assume anything. You know.’

Jim waved his hand, a gesture that clarified nothing. If it was his intent to illustrate that which Spock should have known, then both were victim to their own shortcomings.

‘If I do not give you permission to remain within my cabin, it is likely that you will choose another, less favorable location to spend the night,’ Spock said.

‘Less favorable.’ Jim nodded. Unlike Spock, he did not appear to require the time to analyze the multi-pronged direction of their discussion. ‘Which means this is favorable.’

Jim scratched the back of his hand, wiggling from side to side where he sat. The darker marks scattered across the skin under his knuckles remained despite the friction, so it was likely that they were indicative of freckles and not dirt. That was one smaller mystery solved, with the greater bulk of Jim’s character yet unmapped.

Spock realized that Jim’s interpretation of his words could be perceived as a valid one.

‘I acquiesce,’ Spock said.

‘Wow,’ Jim replied. ‘Way to make a guy feel welcome, Spock.’

‘You are welcome,’ Spock said, which served the dual purpose of providing what Jim had asked for and also reminding him that Spock was granting a concession for which he had not yet been thanked.

He did not require gratitude, but neither did he wish for Jim to forget that there were officers aboard this vessel who would not be so accommodating with their schedules. Jim’s missed appointments with Doctor Chapel came to mind.

‘OK, cool,’ Jim said. ‘You got an extra blanket?’

*
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Spock learns you don’t always have to complicate matters.

First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.56.

Though I remain unable to engender progress regarding James Tiberius Kirk’s socialization with others or his commitment to counseling with Doctor Chapel, there have been no further accidental, instances of polarizing conflict between us. While Jim does not hesitate to speak up when he believes I am ‘being weird’, neither do I hesitate to suggest when he reveals signs of similarly unusual behavior. Though human nature generally finds conflict in stark honesty where there should be none, Jim’s acceptance of the truth may prove to be a point of security upon which he has come to rely. He is aware that I will not lie to him, and he is appreciative, regardless of occasionally wounded pride.

This has been unexpected.

I will now record another instance of note for the sake of posterity. Perhaps its meaning will clarify itself, given enough time.

At zero six hundred yesterday—Stardate 2249.55—I observed Jim, unbeknownst to him at the time, making his way to the transport room when he believed that he was alone and undetected. He spent longer than twenty-seven minutes within, though he did not approach the transporter pads, and remained as far away from them as the area allowed without flattening himself against the control consoles. After twenty-seven minutes of motionless and intense study, he turned to the consoles; without touching them, he familiarized himself with the controls while referencing their schematics on his PADD. He left without accomplishing anything of note, though that summary is not to suggest I would qualify research as nothing of note.

He has spent a total of three hours in the past forty-eight—of which I am aware—engaged in Observation Deck C4. Though he was careful to recalibrate the equipment he used during these sessions before he vacated the deck, I was able to discover that the entirety of these three hours he devoted to scanning Tarsus IV, in whose orbit we remain.

He has not raised the topic of these undertakings of his with me, and appears, at least on the surface, to be content with revisiting familiar topics whenever we converse. (He has requested that I do not refer to our dialogues as intercourse, and it is true that the word has several distinct definitions that are apparently humorous to the teenage human male.) If I believed that his initial recounting of specific events on Tarsus IV was a sign of further confidences to come, it is possible that I was mistaken.

Captain Pike informs me that ‘the course of these things don’t run smooth’, a sentiment with which I am in complete agreement.

The aggregate data collected reveals no pattern or set of patterns. I consider this case to be unique, as is the individual at its center.
Over the next three days, Spock attempted to embark on new pathways of conversation.

He began with the following:

‘Given that you are below average height for an individual your age, would you agree that the years you spent with unreliable food sources and improper nutrition have retarded your growth?’ he asked during a shared morning meal, while Jim stuffed the pockets of his leather jacket, now worn over Spock’s sweater, with protein supplements.

Jim’s reaction to the question left him momentarily speechless.

‘You just called me short,’ he said.

‘You have not been officially measured by a medical officer serving aboard this ship,’ Spock replied. ‘However by visual comparison alone your height is not a matter of contention.’

‘You called me short,’ Jim repeated.

He refused to speak to Spock until after dinner that same day.

‘I am aware of your trip to the transporter room,’ Spock tried again the next morning, when Jim’s mouth was full of too much bread to chew at once, his cheeks bulging comically.

Jim’s face turned mottled, but he was forced to finish masticating and swallowing his food before he was able to voice his outrage.

‘You’re seriously stalking me. I’m gonna file a complaint.’

‘As this ship’s first officer, I must be aware at all times of any unsanctioned business conducted in the transporter room,’ Spock said.

‘Well if you followed me, you’d probably know I didn’t do anything while I was in there,’ Jim replied.

‘I am aware. This leads me to my point of inquiry: if you attended the transporter room in order to do nothing while there, why attend in the first place?’

Jim did not elaborate on his motives. He filled his mouth with more bread and four slices of a green apple and glared across the table at Spock while Spock offered no visual retaliation to Jim’s hostility.

At lunch, Spock informed Jim of the optimal amount of sleep required by a growing human boy, and Jim almost spilled a glass of milk in response. He righted it only at the last second, then licked the drops that had spilled onto his hand from between his knuckles.

‘You know, you suck at small dialogue,’ Jim told him.

At dinner, Spock mentioned he had gone to Observation Deck C4 to recalibrate the equipment.

‘Huh,’ Jim replied.

After dinner, Spock suggested Jim avail himself of a sonic shower.

‘Uh-uh,’ Jim said. ‘Can’t smell different.’
‘You are no longer on Tarsus IV,’ Spock reminded him.

Jim stormed out, though he only remained absent for forty-three minutes.

‘You don’t understand anything,’ he told Spock upon his return.

If there was any potential accuracy to the accusation, then it behooved Spock to consider them fully. It was true that there had been regular instances of imperfect communication between them, but to say that Spock did not comprehend anything was, Spock concluded, a gross exaggeration of the terms.

As always, liberal application of hyperbole was to be expected, as Jim was at an age that favored clear distinctions between states of being as opposed to more accurate and less obvious boundaries.

Nevertheless, if Jim preferred to believe that Spock did not understand the complexities of his young mind, and if that belief allowed him to relax in some meaningful way, then Spock concluded that he did not need to educate Jim to the contrary.

At least for the time being.

It was one of a few insignificant misconceptions that it did not trouble Spock to allow. Doctor Chapel referred to the act as engaging in a ‘white lie,’ which Spock understood to be a different act from committing to any true falsehoods.

The discrepancy was slight, but fell within the realm of technicalities. That was something every Vulcan could embrace.

‘I will take your comment under advisement,’ Spock said.

Jim groaned, tugging his hair to cover his face.

There was no clear-cut reply to such a physical statement, and Spock allowed Jim to have the proverbial last word, despite the fact that in this instance, no parting words had been exchanged.

In Spock’s private quarters, at the usual hour of his rest, Spock watched as Jim contemplated the game he had usurped at Spock’s chessboard. Rather than playing against one another, Spock had allowed Jim to take over his routine of playing against himself.

It was a suitable means to test one’s intellect and Spock had reason to believe it would offer Jim a method for appraising his own skills—those that did not involve silence, tracking, hunting, and so on.

‘Eventually, your utilization of multiple layers of clothing to conceal your body’s odors will not be sufficient,’ Spock said.

Jim’s gaze flicked over the white pieces before landing on Spock.

‘Are you trying to distract me?’

‘Merely offering an accurate evaluation,’ Spock replied.

‘By saying I stink.’

‘Hearing is not the only heightened sense which Vulcans enjoy,’ Spock said. ‘Their sense of smell is also amplified.’
Jim touched his finger to the tip of the queen’s crown, spinning it on its axis. ‘Burn. That’s cold even for you, Iceman.’

Spock cleared his throat. He could not immediately discern the preferable response to this indictment, leaving aside the matter of the new moniker Jim had ascribed to him.

‘You like that, huh?’ Jim, apparently, did not require a response. ‘Me and McCoy came up with it together.’

‘Doctor Leonard H. McCoy,’ Spock confirmed.

‘He’s the one.’ Jim paused to scratch the side of his face beneath the fall of his hair. ‘He was shouting at some yeoman about test tubes or samples, so I finally gave him a break and let him give me some shots or whatever.’

Spock could feel Jim’s eyes shift, and his focus with them, to rest on Spock from behind his bangs. Jim had managed to distract himself better than Spock could have hoped to, and lost his white king to his black queen’s checkmate after an ill-considered move placed the piece in obvious danger.

The following afternoon, Spock visited the medical bay, where Doctor McCoy was, perhaps not to Spock’s surprise, also shouting at a yeoman about test-tubes.

‘He told you about the Iceman thing, didn’t he?’ McCoy didn’t look up from his work when Spock’s shadow fell across his medical PADDs. ‘Just goes to show you: never trust a sixteen-year-old boy. If I’d been born Leona, I’d know that much already.’

‘The matter of your inside humor with a charge of the ship is not my concern, regardless of whether or not I am at the center of it,’ Spock replied. ‘I came to inquire after James Tiberius Kirk’s health. He is of sub-standard weight and height for his age, and the likelihood that he will suffer chronic physical ailments due to improper nourishment is…’ Spock paused, recalling that McCoy, though he was a medical man, did not prefer decimal points in statements of probability. ‘…high,’ he concluded at last.

‘Who’s the doctor here—me or you? Don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs, Commander Spock.’

‘I would have no reason to consider the pastime,’ Spock said. ‘Neither my grandmother nor myself have any interest in recreational egg-sucking.’

McCoy made a few disbelieving noises—or perhaps he was choking, or suffering a respiratory infection, or a sudden allergic reaction—finally looking up to Spock’s face. ‘Doctor-patient confidentiality,’ he said. ‘Unless the request is formal, you’ll have to ask the patient and see if he’s willing to share the fruits of my significant labors. It’s not that he’s squeamish when it comes to needles, mind you,’ McCoy added. ‘Didn’t even flinch when I stuck him. But he kept loitering outside like the whole problem with getting the damn thing over with was committing himself to somebody else’s care in the first place. Still, I’m a doctor, not a psychiatrist. Kid needs somebody who can connect with him.’

The tone of McCoy’s voice seemed to imply that he did not believe Spock was capable of making such a connection. He did not, however, also imply that this was a professional opinion rather than a personal one.

After dinner, as Jim set up a new game on the chessboard and Spock reviewed the self-evaluations of the ship’s junior crew, Spock broached the subject of Jim’s health with the same candor to which Jim
had responded positively in the past. Whether or not he found Spock’s consideration of his feelings appropriate did not affect his appreciation of honesty.

‘Have you received the results of the tests conducted by your new acquaintance, Doctor Leonard H. McCoy?’ he asked.

Jim squinted at the chess pieces without making his first move, sucking the left corner of his bottom lip into his mouth and between his teeth. ‘You know what the H stands for?’

‘If you require an exchange of information—’ Spock began.

‘I’m healthy,’ Jim said. ‘Enough, anyway. I’m not dying or anything. Thanks for caring.’

‘It would be an oversight if I were to neglect matters of your physical well-being.’

‘Sure makes me feel special.’

‘As you are the only individual aboard this ship with whom I frequently socialize, “unique” would be a more fitting descriptor.’

Jim ducked his head, face hidden again by hair. He allowed the silence to linger long past the point of common human decency—but as Spock was no common human, he did not bristle at that which another crewperson would have found uncomfortable. Spock had no reason to experience discomfort. When Jim wished to speak, he would do so, as it had already been proven he did as he pleased, and very little could dissuade him when he was determined.

Commitment was not a flaw; stubbornness, however, was.

‘My stomach’s all messed up, I guess,’ Jim said. It was thirty-four minutes since the conversation had ceased. ‘You didn’t open up my medical files and take a look for yourself?’

‘Doctor-patient confidentiality exists for a reason,’ Spock replied. ‘It is my understanding that, if I sought the results, the only proper way to do so would be to inquire directly at the source. Should you be willing to share the information or not, the decision is yours, and I would not use my position as first officer to breach that trust.’

‘Jeez.’

Jim did not seem moved by Spock’s attention to detail regarding his privacy, but this did not disturb Spock. He had come to the point where he could be reasonably sure—if not altogether certain—that the minor instances of miscommunication between himself and Jim would not damage the greater whole of a mutual understanding they were working together to establish.

That did not mean Spock could discontinue his efforts.

‘Have I said something that has caused offense?’ Spock asked.

‘No.’ Jim went about setting up the pawns in a meticulous fashion that contradicted his casual tone. ‘It’s not—you’re just—you come on a little strong, Spock. And not in a warm, cuddly kind of way. I mean you’re kinda information overload sometimes.’

‘I do not comprehend,’ Spock confessed.

Jim sighed, leaning forward in a display that seemed largely theatrical in nature. His hand knocked over a pawn and one of the rooks he had established earlier upon the board. This seemed to be a
highly ineffective method of readying the game for play, but Spock did not offer comment, due to the aforementioned ‘overload’ of information.

‘Okay.’ Jim lifted his head but not his body, merely turning where he was prone to look in Spock’s direction. ‘You know that expression, the ball’s in your court?’

‘I am familiar with the terminology,’ Spock said, having heard Captain Pike utilize the phrase more than once in hard negotiations with other members of the Federation. ‘Although for the sake of honesty, I will admit that I have never used it.’

‘That’s fine.’ Jim’s nose wrinkled, upper lip twitching, as though he was attempting to keep his face from doing anything impulsive. ‘That’s—that’s not really the issue. Anyway, I’m just saying, when you lob these things my way, Spock, it’s like throwing a phaser on overload into my court. Too much information, too many questions. Way too formal. I feel like you’re interrogating me, only you’re sneaky about it, so I end up interrogating myself.’

‘I see,’ Spock said.

This had not been his intent.

Jim rested his chin upon his arm, slowly gathering the pieces he had knocked over and returning them to their proper squares.

‘It’s not a big deal,’ he said. ‘Just use fewer words, maybe. Small sentences. Limit your options. Hell, limit my options once in a while.’

‘I am to understand that you do not desire the freedom of your actions, but rather clear and distinct boundaries within which to operate?’ Spock asked.

Jim blinked down at the board in front of him.

‘Maybe. I guess. Too many choices can be a bad thing too, you know.’

Spock was neither old enough nor familiar enough with Jim to represent a replacement parental figure, but he was a figure of authority not only in terms of superior age, but in terms of his rank as well. That Jim was a civilian was a fact Spock had cause to reinforce through repetition. Jim was young, though he had separated himself from his peers, as if to encourage others to forget his youth.

Yet now he was insistent that Spock should consider the limitations that Jim strove daily to hide and reject.

‘Jim,’ Spock said, ‘do I have your permission to consult your medical files?’

Jim shrugged. ‘Yeah, sure. Why the hell not.’

He did not look at Spock for the remainder of the evening, and slept—very briefly, for the duration of no greater than two and a half hours—in the earliest hours between midnight and morning, from zero two hundred fifteen and zero four hundred forty-five.

Spock dressed in a fresh uniform and re-entered the cabin to find Jim removing Spock’s sweater, folding it clumsily, and setting it on the desk between the chessboard and the computer terminal.

‘It stopped smelling like your incense,’ he said.

‘My presence is not yet required on the bridge,’ Spock replied. ‘Therefore, I will request your
presence in the medical bay. Together, we will discuss Doctor McCoy’s findings and consider his suggestions for treatment moving forward.’

‘Bossy,’ Jim muttered, but he offered no true protest, walking through the halls at Spock’s side, between the gamma and alpha crews switching places.

It was with Jim present and McCoy attempting to control his passionate gesticulations that Spock learned of the additional allergies Jim had developed—an update to his file was immediately necessary—due to pathogen exposure on Tarsus IV and the strain placed on his digestive system.

‘There wasn’t too much food,’ Jim said, in a moment of unusual openness. The louder McCoy became, the easier it was for Jim to speak, as he was comparatively almost unnoticeable. It was a curious but effective tactic. ‘Winters could be bad. We ate some weird stuff.’

‘From the looks of it, you were eating tree bark,’ McCoy replied.

‘Sometimes,’ Jim said. His face tightened and the crooked grin he wore was absent in his eyes. ‘When we were lucky, that is. We ended up saving the tree bark for special occasions, like birthdays.’

‘Don’t pull my leg, kid. I might just kick back.’ McCoy changed displays to another scan of Jim’s intestinal system, and Jim even got down off his chair to draw even with the screen and observe the image up close.

‘Gross,’ he said.

‘Fascinating,’ Spock added.

‘Congratulations to both of you on being the strangest damn medical consult I’ve had to date,’ McCoy told them on their way out, handing over three prescriptions. ‘And that’s including the one time—I swear on my great-uncle’s best whiskey—I had to remove a Gorn spike from a man where the sun don’t shine.’

‘No way,’ Jim said.

The information, cryptic as it was and likely a violation of the same doctor-patient confidentiality McCoy had sworn to uphold, brightened Jim’s eyes and his demeanor—until it came time to begin his regimen of pills, at which point it darkened.

‘Where is it that the sun does not shine?’ Spock arranged the pill bottles in a neat line atop the desk.

Jim stared at the row of medication the way someone would watch a firing squad. ‘They’re not gonna make me sleepy or anything, are they?’ he asked, rolling one of the bottles between the fingers and palm of his right hand. He did not snort at Spock’s lack of understanding when it came to McCoy’s colorful metaphors.

‘Of the potential side effects,’ Spock replied, ‘drowsiness is the most desirable. The others are far more unpleasant.’

‘I’m not gonna just fall asleep wherever, all right? I won’t do it.’

‘Have you been given cause to believe you are in danger while aboard the Enterprise?’ Spock asked.

Jim frowned and looked away.
‘We will begin the regimen tonight,’ Spock continued. ‘Once I have concluded my shift on the bridge, I will be able to monitor your progress.’ He paused. ‘I will also be able to act as a guard should you be unable to provide yourself with the same services, though I am not a security officer, and neither have I been given cause to believe you are in danger while aboard the Enterprise.’

‘Okay,’ Jim said. ‘Deal.’

His mouth did not smile. His eyes did not lighten. Yet Spock recognized the indicators of determination in his jaw and chin, and spoke once more with McCoy before they embarked upon the treatment.

‘Remember about that one patient I told you about who was allergic to everything?’ McCoy asked.

‘I do not easily forget details,’ Spock replied.

‘That’s real convenient for you—so you’ll know what I’m talking about when I say that kid’s the same patient. Keep a close watch, make sure he doesn’t start swelling up like a loganberry.’

‘Doctor McCoy,’ Spock said, ‘I intend to be a thorough supervisor.’

McCoy looked him up and down. The characteristics that he was interested in appraising were not apparent to the naked eye, but the young doctor was stubborn enough that Spock did not raise his point.

Whatever McCoy was attempting to ascertain, he must have located it, for he nodded.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Well, whatever else they say about you behind your back, Commander Spock, nobody's gonna say you aren't thorough.’

This was confirmation of a claim Spock had already proven to a fault, but in the interests of productivity, he once more remained silent. There was also Jim to consider, and the possibility that his behavior might benefit if he were to observe displays of restraint.

It was not Spock’s place to set examples for Jim. He was not an educator, though he had provided assistance to no fewer than four science professors at Starfleet Academy during his enrollment. Yet Spock could appreciate that, while in the company of better-behaved individuals, Jim might appropriate said better behavior for himself. In that sense, Spock was not presenting himself as a role model so much as tending, with care, the environment that surrounded a fragile adolescent mind.

Jim was sacrificing his own comfort in an attempt to improve his physical condition. Spock, in turn, could make adjustments of his own.

He did not allow himself, however, to become distracted by his additional duties during his time on the bridge. Whether or not Jim would turn up after the conclusion of Spock’s shift was Jim’s decision alone. It would serve neither of them if Spock’s focus were to be split in the time they spent apart.

The bridge crew served admirably during their shared shift. No one raised the obvious question, which was when they would be leaving Tarsus IV behind—although Spock had heard whispers of gossip among the junior officers about Governor Kodos, specifically his commitment to eugenics, which had been the cause of many deaths in advance of his own.

He did not quiet them, although it would have been within Spock’s rights as first officer to do so. Under different circumstances, conjecture would be reserved for after the rulings of a court martial; but, given that the official status of Governor Kodos was deceased, rumors could not harm a potentially innocent man’s reputation.
It was true that the absence of the man meant that he could not defend himself, but it was similarly true that his reputation was no longer in jeopardy. Considering the evidence supporting many, if not all, of the claims made against him, Spock felt his energies would be better served if expended elsewhere.

‘That’s some good work today, son,’ Captain Pike said in passing, as Spock boarded the turbolift and he himself disembarked.

Spock was not his son, but the captain was only human.

And, as Jim had said, Spock did not always need to complicate matters.

*
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Beam me down, Scotty.

*First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.62.*

We have been hailed by the USS Resolute, which has at last arrived at the rendezvous point outside Tarsus IV’s immediate orbit. The commencement of our joint efforts to relocate the survivors will begin once all arrangements have been made, including confirmation of contact with next of kin, reassignment of multiple medical officers to accompany the Resolute on its return to Earth, and clearance from Federation headquarters.

My full and official comments on the aforementioned have been recorded in my First Officer’s Log, Supplemental, Stardate 2249.62 for reference.

The orders given to the Enterprise, once the rendezvous with the Resolute is concluded, are to share our findings with the USS Zenith, which will arrive in twenty-four hours, whereupon the Zenith’s crew will continue our investigation of Tarsus IV. They have been fully equipped with the technology and the resources necessary for an undertaking of this magnitude and their conclusions will be, for lack of a better word, more conclusive than ours. However, I would assert as first officer that the science officers of the Enterprise conducted themselves commendably during this time, without allowing their emotions to interfere significantly with their duties.

While the ship-wide announcement, made by Captain Pike, has already been broadcast, and the survivors were gathered by Doctor Chapel in the mess hall order to address their concerns, fears, discomfort, et cetera, I can state with some certainty that my James Tiberius Kirk assignment will soon be concluded.

* Seventeen minutes and thirty nine seconds after Captain Pike’s broadcast, Spock became aware that Jim was nowhere to be found, as he was notably absent in all of his regular haunts.

Jim’s penchant for resolving his bouts of emotional chaos and any fits of pique into which he had entered, often without any warning, by removing himself from interactive company was not an entirely unwise instinct. His preference for privacy was not dissimilar to Spock’s; likewise, Spock could understand the choice as more than an unthinking reaction to an immediate impulse. Uninterrupted silence offered the space and a lack of interruptions most conducive to self-examination.

Two hours, forty-nine minutes and sixteen seconds after Spock became aware of Jim’s absence, he was less inclined to attribute the nonappearance to Jim’s routine.

‘Routine’, as far as Jim was concerned, was erratic more often than not, but there were indicators of a divergence from custom. When Doctor McCoy contacted Spock to inquire as to ‘Where in the blue blazes is the kid, missing his last appointment? A lesser medical man’d have his feathers ruffled,’ Spock agreed that it was worthy of investigation, as he had been waiting for Jim to attend the
appointment together, only to be equally neglected.

As Jim was not in any of those regular haunts, Spock’s first and best deduction involved what Captain Pike may have incorrectly referred to as a ‘hunch’, when in reality it was a simple analysis of pre-established patterns.

The analysis was not incorrect. When Spock entered the transport room, Jim was at the console; this time, the lights were on, though Jim’s hands were at his sides, and he stared at controls, the colors of which were reflected in his eyes.

‘I’m not going,’ he said without looking up.

Spock had been quiet in his entrance, but the hum of the door as it opened and shut was more than enough to reveal his presence to someone as finely aware of his surroundings as Jim.

‘Clarify,’ Spock replied.

‘Can’t leave,’ Jim said.

That did not clarify, though Spock would have admitted, if pressed, that there may have been an emotional undertone to his tone, which would have been more obvious to another, more sensitive audience.

‘You cannot stay,’ Spock replied.

The muscles in Jim’s jaw tightened, along with his thumbs around his white knuckles. ‘Then you’re gonna have to—’ He swallowed, a loud and unpleasant sound, like choking. ‘There’s nobody for me, remember? Nobody for me to go back to. There’s nobody.’

‘Should your uncle be judged an unfit guardian, the Federation will make other provisions,’ Spock said. ‘An individual of your intelligence and talents would be, for example, a prime candidate for Starfleet Academy’s Early Admission and Training Program.’

‘Don’t care,’ Jim said, though that could not have possibly been true, given his occasional, brief expressions of pleasure whenever Spock’s statements could be construed as complimentary.

‘Have you an alternative proposal?’ Spock asked.

Again, Jim swallowed with difficulty, though the air quality in the transport room was the same as on the rest of the ship. He breathed as though he were underwater, though he equivocally was not.

‘You already said I can’t stay,’ Jim replied.

‘There is no possibility that a request to remain on-board the Enterprise would be approved.’

‘No possibility.’ Jim had been biting his lower lip, a split in the middle already bleeding. ‘Then I’m just gonna have to go back down there, ‘cause I can’t—I can’t go.’

‘Jim,’ Spock said, ‘there are no living colonists on Tarsus IV.’

‘Shut up,’ Jim told him. ‘Just shut up, Spock.’

Spock considered the validity of the request. It would have been easy for him to acquiesce and cease in his attempts to interact with Jim; though maintaining silence was difficult for some, it required no effort on Spock’s part. Indeed, it could also have been considered the logical choice in this instance, since reasoning with someone already determined to preserve an irrational mindset had questionable,
if not insurmountable, odds.

Success was unlikely.

‘I will not,’ Spock informed him. ‘While your entreaty is not unreasonable given your current state of mind, to offer no restraints would be allowing you to risk bodily harm. I cannot in all good conscience permit you to commit a choice that would be detrimental to your health.’

‘You can’t permit me?’

The tenor of Jim’s voice was not one Spock had heard before. It most closely resembled the hoarse disorientation he had exhibited while sleeping—calling out for someone who could not and would not ever respond—except that this time they were both conscious.

Spock was uncertain of how to process such an obvious shift in their dynamic, as well as how to proceed. Up until now it had been Jim who attempted to bridge the gap between them by implicating formality, though it was generally a subversion thereof through exaggeration, rather than a display of true respect. It had not been obvious at the time because of Jim’s rough demeanor, but Spock had been able to recognize the pattern in retrospect.

To use a colloquial expression: Jim had been meeting him halfway.

‘I am not your superior officer,’ Spock said. This was self-evident but once again Spock found himself relying on repetition to mitigate high-stress situations. ‘I cannot issue orders directly to a civilian without sanction from my captain.’

Jim sniffed, rubbing his nose against the root of his thumb where it ran into his wrist.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That’s what I thought.’

‘Then we have an understanding,’ Spock said.

‘I understand that you can’t tell me what to do,’ Jim agreed. ‘I understand that there’s nothing anyone can do to help me. I understand I might as well be on Tarsus because there’s sure as hell nothing for me here or on Earth. Yeah, Spock. I think I get it.’

None of those were realizations Spock had intended to foster. More than that, the sharp anger that colored Jim’s words suggested that the sentiment, however sincere, had been shielded by facetiousness, which undid any progress they had heretofore made.

‘That is a conclusion drawn based upon emotions rather than on fact,’ Spock said.

‘All I did was state the facts,’ Jim replied. ‘Learned that little trick from you.’

‘Then you truly believe there is no place for you anywhere, despite the size of the galaxies and the infinite diversity offered therein?’

‘Anyway,’ Jim added bitterly, ‘it’s not about facts. You don’t get that, either. You’re so smart but you’re really stupid sometimes.’

‘There are matters in which you are less educated than I am,’ Spock said. ‘Yet rather than imply you lack intelligence, I have only ever endeavored to educate you.’

Jim lifted his head. He had wiped a pale red line of blood across his bottom lip while swiping at his nose with the back of his wrist. ‘My mom’s down there,’ he said. His face offered another new
expression, his voice another new tone. They were equally lost, even hollow; it was the lack of emotion that surprised Spock rather than the abundance of it. Tears were a normal reaction to grief; even Vulcans experienced the deep channels of sorrow beneath the dry desert surface. Jim, by contrast, offered nothing: a scrambling emptiness that could not fill itself with any feeling, for it was simply too hollow. It had closed itself off to outside interference; it could let nothing new inside. A meld would have offered more insight—but Jim was young, and private, and he would not have agreed, and neither would Spock have considered making the request. ‘And my brother’s down there. And you think I’m just gonna leave ‘em behind? I can’t,’ Jim said. He had already been insistent about this conviction. ‘I can’t.’

‘Your mother and your brother are dead,’ Spock told him.

He was well aware that his clinical demeanor was not considered soothing. On this occasion, a reassuring axiom and a pitying embrace would not serve. The only way to approach Jim at this time was clinically.

Jim lifted one fist, perhaps with the intention of launching a transport sequence, but instead lowered it with a dull thud to the flat top of the console. He raised it again and dropped it again, this time connecting more solidly. Then, he spread his fingers and flattened his palm to the metalloid coating. His shoulders narrowed; he bent over the edge.

‘What they would or would not want,’ Spock continued, ‘has no bearing. They are made of the same atoms that comprise Tarsus IV, but I would suggest that they have more in common with the molecular composition of Earth. If you wish to be with them—however metaphorically—it is there you should logically return.’

Jim hiccupped. The familiar snort of a laugh followed. His shoulders continued to shake.

‘So I can’t go back,’ he said.

This time, he was referring to Tarsus IV, and not his home-world. Spock nodded, even knowing Jim could not see him. ‘I would also suggest that instead, you go forward.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ Jim said. ‘You’re the one on the ship. First officer. Get to do anything.’

‘That is hardly an accurate representation—’

‘I know, Spock. I know, Jesus.’ Jim swiped at his eyes with his knuckles. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. ‘Didn’t wanna go down there anyway,’ he admitted.

‘Contradictory impulses are not uncommon among humans.’

‘What about losing everybody? Is that not uncommon among humans?’ Jim asked. ‘No, Spock, don’t. Don’t answer that.’

He allowed silence to fall without attempting to deny it, then seemed both uncomfortable with the result of that decision and unsure of how to reverse its effects.

‘Already programmed it to beam me down, though,’ Jim said at last, rapping his knuckles dully beside the control pad.

‘As I said, you would be a prime candidate for Starfleet Academy,’ Spock replied.

Jim took a deep breath. Spock considered the inappropriate but perhaps not-uncalled-for lecture he would receive from McCoy, were he to learn how Spock had allowed Jim’s lip to continue bleeding.
As injuries went, the split lip was a minor one. Spock also considered the other injuries that Jim bore as a result of the hurt visited upon him on Tarsus IV. Some scars were invisible because they were evidence of that which was no longer there, as opposed to that which remained.

‘Should you be determined to visit the site of the lost colony once more before you are called upon to depart,’ Spock added, ‘then you will have to submit a request to Captain Pike for the authorization to beam down. As you will also be required to be accompanied by an escort, I submit my services as a senior officer.’

Jim remained where he was, still ossified by silence. Finally, he lifted his chin in defiance. ‘You don’t have to do that.’

‘I have already informed you that an escort will be mandatory,’ Spock said. ‘I would, in fact, “have to do that”’.‘

‘S’not what I meant.’

‘Then you should have been less vague.’

‘I mean you don’t have to…’ Jim trailed off. ‘Already told you I didn’t want to go back.’

‘Yet you have already programmed the console to beam you down,’ Spock said. ‘With that much forethought and effort, it would appear to me you believed in the importance of the act enough to make provisions.’

‘You’re not gonna let this go, are you?’ Jim asked.

‘It is not in my nature,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah,’ Jim replied. ‘No kidding.’

He briefly reappraised the transporter pads, then turned back to Spock. The distance between him and the transporter room exit was too expansive for him to harbor any hope of properly navigating it without interference, and yet somehow, he did not seem to be planning an escape. Rather, it appeared that he was making a final assessment—both of the plan he had thought was forsaken, and whether or not he was truly prepared to surrender just yet.

If he decided against beaming down, Spock would once more intervene, with a more explicitly stated rationale. But it could stimulate significant maturation to offer Jim the chance to review and evaluate the consequences for himself.

‘You probably couldn’t even get Pike to sign off on something like that,’ Jim said. ‘Wasting his first officer on a day trip to a burned-out husk of a failed colony? Seems like special treatment to me, Commander. He probably wouldn’t wanna set that kind of precedent.’

‘That is unlikely,’ Spock replied, as he could not envision a second set of circumstances that would result in a recreation of this situation. ‘Furthermore, you profess a considerable amount of confidence in Captain Pike’s responses for someone who has negligibly little experience conversing with him.’

‘You don’t know that.’ Jim drummed his fingers against the shell of the transporter control hub, a movement seemingly designed to give Spock uncertainty as to whether or not he would activate the controls. A feint, but one that did not fool Spock for an instant. ‘We could have all kinds of secret meetings behind your back. Maybe I’m recording my own logs for posterity. Maybe you’re my assignment.’
‘You do not have a dedicated channel,’ Spock pointed out, ‘and neither have you been assigned a code of your own to properly store and categorize data within the ship’s computer hubs.’

‘That’s all I’d need though, right?’ Jim asked.

‘These things are only obtainable from the captain,’ Spock replied. ‘As I am not aware of any secret meetings he has arranged with any of the colonists from Tarsus IV, it is unlikely you will be able to gain an audience.’

‘This is a hell of a pep talk, you know that, right? Like—I’m really hoping they don’t put you in charge of hostage negotiations.’

It was similar to a complaint Jim had raised before, although Spock had not given it due consideration at the time. The ability to engender ‘pep’ was not a skill Spock saw the need to nurture.

Jim was still standing behind the transporter controls. He flexed his hands, fractionally too large for the rest of him, proportionally. He had not yet achieved the height and weight that would be conventional for a young man of his age, and thus his extremities appeared slightly out of balance with his frame.

‘I will present our request for day leave to Captain Pike,’ Spock said. ‘As for my pep dialogue, consider the following: if I were to offer you empty platitudes and suggest that I am qualified to predict the severity, or lack thereof, of any emotional reaction you may experience should you return to the colony site, then we would both know I lack the expertise for such claims to be accurate.’

‘Not gonna give me false hope, then.’ Jim swallowed. ‘You think I’m gonna have some emotional reactions, huh?’

‘It is one possibility,’ Spock confirmed. ‘You are experiencing an internal conflict. Either way, a conclusion must be drawn, which means a decision must be made.’

‘It’s not that easy,’ Jim said, then waved his hand and squared his shoulders. His mouth was in its most stubborn shape. ‘Okay, fine, do it.’

‘A brave decision.’

‘You’re only saying that ‘cause it was your idea.’

Spock paused to allow their location to reassert itself in their attentions. ‘Technically, the idea was yours.’

‘Are you gonna talk to the captain or not? Quit stalling.’

‘If I am to leave you alone with the already-programmed transport console, I must have your assurance that you will not betray my trust and beam down to the planet alone in my absence,’ Spock said.

‘Promise,’ Jim muttered, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back against the console. He tuck his hands under his arms so that Spock would not imagine them punching the final coordinates into the control panel. ‘You’re the one who’s making a big deal about all this, not me.’

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Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Returns and departures.

Chapter Notes

EEEK I'm late! I lost track of the time! I'm so sorry!

First Officer’s Log, Personal, Stardate 2249.62.

I have been granted permission for a half-day trip to Tarsus IV by Captain Pike, in order to accompany Jim Kirk to the colony for a final appraisal of what it is—and what it is not. All formal logs were submitted and the record will show that protocol was followed to the letter.

I now intend to beam down to Tarsus IV with Jim Kirk, an event that will mark the conclusion of my efforts directed to this assignment. Doctor Chapel has agreed that the excursion will provide Jim Kirk with ‘closure’, as he will be able to see for himself that a place empty of its inhabitants and possessing merely the history of its past events has no power whatsoever over the living.

Tarsus IV is a collection of abandoned edifices and unsuccessful ventures, and nothing more. It is where Jim’s life changed, but it cannot change him now, as all that has transpired there is now done.

I will endeavor to impart this final lesson, with the assumption that it will prove beneficial to Jim in the future.

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Jim wore his jacket and Spock his science blues, fully equipped with a tricorder, a communicator, and a phaser set to stun. One of the junior engineers, an individual by the name of Montgomery Scott, presided over their beam down, whistling when he learned Jim had been the one who had ‘messed with his sweet lassie’.

‘Engineer Scott, the Enterprise is a ship and not a female,’ Spock informed him.

‘Show’s what little you know—an’ no offense,’ Scott replied.

The leather of Jim’s jacket creaked when he crossed the room. He was so still and so tense on the transporter pad that Spock could not deny the effect of anxiety that surrounded him. Though Jim dug his nails into the soft flesh of his palms as he clenched his fists, he did not request to terminate proceedings, nor did he speak out in complaint at all.

‘Everybody say cheese,’ Scott added, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Neither Spock nor Jim complied. Ensign Scott called them a ‘tough crowd’.
The beam down was quick and without complications. Jim’s face was white in the afternoon sunlight, the distant glimmer of the Enterprise in orbit high above them. The smells of the colony were as they had been during Spock’s first visit: primarily rust and burnt metal, with the lingering tang of sickly mold beneath. The hollow buildings gave no sense of their one-time inhabitants; they had not been lived in for long enough to be given those personal touches that were so prized by human occupants.

Jim swiped his wrist under his nose, which turned pink from the rough treatment.

Doctor Chapel had suggested to Spock that Jim should be the one to lead—that he would know best where it was that he would learn the most, where he could come to terms with what had happened to him—but that some guidance would not be out of place, should he display signs of difficulty or uncertainty.

‘A temporary memorial plaque has been established,’ Spock told him. ‘It is my understanding that a more permanent one will be erected here, and there will doubtless be an addition to the Federation’s memorial wall in San Francisco, once all proper channels of paperwork have been submitted.’

‘A memorial plaque,’ Jim repeated. He shook his head. ‘Is that supposed to make me feel better?’

‘I do not believe it should,’ Spock replied.

‘Then why bother bringing it up?’

Jim’s voice cracked, and he stopped speaking in favor of clearing his throat. The tone in his voice had passed from tense to outright antagonistic, with a speed that Spock could not have tracked. He had anticipated a certain amount of emotional volatility from Jim in advance of their descent, but he had not predicted the immediacy of its incipience, nor the force with which it had been presented.

Faced with these variables, Spock did as Chapel had suggested. When Jim set off in an uncharted direction, offering no explanation, Spock allowed him to take the lead.

‘In preparation for our expedition, I attempted to gather what information I could regarding the changes that occurred Tarsus IV during your absence,’ Spock said. Jim could listen and walk at the same time. Ideally, the added diversion of exercise would provide stimulation to those parts of Jim that were all too eager to lash out at the nearest target. ‘The plaque is one such difference.’

‘Yeah, well…’ Jim rubbed the back of his neck, fingers disappearing under the collar of his too-large jacket. ‘Whatever.’

‘What happened on this planet will not be forgotten,’ Spock added.

Although Jim had not expressed his fear outright in so many words, it was obvious from his actions and thinly veiled comments that he had shouldered the burden of remembering the fallen of Tarsus IV. Perhaps it was due to his age—that Jim was older than nearly all of the children, yet still young enough to preserve the memory for future generations.

Spock did not know what that burden felt like, and he would not speculate.

Jim’s reply came in the form of a gesture; he shrugged one-shouldered as his boots dug into the grit of the path ahead.

The path upon which Jim had embarked did not mirror the one that the initial away team had explored while investigating the intercepted distress beacon. They were not headed into the center of the colony’s established buildings but following a trail that led to the east, toward the agricultural
centers.

There, bright white tarpaulins covered what remained of the blighted crops, preserving the fungus in a controlled state for future science teams to cultivate and study in order to counteract their fatal rate of growth. These tarpaulins crinkled and swayed in the breeze, pinned down on four sides, billowing when the wind strengthened and filled them from below. Their presence was unnatural, and imparted an admitted element of the surreal to the dusty landscape of Tarsus IV.

‘Those stupid things look like ghosts,’ Jim said.

‘They are not,’ Spock replied.

Beyond the fields were the colony’s ruined silos: storage containers knocked onto their sides and split open, now empty of whatever supplies they had once protected. Jim gave the fields a wide berth but paused to examine the silos. The lack of surprise on his face suggested that he had already been aware of what they would find.

‘Riots,’ he said, though he did not look at Spock.

‘Were you present when they were conducted?’

Jim shook his head. He had not been. ‘I watched,’ he admitted. He pointed toward a distant, rocky hill; dense forestation encroached on its location from behind, creating the perfect, hidden vantage point. ‘Should’ve done something, though.’

‘And what would you have done?’ Spock asked.

‘Something.’ Jim focused his accusatory gaze on the horizon rather than centering it on Spock. ‘Anything.’

He trudged up the slow incline of the hill without offering more, pausing to check the soil, to listen to muted sounds in the distance, to study a track left behind in the dirt. Though the circumstances were not exact, Spock could infer what it must have been to watch Jim traverse and navigate his surroundings on Tarsus IV: always listening and always looking. At one point his nostrils flared and his fingers came away dusty, black under the nails.

‘My mom figured out what was gonna happen,’ Jim said quietly. ‘So she came up with this plan—sent a bunch of us from the same classrooms off on a field trip. I knew something weird was up when the sun set and we weren’t heading back. Kevin was such an idiot. He thought it was so cool we were gonna spend the night camping out.’

‘Your mother behaved admirably,’ Spock replied. That much, despite being colored by the irrationality of troubled emotions, should have been obvious even to Jim. ‘She managed to remove you and many others from danger.’

‘You’re gonna tell me her sacrifice was noble, right?’ Jim shrugged more deeply into his jacket. ‘You’re gonna tell me that what she did, she did it for me, and I should be grateful?’

‘I had not intended to impart my opinion of your mother’s actions in those exact words. It is simply my understanding, not having known the woman in question, that she must have done as she believed was right, and that ultimately her actions resulted in your rescue, for which—as a mother—she must have hoped. Therefore, she was successful.’

‘She’s dead,’ Jim said.
Spock nodded.

‘I had this two-way radio,’ Jim continued, voice even quieter. Had Spock not been a Vulcan, he would not have been able to hear the words. ‘Made it with Sam. Used it all the time until he told me it wasn’t cool and to quit it with the secret messages that weren’t so secret. I took it with me on the field trip, ‘cause I didn’t listen to him. Anyway, I didn’t think he’d answer when I dialed him, but he did. Told me that we couldn’t come back, that everything was bad. Real bad. He told me what was happening, too. For a while, anyway. Then, one day, he didn’t answer.’ Jim tugged the hem of his jacket. If it was too large, then it was possible it had once belonged to an older brother. ‘He never even asked me—he never even got mad that Mom sent me away and not him. Wish he had.’

‘That he did not blame you is also admirable,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah,’ Jim replied. ‘Everybody’s admirable except for me.’

Spock had no comment. He would not assuage Jim’s guilt, for it was Jim’s to confront and Jim’s to disavow.

‘Don’t know what you thought I’d find down here.’ Jim had not, Spock noted, put his hands in his pockets once since they had beamed down. They were not balled into fists but rather hung at the ready by Jim’s sides, his elbows bent at a slight angle, as were his knees.

‘Did the jacket you always wear once belong to your brother, George Samuel Kirk?’ Spock asked.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said.

‘Should you apply to Starfleet Academy, you will be able to attend science courses that will grant you access to official publications on the nature and propagation of the fungus first documented here.’

‘Great.’

‘Is it your desire to return now to the ship?’

‘No,’ Jim said, more quickly than Spock had anticipated. The silence came after his refusal rather than before. Finally, he pointed to Spock’s tricorder. ‘Can I use that?’

‘It would not be standard.’ Spock removed the strap from around his shoulders and held out the tricorder for Jim to receive. ‘As it does not belong to you, it is not yours to break or otherwise harm.’

‘Could’ve used one of these the first few months,’ Jim said, not responding straightforwardly to Spock’s directions, or even acknowledging he had heard them, much less taken them under advisement. ‘Yeah, we managed to get some stuff from what was left after the riots, but it wasn’t much and a lot of it needed work.’ He twisted one of the dials and the tricorder hummed, then whistled. ‘Shit,’ Jim hissed, turning it off immediately.

‘That was not a sign of damage done to the equipment,’ Spock said.

‘Shh,’ Jim said.

It had been the noise that elicited the distressed reaction from Jim. He held as still as a smaller lizard in a le-matya’s line of sight, but there was no sign of predatory life in the vicinity.

Jim did not relax, though he hid his face from Spock with the fall of his hair, shoving the tricorder back in Spock’s direction.
‘I don’t wanna be here anymore,’ he said.

‘We will return to the ship.’ Spock recovered his tricorder, adjusting the fall of the strap over his shoulder. From there he located his communicator, but Jim lunged to stop him, latching onto his wrist.

The unexpected contact sent a current of sudden heat through Spock’s skin, Jim’s fingers tight around the point where Spock’s pulse beat steady and slow. The tranquility of Spock’s mind was consumed by a raging flood of discordant emotions, which poured into Spock’s consciousness as grain spilled from a ruined silo. It was only the rigorous mental training Spock had undergone in advance of joining Starfleet that prevented him from being overwhelmed by the assault.

The expression Jim chose to hide behind his hair betrayed only a fraction of his inner struggle. Spock encountered an expected measure of rage and sadness; below that coursed a black, gnawing fear that was anchored in helplessness, which spread through Jim's thoughts. It touched and poisoned everything in its path, just as the fungus had spread to ruin the plant life on Tarsus IV.

It was this undertow for which Spock had not been prepared: a wild inertia that dragged at his consciousness, threatening to paralyze the rationalization centers of his brain.

The determination Spock had come to associate with Jim was tinged with an equally pervasive desperation, but that desperation had a blinding number of facets around a deadly-still center. It bore the sensation of freefalling compulsion and a desire to outrun all responsibilities and all difficulties—as if the right leap made at the right time would have leave that which chased Jim far behind, effectively propelling him free of the labyrinthine patterns of his chaotic mind.

Spock tugged his arm out of Jim’s reach, breaking the blistering contact. He adjusted the hem of his sleeve.

Jim’s expression was bewildered, mouth hanging half-open, red and wet against the pale color of his complexion and the dry, dusty landscape beyond.

He had not experienced the telepathic connection as Spock had, but operating with only the shallow recesses of his human intuition, even Jim seemed to sense that he had overstepped an invisible line between them.

Jim retracted his hand, flexing his fingers to hide them beneath the too-long sleeve of his leather jacket.

‘What the hell?’ he asked. The question was subdued, with none of his usual fervor.

‘Vulcans are touch telepaths.’ Spock’s voice sounded rough to his own ears. It was not a distinction that would be audible to humans, but Spock was aware of the threat of ragged emotion bleeding in at the edges of his words. The emotions were not his—but he recognized them, in the most buried aspects of his emotional self, which he had long believed conquered. They were not. ‘A physical connection with an individual who has not undergone the proper training will often result in mental—or emotional—overlap.’

‘I was just trying to…’ Jim tucked his hair behind one ear, at a loss for what to do with his hands. ‘I don’t know. I wanted to stop you, but it’s not like I’m gonna stay here.’

‘The colony will require significant scientific maintenance before it can be classified as a safe habitat,’ Spock agreed.

This time, when he reached for his communicator, Jim did not grab him to delay the proceedings.
‘Ensign Scott,’ Spock said. ‘There are two to beam up.’

‘Aye, Mr. Spock.’ Scott’s voice was distorted over the transmission. ‘It’ll only be a jiffy.’

Jim steadied himself to take a final, sweeping look at his surroundings, from the shrouded treetops to the sun-bleached rocks. Spock was aware, as disorganized as the shared information had been, of the impression the planet had made on Jim and the lasting effects of its history on Jim’s every conscious and unconscious moment. That history was not Spock’s to tell or even to understand. He had already seen more of it than he should have.

Jim was still watching the horizon when the beam began; despite the intensity of his focus and the fortitude it must have demanded for him to face Tarsus IV a final time, he did not look at Spock once before he left the transporter room.

‘Terrible thing, down there,’ Scott said.

Though Spock had not intended to encourage idle conversation between them—nothing could have been farther from his mind—the moments he had reserved to regain his equilibrium, resting a hand on the transporter console in silence, must have indicated to Scott that socialization was in order.

‘Unequivocally, yes,’ Spock replied.

‘And for the little ones,’ Scott added, with a shake of his head. ‘No one there to protect them. Should have been someone. Should have damn well been.’

Spock nodded to conclude their exchange, then left the transporter room, not surprised when Jim was nowhere to be found, already long gone to whatever secret place he favored. Recuperation would be in order—a brief recess, during which Spock meditated to clear his thoughts of any lingering, human emotionalism—before he attended Captain Pike for the exchange of passengers to the transport ship.

Spock did not see Jim in his cabin; from this point onward, Spock would no longer return to his quarters to find his privacy invaded and his routine disrupted, though that interruption had, in the past seven days, established its own, alternative routine. Jim’s latest chess game had been concluded the night before and a new one had not yet begun. Spock rearranged the pieces to the exact configuration they had formed before Jim had embarked on his chessboard interference, in order to resume from the exact point at which Jim had interrupted. His meditation improved his state of mind, and Captain Pike did not find him lacking or distracted when he began the initial procedures.

‘It’s gonna feel real quiet on this ship for a while, you know,’ Captain Pike confessed from behind Spock’s station. ‘Though whether or not that’s a good thing is probably a matter of personal preference.’

‘That many children do not belong on a Constitution-class starship,’ Spock replied.

‘So I take it you’re in the latter camp, Mr. Spock?’ Captain Pike said.

Spock had no preference; he had continued to accomplish his duties without allowing the interruptions to affect his productivity, and trusted that Captain Pike’s log would reflect Spock’s self-assessment of his performance. In turn, he had filed an official report to Starfleet commending his captain’s performance, as well as that of the crew.

‘Still,’ Captain Pike added, ‘I’m giving you time off to say goodbye to your friend Jim Kirk. I’d rather it was a suggestion, Mr. Spock, but it can be an order if it has to be.’

‘I would not disobey an order,’ Spock replied. ‘Neither would I discount a suggestion from my
‘That’s what I like to hear,’ Captain Pike said.

The hall outside the transporter room was crowded with passengers and the occasional member of the crew who had come to see those passengers off. Chapel was at the center of the commotion; Spock was nearly surprised to note the presence of Doctor McCoy at the outskirts, arms folded, tightening his jaw when he noticed Spock had caught sight of him.

‘Would you look at this herd of wildebeests?’ he asked without meeting Spock’s eyes. ‘Some fool’s gotta be on-call to make sure they don’t trample each other to death and it looks like that fool’s this fool.’

‘Your services are appreciated,’ Spock told him.

McCoy grumbled, but as there were no distinct words accompanying his grunts and sighs, Spock considered that conversation effectively concluded.

‘Jim Kirk isn’t here yet,’ Chapel said as Spock drew even with her, avoiding the bustle of the improperly arranged bodies creating a definite safety hazard in the hall. ‘Though he tells me he had quite a busy day.’

‘He spoke with you?’ Spock asked.

Chapel nodded, guiding Kevin Riley away from crashing into Spock’s knees without having to look down at the task. Spock appreciated her efforts as someone connected with his knees from behind before scurrying into place in the slowly-forming line. ‘He did. I suppose he knew it was his last chance—and he finally decided to make an appointment. Alphabetically,’ Chapel added, voice raised. ‘There you are, Kevin, that’s more like it.’

Spock did not inquire after the nature of Jim’s counseling session. That was a private affair, and he had already been appropriately educated on matters of doctor-patient confidentiality.

Although the line was alphabetical, Spock could not locate Jim in the space where the other K’s had been arranged. The other children and the sparse number of surviving adults were present and accounted for, but Jim was conspicuously missing. Spock thought about forming a search party of single members from each of the security teams, but they were already overtaxed by the ship’s excessive, now centrally located, population. It was not yet necessary to alert the authorities, although Jim’s absence could not be allowed to last beyond the arranged hour of the colonists’ departure.

Spock examined the crowd carefully, then made his way down the ancillary corridor that lead to the turbolift. He rode it alone, stepping off onto the floor that housed the officer’s quarters.

As he had suspected, Jim was standing in the hall outside Spock’s door, arms crossed where he was leaning against the wall.

His hair had been freshly washed, which brightened the color but did nothing for the way it hung in uncombed falls around his face. He was holding something in his arms, a dark bundle of fabric that upon further examination proved to be the sweater he had borrowed from Spock on an unspecified occasion.

If Spock was to be honest, he had not anticipated ever seeing the garment again, or at least not in any condition that approximated the one in which it had been borrowed.
‘Seemed kinda wrong to steal it,’ Jim said, holding out the armful of folded cloth. ‘And—maybe it’s just me—but it seemed even wrong-er to hand it back to you in front of everyone. Makes it look like… Well, you know.’

‘I do not,’ Spock said, but he accepted the sweater before it was again removed from his possession. Jim’s nose wrinkled and he tilted his head up to study Spock’s expression, pushing his hair from his eyes.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I guess you really don’t. Huh. Gonna… Gonna miss that about you, Spock. Probably. Okay, maybe.’

‘You will miss my lack of comprehension,’ Spock repeated. Although it was not a logical statement, this did not necessarily make it untrue.

‘Whatever.’ Jim shrugged, straightening up so that he was no longer availing himself of the wall for ballast. ‘It’s not a big deal. Just can’t imagine anyone back on Earth being as weird as you are.’

‘Matters of your imagination aside, if you linger here, then you run the risk of missing your transportation to Earth altogether,’ Spock pointed out. ‘Captain Pike will not appreciate having to arrange for a second.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Jim started off in the direction Spock had come from, heading for the turbolift. ‘I wouldn’t wanna piss off a Starfleet captain. Might hurt my chances on the entry exam.’

‘Then it is your intention to apply for the program I brought to your attention,’ Spock said. Jim turned. There were five feet and six inches between them. ‘It’s not like I have anything better to do.’

‘To make such a decision lightly indicates a cavalier approach to the security of one’s future.’

‘I think I’m gonna save getting taught for when I’m in actual classes in front of actual teachers,’ Jim said. ‘But thanks for the final lesson, I guess.’

‘That is presuming you are accepted for enrollment,’ Spock replied. ‘Given your exhibited aptitude, the probability is high, but it is not yet certain.’

‘I’ll get in, Spock.’ Jim wriggled one arm free, pulling his hand from the pocket of his brother’s leather jacket to lift it high in the human form of casual greeting as well as farewell known as the ‘wave’. ‘Maybe I’ll even see you again sometime. On assignment.’

The survivors of Tarsus IV had little remaining in terms of possessions. What they had brought with them to the colony had been burned in the fires or repurposed during the long years spent eking out a living in the wilderness.

Spock crossed the five feet and six inches between them and returned the sweater to Jim’s arms. Jim took it with a downward curve of his mouth, though it was not the shape his lips and jaw made to impart the displeasure of a frown.

‘Presents are supposed to come in wrapping paper, you know,’ Jim said. ‘With bows on top, and cards. It’s not even my birthday, anyway.’

‘As I do not have the materials at my disposal, my failure to observe the tradition in full must be excused,’ Spock replied. In response to Jim’s wave, he raised his own hand, parting his fingers in a
long-familiar gesture to offer Jim the *ta’al* of his homeworld, Vulcan. ‘Live long and prosper, James Tiberius Kirk.’

Jim’s cheeks flushed and his jaw tightened. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘You too, Spock. Right back at you.’

With Spock’s sweater clutched to his chest and his head down, Jim sped around the corner of the ancillary corridor and disappeared from Spock’s view. Spock had business elsewhere, to which he attended.

He did not see Jim Kirk again. The transport ship departed at the correct time.

Captain Pike had been correct in his prediction of what was to follow the survivors’ departure. By comparison, the ship now seemed remarkably quiet.

*
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

This sucks as a reunion. - James T. Kirk

First Officer’s Log, Supplemental, Stardate 2252.14.

This day marks the conclusion of the Enterprise’s preliminary three-year-mission of exploration under Captain Christopher Pike. My full ‘First Officer’s Log, Supplemental’, offers a complete timeline of events corroborating my captain’s records. It has been my honor to serve with such a competent crew on a mission of such import to the Federation.

No further recordings will be made to this log. The Enterprise will dock in an hour, and the crew has been reassigned. If you are listening and seek clarification on any point of reference, my contact information will be available through the regular channels, and I in turn will again be lending my assistance as professor’s aid at Starfleet Academy for the approaching spring semester.

*  

‘Well, Spock,’ the transmission from Spock’s mother concluded, ‘I know you’re certain to be busy, what with all your responsibilities, and I wouldn’t want to interrupt the preparations you’ll be making for your classes now that you’ve settled in. San Francisco always was pleasant this time of year. But it was fine—it was very fine to hear your voice again, Spock. I’m sure, if he could, I-Chaya would also send his regards. Until the next time.’

There was a final pause before the end of the recorded video message, as there always was, but no further words were spoken.

Then, the screen of Spock’s computer darkened, showing his face on the reflective surface instead of his mother’s.

In truth—and Spock’s mother would have known this—Spock had concluded his preparations long before he sat down at his desk and opened her message. He did not have ‘free time’ in the human understanding of the word, but neither would he ignore communication from his mother, or allow her to harbor any concerns about his well-being by failing to respond promptly.

He had already familiarized himself with the material with which he would be offering his assistance and had done the same with the professors to whom that assistance would be offered. He had committed to memory their specializations and their curriculums, and had only to receive the full class rosters before classes commenced the following morning.

Spock adjusted the angle of the recording lens and began his reply to his mother.

‘I am well and I have settled,’ he said. ‘I-Chaya is a sehlat and cannot send regards he does not have. There is nothing more to report, as my status has not changed since my last recording. Until the next time, Mother.’

It was brief and unforthcoming, but it would serve adequately. The natural daylight was already fading outside the window of Spock’s apartment—the same rooms in which he had boarded during
his first time serving as a teaching adjutant.

There were some who would have commented that the position was unbefitting of his rank, but Spock was aware that his ‘rise’ was considered ‘meteoric’ by many in Starfleet, both among his peers and his superiors. Pike’s choice to include him as first officer on the Enterprise’s three-year mission had been an irregular one, and Spock was more than content to continue his scientific studies while offering his time, expertise, and assistance to the same academy that had provided him with similar opportunities.

Life in San Francisco was categorically unlike life aboard the Enterprise, as Spock had known it would be. Aside from the obvious shift to a stationary post, the presence of natural light where before everything had been synthesized, and the grounding force of a planet’s natural gravity, what Spock had come to rely upon most had been the controlled environment of the ship. The air in San Francisco was humid and all too often it was damp, several degrees below Spock’s optimal temperature.

It was a less-than-ideal climate for even a half-Vulcan.

This morning was no exception.

The fog that had rolled in from the bay minutes before dawn was now blanketing the city; it settled between the buildings and blanketed the streets in a manner not without a sense of hostility.

Spock harbored no hostility toward the fog. To do so would have been unscientific. But Doctor Chapel—who was now undertaking further medical instruction at the academy to expand her breadth of expertise—had remarked on more than one occasion that she found Spock’s reaction toward the inclement weather to be comical.

There was nothing humorous about the frequency of below-average temperatures, nor could Spock appreciate the joke that was San Francisco’s annual rainfall. Spock had offered Chapel evidence to that effect numerous times, only to be met with the same results. She persisted in her belief that his findings were amusing and not troubling in the slightest.

It was yet another in a carefully curated list of cultural differences.

Having completed his recorded communications to Vulcan, Spock finished his tea and gathered his teaching materials to depart for the academy grounds. He had not yet fully acclimated himself to his new schedule, and was still experimenting with minimizing the amount of travel time between his apartment and Starfleet Headquarters.

This morning, Spock concluded that, due to the inclement weather, he would ultimately reap better results on foot, instead of trying to secure any swifter means of transportation—as the latter would be crowded with passengers seeking to escape the rain.

Thus, Spock found himself in transit while he reviewed the list of participants for the semester’s core curriculum. There was no official directive that dictated he should familiarize himself with the students beforehand, but Spock had come to understand that there were circumstances under which cadets benefited from being identified by name.

As he came to the middle of the list, he found himself pausing over a name he had read before in several debriefing documents after the incident on Tarsus IV.

Kirk, James T.

Spock halted in his tracks, pausing on the campus walkway between the building for specialty
sciences and the simulation rooms that housed the flight tests and other starship bridge condition
recreations.

The remainder of the list temporarily escaped Spock’s attention as his mind attempted to compensate
for the discrepancies in his knowledge upon being confronted with someone he had known once,
albeit in another context. There were no accompanying photos with the roster, although there would
be a personnel file for every enrolled student in the Starfleet Headquarters database.

There was no reason for Spock to consult the archives—and yet he found himself tempted
nonetheless.

He was early, and would need to remain early in order to consult the first of the professors whom he
would be assisting for the duration of the semester. Yet Spock arrived at Professor Puri’s office to
find the door locked and the lights inside dimmed, which allowed Spock an opportunity to view the
identification cards of all students currently attending the academy for the one student whose name
had stood out above the rest.

The image on Spock’s PADD that accompanied Kirk, James T. would not have been recognizable,
were it not for the eyes. The official identification portrait was of an unfamiliar young man with short
hair and a square jaw; there were no signs of freckles on his nose, nor were his cheekbones gaunt,
and neither was his face uncomfortably angular and narrow. His jaw was wide, his mouth full—but
his eyes were not simply the right color, they also held the same challenge and defiance Spock had
not forgotten in the three years since he had seen them last.

After all, Vulcans did not easily forget that which they had already learned, and Spock had learned a
great deal about Jim Kirk.

The personnel file continued:


There was also a classified sub-file that Spock to which Spock did not yet have access. He could
however infer that it was related to the events on Tarsus IV, in order to provide Starfleet Medical
with background on his psychological and physical profile.

Jim had been enrolled in the academy for two and a half years; his transcripts revealed that he was an
exemplary student. Spock scanned and committed to memory the courses Jim had attended once he
was able to create his own schedule and choose his focus, as well as the brief—but insightful—notes
offered by his professors. He was attentive, highly intelligent, and quick to learn; all were qualities
Spock had first recognized in him three years prior.

He showed signs of leadership capability, which was and was not surprising, considering what a
poor communicator he had once been while also having provided for and protected children in need.

A shadow fell across Spock’s PADD. Puri cleared his throat. Spock stepped aside and closed the
personnel file simultaneously, and gave the professor no cause to feel that Spock’s attentions were
not wholly on the curriculum and his services as teacher’s assistant.

Most professors did not relish the prospect of working with Spock on a social level, but they always
reviewed him at the semester’s end with positive remarks; he was efficient, intelligent, and always
available.

At eleven hundred exactly, Puri’s advanced hydromechanics lecture began. Spock sat adjacent to the
professor’s desk, stood when the professor introduced him, and scanned the seats as he greeted the
classroom.

Jim Kirk was in the first row, behind a large stack of books, with broad shoulders, wearing a cadet’s red uniform and not a well-worn leather jacket.

Spock did not allow his attention to linger.

He reseated himself after the introductions were concluded, listening to Puri’s deep voice, which was amplified pleasantly by the acoustics in the lecture hall. He was a soft-spoken man who tended to mumble in private, but with the arched ceiling, it was possible that even those in the back rows were able—with no small amount of straining—to hear him and take adequate notes.

Spock had no need of taking notes; he memorized the lesson as he listened, having already skimmed the files with which Puri had provided him. Spock spoke once more, after the session had concluded, to inform the students of his office hours, and how to contact him for extra-curricular consultation.

The students had other classes for which they would avoid being late, at least on the first day. Jim Kirk did not linger as he once had in the halls of the USS Enterprise, and Spock met with two more professors, just as his agenda for the day detailed, without altering his timetable to include Jim’s needs.

Spock’s appearance had not changed noticeably during the Enterprise’s three-year mission. It was merely that he and Jim had known each other only temporarily, and Spock was satisfied merely to know that Jim Kirk had studied in accordance with his full potential.

Chapel had insisted they eat together that night; Spock had agreed, since it would be wisest to socialize before the business of the semester was under-way rather than after. When he mentioned, over their two bowls of plomeek soup, that he had seen James T. Kirk in one of the courses for which he was assistant teaching, Chapel scrutinized him with an expression that wrinkled her nose and widened her eyes simultaneously.

‘What a nice surprise,’ she said at last. ‘You’ve spoken to him, of course?’

‘I have not,’ Spock replied.

Chapel redoubled her expressive efforts. ‘You really haven’t? Oh, Spock.’

‘I see no reason why I should have, unless it was to discuss Professor Puri’s coursework. As today’s lecture was introductory in nature, it is highly improbable that any of his students would seek my consultation.’

Chapel let out a sigh, which seemed to indicate a desire to repeat her earlier exclamation: Oh, Spock.

He had disappointed her. Although Spock could not imagine how, he harbored no doubts that she would not manage to conceal her reasoning for long.

‘Don’t you think it would have done him good to see a friendly—well, let’s say a recognizable face?’ Chapel was neglecting her plomeek soup, allowing it to dip past the preferred temperature. ‘Surely even Vulcans get some comfort out of the familiar every now and then.’

Spock reviewed her statement. While it assumed human sentiment was present in a people who did not ascribe to Terran mores, it was not entirely without merit. Spock had, for example, benefited from returning to the same apartment both times he had accepted a teaching position at the academy. Doing so had eased his transition, affording him a pre-existing knowledge of the surrounding
facilities and transportation, the most direct route to Starfleet Headquarters and other similar matters.

‘Yes,’ Spock agreed.

Chapel waited for his elaboration. When none was forthcoming, she made her impatience more obvious, dragging her chair along the ground and leaning forward across the table.

‘Yes…’ she prompted. ‘As in—yes, you do know what I’m talking about? Or are you just trying to get me to stop talking?’

Although she was no longer a counselor aboard the *Enterprise*, Chapel had not forgotten her training in that role. Analysis of behavior was something that came naturally to her, and Spock could not escape her scrutiny merely by virtue of not being human.

‘I have related your example to a parallel from my experience with living accommodations and found it accurate,’ Spock replied.

Chapel tapped her spoon against the bottom of the bowl. Spock took this momentary silence as a chance for him to resume the consumption of his lunch.

‘Except I was talking about people, Spock. Human—or, interspecies interaction. You know, like what we’re having now? People respond to that kind of thing, too. It helps to have a routine.’

‘If Jim Kirk has been attending Starfleet Academy for two and a half years, then he has already established a routine. To call attention to my presence here would be a disruption,’ Spock pointed out.

‘Give me strength,’ Chapel said. As she did not appear to be addressing Spock, and there was nothing heavy nearby that would have required an additional showing of force to lift, the statement remained a mystery to him. ‘Spock, don’t you think that nice boy had enough trouble making friends on the *Enterprise* that the problem might’ve followed him here? It might do him some good to see one.’

Although Jim was no longer Chapel’s charge, it was apparent that she had not relinquished her interest in his continued care.

She was a dedicated counselor.

‘Having checked the entire student roster, I have learned that there are other survivors of Tarsus IV enrolled in the academy,’ Spock said. ‘As an example: Kevin Riley, who was an acquaintance of James T. Kirk’s during that time, was accepted into the program last fall and begins his studies this semester. He is both closer in age and shares similar experiences with Jim Kirk; therefore, he is a superior candidate for friendship.’

‘Now, Spock.’ Chapel returned to her soup, frowning faintly when she discovered—as Spock had known she would—that the broth had cooled in the dank San Francisco air after being neglected for too long. ‘After all that time on the *Enterprise*, first officer to an entire crew, the only Vulcan on board—I’m sure we both know that friendship isn’t necessarily about candidacy, superior or otherwise.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Spock replied, ‘there are set algorithms that prove some individuals are better suited to the role of companion than others.’

Chapel sighed again and finished her soup, then stood with her bowl and her tray. ‘I’m certainly going to say hello to him. Gently, though. Gently. It’s certainly possible that we’re from a time in his
past that’s going to remind him of emotional difficulties, ones he may not have fully come to terms with just yet. It’s important to tread lightly in these matters. Perhaps you were right not to approach him, after all—though I wouldn’t suggest ignoring him outright.’

‘What is the exact probability that our presence will trigger such a reminder?’ Spock asked.

‘Enough,’ Chapel said. ‘The exact probability is enough.’

‘Enough’ was not exact, but Chapel had already departed, leaving Spock with variables instead of definite statistics.

That night, Spock’s duties took precedence over personal considerations. There was a teacher’s assistant orientation taking place parallel to the hall in which all new students were undergoing a similar induction; Spock had learned from his first orientation that attending and leaving immediately afterward was not ‘good manners’, and so he stayed for the ‘meet and greet’ afterward. He did not accept any of the hors-d’oeuvres being passed around on trays or the alcoholic refreshments offered to and gratefully accepted by his peers. He spoke chiefly with the professors rather than their assistants; some had occupied the same position for the three years during which Spock had been assigned to the Enterprise, and it was obvious they would have little to no common interests to fuel an ideal conversation.

Spock retired early, woke equally early, consumed the ideal number of calories for breakfast, and attended the second of Puri’s hydromechanics lectures, the first to arrive in the lecture room.

The second to arrive was Jim Kirk.

He had a new stack of books, different from the day before, as well as a PADD. The stiff, high collar of his cadet reds was open at the top, forming a v of bare, flushed skin and there was sweat at his temples, as though he had arrived in a hurry. He sat without saying anything or acknowledging Spock’s presence, then looked up, hands braced on the desk attachment to his chair.

‘Would you look at that—you’re stalking me,’ he said. ‘Again. So, do I report you to Captain Pike this time, or somebody else?’

‘My assignment under Captain Pike has ended,’ Spock replied. ‘It may resume should he request my skills on another mission in the future; for the time being, if you have a complaint about my behavior or my performance, it should be made first to Professor Puri, then to the Starfleet Academy deans.’

‘You didn’t say hello yesterday,’ Jim added.

‘That does not constitute a valid complaint.’

‘Yeah, it definitely does.’ Jim’s voice was deeper than Spock recalled; not only were his shoulders broader but his chest and waist had also widened, and he no longer had the appearance of someone who was denied proper nutrition. He cleared his throat, chin resting on his hand, without the tension that had defined his every movement, promising motion even when he was completely still.

‘Neither did you decide to greet me,’ Spock pointed out.

‘I figured you might be pissed.’

‘Pissed,’ Spock repeated.

‘Cause I kept in touch with Bones—that’s Leonard H. McCoy, Doctor—and not with you.’
Spock had not been aware of this fact; even if he had, it would not have inspired a ‘pissed’ state. ‘You have assumed a reaction to this knowledge that I would not—and now do not—have.’

‘The H stands for Horatio,’ Jim said.

‘Indeed.’

‘You sure you’re not stalking me?’

‘Contrary to your belief, my career decisions are not predicated upon any other individual, you included.’

‘Right.’ Jim ducked his head, a brief reminder of the physical habits of a younger individual, though Jim did not currently have hair long enough to hide his eyes in the shadows beneath its fall. ‘Right, yeah, no—’course not, Spock, that’d be crazy. And weird. But mostly crazy.’

A door in the back of the hall swung open; another student entered, followed by three more. Jim’s eyes were bright and trained on Spock, but now that they were not alone, Jim said nothing more. Spock could appreciate his discretion, if nothing else.

In the amount of time it took him to prepare the provisional slides and samples for Puri’s lecture, Spock had approximately seven minutes of privacy to contemplate and analyze the situation as it had transpired.

Jim had noticed Spock the day prior, but had chosen not to address him. His reasons were not the same as Spock’s, as he believed that Spock had not drawn attention to himself because of an imagined slight. Finally, he had assumed that Spock was aware of his communications with Leonard McCoy and had taken offense at the lack of a similar overture made toward him.

There were several faults in Jim’s conclusion, of which Spock could not inform him with an audience. He reviewed Puri’s notes regarding the day’s lesson plan, watching the rest of the students arrive, some alone and others in small social groups often referred to as cliques.

Jim’s head was down, bent over the screen of his PADD as he rubbed the back of his neck. This was not a part of his anatomy that had ever been visible on the Enterprise, which had been due to the unkempt length of his hair. The skin under Jim’s fingers was sunburnt, suggesting that Jim: one, enjoyed the outdoors; and two, was still accustomed to the protection longer hair afforded him.

It surprised Spock that Jim would be careless in his recreational hours.

Spock had not known that Jim and McCoy were in contact, but the knowledge did not change anything. There was no reason for Spock to strive to find fault with something that was not intrinsically offensive. He had discovered for himself on more than one occasion that both he and Jim shared the same difficulty in communicating. It would not be appropriate, therefore, to allow pettiness to exacerbate those flaws.

Spock could not discern the reason for Jim’s assumption that Spock would have reason to take umbrage at his personal communications. Jim’s decision not to engage in further interaction had been entirely logical, for an adolescent who had behaved as anything but during their stay aboard the Enterprise.

Perhaps Jim’s concern stemmed from the conclusion that he had behaved uncharacteristically without knowing why. Spock could not speculate without the proper context, and absent a chance to initiate further dialogue, he would have to let the matter rest.
Puri was the last to arrive. When the lecture commenced, Spock ceased to contemplate his personal matters.

They were twelve minutes into the lecture when Spock’s personal PADD brightened, then dimmed. He had switched the notifications to silent during classroom hours; this did not prevent him from receiving messages, but it did prevent those messages from disrupting the lecture at large.

even you think this is boring right

Jim had not bothered to send the message anonymously, though Spock did not yet comprehend how he had managed to contact Spock’s private account.

Puri was still engaged in the dynamics of his lecture, though his tone admittedly muted those dynamics. Spock did not encourage the behavior by responding even to chastise Jim for distracting himself from the lesson, though it reminded him—in essence, if not in form—of the days when Jim had broken into Spock’s cabin, and Spock’s silence did not discourage him from future intrusions.

For his part, Jim was taking notes, focusing intermittently between his PADD and Puri. He did not return his gaze to Spock; Spock did not study Jim any more than he observed the other students in the front three rows.

his voice is like a lullaby

he sounds like a big fat bumblebee

bbbbbbbbzzzzzzz bbbbbbbzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

The three messages were evenly spaced, sent three minutes apart from one another. Spock dimmed the brightness on his PADD to the lowest setting so that it would not flash and adhered to the course he had already chosen, on the assumption that a lack of any response, positive or negative, would be the least satisfying for Jim, and would eventually lead to his surrender.

That postulate did not factor in Jim’s excessive determination to the point of outright stubbornness.

sixth row five seats over from me red hair taking a nap

wonder if she’s dreaming of big fat bumblebees

i know you’re getting these spock i can see your padd lighting up

is this payback for not staying in contact with you but chatting with bones all this time?

didn’t peg you for the vindictive type this sucks as a reunion

Jim’s exemplary personnel file and student record, which included no fewer than seventeen extra-curricular projects, had not included mention of his inability to write in proper sentences, with punctuation, capitalization, and grammar present. It was true that Jim had spent his formative years in the wilds of an inhospitable planet, without the primary education necessary to provide a foundation of literary skills, but there were introductory courses in Starfleet Academy that would have offered the same services. Jim should have availed himself of those opportunities, rather than allowing himself to remain so egregiously behind his fellow students.

first you stalk me then you ignore me blowing hot and cold huh?

hey we should get lunch sometime
how’s tomorrow for you? after puri’s lectures i always need plenty of food to wake me up again

okay cool i’ll see you then.

That message proved to be Jim’s final offering; he at last returned to focus solely on his studies, his chin resting on the knuckles of his right fist. Those knuckles were not white with tension. The back of his hand was, in fact, pink from what appeared to be a two-day-old abrasive encounter; with what Spock could not surmise.

*
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Names as greeting and farewell.

*Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.20.*

Hello, mother. No difficulties have presented themselves since my last message; therefore, you may assume that I am doing well. I have committed myself once more to the duties specified by Starfleet Academy’s Assistant Teachers’ Program. Today it is raining. It also rained yesterday and the forecast for tomorrow suggests that it will rain again in the morning and evening with a brief ‘window’ of sunshine in the afternoon. That is my summary of the local weather in accordance with the rules of socialization. I know that it is hot and dry on Vulcan, so there is no need to respond to my small dialogue with information of which I am already aware. Am I to assume that you are also doing well?

* True to his word, Jim was waiting for Spock after the conclusion of Professor Puri’s lecture the next day. His back was to the wall, which Spock recalled was a favored tactical position, but his legs were crossed at the ankle, which was a new addition to the old form. It would not allow for a speedy escape, and Spock concluded that Jim was no longer as wary of sudden hostilities as he once was. He held his books to his chest, also a half-similar and half-revised behavioral relic from the past.

‘Don’t look so excited to see me,’ Jim said.

‘I do not look excited to see you,’ Spock replied.

The rest of the lecture’s students had already filed out of the classroom in a disorderly fashion. Spock had been the last individual to depart, first returning Professor Puri, Sr.’s lecture materials to the proper storage facilities. He and Jim were alone—though there were few places that allowed true privacy on the entire academy campus—if only for a moment.

‘Neither do you express physical indicators of excitement,’ Spock added. ‘Your posture would suggest relaxation, which is a direct contradiction to the state of enthusiasm.’

Jim’s mouth twisted into an expression Spock did not recognize. At present, Spock would have to categorize it as a grin.

‘This is gonna be the best lunch ever,’ he said. ‘What are you in the mood for?’

Spock’s plomeek soup, offered in one of the six all-inclusive cafeteria locations at Starfleet Academy, was dwarfed by the selection of food Jim gathered on his tray. The reason for Jim’s physical growth was clear, at least.

‘Don’t worry,’ Jim said, catching sight of Spock’s inspection of his tray. ‘I’m not gonna make myself sick.’

‘That was not my concern,’ Spock replied, which was true.
Now that Jim had reminded him of his earlier eating habits, however, Spock had reason to believe that this was also something of which to be mindful. While the meals served on the Enterprise had been bland but nutritious, dining hall menus at the academy focused on providing variety in appetizing combinations of hot proteins with melted provisional dairy products.

It seemed indigestion was the only logical result of indulging in such a meal, but Jim was no longer Spock’s charge, meaning that Spock was no longer compelled to share his expertise.

‘That thing you’re giving the stink eye’s a cheeseburger.’ Jim ducked his head in an attempt to catch Spock’s attention, as it was lingering over the abundance on his tray. ‘And that’s a chili dog. Mac and cheese. French fries. Yogurt. Apple with all the peel shaved off. Did I solve the mystery for you, or were you trying to figure out the chemical compounds involved in pudding?’

There were several mysteries about Jim’s lunch, least of all why he felt the need to indulge in both yogurt and pudding, two food groups that offered the same texture and consistency. Other concerns included the structural strength of the tray compared to a weight it had not been designed to support. The metal was practically buckling as Jim carried it to the end of an empty table.

Jim threw one leg over the bench, sitting on it crosswise. While he waited for Spock to join him, he picked up one of the French fries he had indicated, twirling it between his fingers before eating it in two swift bites.

‘So this is just you, huh?’ Jim kicked up his legs to realign himself across the table from Spock. ‘I thought maybe it was an officer thing—that you were always trying to set a good example for the civilians, or whatever. But it’s totally your personality. Tall, dark, and quiet.’

‘Vulcans are, on average, not substantially taller than humans,’ Spock said.

The steam rising from his plomeek soup suggested that it was at now at the ideal temperature to be eaten. As he saw no reason to delay, Spock began, aware of Jim’s eyes on him as he lifted the spoon to his mouth.

When their gazes met, Jim looked away, as if he thought he could avoid detection after the fact. This had not been one of Jim’s skills during his time on the Enterprise, despite his ability to find periodical hiding places in unoccupied quarters during rest hours.

‘Yeah, I guess. I mean, I’ll take your word on that one. Not that much information about Vulcans out there for public consumption, you know?’

‘It is clear that you appreciate consumption,’ Spock replied.

Jim licked something hot and greasy off his thumb. ‘Missed your sense of humor, Spock. Nothing else quite like it.’

‘I was not seeking to employ humor.’

‘Then it’s effortless,’ Jim said. ‘Comes naturally. Must be the human part of you.’ He paused, then held out another fry. ‘Want one?’

Spock swallowed a mouthful of soup. ‘I have provided myself with the exact amount of sustenance my daily schedule will require. Nothing more is necessary.’

Jim shrugged. ‘More for me, then.’

The obviousness of the statement allowed for a lull in the conversation, during which Spock ate his
soup and Jim ate the ‘chili dog’, which Spock had determined utilized chili as in the name of the spicy pepper, and not chilly as in the reference to temperature. The ‘chili dog’ was hot and Jim winced when he burned his tongue. Spock blew on a spoonful of soup in a pointed demonstration of how to properly cool food, but Jim did not mimic that action, as he must have now been too old to absorb new methods as quickly as a younger human.

‘Surprised to see me here?’ Jim asked at last, in a natural pause between his dishes.

‘You had intimated yesterday that you intended to join me for lunch today,’ Spock reminded him.

Jim sighed and grabbed his yogurt. ‘I mean here. At Starfleet Academy. In my third year.’

‘No,’ Spock said. ‘I am not surprised.’

‘Then you always thought I’d get in, even with the whole probability speech you made.’

‘I had not given it any thought.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I am still not seeking to employ humor.’

Jim allowed the spoon to dangle from his mouth, balanced between his upper teeth and his bottom lip. His yogurt had been devoured as quickly as the rest, and the plastic container in which it had been packaged had been added to the precarious stack of empty plates on the left side of Jim’s tray. When he spoke, his voice was muffled, but Spock did not find it overly difficult to understand him.

‘C’mon, Spock.’

‘Do you seek praise for achievements that are merely consistent with your aptitude for those achievements? Living up to one’s potential is only logical.’

‘Then I guess I’ve been pretty logical,’ Jim said. ‘Must’ve been you rubbing off on me.’

Spock had heard that phrase before and did not react as he had the first time he had been made aware of its existence, knowing that it was not meant in the literal sense.

‘Pudding?’ Jim asked. ‘Oh, right. Exact amount of sustenance. Plomeek soup, right? It’s okay. Could use some salt, most of the time.’

‘It is made with the traditional balance of ingredients,’ Spock said.

Jim’s eyes crinkled at the corners, a micro-expression indicative of a latent smile. He must have found the pudding particularly pleasing. Conclusive evidence of Spock’s theory arrived when Jim was certain to scrape all that he could from the corners of the container before stacking it atop the rest. The tower swayed, but remained structurally sound.

‘You taught here before, right?’ Jim’s commitment to conversation had improved since their last interactions on the Enterprise. ‘As a TA, I mean.’

‘That is correct.’

‘When you were my age, too. So—you were my age, and you were assisting professors for classes full of people who were your age or even older.’

‘That is also correct.’
Jim pursed his lips in reference to a whistle. ‘No wonder you’re so weird.’ For reasons due to historicity, Spock could find no judgment or venom in Jim’s use of the word. There were times when it had been wielded as a weapon; this was not one of them. ‘You’re like a legend in this place, you know.’

‘A Vulcan does not pay attention to rumor or gossip,’ Spock said. ‘Rather we gather our own evidence, and do not base our conclusions on the distortions of reputation and hearsay.’

‘And that pain in the ass practical exam you designed, oh my God,’ Jim continued. ‘I kept asking myself who would design a test like that, and when I found out I actually knew the guy who did, it all made sense.’

‘Then you have succeeded at the Kobayashi Maru?’ Spock asked.

As the Kobayashi Maru had been structured so as to have no true solution, Spock knew that Jim could not answer in the affirmative. It was his reaction to that realization that would provide insight into his performance as an officer of Starfleet.

Jim’s nose wrinkled. ‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘But I’m like, this close, though. I’m not gonna let that thing beat me. I’ll figure it out.’

Spock’s bowl no longer had any plomeek soup left. He lifted the tray and stood, though he also recalled Christine Chapel’s words of counsel in regards to socializing with Jim. ‘I have finished my lunch,’ he explained. ‘At this time, it is customary to say our farewells and continue according to our schedules. It is not likely that either of us is without work, and to linger over a meal once there is nothing more to eat is not efficient.’

Jim’s mouth was partially open, watching Spock as he rose. If he had been about to speak, Spock’s change of position had distracted him enough to stop him before he was able to start. He pursed his lips, then cleared his throat, adjusting his gaze to the clock on the far wall of the lunchroom. There was a cold fry on the table, half-crushed by Jim’s macaroni and cheese plate. He fished it out from underneath the stack and ate it.

‘Yeah, all right.’ Jim swallowed, wiping his fingers on the jacket of his cadet uniform. ‘Same old Spock, I guess. Wouldn’t wanna get in the way of all that efficiency.’

‘I would never have allowed a social interlude to interfere with my schedule,’ Spock agreed.

Jim nodded. His tongue was in the corner of his mouth, protruding against the side of his cheek.

‘Sure. I’ll see you tomorrow then, Commander.’

The title gave Spock pause, though it was technically not incorrect for Jim to address Spock as a superior officer. Spock’s Starfleet rank had not been altered after the conclusion of the Enterprise’s three-year mission, and Jim was now a Starfleet cadet. They belonged to the same organization, a hierarchy that would be formalized upon Jim’s graduation.

However, there was a formality to the title that Spock had not come to associate with Jim. As his behavior was uncharacteristic it would merit further analysis at a later date. Fortunately, as Jim had mentioned, they would be seeing one another in class the next day, which afforded Spock additional opportunities to solve the incongruity before they met again.

‘Jim,’ Spock said.

Referring to someone by their name, as he had learned, was an acceptable farewell. Spock
accompanied the gesture with a nod before exiting the academy cafeteria.

Although Jim had made a specific point of mentioning when he would next encounter Spock, he did not in fact wait until the next day to initiate other means of contact. Rather, he continued to send messages to Spock’s PADD throughout the course of the afternoon, despite being aware of Spock’s full schedule as well as having one of his own. He maintained repeated, one-sided contact throughout the afternoon, with the following timestamps:

1452: did you ever take study hall i bet not it’s not very efficient

1503: there’s a kid here who’s some kind of computer genius i’ve got three pencils stuck in his hair i’m gonna go for four

1507: you think a computer genius could trump your little kobayashi maru torture test?

1508: i think we should find out

1534: spock

1535: spock

1536: spock!!

As they were no longer in the same room, Spock could not utilize nonverbal cues in order to make it obvious that he did not intend to respond. His reasons as to why should have been evident—that it would not be professional—but Jim had demonstrated behavior that called for a firmer explanation.

How is it that you came by my private contact information?

whoa oh wow you’re actually responding

seriously i thought maybe your padd was broken

either that or you’re rude

And you are responding as well, though in the broadest sense of the word. You have not responded to my question, merely to the presence of the message. If you did not intend to converse in order to exchange information properly, you should not have initiated contact in the first place.

how do you think i came by it you’ve read my transcripts right i’m smart

maybe not as smart as computer genius but it’s not like i’m jealous of him or anything

i mean right now he still has two pencils in his hair he hasn’t even noticed so i’m not feeling too busted up about it

Spock did not reply, as Jim still had not answered his question. He instead continued to grade preliminary aptitude tests for the science department’s advanced placement courses.

Half an hour later exactly, his PADD again began to flash.

i told him about the pencils okay he’s not walking around with pencils in his hair anymore

we just spent like half an hour talking about the kobayashi maru test too and he’s got some theories that are pretty cool
i hacked into the system the other night after i saw you in hydromechanics for people who need naps all right so i could see if you even remembered me

happy now?

no you’re probably not wouldn’t know what happy’d look like on you although maybe it wouldn’t look half bad you should try it sometime

Spock set aside a finished exam, placing it in the stack of candidates who were not prepared for Starfleet Academy’s advanced science courses.

You have answered my question adequately, if not fully. I accept the explanation as it is in keeping with actions of which I know you are capable. I will have to inform my superiors at this institution of your violation of faculty privacy, whereupon a demerit will appear on your transcript.

it’s worth it

That is doubtful.

you did look me up right

Until now, your record was without fault.

maybe you’re a bad influence

Spock returned to grading. The students who had succeeded to meet his rigorous standards were fewer in number than those who had not.

this isn’t going right

spock hey spock

you informed the authorities yet about my transgressions cause i wanna be able to defend myself

An individual of your intelligence quotient should be more than capable of reflecting that intelligence in his written communications. If you have approached every written test with the same style as you are currently employing, then I will also file a complaint with the academy board regarding their unacceptably lowered standards.

There were no more exams to grade. Six had suggested impressively inquisitive minds; twenty-four had failed to distinguish themselves from the rest. Spock logged his decisions, took his PADD, and crossed the campus in a faint drizzle of cold rain.

He was between scientific study laboratories—intending to supervise a campus-wide computer upgrade slated for installation that evening—when the sound of quickened breath and feet slapping the wet ground descended upon him. Spock turned a quarter of an inch to discover Jim’s arrival, books under one arm while he struggled one-handed with a black umbrella.

‘Saw you out of the window.’ Jim jerked his head in the direction of the nearest research library. ‘Vulcans aren’t big on cold temperatures or high humidity, so I figured, since I had the umbrella with me, why not help out?’

The umbrella unfurled with a snap. Jim stumbled back from the force, then swung the umbrella around to protect his books and Spock, respectively. This left his right side open to the rain, cadet reds freckled with spots of moisture.
‘Not that I did it for the gratitude or anything,’ Jim added. ‘So, where are we headed? Off to inform the board of my transgressions?’

‘As of yet, I had not factored that meeting into my schedule,’ Spock said.

‘So…’ Jim trailed off, taking stock of their location with a wide sweep. ‘Science labs, right? It’s gotta be science labs. It’s always science labs.’

‘My plans for the evening are not available to the public,’ Spock replied.

‘Lemme walk you the rest of the way, at least.’ Jim moved closer, so that he could cover Spock with the umbrella shoulder to shoulder. The binding of one of his books bumped Spock’s side. ‘And I’m not trying to butter you up so you won’t tell on me, either. I’m just—I’ve got an umbrella, you need an umbrella, that’s all there is to it. Complete altruism.’

‘I had not considered your motives to be self-serving until you suggested the possibility yourself,’ Spock said. ‘However, now that you have mentioned it, the possibility that our fraternization may be interpreted as a form of favoritism is itself a concern.’

‘You’d rather get wet than walk fifty feet with me?’

‘It is not a matter of preference.’

‘Then let’s go, before it starts raining even harder,’ Jim said.

The points Spock had raised about the potential consequences of their shared company were valid, and yet they did not create an insurmountable obstacle. Jim had judiciously aligned his final argument on the side of logic, and Spock could not pause to find fault without allowing them both to get wet. It seemed like poor reasoning to avoid Jim’s company purely due to hypothetical concern.

Fifty feet was not so great a distance.

The rain provided a soothing patter as it struck the taut, water-resistant fabric of the umbrella over their heads. Jim adjusted his grip on the handle no fewer than four separate times, his hand clammy and white around the curved shape of the plastic.

‘I guess you’re probably not looking into any fungal infections this time around,’ Jim said, not meeting Spock’s eyes, as they approached the main wing of the science laboratories. While it was not strictly off-limits to cadets, the wing had been built separately from the general learning facilities of the academy. In this way, Starfleet could preserve the secrecy of its official business while retaining a single base of operations and drawing upon student body resources. ‘That’d be way too much of a coincidence, right?’

‘While I cannot speak as to the accuracy of the phenomenon known as the “coincidence”, I can safely state that I am not currently experimenting with anything similar to the fungus encountered upon Tarsus IV,’ Spock replied.

Jim whistled, looking away to keep the expression on his face from being visible.

‘That’s a lot of words for no.’

He shrugged, briefly upsetting the even coverage of their umbrella. The sudden tilt sent a shower of collected raindrops toward Jim’s shoulder and down onto the paved pathway beneath his feet. He did not react other than to sidestep the shower abruptly, bringing his shoulder and the books he bore into sudden, sharp contact with Spock’s elbow.
'Sorry.' Jim cleared his throat, readjusting his hold on both umbrella and his schoolwork. 'Didn’t mean to. It was, uh. Wet.’

'The rainfall is indeed intensifying,’ Spock agreed.

In terms of conversational discourse, it was one of their more successful, if more generic, undertakings. Jim slowed his pace as Spock reached the main entrance, hovering with an air of distinct uncertainty, as if he did not know whether to proceed or withdraw.

The decision would be made for him in short order, as Spock was headed to one of the secured labs above the tenth floor, 13-AB. The work that awaited him had nothing to do with his teaching position at the academy, but he had been called in to consult on a quandary by an attending admiral, and had promised his attentions before the end of the day.

'You want me to wait for you?' Jim asked. 'Inside, I mean. Not out in the rain. That’d be crazy.’

'You should consider attending to your studies,’ Spock said.

'Brought my books.’ Jim shifted the stack tucked against his ribs to draw Spock’s attention to them. 'And that’s one of the advantages of growing up like I did. I can get comfortable anywhere. Floor; bathroom; closet; air vent; up a tree—you name it.’

'Your choice of study locations is not my concern,’ Spock said. 'If you elect to conduct your work in an area that is considered academy property, then I cannot stop you, other than to suggest that availing yourself of a more comfortable arrangement would be a more sensible decision.’

'Gotcha,’ Jim replied. He leaned forward to push the door open, keeping Spock under the protective canopy of the umbrella until Spock was securely within the entrance hall. Jim entered only a step behind him, dripping on the floor, his shoes squelching with every step taken on the marble. Jim dried his hair by shaking his head rapidly from side to side, though he at least waited to do so until after he had put a polite distance between himself and Spock.

After running his fingers through his hair and brushing excess water off his one soaked shoulder, Jim found a bench upon which to set his books. He left the umbrella open and upside-down to dry on the floor, popping open his collar with one idle finger.

'Have fun with your top-secret business,’ he said, cracking open the nearest of his reading materials. He had folded himself into a smaller shape in the corner of the hallway bench, the book tucked between him and his bent knees.

That was another point of familiarity.

'Jim,’ Spock said, once more speaking that name as a form of farewell.

Although the clouds had moved on and it was no longer raining when, three hours and seventeen minutes later, Spock returned to the hallway, Jim was still waiting, just as he had promised and not quite as damp as he had been before.

'Spock,’ he said.

After all, names could be employed both as a greeting and as a farewell. Jim had simply chosen the former.

*
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Vulcans and the common cold.

Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.29.

Hello, Mother. It is currently raining in San Francisco. I shall heretofore make note of the weather only when it is not raining, as that is the exception during this season. If I make no mention of the weather at all then you may reasonably assume that the seasonable rate of precipitation has continued according to average.

I am appreciative of the new sweater that you sent, which arrived two days ago, and which I am currently wearing, as you have no doubt already noticed for yourself. The garment is satisfactory and provides my person with warmth, as intended.

My assistance to Professor Puri., the computer lab engineers, and Admiral Archer—who required my assistance regarding the disappearance of his canine companion after a non-standard transportation experiment—has proven helpful.

Christine Chapel is, in response to your inquiry in your previous message, in good health. We remain in contact and said contact is not unpleasant. The stimulation provided by her conversation is acceptable, and though we are not always in agreement, the alternative perspective she provides is worthy of consideration.

You may recall that in the past you have expressed concern regarding the inconsequential matter of whether or not I have been able to secure companionship for myself here at Starfleet Academy. Though it is not vital and I have not sought to cultivate friendship beyond what is accepted as the interactive standard on Earth, I have nevertheless encountered an individual whose determination to remain in my company could be considered friendly in its intentions. His persistence is noteworthy, if not always appreciated. He is also the reason why I was in need of another sweater.

Are you still healthy?

* 

After dedicated efforts to provide Spock with an umbrella when their schedules allowed it while simultaneously neglecting his own need for protection against the constant rain, Jim contracted nasopharyngitis, also referred to as the common cold. The eventuality was inevitable, given the circumstances, and it was not remarkable, as a growing percentage of the student body was currently afflicted with the same.

Christine Chapel had once expressed to Spock how lucky it was that Vulcans were not susceptible to this viral infection, to which Spock had replied that it was not a matter of luck but rather of biology. She had not been pleased by the explanation, though the fact that she found herself constantly blowing her inflamed nose into a moisturizing tissue may have affected her willingness to listen to reason, along with her mood.
The common cold was, as its name suggested, not an uncommon occurrence. The only uncommon element of Jim’s experience was that he refused to acknowledge that he was affected. Though his eyes were watering and his nose pink, his insistence that he was not sick defied all reason—as well as an abundance of evidence.

‘But I guess it couldn’t hurt to have some of that plomeek soup,’ he conceded on the third day of exhibiting all the symptoms of the infection.

He ordered three bowls for his lunch and burnt his tongue on the first.

For Spock, who had now observed him both in a personal and an official setting, there was no reconciling the disparate halves of Jim’s personality. Not even Spock could achieve such a feat.

‘Soup’s not half bad,’ Jim added. ‘Or maybe I just killed all my taste buds.’

‘They will recover,’ Spock said. ‘Though it is true that permanent damage may be done if you do not exercise caution in the future.’

‘I’m not gonna permanently damage my taste buds just from eating hot soup,’ Jim said. ‘You know, you’re a little melodramatic for a Vulcan.’

Despite his protests, Jim was slurring his consonants due to his temporarily damaged tongue; that impediment, coupled with his obstructed sinuses, made it more difficult for him to be understood.

Still, the derision in his voice was clear. He strongly felt that Spock’s precautions were not needed.

It was true that Jim was no longer of an age at which he required the same level of supervision. He had not been so young three years prior, either, but the trauma he had suffered on Tarsus IV had made supervision recommended where it might otherwise never have been considered. While he had displayed notable leadership qualities at the time, it was clear that the responsibilities Jim had been forced to assume had been detrimental to his mental and emotional state.

Jim as he was now did not appear to suffer from an overabundance of responsibility. Indeed, as Spock watched him tap the convex surface of his spoon against the soup to create ripples in the liquid, it seemed as though he had very few concerns of which to speak.

However, appearances could be deceptive; of humans this was particularly true. Jim’s marks suggested that he was doing more than the minimal amount of work required by the Starfleet cadet program.

‘Your condition would improve, were you to devote more time to rest,’ Spock said.

He had not intentionally waited for Jim to take a mouthful of soup before he spoke, but the timing was such that Jim inhaled a hot mouthful of his lunch as he tried, without pausing for consideration, to respond. The ensuing coughing fit drew the attention of several passersby and flushed Jim’s complexion to an unhealthy red that matched the shade of his second bowl of plomeek soup.

Spock waited. As Jim’s airways were not fully blocked, he did not require medical intervention. In time, the problem would resolve itself.

Jim’s cheeks were mottled and his eyes teary when he finally lifted his head.

‘I get this feeling you’re trying to kill me. Think we should talk about that?’

‘I did not have cause to suspect that the suggestion of rest would inspire such a violent reaction,’
Spock replied.

Jim blinked some of the residual wetness from his eyes, swiping the corners with his thumbs. ‘And now you’re making jokes. Did I pass out in my lunch? Am I dreaming?’

‘Had you fallen unconscious into your bowl of plomeek soup, you would be experiencing facial burns rather than dreaming,’ Spock pointed out.

‘Definitely not dreaming, then,’ Jim agreed.

He failed to disclose the criteria he had utilized to come to this conclusion, instead pinching the bridge of his nose an attempt to alleviate the pressure in his sinuses.

‘By your own admission, you have maintained contact with Leonard H. McCoy, one of the junior doctors on the Enterprise,’ Spock said.

‘The best junior doctor on the Enterprise. Just don’t tell him I said that.’

Spock had not maintained contact with Leonard H. McCoy, and therefore had no way to transfer the message—a complimentary one, which indicated Jim’s desire to prevent McCoy from learning of it was not an attempt to avoid giving offense. ‘He would be qualified to offer medical advice to alleviate your symptoms.’

‘I’m fine,’ Jim said. ‘I’ve had way worse.’

‘The arrhythmic and laborious breathing patterns from which you are currently suffering may be considered disruptive to some,’ Spock replied.

‘I’m annoying you,’ Jim said.

‘It is unlikely that I would be annoyed by something so easily discounted and ultimately unimportant.’

‘I’m annoying you,’ Jim repeated, ‘by breathing.’

Jim escorted Spock to his next class before departing to attend his own—but not without informing Spock, in five separate ways and with explicit examples, that his bedside manner was without any positive qualities to recommend it. Apparently it did not matter that there was no bed present to stand beside.

‘Bedside manner?’ Chapel paused after Spock brought the topic before her for consideration, as it was possible she might be able to illuminate the intricacies of the subject. ‘Well, I would say that it’s a good thing you didn’t specialize in medicine.’

‘Then you agree with Jim Kirk that my bedside manner is lacking,’ Spock said.

‘Lacking or nonexistent,’ Chapel replied. ‘But, to be fair, I think that’s what certain, discerning individuals find so refreshing about you.’

There were no further opportunities to discuss it while attending the ceremony of promotion to the Admiralty for Christopher Pike. The other Starfleet officers in attendance shook hands, a commonplace form of greeting on Earth in which Spock did not participate, and told one another jokes easily, their laughter as quiet as the rainfall on the roof of the greenhouse in which the ‘wetting-down’ took place.
‘Congratulations, Admiral Pike,’ Spock said, without shaking Pike’s hand.

‘Collar’s too damn tight,’ Pike replied. ‘Instead of congratulating me, just think of me every now and then, like any other fallen comrade.’

Chapel laughed; after a moment, Pike joined her.

Spock returned to his apartment to find a backlog of messages waiting for him on his PADD.

1905: hey spock my tongue is totally fine

1920: guess you weren’t really worried about my tongue in the first place

1935: are you staying late in the lab again what’s up

1936: if you describe exactly what’s up i could guess where you are based on the description

1937: before you ask i already finished my coursework

1938: for the week

1939: im gonna stop now

2001: spock

2002: spockerole

2003: spockerooni

2004: think ive got a fever so just ignore every single one of these messages

2005: stop ignoring me

2006: spooooooooooooooooooooock

2045: so it turns out there is no way to delete a lot of padd messages once you’ve sent em isn’t that funny

2046: do half humans get nasopharyngitis did i infect you and now you’re not talking to me

2053: i seriously can’t believe there’s no way to delete these messages after you hit send

2054: fever talking not me

Spock observed the current time. It was 21:49, almost an hour since Jim’s latest communication.

There were a number of explanations as to why Jim had ceased contact. His fever could have broken, no longer compelling him to write pointless messages; his fever could have persisted, but he had recalled and followed Spock’s advice to rest in order to improve his health; he could have chosen to shower, to interact with another acquaintance, to sleep because he was tired rather than to allow his body to heal, or attend another, unspecified recreational activity. Or—though Spock had no way to prove that this possibility was any more likely than the other scenarios—his fever could have worsened, thus rendering him unable to communicate the severity of his condition, as he was unable to communicate at all.

Given that this last option was possible, even if the likelihood was minimal, Spock considered it
reasonable to inquire after Jim’s condition.

He wrote: You have ceased contact. For what reason?

Jim did not reply immediately. Realizing that he was wasting time waiting beside an inactive PADD, Spock took a shower, the water temperature higher than that of the average shower enjoyed by humans by ten degrees Celsius. He checked the PADD between his shower and his nightly meditation to discover there was still no reply, a realization that prevented him from achieving a fully meditative state.

The common cold was not deadly; at worst, it was an uncomfortable inconvenience. Jim had already made Spock aware of the fact that he had ‘had way worse.’

The PADD flashed, but it was a message from Chapel, thanking Spock for the pleasant evening they had shared and informing him of a campus-wide psychological study she was preparing to conduct.

Spock replied: I believe that Jim Kirk is not well.

Her reply was not delayed.

He has that cold that’s been going around, doesn’t he? I think you’re the one who told me about it.

It was not Spock’s intent to distract her from the work she had proposed to prepare for; however, since Christine Chapel had contacted him first, he understood that it was not outside the realm of etiquette to prolong that contact until such time as she deemed it detrimental to her progress.

He has complained of a fever and implied delirium, symptoms that do not regularly accompany the common cold.

I see, Chapel replied, which did not seem to Spock to be altogether a useful exchange. Her second message, which followed swiftly, was equally unhelpful. Are you worried, Spock? Or do you have reasonable cause to be concerned?

The first question did not seem to Spock to have firm ties to the second. Worry was a useless sentiment that humans experienced even more commonly than they did the common cold; it was not often experienced by Vulcans and yet Spock, due to his mixed heritage, was not ignorant of its existence. Whether or not one had cause seemed to have little bearing on the presence of the feeling itself.

It was, by its very nature, irrational.

I have it on Jim’s authority that he is in regular contact with Doctor Leonard H. McCoy, Spock wrote. Perhaps a medical consult would be in order.

Oh, yes, I know McCoy. He might not be up at this hour, but I’ll try him, Spock.

Spock dressed in layers to compensate for the potential chill of the night air, including his new sweater. As he had already reviewed, there were several possible causes for Jim’s silence. Since he had already inquired and received no further information, Spock could only speculate in regards to his absence.

If McCoy was not awake or otherwise occupied, then Spock determined that there was no alternative. He would have to endeavor to make contact with Jim in his dormitory on the academy campus.
Spock’s PADD once again remained dark. He sent Chapel a practical addendum.

*You may inform him that I believe there is a high likelihood that the cold has progressed to influenza. I am capable of reciting the exact percentage of possibility if required, although I do not believe it will be necessary.*

*I’ll tell him, Spock,* Chapel replied.

*If needed, you may also inform him that I am currently seeking a firsthand account of Jim’s condition for myself.*

The hour was not excessively late, but foot traffic had thinned around campus and the main lecture buildings were darkened and locked down for the night. Spock’s keycard allowed him entry to one of the east-facing dormitory wards; Jim’s room assignment had been noted in his file. It had been useful to read with the information within after all. While Spock could not have foreseen its application in this situation, he was satisfied that he was as prepared as he could be.

However, once Spock found himself in front of the room indicated on Jim’s file, he paused rather than immediately making his presence known. He did not consider it a true hesitation, merely a momentary reaffirmation of the facts. It was possible, if Jim were not dangerously ill, that knocking on his door would wake him from the very rest Spock had prescribed.

It was also possible that Jim had neglected his health to the point of endangering himself, behavior of which Spock had already observed the precedent.

It was Spock’s conclusion that the potential benefits of knocking outweighed the potential disadvantages. He rapped on the door and awaited an answer.

None came—not until Spock had waited, by his count, an appropriate ninety-nine seconds, and lifted his hand to knock again. It was only then that there was a thump from within, followed by a muffled string of grunts, which sounded perplexed. They were uttered in Jim’s voice, as was a brief spate of coughing, and, at last, a proper attempt at communication.

‘Whossit?’ Jim asked from the other side of the door.

‘It is Spock,’ Spock replied. ‘I am here to determine whether or not your condition demands immediate medical attention.’

There was another thump from the other side of the door. Five seconds later, the door opened, Jim leaning heavily against the frame. His eyes were bleary, his hair unkempt, and his cadet reds wrinkled, as though he had been sleeping in them. He scrubbed his cheek with his knuckles, then swiped his palm over his chest in an unsuccessful and half-hearted attempt to smooth the fabric of his uniform.

‘Huh?’ he asked.

Spock would have to repeat his statement, as Jim’s mental faculties had clearly been affected negatively by his illness. ‘It is Spock,’ he said again. ‘I am here to determine whether or not your condition demands—’

‘What? No, no,’ Jim said. ‘I’ve got a cold, I’m fine. What?’

‘Your inability to process basic information indicates otherwise.’

‘C’mon in,’ Jim said, rather than responding to Spock’s statement. He waved at Spock unsteadily,
stepping away from the doorway, but still maintaining his hold on the frame. He may have been equally unsteady on his feet. He was not, as he stubbornly insisted, ‘fine’ at all. Many of his senses had been adversely affected, and his self-assessment was obviously inaccurate. ‘It’s kind of a mess in here but it’s not like I knew anybody was coming.’ Jim cleared his throat. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Your illness—’

‘Cold, Spock.’ Jim held back a sneeze. ‘It’s just a cold.’

‘You delivered numerous alarming messages to my account. When I requested clarification, none was forthcoming.’

Jim’s brow furrowed. ‘I send you tons of messages you don’t respond to,’ he said finally.

‘If your messages required confirmation, I would not hesitate to respond the moment I was able.’

‘So my messages just don’t require confirmation?’

Spock did not have to pause to recall the exact text that had been sent to him. ‘Spock, Spockerole, Spockerooni,’ he recited.

Jim winced. ‘I told you, that was the fever talking.’

‘Indeed. And, when I inquired as to the specifics of your health, your silence suggested, among other explanations, an escalation of your symptoms had occurred, rendering you incapable of communicating.’

‘I’m gonna sit down,’ Jim said.

He did so almost immediately, legs folding under him as he rested on the edge of his standard single dormitory bed. There was an empty box of tissues by his feet on the floor and a small garbage pail overflowing with used tissues and protein bar wrappers. Beside that was a stack of books, another stack of books and beside that, corner peaking out from beneath the bed, was Jim’s darkened PADD. By contrast, the area covering and surrounding his desk was neatly attended and well organized.

Spock remained standing, hands clasped behind his back. Jim swiped for a relatively unused tissue with which to blow his nose.

It was little wonder, given the complications of his weakened immune system and his failure to procure a fresh box of tissues, that he remained unwell.

‘Your PADD’s flashing,’ Jim said, pointing vaguely.

‘It is a message from Christine Chapel,’ Spock replied, after a swift glance at the contents. ‘She informs me that Leonard H. McCoy has already been in contact with you and that his official diagnosis is “Stubborn fool who needs bed-rest”’.

‘Sounds about right,’ Jim said.

‘Jim, if you are unable to remember the basics of conversations conducted during your illness—’

‘Bones says a lot of things,’ Jim explained. ‘All of ‘em more or less sound like he’s yelling at you when he’s just trying to look out for you. I had another box of tissues, by the way,’ he added sheepishly, ‘but then Gaila down the hall said her roommate caught the cold too, so I gave ‘em to her.’
‘They were your tissues,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah, and I gave ‘em to Gaila for her roommate.’

‘Yet you still had use of them.’ Spock paused. ‘When I knocked on your door, I woke you.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim said.

‘I will leave and allow you to return to bed.’

‘No,’ Jim said, quickly and loudly, before he was able to calm himself. ‘I mean, you don’t have to, that’s all. You came all this way to check up on me. God, Bones is gonna kill me if he thinks I haven’t been looking after myself.’

‘The role of a doctor is to first do no harm,’ Spock informed him. ‘If you believe that McCoy poses a threat to you or any of his patients, it is advisable that you file a report.’

He did not indulge the conversational detours further by inquiring after the origin of the moniker Bones, which held an obviously morbid connotation. This did not seem to Spock to be in keeping with an appropriate reputation for a doctor to cultivate, but McCoy’s work had always been exceptional.

Jim snorted, but this did not seem to be an expression of scorn. Rather, he was attempting to clear his clogged sinuses.

‘No, Spock. That’s—a slight exaggeration.’ He balled up the tissue he was holding and tossed it toward the overflowing trash. When it bounced off the surface and fell outside of the bin, Jim rolled his eyes, crossing the room to shove down the excess. He regarded his hands, then let out a sigh. ‘I’m gonna go wash these in the bathroom.’

‘Do you require supervision?’ Spock inquired.

‘No,’ Jim said, too loudly. This was the second time he had exhibited difficulty in managing the volume of his voice, perhaps owing to difficulty hearing. Clogged sinuses could have that effect on auditory senses. ‘I mean—I’m good, Spock, I promise. Just washing my hands. If I’m not back in three minutes, you can come in and check up on me. I know you can keep track in your head.’

‘It is not a difficult task,’ Spock agreed.

Jim returned in two minutes, forty-three seconds. Judging by his complexion, he had utilized the time not simply to wash his hands but to splash cold water onto his face.

‘Is your temperature still elevated?’ Spock asked.

Jim’s mouth quirked on the left, not quite forming a proper smile as he closed the door behind him.

‘You asking me if I’m hot, Spock?’

Spock thought this was self-evident, but perhaps Jim’s illness was again slowing his mental faculties, forcing Spock to show exaggerated lenience.

‘I am,’ Spock replied.

Jim exhaled, returning to the corner of the bed. When he sat, the mattress sagged beneath him, and his posture soon followed, bending almost double to lean his elbows against his knees. It was only then that he glanced in Spock’s direction, eyes red-rimmed but as vividly blue as Spock had ever
'You just gonna stand there all night?'

'If necessary,' Spock said. 'Until such time as my company is no longer required.'

'Uh, yeah.' Jim cleared his throat. 'Gonna chalk that one up to the fever, too. But you could sit
down, Spock. I don’t know how I feel about you standing there looming.'

He adjusted the open fall of his collar, tugging at the white cotton shirt he wore beneath his red jacket. A patch just below the collarbone was damp from sweat. Jim was hot—to utilize the less complicated phrase for which Jim had expressed preference.

There was a desk chair of which Spock availed himself, once more humoring Jim’s requests due to the illness that plagued him. There had been a time, Spock was forced to concede, when any virus from which Jim suffered would have gone untreated and unconsidered. On Tarsus IV, there had been no surviving doctors, and Jim had been left to care for himself as well as to offer that same care to others younger and less experienced than he.

If Jim refused to avail himself of proper medical care, then the next line of defense was Spock’s surveillance. Should Jim’s condition worsen, Spock would know to call for professional assistance.

He took out his PADD to inform Chapel that, for the present, McCoy need not be troubled—though it was troubling that he would consider his duties a trouble to begin with.

'What’re you writing?' Jim asked, still watching Spock from the edge of his bed, under the stooped curve of his shoulders.

'I have requested Christine Chapel prevent Leonard H. McCoy from acting on his threats, as his services are not required,' Spock replied.

'You didn’t have to bother all those people, Spock.'

'Both parties would not consider fulfillment of their duties or expectations placed on them based upon their chosen fields a “bother”.'

'It’s late.’ Jim tipped his chin toward the digital alarm clock on the side of his desk closest to the bed, an arm’s length away from the rumpled pillow. ‘Doctor Chapel’s around, too, huh?’

'Conducting studies to better prepare her for another exploratory mission,’ Spock said.

Jim grimaced. ‘Hate that stuff. Observational periods, gathering data from live subjects, treating people like studies.'

‘Christine Chapel’s studies operate according to the scientific method,’ Spock said. ‘The benefits of her conclusions on the human mind and the ability of officers to operate in space have been cited in over thirteen studies worldwide.’

‘Okay, Okay.’ Jim tugged at his collar again, to let fresh air against his skin. ‘I’m just glad she hasn’t asked me to be a part of any studies.’

The truth was that Chapel was soon to publish—with all names redacted in order to preserve the privacy of the subjects—a paper on her discoveries treating the children of Tarsus IV. Spock had read the paper, and though he did not ascribe to Chapel’s methodology personally, he had found the experience insightful and not without merit.
Given what he had learned from reading an advance copy of those findings, Spock did not inform Jim that he had, in fact, been a part of a study already.

‘So,’ Jim said, elongating the vowel.

Spock lifted a brow.

‘I mean, I didn’t have any plans for the night,’ Jim continued, after relieving his congestion with another, questionably sanitary rectangle of tissue paper. ‘I was just gonna sleep.’

‘Commence with your period of rest,’ Spock said. ‘I will not interrupt.’

‘You’re gonna stay here and watch me sleep?’

‘I will be monitoring your condition, which calls for periodic observation.’

Jim crushed the tissue into a ball one-handed, squinted to aim, and managed to toss the projectile so that it landed within the trash bin. His subsequent expression of satisfaction was interrupted by an undeniable yawn. At the last moment, he remembered to cover his mouth.

‘That’s…’ Jim began. ‘Look, that might make it a little hard to relax, all right?’

‘I am capable of maintaining explicit silence, as you are already aware. My presence would not be obtrusive.’

‘Yeah, but I’m still gonna know you’re there, periodically observing me.’ Jim’s cheeks were redder; the body temperatures of humans were commonly elevated at later hours of the night.

‘I fail to see why this should prove a disturbance.’

‘Of course you do,’ Jim said. ‘Besides, you’ve probably got stuff to do. You don’t have to waste your time with this. Wasted time and Vulcans—they don’t mix.’

Jim had Spock at a logical impasse; however, there may have been a hidden motive to explain why Jim was so adamant to prevent something as simple as an unseen, unfelt, additional presence in his vicinity while he slept. Having eliminated the possible reasons—there were none—what Spock was left with, at the very least, was the improbable. Or, in this instance, the individual.

‘Do you still suffer from disturbed sleep?’ Spock asked. ‘You have no roommate; you must have requested a dormitory assignment with that specification in order to enjoy these living arrangements. In the past, you believed your inability to enter the REM stage of sleep without experiencing emotional distress somehow reflected poorly on your person, though you should know that it has no bearing on your capabilities, either positively or negatively. Therefore, it is possible that you do not wish for me to stay because you are eager to deny the opportunity for potential embarrassment. Allow me to assure you, I will not pass judgment on your character if this is the case.’

Jim blinked slowly. ‘I’m too sick for this,’ he said at last.

It was Spock’s understanding that this was exactly the reason why he was there. Jim’s health, while not in a rapid state of decline, had nevertheless been questionable enough to draw Spock to attend him in the first place. That it would impair Jim’s ability to reason was not unexpected, although his ongoing surprise at finding himself impaired suggested that Jim, unlike Spock, had difficulty comprehending the transition.

‘Rest now,’ Spock suggested.
Jim made a tacit effort at participation. He lifted his pillow and leaned it against the wall, testing the angle by leaning into it sideways, shoulder-first.

‘Can’t lie down,’ he explained when he became aware of Spock observing him. ‘All the mucus just—Well, hey, let’s see if I can have a conversation tonight without bringing mucus into it just once.’

‘You have already failed in that attempt,’ Spock said.

Jim groaned, although it was unclear whether this was a genuine lament or another side effect of his ongoing nasal blockage. Both causes seemed likely in equal measure. He issued a glance in Spock’s direction, then began to unhook the fastenings on his jacket one by one, allowing it to fall open over the shirt beneath.

The layers could not have been beneficial, considering his elevated temperature. It was not Spock’s place to applaud Jim’s decision, but he approved of the sense in it silently.

‘You could be nicer to me, you know.’ Jim shrugged his shoulders to help him get his jacket off. Once he had managed this, he pulled it over his chest in place of a blanket. ‘See—I say stuff like that, and then I remember you came all the way over here to check up on me, and suddenly I’m the jackass.’

Spock had not been aware that there was a matter of contention over who was the ‘jackass’. As the term was one with which he held a passing familiarity, he did not question its definition.

‘If it would assist in your level of comfort, I will enter into my own meditative state,’ Spock said. ‘You can be certain that my focus will be inward, with observation of your vitals a secondary concern.’

‘You don’t have to go to all that trouble,’ Jim said.

He blinked in a series of slow, lingering impulses, which gradually made it appear as though he was falling asleep while sitting up. This had been Jim’s stated goal, but to see it in practice made Spock wonder whether he should not have intervened and insisted Jim align himself properly within his dormitory bed.

To speak up now would only draw attention to his presence, something Spock had already tacitly promised he would not do.

Spock closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, aligning his breaths with the rhythm of Jim’s chest as it rose and fell. Should that rhythm be interrupted, Spock would sense the interference. In this way he could both monitor Jim’s progress without, as Jim put it, looming.

They spent the night breathing together—until Jim’s heart-rate quickened and he began to shift in discomfort. Spock kept close watch after that, but Jim did not awaken.

*
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Save the beagle, save the world.

Chapter Notes

OMG I HECKED UP I HECKED UP SO BAD. THIS IS THE 17TH CHAPTER SO PLEASE READ THIS CHAPTER FIRST:

CHAPTER 16 HERE

AND THEN THIS ONE oh my god. Frick. I fricked up.

Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.35.

Mother, I am well. I trust that you are the same, or else you would have informed me.

Is there a connotation to the specifics of a Saturday evening—as shared with another individual’s company—of which I am unaware?

Your compliance in educating me will be appreciated.

*  

The following Monday morning, Admiral Pike requested Spock’s presence before the first period of the day’s classes were slated to begin. As Pike’s offices were on the other end of the campus, located in Starfleet Headquarters proper and not within any of the educational facilities, Spock was required to leave his apartment a full hour and a half earlier than he would have to satisfy the demands of his usual schedule.

Spock did not rush, although he could not mentally discount the additional strain on his morning routine that the change in plans had provided. Therefore, he was mindful but not overly bothered when he was permitted to enter the captain’s offices by the security personnel stationed outside.

Pike was standing when Spock entered, engaged in observing the view of the bay from his window.

‘Commander Spock,’ he said, turning to offer Spock a seat in one of the two chairs set opposite his desk. ‘I trust you’re holding up all right?’

‘I have no reason to question my performance,’ Spock said. ‘It is also my understanding that none of my superiors have any reason to do the same.’
He politely declined to sit and instead folded his hands behind his back in the absence of his uniform’s cap to hold. He had not worn it, as this was not a formal meeting, although he was forced to question that assumption when he noted that Pike had not seated himself, either.

When he regarded Spock, Pike’s expression was amiable. Indeed, it almost seemed as though he had recalled a joke that he found to be privately amusing.

‘Forgot how serious you were,’ he said. ‘Never mind, Spock, I’m not questioning anything. Just wanted to know whether you found it easier to deal with singularities, meteors and uncharted space; or a bunch of rowdy teenagers.’

‘One cannot be compared to the other,’ Spock replied.

‘So you say,’ Admiral Pike agreed. ‘Only sometimes, I wonder.’

They were not pressed for time, yet it would be an oversight to assume, therefore, that they did not have any other obligations. Spock himself had his morning classes to attend—and, beyond that, Pike had new recruits to oversee. There was no doubt of a purpose to their meeting, but Pike did not seem overly concerned about arriving at it.

‘Admiral?’ Spock prompted.

‘I wanted to talk to you about Jim Kirk,’ Pike said.

Spock had not allowed himself to speculate upon the potential reasons for their meeting—and he could admit to being surprised by the sudden introduction of the unexpected topic.

‘I take by that look you’re sporting that you remember who I’m talking about,’ Pike continued. ‘Well anyway, we’ve had his computer flagged—long story, caught him messing with the algorithms for one of the captaincy exams.’

‘The Kobayashi Maru,’ Spock said, having recalled Jim’s expressed interest.

Pike nodded. Despite the severity of an accusation implying a cadet had been cheating, he did not appear grim, merely thoughtful. ‘The very one. Thought it might interest you, seeing as how you’re the one who programmed it. Not to mention, I looked up on him, just to be sure he was the same Jim Kirk as the one we picked up three years ago off that damn planet.’

‘James Tiberius Kirk,’ Spock said.

‘The one and only. Your old assignment.’

‘Sir,’ Spock said.

Pike waved off Spock’s formalities as he had on the bridge; Spock had not forgotten Pike’s proclivities, but he had also not forgotten his sense of decorum. ‘So is this a Vulcan memory thing, or have you kept in touch?’

‘I did not breach the bounds of my assignment. When the transport departed with the survivors on board, I ceased my contact with the individual, as I had no further orders to maintain it. If this was an error—’

‘No; no errors, Spock. After flying with you for three years, I’d like to think I know you well enough to say you don’t make them. Not that easily, anyway.’
‘Sir,’ Spock said again. Following a pause, he added, ‘However, it is my understanding that Jim Kirk did maintain contact with another individual who served aboard the Enterprise: Doctor Leonard H. McCoy.’

‘You’re probably going to give me that look you used to throw me when I got too sentimental for your liking,’ Pike said, ‘but the truth of the matter is, I wrote a dissertation on that kid’s father. So from the moment he beamed aboard the Enterprise, I had my eye on Jim Kirk. You know he cited his time with our crew as the reason for applying to Starfleet?’

‘I had suggested that he do so before he departed,’ Spock replied.

‘Well, what do you know? Guess you had that breakthrough after all.’ Again, Pike gestured to the seats in front of his desk. ‘Please, Spock, sit down. That way I can do the same, and at least one of us will be a hell of a lot more comfortable.’

Spock would not outright disobey an order from a superior, especially not from an admiral. He sat and Pike followed suit, pulling up Jim’s files on his personal computer.

‘If you believe that Jim Kirk has broken some of the Starfleet General Orders and Regulations—’

Spock began.

‘He was taking your test apart, Spock; that’s all. Trying to figure out how it ticked. You know, if there’s a mind on this campus that’s going to realize it doesn’t tick, it’d be his.’ When Spock arched a brow, Pike added, ‘Like I said: I’ve had my eye on him.’

‘I have met with him as well, on occasion,’ Spock said.

‘Is that so?’ Pike leaned forward. ‘How’s he doing?’

‘Now that he has recovered from a severe case of nasopharyngitis, his health is not in question.’

Pike didn’t blink, although he did chuckle. ‘I mean, Mr. Spock, does he seem like he’s in any kind of trouble to you?’

‘I am not a specialist,’ Spock said.

‘Understood.’ Pike clapped his palm to the surface of his desk. ‘It’s a delicate situation. Technically, he hasn’t done anything wrong. He wants to learn; that’s the sign of a keen mind. Maybe too keen for his own good. And I wouldn’t want to see him push the limits too far—do you understand what I’m saying, Spock?’

Spock opened his mouth to request clarification on numerous elements, but Pike held up his hand.

‘I will “keep an eye” on him,’ Spock said instead.

‘Now we’re talking,’ Pike replied.

Over the course of the next three weeks, Spock saw Jim an average of twice per day, spending a longer amount of time with him on weekends, while during the week days, they met for lunch or dinner, occasionally both. Their separate schedules kept them apart, save for the one class of Jim’s that Spock was assisting, Professor Puri’s hydromechanics course. During those three weeks, Spock waited to see if Jim would choose to speak to him regarding the Kobayashi Maru and his private, unsanctioned research, but Jim did not broach the subject.

It was incongruent. Given the fact that Spock had been the one to design the practical examination in
the first place, and that Jim was so determined to ‘solve’ it, it would have been sensible for Jim to confront Spock in an attempt to glean new information.

Spock would not have been forthcoming; perhaps Jim knew this, and that was the reason why he did not bring it up. Spock’s knowledge of Jim’s character corroborated this theory, as Jim often stated that he was ‘fine’ without aid from another party.

It explained the books Jim always carried with him on multiple subjects, related to theoretical sciences as well as engineering, biology, bio-mechanics, and mechanics alone.

These reading materials did not always coincide with the semester of classes in which Jim had enrolled. They were indicative of Jim’s intelligence; Spock had not considered that a thirst for knowledge could ever imply poor judgment in how that knowledge was employed.

Other than that, the only peculiarity of Jim’s behavior was his insistence that they spend Saturday evenings together: to share each other’s company while consuming their dinners, then work on the transwarp conundrum in order to determine the location of the missing beagle.

In theory, the work would have gone faster had Montgomery Scott been included in their weekly meetings and discussions, but after the initial suggestion to reach him, the notion had fallen by the wayside. Indeed, Jim had made no mention of attracting the attention of Scott beyond the first discussion that had inspired the idea.

‘It would be simpler to understand the exact parameters of the equation if we were to include Montgomery Scott in these discussions,’ Spock said one night, venturing to discover why they had not pursued this logical solution.

‘You don’t want that guy in your apartment,’ Jim said, his mouth full of the popped corn he had brought as a post-dinner snack. ‘Trust me.’

Spock did not indulge in snacks in addition to his daily meals, but Jim’s metabolism appeared to have recovered since his time on Tarsus IV, and he seemed determined to make up for lost time and lost nutrition, which explained his added muscle mass.

Spock waited for Jim to expand upon his declaration, raising his eyebrows so that Jim would know to continue. In minor but noticeable ways, they had come to ease the initial difficulty that had been present in their communications. It had not been entirely reformed, but they had made admirable progress.

Jim widened his eyes, but kept his mouth shut in order to keep from dropping any of the popped corn.

‘Because he’s weird.’ Jim’s words were mumbled, due to the obstruction of the popped corn on his tongue. He added another handful before he started chewing, an act that was highly illogical. ‘He’d take apart your stuff and say he was building you better stuff and then he’d get distracted halfway through and— You should see what he did to the Chekov’s computer.’

‘I am not familiar with that individual,’ Spock said.

‘Computer kid,’ Jim replied. ‘With the hair. Pencils. He’s helping me with a—thing. Anyway, that Monty guy is a total weirdo. He’d mess up all the cool Vulcan ambiance you’ve got going on in here. Did I tell you this was a cool apartment yet? Because it is.’

Though Jim could not recall the event, he had said as much upon first entering Spock’s domicile, but the repetition of the honest commendation was not troublesome.
‘You contend that Montgomery Scott has a deficit of interpersonal skills and a failure to appreciate boundaries that would negate the insight granted by his expertise in matters of an equation he calculated,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah I do.’ Jim’s mouth was finally free of popped corn, which gave him the liberty of emphasis. ‘Anyway, whatever—we’re smart enough to figure this out on our own. We don’t need him.’

‘Our lack of progress would suggest otherwise.’

Jim stared at Spock, unblinking, for fourteen seconds before he sighed and reached for another handful of his snack. ‘You really wanna invite him along?’

‘If I were to deny his requests to experiment with my private property and preside over his work so that he did not become distracted, then the damage caused by his presence would be mitigated, leaving the benefits to outweigh the costs,’ Spock said.

‘But he’d—’ Jim bit his tongue instead of a kernel of popped corn and winced, sucking it against the inside of his cheek. ‘Like I said, we can figure this one out together.’

‘Is this a point of pride?’ Spock asked.

Jim shrugged. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Matters of ego should not interfere with scientific inquiry.’

‘People are gonna be people, Spock.’ Jim sighed, wiping his hands off on his thighs before pushing his fingers through his hair. He smelled of salt and butter combined with the other, familiar scents specific to his person: a combination of fabrics, foods, and sweat. ‘Fine. Why not? Let’s just invite Montgomery Scott along.’

‘Do you protest the idea because you suffer from an inability to work well with others?’ Spock asked.

‘What? No, Spock—I already said, let’s just bring him in on this, whatever. He’ll probably be so excited somebody actually wants to talk to him about this stuff that he won’t remember me from the last time we met.’ Jim glanced up at Spock. ‘I bet he’ll remember you, though.’

‘I was his first officer,’ Spock agreed.

‘Even if you hadn’t been, you’re still pretty memorable.’ Jim nudged the bowl of popped corn closer to the side of the table by which Spock stood, then reached for his PADD to pull up Montgomery Scott’s contact information. ‘You sure you’re not gonna try at least one piece? It’d be a cultural experience. Broadening your horizons.’

Spock retrieved a kernel from the bowl, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. Though Jim had displayed a method of ingesting the product by the handful, Spock could not be so careless, as it was more important to first test the sample before engaging in a method of eating that was culturally encouraged.

Before the kernel could stain his fingers with the salt and butter that Jim so liberally licked from his own, Spock placed the kernel on his tongue, closed his mouth, and began to chew. The taste was not unpleasant, though it did not fit the flavor profiles of Vulcan. It was much as Spock had suspected from the smell, though the combination of textures was unexpected. After thirty seconds of chewing exactly, Spock discovered that a hard element of the kernel had become lodged between his lower
right molars.

‘He’s on his way,’ Jim said. ‘Doesn’t have anything better to do on a Saturday night, I guess.’ After he studied Spock’s face, he added, ‘You don’t like the popcorn.’

‘Its flavor is not unpleasant,’ Spock replied. ‘However, a small but solid fragment—’

‘You got it stuck in your teeth?’ Jim’s mouth twitched at both corners. ‘Spock, that happens all the time. You just have to suck at it until it comes loose.’

‘I fail to see the enjoyment in choosing a snack that would cause such difficulties,’ Spock said.

‘The benefits outweigh the costs,’ Jim repeated. ‘For some people. Just poke it out with your tongue.’

Given that Jim was the expert in popped corn, Spock would have to defer to his good judgment. He sat, placed his hands on the edge of the desk, and proceeded to ‘poke’ at the area with the tip of his tongue. It was not a precise science; Spock assumed that a practice period would be required before he experienced success.

On the other side of the desk, Jim’s chin was on his palm. He was staring.

‘Am I not executing the task correctly?’ Spock asked.

‘Huh?’ Jim sat up, suddenly and swiftly, banging his knee against one of the legs of the desk. ‘How should I know? I’m not in your mouth. It takes a while, that’s all. Gotta keep working at it until you see some results. I’m gonna go to the bathroom.’

Despite his final pronouncement, Jim gave no sign of standing. Spock continued to ‘work at’ the kernel, but it was firmly wedged in place; he supposed that Jim’s lack of action was in part due to his need to oversee Spock’s progress.

‘I like that sweater,’ Jim said.

Spock did not reply; he was still committed to following the post-popped-corn protocol.

‘Not like I’m gonna take it from you or anything,’ Jim continued, in a rush to fill the silence. ‘I don’t steal sweaters anymore. Or food. Or anything else. Although in the end, it wasn’t exactly stealing your sweater; I just borrowed it until you gave it to me. I still have it, you know.’

The kernel budged, briefly, but it was only a minor shift and not, as Spock had at first thought, a sign of impending success.

‘Like I said,’ Jim concluded, ‘I like that sweater.’

He grabbed an over-sized handful of popcorn without warning and filled his mouth with it—then stood and headed for the bathroom without chewing.

Scott’s peculiar behavior was not the only social eccentricity with which they would be forced to contend that evening.

Spock counseled himself to look at it as an exercise in understanding human socialization patterns. While at inception the prospect may have appeared overwhelming, it would prove a worthwhile endeavor with valuable results.

It took Scott seventeen minutes and twelve seconds to arrive at Spock’s apartment complex and ring
to be allowed inside. Jim was occupied in the bathroom for fourteen of these minutes, red-faced and damp when he exited; as for what he had engaged in, Spock had only the sound of running water as evidence. Jim returned to his reading without engaging in new discourse with Spock and did not look up from his book in the minimal time it took Scott to be brought to Spock’s door in the turbolift.

‘All right, what’s this about the pair of ye digging into my research?’ Scott was already speaking as the door of the turbolift opened and before he had entered Spock’s apartment. He was wearing a down coat with a fur-lined hood, an outfit that seemed to Spock to be uncommonly heavy for the weather. He would enquire at a later date as to where it had been obtained. ‘That equation’s supposed to be classified, by the by. I’ve got a bone t’pick with Starfleet’s security measures.’

‘As an officer of Starfleet, it is within my purview to have access to all scientific advances that have been made a matter of public record,’ Spock said.

Scott discarded his coat over the small chair in Spock’s entryway, which served no purpose other than to give someone a place to sit in order to take their shoes off and put them on before entering and exiting, respectively. The function was primarily decorative, but Mother had insisted.

It created an environment that was ‘homey’, a highly desirable quality in one’s living space.

‘Sure, that might be true for you, Commander, but what about that one?’ Scott did not remove his boots. ‘Aye, don’t think I can’t see you hidin’ behind those books of yers, either, James Tiberius Kirk. That’s right, I’ve got access to all the personnel files, same as you. A’course, those were revoked as a part of my probation. Still, I’ve got everything up here.’

Scott tapped his temple to demonstrate that the knowledge he had gathered was within the recesses of his mind. Jim raised his eyes to look at Spock over the edge of his book as if to communicate both his distress over the situation and to remind Spock that he had been right to characterize Scott’s behavior as eccentric.

‘We called you,’ Jim said. ‘If I was trying to get away with something, don’t you think I’d be a little smarter than that? At least gimme the benefit of the doubt.’

‘As a shrewd man and as a scientist, I would never.’ Scott grabbed the chair that Spock had been sitting in, twisted it sideways, and claimed it for his own use. ‘Right then. What are we up to now? Aside from snoopin’ and pokin’ your noses into another man’s sensitive, wildly intelligent work, that is.’

‘I was consulted by Admiral Archer,’ Spock began, ‘as he was desirous of exhausting every avenue open to him for the rescue of his canine.’

‘Sweet little doggy, that one. I keep sayin’, wherever he is, according to my calculations at least, he’s in one piece—but no. There’s no convincing a man who loves a dog that much of anything, if you’re not presenting your findings with a dog biscuit and a scratch behind the ears.’

‘Do not touch or attempt to modify my computer terminal,’ Spock said. It was clear now that preventative measures would have to be taken, as it was difficult to interrupt Scott once he began.

‘Beggin’ yer pardon?’

‘Your focus on the equation and your explanation of your methods are all that is required of you,’ Spock said. ‘No other services will be allowed at this time.’

Scott looked between Spock and Jim, finally settling on the latter for an explanation.
In response, Jim shrugged. ‘You heard Commander Spock. We’re just trying to figure out where the admiral’s beagle is, first of all. After that, I’m figuring we’ll just modify your original equation to lock onto his coordinates and bring him back.’

‘Oh, aye, it’s that simple to you, is it?’ Scott pinched the bridge of his nose so tightly that the tip of it lost color before he released his hold. ‘If only you’d contacted me after I was banished to the arse-end of the galaxy, I wouldn’t have to suffer fools and upstarts thinking they’re the ones who can improve on my brilliance.’

‘So it’s true,’ Jim said. ‘They’re gonna send you somewhere you can’t cause any more trouble, huh?’

‘Somewhere no sun shines,’ Scott replied mournfully. ‘Official paperwork t’go through a week from t’morrow, and then I’ll be shipped off. It’ll be cold as a Vulcan’s disposition—no offense to you in particular, Mr. Spock—and it’ll be a solitary post, too, from th’looks of it. All alone out there in the arse-crack of the galaxy—all the time in th’world to think on my sins. It’s torture, that’s what it is. It isn’t decent.’

If Scott were to expend as much of his energy on the fault in his equation as he did on conversation, Spock thought, then he would not have to worry about being reassigned, as he would have already found a solution.

‘Strange little brain-trust, this,’ Scott added, pointing between the two of them. ‘A Starfleet cadet and a Federation science officer—is this some manner of extra-curricular business I’ve stumbled into?’

‘You did not have to agree to meet with us,’ Spock pointed out.

‘I’ll be starved enough for human contact as it is,’ Scott said. ‘Might as well get as much of it as I can when I can, before it’s too late!’

Jim didn’t reply; Spock had nothing to add. Scott would have been perfectly content as the sole contributor to the conversation if necessary, but there was something about Jim’s expression that kept him silent. Though Spock studied it, he could not find an explanation for it.

‘Look, I’ve been thinking,’ Jim said at last, jaw relaxing, ‘and maybe this is stupid, I don’t know, I just had a lot of time to think about this—’

Scott snorted. ‘Oh, a lot of time to think about it, have you? How old are you—the ripe old age of twelve, is it?’

‘It was a while ago,’ Jim said, waving one hand. ‘Anyway, I read all your research, and there’s something that doesn’t add up.’

‘Aye.’ Scott rested his head in both hands. ‘Th’bloody beagle, that’s what.’

‘It’d just make a lot more sense,’ Jim said, ‘if you thought of space as the thing that’s moving.’

Scott’s head remained in his hands, but his shoulders had stiffened; he, like Spock, was considering the validity of the suggestion. Spock crossed the room from where he had remained at the entrance to his apartment, in order to stand behind Jim and observe the work he had done on his PADD. After only a second, Jim held the PADD up to give Spock better access, while Scott’s head rose slowly from the cradle of his palms.

‘Hang on,’ Scott said. Spock was busy consulting Jim’s PADD and could not comply. ‘Hang, hang on for just a— Give me something to write on, so help me, or I’ll have t’use the desk t’work this out.’
Jim offered Scott another PADD with a stylus, with which he began writing excitedly.

Spock had already come to his initial conclusion, having familiarized himself with Jim’s work. ‘It is a viable theory,’ he said.

Jim’s eyes were on him despite the excitement from Scott’s corner of the room. ‘Yeah?’ he asked. ‘You think so?’

‘It answers the inconsistencies of the original equation by changing the variable,’ Spock replied.

Jim rubbed the back of his neck, where the skin was flushed. Whether it was flushed because he had rubbed it, or he had rubbed it because of the sudden flush, Spock could not know. ‘Cool,’ he said.

‘Cool.’ Scott was fervently focused on his writing, but this did not prevent him from offering commentary. ‘Cool, he says. Cool! You’re only talking about my life’s work, laddie. Or rather, I should say, my life’s never–could-get-the-bloody-thing t’work. Where were you when I got the idea into my head to test the theory on an admiral’s beagle, of all things? Could’ve saved me a mess o’trouble.’

‘It was just an idea,’ Jim said. He kept his eyes averted, rubbing the same pink spot on his neck. ‘I only got it after staring at the basics of that equation of yours for hours, anyway. It’s not like I could’ve come up with the thing on my own.’

‘Shh,’ Scott said, holding up a finger. Although he had been the one to encourage the conversation, he saw no contradiction in being the one to halt that same conversation when it suited him. ‘I haven’t come up with anythin’ yet, have I? Just—you just give me a tick, and we’ll see what we’ve got t’work with here.’

‘You sure about that?’ Jim asked. ‘Because you seemed pretty excited.’

‘Ah, ah, ah,’ Scott said. ‘Not another word. Not until I’m finished.’

Jim raised both eyebrows, turning his gaze to Spock as if to silently ask his opinion on the exchange. As silence had been requested, Spock did not verbalize clarification of Scott’s erratic behavior.

In his time on the Enterprise, Spock had observed the engineers to be, as a group, the most superstitious of the separate departments. It was not something Spock would have noticed on his own, but Doctor Chapel had remarked several times on the paper she desired to write regarding the different alignments of individuals aboard the ship and their disparate behavioral proclivities. Since she had drawn Spock’s attention to the phenomenon, its appearance was more easily detected.

In the absence of sound, Jim took it upon himself to relocate, standing to examine his PADD over Spock’s shoulder. He leaned close, interest that must have been feigned—for he had already presented his completed hypothesis. His breath was warm against the helix and scapha of Spock’s ear.

‘So,’ he said, quietly enough that he would not disrupt Scott, ‘does this count as a breakthrough or not?’

Spock contemplated the virtues of a reply against the potential retribution from the huddled outline of Scott, still hard at work on his borrowed PADD. He turned his head toward Jim and lowered his voice in order to keep the conversation as unobtrusive as possible.

‘I believe you may have given Montgomery Scott the necessary “push”, as it were, to complete his
‘Yeah.’ Jim’s voice was pitched equally low. He rested his hand against Spock’s shoulder, removing
the touch before it could begin to bear his weight. ‘Don’t think I’m ever gonna get sick of hearing
you say that.’

Spock had only said it once. If Jim believed that Spock would willingly repeat the same statement
gratuitously, then he would only be disappointed by his implausible expectations.

‘When was the aforementioned “a lot of time” in which you previously considered this insight?’
Spock asked instead.

‘Doesn’t really matter, does it?’ Jim said.

Technically, it did not; Spock could not argue with Jim’s results, and therefore could not argue with
him to reveal his methods. However, that Jim continued to avoid specification and remained
committed to purposeful vagaries was evidence enough that the period in question referred to one
spent on Tarsus IV.

Jim had been, by his reluctant account, on his own for a significant portion of the ordeal. Though he
had foraged for supplies in order to provide for and protect his peers, he had done so alone, believing
himself to be the only child old enough and mature enough to face the dangers of the task. It was not
ridiculous to surmise that, without distractions, Jim had instead chosen to distract himself from the
weight of his emotions by committing his attentions to other thoughts. With a mind as active as his, it
was no surprise that he had applied himself to topics of real merit rather than allowing his idle
imagination to run free.

‘Hey,’ Jim said.

Spock had been silent not for an uncommonly long time; by his count, it had only been two minutes
and forty-six seconds, and was in keeping with Scott’s request for silent conditions. However, it had
been long enough since Jim had last spoken for him to become impatient—or perhaps concerned that
Spock had gleaned the true reason for Jim’s reticence.

‘Science made sense, okay?’ Jim added, rubbing the back his neck even more intensely. He was
certain to inflict damage upon the outermost dermal layer if he continued to cause it such
concentrated friction. ‘There were some books back in the library after— after everything quieted
down. I put ’em all back when I was done with ’em. Guess I really am a nerd.’

‘I had not suggested that you were a “nerd”,’ Spock said.

‘I know. I wasn’t talking about something you said. It was something somebody else called me one
time.’

‘Jim.’ Spock touched Jim’s forearm, briefly enough that the contact would not set a precedent or
imply Spock’s comfort with physical interaction, in order to still Jim’s hand. ‘You have irritated the
epidermis on the back of your neck.’

‘Oh,’ Jim said. He dropped his hand, flexing his fingers before curling them tightly into his palm.

‘Mutter mutter, mutter mutter,’ Scott snapped. ‘And hiss hiss and whisper whisper—the two of you
are about as good at following directions as th’damn beagle was. That’s right. Now I remember why
I beamed the little bugger off into th’wild, black-and-blue yonder. Thought I’d be teachin’ him a
lesson. Keep barking at a genius while he’s hard at work, and see for yourself the brilliant strides
he’s making. I said I needed complete silence to—yes. Oho, yes. That’s it, isn’t it?’ For the first time
since he had arrived, Scott paused for a long, reverent moment between sentences. He brought his borrowed PADD up to his face so that it was illuminated sharply by the glow, and his eyes widened. ‘What a beauty you are. Why, ye’re so bonny I could kiss you.’

‘That will not be necessary or encouraged,’ Spock began.

Yet Scott was true to his word. He pressed his lips to the screen with a wet, smacking sound, the sight of which inspired Jim to laugh. As Scott’s antics had mitigated some of Jim’s tension, Spock supposed that it could be allowed in this specific circumstance—as long as it was made explicit it would not be tolerated in any other.

‘Have you concluded your business with my equipment?’ Spock asked.

‘I was thinkin’ about slipping her a bit o’ tongue, now that you mention it,’ Scott replied. ‘When something this special comes along, you treat it right or you’re a fool.’

‘It is foolish to ascribe personality traits to an inanimate object,’ Spock said.

Scott shifted his focus to Jim. ‘Not th’celebrating type, is he, our Mr. Spock?’

‘He doesn’t like popcorn, either,’ Jim said.

‘No.’ Montgomery Scott clasped the front of his coat with one hand. ‘Ah, but speaking of which—might I be allowed to partake of the refreshments, as I happen to be an esteemed guest and brilliant pioneer in the field of warp sciences?’

‘Go ahead,’ Jim said.

‘Right you are, then. Ye’re not all bad, though your choice of company does leave somethin’ t’be desired.’ Scott lifted the popcorn bowl in the crook of one arm, tucking the PADD under the other. ‘I’ll eat while I’m walking.’

‘Where is it that you are intending to go?’ Spock asked.

‘Why, to my lab, o’course! T’get tha’ beagle back safe and sound and hand him over to Admiral Archer so I’m not sent off with my tail between my legs!’

‘You were correct in your initial assessment of Montgomery Scott,’ Spock told Jim.

‘I’m not gonna let you forget you said that,’ Jim replied. ‘Come on, Spock. We’ve gotta follow him. It’s not like we can let him be the only one to take care of the admiral’s beagle, can we?’

It was, all told, a wise statement.

*
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Technically, they’ve been sharing heat for years.

Chapter Notes

I SCREWED UP THE ORDER OF THESE SOMETHING TERRIBLE GOD I AM AN IDIOT this chapter should be read before the chapter 16. Actually posted previously. Oh God.

Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.32.

Mother, I am writing to you now rather than recording a video for practical reasons. Were I to record an audio transmission in which I spoke loudly and clearly enough for my words to be understood, I would wake an individual whose rest is vital to the improvement of his health. I intend to resume communications as normal after this singular aberrance, since these circumstances are unlikely to repeat themselves.

Before I commence scientific study of the phenomenon of dreaming, specifically as experienced by humans, I considered it prudent to consult with a human of my acquaintance to assess their experiences of the same. Mother, have you experienced a ‘nightmare’, recurring or otherwise?

It is possible that I have, in the past—and therefore before such a time as I was in control of my emotions—felt the effects of that state, to which humans are particularly susceptible. Though Vulcan memory is, as you are aware, without defect, I would not be able to classify the incongruent elements of those nightmares; my position as half-human, half-Vulcan would render my examples anomalous, unsuitable for the case study I intend to undertake.

Though the subject does not fall within my fields of expertise, I nevertheless am aware that the nervous system of the human body, while at rest, provides the assortment of images ‘seen’ by the dreamer. Meaning beyond the troubles of the subconscious cannot exist within the human mind. Nevertheless, like the common cold, the nightmare is a disease for which there has been no definitive cure.

Also, there is only a 10% chance of rainfall tomorrow—unusual enough that it seemed worthy of mention.

* 

‘They’re not that bad,’ Jim said through the steam of his hot chocolate, rising from the plastic lid covering his paper cup and its protective corrugated sleeve. ‘They’re just, whatever—bad dreams. Can we talk about something, anything, else for a change?’

Though Jim had grown in size and in experience over the course of three years attending Starfleet
Academy, he had not been weaned from his stubborn bouts of pride. These persisted despite the high level of education he had received; there was also a damp stretch of foam spread across his upper lip, left there after the first sip of his drink, which he sought to remedy far more quickly than he confronted his deeper flaws.

‘Very well,’ Spock said. ‘Would you prefer a general topic of conversation, or one of more serious, scientific distinction?’

‘If the first option is you going on about the weather again, then I’m gonna have to go with door number two,’ Jim replied.

After clarification of what door number two was in reference to—they were outside, with no doorways in sight—Spock honored Jim’s request. Without naming any names, he recounted the quandary in which Admiral Archer found himself when, due to the experiments of one of Starfleet’s brightest young engineers, his pet beagle had been lost between beam sites.

‘It’s gotta be Admiral Archer’s dog, right?’ Jim asked when Spock had concluded his recitation of the facts.

‘I can neither confirm nor deny your suspicions. The matter is a sensitive one.’

‘Yeah, it’s definitely Admiral Archer. He gave us a guest lecture once and the dog was up there on the podium with him, drinking from his glass of water. The best part was when the admiral drank out of it right after the dog was finished licking it all over. Could’ve heard a pin drop.’ Jim’s nose was still pink and irritated, but now that Spock had personally ensured his rest was sufficient for three nights in a row, his health had clearly improved. The topic was one that interested him, which caused his complexion to flush, though he had chosen to focus on an unexpected element. ‘Man, the admiral must be pissed.’

‘That is one way to put it,’ Spock said. ‘However, I had thought that your curiosity would be expressed toward the scientific principles of the case, rather than its extraneous factors.’

‘Right. Right, yeah, it is. My curiosity’s definitely, uh, piqued,’ Jim replied. ‘I mean, it’s not every day somebody beams a dog into disappearing. You think the dog’s okay? I mean, confused, probably, but that’s gotta be rough—wherever he is, he’s alone and wondering where his friend Archer is.’

‘The scientific principles,’ Spock reminded him.

‘Well, what’ve you got figured out so far?’ Jim asked.

It was a Saturday, which meant there were no classes to attend, only optional lectures in the evening—at which Spock would be present. This meant that there was ample opportunity to present the equations to Jim in a private study room in the main research library, while the hot chocolate in Jim’s cup steadily dropped in temperature.

It was without consideration for the changes in temperature that he took his next sip from the cup in front of him. The expression on his face, Spock understood, would have been comical to anyone with an appreciation for comedy. He flinched, wrinkling his nose and mouth as if he had ingested something inedible.

‘Cocoa skin,’ he said by way of explanation. ‘You know when your hot drinks get that, like, membrane on them if you leave them for too long?’

‘I do not,’ Spock said.
‘Oh,’ Jim said. ‘Well—it’s mostly a milk-based thing. Probably doesn’t happen to Vulcan drinks. But it’s pretty disgusting. Does that mean you’ve never had hot chocolate?’

‘It does,’ Spock confirmed.

‘You should definitely try it.’

‘So I, too, can experience how disgusting it is?’

‘I said pretty disgusting.’ Jim scratched his cheek, looking Spock up and down. There was color in his cheeks reminiscent of the night he had suffered the highest elevation of his latest fever. ‘Plus, you probably wouldn’t leave it long enough to get one, anyway. And you wouldn’t drink it too quick and burn your tongue. You’re basically perfect.’

‘The consumption of beverages seems an imprecise indicator of perfection,’ Spock said. He did not disagree beyond that, but only because Jim had not said anything worth cross-examining. It was correct that Spock drank his beverages in a timely fashion, before they had cooled, but after they had reached inoffensive temperatures.

Jim drummed his fingers on either side of the cup he was holding, examining its chilled and now undesirable contents. This indicated he would continue to discuss the properties of the beverage when next he spoke.

He did not.

‘Okay, so I understand the principles behind the transwarp equation, but are we seriously talking about that and not the fact that there’s a lonely old beagle out there? I mean—it must’ve beamed in somewhere, right? It’s not just—out there. In the galaxy.’

‘Your persistent concern for an animal you have never met is perplexing,’ Spock admitted.

‘Not a dog person, huh?’ Jim took another sip from his cup, leaving a smear of hot chocolate against his upper lip. As the drink was no longer hot, Spock reflected that perhaps the correct moniker was simply chocolate, though to distinguish it from the hardened version of the same, liquid chocolate may have been preferable. ‘That a personal choice or a Vulcan thing?’

‘The beagle, among other species of canines, is not native to Vulcan,’ Spock said. ‘Therefore I cannot have formed the same attachment to them at an early age as a human might.’

‘Come on,’ Jim said. ‘You guys don’t have pets growing up?’

‘That is not what I said,’ Spock replied.

Jim squinted thoughtfully. ‘Birds, maybe? Or—wait, okay, I’ve got it. Lizards. You had lizards.’

‘On Vulcan, the le-mata is the closest parallel to the Terran classifications of reptiles. They are larger than an average Vulcan male of twenty to twenty-five years, and they are carnivorous. Though it is possible to avoid their interest at noon, when they sun themselves on the rocks, they are natural hunters, and any living organism smaller than they are they consider their prey.’

‘Yikes,’ Jim said. ‘You guys don’t train ‘em to meditate with you or anything like that, do you?’

‘The predominant Vulcan childhood pet is one that serves as a guardian,’ Spock replied. ‘They are the sehlat, a species that once could speak with their companions, though that ability is no longer extant.’ Spock opened an encyclopedic entry on the sehlat of Vulcan to illustrate, turning his PADD
to face Jim. Jim leaned forward over the table, resting his chin atop the plastic cover on his no-
longer-hot chocolate. ‘They are loyal and intelligent creatures, though at times they are brave beyond
their capabilities.’

‘It’s kinda cute, I guess,’ Jim said. ‘If you ignore the fangs.’

‘They are the enemy of the le-matya. The fangs are employed only when they have sensed hostility.’

‘They’re still huge,’ Jim said. ‘And sharp. Wait, is that one drooling?’

‘Their salivary glands become over-active with advanced age.’

‘I take it back. They’re cute. They look like grizzly bears, but I bet they like being scratched under
the chin.’

‘Perhaps,’ Spock said. ‘However, the missing animal in question is not a sehlat.’

‘It’d be pretty hard to lose a sehlat,’ Jim agreed. ‘What did you call yours?’

‘He was known as I-Chaya,’ Spock said. ‘He was old and stubborn. Though he was wise, he was
also foolish.’

Jim mouthed the unfamiliar name, at last realizing that there was liquid chocolate drying on his lip
and scrubbing it off hurriedly with the back of his hand. ‘Somehow I can’t picture you playing fetch
with the old boy.’

‘Fetch,’ Spock repeated.

‘Never mind,’ Jim said. ‘It’s a human thing.’ He paused; a minute and twenty-seven seconds passed
before Spock considered that he may have been waiting for Spock to contribute to, or in other words
drive, the direction of their conversation. Before Spock could act on that new understanding, Jim
rubbed his now clean mouth with his knuckles. ‘I always wanted a dog. Never had one, until… You
know what? It’s not that interesting.’

‘Shall we return to a more productive avenue of discourse?’ Spock suggested.

‘The admiral’s beagle. Yeah. Let’s save that little guy,’ Jim said.

He was quick to grasp and retain the principles of the transwarp equation, proposed in its initial,
rudimentary stages by Montgomery Scott—one of the engineers who had served under Captain Pike
during the Enterprise’s maiden voyage. Spock had exchanged words on occasion with the man, and
Jim recognized the photograph he had on file, though he had not recognized the name.

‘I remember him,’ Jim said, taking another gulp of his drink. To do so, he had to tip his head back,
sucking the contents of the cup dry despite his expressed displeasure over their current state. ‘He told
me he’d beam me back to the mess hall if I didn’t stop poking around in engineering. Guess I’m
lucky he didn’t make good on that threat—even though I could be hanging out with Admiral Archer’s
beagle right now, if he had.’

‘His threats should have been reported,’ Spock replied.

Jim grinned, mouth around the rim of his empty cup. ‘I’m pretty sure he was exaggerating, Spock.’

‘Nevertheless, he was in a position of authority over you, as both a minor and a civilian aboard a
Federation vessel. Any threat, no matter how insincere, is a breach of protocol and a violation of a
Starfleet officer’s directives. Similarly, it is cause for concern that multiple individuals, one of whom was a ship’s doctor, made threats toward your person.’

‘Even if they had been serious, I could’ve handled it,’ Jim said. ‘But, hey—it’s nice to know you care.’

‘As first officer, it was my duty to “care” about any breach of protocol,’ Spock replied.

Jim’s lips curved downward and he huffed hollowly into the paper cup. ‘Transwarp equation,’ he mumbled.

An hour and thirteen minutes later, Jim flopped forward onto the table and groaned.

‘Are you unwell?’ Spock asked. ‘Have you suffered from a relapse of your symptoms?’

‘It’s not that,’ Jim said. ‘I just get this feeling like we’re gonna have to talk to Montgomery Scott if we wanna figure this out. Put our heads together.’

‘And you are concerned about meeting him again, given the menace he posed the last time you were in contact.’

‘Mostly I’m concerned about spending a lot of time with a guy smart enough to come up with an equation like this in the first place.’ Jim waved the PADD with the exact specifications in one hand as he rose. ‘I’m pretty sure he’s not gonna give us a chance to think, much less talk.’

Spock reflected on the likelihood of this possibility, given Montgomery Scott’s fondness for the sound of his own voice and his proclivity for long-winded treatises on topics such as his work and his favored class of starship. To date, the Enterprise had by far proven itself his preferred model. Captain Pike had remarked on more than one occasion that he believed Scott to have proprietary designs on the ship. He would not allow lesser engineers to perform even routine maintenance upon the Enterprise while ‘she’ had been entrusted to the care of the crew.

Now that they were no longer aboard, Spock could only speculate as to how the Enterprise’s upkeep was handled. Though he could not be certain, it seemed a probable conclusion that Scott would have found some way to involve himself, although this veered closer to speculation than Spock generally allowed.

‘The difficulties you present are not insurmountable,’ Spock said.

Jim smiled, though he looked away shortly after, as if he did not trust the expression to hold up under scrutiny. ‘That’s just because you don’t like to talk.’

‘A Vulcan conserves his words more shrewdly than the average human,’ Spock agreed. ‘Perhaps that is the reason for your misapprehension.’

‘Right. You don’t like to talk,’ Jim repeated. ‘No—I think I’m good. No misapprehensions here.’

The distinction was slight enough that Spock was not obligated to correct him. To further entertain the debate would be engaging in what Chapel referred to as ‘splitting hairs’, an activity that was widely regarded as a waste of time and effort to garner meager results.

Jim gathered his study materials to place them in his bag. This time, he did not attempt to commandeer Spock’s PADD, as he already possessed one of his own.

‘We should start tonight,’ Jim suggested, handing Spock’s PADD with the calculations back across
the table. ‘Look for Monty, see if we can keep him from getting bumped down to ensign or something. The transwarp equation’s a good one, even if he should’ve tried beaming a banana or a hat first.’

‘It is likely that any disciplinary measures have already been taken,’ Spock informed him.

‘Anyone ever tell you you’re no fun, Spock?’

‘Yes,’ Spock replied. ‘In addition, there is an evening lecture by a visiting botanist regarding the growth of viable crops in atmospheres that would otherwise be inhospitable. I had planned to attend.’

Jim bit his lip, then allowed it to slip free from between his teeth.

‘Sounds like you’re kinda proving my point for me there, Spock.’

‘Given that the subject matter will largely concern the organic field, it is unlikely that Montgomery Scott will be present,’ Spock added. ‘You may consider that a possible location eliminated, should you wish to begin the search.’

‘Should I wish to—’ Jim began. He shook his head. ‘On my own, you mean.’

‘I will be attending the evening lecture,’ Spock reminded him.

‘Viable crops and inhospitable atmospheres, huh?’ Jim’s pause may have held deeper meaning, but Spock did not pry. ‘Actually, I heard about that one. Got some group-wide mailing about it a while back. I was thinking of going, too.’

‘Then consultation with Montgomery Scott may be delayed, regardless of your personal feelings concerning the whereabouts of the lost canine,’ Spock said.

‘Cool,’ Jim replied. His expression had solidified; it was no longer uncertain of itself, but had also lost its momentary, if inexplicable, vulnerability. ‘It starts at nine, right? I’ll pick you up at eight-thirty.’ Spock’s silence caused him to revise. ‘Eight?’ Jim asked. Spock nodded. ‘Eight. Great.’

Jim signaled his farewell by forming the shape of a phaser with his fingers, pursing his lips to indicate the sound it would have made were it a real weapon being fired. Spock remained at the table for seventeen minutes longer, during which time he answered queries from Professor Puri’s students who had concerns about their first project of the semester, and acknowledged Jim’s multiple communications in regards to their later plans.

2000 sharp don’t forget

at your place. 2000. i won’t forget either

this is me not forgetting

quit studying go home and get ready spock i know you’re still in the library

Other messages followed that were equally repetitive; Spock sent one in response to the second to confirm his availability, then muted their conversation in order to finish his work without suffering further delays.

He was in position at the appointed time and place when Jim knocked on the door, only to escort Spock back to the campus from which had walked in the first place. Spock informed Jim of the inefficiency of the plan’s specifics, to which Jim replied with a noncommittal, ‘Whatever.’ Then, as
an afterthought, he added, ‘I don’t mind the walk.’

‘Nevertheless, its poor organization is obvious.’

‘You win,’ Jim said, though Spock had not been aware of any competition.

They arrived at the visiting lecture hall to discover they were only two of six intrepid, interested parties to attend earlier than the lecture’s scheduled starting time. Jim took a seat in the second row, one that was not reserved for older professors and high-ranking officers, and Spock occupied the seat to his left. Spock did not see that there was reason to engage in discussion before the lecture commenced. With only five minutes before twenty-one-hundred, the majority of the audience began to arrive, and the lecture itself began seven minutes late, due to unforeseen technical difficulties—solved at last by the student assistant managing the equipment, Hikaru Sulu, whom Spock had encountered at other campus-wide botany lectures.

The lights dimmed. Jim rubbed his palms against his thighs and leaned forward. The first of the slides appeared on the projection screen, and Spock recognized it before it was introduced. He had been the first to observe and identify the fungus from Tarsus IV under the microscopic and he had not forgotten its composition since. This was irrefutably that first sample.

‘There are numerous challenges presented to colonists throughout Federation-approved space,’ the lecturer began.

Jim rolled one hand into a fist on his lap. Spock watched his knuckles whiten as the slides passed, paying attention equally to Jim’s reactions and the projections.

Tarsus IV was only mentioned by name in brief, as one example of an inhospitable environment that would have benefited from the advancements in biological engineering and crop sustainability, now in the final stages of development. ‘It is the conclusion of this research that future colonies will never face a scenario in which their crops have been destroyed,’ the lecturer concluded. He opened the floor to questions.

Jim’s hands remained where they were. Spock could feel the tension in his body like an assault, though they were not touching, and Jim’s stillness should have otherwise been unobtrusive.

It was unfortunate, but Spock had not given the lecture’s information his full attention, due to the distraction Jim had caused.

No; that was not all that was unfortunate. Though the advancements made in biological engineering were positive and the knowledge that the events on Tarsus IV would never be repeated should not have disturbed Jim, Spock presumed that it was the reminder of those events that unsettled him.

Had Spock known in advance that the colony of Tarsus IV would be referenced in the lecture, he would have informed Jim of the fact and allowed him to decide whether or not he still wished to attend. It was, after all, what Chapel would have suggested. But Spock had not known of the lecture’s reference in advance; he could not have known.

Mildly enthusiastic applause followed the lecturer’s departure from the stage.

‘I’m gonna get some fresh air,’ Jim said.

Spock followed him outside, where it was cool and dark, and it had begun to rain. Jim, who regularly thought of the possibility, had not brought an umbrella. He stood under the rainfall, but when Spock moved to join him, Jim angled them both under the nearest awning, where the cement below was still dry.
‘I’m fine,’ Jim said. ‘Good lecture. Good stuff.’

‘Your present demeanor does not suggest—’

‘I’m good,’ Jim said, taking a deep breath of the humid air.

‘Had I known that the lecture would contain references to the incident at Tarsus IV,’ Spock began again.

‘It’s all right,’ Jim interrupted him, also again. ‘Or—I’m all right. Whichever one of those will convince you.’

‘Only the truth would convince me,’ Spock said.

It was not up to him to judge Jim’s situation, but while it was evident that he was holding something back, Spock could not discern the reason for Jim’s reluctance. Spock had been present for the aftermath of the Tarsus IV massacre and fire. It was not an unknown element from Jim’s past that he would have felt obliged to conceal from Spock.

Jim tugged at the collar of his jacket, crossing his arms over his chest. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, an exertion that had drawn mottled color to his cheeks. The rain was coming down more heavily now, falling on the pavement in an uneven patter. Spock had the distinct impression that it was the only thing preventing Jim from darting out across campus. If he had brought an umbrella, their conversation might have come to an early end.

‘I don’t wanna talk about it here,’ Jim said finally. He glanced toward the nearest door, though there was no traffic currently entering or exiting the building. ‘Someone could—I don’t know. I don’t wanna get into it. There’s nothing to get into.’

‘You are concerned about being overheard,’ Spock concluded.

‘I don’t know why you care,’ Jim said. The expostulation seemed to startle him, but he continued. ‘It’s not like I’m your assignment anymore, so you don’t have to—observe me, or whatever. I’m dealing fine on my own. Three years and I’m dealing just fine.’

It was possible that Jim believed his protests to be the truth; however, it was less clear whether or not his insistence was based on actual fact.

Spock, unlike Chapel, was far from an expert in human behavior.

‘You would not have been present at that lecture had it not been at my suggestion,’ Spock said.

Jim laughed, but there was no humor in it. His hands remained tightly clamped around his biceps, as though he had only just now begun to suffer from the cold in the air. Spock had not dressed for a prolonged period of standing outdoors after the sun had already set.

If he had followed his usual schedule, Spock would have proceeded directly to his apartment and retired for the night. But he could not abandon Jim after having inadvertently caused him to recall a traumatic experience in his life.

‘Yeah, some Saturday night, huh?’

‘Is there a connotation as to the specifics of a Saturday evening of which I am unaware?’ Spock asked.
‘Maybe.’ Jim turned his face away from Spock and toward the rain.

‘You did not answer—’

‘You think we should wait for the rain to let up or make a run for it?’ Jim gave his upper arms a final, chafing rub with his palms, then dropped his hands. ‘You’re probably getting cold standing around out here, right?’

‘I had not dressed in accordance with that possibility,’ Spock replied.

Jim reached a hand out from under the awning in order to test the rapidity of the rainfall, withdrawing his arm and shaking the water off the hem of his sleeve when he had finished.

‘Can’t see the sky well enough in a big city like San Francisco,’ he said. ‘If there wasn’t so much extra light, I’d be able to see the cloud cover—figure out how soon the showers’d pass.’

‘A skill you learned—’

‘When I was younger. Yeah.’ Jim faced Spock, fore- and index-fingers on the second button of his collar. ‘You want my jacket?’

‘It is your jacket,’ Spock said.

‘Right—and I’m offering it to you.’

‘That is not necessary,’ Spock said. ‘Besides which, having observed for myself how quickly you are able to “catch” a cold, I would not accept the offer even if it were necessary, as your need for the extra source of warmth outweighs my own.’

‘Some people just say “no thanks”, you know,’ Jim told him.

‘They lack specificity.’

Jim laughed again, this time less hollowly. ‘You got me. It’s true. Still, if we do make a run for it, it’d be better if I took the thing off anyway. Used it as a makeshift umbrella—you know, a tarp. Might even stretch over both our heads.’

‘To run while maintaining the jacket’s suggested position would slow our speed considerably,’ Spock replied. ‘We would in fact experience more time in the rain than if we were simply to maintain a rapid pace of travel.’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘You did not answer one of mine.’ Spock paused. ‘To which question are you referring?’

‘If we should stay or if we should go,’ Jim said. ‘If we’re gonna stay, you could get over here, share some body heat.’

‘Vulcans do not appreciate close physical proximity with other individuals.’ Spock measured the impact the damp, chill air would have on him versus the discomfort of the suggested solution to find that both were equally balanced in terms of their positives and negatives. ‘Do you require additional body heat?’

‘Like you said.’ Jim dragged his heel in a truncated arc across the pavement. ‘I catch cold easily. Not that I mind—I’m used to it. Do whatever, Spock. Wouldn’t want you to do something you don’t appreciate.’
‘Having weighed the options, it is clear that the logical choice of action is to do as you have suggested,’ Spock said.

He took a step closer to Jim; for a moment, it appeared as though Jim was about to step away, his shoulders and hands tensing. The latter did not ball into fists, though the former remained tense as Spock put his right arm around them. After another long and unpredictable thirteen seconds, Jim slid his left arm into a careful loop around Spock’s waist. He did not fidget shiftlessly where he stood; instead, he maintained a complete stillness that would have served him well if he had ever taken Spock’s advice about meditation.

Twenty-seven more seconds passed, during which time Spock was aware of the rhythm of Jim’s breath—as well as the moments when it skipped out of rhythm—and his own breathing patterns sought to even them out by matching them.

‘I can feel your heartbeat,’ Jim said.

‘That is not unlikely. The Vulcan heart is located in the same area as the human liver,’ Spock replied.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said. ‘I know. I got some anatomical references from Bones.’

‘Has your temperature returned to a more agreeable one?’

‘Yeah,’ Jim repeated.

He swallowed thickly. His fingers braced themselves, then curved stiffly over Spock’s side, his palm forming an arch against the heartbeat he had mentioned.

‘Jim,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah?’

‘The rate of rainfall has slowed by approximately thirty-six percent,’ Spock said. ‘I say approximately because I do not have with me the tools to corroborate my estimate. As you have expressed discomfort regarding the temperature, this may well be the best opportunity for undertaking a return to your dormitory.’

‘Oh.’ Jim cleared his throat, one of the potential signs of a relapse of the common cold due to improper care. Spock was assured that his proposal had not been offered too soon. ‘Sure, that sounds good. Guess I’m not keeping you warm enough out here, huh?’

‘That is incorrect. Your close proximity has raised my internal temperature significantly.’

For reasons that Spock could not fathom, this above all caused Jim to smile honestly, without the brittleness that betrayed he had forced the expression to his mouth, if not his eyes.

‘Let’s do this thing, then,’ he said, putting his head down and bolting forward in a single burst of speed. His legs were shorter than Spock’s, but he more than managed to keep up.

*
Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.43.

It did not rain for two consecutive days. This occurrence is rare enough that I have chosen to inform you of its passing.

You may tell my father, should it not trouble him to hear it, that I, along with an engineering scientist by the name of Montgomery Scott and a Starfleet cadet in his third year by the name of James Tiberius Kirk, have received a special commendation for the rescue of Admiral Archer’s lost canine, a beagle, resulting in a greater understanding of transwarp technology.

Are you well?

* 

‘So they’re calling him “Beagle Boy”,’ Jim said over lunch in the main academy cafeteria.

Although the matter of the transwarp equation had been solved and Montgomery Scott had gained a place of prominence in Starfleet history for its development, Spock’s afternoons with Jim had not come to their expected end. Rather, with Admiral Pike’s counsel in mind, Spock had taken it upon himself to extend their contact in the interest of keeping ‘an eye on’ Jim.

He did not know what it was he was watching for; thus it was crucial to maintain a general vigilance.

Jim, for his part, did not seem troubled by the continuation of their association. He had not taken it upon himself once to remark on the completion of their work and, in the absence of a clear-cut topic of discussion, he had filled their lunchtime meetings with a variety of diverse themes and subject matter.

This latest point of interest had arrived seemingly as a non sequitur, and Spock paused over his meal while deciding on an appropriate response.

‘Scotty,’ Jim said, after Spock’s silence had crossed from merely contemplative to one that required further illumination. ‘Montgomery Scott. They call him Beagle Boy, because of the—well, you know. I’m just saying, that’s gotta suck, right? You basically change the face of warp technology as we know it and you still end up named after someone’s dog.’

Jim’s lunch—a sandwich item known by the colloquial title of *Sloppy Joe*—exemplified its name by slipping from his hands and onto his plate. He was left holding the two separate sides of a bun, while the loose filling of synthesized meat product spilled out to cover his plate. In all likelihood, Jim would need a fork to continue.

Spock, having taken two at the outset after noting Jim had not taken even one, provided the spare he had not yet utilized.
‘You suggest that it is not the kind of notoriety that Montgomery Scott deserves,’ Spock said.

‘Uh, yeah.’ Jim took the fork with his free hand, setting aside the top half of his bun. With the borrowed utensil, he scraped the contents of the ‘Joe’ toward the bottom half of the bun, creating, in Spock’s opinion, more of a mess than a proper solution. ‘It’s just—weird what you get remembered for, I guess. Right? Like, it could be something totally different from what actually happened, and only the people who were around at the time would know it for sure.’

It seemed to Spock that Jim’s mind was not on the conversation at hand. He proved this by sticking his thumb in meat substitute.

He did not clean himself with his recyclable napkin, instead swiping his finger with his tongue before returning, as dedicated in regards to food as ever, to the halved sandwich. It was, Spock had to admit, more structurally sound now that it had been modified. Less of the ‘sloppy’ filling was lost between the plate and Jim’s mouth.

‘You question the nature of history and the mutability of a perceived truth,’ Spock said.

‘Little complicated for conversation over lunch,’ Jim agreed. ‘I should at least take you to dinner if I want to philosophize, right?’

‘I fail to understand why the hour at which a meal is had should affect the topics addressed.’

‘I mean,’ Jim said, ‘can I take you to dinner sometime?’

‘We have shared meals in the evening together before. If you wish to do so again, we will both have to consult our schedules to find a mutually plausible time.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim said.

He finished his lunch without consulting his schedule; Spock had no reason to think that he did not intend to do so later, when he was not between classes, and it would therefore be more convenient.

Yet Spock received no message from Jim that returned to the subject. They continued to meet regularly, and Spock determined that it was most likely that Jim, due to the demands of his heavy coursework, simply did not have the free time to devote to social engagements. This was understandable. ‘Keeping an eye’ on Jim without disturbing his routine or interrupting his studies was, after all, an ideal arrangement.

Though the nickname ‘Beagle Boy’ was one that Spock heard on occasion in the days approaching Scott’s ceremony of commendation, it did not appear to possess any connotation of malice. Spock corrected those cadets who were spreading misinformation via an emphasis on the least important element of Mr. Scott’s discovery, but it was also true that there was equal interest taken in the discovery itself—as multiple professors and Starfleet officers were already integrating the equation into their lectures and practical examinations.

Spock himself was called upon to explain it to multiple study groups and other teacher’s assistants, given his intimate knowledge of the principles behind the equation as well as the ways in which it had been completed and proven. For this, he was careful to give full credit to Scott’s groundbreaking work without ignoring the assistance provided by James T. Kirk.

‘You don’t have to do that, you know,’ Jim said, four days before the ceremony of commendation.

Spock had not been doing anything, other than attending essay corrections while Jim, sitting on the floor of Spock’s room rather than utilizing a chair, read one of Spock’s recommended books on
Surak’s teachings.

‘You cannot be referencing my duties as a teacher’s assistant; therefore, I must ask, to what are you referring?’ Spock replied.

‘I’m talking about telling everybody about my hand in the transwarp stuff,’ Jim explained, as casually as if he were commenting on a lack of change in the weather. ‘I know I said some things about what history remembers but it wasn’t because I wanted to be Beagle Boy Number Two.’

‘Your contributions to the equation are not negligible,’ Spock reminded him.

‘Thanks,’ Jim said.

His expression was open and unguarded, his eyes watching Spock from over the top of his book. As he valued his privacy, he would not have wanted Spock to study him in such a moment.

Spock had already returned to his work when he sensed that Jim was still looking at him instead of at his reading. This was indicative that there had been a miscommunication.

‘If it displeases you to be mentioned for credit that you factually deserve—’ Spock began.

‘It’s fine,’ Jim said quickly. ‘It’s just—I said thanks. It’s fine.’

He did not address the subject again until three days before the ceremony of commendation.

‘They’re not gonna mention me in the ceremony or anything, are they?’ he asked, having just finished chewing and swallowing a particularly sticky protein bar.

‘They’,’ Spock repeated.

‘Whoever,’ Jim replied.

‘Your question is too vague to warrant an answer.’

Jim groaned, clearly frustrated, though the reason for that frustration was not clear. ‘Fine,’ he said, which Spock had discovered did not have the same meaning as ‘it’s fine’.

‘What is fine?’

‘Everything’s fine.’ Jim raked his hands through his hair without dispelling his agitation. ‘You’re gonna be there, right? At the ceremony?’

‘That is true.’

‘I got my invitation,’ Jim said. ‘Special Guest. I don’t wanna be a special guest.’

‘You are not required to attend,’ Spock replied, ‘though I can think of no logical explanation for why you would not.’

Jim groaned again—and a third time, after Spock inquired as to his digestive state, given the speed with which he had ingested his latest protein bar.

Two days before the ceremony, Jim contradicted everything he had said during their prior meeting by asking Spock to attend the event with him.

‘Do I just wear my cadet reds?’ Jim added, without giving Spock a chance to reply. ‘I’ve never been
to one of these things before, so… Are there gonna be a lot of people?’

‘You have not allowed me an opportunity to respond to your first inquiry,’ Spock said.

‘You don’t have to answer. It’s no big deal.’

‘The progress that will be made based on the transwarp equation is the very definition of a “big deal”.’

‘Right.’ Jim exhaled in a forceful burst. He looked down at his chest, as if examining his jacket.

‘Uniform it is, then.’

‘That would be appropriate,’ Spock agreed.

If Jim had hoped for a more detailed explanation, he should have consulted another source. Spock possessed minimal understanding of human cultural formalities, despite having spent numerous years in their company. However, the commemoration ceremony for the end of the Enterprise’s maiden three-year mission had seen the entire crew present in full Starfleet dress uniforms. In terms of formal attire, this was understood to be the standard.

As members of a recognized organization, it was fitting to wear the insignia of said organization to present a united front.

‘I guess we’re lucky we have a fallback,’ Jim said. ‘It’s been a while since I had to dress myself.’

‘I am no expert on human fashion,’ Spock agreed.

Jim made a sound that distinctly resembled a snort.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ he said quickly. ‘I’m not laughing at you, I just—I wore your clothes, all right? I wouldn’t say anything about your sense of style.’

‘I had not thought to take offense,’ Spock replied.

The statement was true. He saw no reason to assume that Jim’s expulsion had been negative, as he did not possess the necessary level of awareness regarding these subtleties of human expression. What Spock wore had never been a point of pride; neither was it something of which to be ashamed. It served a function: to meet the demands of commonly accepted modesty. No more, no less.

‘Well, that’s good.’ Jim nodded once, then again, more firmly. ‘Wouldn’t want you to.’

‘As I have answered your first question, it seems fitting to move on to the second,’ Spock said.

‘There is no set number of participants and, as I am not in charge of the planning for the ceremony, I have no knowledge of the acceptable capacity for the venue. Therefore, I cannot answer with definitive certainty the total of Starfleet personnel who will be in attendance.’

‘So it could be no one.’ Rather than being disappointed by this conclusion, Jim brightened. ‘It’s not like it’s unveiling a new starship class or something, right? It’s just—just an equation. No one needs to see that.’

Spock could not comprehend Jim’s sudden desire to downplay his contribution to the accomplishment. It ran directly counter to the desire for attention he had displayed on other occasions. Prior to this abnormal behavior, Spock would have characterized him as someone who was most comfortable when being acknowledged for his skills and recognized for his successes. Although he had concealed himself in quarters separate from the rest of the survivors aboard the
Enterprise, he had not shied away from making himself known to her crew.

Jim had regularly displayed confidence uncharacteristic of most young men his age. Spock could not fathom why it had abandoned him.

The inconsistency of personality was a common trait among humans. Though Jim was exceptional in multiple areas, he was no less susceptible to this fact of his birthright.

Spock recognized—but did not encourage—his idiosyncrasies.

They did not meet on the day before the ceremony; Spock had three separate examinations to grade, and Jim was assisting a study group, despite his insistence that he did not require the same periods of study as his fellow students. Instead, Spock received a single, straightforward message from Jim’s account:

pick you up at 1900 sharp

Though Jim had not clarified the date, merely a time, there had been no indication of plans for that evening. Spock inferred correctly that Jim was referring to the following evening, and confirmed with:

Tomorrow. I accept.

On the day of the ceremony, it was not Jim who assailed Spock with insistent and erratic communications, but Scott.

‘It’s just—y’see, Mr. Spock, the thing is, I’ve got this feeling, a tickle in th’back of my throat and a bit o’ arrhythmia in my chest—and I can’t help but think to myself, “Scotty, my lad, ye’d better run now, afore Admiral Archer can exact his revenge.” Oh, sure, I rescued th’pup—eventually—but there’s something unnatural about th’ way the admiral loves that beagle, an’ we all know it—so who’s to say this isn’t all just an elaborate scheme to pay me back for everything, hm? Get old Montgomery Scott up on stage in front of his peers, then, I don’t know, beam me out of my uniform and into my skivvies right then an’ there? Ye didnae see the way the man looked at me when I—Ye’re not even listenin’ to me, are you?’

‘I am capable of focusing on multiple topics at once,’ Spock replied, over the open line he knew now he should not have answered—though at the time of receiving the PADD-to-PADD call, he had erred on the side of caution, putting Scott through on the possibility that something had gone awry and he was in need of Spock’s assistance. ‘If you are suffering from physical ailments, you should have contacted medical personnel. I am a science officer; I cannot act in a health-care capacity.’

‘You’re no good at all when it comes to bedside manner, commander,’ Scott said. ‘Has anyone ever told y’that?’

‘On more than one occasion, I have been informed of this fact.’

‘Well, I know I can rely on young Jim to stand by me in my hour of need, if it comes to that,’ Scott continued. ‘H’e’s a loyal sort, isn’t he? Wouldn’t let a poor man be stripped down to his unmentionables before the whole lot of Starfleet brass without coming to his rescue?’

‘It appears you are hallucinating, Mr. Scott,’ Spock said.

‘Good day, Commander,’ Scott replied, and severed their connection.

He left no fewer than five messages for Spock from eleven-hundred to sixteen-hundred. Spock
would have to inform his superiors of the man’s unpredictable behavior; he may have been a brilliant engineer, but he was in need of a counselor.

Spock at last intercepted the sixth call, at which point he suggested that if he was as wary of the event as he seemed, then Scott should attend the event with a companion, or companions, of his choosing.

‘Well now, Mr. Spock, that’s th’ first milk of human kindness you’ve ever shown,’ Scott said. ‘I’ll be over in a dash. Present a united front—aye, that’s the ticket. You’re a valued asset to Starfleet and the Federation, and t’show up by your side—well. They’d not risk it. Aye, there’s a good man.’

Spock was left to review his statement, only to conclude that he had not at any juncture suggested what Scott had inferred.

Scott arrived at eighteen-hundred-forty-five. Spock was already dressed in his formal grays and had no further preparations before he was ready to depart; therefore, Scott was not technically interrupting him.

‘Ah,’ Scott said, bending over Spock’s computer without asking permission. ‘Returning to th’ scene of the crime, as it were. Where th’last dash of magic happened. Where it all came together. Where—’

‘Mr. Scott,’ Spock replied.

‘Right. You’re right, o’course. Don’t let them smell fear; it’d be like blood in the water. All this over a bloody beagle. Well—aren’t you going to offer me some refreshments, Commander?’

Scott was drinking a glass of water, with an expression of pained acceptance, when Jim rang the intercom below. ‘Ye called in the reinforcements too, did you? We’ll be like th’ three musketeers, us,’ Scott said.

They would not, Spock thought.

The elevator door opened forty-nine seconds later and Jim stepped into the apartment, mouth already open, as if to speak. His hair was combed in a different direction and the collar of his cadet reds was, for the first time, buttoned to the top. He was on the verge of greeting Spock when he stopped, catching sight of Scott over Spock’s shoulder.

‘Oh,’ Jim said. ‘Scotty.’

‘Listen to the lad—“Oh, Scotty,” he says—like he won’t be going down in the history books because of me.’ Scott snorted. ‘Don’t sound too excited to see me, James Tiberius Kirk.’

‘I’m…’ Jim trailed off, missing an opportunity to reply with the standard repartee of prompt and cutting humor, though he had demonstrated a talent for in earlier conversations. ‘Just thought you’d be there already, sizing up your throne.’

‘They’re not gonna have a throne.’ Scott took a long gulp of his water. Judging by the way he swallowed afterward, it had not remedied the dryness in his throat. ‘They wouldnae do that, would they, Commander? It could be a trap.’

‘Montgomery Scott is experiencing second thoughts about the ceremony,’ Spock informed Jim.

‘Sure.’ Jim wiped his hands on his thighs, standing in the entranceway as if transfixed. ‘Explains why he stopped here first, doesn’t it? It’s what I’d do. What I did do, technically.’
‘Only hanging around here—it’s like being around a computer,’ Scott said. He was watching Spock with an expression that could only be classified as wistful. ‘A particularly unfriendly one, at that. No worries or insecurities or vengeful admirals with a penchant for pooches—just good sense and maybe the whir of a cooling fan or two. D’you think you could hum for me, Commander Spock?’

‘Jesus,’ Jim muttered. ‘This is the guy we’re putting in the history books.’

‘That could just as easily apply to you, boyo,’ Scott replied, gesticulating with his borrowed glass and splashing some of its contents onto the desktop.

The likelihood of Jim being included in ‘the history books’ was far from a resolved matter. In Spock’s opinion, it was more likely that Scott would receive all the credit for creating the equation, and Jim’s help would be attributed orally, if at all. It was not that the contribution had been minor—but rather that’s Scott’s accomplishments were more quantifiable than the informal help Jim had offered. As such, they former was more easily recorded for posterity.

Perhaps Jim had come to the same realization himself, and this was the reason for the complex, ambivalent expression on his face. Any excitement he had tentatively conveyed had been replaced by a tight wariness—although perhaps this discomfort might just as easily have been accredited to the severity of his appearance.

Spock reflected that he had never seen Jim put any amount of thought into his appearance. His attention to the same now could have been a private indication of his feelings on being honored in a ceremony, however minor a part he had to play.

It would certainly have explained the excessive concern he had displayed in the days prior to the event.

‘If we do not leave now,’ Spock said, ‘we are unlikely to arrive on time.’

The looks from both Scott and Jim that followed this pronouncement suggested that they had been aware of the hour—and that they were not certain, as Spock was, that it would be unfavorable to be delayed.

‘Can’t we make a sort of, I don’t know, fashionably late entrance?’ Scott asked. ‘How about we get so fashionable that we don’t show up at all?’

‘You know, it could work,’ Jim said. He did not meet Spock’s eyes or even look in Spock’s direction at all, focusing either on Mr. Scott or on the closed door that led to Spock’s bedroom. In contrast, Spock had observed the changes in Jim’s appearance meticulously—so that he would be able to cite specific examples when he expressed a positive reaction later, thereby reinforcing the appropriate behavior. ‘We could have a celebration of our own somewhere else. Something private. That’d be way better.’

‘Aye, and somewhere Admiral Archer isn’t waiting for me wi’ that beagle of his,’ Scott added.

‘Wouldn’t know how to act at a fancy ceremony, anyway,’ Jim agreed, tugging at the hem of his jacket.

‘I cannot influence your decisions,’ Spock said. ‘However, as I responded that I would attend, I will not fail to be present; neither will I fail to appear at the appointed hour.’

If Jim and Scott had truly intended to go elsewhere that evening, Spock would never know. That they did not shirk their obligations was all that mattered, and despite the latter’s attempts at postponement, they did not arrive so late as to cause any concern among their senior officers. When
they were ushered to their seats—three of them set beside a fourth in which Admiral Archer was already presiding, on a raised dais atop the stage—the audience applauded politely.

Jim’s hands remained clasped tightly in his lap for the duration of the ceremony, which was concluded by Scott’s long and incoherent address.

‘Made that one up off th’cuff,’ he whispered to Spock as he retook his seat. ‘Completely extemporaneous. I improvised.’

‘Given the nature of the speech’s content, I had suspected as much,’ Spock replied.

Yet it was not Scott’s nervousness—expressed in grand strokes and sudden twitches, a constant twisting over his shoulder to be certain Admiral Archer was not approaching—that concerned Spock during the reception following the ceremony. Rather, it was Jim’s nervousness, which was hardly expressed at all, which garnered Spock’s attention.

Jim did not twitch and he did not twist, but something had muted the personality Spock had come to know and recognize. Over the course of the evening, a quiet fell over Jim that caused him not to enter a conversation intelligently, but to retreat from it. There were occasions when Spock lost sight of Jim completely, only to discover he had withdrawn to a corner of the room to observe it alone rather than to participate, tucked into the shadows with refreshments held in both hands. He had not, however, lowered his guard for long enough to eat.

‘There are senior officers here who would not be displeased to make your acquaintance,’ Spock informed him, drawing even with him between a wall and a marble column. ‘They may provide you with the benefit of interesting conversation.’

‘Huh?’ Jim shifted closer to Spock’s side, then pulled away, two actions that did not make sense when juxtaposed immediately with one another. ‘It’s okay, Spock. Wouldn’t know what to say to them.’

‘You are also capable of providing interesting conversation,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah, I know.’ Jim nearly dropped a fried item skewered on a pointed stick but managed to maintain possession of it through a complicated act of balancing. ‘It’s Scotty’s big night, anyway. Not mine.’

‘What is the source of your reluctance to interact with those who would offer challenging and stimulating dialogue?’ Spock asked.

Jim fixed Spock with a look of betrayal, though Spock could not fathom the motivation for its appearance. Just as quickly as it had appeared, it faded, leaving no trace of itself behind. ‘Why don’t you go ahead? I didn’t think you were the meet and greet type, but I guess I was wrong.’

‘There is no reason for me to incur offense when it is easily avoidable,’ Spock said. ‘While a Vulcan would not exchange idle pleasantries with his peers, an officer of Starfleet would—and should—if only to a point.’

The truth of the matter was that Spock preferred these events to those that were purely social, as they afforded him the opportunity to speak to fellow scientists regarding specific advancements in their shared fields. At other gatherings, little dialogue was required; though Spock recognized its prevalence, he did not espouse its practice.

‘Looks like Scotty’s come around, at least,’ Jim added, nodding toward the center of the room. Scott was at the nucleus of a group of interested officers, nine to be exact, and he was gesturing excitedly;
as his voice carried, Spock discovered that he was re-enacting the rescue of the beagle in a fashion that was not strictly accurate. ‘Wonder what he’s talking about right now?’

‘He is lying about the events surrounding the return of Admiral Archer’s pet canine,’ Spock replied.

Jim huffed quietly. ‘Sounds about right. You can hear him from all the way over here?’

‘Obviously, as I would not suggest it if I could not.’

‘Must come in handy, having sharp hearing like that.’

‘It is a biological asset,’ Spock agreed.

‘Hey, I’m serious.’ Jim inserted three ‘pigs in blankets’ into his mouth at once, chewing and swallowing them far too quickly. ‘Go back out there. I’m good where I am.’

‘Your behavior is peculiar,’ Spock said.

‘Your behavior is peculiar,’ Jim replied.

His sudden shift to aggression was not without precedent, although Spock had not glimpsed it for the past three years. He had assumed that it was a temporary side effect of the trauma he had suffered on Tarsus IV and that he had matured beyond it as he grew older. However, human personalities did not follow a linear progression of character growth. It was possible for old traits to reassert themselves, particularly in moments of great stress.

As Jim had indicated on more than one occasion that he found the prospect of the ceremony and reception troubling, his behavior should not have come as a surprise.

Spock examined his observational capacities for any flaw that would have caused a failure to anticipate this reaction from Jim. The sole explanation Spock could accept was that he had grown accustomed to Jim as an individual and had neglected to exercise the more rigorous aspects of a continued case study.

‘My behavior is consistent,’ Spock said. ‘It has not been altered in light of recent circumstances.’

‘I’m not altering anything,’ Jim said.

He helped himself to the nourishment borne by a passing tray: what resembled a soft, white cheese product chopped into cubes and served upon more of the tiny sticks Spock had observed from earlier. It seemed that Jim was motivated by a desire to keep his mouth full, although to what end, Spock could not guess. It did not stop him from attempting to speak, despite the societal conventions that indicated this fell within the category of bad manners.

Whatever was troubling Jim, it did not seem to be related to his stomach in any way.

‘Sorry.’ Jim wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

There was no one but Spock to whom he could have been speaking—and yet, by Spock’s estimation, he had not done anything that merited an apology. As in all things, it seemed prudent to inquire after his intentions rather than to assume total knowledge of the reasons behind Jim’s confusing behavior.

‘For what offense?’ Spock asked.

‘Showing up at your place like that. Not calling first.’ Jim shrugged, his eyes on the crowd and not
Spock. ‘I mean, I said I was gonna pick you up and all. I know we made plans, but—I didn’t mean to interrupt. With Scotty.’

‘Montgomery Scott was experiencing some unexpected anxiety preceding these events,’ Spock said. ‘Though I had not invited him, it is most likely that the company had a calming effect.’

This statement was punctuated by a bark of laughter from Scott, standing at the center of a ring of admirers.

‘Oh yeah,’ Jim said. ‘He seems real nervous.’

‘Earlier, he was suffering from paranoid delusions that Admiral Archer continued to bear a grudge for the difficulty with his canine pet,’ Spock said. ‘As he is now able to see that these delusions were unfounded, he is paranoid no longer.’

‘That’s lucky.’ Jim’s mouth was full of cubed cheese. ‘That his problem was solved that easy.’

‘Perhaps you should not speak with a mouth full of cubed cheese,’ Spock suggested.

It was not unkind to remind Jim of those societal standards to which others would hold him more meticulously than Spock. As Jim had no parental figures to do so and no older brother to offer similar advice, Spock did not feel as though it were an imposition to fulfill that role.

For a brief moment—thirteen seconds exactly—Jim did not respond; he also ceased to chew without attempting to swallow. The cubes of cheese pressing against the inside of his cheeks made them bulge outward in sharp, geometric shapes. Finally, when it seemed as though Jim’s eyes were about to unfocus, he returned to the present and gulped down the mouthful of ‘finger foods’, which Spock had always privately considered incorrectly named.

‘I’ve gotta get out of here,’ Jim said. ‘See you around, Spock.’

‘If you are experiencing discomfort due to the factors of this social event—’ Spock began.

‘I showed up, didn’t I? Sat on the stage, went to the reception, got as much out of it as I could.’

‘Nevertheless, should you require company—’

‘You mean like Scotty over there required company, right?’ Jim gestured abruptly. ‘Only I’m not suffering from any paranoid delusions, and I’m not asking for any charity, either. You wanna stay, stay. I’m leaving.’

‘I have no distinct preference,’ Spock said.

‘Then I definitely don’t want you following me,’ Jim replied.

He left through a shadowed back exit rather than the open front doors of the reception room, where Admiral Archer—his beagle held to his chest—was laughing with two of the newly-promoted starship captains in the fleet. If pressed, Spock would not have been able to quantify whose behavior that day had been more inexplicable: Scott’s in the afternoon, or Jim’s in the evening.

*
Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.60.

Mother, it is not raining. I have reason to believe from preferences you have referenced in the past that this weather would be ideal for your enjoyment. However, I am not contacting you in order to discuss the weather, although I would not ignore the customary formalities that comprise a standard communication.

Though I attended Starfleet Academy, where the student body was predominantly human in nature, and then served as first officer on the USS Enterprise for three years, under a human captain and with a predominantly human crew, I am regularly reminded of the fact that the eccentricities of human personalities are often beyond my ability to fathom, much less to predict. An individual of my acquaintance—I have spoken of her to you before in response to your query involving any ‘friends’ or ‘companions’ I may have made during my time in San Francisco—the counselor named Christine Chapel, suggests that emotional variety cannot be quantified at all. Every individual human may be governed according to the same set of moral principles, but their individuality suggests that they will respond to and enact these principles differently.

Infinite diversity in infinite combinations.

For what reason would someone who has regularly sought my company for a period of time long enough that it may be considered ‘routine’ cease, without explanation, to seek my company? There has been no unpleasantness of which I am aware.

Are humans always this capricious in their interests?

* 

Seven of Professor Puri’s hydromechanics lectures passed in which Jim did not once look Spock’s way. He was a dedicated student; he had doubled his efforts at note-taking, and rarely looked up from his PADD, stylus held tightly in his hand.

It was possible, therefore, that the increase of the semester’s workload and demands over time required most, if not all, of Jim’s energies, leaving him no time for socialization.

Yet by Jim’s own admission, he did not require the same amount of preparation and study for his classes as the other top students in his year. If he had chosen to assist others in their studies, guiding them through the material and answering their questions, then he could have informed Spock of this, as it would have minimized the number of office hours Spock would have offered to those same students already finding assistance elsewhere.

Jim did not inform Spock of this. He did not inform Spock of anything. His regular, if pointless, messages had ceased, and Spock had come to realize that in their absence he had come to anticipate, if not rely upon, their presence.
The disruption was not significant enough to distract Spock from attending his duties without fail and his work did not suffer for the confusion he had experienced outside of his work, in the personal sphere. As Jim was always the instigator of their conversations, Spock concluded that if Jim wished to re-establish their interaction, he would be the one to do so. Spock had no reason to presume that Jim would desire communication but would not initiate it; therefore, that he had not initiated it indicated a lack of desire.

‘I wouldn’t say that’s entirely accurate,’ Chapel said, while eating her lunch with Spock in one of the smaller dining areas that littered the campus. ‘It would be very logical, but as I’m sure you’ve discovered, humans are anything but. And teenagers are the worst of the lot, I’m afraid.’

‘Jim has only one year left in his teen ages,’ Spock said.

‘If you think things will magically become clearer once that year’s up, Spock, I’m afraid you’re in for a bit of a disappointment,’ Chapel replied.

Contrary to her words, her expression was lively and cheerful, as if they were discussing an amusing topic and not a distressing one. She tilted her head in the direction of Leonard H. McCoy, seated at the end of their long table, close enough to overhear while still preserving a pointed distance. He had arrived seventeen minutes earlier, announced his unfit state for conversation, and buried his attentions directly in one of three comprehensive anatomical texts, all of which were open on the table before him.

McCoy was unaware of Chapel’s suggestion that his behavior had proven illogical—and disappointing—despite his age. Given his temperament, this lack of awareness seemed the best possible outcome.

‘I don’t want you to think I’m complaining, mind,’ Chapel added. ‘I’m just not used to seeing you so often, Spock. You’re going to spoil me rotten.’

‘Something’s rotten all right,’ McCoy muttered.

Despite lacking a desire for discussion, he did not refrain from speaking up whenever he overhead something that piqued his interest. This behavior was an example of the contradictory nature of humans, but Spock’s familiarity with McCoy in particular had by now prepared him for such discrepancies. As the comment had not been specifically directed toward Spock, he found that he could ignore it.

Chapel rolled her eyes, but like Spock, she did not see fit to reply.

‘You see what I mean? You’ll never catch him admitting he likes a little company for his meals, but do you see him locked away in his office, where no one would bother him?’

‘Why do you think I’m studying?’ McCoy asked, also without lifting his head. ‘They don’t dole out the private offices to just anyone, Christine. I dream of the day I can get a little me time—all alone with medical equipment, which, by the way, doesn’t interrupt a man in the middle of his sandwich.’

Spock had the distinct impression that he was an interloper in an established dynamic, one that had sprung up in his absence and would continue unaltered after he left. It was not the same as eating with Jim, who did not require input for his conversation but demanded a certain amount of Spock’s attention all the same.

‘All I’m saying, Spock, is that I don’t think avoiding the problem is the way to go here,’ Chapel said.

‘And that’s what you get for trying to eat in peace with a counselor,’ McCoy added, before Spock
could reply. ‘She lures you in, and then she starts doling out the advice.’

‘Doctor Christine Chapel is a noted specialist in her field of study,’ Spock replied. ‘I would be remiss in ignoring her counsel, given that she is, as stated, a counselor.’

‘I’m flattered,’ Chapel said.

‘It’s your funeral,’ McCoy added. ‘But by all means, be my guest—go ahead and dig that grave even deeper.’

‘The numerous inconsistencies of metaphor in your suggestion aside,’ Spock said, ‘for we are both aware I cannot be your guest at my own funeral, the point remains that any consult provided by Doctor Chapel would not go unappreciated.’

‘He’s teaching first-year medical students.’ Chapel leaned closer to Spock to impart this information, yet did not lower her voice sufficiently to prevent McCoy from hearing her. ‘That’s why he’s so grumpy. You notice I say grumpy and not miserable, because I’m almost positive he actually enjoys it.’

‘I had detected no difference in Doctor McCoy’s personality from that which has been established as standard,’ Spock said.

‘That supposed to be an insult?’ McCoy demanded.

It had not been an insult, despite Leonard McCoy’s determination to appreciate it as one. Though Chapel attempted to mediate the ensuing difficulties of communication, no progress was made, and a pudding was spilled in the process.

‘I will take my leave before further comestibles are carelessly wasted,’ Spock informed both Chapel and McCoy as he rose, both of whom were engaged in the thankless task of removing pudding from the latter’s lap.

‘He’s asking for a pudding in that damn hair of his, I’m telling you,’ McCoy said over the sound of Chapel’s laughter.

This was not true. Spock could not think of anyone, no matter how irrational, who would want a pudding in their hair, much less request such an action be taken.

Spock did not discount Chapel’s advice in the days that followed; this was because he did not doubt her expertise, though he did not interpret the events as she did. He was certain he had not been avoiding ‘the problem’, for any problem that existed was Jim’s, not Spock’s, and he could not confront that of which he was not aware. He still believed that Jim was required to make the proverbial ‘first move’, which should not have been too onerous a task, considering the ‘first’, in this instance, was purely metaphorical. Many moves had already been made.

No further moves were, however. Spock received a text-based message on his PADD on a Friday night, but it was from Montgomery Scott, informing Spock that he had not been followed by agents of Admiral Archer yet, and what did Spock suppose was the statute of limitations on a beagle-related beam crimes these days?

*There is no other such crime recorded in history. If these bouts of paranoia persist, you would be negligent in your duties as an officer of Starfleet if you did not attend regular meetings with a counselor to resolve the issue.*

*YOU’RE NO FUN AND SOMETIMES VERY MEAN TO BOOT.*
It was a matter of interpretation. Spock had offered honest advice based upon the evidence with which he had been presented, yet Scott had found this offering to be unpleasant and cruel despite the fact that it was obviously neither. If it was that easy for a brilliant mind such as Scott’s to leap to these unfounded conclusions, then it may have been equally easy for Jim to do the same.

While it might not have been ‘the problem’ to which Chapel referred, Spock had nevertheless encountered a potential problem; he could now follow the advice he had been given and cease to avoid it.

*Have I been no fun and sometimes very mean?*

He sent the message to Jim and contemplated Jim’s potential responses while he waited.

At last, nineteen minutes and twenty-four seconds after Spock had hit send, his PADD flashed.

*did somebody call you that?*

Indeed, it was suggested by a third party, though the source is not entirely reliable. I sought corroboration or refutation, depending on your experience.

*i’m kinda busy right now spock*

That Jim had the time to respond to say that he was busy and not to offer a simple yes or no suggested that the matter was even more complicated than it appeared on the surface.

*Very well. I would not seek to interrupt.*

*it was scotty though, right? what’d you say to him?*

Now Jim was directly contradicting himself: insisting he was not available to discuss the matter, then replying only to alter the subject.

*I merely suggested he speak to a professional in order to manage his paranoia.*

*so you told him he was crazy*

*I told him the following: “If these bouts of paranoia persist, you would be negligent in your duties as an officer of Starfleet if you did not attend regular meetings with a counselor to resolve the issue.” That was an exact quote.*

*well i don’t know about mean spock but that’s definitely no fun*

Spock considered the benefits of continuing as they were or offering a more enjoyable conversational experience, in order to improve on the flaw of which two separate parties had now informed him. At last, he settled on one of the topics he knew to be a standard; if not strictly ‘fun’ then it was at least not ‘very mean’.

*The weather has not been unpleasant for three days.*

*wouldn’t know. i’ve been working on some stuff*

*How has your health been?*

*i’ve gotta go spock. bye*

The abruptness in Jim’s reply was unprecedented. While they had on numerous occasions engaged
in dialogue that was absent conventional precursors and conclusions, there were markedly different patterns to this exchange.

It had been years since Spock sought to understand Jim’s behavior on a purely analytical level; however, it was not beyond his capacity to revert to an earlier state in the interest of gaining better insight.

It was not the first time an acquaintance of Spock’s had chosen to behave in a perplexing manner. Yet there had never been anyone with whom Spock had made such frequent, personal contact. In the absence of a precedent from which to work, he would have to operate based largely upon speculation.

This was not his preference, but it was all he had.

_Do not neglect your health, Jim._

Jim did not reply.

There could have been a variety of reasons for his silence. Perhaps Jim was avoiding the topic due to not wanting to discuss his health—or perhaps he had taken offense at an imagined implication by Spock that he was not in possession of the necessary faculties to take care of himself. As there was no way to know for certain, Spock could not in good conscience dedicate a substantial amount of time to conjecture.

However, an hour later—as Spock was finishing his evening meal—his PADD flashed with another notification.

.say hey to scotty for me

Spock considered the message. Although it was brief, he could not clearly intuit Jim’s reason for choosing to send it after the length of time he had allowed to lapse. If Jim had been working, perhaps he was unaware of the delay, but there were further incongruities. As Jim was in possession of a PADD, he was just as capable of extending a greeting as Spock. And if, as he had stated, he was too busy to engage in social pursuits, then he would not have had the inclination to contact Spock further regarding a minor social nicety.

At least, that was not the logical path. But, as in all things, Spock could reasonably expect that logic would not always apply to Jim Kirk.

_I will pass along your greeting when given an opportunity to do so._

When there was no immediate reply forthcoming, he continued his nightly business: cleaning the dishes he had used for dinner and preparing for the shower. It occurred to him as he did so that there was a chance Jim had not intended for Spock to pass along his message in a verbal fashion.

If this was true, then he had neglected his duties as a friend.

_Jim Kirk sends his greetings,_ Spock wrote to Montgomery Scott.

At the same time, he received a message back from Jim.

_guess it was an early night

_It is not early._
right but with you and scotty

Jim’s other activities must have ended, as he was now responding immediately. Spock would not suffer from postponing his shower in order to offer Jim the same courtesy, as it was a matter of prioritizing the alignment of conflicting schedules.

I do not understand.

you said scotty called you no fun and that other stuff it’s obvious you guys must've been hanging out

You inferred incorrectly, Jim. The accusation in question was sent via text-based communications.

oh

Spock waited. Jim did not elaborate. The exact time at which Spock took his evening shower had passed. Spock continued to wait, but the screen of his PADD remained dark.

I have not experienced Montgomery Scott’s presence since the ceremony honoring his achievement in the sciences.

oh

This time, when Spock waited, it was Jim who continued the conversation.

guess i just figured you two were making beautiful science together

Montgomery Scott has shown no signs of possessing the skills and qualities necessary for partnered research.

yeah i’m definitely aware

Then for what reason did you assume the two of us were ‘making beautiful science’ in one another’s company?

Jim had no ready answer for that—and, as the minutes passed, it seemed he had no answer at all. Spock removed his sweater, folding it neatly and setting it on the foot of his bed, intending to shower now before it grew too late. He passed his PADD on his way to the bathroom, the screen alight with a new message.

just figured

We may discuss this topic in more depth at your convenience when I have concluded my evening shower.

The temperature of the water was raised from that which was commonly acceptable to human standards; during Spock’s first year at the Academy, he had learned to be conscientious of returning the settings to those endurable by his human roommate, so that he would not ‘be boiled alive like a lobster’ whenever he forgot to check the temperature panel before turning on the showerhead. Spock did not take long showers but rather efficient ones, since even though the conservation of water was nowhere near as important in San Francisco as it was anywhere on Vulcan, there was no reason to waste it no matter where he was. After sonic showers during his childhood and while serving on the Enterprise, a water-based shower was a luxury in which it seemed excessive to indulge for too long.

The hot spray warmed his skin. He allowed it for no longer than was required to achieve cleanliness.

He dried his hair upon the shower’s conclusion, two minutes and fifteen seconds after it had begun,
and dressed for bed. Only then did he check his PADD to find there were no messages from Jim indicating whether or not he desired to discuss the topic further. The absence of a response indicated that he did not.

Or he had fallen asleep, as he sometimes did when he had over-extended himself; or he had been reminded of the time and his own need to shower. There were infinite potential motivations for Jim’s silence that were, to Spock, irrational and therefore elusive.

*Good night, Jim.*

When in doubt, the only sensible reaction was to rely upon the structure given to human interaction by conversational formulae. There were rules, though they were not regularly followed, and Spock could rely upon them, if not upon the spontaneity and improvisation of the individuals in any given conversation.

One minutes and thirty-seven seconds later, as Spock was turning down the blanket on his bed, the buzzer at the front door intercom rang. Spock answered it.

It was Jim.

‘Hey.’ His voice sounded breathless, though that could have been distortion through an unreliable connection. For some reason, the building’s landlord had not responded to Spock’s four submissions to assist in rewiring the building’s intercom system. ‘Can I come up? If you’re not fresh out of the shower. You’re not still in your towel, are you?’

‘My showers are brief,’ Spock replied. ‘If you have come this far then it would be neglectful of me not to allow you to complete your business, especially at this time of night.’

‘Was that a yes?’ Jim asked.

Spock responded in the form of entering the admittance code to allow Jim access to the building. He stood before the door to his apartment until it rolled open and Jim stepped inside, hair messy and damp. Spock knew from the air pressure and the humidity—despite the climate controls of the apartment complex—that it had begun to rain.

‘You did not bring an umbrella,’ Spock said.

‘Wow,’ Jim replied, though it could not be considered a true reply. ‘I’ve never seen you wearing so little before.’

His cheeks had flushed and his eyes were bright, both signs of an elevated temperature. It would not surprise Spock to learn that Jim had again fallen ill, due to the failures of his immune system as well as his choice to travel by foot in the rain without an umbrella late at night.

Jim should have been more careful. He was intelligent enough that he must have known this. Yet he ignored his health as though it was of no consequence.

‘This was stupid,’ Jim said suddenly.

‘If you are referring to your negligence regarding your well-being, I am not inclined to disagree,’ Spock replied.

‘Oh my God, this was *so* stupid,’ Jim said.

At an early age, Spock’s mother had discouraged him from classifying behavior by the virtues of its
intelligence alone. Therefore, he could not allow himself to agree immediately with Jim’s assertion. More to the point, it was not clear to what Jim was referring.

There were, at any given point in Spock’s life, any number of things that could be considered stupid.

‘Jim,’ Spock said instead.

It had been indicated to him before that the appropriate utilization of someone’s name in conversation would draw their attention back to the topic at hand. It was a tactic Spock had employed before with Jim to some success, although the circumstances of their relationship had grown more complicated than they had proven in the past.

Whenever Spock found himself mapping the parameters of a shared dynamic with Jim, that dynamic changed. Once again, he found himself off-balance, as Jim had referenced something that Spock did not—and perhaps could not hope to—understand.

Jim did not reply.

He darted forward and out of the entryway; the door, no longer sensing a body nearby, rolled closed. Jim’s hand landed against Spock’s chest, twisting in the thin fabric of the short-sleeved shirt he favored for bed. When referring to Spock’s state of undress, it was likely that this had been what Jim had meant; it exposed Spock’s arms, and the fall of the collar was lower than the one shown by his Academy uniform.

Spock had time, however brief, to come to this revelation before Jim raised himself on the soles of his boots with a creak of synthetic leather and touched the surface of his lips to Spock’s mouth.

The contact was fleeting. Vulcan anatomical differences indicated that they had fewer gathered nerve endings in their mouths than humans, but the skin was there was still thin and sensitive. The slight pressure of Jim’s lips could not be ignored, nor could the way his mouth twitched against Spock’s, as if possessed by the sudden urge to smile.

Neither the expression nor the contact lasted for more than five seconds.

Jim exerted pressure with his hand on Spock’s chest—the same hand he had used to pull Spock closer—to push him away. Although the encounter had been brief, the color in Jim’s cheeks had deepened, and he was still suffering from a shortness of breath. His gaze traveled from Spock’s face to the floor, then to the double set of windows over Spock’s shoulder. The sound of rain was now audible from outside, having intensified in the time since Jim had entered the apartment.

‘Um,’ Jim said. ‘Yeah. Just—I figured—I wasn’t getting anywhere. With words.’

The gesture indicated an uncharacteristic desire for economy on Jim’s part.

‘And,’ Jim added, more quietly, ‘you don’t have to say anything right away, or do anything. Not that you would. You always think things over first, you always—but don’t think too hard, either.’

‘You are offering conflicting sets of advice,’ Spock said.

‘Don’t you ever feel conflicted?’ Jim asked.

The answer to Jim’s question was far too complicated to explain while they were both standing in the hall to Spock’s living room, next to the chair he had placed in its location due to the sentimental insistence of his mother, while Jim’s hair was still wet from his travels in the rain. It was that last detail that allowed Spock to regain his equilibrium through common sense.
Jim’s hair was wet; it had not been dried; it would be beneficial to do so before too much time had passed. Jim’s immune system was not ideally functioning; drying Jim’s hair was the only logical progression; Spock had a dry towel in the bathroom that would be suited to the task.

‘I will return,’ Spock said.

He left Jim beside the chair, most likely reluctant to follow and track wet footprints into Spock’s apartment. Despite the chill in the damp air, Jim’s mouth had been warm, as had the hand on Spock’s chest.

Spock had not watched that hand grow, though he had noticed the change in size it had undergone: from the bruised and split knuckles belonging to Jim at sixteen to the blunt, hard-edged fingers that belonged to Jim now. He was nineteen years old, with eyes that had always struck Spock for reasons beyond their basic, descriptive qualities—blue, by turns light and dark, keen, too often wary—and he was regularly capable of surprising Spock, though this unpredictability was not always the direct result of recklessness. Imagination, too, was a factor, and it was not altogether undesirable in humans.

Spock retrieved a dry towel from the bathroom, where it had been folded into a perfect square. The terrycloth felt rougher than usual against his fingertips, which suggested his body was reacting more sensitively to stimulus, since no inherent properties of the towel had changed. Spock knew that he could not still feel the warmth of Jim’s lips pressed to his and that the instance of contact had been too short to have a lasting effect. He carried the towel from the bathroom, through the living room, and stopped in the front hall, where Jim was facing the doorway, one hand braced against the wall.

He heard Spock approach. His shoulders stiffened and he moved slowly, but nonetheless, Jim forced himself to turn around.

‘I have brought a towel to dry your hair,’ Spock said. ‘If you do not dry your hair, you run the risk of weakening your immune system further, and will be even more susceptible to viral infections, which are not uncommon in communal living situations, such as academy dormitories.’

Jim’s mouth twisted crookedly. ‘Yeah,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Thanks, Spock, that’s really—logical of you.’

He made no move to step forward, leaving Spock to close the distance. His hands hung at his sides, clenched into fists, leaving Spock to drape the towel around Jim’s head. Jim’s only movement was to turn his face into the shadows of the towel’s folds as it grew damp under Spock’s palms, which rubbed the terrycloth against Jim’s wet hair. Again, the rough, bristling sensation bunching beneath Spock’s fingertips were indicative of heightened senses, susceptible to every external stimuli with which they were met.

Spock would not have done this for anyone else of his acquaintance. Jim was special, but for what reason was he special?

The equation did not have to be challenging. It was not implausible, given the constants—the prolonged contact; the enjoyment of said contact; the personal interest taken in Jim’s well-being beyond the point of professionalism—to conclude that Spock loved Jim.

Yet Spock had always known that the boundaries that defined human love were not the same as those that defined the bonds experienced by Vulcans. On occasion, they intersected—if not emotionally, then at least beneficially, in that they served mutual needs—but this was rare enough that Spock was the only half-Vulcan raised on Vulcan sands. There had been no others like him. His parents’ marriage was an exception, a sensible function of diplomacy. Neither Spock’s mother nor
his father Sarek was unhappy with the arrangement, though this was a topic on which Spock had not ruminated in some time.

However, in times past, it had been the topic front and foremost in his mind.

‘I know what it is to harbor conflict,’ Spock said, so that Jim’s question would not go unanswered. It had certainly not been forgotten.

‘I thought so,’ Jim replied. His words were muffled by the towel, his hot breath trapped in a corner of the fabric. ‘We’re not so different.’

‘Neither are we so similar,’ Spock said.

Jim said nothing. He had taken his bottom lip between his teeth as though he sought to hide it from view—and as though hiding it could obscure any recent action it had taken. Spock’s hands were warm.

‘The human kiss is not one I have had occasion to practice,’ Spock said. ‘It differs from the Vulcan expression of what I understand to be similar intent. The Vulcan “kiss” is committed by a joining of hands, specifically the fore- and index-fingertips.’

‘Oh,’ Jim said.

Like the ‘oh’ he had written, it did not offer.

It also did not deny.

Jim had not shut his eyes, though they could not have seen much over Spock’s shoulder; in fact, they faced the V-shape of Spock’s collar and the skin revealed, along with the dark hair that thickened where it grew over Spock’s chest. But all that was in shadow, and Jim’s eyes may have been keen, but they were limited by the facts of his biology.

His shoulders tensed; his arms shifted; and his fingers brushed Spock’s, the touch moving from nail bed to knuckle to drag over the back of Spock’s hand.

This contact accomplished what the kiss on Spock’s mouth had not, stimulating sensitive nerve endings where they were the most vulnerable.

It had been suggested that Vulcans who spent any prolonged period of their lives among humans would benefit from the protection afforded by wearing gloves; however, this stemmed from a functional misunderstanding of the sensitivity of Vulcan fingers. To cover them with a fabric would be a source of constant stimulation, and the trouble would be exacerbated, not lessened.

Jim’s index finger slipped between Spock’s where they were rooted to his hand, drawing over the delicate skin where it formed a joint.

‘Jim.’

Where before the word had been a caution, a point of commonality to ground them, this time Spock’s breathing hitched, and the sound did not provide the same reminder of tranquility. His tone of voice was lighter, erratic to his own ears.

Jim covered the back of Spock’s hand with his palm, leaning forward without making eye contact. His hand was warm and damp where it grazed Spock’s skin, the temperature of Spock’s body lower and cooler than that of any human.
Vulcans did not sweat. Spock had inherited much of his biology from his father, although this did not mean that he could allow himself to forget his mixed heritage. There would always be outside influences willing to remind him if he did not preserve awareness himself.

Jim’s hand tightened over Spock’s; the added pressure came with a scattered flood of emotions that were not his own. There were physical symptoms, too: sudden heat prickling over his skin in places they were not touching; a knot of tension in the pit of his stomach; a shortness of breath that indicated anxiety.

The unfamiliar sensations clouded Spock’s thoughts so that he was not prepared for the heat of Jim’s breath when his nose grazed the surface of Spock’s chest. He had not been aware of Jim leaning close enough to touch before it happened, his face bent to the open V-neck of Spock’s short-sleeved shirt. He rubbed the soft tip of his nose against Spock’s chest, beneath the ridges of bone that formed the separate halves of Spock’s clavicle.

The action rasped quietly in the silence, interrupted only by the uneven rhythm of Jim’s breathing as he pressed himself closer still.

Spock had informed Jim in advance that the practice of human kissing was one unfamiliar to him. What he had neglected to mention was that he was equally inexperienced with the more conventional Vulcan practices of the same.

For the latter, he at least possessed rudimentary knowledge of the practices based upon research, if not personal experience. He had informed himself because it was unthinkable that he should not be informed, but he had not acted on the information because there had been no reason to act.

‘Am I doing it right?’ Jim asked. The sentence cracked halfway through, but Jim pressed on to its completion. His lips moved against the dark hair on Spock’s chest and his words rumbled deeper, through Spock’s lungs, as his mouth was muffled by Spock’s skin.

‘It is pleasant,’ Spock replied.

To have suggested otherwise would have been a lie.

Jim shut his eyes and turned his face so that his cheek rested below Spock’s clavicle, his hair tickling the bare flesh above it while Spock’s hair tickled Jim’s ear and jaw. Jim’s thumb, with a stylus callus on the inside between the topmost knuckle and the tip, traced the length of Spock’s fingers from base to head.

The parameters of their relationship had been fundamentally altered. The new shapes that Jim’s touch followed seemed to create new boundaries, at times through the suggestion that no boundaries existed that could not be crossed.

‘Feels good,’ Jim said hoarsely.

Yet his heart pounded rapidly, two point three times its usual speed. It was indicative of the fight-or-flight response exhibited by humans who were afraid.

‘Jim,’ Spock said again. ‘Are you frightened?’

‘Yeah.’ Jim sighed—it evolved into a groan—pushing his face against Spock’s chest as though he believed he could hide in this fashion. That was impossible, and Jim must have known it. He attempted it nonetheless. ‘But—no. Feels safe.’

‘I would not allow harm to come to you,’ Spock agreed.
‘Yeah.’ Jim’s breathing began to steady, evening itself into a more regular pattern. ‘I know.’ His right arm cinched around Spock’s waist, not too tightly, but without indication that he would release his hold in the near future.

Spock knew what it was to hug; it was not a common Vulcan practice, a vulgar display that overwhelmed the participants as much as it discomfited any observers. Embraces were rare and occurred only in private. They were shrouded in more secrecy than ritual. Spock had observed his first while on Earth; he had not participated in any, and he still averted his gaze when two individuals committed themselves to the act in public.

Spock touched Jim’s shoulder with his free hand, all the rigidity and anxiety that tightened the muscles only beginning to subside. Despite the fact that Jim had claimed to feel safe, his body had not relaxed. He had never fully relaxed in Spock’s presence. Spock could not be certain if Jim had ever fully relaxed at all.

‘I don’t know what I’m doing,’ Jim admitted. ‘I just wanna hold you without letting go. I wanna be with you all the time, but I’ve gotta earn it.’

‘I do not understand,’ Spock said, which was true.

Jim sighed again, then pursed his lips, pressing them against the hemline of Spock’s collar and nosing it downward. The position could not allow him to breathe easily, which was required to maintain a steady heartbeat, but Spock would not have said it was without its merits. Jim was kissing Spock’s chest, hot breath followed by a hot mouth, ragged huffs and wordless murmurs that echoed through Spock’s skin.

‘Me neither.’ Jim’s words slurred across cotton, hair, and muscle. Spock felt the brief pull of his teeth, dragging a wet line downward. ‘I hoped, for a while—that maybe you could explain it to me. But—’

Jim did not finish the sentence. He did not have to.

Spock had failed him.

His thumb brushed the hot, sweaty back of Jim’s neck when Jim again twisted his face to the side, precluding the ability, if not the need, to speak. Jim’s pulse throbbed beneath Spock’s fingertips. It was a curious phenomenon—worthy of study—and Spock spread his fingers wide over the bare skin to the line of Jim’s hair, the soft and frightened need couched under his pinched shoulders.

Jim shivered.

‘You are not cold,’ Spock said. ‘Your symptoms correspond with those presented by a fever.’

‘It’s something like that,’ Jim replied.

‘My temperatures are also elevated,’ Spock added after a pause.

Jim gasped sharply before silencing himself. ‘So you’re—hot?’ he asked.

‘Something like that’,’ Spock said.

‘Me too.’ Jim’s hand tightened on Spock’s, squeezing it, pressure that was overwhelming, but not without pleasure. Spock’s lips parted when Jim released the grip with a mumbled apology. It was barely a word, but Spock recognized the pitch and intonation as consistent with remorse.
None was necessary.

He held Jim’s hand tighter to indicate that he had not done anything wrong. After a brief, internal struggle, muscles fighting instinct and logic fighting desire, Jim pushed forward hips first. The shape of his erection beneath the fabric of his trousers made itself known against Spock’s thigh.

‘Jim, you are aroused,’ Spock said.

Jim wheezed, a sound close to laughter. ‘I’m not laughing,’ he said, though it was clear that he had been gripped by a similar urge. ‘I’m—yeah.’ He grit his teeth. ‘Very.’

After a moment’s consideration, Spock arrived at a similar conclusion. ‘As am I.’

‘Jesus.’ Jim shivered again, this time with a whimper. ‘At least we’ve had, like, twenty dates. At least.’

‘Is that a satisfactory number to precede physical intimacy?’ Spock inquired.

He was aware of the human notion that there were a number of terms to satisfy before they could allow a relationship to proceed. There were similar cultural stipulations for Vulcans, although none of them could be applied to Spock’s relationship with Jim.

Jim—who groaned in the back of his throat as he had before on numerous occasions to indicate frustration with Spock’s questions or his methods. That did not seem to be the cause of his expostulation now.

‘Yeah, Spock, it is.’

Jim’s thighs were tense on the outside of Spock’s, but they did not hold rigidly enough to prevent his hips from slipping forward to seek further contact. He had effectively maneuvered Spock into the chair in the hallway, having crawled into Spock’s lap with neither of them drawing attention to the act. For Jim, who had on previous occasions made a habit of announcing his presence with attention to fanfare, this behavior was inconsistent.

It was a surprise, but one that Spock did not find alarming. Rather, the unexpected nature of the act served to stimulate the arousal of which he had spoken.

‘It’s like—way too many, really.’ Jim’s breath was on Spock’s throat now, instead of on his chest. ‘Twenty dates is overkill.’

‘I was not aware that there was a limit placed on one’s social interactions,’ Spock said.

‘Uh huh.’ Jim nodded, although he seemed distracted, almost unconscious of his own words. ‘It’s—there’s all kinds of rules, you know. Dumb. Most of ’em. I don’t think anybody knows what they’re talking about.’

Spock had come to suspect that Jim, too, was no longer aware of what he was talking about. He rubbed his fingers, which had once been cool, against the back of Jim’s neck, the touch soothing them both before he removed it. The longer they spent in contact, the simpler it seemed. Jim’s emotional state hummed in the background of Spock’s consciousness, rather than threatening to consume it.

The ‘dates’ they had spent together had served to prepare them adequately for this natural development. Jim’s body behaved not incomprehensibly but, for once, predictably; the source of heat in his belly was fueled by the heat between his legs.
Spock allowed his hand to travel from around the back of Jim’s neck, passing over his chest to rest at his hip. He steadied his grip on Jim’s thigh, feeling the stiff fabric of his cadet-issued trousers crease. From there, he slid his hand under Jim’s navel to the shape of his erection, where it stretched the fabric prominently.

Jim gasped, pushing forward against Spock as though Spock had done something to harm him.

The chair, which had not been built for the weight of two individuals in motion, creaked.

Spock steadied himself, bracing his back against chair and the chair against the wall. Jim’s fingers scrabbled after Spock’s hand, blunt nails scraping Spock’s knuckles. It was a sensation unlike any other, as was the tightening of Jim’s thighs, the rocking of his body from his hips. He was heavy, no longer too-thin from years of improper nourishment, and that heaviness grounded Spock with a precise gravity—one for which Spock had no equation. He rubbed Jim’s arousal, which was as sensitive to texture as Spock’s fingertips, and both Spock’s hand and Jim’s erection reacted with similar waves of appreciation.

Jim bowed his head over Spock’s shoulder, muffling his sounds. He appreciated silence and privacy, but with his lips parted so close to Spock’s ear, it was loud enough, or louder than Jim was aware. Even the noises that he made elicited reactions from Spock he had not known were possible.

The muscle below the extra flesh at Jim’s abdomen contracted and clench. The fair blond hairs under the wrinkled cotton twitched, hair follicles standing erect. Jim’s wordless noises took one form: Spock’s name, repeated and pleading, but it had no specific direction. It simply wanted, and Spock could not be certain how to answer that wanting, how to solve it. It opened wide; it had no answer. The sweat on Jim’s belly and the heat between his legs were unknowns.

‘Spock,’ Jim begged.

Spock would have given him what he begged for—if he had known what that was. But even Jim did not know it. He was frightened again. His eyes were open, lashes tickling Spock’s neck. He sought that which was also unknown to him, but his search was not a clinical one. He whimpered again and sounded younger than he was, though his shoulders were broad and the musculature of his thighs impressively developed.

He orgasmed.

Spock felt it, barely muted by the dividing layer of fabric, throbbing against his palm and aching through his fingertips. They shared the sensation completely the way a planet and its orbiting moon shared tides, exerting those tides on one another. It was through Jim’s pleasure that Spock found his release.

Jim slumped, hiccupping a sigh of relief. Spock had lost count of the seconds; he did not know how long the state of that release had lasted. Jim was, for the first time, relaxed and at ease in Spock’s arms, fingers stroking Spock’s wrist and the back of his hand in thoughtless patterns. His back arched, then curved.

‘Jim,’ Spock said. Then, to avoid confusion or uncertainty, he added, ‘Would you prefer to stay here for the night than return to your dormitory at this late hour?’

‘Yeah,’ Jim replied. ‘I can—I can sleep on the couch. I won’t get in the way. And I won’t be late for my morning class tomorrow, either.’

His abrupt shyness did not match the intimacy they had shared, but Spock would have to prepare
himself for all future inconsistencies. It was Jim’s way—Jim’s human way.

Jim drew back, standing on legs that swayed, then held firm. He touched Spock’s face, cupping his hand around Spock’s jaw. His expression was open, so unguarded that it could not be interpreted. Instead of devoting himself to an impossible task, Spock retrieved a pillow and a blanket for Jim to make use of while sleeping on the couch, then watched him prepare for the night’s rest. Jim removed his shirt, while Spock committed to memory the patterns flushed across his bare chest and freckled back.

‘It’s warm,’ Jim said, briefly employing the pillow as a makeshift barrier between them.

‘You are indeed hot,’ Spock replied.

Jim’s smile was the subject of Spock’s thoughts for the rest of the night.

*
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Beta very angry with me please send help. (just kidding. mostly.)

*Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulc, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.83.*

*Mother, I am sending this message to inform you of the change in my relationship with an individual whose acquaintance I made over three years ago. (I will be able to provide the exact number of days should you require it for your records, or should the information be necessary to your understanding of the situation as it has progressed.) I am aware that these matters are private and to be shared only with those closest to the individuals. His name is Jim, born James Tiberius Kirk. He is three years my junior and I have attached his Starfleet Academy record, which will prove that he is an exemplary student. His family—a mother and an older brother—was lost in the incident on Tarsus IV, the events of which have become public record. Though he has faced adversity, he has responded with what can only be interpreted as integrity. Our friendship has progressed to another stage, but rest assured that the appropriate number of ‘dates’ was conducted prior to the events that culminated in this progression.*

*How is your health?*

*Spock rose before the sun—five minutes before the sun, precisely. He had meditated in bed rather than sleeping, written to his mother, and decided to ensure that Jim ate an appropriate breakfast before he departed.*

*Jim was not, as Spock expected, sleeping. He had not yet put his shirt back on, but was folding the blanket Spock had given him against his bare chest. He did not look up when Spock entered, but he was aware of Spock’s presence.*

*‘This whole place smells like you,’ he said.*

*‘I have endeavored to maintain the cleanliness of this apartment to Federation ship standard,’ Spock replied. ‘If there are any affronting scents—’*

*‘Spock,’ Jim said, ‘I meant that in a good way. The incense—you know, like the sweater you gave me smelled like—that’s all.’*

*‘Ah.’ Spock paused. ‘I had not realized that reference to a specific smell could be made positively.’*

*‘I didn’t say it smelled bad, Spock. You gotta listen for that kinda modifier when it comes to human colloquialisms, all right? If it smelled bad, I’d say it stinks.’*

*‘It does not stink,’ Spock said, by way of settling the matter.*

This had never been in question. His heightened senses would have picked up on any unpleasantness in the apartment long before Jim’s were able to catch the scent.
‘No, Spock.’ Jim folded the blanket in his arms, burying his face in the warm, loose weave of the fabric. ‘Nothing bad going on here.’

He did not lift his head; neither did he adjust his posture from the comfortable lassitude it had retained from his time spent asleep. Although the sun was up, the light from outside was faint through the cloud cover. Jim’s shoulders were pale, absent their earlier flushed tone.

It was a commonly held belief that things cast in a dawn light—or rather the light of day—would be starker, whereas the evening shadows were associated with warmth and romanticism.

Neither illumination had any effect on Spock’s sentimentalism. He could appreciate the differences while remaining unaffected by the quality of light that fell across Jim’s bare shoulders, as opposed to the properties of the shoulders themselves.

‘I had thought to make breakfast,’ Spock said. ‘What is your preferred form of sustenance?’

Jim made a soft sound against the blanket. It was unintelligible.

Spock suspected that perhaps he was experiencing some difficulty in calling to mind a proper suggestion. This was a common problem in humans, who often did not perform well when ‘put on the spot’, which Spock had observed in Professor Puri’s class. Since they were not in a classroom setting, it would not be inappropriate assistance if Spock were to intervene in order to offer suggestions.

‘Common forms of sustenance for humans in the morning include the following: eggs, toasted bread, bacon, sausage, pan “cakes”, waffles…’

Jim lifted his head, biting his lip.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Stop—stop. I get the picture, all right? I’m not, uh. I’m not very good at this whole morning after thing.’

‘I was unaware that there was any specific skill inherently related to succeeding at this time of day,’ Spock said. There were still more conventional breakfast foods to name, but as Jim had requested that he stop, for the time being it seemed only logical that he obey that demand.

‘Uh,’ Jim said. He allowed the blanket to drop, revealing the shape of his chest beneath. ‘Then I guess neither of us knows what we’re doing here, then.’

‘On the contrary,’ Spock said. ‘My plans were not in question. I was intending to make breakfast.’

‘I could do that,’ Jim replied quickly. ‘So you wouldn’t have to waste any of your time on me. There’s probably stuff you normally do now, right?’ Spock nodded, as that was a correct assumption. ‘Thought so. I’d just be slowing things down, making ‘em complicated. Look, I can handle breakfast.’

‘However, as the rules of hospitality clearly state that the host must provide for the guest on these occasions, I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed the opposite to occur.’

Jim ran his fingers through his hair, scratching the crown of his skull and leaving more, rather than less, of a mess in his wake. The act of combing was meant to subdue unruly hair rather than to encourage it. Spock considered this indicative that Jim was still experiencing the effects of sleepiness and would not—being ‘not very good’ at the ‘whole morning after thing’—be well suited to the task of preparing their meals.
‘Perhaps, while I am engaged in supplying us both with breakfast, you could utilize a comb to more success than your fingers are currently having,’ Spock added.

Jim froze in the middle of rubbing a spot behind his ear, more of the color leaching from his face. ‘Okay, you win. You can make breakfast. Just—whatever you were gonna make for yourself, I’ll have that. I’ve gotta—bathroom.’

His awkward conversation and frequent mid-sentence corrections corroborated his claim that mornings were not his area of expertise. Spock allowed him to retreat to the bathroom in order to attend to his personal hygiene and in the interim produced two bowls of the hot cereal he had favored for his breakfast since his childhood. It was nourishing as well as filling and provided Spock with enough energy to complete his tasks until noon, which was the correct time for lunch.

However, Jim’s appetite was not the same as Spock’s. While he would not encourage any unhealthy habits, Spock knew that Jim would likely require more sustenance than Spock, based on his preferences. It was possible that a more balanced morning meal would have a positive effect on him, reducing the amount he felt compelled to ingest at lunch.

Spock consulted four separate and well-reviewed sources to determine the most universally appreciated breakfast additions, according to humans. The consensus appeared to be that a broad sampling of individuals commonly enjoyed toasted bread with butter and a glass of juice. Spock employed his replicator to provide him with the basic ingredients—two slices of plain bread, a ‘pat’ of butter, and juiced oranges—then fulfilled the brief of buttered toast himself.

Jim reappeared from the bathroom with his shirt on and his hair combed. His face had been washed; his ears were pink, as though they had been scrubbed rigorously with cold water; there were even a few droplets on Jim’s lashes before he blinked them away.

Spock nodded in approval. No further commentary should have been necessary.

‘I’ve got toast,’ Jim pointed out immediately after sitting down at the kitchen table. ‘You don’t.’

‘You regularly consume more than I do at every meal,’ Spock replied.

‘I like toast,’ Jim said. ‘I’m not complaining.’

To prove his point, he ate the first slice in two large bites. He also complimented Spock on the hot cereal, though he did not request a second bowl. Spock provided it without being prompted, and it too was finished, if not as quickly as the first.

They did not speak during the meal. Spock had messages from professors as well as Starfleet colleagues to read and address, and Jim honored his promise that he would not interfere with Spock’s routine or attempt to distract him.

This did not mean that Spock was not aware of Jim’s presence: the rise and fall of his shoulders with every breath; the heat on his cheeks; the damp curl of hair at the back of his neck; every bite and swallow, even every blink.

‘I’ll get the dishes.’ Jim had licked his spoon clean while standing; it was the first he had spoken in five minutes and sixteen seconds.

Spock looked up from his PADD. ‘Again, that violates the code of conduct suggested for a host and his guest—’

‘Uh-uh. The person who makes the meal never has to clean it up. It’s the rule.’ He swiped Spock’s
bowl in one hand, already holding his own in the other. Spock referred to his sources to learn that Jim was not incorrect, and so he allowed Jim to wash the dishes at the sink, though it was not necessary to go to those lengths.

He stood facing the window, his back to Spock. The muscles in his shoulders shifted, rising and falling, as he dried the dishes and set them on the counter. The hair at the back of his neck had at last dried.

‘I’m gonna be late for my first class if I don’t get going,’ he said, still without turning around. ‘So I’m gonna do that, ‘cause I promised I wouldn’t be.’

‘The evening as well as this morning have not been unpleasant,’ Spock replied. ‘Without practice, it is unlikely you will ever have the opportunity to improve at “the morning after thing”.’

‘Am I gonna get much practice?’ Jim asked. He leaned against the edge of the counter when he faced Spock, one elbow braced on the sink, his fingers pink from the hot water.

‘I see no reason why you should not,’ Spock informed him.

The matter was a private one, concerning only the two of them. Thus, Spock did not need to consult with any authorities before making his pronouncement. It was, in a word, personal. In some ways, it was the first truly personal concern Spock had ever entertained. Aboard the Enterprise, there had been his duty to the ship and crew, and while he had developed acquaintanceships, they had never evolved beyond the point of a working relationship.

The only potential exception to this pattern, Christine Chapel, would have informed him if his definition of their relationship had required restructuring.

The pink coloring in Jim’s fingers transitioned to his face, capillaries swelling to flush his cheeks and throat, although there was no external heat to account for the cause.

He was not ill. Spock had reassured himself of this fact earlier that morning by thoroughly researching the average body temperature for a human, both at rest and while aroused. Jim was well within the normal boundaries for a healthy body of his age and weight.

This did not mean his weakened immune system could be something easily overlooked in the future.

‘Cool,’ Jim said, though he clearly was not cool. He swallowed, then nodded, stepping away from the sink. He dried his hands on his thighs, leaving faint, dark marks where the water had seeped in. ‘Okay. That’s—that’s good.’

‘So long as there is no interruption to our separately scheduled commitments, I see no reason why you should not be given multiple opportunities to become accustomed to the concept,’ Spock replied.

‘Like not letting it make me late for class. Absolutely.’ Jim nodded, crossing the room to search out his jacket. He located it—folded over the back of a chair, where Spock had arranged it so it would not wrinkle without relocating the garment entirely. ‘I get the picture, Spock.’

‘You are possessed of above-average intelligence,’ Spock agreed. ‘It is expected that such concepts would be clear to you.’

‘Well, as long as I know what’s expected of me,’ Jim said.

In spite of his earlier concern and expressed desire to avoid reprimand for being late, he lingered in front of Spock without putting on his jacket and his boots. After six seconds of inaction had passed,
he leaned in, placing one hand on Spock’s arm for ballast and pressing his lips to the corner of Spock’s mouth.

‘Have, uh, have a good day, Spock.’

‘I will see you in class,’ Spock reminded him.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said. ‘Sounds kinda kinky when you say it like that.’

There were two main definitions of kinky, the latter of which Spock knew, and had at first assumed was the meaning Jim sought to impart. However, as it made no sense in context, Spock sought clarification.

1. Involving or given to unusual sexual behavior. Synonyms: Perverse, abnormal, deviant, depraved, perverted.
2. Having kinks or twists. Synonyms: Curly, crimped, frizzy, wavy.

After consulting his Standard dictionary, Spock concluded that it was not the latter definition but the former that Jim had referenced. However, nothing of the sort would be appropriate within the lecture hall and classroom setting. Simply seeing Jim in the lecture hall was neither curly nor deviant.

Spock remained uncertain of Jim’s meaning through the class in which their schedules intersected. Nothing unusual occurred during the period; Jim applied himself to his notes, responded to Puri when he was called on to answer a question, and asked two pertinent questions of his own. He did not look at Spock and he did not send Spock a message PADD to PADD, which was a sign of his good will. They did not allow the events of the night before or those of that early morning to distract them, reinforcing Spock’s decision that it had not been a mistake to engage with Jim in extra-curricular activities of a physical nature.

After class, however, Jim did send a message, which he must have typed while he was walking between buildings. While this was admittedly careless, it was neither dangerous nor unsuitable behavior, and was therefore permissible.

we should have lunch.

Are you better at the ‘lunch after stuff’ than you are the ‘morning after stuff’? Spock wrote.

i dunno guess we’ll have to wait and see

A prudent course.

The following period commenced and Jim again applied himself to his studies—or, at least, he did not seek to distract himself through intercourse with Spock. Whatever his other methods of distraction may have been, they did not involve Spock and were not his immediate concern. He kept a watchful eye on the students in the hall who were bent over their exam PADDs until the end of the hour and a half testing block, then gathered the stack of PADDs to return to his adjacent office space and begin grading them before noon.

He was in the turbolift when the pain hit.

It was not physical; it only manifested itself physically because there were no alternative outlets for pain in any life form. When the mind encountered agony, no matter the source—whether it was the body that felt it or if it was the recognition of a telepathic cry for help—it responded in the same fashion. Nerve endings reacted.
Spock’s vision went white.

The turbolift stopped; someone was touching him, gently, on the elbow, aware of his sensitivities vis-à-vis the obviousness of his physicality. He was Vulcan, and Vulcans preferred not to be touched.

Spock blinked. He had dropped one and only one of the test PADDs, though he had not heard it fall, nor had he felt it slipping from his grasp. He could not clear his vision, but that did not trouble him; neither did that which immediately surrounded him. He was elsewhere, at the center of Vulcan, where the entirety of his home planet had begun to quake in fear. It was not one telepathic cry, but hundreds of thousands simultaneously.

What was worse than the initial cacophony was the silence that rushed to follow it—like lights in the windows of one of the downtown skyscrapers turning off one by one.

Spock’s body could regulate itself without his attention. It continued to function, lungs breathing and heart beating, while internally he struggled not even to understand what it was he felt, but to control it.

Perhaps one could not be achieved without the other.

‘Sir,’ a woman’s voice said. The grip on Spock’s elbow tightened noticeably. ‘It’s going to be all right. I’m going to take you to the nearest infirmary.’

‘That will not be necessary,’ Spock replied, the same operational competency as governed his other basic functions allowing him to speak. ‘I must be taken instead to Federation Headquarters.’

‘Sir?’ Spock’s vision was at last beginning to clear, though he was not grateful for it. There were fewer telepathic stimuli for him to process every fraction of a second; so many of the voices that had called to him had ceased, and the silence was a terrible loss. Spock looked to the young woman before him, her hair and skin dark, and waited until he could focus on her worried eyes.

‘Federation Headquarters,’ Spock repeated.

He did not recall much of the trip from office building to HQ, across the cadet parade grounds, through United Nations Park. He was aware of movement, but not of his limbs engineering that movement.

His attention cohered when they were delayed outside of the main property, noticing the sudden appearance of an unusually high number of Starfleet Officers and security personnel.

The woman beside him shook her head, arms wrapped tightly around her chest. ‘Something’s wrong,’ she said.

‘Indeed,’ Spock replied. ‘Though I cannot say what.’

‘Uhura.’ The woman did not hold out her hand in introduction. She was exceptionally aware of Vulcan protocol and boundaries.

Spock nodded, having absorbed human rituals to the point where they had become his protocol as well. ‘Commander Spock. It is imperative that I am allowed inside.’

‘Uh huh,’ Uhura said. ‘And I’ll bet just about everyone on this lawn is feeling that same urgency, Commander.’

‘They cannot share in my awareness of my situation,’ Spock said.
It was not hubris, or indeed any sense of special importance, which drove Spock to make such an assertion. There were other races in Starfleet who may have been able to lay claim to modest telepathic ability, but when it came to Vulcans, Spock was the first and only member of his race present on the academy campus.

And there had been Vulcan voices with him, louder than his own: a concentrated burst of mental energy that had spanned a great distance to brush against his mind.

He could not explain what was happening—or what may have already happened. As a species, Vulcans did not commonly experience visions. Although there were rare reports mentioned in the archives, such examples had been lost long ago to the annals of history.

‘All right,’ Uhura said. She did not question Spock’s conviction, merely casting a look around at security before pressing forward. ‘Excuse me, please. Commander Spock to see…’

She glanced over her shoulder, waiting for Spock to provide the name.

‘Admiral Pike,’ Spock said.

‘You heard him,’ Uhura said. ‘You do know Commander Spock, don’t you? Served on the Enterprise, part of its somewhat famous three year mission? I’m sure someone in your position must have been there for the commemoration ceremony.’

The security guard by the door looked Spock over, one hand on his phaser. After a pause to process the obvious, visual confirmation of Uhura’s introduction, he gestured them through, Uhura moving swiftly at Spock’s side before they were separated.

These were all arguments Spock could have made for himself—yet he did not have the presence of mind to make them. His consciousness remained severed in some way from his body; there were no words to describe it, for it was not existential, and neither was it an ‘out of body’ experience. He was aware of his position, although that awareness came at a terrible cost.

Spock was not unaccustomed to the sensation of being alone, but there had always been the promise of company should he choose to seek it. One of the uncommon comforts that came with being a member of a telepathic race was that there was always the potential for communication and collaboration, no matter how distant.

That potential had been sundered. Spock would not and could not speculate as to what may have occurred before sharing his concerns with a trusted colleague.

Admiral Pike might not have held any advanced awareness of what had transpired, but he would have the necessary security clearance to illuminate Spock’s concerns.

His hands were shaking. He folded them behind his back.

Uhura glanced to him; he was aware of her eyes on him. ‘I’d ask if you were sure you’re all right, but I know you’re not.’

‘I will manage,’ Spock said.

‘Managing and being all right are two different things.’ Uhura stepped into the turbolift ahead of him, allowing Spock’s hands to remain clasped by choosing the right floor herself. ‘But you don’t have to talk about it now. Admiral Pike, coming right up.’

The turbolift door slid shut. They ascended to a familiar floor, though when the door rolled open, it
was in an unfamiliar state of excitement.

No; excitement was an improper word. Agitation; uncertainty; minor chaos. Spock pressed forward through the unusually crowded hallway, Starfleet officers rushing past him and between offices, to the one office he had visited on too many prior occasions to count.

He did not have to knock—not because Uhura had anticipated his need for that action, but because Admiral Pike was standing in the doorway awaiting Spock’s arrival.

‘You’d better come inside, Spock,’ Pike said.

‘I had planned on it,’ Spock replied.

Pike looked over Spock’s shoulder, noting the presence of another individual, one whose acquaintance he had not yet made. Spock allowed protocol to govern his actions, as he had been Pike’s first officer for three years, and had not forgotten procedure.

‘This is Uhura, a cadet at Starfleet Academy. She has escorted me to this building due to my…’

Momentarily, words failed him. He drew upon a repository of definitions and synonyms that he had never been without but were now darkened, and found only new blanks to fill the pre-existing ones. Spock pressed his fingertips into the center of his wrist over his sluggish pulse. There was no need to concern a superior over that which he knew but could not explain how he had come to know it. His training had prepared him for situations of such magnitude that it was vital for those in positions of authority to remain calm, clear-headed, and otherwise totally functional. ‘…difficulties,’ Spock concluded at last.

‘Maybe you’d better sit down, Spock,’ Pike said.

It would have been possible to bend his knees and do as Pike suggested—but as it was not an order and Spock could no more move than he could express the conclusion that his mounting dread had formed, he chose to remain standing. ‘You intend to tell me that a catastrophe has befallen my home planet of Vulcan,’ Spock said instead. This, he already knew. ‘You believe, for reasons I cannot fully comprehend, that it will be beneficial to me if I am seated when I receive the news of a tragedy that has surely claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Rather than seek to spare my feelings—’

Again, Spock paused. Feelings. It was not a word he often employed; it was not apropos in this situation, either, but it was the closest translation to all that was—and, more importantly, all that was not—felt. ‘—I would prefer it if you were simply to inform me. What has happened to Vulcan, Admiral?’

Pike’s jaw tightened, the same look he had worn when the full number of the losses on Tarsus IV had been presented to him. ‘If you’re not going to sit, I sure as hell want to,’ he said. He did not. He rested his hand against the back of his chair and did not look away from Spock or attempt to turn away from him, instead facing him, the motive for that choice obscure but honorable. Though it was painful for him, he did not take his eyes from Spock’s face. ‘Reports are still coming in, and it’s not clear what the hell’s happening exactly, but twenty minutes ago—you’re right. Something did happen to Vulcan. Spock, the planet’s gone.’

Pike had a manner of sharing news that was not overly sentimental. It did not suffer in accuracy for the sake of gentling the impact. Spock preferred this method to any other. He did not seek platitudes, only information. He nodded.

‘I had already suspected as much,’ he said.

The white heat of grief seared him from within. He could not allow it to incapacitate him; neither
could he ignore it. He focused on the same patterns of steady breathing that he had learned on the sands of Vulcan and did not allow his thoughts to travel, tangentially, to the fact that those sands were gone.

‘Like I said,’ Pike continued, in the voice he had used on the bridge of the Enterprise, ‘we’re not sure exactly how, but you wanted the truth, and that’s as much as I know. The planet’s gone. There’s a black hole in its place. We’re trying to keep in contact with survivors and the Federation vessels in the vicinity are all saying this: it wasn’t natural. Somebody—something—and we don’t have a damn idea of what—did that.’

Uhura drew a sharp breath, a sound of sorrow that Spock could not have made. She had covered her mouth; Spock would never have done this.

‘But there are survivors,’ he said. ‘Is there an estimate of how many?’

‘It’s too early to tell,’ Pike replied. ‘We know there was some warning—it wasn’t much, but a few transport ships managed to make it off-world. Some were beamed off by the USS Contact, which was nearby. They were fired on, but they managed to hit warp and escape with forty-five Vulcans on board.’

‘Your honesty is appreciated, Admiral,’ Spock told him.

Forty-five Vulcans. In addition to Spock, there were others off-world who would eventually be counted among the sum total of survivors. Forty-five was not a final tally by any means. Yet this was not an instance in which knowledge could salve the pain that joined Spock’s mind and heart. Numbers and probabilities did nothing to ease the shock of so sudden a loss.

He wished now that he had been capable of gauging the initial alarm when it had struck him—that he had done something more to preserve the memories of those who had used their final seconds of life to reach out to their fellow Vulcans.

He had allowed the summary of their emotions to pass through him like a burst of clean phaser fire and now he was left with nothing: no clear recollection of the voices in his head; no impression of the faces that had passed as shadows across his consciousness. He did not know them, and now he could not be of any use to anyone who might have.

He would be unable to provide corroborating reports of the identities of all those they had lost on Vulcan. Judging from the sheer volume of that loss, however, it was likely that a census would be performed based on the survivors rather than attempting to accurately catalogue a comprehensive report of the deaths.

Either way, such information would require time to tabulate.

As a logical race, the surviving Vulcans could be expected to wait patiently for news of their loved ones, relatives, friends and family. As a logical race, they were all intelligent enough to assume the worst.

Spock’s father Sarek was a diplomat; his work took him across the galaxy, and therefore he was not always stationed on Vulcan itself. Spock’s mother, however, had given up her engagements on Earth in order to relocate to her husband’s home. Amanda Grayson had little reason to leave Vulcan, save for diplomatic missions that called for her to be at Sarek’s side, and had almost certainly been present during the time of Vulcan’s destruction.

A disappearance, Admiral Pike had called it, but Spock had no awareness of any technology that
could transport an entire world intact.

The planet was dead, alongside its considerable population. Spock was one of a bare handful of survivors.

Admiral Pike was speaking. Spock became aware of the cadence of his voice as it filtered into his ears from a distance. It was difficult but not impossible to realign his focus, turning it outward instead of retreating ever more deeply into an inward gaze.

‘I must send word to my mother,’ Spock said. That was not correct. ‘I must attempt to establish communications with my mother, if she has survived the destruction of the planet on which she lives,’ he added.

‘Commander—’ Uhura began. The word was gentle and lacked the strength of its official meaning. It may as well have been a name, for it was personal and sad, and Spock could not answer to it. He was Vulcan. He did not grieve as a human grieved. He could not.

‘I will do this in private,’ Spock said.

Pike nodded, holding up one hand to signal that Spock should stay. ‘You go ahead and do what you have to, Spock. Use my office, while you’re at it. Cadet—Uhura, was it? Cadet Uhura and I will go about our business, considering we’re all going to have our hands full, and we’ll leave you to it.’

Spock nodded. He waited for Pike and Uhura to leave the room, Uhura holding Spock’s test PADDs —she had taken them from him at some point and had them still, though due to the interference, the results would not be accepted and the grades would be rendered void.

Void.

Spock’s private PADD remained. The door to Pike’s office was shut. Pike was correct in assuming that his presence would be requested elsewhere, as Starfleet brass met with Federation councilmembers to discuss this unprecedented disaster.

Disaster.

There was no hostility inherent in the word. A disaster was a volcano, a devastating sandstorm, a hurricane, or an engine malfunction that occurred due to strain on the dilithium chambers, rather than to negligence. A disaster was not an attack, though an attack could easily be a disaster.

Spock opened the channel and began to record his message.

*
Chapter Summary

Counting casualties.

Communication to Amanda Grayson of Vulcan, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.83.

Mother, I know that it is rare that I would send you two communications in the course of the same day, but exigent circumstances have brought to light a need to communicate again.

I do not know if you will receive this message. It is likely that you did not survive the destruction of Vulcan.

If you have, despite the odds, survived, a swift response confirming your whereabouts and your condition would be appreciated.

I would send a similar communication to Sarek, but if he has survived the destruction of Vulcan, then his position as diplomat will demand that his attentions be focused elsewhere than on his family.

Mother, if you yet live, respond as soon as you are able.

*

The first message Spock received—he had not counted the seconds or the minutes, though he was aware of the time passing due to the digital clock on Pike’s desk—was a campus-wide bulletin, informing the student body as well as all other campus residents and workers that a threat was present against the Federation. One of its most prominent planets, Vulcan, had been destroyed. Further information would be released at such a time as it could be cleared for public knowledge.

Spock still was not counting the seconds, but he did not have to in order to know that the second message he received came almost instantaneously after the first—and it, too, was not a message from his mother.

spock where are you

It was Jim. He did not ask, as someone else might, if Spock was ‘all right’, as the parameters lacked specificity—and even then, Spock would not have been able to answer in the affirmative. Jim did not ask because he already knew the answer to such a pointless question.

At first, Spock did not answer. However, in Pike’s darkened office, where the lights had not been turned on after the sun outside had set, there was nothing else for Spock but the silence that was internal as well as external. It was an empty room. He, too, was waiting for a reply that had not come, and as the wait continued the calculations that it would ever end offered diminishing probabilities.

I am in Admiral Pike’s office.

Two responses followed in quick succession.
you alone?

you shouldn’t have to be alone

I am alone.

they’re not letting any of us out of our lecture halls cause the whole campus is on lockdown but i’m gonna try to get to pike’s office. i’ll sneak out or something

That will not be necessary. If the campus is on lockdown, then it would not be conscionable to act in a manner that will complicate the duties of those whose job it is to protect the student body. You must follow protocol.

fuck protocol

you’re not alone spock

Follow protocol and observe instructions as they are given.

i’m gonna keep writing to you spock

i can listen to what they’re telling me and keep writing to you at the same time so that’s what i’m gonna do

there’s about fifty—nah strike that there’s fifty-six third-year cadets in this hall, so i figure the way we’ve been split up is by year and building. people are wondering if other federation planets are gonna be hit next so the way i see it just sitting around on lockdown is the worst possible strategy, but then again, so’s listening to rumor and letting panic set in. i’m not gonna let panic set in either, spock

another announcement just got made, there’s fleet patrols in orbit right now setting up perimeter defense

wish i were up there

I do not wish that you were, Spock wrote.

typical, Jim wrote.

Spock did not comprehend, and conveyed as much in his follow-up message.

Please clarify.

you trying to look after me

especially when you’re the one who needs looking after

I have already informed you that there is nothing I require.

no you didn’t

Spock reviewed their correspondence and was surprised to find that he had not. It had been his intention to reassure Jim first and foremost of his own wellbeing and to explain to him that there was no reason to waste time and energy worrying after someone who was not in any danger. Jim was sensible for a human, but he was emotional, and fell victim to the same assumptions as any member of his species. He assumed that it was Spock who was deserving of concern.
He did not understand that Spock was one of a very select group of Vulcans who did not warrant that concern. If Jim was to turn his attention toward anyone, it should have been the lost.

*spock*

The PADD before him flashed again, drawing Spock’s attention to another obvious factor he had missed. It was unlike him to be so careless. He could understand if this atypical behavior was what had drawn Jim’s attention, but he suspected that it was not.

Vulcan’s disappearance was the more likely motivation than Spock’s distraction.

I am here.

okay

if you want me to leave you alone, i’ll stop

A third message followed before Spock could consider the relevancy of Jim’s offer.

actually scratch that, i said i wasn’t gonna leave you alone and i’m not gonna. don’t feel like you have to answer or anything, but it’s not good for you being all boarded up like that. pike shouldn’t have left you alone.

The Admiral was not remiss in his duties, Spock replied. I am not ill, nor am I injured. There is no special treatment required.

that’s bullshit spock, but whatever

All resources are currently being allocated to the defense of Earth and other Federation worlds.

don’t tell me you’re less important than any of that spock

By any standards of measure that would be true.

He was, after all, only one being. He had been dealt no physical damage, and the mere presence of another individual would not assuage the cause of his suffering.

His mother had not replied to his message, although it had been sent some time before.

There were a number of possibilities as to why. The chance that she was not in possession of a PADD herself—or that she was not in a position to be checking personal messages—was high. But Spock could not pin his hopes to mere speculation. Not in the absence of truth.

it’s not about standards of measure spock

it’s about people

vulcans, humans, everybody

My people have a saying. It is this: ‘I grieve with thee.’

okay sure

that sounds about right

i grieve with thee spock
Spock assessed his grief. It had no size, no shape, and no formula for measurement. It was there in the absence of action; perhaps it was a paralytic, a cause for the absence of action. By his own explanation, all available resources had been allocated to the protection of Earth from a potential threat—the same potential threat that had already dealt the Federation unimaginable damage. If there were, as Jim had said, already security patrols in orbit, then it was likely that Pike was among those commanding a defense vessel. All senior officers would have been assigned to their stations, and as such, Spock should have received an assignment as well.

It was not an oversight that he had received no such orders. Those in authority would have considered him in need of protection—though their concerns would likely have fallen under the category of an emotional, sympathetic response, as opposed to a statistical necessity. If Vulcans were now an endangered species—and by Spock’s calculations, they were—then he could not allow his life to be threatened. It would have to be protected, for the sake of Vulcan culture and for the sake of a Vulcan future.

Spock’s duty to Starfleet was secondary to his duty as a Vulcan. This had always been a possibility and he had always been honest regarding the potential with his superiors.

This left him, as Jim was so eager to repeat, alone. Pike’s office was a familiar space, but in the darkness and without the admiral inhabiting it, it no longer felt familiar. It was a room, a simple assemblage of walls and furniture; it should not have ‘felt’ like anything at all. But perhaps it would have to feel in the absence of Spock’s feelings, which could not be allowed to emerge above the surface.

spock?

I am here, Jim.

okay just checking

we’re all getting moved now, heading back to the safe zones that’re outlined in our intro to starfleet material. nobody else read that thing the way i did

not that i’m bragging it’s just important to know all the entrances and exits to a place and where you’ve got tactical advantages and that kinda thing, you know?

of course you know, you know everything

I, too, familiarized myself with that material, as it was flagged as important. Not to do so would have been negligent.

yeah exactly

hey you should probably get to one of those safe zones yourself right? i mean in case anything happens and right now anything could happen

they’re not exactly keeping us in the know although i’m with chekov right now you remember him? the genius with the stuff in his hair. i’m thinking together we can maybe find a few channels that’ll be more informative

yeah i know spock it’s not like starfleet needs more crap to deal with like a couple of cadets busting through their security protocol but we could help, that’s all i’m saying. we’re smart, we’re qualified, we could be doing something

are you gonna go to a safe zone spock
At present I have concluded that it will be preferable to all involved if I do not.

okay i get it

kind of

no you know what i do get it

just do what you have to but don’t be illogical or anything okay

look after yourself

i’ll keep in touch once we’re all moved

spock

Jim did not write again and Spock did not reply. His safety was, for the time being, not in question. The screen of his PADD was dark. The minutes passed. They, too, were like grief—the incalculable measurements of grief, both space and time, and how each was expressed, though they could not be quantified. He simply waited.

It was past midnight when Spock’s PADD screen brightened. He had not been meditating, although he had entered a semi-meditative state. His body attended to its needs automatically, while Spock crossed the boundaries of memory in a half-trance.

The message was not from Jim; neither was it from Spock’s mother. It was a communication sent to all known Vulcans from those who had been beamed off the planet and onto the USS Contact in the final moments of the planet’s destruction. It contained a succinct and detailed list of procedure to follow in the event of the emergency, duties to which all Vulcans would be required to attend. After that was a list of known Vulcan survivors.

Sarek’s name was not among them.

The message’s informative concision was admirable. The members of Spock’s species had not been so affected that they were unable to carry out their basic duties. Their attention to detail was commendable.

At the end of the transmission was another list—non-Vulcan survivors of Vulcan, now aboard the USS Contact.

Amanda Grayson, wife of Sarek, was among them.

Spock closed his eyes. The brightness of the PADD screen lighting up once more was felt on his face, but he did not open his eyes for some time—an indulgence of which he was not and could not be proud.

At last, having considered the exemplary behavior of Vulcan’s survivors, Spock returned to himself. He took up the PADD and read Jim’s latest communication.

it’s dark here. is it dark where you are, spock?

I have not been relocated. As such, we are experiencing the same planetary light and darkness cycles.

okay
don’t quote me on this but that might’ve been my way of checking where you were

There were several more straightforward ways for Jim to inquire after Spock’s whereabouts, not least of which would have been the actual process of inquiry. It was unlike him to behave in so convoluted a manner, but the act of grieving inspired many unconventional behaviors in both those who suffered and those who were close enough to empathize with the suffering. Spock was well acquainted with the particulars intellectually, although he had never been given cause to experience them personally until this day.

It was, in a word, comprehensive.

Spock could not have asked for a more thorough learning experience. He would not have ever desired it under any circumstances, but such things transpired whether they were willed or not.

Not knowing the cause of what had happened to Vulcan that continued to plague him. His father’s name missing from the list of survivors was something that would be processed and dealt with in time. It was a fact that could be analyzed and therefore understood.

In the absence of understanding there was only a void. Spock had come to the same deduction as every Vulcan must have: that there would be no rest among them until they could comprehend what had happened to their world, if not why.

_I have not moved_, Spock wrote, when he realized he had neglected to carry his end of communications with Jim once again.

_Though he had practiced the method in other circumstances, he was not presently able to cater to human comforts and social traditions. However it was true that the process of receiving and replying to messages was meditative in its own right. If Spock was to be conscious, then it seemed only logical to have a basic means of occupying his thoughts._

_so you’ve just been there alone this whole time spock i don’t know i don’t like that very much it doesn’t seem right_

_Admiral Pike’s continued presence elsewhere suggests that Starfleet utilizing his expertise to its fullest potential. This is preferable for a man of his skill._

_i guess but wouldn’t it be great if we knew what that even meant?_

_Starfleet has its reasons for the hierarchy of disseminating information. I do not seek to question it._

_of course you don’t. not your style_

Spock had never contemplated the delineations of his ‘style’, although now did not seem the ideal point in his life to begin. There were other concerns at hand, from the obvious to the less immediately urgent, such as Jim’s desire to intervene in a cause that did not yet require his intervention.

_Some personalities did not thrive under inaction._

_It was what had suited Jim to a life of Starfleet service, a quality Spock had recognized in him that he knew would have been best nurtured in an environment like the academy._

_hey_

_what are you gonna do spock?_
Of all Jim’s questions, this was the most pertinent. Spock allowed his thoughts to fixate on the subject, employing it as a nucleus around which all other thoughts could structure themselves in orbit. It centered him by allowing him to address the future in a series of logical steps.

It would not be wise for all Vulcans to convene in the same area until the danger is appraised and understood. Until such a time as this has been achieved, I will remain where I am to offer my knowledge and my assistance to the efforts being made here to protect Earth. After the threat has been assessed, I will naturally withdraw from Starfleet in order to attend my people. Their numbers have dwindled exponentially. It will be vital for all those who are able to protect Vulcan culture and preserve Vulcan interests, regardless of their current status and obligations. On this matter the Federation cannot disagree.

wait what?

I am not sure what will be required of me. Yet I am certain that it will be required, and that I shall provide it.

so you’re not gonna be a commander in starfleet anymore

That hardly seems a concern.

starfleet’s gonna miss you

i’m gonna miss you

There is much that will be missed.

Jim’s next message, though delayed, came swiftly enough that Spock did not have time to retreat into meditation again or even begin to surmise that the conversation was over.

hey spock?

Yes, Jim.

i should be there with you

You are where you should be, unless you have vacated the safe zone for reasons known only to yourself.

i haven’t i’m staying

even if it doesn’t feel right

and i’m staying because i know what it’s like to want to be alone when you feel like you should be alone, not because i’m supposed to. figured i should let you know that, you were always honest with me

although come to think of it when i wanted to be alone you kept following me around and figuring out where i was hiding like it was important somebody was with me so now i’m not so sure if i should be doing as you say or doing as you’d do you know?

I would prefer it if you did not add undue strain to Starfleet’s already taxed emergency efforts by complicating their knowledge of where one of their greatest assets for the future, their students, have gone. As, I am sure, those assigned the task of maintaining surveillance over the student body would prefer this as well.
okay okay

you make it sound so simple

*It is one of the matters that is simple.*

it's not

it never is

Jim’s distress, if not palpable, was nevertheless real. Spock again thought of his mother—his mind did not wander, but it returned regularly to a set group of topics that were primary concerns—and from there, he questioned himself as to what his mother would have done to reassure an individual of Jim’s personality when there was little reassurance, if any, to be had. Spock had always been honest with Jim, a fact of which Jim was both aware and appreciative. He would not cease this pattern now that honesty was more fundamental, not less.

*For the present, my mother is alive,* Spock wrote. It was not a direct reply, but it was the truth, and it was the first he had assembled those four words in that particular, incredible order. As unlikely as it was, this was the information with which he had been provided. *Also for the present, it is unclear whether or not my father Sarek has survived.*

*do vulcans hope?*

*Hope is not defined or experienced blindly. It falls under the same category as luck and faith; they are philosophical concepts. As a Vulcan, I calculate.*

*i figured*

*hoping sucks anyway*

*i’ll hope for you though since it’s not your thing*

*You do not have to do anything that ‘sucks’.*

*yeah spock i do*

*that’s good to hear about your mom though*

*i mean it*

*really*

*even if you don’t believe in luck*

*hey so*

*you wanna tell me the odds?*

Spock did. He did not have to pause to calculate. He already knew the answer and provided it without consciously applying himself, discovering that he had sent the probability to Jim before he had the opportunity to translate the numbers into anything else, such as what those numbers stood for.

*yeah, that’s good spock*
It is good.

Minutes passed. Spock discovered he had come to depend upon the conversation for reasons he could not explain. It had provided a structure or rhythm by which to appreciate the passage of time and, without it, that structure had collapsed, leaving only unmarked seconds that were—for lack of a better word—relative.

*if i were there i wouldn’t know what to say or how to say it either.*

*like i keep thinking about all the things i wanted when i needed them but it’s not like i wanted anything i could have*

*i wanted all the things i couldn’t have*

*and the whole time i knew i couldn’t have them*

*hey spock?*

*Yes, Jim.*

*you wanna tell me what your mom’s like?*

Spock did.

He told Jim of his mother’s flowers, the garden she cultivated despite the inhospitable soil, and the potted plants that could be found in every room of the house of Sarek. He told Jim of the scarves she wore and the suspicion he once bore that she wore them less to protect her skin from the harsh sunlight and the sandy winds, but to obscure her rounded ears. In time, though he was not aware of it until it had already transpired, Jim began to share facts about his own mother in return.

Winona Kirk had been a formidable woman, one diminished in hope if not in character after the death of her husband. She did not bake, but she grilled a ‘mean hamburger’, and had instructed Jim in the art of phaser operation. Jim had inherited her smile, although he knew this because he had been told; he had not seen her smile often.

Spock did not allow himself to wonder whether his mother would change if Sarek’s uncertain status came to be clarified as lost. Her family was such that she would not be required to provide for Spock; he was no longer a child, even if he would always be her son.

It was likely that if her character did undergo any great transformation, it would not be in ways that affected the quality of Spock’s life.

His situation was not Jim’s. And yet, as they continued to converse, Spock found himself drawing tenuous comparisons. This was, he understood, the chief goal of relating to another being. If Jim was attempting to relate to him by continuing the conversation, he had performed more than adequately.

Jim had not known his father, but the loss of the man before he was born had shaped the course of Jim’s life. Winona had sought a change from their circumstances, and moved them to live with the aforementioned Uncle Frank, for whom Jim held no familial affection. The lack of success following that decision had led them to apply to be a part of the colony on Tarsus IV, where Jim had lost both brother and mother, the only ‘true’ family he had left.

Stacked numerically against the loss of Vulcan, the massacre at Tarsus IV was minor. But Jim’s grief had been no less great than Spock’s was now.
Personal loss could not be quantified by numbers and analysis. Spock’s father was only one Vulcan; it was senseless to consider his importance ahead of the bulk of the population that had disappeared, to say nothing of the culture, history, and architecture of their homeworld.

Spock was not incapable of appreciating the breadth of the catastrophe.

That did not mean that he would devote the full power of his focus toward it.

*It is likely that we will form a colonization effort on another planet suitable to the particulars of Vulcan physiology,* Spock informed Jim when the hour had grown late. His conversation with Jim had taken the place of his careful mental timekeeping, and he was surprised but not troubled to learn the former was just as suitable as the latter by way of passing the hours.

*sounds lonely*

*But it will be necessary. The survival of our race must be ensured.*

*survival’s pretty hard*

*It is the most basic instinct of all living organisms.*

*you either do it or you don’t*

*There was a depth of philosophy in that statement.*

*it’s the truth*

*we gonna stay up all night talking like this?*

*not that i’m complaining*

*i’d talk to you all night every night*

At last, Spock ascertained the hour on his PADD, and saw that it was zero four hundred thirty-three. There had still been no word from his mother, though he could not expect it before she had the means to make contact. She would be cared for, but her private concerns would not be classified as pressing.

*You should rest, Jim.*

*probably not gonna be able to tonight*

*you were right you know*

*back on the enterprise*

*i had nightmares and that’s why i couldn’t sleep*

*why i didn’t want to at least*

*do vulcans have nightmares*

*i figure probably not*

*They do not, as a general rule,* Spock confirmed. Jim’s sentences had grown erratic, his presentation of information jumbled and unstructured. Though he may have protested due to stubbornness, it was
clear that he was tired and suffering the effects of a lack of proper sleep. The night before could not have been comfortable or restful for him; he had slept on Spock’s couch. If he were to operate in the coming days at an optimal level, he would have to experience the ‘rest and relaxation’ of which the human race was so fond. And, if he were to ignore his basic needs, then Spock would be the one to remind him that they were real, and that they could not be disregarded.

that’s lucky

you guys probably have control over that huh?

You must sleep now, Jim.

and what about you?

I, too, will rest.

you’d better be telling the truth

I would not do otherwise.

i know

always liked that about you

really liked it

Goodnight, Jim.

Spock waited.

night spock, Jim replied.

Spock allowed the screen of his PADD to grow dark once more. As he had promised, he rested, until the light of dawn glanced over the black surface of the PADD. There were new bulletins—updated lists of known casualties—waiting to be consulted.

Spock straightened his posture and read.

*
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

There's no right answer, Spock.

*Communication to Amanda Grayson, wife of Sarek. Stardate 2252.84.*

Hello, Mother. Do not infer that this message is one of reprimand or reproving for any silence on your part. I am aware that your access to proper communication resources has been and will continue to be limited. Mine, however, are not, and as such, it falls upon me to inform you—if you are not already aware—that Sarek has died.

It was common practice aboard the Enterprise, upon which I served as first officer, to ‘soften the blow’ when informing the family members of any crew that were lost during the three-year mission; this practice did not fall to me.

I see no reason to gentle the truth, as it will remain the truth no matter how it is presented.

According to accurate sources, Sarek is dead; according to those same sources, you are not.

This is why I write to you.

Though we are yet separated, I do not believe it would be inappropriate to inform you that I grieve with thee.

* Three days after the destruction of Vulcan, Spock received an alert that the USS Contact docked. An hour later, the transport ships landed in San Francisco, bearing the survivors.

They were not the sum total of that number; others would soon arrive, as the patrols surrounding Earth were on highest alert, making the planet the safest Federation post for an endangered species.

Among the Vulcan elders and Vulcan children who disembarked was a lone, human woman: Amanda Grayson, her familiar scarves billowing in the damp wind. It was raining, though lightly, the air humid and chill, with clouds hanging low over the river, obscuring the topmost points of the arches of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Security was high. Spock had been escorted to the location by two guards; he was to act as a liaison, not an ambassador, bringing the Vulcan elders to Federation headquarters. It was also assumed by Admiral Pike, who had issued Spock his orders after gaining assurance that Spock was fit for duty, that Spock would reunite with his mother.

‘Admiral,’ Spock had replied simply, ‘in a time of crisis, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.’

‘She’s your mother, Spock,’ Pike had insisted. ‘And one day—maybe not tomorrow, maybe not even next year, but sometime in the future—you’ll look back on this and have to decide for yourself whether or not you did the right thing by her. You do the right thing, Commander.’
Spock would not be referred to as ‘Commander’ for much longer.

Amanda caught sight of Spock at the same time as Spock saw her. She was restrained—and not, as perhaps Pike had expected, in need of Spock’s comfort. This was wise of her, as there was no comfort he could have provided.

The source of the attack had been pinpointed as the result of a massive spatial anomaly that cloaked a ship, the specifications of which were not known to the Federation. For the time being, it remained near to the black hole that had once been the planet Vulcan. It was clear to every Federation strategist that it was waiting.

Spock stepped forward to meet his mother.

She took his hand in both of hers, gloved to prevent the gesture from being thought of as improper or too invasive. Even within family units, careless contact was not practiced. Spock’s mother was not a Vulcan, but she had learned their ways before she ever came to live among them. Now more than ever, with their population so diminished, it was important to adhere to traditions.

That was what prevented her from taking the gesture any further; it was also why she did not embrace Spock at the docks the way a conventional human mother might have.

Their family was unique. It had been before the fall of Vulcan and it would continue to be in the aftermath of that fall. Spock allowed her to squeeze his hand, and even leaned close should she change her mind and require a more human expression of affection to comfort her in this time of grief.

While it was true that Vulcan codes of conduct were now more important than ever, Amanda was still a human woman. It could not be expected that she would not appreciate a more native form of reassurance.

Amanda did not hug him. The pain in her face would have been palpable to Spock even without the presence of a strong mental bond.

‘Mother,’ Spock said.

‘Oh, Spock,’ Amanda replied.

There was a quaver in her voice, understated but unmistakable. Spock did not comment on what he had heard, although he committed it to memory. Even his mother, to the best of her abilities, could not fully rein in her emotional reaction to the news that was affecting them both.

Spock could not posit what it was that had caused the strongest of his mother’s grief, although his understanding of her character made a reasonable estimate possible. Although she mourned the loss of the Vulcan homeworld, she was able to return to another home: her birthplace of Earth. But there would not be another Sarek to whom she could return, and humans in general were more inclined to mourn the loss of a single individual than they were to mourn the loss of thousands.

Amanda’s husband, Spock’s father, was lost to them now. The ship manning the singularity that had claimed Vulcan had not yet made contact with the Federation to express their intentions or make demands. Until they did, there was nothing to be gained by asking oneself why.

Spock escorted his mother in a private transport shuttle to the Vulcan embassy in San Francisco. Starfleet resources were stretched thin, directed toward planetary security as well as temporary housing for the Vulcan refugees. Arrangements were already underway for future planning sessions to consult on a likely location for a new colony, although this effort would not be undertaken until
the security of the galaxy could be guaranteed.

There were apartments in the Vulcan embassy that belonged to Sarek, and this was where Spock and his mother arrived. Unlike previous excursions that ended in the same location, there was no luggage to unpack, and while Sarek’s absence made no physical impact, it was felt nonetheless.

Amanda stood beside the window in the sitting room, touching the curtains.

‘I trust that your health is not a concern,’ Spock said.

His mother shook her head. ‘No. My health is fine, Spock.’

‘Do you require sustenance?’

‘I might—later. Just now, I’m not hungry.’

‘Liquid refreshment would be advisable.’

Amanda bowed her head. ‘Very well, Spock. Some water. Thank you for looking after me.’

Spock entered the kitchen and filtered two glasses of water to equal heights. As the water ran into the glasses he acknowledged that the reason they were unable to grieve together was because their modes of grief were too disparate. Spock could not approach loss the same way as a human—and a human could not approach loss any other way. It did not improve that difficulty to be half-human; it merely complicated the matter of Spock’s nature, as conflicting instincts made themselves known to him without offering potential resolutions.

Spock returned to the sitting room, where his mother was still standing by the window, still observing the view from the twenty-second level of the residential complex. The decoration of the room was similar to the rooms within the house of Sarek, though the positioning of the ‘coffee table’ was off by seventeen degrees and there were three fewer chairs, no flowers in the vases as they had only just arrived. There were other changes as well, and Spock catalogued them while Amanda held a glass of water in one gloved hand and a length of window curtain in the other.

She did not drink.

‘Oh, my,’ she said, turning away from the view at last and allowing the curtain to fall. ‘I’ve allowed my glove to get wet. How very careless of me.’

She crossed the room, placing the glass on the coffee table and occupying the nearest seat. Finger by finger, she removed the water-stained glove, and spread it out neatly beside the glass. It lay flat and empty on the dark, polished wood. Her hand was now bare, a sight Spock did not often have occasion to see. Since his early childhood, she had worn gloves whenever she was with him, a gesture that was suggestive of forethought, consideration, and protection. Amanda would not accidentally touch her son and share with him more of a mother’s heart than a mother should. She would not impose upon his senses; she would not force humanity upon him. He had appreciated her love as it presented itself: through intelligence. However, he had also considered these small acts of caring with the faintest confusion that to this day had not been resolved.

Spock knelt on the floor beside her. With her gloved hands, she had sometimes brushed his hair back from his face, touches that were as light and as brief as a sirocco breeze. He had valued those moments, though he had never said as much; that he did not protest should have been confirmation enough.

Perhaps it was not.
He took his mother’s bare hand with both of his own and with it, held her sorrow. It was strong and rich and deep. Colorless, soundless, but heavy—it did not resemble the world that had been destroyed but the world on which they currently took refuge.

‘Yes,’ Amanda said. ‘Yes, Spock—I grieve with thee, as well.’

They were silent, attuned to one another’s breathing. Spock regulated their inhalations and exhalations so that his mother would experience the relief of a meditative state. She rested her forehead against his, scarves and his hair between their brows, and hours passed.

At length, Amanda pulled back to rearrange the fall of her headscarves.

‘Are you tired, Spock?’ she asked.

‘I am and I am not,’ Spock replied.

Amanda nodded. ‘Of course. That does seem familiar. I suppose I’ll drink that water now.’ She did so, bare palm pressed to the glass, leaving the faint outline of heat from her touch when she released it. ‘If neither of us is prepared to sleep a little just yet, I think it would be best if we made ourselves useful to Vulcan.’

‘The Vulcan elders who were rescued will be more than able to attend those duties,’ Spock said.

‘Perhaps in time—but for now, I’d imagine they’re occupied in very specific ways. They won’t be thinking about relocation efforts right away, which means it might be helpful if we were to do the research.’

‘You have had a long journey,’ Spock said.

‘Yes. Very long,’ his mother replied.

‘I am acquainted with a counselor whose qualifications are more than acceptable,’ Spock added. ‘I am sure that her presence would be beneficial.’

‘I’m sure that it would.’ Amanda paused. ‘In time. It’s Christine Chapel, isn’t it? Yes, I would love to meet her—soon. Not now. I’m going to consult a few cosmic maps, Spock, I think that would be for the best. They must be a little more detailed now than when I was a cadet.’ She stood. ‘Once that’s finished, we might both be hungry. Working always stimulates the appetite.’

Her words were sensible, but Spock found that her sensibility at this time was anything but.

‘I will remain here,’ Spock said.

‘Are you sure, Spock?’ The tightness around his mother’s mouth aged her—though aging was to be expected, since Spock had not been in the same room with her in nearly four years. ‘You don’t have to be alone. You aren’t alone.’

‘I know that I am not,’ Spock said. ‘It is practical to engage in the act of research you have suggested.’

‘Yes,’ Amanda replied. ‘I thought so.’

Spock could not tell his mother how to grieve. He had been aware of this fact long before her arrival—but when it came to putting his knowledge into practice, he found himself confronted with an unexpected inner struggle. It did not arise from the desire to instruct her, but rather from his concern
for her.

What Spock had glimpsed during their brief moments of shared emotion was not unfathomable. It was deeply personal, but Spock was perhaps the only other being who could understand its extent. They were a family, now diminished, but diminished together.

It was only right that Spock should stay with her in order to reinforce this belief.

‘It would be prudent to begin in the Alpha Quadrant,’ Spock said. ‘Although much of it has been explored, this would be the first known instance in which any group would have chosen the exact search parameters necessary to find a suitable match for the Vulcan atmosphere.’

‘Very sensible of you, Spock,’ Amanda replied. ‘I imagine we’ll be like pioneers.’

The humans Spock had known in Starfleet always attached a measure of excitement to the title of ‘pioneer’, as though to go forth into the unknown and discover what it offered was the greatest adventure conceivable by the human mind.

By comparison, Spock and Amanda must have made a relatively grim portrait as they pored over the interactive star charts projected by holograph onto Sarek’s glass table.

They allowed for full rotation of the quadrant under examination, so that a three-dimensional view of all known, charted planets could be observed and their locations analyzed from all angles. It was unlikely that such a monumental decision would be influenced by arbitrary participants—but both Spock and Amanda held enough sway due to their unique positions to at least be allowed communication with the Council.

If anywhere suitable were discovered during their research, they would be able to at least make a recommendation.

Spock took notes while Amanda searched and offered his experience with certain worlds only when prompted. On the rare occasions when his mind threatened to wander from their task, he observed his mother, although he could not have said what it was he sought to find.

The room, darkened to suit their purposes, grew darker still as the sun set behind the buildings. This afforded Spock and his mother a greater view of the star charts, but it meant that Spock no longer had any natural light by which to observe the minute changes in her expression.

‘Mother,’ Spock said, once three hours had stretched close to four, ‘it is past the conventional dinner hour.’

‘Oh, Spock—you must be hungry.’ Amanda sat back, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, a pause that Spock could not study in the darkness. ‘I’m so sorry, Spock. I really wasn’t thinking.’

‘I am not suffering distress,’ Spock replied in an attempt to assuage her misplaced guilt. ‘I have gone for longer periods of time having eaten less, and as you yourself mentioned earlier, neither of us seem to be experiencing acute hunger, as we would under other circumstances.’

‘Other circumstances.’ Amanda quickly shut off the projector; with that, the room was truly dark, Spock’s eyes adjusting more quickly than his mother’s. He heard the rustle of her scarves—a gentle whisper of fabric that was reminiscent of home. ‘Still, we can’t allow ourselves to neglect every—one logical duty we have. And we do have many.’

Spock inclined his head in a nod as he stood. ‘I will make the preparations. While I am aware of the
comforting qualities of the “home-cooked meal”, the hour is late enough that utilizing the replicator will be a more sensible choice.” Now, it was Spock who paused, standing between rooms. He knew where the light controls were for the kitchen, but he refrained from activating them.

His mother remained seated in the empty living room.

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

She sounded lost. Spock was not susceptible to tricks of the light—or a lack thereof—and did not allow himself to presume this was an effect of the darkness on his sensibilities. They were not so shaken that they were no longer as solid and as consistent as ever.

‘No—I do know,’ Amanda continued. ‘I’d like a bowl of plomeek soup. I never much cared for it, you see.’

‘Then it does not make sense that you should request to eat it now,’ Spock said.

‘No,’ Amanda replied. ‘It doesn’t. But that’s what I want to have. I suppose I seem very silly to you tonight, Spock—don’t I?’

‘I will procure your bowl of plomeek soup in accordance with your request,’ Spock told her.

He turned the light on in the kitchen, though it was harsh on his eyes until they re-adjusted, and programmed the replicator accordingly. Two bowls of plomeek soup were produced, steam rising from the surface of the liquid. It would have been appropriate if his mother had joined him in the kitchen to have their meal at the kitchen table, or if she had entered the adjacent dining room to wait for him there, but she had done neither.

Spock brought the soup into the sitting room. Although it was an unconventional place to take the evening meal, it was not without precedent.

They ate in silence for the first three minutes of the meal, save for the sound of Amanda blowing on each spoonful to cool the liquid before it entered her mouth.

‘It isn’t as tart as I remember,’ she confessed at last.

‘That is a function of the replicator settings,’ Spock replied. Amanda pursed her lips and blew over another spoonful, furrowing minuscule ripples across the liquid’s surface. ‘I will contact my acquaintance, the counselor, and request her presence.’

‘No,’ Amanda said quickly. Then, more gently, she added, ‘that won’t be necessary, Spock.’

‘She is knowledgeable and her methods are generally effective,’ Spock said. ‘The scope of her research is impressive and her education affords her insights into human emotionalism that I am lacking. She would be of use here, and would not put her comfort and her schedule above the needs of a potential patient.’

‘Oh, Spock.’ Amanda set down her spoon. ‘I do want to meet your friend—only I’d rather have the chance to meet her because she is your friend, and not because I’m a potential patient.’

‘That distinction is not entirely necessary.’

‘Isn’t it?’ For an instant, Spock detected the melody in his mother’s voice that signaled her version of a smile. It did not touch her lips and therefore could not be seen—but it could be heard, and would only have been subtle to other humans, while a Vulcan would have been able to detect it
immediately. There had been times when Spock had felt concern for her, believing her to be unaware
that she had not succeeded in hiding her amusement or her affection, but he had come, however
slowly, to understand that hiding had never been her intent in the first place. She was herself, and
would not be anyone other. ‘You shouldn’t have to worry about me, Spock.’

‘You are my mother,’ Spock replied.

‘And you are my son,’ Amanda said.

She had not finished her soup. What Spock had perceived as a brief pause was in fact a conclusion.
She had not eaten enough to achieve optimal levels of nutrition.

Instead, she folded her hands in her lap. She was still missing one glove, though it must have dried
hours ago.

Some further attempts at conversation, it seemed, would be necessary.

‘I do not intend to continue my position as an officer of Starfleet,’ Spock said. ‘After a plan for the
future of Vulcan has been secured, I will resign my post and attend the preservation of the culture.’

‘Spock,’ Amanda said, with no smile in her voice. ‘Are you certain?’

‘I could not be more certain,’ Spock replied. ‘All those who are able must commit themselves to this
duty without hesitation.’

‘I’m sure that your father would be very—’ Amanda rearranged the placement of her spoon within
her half-eaten bowl of plomeek soup for no reason that Spock could determine. ‘He would be very
proud.’

‘He would not be proud of that which was the only logical course of action,’ Spock replied.

‘He would be,’ Amanda insisted. ‘Even if he didn’t show it. Sometimes, these things go unnoticed. It
doesn’t make them any less real.’

Spock did not know what could be said in response to that. Though his mother was sitting beside
him, she was not close.

‘Your PADD, dear,’ she said. ‘Over there, on the desk—it’s flashing.’

‘It is not important,’ Spock said.

‘I find that hard to believe,’ Amanda replied.

She was not incorrect. Spock had come to associate the flashing light of his PADD notification with
contact from Jim, something he had not realized until this moment. But he could not be certain
without verification if the message was not more important: such as an official notice from the
Vulcan embassy or an inquiry as to his mother’s health from Pike.

Spock had acquaintances other than Jim. There was no reason beyond routine for him to assume that
he knew the context of the message before he had read it, and that routine had been broken.

‘Perhaps you are correct,’ Spock acquiesced.

There was always room in Spock’s mind for reconsideration, and no one knew it better than his
mother. He stood, fetching his PADD from the shelf where he had abandoned it in favor of
examining star charts.
There were four new messages on the device; none were official communiqués about the Vulcan emergency or Starfleet bulletins regarding the status of the anomalous ship orbiting the location that had once been occupied by Vulcan.

Three of them were indeed from Jim, and the fourth was from Chapel, which included a list of approved substitutes to assume Spock’s classroom duties.

*hey spock*, the first said.

*i was gonna ask how you’re holding up but that seems pretty stupid given the circumstances*

*i went by your place but the lights were all out/no one answered the bell so i just wanted to make sure you’re all right and all*

As Spock was reading, another message flashed to the top of the queue.

*you’re not with scotty are you haha*

This question, facetious in nature, was not wholly irreverent, as it gave Spock a clear point from which to begin replying to Jim’s myriad queries.

*I am with my mother, Lady Amanda Grayson, in the apartments that previously belonged to my father, Sarek of Vulcan. The nature of their belonging has not changed—they have fallen to my mother’s ownership—but since my father is now presumed deceased, it is accurate to describe them as such.*

Jim’s reply came swiftly; it was not difficult for Spock to imagine him sitting in his own cluttered quarters, with his PADD close at hand.

*Jesus*

*i know she got in today i just wasn’t sure if you guys were still together or what since it was a while ago*

*sorry spock i’m an idiot just forget i ever said anything ok?*

*That is impossible.*

*you’re with your mom you should go be with her*

*I have been with her for the majority of the day and the evening. We have shared a meal reminiscent of the dishes native to my homeworld, the one from which my mother was rescued prior to its destruction. We have also committed ourselves to duties that may in the future provide assistance to the Vulcan people, such as researching uninhabited Class M planets that would be suitable to the needs of a growing Vulcan population.*

After a pause, considering that which would seem important to Jim as a human, Spock added: *We have also grieved together in a way that befits our personalities. Understand that my mother is not given to displays of emotionalism despite her human origins and upbringing. Her time on Vulcan and among Vulcans has cultivated in her an admirable restraint, so that any overt displays of sentimentality would no doubt be comparably distasteful to her as they would be to me.*

*you guys need anything?* Jim asked, after an appropriate amount of time had passed for him to read and process Spock’s latest, and longest, message.
anything i could get for you, I mean

bring you some stuff from your apartment or something

The apartment that once belonged to Ambassador Sarek is amply stocked with all that his family should need.

oh yeah of course it is

but if you do need anything you can count on me for that

even if we are supposed to stick to our schedules and not go off on our own or anything i figure it’d be an important errand and anybody else would agree

it just doesn’t seem right acting like everything is normal when it isn’t

The approach is a sensible one. In order to foster a sense of calm among the populace and maintain stability, the presence of a familiar routine provides structure for those who would otherwise fall prey to the uncertainty of chaos.

but the chaos is out there and acting like it’s not isn’t gonna make it go away

still i get it and i’ve been doing my homework and everything

‘Was it important?’ Amanda asked quietly.

Spock had not forgotten that she was there; the sound of her rhythmic breathing, the smells she had brought with her, were impossible to ignore, and they filled any room in which she was present. He set his PADD aside.

‘It was merely a series of communications from an individual of my acquaintance, Jim Kirk,’ Spock said.

When his mother did not react with genuine interest to the name, Spock could confirm what he had always assumed: that she had not received his message referring to the nature of his relationship with Jim, as she had not thought to comment upon it.

It was true now that this relationship was not the most important topic to address at this time; however, it was also true that Amanda might prefer a distraction from those important topics, as they had spent the day addressing them.

Spock could not be certain.

He wrote to Christine Chapel instead requesting her opinion.

There’s no right answer, Spock, she wrote back quickly, aware of the sensitive nature of his inquiry. I wish there was, but there isn’t. It all depends on the person—and you know your mother far better than I could. Still, Spock, if there’s anything that you might benefit from talking about, you only have to ask.

I understand your willingness to assist and it is not unappreciated, Doctor Chapel. Should my mother express interest in your services as a specialist I will contact you at once.

‘Another acquaintance?’ Amanda’s voice was soft, not without tenderness, as though she was speaking to Spock years in their shared past—as though she thought of him as a boy, rather than as a man. He allowed the oversight to pass without comment. ‘It’s good to know you have friends who
are worried about your well-being.’

‘I do not take comfort in the knowledge that I have caused others to worry on my behalf,’ Spock replied. ‘Are you weary from the stressors of the day?’

‘Something like that, I suppose.’ Amanda stood. ‘We should both get some rest—keep up our strength to meet the coming day.’

‘That is wise,’ Spock said.

They retired to their separate rooms. On the shelf by Spock’s bed there was a model of the Golden Gate Bridge, one of the items of memorabilia Sarek had procured during his trips of outreach to Starfleet headquarters in San Francisco. On one of those trips of outreach, he had met Spock’s mother, and it was Spock’s understanding that the model had been bought at that time as commemoration, at his mother’s urging. His father had not seen the purpose in this human ritual, but he had allowed himself to participate nonetheless. Spock had often desired to know the reason why.

Now, he no longer had the opportunity to ask.

*
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Parted from me, but never parted...

Spock of Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2252.105. To Admiral Christopher Pike, C/o—Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco

It is my intention to retire from active service in Starfleet and act as Federation liaison to Vulcan in whatever capacity I am able.

Though it is true that Starfleet’s efforts against the yet-unidentified rogue vessel that destroyed the planet Vulcan are currently underway and that a state of emergency has been put into effect, it is also true that I cannot allow my life to be endangered on the frontlines, as it will be imperative that I contribute to the repopulation efforts of my species.

It has been my honor to serve with my fellow officers and under my superiors.

My resignation shall be effective once the paperwork has been processed.

This has been my final personal log.

*

Despite the best intentions of both Spock’s peers and colleagues in their efforts to understand his decision, it was evident in the days that followed that some were experiencing difficulty concealing their evident disappointment over Spock’s resignation.

‘A damn shame, is what it is,’ Admiral Pike said. He had never demonstrated any previous struggle expressing himself plainly, and this particular event was no exception. ‘Finest first officer I ever served with. Hell, and don’t spread this around—not that you would; you’re cagey even for a Vulcan—but you’re probably the best in the fleet.’

‘It would be appropriate to amend your appraisal to the more appropriate past tense,’ Spock informed him.

‘And I think I’ll miss our little talks most of all, Spock,’ Pike replied.

After Pike, there were the other members of the crew Spock had served with aboard the Enterprise, among them Leonard H. McCoy and Montgomery Scott, both of whom conveyed in their own ways that they could not imagine making a similar sacrifice. This, Spock refrained from mentioning, was likely due to the fact that Earth was still intact and its population as robust as ever.

It was a decision that had to be made as a result of an incredibly specific set of circumstances. Therefore, there was no one else who could truly comprehend Spock’s situation.

The apparent sympathy, at least, could be appreciated where the confusion was not.

‘I’ll be sure and keep an eye on th’ship for ye, Commander,’ Scott said.
‘That title is no longer accurate,’ Spock replied.

‘All the same,’ Scott said, ‘I think I’ll stick with the formalities.’

As a man who professed to be more comfortable with machinery than his fellow officers, this request did not seem out of the ordinary.

Last among the crew was Christine Chapel, who met Spock’s news with the same levelheaded grace she had utilized in talking him through his other personal complications. She informed him that she would be serving as a medical doctor in addition to her duties as counselor in the future, although she had not yet been assigned a vessel.

‘So we’re both moving on, Spock—in our own ways,’ she said.

It was common practice for humans to relate to one another’s conditions by sharing something personal about themselves. Spock understood this and could welcome the effort she had put toward creating effective closure for their time together.

There was one more person, though he had not served aboard the Enterprise, with whom Spock had cultivated a relationship of substantial intimacy. It would not be appropriate to leave the campus without addressing the state of their association with one another.

Just because Spock was leaving Starfleet without reservation did not indicate that he approached his necessary departure from Jim’s side with similar, straightforward determination.

They had not found occasion to spend much time with one another in the past month, as Spock’s attentions were devoted foremost to his mother and to his people, and Jim had continued to apply himself with admirable vigor to his schoolwork in order to support Starfleet Academy’s attempts at normality. They had separate duties, separate roles to play, and separate lives to lead, and were both intelligent enough to recognize that their preferences were no longer a part of the equation. While it was a departure from the same adherence to routine that structured the rest of campus life, they were busy enough that there was little time for regret.

Instead, there were battlefront reports arriving multiple times a day; meetings among top Federation scientists for the analysis and replication of the rogue ship’s technology; and a forum of Vulcan elders that met daily, devoted the development of a New Vulcan Initiative. These occupied Spock’s attention fully, as did his mother’s involvement therein, not just his own.

Jim did not neglect his attempts at communication. Spock’s PADD contained many messages inquiring after his health and informing him of day-to-day minutiae, to which Spock replied honestly, though he did not divulge any details that would break confidentiality.

Therefore, they were in contact, but it was not the same. It could not be.

As he had served in Starfleet, Spock was qualified to be—and accepted as—a member of the initial group set to arrive on the chosen planet for Vulcan colonization; he would depart in a cloaked transport for the classified location the morning of Stardate 2252.106.

Jim had expressed the desire—he had phrased it as a ‘need’—to see Spock in person before zero-six hundred on the appointed date, and Spock accepted. They met outside the Vulcan embassy at dusk, twenty-five minutes after the end of Jim’s final class that day, at which point Jim was not dressed in his cadet reds, but wearing a familiar leather jacket Spock had not seen on him in years.

‘I was not aware that you had kept that jacket,’ Spock said. ‘Yet, as you once expressed your sentimentality for the garment, considering it once belonged to your brother, I should not be surprised
to note that it is still in your possession.’

‘Yeah.’ Jim shrugged, upturning the collar up around his face. He had very recently been given a haircut. ‘Gotta hang onto it.’

‘Indeed.’

‘You have anywhere special you wanna go?’ Jim asked, rolling his shoulders beneath the old, cracked leather.

‘As you chose the time, I had assumed you also had a place in mind.’

‘Or maybe, since I chose the time, it’d only be fair if you chose the place.’ Jim sighed, continuing before Spock could supply a list of potential locations. ‘Might be nice to get off the campus, go for a walk. I’ve been sitting in lectures all day. Wouldn’t mind getting the chance to stretch my legs.’

‘Then we will go for a walk,’ Spock said. ‘However, an ultimate destination will be required.’

‘We can head to the waterfront, maybe,’ Jim replied.

That was not a specific terminus, but it would suffice. Spock turned to cross the campus green with Jim by his side, Jim’s silence pronounced between the heavy clip of his footfalls on the stone walkway.

‘Still can’t believe you’re bailing,’ he said finally, as they passed beneath the metalwork arch of the front gate.

‘“Bailing”,’ Spock repeated.

‘Leaving. Whatever. You know what I mean.’ Jim tapped his ID card on the scanner for signing out, then stuffed the card—and both hands—into his pockets. ‘You told me that I belonged here, I just figured you felt the same way.’

‘Whether or not you are able to believe it does not change the fact that I will be gone tomorrow morning,’ Spock said.

Jim huffed, and fell silent once more.

Though Spock had attended Starfleet Academy and had familiarized himself with the surrounding city, he did not often spend recreational time off the campus and in downtown San Francisco. It was crowded in a more diverse fashion than the academy campus; human fashion would forever remain anathema to Spock’s senses, as would their desire to rush across streets before lights changed to signal they should stop and wait at the corner, as though the thirty seconds they would gain would make a vital difference—or as though they had failed to memorize the streetlights’ timing schedule, so as to avoid the need to rush in the first place.

Jim stopped at one such streetlight with Spock. They were able to see the Golden Gate Bridge, alight in the darkness, over the rooftops. Though the city planning could at times feel haphazard, this choice in particular made visual sense.

‘You gonna get cold by the water?’ Jim asked.

‘I dressed appropriately.’

‘You gotta tell me if you get cold,’ Jim said.
‘If the temperature presents discomfort, I will not refrain from informing you.’

‘Just tell me if you do,’ Jim said, though Spock had already confirmed that he would.

It was cool on the cement walkway that ran alongside the water, as Jim had anticipated, but it was not unpleasant enough for Spock to mention it. Rather than claim a bench to sit upon, Jim continued to walk—which was sensible, as action would produce body heat, and prevent Spock from feeling the full brunt of the chill.

‘So,’ Jim said, without clarification or further incentive to reply.

‘So,’ Spock repeated.

Jim stopped and turned, offering no warning for his abrupt actions. Spock was swift enough to avoid a collision, noticing Jim had balled his hands into fists where they were hidden in his now-bulging pockets.

‘You know I’m gonna miss you, right?’ he asked, though it sounded more like a demand. ‘I just don’t know—I keep telling myself, of course you are—but are you gonna miss me?’

‘Whether or not I will miss you will have no bearing upon my plans,’ Spock said.

‘Jesus.’ Jim breathed out, creating a cloud of moisture in the air. ‘You’d think I wouldn’t miss that, but apparently I’m crazy.’

‘You have given no indication of having taken leave of your senses,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said, ‘other than this little thing I like to call our entire relationship.’

On the topic of relationships, Spock’s knowledge was limited. It seemed to him that it was not desirable to have attained mental instability through the company of a cherished companion—but he was also acquainted with Jim and his quirks of behavior, and knew that Jim’s emotions were deeply felt. This did not preclude him from being prone to exaggeration.

It was a defense mechanism related to the art of humor.

Spock could not relate personally, as the human sense of comicality was something that had consistently eluded him. However, he had observed this trait on more than one occasion being displayed by his peers, and by Jim in particular.

They knew one another. In spite of their differences, they had reached an understanding that benefited them both. Because of this, Spock did not take offense at Jim’s inflammatory comment, in spite of the tone in his voice.

‘You are employing sarcasm,’ Spock said.

Jim laughed. It was similar to the laughter he had employed aboard the Enterprise, a sound more akin to restless desperation than genuine amusement. He doubled over as the sound went on, taking his hands from his pockets to wrap his arms around himself. There were few passersby on the walkway who observed Jim’s strange behavior. A lone boat passed by slowly in the harbor; above and ahead of them on the bridge, cars rolled by in a series of flashing headlights.

‘Have I said something amusing?’ Spock asked.

‘No.’ Jim straightened, wiping the tears from his eyes with his knuckles. ‘But also—yeah. I guess.
You’re just… You, you know? I don’t know anyone else who says stuff like that.’

‘There are—’ Spock began, and then stopped himself. ‘You have not yet been given opportunity to converse with many Vulcans.’

‘You were just about to say there aren’t any other Vulcans in Starfleet, weren’t you?’

Jim’s gaze was keen, his bottom lip white around the edges of his teeth where he was biting it. It was evident that he was more troubled by Spock’s decision than Spock had allowed himself to be, even though it was not something that would affect the course of Jim’s life directly.

Indirectly, however, it would alter his routine and his patterns of socialization. It would certainly make an impact, though in time, Jim would come to appreciate his new routine and new patterns of socialization.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said. ‘I’m gonna miss you, and this. Especially talking to you, weird as it is. But I get it, too. I know why you’re doing what you’re doing. It’s just—it’s Starfleet’s loss, that’s all.’ Jim shook his head on a single word—loss—turning his gaze out over the water. The reflection of the distant headlights brightened his eyes. He ceased to bite his lip. His hands hung empty at his sides, as he was no longer clenching them into too-tight fists.

‘We will still be able to pursue one avenue of communication,’ Spock reminded him. ‘The text-based messaging program of which you are so fond will remain a viable means of conversation.’

‘Yeah,’ Jim said again. As his voice was hoarse, he was forced to clear his throat. ‘Of course. But you’ll be busy doing your own stuff, and I’ll be busy, too. Won’t be able to meet up for lunch or study after class or—all the usual stuff.’

‘Naturally, we will not.’

‘So it’ll be different,’ Jim said.

‘Change does not inherently possess negative or positive connotations,’ Spock replied.

‘Guess not.’ Jim shrugged. ‘Guess it probably, uh, possesses both.’

Spock nodded.

‘I get it,’ Jim repeated. He was prone to that now for reasons Spock could not grasp; they were in an emotional realm just outside of his reach. It was possible—highly probable, in fact—that Jim believed Spock’s certainty and determination, coupled with his lack of an emotional reaction, suggested that Jim would not also be missed. However, Jim had not demanded proof that Spock would be unhappy without him—and that was sensible, as in matters of affection, it would be contradictory to wish the object of said affection to experience distress.

‘I meant only to offer an alternative,’ Spock said, ‘in order to provide that which you would be…’ He paused. ‘…missing.’

‘I know, Spock. I gotcha.’ Jim’s mouth twisted, in a shape that was neither smile nor frown. ‘Only there isn’t any alternative. You or not you—those are the two options.’

‘I am leaving Starfleet,’ Spock said. ‘It is true that there may be difficulties and there will certainly be dangers. However, they will be no more or less severe, in their own way, than if I continued my post as an officer in the fleet.’
‘Just take care of yourself, okay?’

‘Considering the depleted numbers of my people, to do otherwise would be indefensible.’

‘I don’t mean like that.’ Jim’s arm swung, seemingly independent of conscious thought, back and forth by his side in an uncharacteristically obvious display of anxiety. With each swing, his knuckles narrowly missed brushing Spock’s fingers. The breeze that the motion caused, a disturbance in the air, was cool against the back of Spock’s hand.

‘Do you intend to clarify?’ Spock asked.

Jim’s arm stopped. His knuckles were half a centimeter—even less—away from Spock’s. After a brief pause, he allowed them to touch, each ridge resting in a corresponding valley. It was a physical connection that could not be denied, though it did not demand more from Spock than was decent or respectful of his boundaries. Jim did not rub Spock’s fingertips with his own, callused and strong as his fingers were, but Spock recalled the sensation nonetheless, a memory inspired by the simplest, gentlest of touches.

‘Sometimes,’ Jim said, swallowing thickly, ‘not all the time, but sometimes, when you’re not too busy and if you remember—and I know, you don’t forget stuff—but sometimes, think about how I’d take care of you, and do that.’

‘A peculiar request,’ Spock replied. ‘However, I will honor it.’

Jim’s smile was in his eyes. He blinked rapidly and nodded. ‘Yeah. Cool. Thanks, Spock. For everything.’

‘I am also grateful for “everything” that we have experienced together, Jim.’

‘Yeah?’ Again, Jim cleared his throat. ‘Yeah, me too. I already said that, but it’s true. Some things need repeating, just so you know it’s not a one-time deal. Something that could happen again, even.’

‘Even if you do not intend to remain “in touch” and it is no longer within my purview to “keep tabs” on the cadets and officers in Starfleet, I will attempt to remain current with your career,’ Spock said.

‘You mean you’re gonna check up on me?’ Jim did not sound displeased. In fact, despite his meticulously cultivated privacy, this possibility caused him to sound hopeful.

‘As I suggested that you apply yourself to this particular course of study, I believe the proper phrase would be: I have a vested interest in the results.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m not gonna let you down,’ Jim said.

‘That is not a matter with which you must concern yourself.’

‘Still,’ Jim said, ‘I’m gonna graduate, and I’m gonna get an assignment to a ship, and if they haven’t been tracked down yet, if nobody’s caught up to ‘em—then I’m gonna get the bastards that did this. I’m gonna get ‘em.’

His hand shook, and Spock wondered if this was due to the cold. Though Jim’s body regularly emanated warmth from a raised temperature, Spock had not yet considered the possibility that he might suffer from the distinct chill in the damp air.

‘An embrace, at this time, would not be inappropriate,’ Spock said. It was both indicative of a farewell and a logistical means of sharing body heat.
‘Oh my god,’ Jim said.

This, Spock recognized, was an expression he most commonly used in times of distress or frustration. Jim was clearly reacting to the influence of both, although it did not seem to be a direct result of Spock’s statement.

When Jim threw himself at Spock it felt more like an assault than an embrace. His body collided with Spock’s chest as though it was his intention to knock Spock off-balance—although their understanding of each other permitted Spock to comprehend that this could not be Jim’s intention. His arms wrapped hard around Spock’s shoulders, and even though there was still a notable difference in their heights, that distance was shrinking week by week.

If they were to see each other again, it was possible that Jim would not have to look up in order to meet Spock’s eye. It was unlike Spock to deal in uncertainties; however, at this time in his life, he believed he could allow some atypical behavior to pass unchecked.

He could feel Jim’s thumbs digging into the space between his shoulder blades, reminding Spock that the proper thing to do in such an instance was to contribute to the gesture. He lifted his arms to put them around Jim’s waist. There was no remaining distance between them to bridge, yet Spock tightened his hold on Jim’s body, providing him with the security of a firm hold returned.

There was something wet against the side of his neck, separate from the typical damp that hung over the harbor. It was not cool, but touched with a distinctive, human warmth.

‘Are you crying?’ Spock inquired.

‘What?’ Jim asked.

‘You are shedding tears,’ Spock said, ‘as the result of your emotional state.’

‘No.’ Jim’s reply was vehement, his breath a gust of hot air against Spock’s throat. He moved his mouth against the thin skin of Spock’s neck. He had not worn a high collared shirt for the occasion, a decision that at the time had seemed arbitrary, but now served a greater purpose. ‘It’s just—it’s allergies, Spock. It’s nothing.’

While it was true that Jim’s immune system was what McCoy had referred to as ‘a tricky bastard’ during their shared correspondence regarding Jim’s well-being, it seemed unlikely that he would have spontaneously generated a sudden allergy to Spock or the fibers of his clothing.

‘You are not allergic to me, Jim,’ Spock pointed out.

‘I’m allergic to goodbyes,’ Jim said.

‘That is not what this is.’

‘The wind,’ Jim said.

‘Currently you are protected from the wind by my person,’ Spock replied.

‘It’s a lot of things,’ Jim said. ‘Everything. Just let me—’

His cinched his arms more tightly around Spock’s shoulders instead of finishing his sentence verbally. The action appeared to convey, to Jim’s satisfaction, all that he had not said. For Spock, intuiting the exact definition of the intention was not so simple. If he had the opportunity, he would meditate on the meaning of the moment further, though it was unlikely the opportunity would present
itself for some time.

Jim turned his face against Spock’s throat, breath warm, his hair a faint tickle at Spock’s skin. Though Spock would not have requested the embrace for himself, he discovered that it was not as intrusive or as uncomfortable as he would have predicted. He did not prefer to be held; he did not seek close physical proximity with others. Yet Jim was warm, the smell of his leather jacket distinct and the smell of his skin and sweat even more so, as his fingers clenched the fabric at Spock’s collar. His chest was broad; the breeze shifted his hair to brush the underside of Spock’s jaw.

There they remained until the cloud cover that misted the city night-lights opened and it began, faintly, to rain, at which point they departed together, then parted from one another.

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Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Excerpts from the private logs of Spock of New Vulcan. (No, I'm totally not updating this from work while everyone's on their lunch break...)

EXCERPTS FROM THE PERSONAL LOG OF SPOCK OF NEW VULCAN, Stardate 2252.108 – Stardate 2255.25.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2252.108.

Herein is my first record submitted for posterity regarding the unnamed Class M planet assigned the Vulcan people, herewith referred to as New Vulcan.

The atmosphere is suitable to our needs, the soil acceptable to the cultivation of our native flora—samples of which have been retained or genetically engineered—and the city planning is already underway. At such a time as proper security measures are established, the remaining Vulcan population will join the initial group here on this planet, and we shall begin to rebuild a culture that would otherwise have been lost without this initiative.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2252.159.

The arrival of the first transport of Vulcans was not without its unforeseen difficulty. Escorted by the USS Enterprise, a ship on which I once served, those aboard the transport were not harmed by the attack from the ship known to us now as the Narada. Their first—and only—communication with the Federation indicates that they are Romulans, though they are unlike any Romulans known to the Federation, and that they will not rest until they have destroyed every last Vulcan alive.

The coordinates of New Vulcan remain unknown to the enemy of the Vulcan people.

I have learned that four lives were lost on the Enterprise as a result of the confrontation: Lieutenant Monroe, Ensigns Anderson and Hendorff, and Yeoman Tamura.

I record their names in honor of their service, and now return to the needs of my people.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2252.203.

I have aided the scientists whose chief concern is the swift and healthy repopulation of New Vulcan, with assistance provided by Starfleet Science, in establishing a suitable laboratory for the incubation of Vulcan fetuses. Though I have offered to submit my DNA, as all other Vulcans must, the submission has been denied due to the particulars of my parentage. As I am only half Vulcan, my genetic material is not requested at this time.

I shall continue to contribute my efforts where they are required.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2253.01.

According to my contacts in Starfleet, three ships and their crew have been lost in the latest confrontation with the Narada: the USS Concord, the USS Divergent, and the USS Spectacle.
This is in commemoration of those who gave their lives to the ongoing efforts to protect us from the threat that presides over us all.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2253.75.

The first of the new generation of Vulcans have left the facility and are now secure in their homes. During those times in which I am not engaged in these scientific pursuits, I have offered my time and knowledge to the New Vulcan Science Academy, where I am instructing the Vulcan youth in a variety of subjects including mathematics, sciences, and philosophy.

There are sixty-five students, aged five through thirteen, whom I instruct each day.

There were seventeen Vulcan infants placed in their homes on this day.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2253.219.

According to my contacts in Starfleet, one ship was lost in the latest confrontation with the Narada: the USS Unity.

This is in commemoration of those who gave their lives to the ongoing efforts to protect us from the threat that presides over us all.

Another ship of the fleet, the USS Enterprise, escaped the encounter with valuable information regarding the technology possessed by the Narada. Federation scientists and engineers will soon arrive on New Vulcan with the intelligence gained by the USS Enterprise’s crew, whereupon we will begin our research of the data in order to understand our enemy.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2253.304.

The second of the new generation of Vulcans have left the facility and are now secure in their homes.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.12.

According to my contacts in Starfleet, two ships were damaged in the latest confrontation with the Narada: the USS Enterprise and the USS Sightseer. These ships were not destroyed, and the survivors of the latest interstellar battle are being treated by the finest medical officers Starfleet has to offer.

This is in commemoration of those who gave their lives to the ongoing efforts to protect us from the threat that presides over us all.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.24

Information on the casualties from the latest confrontation has been made classified due to Starfleet protocols. Those without the proper authority have not been granted access to more sensitive Federation intelligence, which is as it should be.

However, with my security clearance revoked, I am left to speculate on the status of the crew of the USS Enterprise.

Although they are not my crew at present, I once served alongside the officers of the Enterprise. I am no longer ranked as a member of Starfleet, and I cannot claim any right to such knowledge—and yet it is acknowledged that the information would give me a ‘peace of mind’ I am unable to achieve on my own.
Communication to Amanda Grayson, mother of Spock. Stardate 2254.30

Mother, I am well. I trust that you are the same. Doctor Chapel has informed me that you have been making your expertise available to the Vulcan embassy in your time on Earth. I regret your decision to postpone relocating to New Vulcan; however, in this as in all things, I will respect your wishes and defer to your wisdom. Since it is true that your genetic material cannot be of value to the effort, it is of course your prerogative to live and work where you believe you may provide the most use.

Should the USS Enterprise dock with a list of known survivors and casualties, I would be gratified if you would inform me of the statistics, inasmuch as you are able to divulge.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.88

Today marks the loss of the USS Valiant in the fight against the Narada.

Starfleet’s scientists have been working in close proximity with what remains of the Vulcan Science Academy in order to analyze the data gathered by the USS Enterprise on its reconnaissance mission. Some of their findings are sensitive in nature, and I will not report them here. However, it has become evident that the design of the Narada is more technologically advanced than anything we have ever seen, which would explain its near constant superiority against all Federation vessels in combat.

It is not anything that could have been created given the current state of all Federation worlds and their levels of space-flight capability. Therefore, the only conclusion to be made is the only conclusion left to us, however impossible it may sound: this ship has invaded Federation space from a quadrant of the galaxy not yet reached by our pioneering efforts.

There are rumors of another theory regarding the Narada’s origins in our space, but this theory has not yet been made public.

This is in commemoration of those who gave their lives to the ongoing efforts to protect us from the threat that presides over us all.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.140.

Today marks the first victory in battle against the Narada.

I know neither the details of the battle nor the parameters of the victory. My clearance level is not one that allows me to be made familiar with the specifics. I am merely aware of the news, now that it has reached New Vulcan.

The USS Enterprise and the USS Contact (the second) were among the vessels involved in this battle, the damage to the former having been repaired, and the latter having been rebuilt in record time.

This is in commemoration of those who gave their lives to the ongoing efforts to protect us from the threat that presides over us all.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.160.

It has been confirmed that the captain of the Narada, a Romulan named Nero, has been taken captive.

The Narada itself has been destroyed.

Whether or not enough remains of the ship to be studied for the improvements in technology they
may offer has not been disclosed to those who are not of the highest echelon in Federation rank.

This is the sum of the news that has been made public knowledge at this time.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.190.

While the prisoner of war Nero remains in Federation custody, plans for the study of the Narada’s technology are already underway. After consulting with my mother, Amanda Grayson, who remains on Earth in San Francisco, I have submitted my candidacy for the project. After arrangements have been made for the location of the study, I will be informed as to whether or not I have been chosen as one of the Vulcan representatives among the group of top-level scientists assigned this monumental task. Other species will be equally represented in this elite group so as to avoid any possibility of one gaining significant technological advantage over the others.

This is the sum of the news that has been made public knowledge at this time.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.230.

The prisoner of war Nero has been convicted of war crimes beyond the scope of any judgement yet handed down by the Federation.

His sentencing will occur in three days’ time.

In ten days’ time, the full list of scientists chosen for the Narada Study will be released and those accepted will be informed.

We cannot be certain that no retaliation will occur. At my current clearance level, I do not know if Nero and the Narada have allies who will seek to exact revenge, or where their group came from, and why.

Perhaps, in time, these questions will have concrete answers.

For now, the skies are quiet.

Communication to Amanda Grayson, mother of Spock. Stardate 2254.240.

Mother, I am well. I trust that you are the same. I have been chosen as a scientist for the Narada Study, though perhaps you have already been made aware of this fact. I trust that I will be able to serve the Vulcan people through the research I will conduct on, and the insight I will gain from, the data gathered from the remains of the Narada.

The location has not yet been chosen, though my fellow Vulcan scientists have suggested that it should be here, on New Vulcan. I am in agreement.

The repopulation efforts have continued without difficulty. I have continued my position as a teacher, also without difficulty.

There is no more news to report.

If there is pressing news of which you believe I should be made aware, I would be gratified if you would share it. I was appreciative that you sought to inform me of the statuses of those acquaintances I made during my tenure in Starfleet Academy and during my assignment on the USS Enterprise.

How is Admiral Pike’s physical therapy progressing? If it is no trouble and does not prevent you
from performing other, more pressing duties, would you be able to share the status of an officer named James Tiberius Kirk?

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2254.246.

The toll of casualties involved in the War of the Narada is unprecedented. I have already recorded the exact number in previous log entries and will not repeat them in this recording as they have not changed since my last statistical record.

It is illogical to inquire after the status of any individual; Vulcans, unlike humans, are capable of regarding the sum of a tragedy, rather than insisting upon making the tragedy personal by assigning the brunt of its meaning to familiar faces.

However, it is a relief to note here that Admiral Pike, whose service during the War of the Narada has been exemplary, may one day be able to walk again.

James Tiberius Kirk, known to me once only as Jim, earned medals of honor during his service as a first officer aboard the USS Enterprise. I am told that the injuries he sustained in the final battle, while severe, will not have a lasting effect.

On the first of the new year, Stardate 2255.01, the preparations for the Narada Study will have been completed and the scientists will arrive at the facility we have built on New Vulcan. It is the hope of these scientists, and myself among them, that with a full understanding of the Narada’s technological advancements, the Federation will never again suffer the way it has from the repeated attacks of such a deadly ship.

I shall record this study to the extent that I am able, but I will not break confidentiality.

In this way, I will continue to contribute to the preservation of the Vulcan people.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2255.25.

The results of the Narada Study thus far, while I cannot divulge them in detail, are nothing short of fascinating.

* 

After a week of research conducted by the best scientists the Federation had gathered devoted to a single question, it was concluded that the red matter aboard the Narada was an undiscovered element, one previously unimaginable. Once this had been analyzed and accepted as a working theory, a secondary truth became easier to accept.

The Narada was not from their time.

Although the study had refrained from publishing its findings, it had quickly become consensus among the group that the ship had originated in another timeline. Had this knowledge been made public, it would have validated at least three separate members of the Vulcan Science Academy, who had been the initial supporters of the theory that Nero’s ship had been the result of a temporal flux.

The incident was unprecedented, but all other explanations had been eliminated in sequential order once the team had boarded the remains of the vessel itself, replacing secondhand information with a new, invaluable firsthand perspective.

Most exciting among the prospects of the study was the potential to learn from the Narada’s advancements and apply those same advancements to Federation ships. Future endeavors for
replenishing Starfleet’s ranks after the loss of several starships would be aided by the technology the Narada had provided.

As Spock’s chief occupation, his work on the Narada Study had the distinction of occupying the bulk of his attention. The only development to supersede this focus came in the form of an official announcement: that members of the crew of the USS Enterprise would be visiting New Vulcan in order to meet with their scientists, learn what they had already gleaned from the Narada Study, and return to the Federation headquarters on Earth with the study’s progress.

They would bring with them also information on the prisoner Nero, as anything of substance regarding his interrogation had been deemed too sensitive for public channels. Even encrypted messages were hypothetically suspect, based upon the advanced nature of the Narada’s communications network.

There were no known Romulan escapees after the Narada’s defeat; however, the Federation had not been aware of the Narada’s presence at all until Vulcan’s destruction. In this as in all other matters, it was wise to favor prudence above haste.

‘Your mind is not on your work,’ T’Pring told Spock, on the morning of the Enterprise’s stated arrival. She was one of Spock’s fellow Vulcan scientists, and it had been her and Spock’s investment of the bulk of their time that had allowed the red matter to be more fully understood.

‘My findings have been recorded with neither inaccuracy nor delay,’ Spock replied

‘I did not express trouble with your findings,’ T’Pring said, but she did not press the subject further.

When their shift ended, observation of the red matter passed to another team of scientists. T’Pring returned home to her husband Stonn and their children, and Spock traveled to New Vulcan’s docking bay. It was the largest in the colony and the only one yet fit to receive starships of the Enterprise’s caliber. Construction had been completed one year prior to this occasion, but all efforts had been tied up in the war up to this point.

This was true no longer.

Spock boarded the transport shuttle that carried him from planet-side to the orbital docking bay, where he would wait to meet the envoys from the Enterprise and escort them to their temporary quarters on New Vulcan. Tomorrow, he would also escort them to the second, shielded docking bay where the bulk of the Narada rested.

Below him, on the docking bay’s observation deck, Spock could see the arced form of New Vulcan, cast in a reddish-brown from its neighboring starlight. New Vulcan had two moons, whereas Vulcan had not even one, and the gravitational differences were felt by all who remembered their time on the latter through the tides those moons exerted on the planet.

Nevertheless, great strides had been made in the time since Vulcan’s destruction, and the envoys from the Enterprise crew would be given a full tour of New Vulcan’s facilities so as to gauge its progress for themselves and offer an unbiased report to the Federation.

It was zero-one-hundred-twenty-five, local standard time, when the Enterprise came into view of the docking bay, which was according to its schedule. By the time it had docked and debarking procedures had been followed, it was zero-two-hundred-forty-five, which was fifteen minutes late, according to that same schedule.

Spock straightened as the away team disembarked. There were those among them whom he
recognized from his service and those who were too young to have served with him; he deduced that they must have been new additions to active duty, assigned posts to fill those that had been left vacant due to the casualties of war.

Leading the away team, which was primarily composed of the ship’s scientists and engineers, were two more-familiar faces: the ship’s now-chief engineer, Montgomery Scott, and its first officer, Jim Kirk. The latter was the only member of the group who wore command gold, and though he came down the ramp with a noticeable limp, there was no doubt in Spock’s mind as to who he was. The changes in his physical person were not irrelevant, but they did nothing to obscure his identity.

Jim stood beside Scott, handing over a PADD that Spock knew would have explicit instructions for every member of the away team. Scott straightened and nodded, though a salute would have been less informal; only then did Jim turn, crossing the length of the open hangar, to come face to face with Spock.

‘Commander James T. Kirk, First Officer, USS Enterprise, reporting,’ he said. His voice was deep, but not hoarse from fatigue. There was scar tissue Spock did not recognize along his throat, disappearing below the collar of his uniform. He stood with better posture than Spock recalled him possessing, though this was not surprising. His service as an officer of Starfleet, as well as the nature of the assignments he had been given, had aged him.

‘Talsu Spock, Lead Scientist of the Narada Study,’ Spock replied. ‘I am to conduct reconnaissance between the envoy from the USS Enterprise, the government of New Vulcan, and my fellow scientists.’

Jim cleared his throat, nodding stiffly. ‘It’s been a long trip, Talsu Spock,’ he said. ‘Let’s get my team into their temporary residences and let them rest up in preparation for tomorrow. It’s going to be a big day.’

They did not greet one another as old friends, as it would not have been appropriate to do so when conducting official business. Instead, Spock stepped aside, allowing Jim to keep his pace while they both led the away team to the transport shuttle.

Jim covered his limp for reasons best known to himself. It could not be hidden completely; therefore, hiding it at all must have been a waste of energy.

Spock did not comment upon it.

In the shuttle, the team remained well behaved and unusually demure for a group comprised primarily of human individuals, though the weariness of the officers may have explained their silence during transportation. Even Scott, whose loquaciousness Spock had not forgotten, was unusually reserved, though he did not attempt to pretend his yawns were anything else. They were large and noisome, lacking the restraint demanded of a senior officer, but Jim did not reprimand him, as doing so in front of junior officers would have undermined Scott’s authority.

‘I think we’ll save the tour of the compound for tomorrow, considering how late it is,’ Jim said, after the shuttle had parked.

‘I would not impose further exertion on your team than is required,’ Spock replied.

‘Plus, I’m betting most of the tourist attractions around here are closed up for the night,’ Jim added. A hint of his familiar humor did not escape Spock’s notice, though it was buried under the roughened edges of Jim’s voice. ‘And I’m not about to ask you to sneak us in anywhere, either.’
They approached the guest residences in land vehicles that carried four passengers each, four vehicles in total to carry every member of the away team. Spock issued basic identification cards and room key cards; as the names of the team members had not been disclosed in advance, he explained that no specific room assignments had been issued. They would be given according to the team leader’s discretion.

Jim met Spock’s eyes, briefly, when Spock handed him his cards.

Then, he turned away.

‘Better not hear any of you arguing over who gets top bunk,’ he called out. ‘It’s too late for any of that. Get some R&R, set your alarms for zero-eight-hundred, and remember: nobody wakes Scotty while he’s sleeping, because if somebody wakes Scotty, then Scotty’s going to wake me, and nobody wins in that scenario. Go on, turn in.’ He punctuated the command with a wave of his hand, rather than the standard ‘dismissed’.

Nevertheless, the away team responded instantly, which spoke highly of Jim’s abilities as a command officer. While Spock had never been given an opportunity to observe them, he knew enough of Jim’s character that he did not react to the sight with surprise.

What he felt was closer to something like pride, but it was not Spock’s place to be proud of Jim’s accomplishments.

The man in front of him was a far cry from the starved, wild boy Spock had first encountered in a school building on the abandoned colony of Tarsus IV—but his eyes were the same shade of blue and they held the same sparkle of promising intelligence.

‘So,’ Jim looked Spock up and down, ‘I see you’ve managed to preserve the Vulcan fashion sense. That’s good, you know. Important to hold onto the little things.’

Spock was inspired to glance down at his outfit: a dark, sleeveless tunic layered over gray robes, which was the customary outfit for teaching professionals on New Vulcan.

‘This is standard dress,’ Spock said.

Jim smiled, a scant flash of white teeth in his flushed face. The heat was already beginning to affect his physical comfort. While the climate on New Vulcan was not identical to that of its predecessor, it was sufficiently hot and dry, with the atmospheric pressure far above what was optimal for the average human body.

‘It’s a dress all right.’

‘I have missed the humor in this remark,’ Spock observed.

‘Yeah, well, don’t sweat it.’ Jim ducked his head, making a gesture with his hands as if he wished to put them into pockets that did not exist. ‘You’ve been sequestered out here, all Vulcans all the time, replenishing the masses and whatnot. You haven’t exactly had time to exercise your sense of humor.’

‘Humor has not been a top priority,’ Spock replied. ‘However, your statement is inaccurate in another area. I have not been “replenishing”.’

Jim raised his eyebrows, regarding Spock up and down. There were lines around his eyes where none had been present before, thin wrinkles that made him look older, weary in a sense that went beyond the stresses of space travel.
The Jim whom Spock had known in San Francisco had been tireless, determined to stave off the natural rhythms of his body for fear of missing out on every imagined opportunity. Now, he would benefit from his own period of rest, but he had not yet moved to take residence in his own temporary lodgings.

‘Well,’ Jim said, ‘that’s good to know. Guess I don’t have to ask you to introduce me to the wife and kids.’

‘Though I once had an intended by the name of T’Pring, our union was dissolved for the sake of preserving a complete and undiluted Vulcan bloodline,’ Spock replied. ‘Her husband is Stonn, and they are currently raising two children of the suggested three per family.’

Jim’s face darkened. ‘Undiluted, huh?’

‘I am half-human, after all,’ Spock said.

‘You don’t have to remind me,’ Jim told him. ‘And apparently you don’t have to remind the rest of Vulcan, either.’

‘Reminders are not necessary for the Vulcan people.’

The darkness passed. Jim rubbed the back of his head with the palm of his hand, the quiet whisper of his hair on his skin audible to Spock’s keen ears. Vulcans did not rub their heads in such a fashion, disturbing their hair carelessly for no purpose at all. One of the human scientists involved in the Narada Study behaved similarly—but she did not regularly comb her close-cropped hair to begin with, and therefore disturbed nothing but general messiness.

‘I should probably set a good example for the away team,’ Jim said. ‘Turn in, get that R&R I was talking about.’

‘It is important to lead junior officers by example,’ Spock agreed.

‘I learned from the best.’ Jim leaned against the wall rather than straightening to depart. His contradictory nature had not been lost, though the brightest flush of his youth had dwindled.

Spock awaited his contributions to the conversation, contemplating an offer to escort him to his room personally in order to ensure that he arrived without further delay.

‘So, no wife and kids,’ Jim said instead.

‘I offer aid to the repopulation initiative in other ways,’ Spock replied. ‘I was one of the chief scientists involved in establishing the parameters of the laboratory in which the majority of the fetuses were observed and cared for while certifying their good health.’

‘Yeah, I’ve been looking after a few fetuses, myself.’ Jim grinned, if tightly. ‘That was a joke, by the way. I was referring to my junior officers. They’re pretty young, though I’m pretty sure you already noticed.’

‘Your age is not significantly advanced, for one who holds the position of a first officer.’

‘Yeah?’ Again, Jim’s hands sought pockets that were not present to hold them. ‘Supposedly that’s a good thing. I earned the rank, if you were wondering.’

‘I would not have doubted it.’
‘Being in Starfleet the past few years,’ Jim added, ‘it was basically being on the fast track to a command position. If you survived, you were promoted. I guess brass had to figure you were doing something right.’

Though Spock did not believe that furthering a discussion now was to Jim’s benefit, he would not risk a display of rudeness to deny his obvious overtures. ‘I was made aware of your injuries during the *Narada* War,’ he said.

Jim shrugged with the same ease of a much younger man. The motion did not suit his broad shoulders, though when they settled, they were as straight as any officer deserving of his ranking stripes. ‘Could’ve been worse. Could’ve been a lot worse.’ He paused. ‘Your mother—Amanda Grayson came to visit me a few times while I was in recovery, you know.’

‘This was how I was made aware of your injuries,’ Spock replied.

‘She visited plenty of us, actually,’ Jim said. ‘Everyone she could, whenever she could. Sometimes it was her and Christine—Chapel, of course you remember her. Even if you weren’t Vulcan, she’s not easy to forget.’

‘My mother sought to provide relief services wherever they were necessary,’ Spock replied.

Jim nodded, the muscles in his jaw working soundlessly before he spoke. ‘It was a good thing, too. Some of the survivors—they needed that kind of thing. Somebody to talk to. Somebody who didn’t look at ‘em like an injury that needed healing, that didn’t just come to check on the bandages, like all they were was one walking infection.’

‘My mother’s sensitivity was what suited her to a life with a Vulcan husband, as the matriarch of a Vulcan household,’ Spock said.

‘Just figured you might like to know,’ Jim replied. ‘Since chances are I’ve seen more of her lately than you have. In person, that is. When I got assigned to this mission, I promised her I’d check up on you, make sure everything was ship-shape.’

‘I regularly inform my mother of my well-being while inquiring after her own, and do not cause her undue concern by neglecting to maintain a predictable schedule of communication.’

Jim sighed, what Spock recognized three seconds after it had passed as laughter. ‘Figured you’d say something like that when I told you. Which is why I wasn’t supposed to report back on your health, Spock. Just a few other things.’

‘Clarify,’ Spock said.

‘Uh-uh,’ Jim replied. ‘Can’t break confidentiality. The way I see it, Amanda Grayson outranks me by a mile.’

‘I trust you will not give her reason to worry,’ Spock said.

‘Not if there isn’t reason to worry.’ Jim folded his arms across his chest, having finally decided upon the best alternative to occupying his arms without placing his hands in pockets. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it, Spock. She’s got enough on her plate already. That doesn’t mean I’m not gonna give her a thorough report, and I’m not gonna lie to her. But the truth is, you look good.’

‘Though my duties occupy my time, it is only logical that I fulfill them,’ Spock agreed.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said. ‘Yeah.’
The conversation appeared to have found a natural conclusion. Spock straightened, but Jim still made no move to terminate their shared company.

It was possible—as Spock had not been among human society in years—that he had missed a subtle social cue in their interaction that meant the conversation had not yet achieved completion. He quickly and silently reviewed the highlights of their dialogue, searching for the oversight so that it could be addressed. In his estimation, he had not left room for Jim to have any reason to linger in Spock’s company past the point of his own comfort, but there was one point where perhaps it could be considered that Spock had failed in his approximation of human social niceties.

‘You look well also, Jim.’ Spock paused, then felt compelled to continue. ‘It would be accurate to note that you are not currently at your peak condition, and that you would benefit from the rest you ordered for your subordinates. However, your appearance is pleasing.’

Jim blinked several times in rapid succession, looking down as if to judge Spock’s appraisal for himself, and then back up, raising his thick eyebrows. His eyes tightened at the corners, not a narrowing expression, but one suffused with simple joy.

It seemed that Spock’s revised instincts had been correct, however illogical their source. Jim was correct: that it was important to be mindful of human behaviors after having lived apart from them for so long. The few who had come to work on the Narada Study could not compare to full immersion. Likewise, Spock had understood after the first twenty-four hour period that they were anomalous representatives of the average human.

It was an awareness Spock would have to exercise, just like any other muscle.

‘Huh,’ Jim said.

He straightened, though it was not to enter his private quarters, and Spock considered that perhaps a firmer hand of guidance would be needed. Jim was not possessed of a weak character—yet at times Spock had observed that he became distracted in matters directly related to the preservation of his health.

‘Good night, Jim,’ Spock replied.

‘Right,’ Jim said. ‘That thing.’

‘You will find that the temperatures are not as oppressive at night,’ Spock said. ‘Also, your temporary housing is equipped with environmental controls, should you wish to make adjustments.’

‘Figures you’d be the perfect hosts,’ Jim said.

As far as parting remarks went, Spock chose to accept this as complimentary. He was aware of Jim’s eyes on him as he turned to make his way back down the path and up the steep slope that lead toward the scientists’ housing. When he turned at the crest of the hill, however, there were only illuminated windows to mark the Starfleet quarters, and no one remained outside to watch him leave.

*
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

"Cute".

Chapter Notes

For the record, Talsu is being used here as "specialist/scientist", a note I failed to make in my last chapter.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2255.32.

My duties as Federation liaison include leadership of a tour of New Vulcan first and foremost, then escorting the away team from the Enterprise in their studies of the scientific findings regarding the Narada. The former duties will commence today and no detail will be neglected in outlining the progress that has been made by the Vulcan Cultural Preservation Council since its establishment.

The individual in charge of the expedition is an old acquaintance, Jim Kirk, who now serves as the USS Enterprise’s first officer under Captain Gaila, an Orion whose service in Starfleet has been most distinguished. For the sake of posterity, I will underscore the fact that my personal connection with Commander Kirk will in no way influence my duties as Vulcan Cultural Liaison, educator, or scientist.

Full record will be kept of the visit, which may be consulted in my personal log supplemental.

* 

One of the light-skinned members of the away team was already sunburnt on the nose and forehead when Spock met them outside the visitor’s compound. Others were squinting against the bright light of New Vulcan’s binary suns, Jim among that number, shielding his eyes to observe Spock standing before them. Umbrellas and rehydration drinks were issued, and the tour commenced, with Spock and Jim leading the junior officers side by side in order to assert official hierarchy. Lieutenant Commander Scott followed closely behind, referring to the rest of the team as his ducklings for reasons Spock did not choose to consider.

At the outset, New Vulcan’s residential areas were touched upon only briefly in order to illustrate the regularity of daily Vulcan life, as well as improvements made to the quality thereof. Their main points of interest on the first half of the first day of the mission were the general science compounds, where Spock’s work with the Science Council on genetics were outline in brief, and the Vulcan Science Academy, where the sum of Vulcan knowledge was stored and shared with future generations of Vulcans. Per request, no lectures were intruded upon, nor was coursework disrupted.

At twelve hundred-thirty, a mandatory break for a midday meal was imposed, and a second issuing of rehydration drinks was provided. They dined outdoors at tables that surrounded the academy gymnasium, where a group of twelve- to thirteen-year-old Vulcans instructed their six- to seven-year-
old counterparts in the art of the *lirpa*.

‘An’ here I was, thinkin’ we might get a chance to watch a friendly game of Vulcan dodgeball,’ Scott said wistfully. As he had poured half his rehydration drink directly over his head at the start of the meal, Spock had already surmised he was suffering from the atmospheric pressure enough that a return to the USS *Enterprise* might be necessary.

‘Now hang on—I’d never!’ Scott replied, when Spock broached the possibility. ‘I’d not miss th’ chance to inspect that damned ship for myself—I’ve been waiting to have a crack at the beast, and I’d not blow my best chance—and, what’s more, I’m offended ye’d think I’m not man enough to handle the heat in your little sandbox!’

‘Scotty,’ Jim intervened, ‘you’re practically melting.’

‘Aye,’ Scotty agreed. ‘But I’ll melt in my own time, thank you, and without any commentary from the cold-blooded about it!’

Jim was also clearly affected by both the heat and the atmosphere, but he had not yet doused himself in liquid electrolytes, opting instead to sensibly consume the nourishment and replenish that which he had sweated out.

‘So you were saying you were a teacher here too, Talsu Spock,’ Jim prompted, resting his cool drink bottle at the back of his neck after less than a fluid ounce of the liquid remained within.

‘An auxiliary educator,’ Spock said. ‘I provide supplemental materials on a variety of subjects and preside over self-guided study sessions. I conduct mathematic drills, philosophical seminars, and observational astronomy.’

‘But you’re only an auxiliary educator?’ Jim whistled softly. ‘That seems like it’s worthy of a tenured position, at least.’

‘There are others with more experience and seniority who have assumed the bulk of the responsibilities in education,’ Spock said.

On the open sand, the Vulcan children who were old enough to attend schooling but not yet old enough to wield the *lirpa* were seated, observing the technique displayed by their elders. Their attention did not wander, though none were older than five.

Jim leaned back against the table on his right elbow, watching those who were watching the demonstrations with equal interest as he watched the demonstrations themselves.

‘And this is what Vulcan playtime looks like?’ he asked.

‘Recreational pursuits are cultivated from an early age,’ Spock replied. ‘Time that is not devoted to learning is neither encouraged nor fostered.’

‘They’ve gotta be, what—four? Five years old?’ Spock nodded. Jim’s assessment was correct.

‘You’re telling me,’ Jim continued, ‘that they don’t play ball or build sandcastles? Especially with all the sand.’

‘They are taught architecture,’ Spock said.
Jim’s eyes tightened at the corners, causing the lines there to be more pronounced. ‘That’s not what I mean, Spock.’

‘Their energies are expended in different channels from human children,’ Spock said.

‘Ye wouldn’t think they’d be quite so adorable,’ Scott added, ‘what with how serious they look—but then, that’s part of why they do. Look at those round cheeks and those wise, Vulcan eyes. Ye’d never think they could beat you at chess without breaking a sweat.’

‘If a Vulcan at age four is able to beat you at a game of chess, Mr. Scott,’ Spock said, ‘then it is very likely you should devote more time to practicing the strategies of the game.’

Scott sighed heavily. ‘They don’t stay adorable for long, do they? They grow up into walking, talking corrections. Same hairstyle, though. Now, Mr.—er, Talsu Spock, can ye tell us—what’s with that?’

Spock regarded him for a moment, attempting to gauge the seriousness of Scott’s question before responding.

‘It is the logical choice.’

Jim groaned, resting his face in his hands. He rubbed his eyes and along the bridge of his nose, skin paling before reddening under the pressure from his fingers.

‘You knew he was gonna say that, Scotty. Why’d you even bother asking?’

‘Well, excuse me for thinkin’ there might be something more to Vulcan fashion than sensibility. Call it optimism, and pardon me for having some.’

‘There is no function for style,’ Spock informed them.

‘You’re telling me that not one Vulcan in the history of the world has ever wanted a curling iron?’ Jim asked.

Spock had not been aware that this was a curiosity shared by multiple humans. He did not feel they had unfairly aligned against him; however, it surprised him to find Jim joining his interests with Scott’s when previously he had expressed discomfort with Scott’s presence. Doubtless, in their time serving together on the Enterprise, they had found common ground upon which to work. Spock had not been there to observe the change in their relationship; that did not mean no changes had occurred.

‘There has been no reason for them to desire such a thing,’ Spock said. ‘In our past, Vulcan females featured a series of hairstyles intricate in their ceremonial nature. My mother, on occasion, has styled her hair in this manner. However, with the advent of our colonization efforts, these have been largely discarded as unnecessary, save for during the observance of historic rituals.’

‘Aye, so what you’re saying is, you’ve all been too busy popping out wee ones to have th’ time to do their hair, is it? Sounds like my dear old mum,’ Scotty said. ‘And don’t think I’ll be askin’ another hypothetical question again for fear o’ getting a history lesson.’

‘My explanation was thorough,’ Spock said.

‘Was it ever,’ Scott agreed, leaving Spock to speculate on the source of his displeasure.

‘All right,’ Jim said, ‘I’ve had just about all I can take of Vulcan recreational activities. It’s a little sad, if you ask me.’
No one had asked Jim, but Spock refrained from bringing that up. Rather, he rose in place and took Scott and Jim to observe the learning annexes and the solar gardens—which provided the place of recreation of the Vulcan High Council. To previous generations, it had stood as an example to Vulcan architecture, and had been reconstructed in full, without a single detail lacking.

As they made their way through the colony, they attracted no shortage of attention. Vulcan children did not yet possess the full restraint exhibited by their elders. For many of them, these were among the first humans they had seen; their only other examples of the species was from a distance, where they worked tirelessly in the science quarters.

They were not above staring as their small party passed by.

Jim in particular drew the most attention, due to his expressiveness, a range of facial emotion that could not be found on New Vulcan. The youngest Vulcans—though they were already aware of the necessity of restraint and displayed greater control over their baser emotions than human children of a comparable age—indulged in their natural curiosity, which in the years to follow would be honed to scientific inquiry.

‘Don’t look now, but it seems t’me we’ve gathered a bit of a fan club,’ Scott said. ‘O’course they’re all of them fawning over you, Mr. Kirk, an’ don’t think it doesn’t land a grave blow to a fellow’s ego to know it.’

Jim waved his hand to indicate he did not wish to respond to Scott’s comment or take it seriously; it was a gesture that none of the Vulcan children had found occasion to observe, and three of them repeated the gesture studiously. It was admirable that they were so committed to learning the cultural minutiae of other species, though their methods were not strictly Vulcan in nature.

Spock cleared his throat, but Jim stepped between him and the gathering crowd of exactly seven Vulcan children, once again waving his hand.

‘It’s all right,’ Jim said. ‘You do whatever you want; I don’t mind it. Though I’ve gotta warn you, if you pick up any habits from Montgomery Scott over here, it’s not exactly a good thing. He’s a bad influence.’

Scott snorted. While the children did not startle, they were nevertheless impressed with such an overt display of emotionalism.

‘Like I said,’ Jim told them, ‘he’ll only set a bad example. Watch out for guys like Scotty.’

The teaching moment was not, Spock understood, a serious one; however, the Vulcan children did not have the experience with Jim’s sense of humor that Spock had once enjoyed, and could not make that distinction for themselves. As Spock continued to lead the senior officers of the away team through the arboretum—dedicated to preserving the native succulents of the finest Vulcan sand gardens—the young Vulcans gave Scott a wide berth, which became the subject of lively discussion between him and Jim.

Spock would not have accepted such informality from any of his team while he was first officer, but he was aware that Jim’s style of command was dissimilar to Spock’s own, and though it did not focus more heavily on protocol, that did not mean it was not equally valid.

While the children did their best to avoid Scott, their fascination with Jim only heightened over time. They focused on, in order: the color of Jim’s hair; the color of his eyes; his posture when he walked; the slight gestures he made with his hands for want of pockets with which to occupy them; and his minor limp as he walked.
‘Commander Kirk is a senior officer in Starfleet on the USS Enterprise,’ Spock informed the ‘fan club’, as Scott had labeled them. ‘Though we are not members of Starfleet, we are members of the United Federation of Planets, and as such, Commander Kirk is deserving of our respect.’

One of the Vulcans—Saavei, female, wearing her dark hair in a single, simple plait—lifted her hand. Spock nodded to signify that she was allowed to speak, though she would have known that she should only choose to do so if she had a question she herself could not answer.

‘Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott is also a senior officer in Starfleet on the USS Enterprise,’ Saavei said. ‘Yet Commander Kirk has informed us that assumption of his habits will be detrimental. Why is it that such an individual would be promoted within Starfleet?’

‘The answer to your question should be clear,’ Spock said.

‘Aye, that it should,’ Scott agreed with a huff.

‘Since Commander Scott’s abilities are not immediately obvious, and his personality may be considered troublesome,’ Spock continued, ‘it is obvious that his talents must lie elsewhere.’

‘Oh, and thank you for that,’ Scott said.

Jim rubbed his knuckles against his mouth, the muscles in his jaw tightening. It appeared that the gesture was meant to deflect attention from the expression he wore: a fleeting smile.

Then, he cleared his throat, sobering enough to appear every inch a proper commanding officer. ‘What Mr. Spock—sorry, Talsu Spock—What Spock’s telling you is true. Commander Scott might seem like a crackpot in person, but he’s actually good at his job. The point is, appearances can be deceiving.’

‘We are aware of this,’ Saavei said.

‘That’s good,’ Jim replied. ‘That’s an important lesson to learn.’

‘The manifestation of your genetics is statistically unlikely but not unpleasant aesthetically,’ Saavei said.

Jim ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his sweaty brow. ‘You’re gonna make me blush, and I don’t even know your name,’ he said.

Introductions were made, one by one, beginning with Saavei and ending with the youngest of the group, Selin. Jim responded to each of them in a manner befitting foreign dignitaries being escorted on-board his ship. They were Vulcan children, not dignitaries, and did not demand that level of respect, yet Jim—on one knee in the sand, under the fine glass ceiling of the arboretum—addressed each of them with humble deference.

‘How is that you know our assistant teacher Spock, son of Sarek?’ Saavei asked.

Jim glanced to Spock before replying. ‘He saved my life, actually. Back when he was still an officer of Starfleet.’

‘That is an exaggeration of the events as they transpired,’ Spock said. It was important that strict truth was offered rather than an exciting embellishment.

‘Maybe,’ Jim admitted. ‘But only a little.’
‘Will you inform us of the history?’ Saavei asked.

Again, Jim looked to Spock. ‘Maybe your— Maybe it’d be better if Spock told you about it. Since he’s got the better memory, and all.’

‘Our history is personal,’ Spock said, ‘and not a matter of significance to the Federation in general.’

‘The hell it isn’t,’ Jim replied.

He colored, looking at their audience, then seemed surprised when there was no reaction. Of course, Spock was aware of the inflammatory nature of words on Earth, but on Vulcan there were few such correlations. They had their own curse words without the need to appropriate meaning from a human vocabulary on top of their own.

‘Very professional,’ Scott observed.

‘Scott—’ Jim began.

‘Very professional, sir,’ Scott amended.

He punctuated his statement with an expression of considerable pride, as though he had just made an engineering modification that would have improved the Enterprise’s efficiency by a considerable margin.

In Spock’s opinion, he had overestimated the efficacy of a single word.

Jim rubbed the back of his neck, where it had begun to redden in the sun. ‘All I’m saying is, if Spock here hadn’t talked me into joining Starfleet back in the day, I wouldn’t even be here right now.’

‘Where would you be, Commander Kirk?’ Saavei asked.

‘Well, actually, that’s a good question,’ Jim said, unaware of how his cavalier praise caused Saavei to stand a little straighter. ‘I can’t say for sure. Might’ve gotten a job cleaning ship decks or something. Maintenance. I’d be that guy who scrubs down the windows on the bridge, you know— really makes ’em glimmer, so you’re not wondering whether or not that smudge you’re looking at is a spatial anomaly.’

Selin laughed, a sudden expression of mirth that could not be contained. He seemed startled by his own outburst and quickly sought to regain his previous emotional control.

Such struggles were not uncommon among the younger children, and Spock saw fit to refrain from admonishment. While it was true that on New Vulcan it was more important than ever to adhere to tradition, there would be plenty of time for the youngest students to absorb the methods of managing and containing their feelings.

‘The career you have described would have been a waste of your talents,’ Spock said.

Jim was busy looking satisfied with himself for the reaction he had garnered from the group and did not respond immediately. However, he favored Spock with another of his sideways smiles, not quite meeting Spock’s eye before looking away again, as if he did not trust his full attention to Spock just yet.

For what reason, Spock could not fathom.

‘We would like to hear more,’ Saavei said, imbued with a newfound confidence now that Jim had
approved her previous question.

‘Young Saavei,’ Spock said, not a rebuke, but a reminder, ‘the relevance of an answer is directly related to the specificity of the question. If there is information that you seek, then you must seek it judiciously.’

Saavei sucked in a breath—similar to a breath Jim held, which Spock surmised may have been his choice to refrain from contradicting Spock’s instructions and telling her he did not mind her imprecision.

‘It would be informative if you would explain the talents of which Spock, son of Sarek, spoke,’ Saavei said.

Spock nodded. As a revision, this was acceptable.

‘Now, hang on just a moment,’ Scott said, having remained silent for longer than he was customarily able. ‘Ye’d be opening a Pandora’s box, with a question like that. You don’t know that asking an individual like Commander Kirk here—whose head, as ye can plainly see, is big enough already—to go over his own good points’ll only make that head swell to such a size he’ll have to stay here on Vulcan for good, since otherwise, he’d be bangin’ his noggin on all the doorframes of a standard fleet vessel?’

‘You suggest a discussion of attributes, positive or negative, could have an effect on the human cranial size,’ Saavei replied. ‘This is categorically false.’

‘I think what Scotty’s trying to say is that I shouldn’t brag,’ Jim said. ‘So, how about this: the truth is, Spock was right to tell me I belonged in Starfleet, even if it turned out he didn’t.’

Saavei nodded. ‘As an answer, Commander Kirk, this is acceptable.’

‘I’m glad,’ Jim said.

‘Where did you get your scars?’ Selin asked.

This was not, Spock decided, a rude question in and of itself; there were some codes of conduct that suggested remarks on physical details were not wholly polite in human company, but only if those remarks carried negative connotations. Spock could not reprimand an inquisitive mind for seeking the truth without judgment as to its manifestation.

Nevertheless, as Jim had not possessed those scars the last time they had met, it was obvious that he had gained them during the Narada War. The memory thereof could only have been painful, and as the topic was personal, it should also be considered private.

‘It’s okay,’ Jim said, before Spock had the chance to explain the distinctions to Selin so that he would not pry in such a fashion again. ‘I mean, they’re pretty obvious, right? No use pretending they aren’t there.’ After a pause, he looped his forefinger under the collar of his standard command gold shirt and the standard black undershirt, tugging it forward to reveal—modestly—the extent of the scarred tissue for the children to observe. ‘It’s worse than it looks, anyway. Didn’t hurt much, considering it was phaser burn. Body goes into shock and you run on adrenaline alone. Humans might not be the fine physical specimens Vulcans are, but we can hang in there, sometimes.’

‘You did not answer the question,’ Selin pointed out.

‘Didn’t I?’ Jim’s grin was tight around his eyes. ‘Can’t pull the wool over your eyes, can I? Colloquialism,’ he added quickly. ‘I’m not actually gonna pull wool over your eyes, so don’t worry.
Well, I can tell you as much as I’m allowed to, while keeping the rest classified. I was in a battle, and my captain was in trouble, and as a first officer, I did what I had to do. Captain lost his leg, I got these scars, but both of us made it out alive, and with some valuable blueprints of the Narada’s schematics to show for it. I figure it was an even trade.’

‘This is an acceptable answer to the question,’ Selin said. ‘I would not require that you break confidentiality.’

‘Well then, Talsu Spock.’ Jim rose from his knees—he had remained on eye-level with the children in order to communicate with them more easily—and dusted the sand off his trousers with his palms. He winced, but covered the expression swiftly, so that Spock did not have the chance to comment upon it. ‘Am I taking up too much of their valuable studying time? Wouldn’t want to interfere with the schedules on New Vulcan. We’re here to observe, not get in the way.’

‘You have been informative,’ Saavei replied. ‘I cannot speak for Spock, son of Sarek, but the knowledge that you have imparted has been valuable, as all knowledge is.’

‘Yeah?’ Jim rested his hands on his hips. ‘Then, I tell you what—it’s been my honor.’

‘Talsu Spock, will we have the opportunity to learn from Commander Kirk of the USS Enterprise again?’ Selin asked.

‘That will be a matter left to Commander Kirk’s discretion,’ Spock said. ‘Now we must return to our duties. As you do not require a tour of the rest of the colony grounds, it would be logical to return to your studies at this time.’

Reluctance was not a Vulcan trait—in that it was rarely, if ever, shown. The Vulcan children were not an exception to this rule and they did not loiter or look back over their shoulders. Nonetheless, it was not difficult to see that they would not have preferred to leave; that they did depart despite their preferences spoke well of their resolve.

‘Precocious little tykes, aren’t they?’ Scott asked. ‘Like a passel of miniature Mr. Spocks running about with round cheeks and tough questions and no sense of personal space.’

‘C’mon, Scotty,’ Jim said. ‘They were cute.’

“‘Cute’; Spock repeated.

Scott favored Jim with a meaningful, but unfathomable, look. ‘See what I mean?’

As far as Spock was concerned, there was nothing to observe. However, as the comment had not been addressed to him directly, there was no need for him to reply.

Jim, for his part, turned to look at Spock, appraising something else that was also not immediately apparent.

‘I dunno, Scotty,’ he said. ‘I think I’m gonna stand by my initial assessment.’

Scotty made a sound of disbelief in the back of his throat, a rich grumble that was assisted by the natural roughness of his regional accent. In Vulcan, there were no comparable differentials. Spock could appreciate the variance, if nothing else.

‘Aye,’ Scotty said. ‘I think that’s my cue t’be excusing myself. I wanna get an eyeful of that ship before they decide it’s science team only.’
As a member of the Narada Study, I have procured the proper clearance for you to examine the vessel at your discretion,’ Spock informed him. ‘However, you will be accompanied by another member of the study group at all times, and you will not be allowed to perform any experiments on the engineering equipment therein.’

‘So no fun allowed, is that it?’

Despite Scotty’s words, his excitement was evident. Why he sought to mislead Spock as to the source of his true feelings, Spock could not imagine—and neither was it any of his concern.

‘No one has the clearance to perform experiments on the engineering equipment,’ Spock explained, ‘in the event that it causes a chain reaction for which we are unprepared. As we do not yet fully comprehend the technology that powers the Narada, we cannot afford to risk activating it.’

‘I suppose that’s reasonable of ye.’ Scotty reached forward, clapping Spock on the back. The contact was more forceful than Spock preferred, but it did not linger, which minimized its effect. ‘Don’t worry about it. Anything you don’t understand, I’ll have it all worked out by the end of the business day.’

Jim groaned. ‘Don’t think that’s my influence as a first officer, please.’

‘The thought had not crossed my mind,’ Spock assured him. ‘I am aware of Montgomery Scott’s personality as it was prior to your authority.’

‘Still, I suppose I should probably go along with him,’ Jim said. ‘Since anything he does would be my business.’

‘That is prudent,’ Spock replied.

They accompanied Scott to the hangar that had been built specifically to house the Narada in its complete form—damaged though it was from years of space battle. The hangar had been a project funded by the Federation, in order to provide a place to observe the construction of the ship as a whole before it was broken down into separate parts. It stretched long into the desert, manned by security and equipped with environmental controls of considerable strength in order to combat the heat of New Vulcan’s sun, as well as a shielding device to hide the edifice from any scans conducted of the planet.

It was a scientific achievement in itself, and one that consumed an amount of power equivalent to the rest of the colony.

Inside the hangar, the air was cool, a lower temperature than most Vulcans preferred. Comparatively, the lighting conditions were more than adequate for Vulcan standards, as the group currently working within was primarily composed of Vulcan scientists with only one Orion also presiding; they were not optimal for the human sense of sight, a fact upon which Scott wasted no time commenting.

‘So it’s active sabotage, then, is it? Afraid I’ll swan in and put you all t’ shame with my superior technical knowledge, so a little sabotage is all that’s left to ye?’ Scott stepped close to the hull of the ship, a burned streak across the compound alloy surface. Unexpectedly, he did not reach out immediately to touch it, but stood in the shadow it cast, gazing upward toward one of the many spikes and spires that comprised its intimidating shape.

The Narada had suffered undeniable destruction in the final conflict of its posthumous war, but it was still impossible to ignore the enormity of the façade that it presented: a daunting visage of
carnage and power. It had lost some of its mystery due to the study’s efforts, though Spock had always been aware that it was a feat of scientific progress—which would eventually be understood—rather than the result of any other, less comprehensible, and ephemeral quality. Without those that once manned the ship, it had not lost that which made it so formidable in the skies, but it was more readily apparent that the ship was merely a collection of assembled alloys and could not harm anyone who stood before it.

Scott whistled, the sound echoing upward to the high ceiling of the enclosed hangar.

‘A Vulcan would not engage in sabotage where matters of scientific inquest are concerned,’ Spock said. ‘Science should not be swayed by the influence of reputation or pride.’

‘Should not, aye, but cannot?’ Scott did not turn to regard Spock with a wink and a grin, his gaze captured by the _Narada_. Even his banter had lost its edge, his attention fully captivated by a more important subject. It was possible that Scott would at last fall silent, though his reverential study did occasion the disturbing habit of muttering to himself, and the silence would not last for long.

Spock turned to regard Jim, whose head was tilted upward in the vain attempt to see to the highest point of the ship.

‘I’m gonna get a crick if I keep staring like this,’ he said, suddenly aware of Spock’s eyes on him. He rubbed the back of his neck not to brush away sweat this time, rolling out his shoulders and relaxing his posture. ‘Looks pretty different here than it did out there.’

Jim had not qualified what he meant by ‘out there’, but Spock was able to accept this generalization. He nodded. ‘I would not know. Therefore, I must cede any opinions to your superior knowledge.’

‘It used to appear out of nowhere. Blip in, blip out, sometimes in the blink of an eye,’ Jim added. ‘And if you were lucky, you wouldn’t even get the chance to exchange fire—because if it was in view long enough to get fired on, then it was in view long enough to fire on you. Only three ships made it out once the phasers got locked. That was early on, though.’

Again, Spock nodded. There was nothing he could contribute. At the time, all he had known had been general news and whatever his mother was cleared to inform him.

‘Anyway, I’ve been up close and personal with this thing more times than Scotty,’ Jim said. ‘Might get some fresh air. Or whatever passes for it out there, human-wise.’ He patted his chest, taking a step backward. ‘Go check on the kids, maybe. Leave Scotty under your watchful eye.’

‘I would join you as a guide for your walk,’ Spock replied, ‘yet I am required to maintain surveillance.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Jim said. ‘Scotty’s mellowed with time. A little. Not much—I mean, this is Scotty we’re talking about—but he’ll be on his best behavior, so he won’t be too much trouble. And if he is, I’ve always wanted to throw him in the brig. Just had to wait for him to earn it. Wouldn’t want to be seen playing favorites.’

Spock began to confess that he did not entirely grasp Jim’s sense of humor in the statement, but Jim had already left—without once turning his back on the _Narada_, sentinel of the New Vulcan desert, Ozymandian in its silence.

*
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Sorry updating time has been hectic. Work is taking its toll. Hope you enjoy! <3

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log—supplemental addition. Stardate 2255.32.

A more complete summary of the day’s events will be forthcoming. The members of the USS Enterprise’s away team, led by Commander Kirk, have comported themselves in a fashion that speaks well of their training and their respect for their senior officer, presiding. Their presence has provided brief and not-unexpected distraction; it has not interrupted or otherwise negatively affected ‘business as usual’.

We are, as a whole, better accustomed to large-scale change, and have developed resistance accordingly.

*

It was after the evening meal that Spock attended the sehlat breeding ground to check on the progress being made by the runt of the latest litter—she had fallen ill, but Spock had sought to tend her health, as without proper vigilance, the Vulcan sehlat faced total extinction—before his excursion into the desert. There, he could meditate, interrupted only by the winds furrowing the sand and the distant stars. It was not the same as meditation conducted in one of the mountainous promontories of Vulcan, but Spock did not expect it to be.

He also did not expect company. That expectation was proved incorrect when he met Jim on his way past one of the three rock garden recreations, depicting the most aesthetically ideal originals that had been destroyed along with their planet.

‘Hey there,’ Jim said. He lifted his right hand in a greeting wave.

The bridge of his nose was discolored from his time in the sun; his forehead had flushed to a similar shade. His coloring was uneven across the rest of his face, his cheeks and chin paler where the sun had not been quite so unkind. He would have done well to take advantage of the shade cast by the obelisks around him, yet apparently in their time apart he had not had the presence of mind to engineer his own self-preservation in that way.

Spock was aware of the exact path of the sun as it crossed to this area of the desert. The hour at which Jim had left to obtain his purported ‘quiet time’ was when the sun would not have been directly overhead. Therefore, it was easy to assume that shadows would have been present, and he had simply neglected to remain within their shadows.

‘I intend to meditate,’ Spock said, the reply an answer to a question that had not yet been asked.

‘Oh yeah?’

Jim fell into step alongside him, rolling up the sleeves of his uniform, which had the dual purpose of concealing his rank as well as exposing more of his skin to the harsh New Vulcan sun. This seemed like folly to Spock, but it was later now in the day, and the sun had long since passed through its
apex. It was likely that the damage done to Jim’s face would represent the bulk of his suffering later, and now he sought to benefit from the cooling effects of less fabric resting against his skin.

‘That sounds nice,’ Jim continued. ‘Relaxing. I figured you’d have a whole set-up in your house for stuff like that.’

‘Privacy, while not limited, is difficult to come by when in an area that contains so high a concentration of voices,’ Spock replied.

While it was true that the denizens of New Vulcan were no longer in a position to be sharing close living accommodations with one another as they had done in the earlier days of the colony’s establishment, the presence of so many young, untrained minds created an environment of telepathic chaos. Placing physical distance between him and the source of the cacophony was often all Spock needed in order to obtain a much-appreciated state of tranquility.

Just now, the only sound in his ears was Jim’s Starfleet-issued boots on the sand, taking long strides to keep pace with Spock, who was still taller—though by a narrow margin.

‘Have you achieved the peace of mind you sought earlier?’ Spock inquired.

‘Huh?’ Jim moved as though to put his hands in his pockets again, before remembering he had none. ‘Oh. Yeah. I guess so. I just needed some air after— I dunno. It’s been a busy day, I guess.’

‘The assignment of first officer can be demanding,’ Spock said.

‘You’d know. After you, I had a lot to live up to.’

‘You would not have maintained your position if you were incapable of performing your duties satisfactorily.’

‘True,’ Jim said with a sideways grin. ‘But then, I never served under Pike, so the standards might’ve been different back when you were in the fleet.’

‘Standards are referred to as such for a reason,’ Spock replied.

‘You remember that one time you tried to convince me I’d benefit from some meditation?’ Jim rubbed sand from the corner of his left eye with the knuckles of his right hand, then sought to expel some of the same from where it had blown into his mouth, nose wrinkling in distaste. ‘Sand gets everywhere, doesn’t it?’

‘Which question would you prefer me to answer first?’ Spock asked.

Jim shrugged. His shadow had lengthened behind him by two inches since they had begun to walk together. ‘Your choice.’

‘I have not forgotten any detail of our acquaintanceship,’ Spock said. ‘As for the sand, it is an undeniable element of the desert.’

Jim stretched; his distorted shadow mirrored his movement with exaggerated proportions. The one thing the shadow did not mimic was the limp, which had grown more pronounced, no doubt due to the amount of physical exertion Jim had been called upon to exhibit that day. Spock resolved to attend the tour on the following days in a transport vehicle, if one could be spared.

‘Haven’t forgotten any detail, huh?’ Jim asked. ‘Vulcan memory, though. I know; I shouldn’t be surprised.’
'You should not,' Spock agreed.

'But it might not be so bad, having a good surprise now and then,' Jim said. 'As opposed to the other kind of surprise, which everybody’s had enough of lately.'

'It is my understanding that the good kind would be preferable.'

Jim ducked his head to laugh under his breath, an action that revealed the red strip of irritated skin on the back of his neck spread between his hairline and the collar of his uniform. In the dry heat, the hair there had begun to curl, but only slightly, before Jim’s sweat was absorbed.

Spock noticed the anomaly, not because the sight of any and every detail of Jim’s person was familiar to him, as this was no longer the case, but because he was trained to notice anomalies.

'I thought about writing to you, sometimes,' Jim said. It was not unthinkable to draw a parallel between the pace they kept as they walked—not urgent, if not meandering—and the pace of their conversation. If there was a destination in mind for the latter, then it was a vague one, growing more and more shrouded as the first of the binary suns dipped below the horizon line and Jim’s face darkened into a play of darker on lighter shadows. 'Except you were busy, and so was I. I didn’t know how much of the war effort I could talk about, you know, for the sake of the whole thing, since you weren’t Starfleet anymore—and there wasn’t much of anything else to talk about. Plus, I always figured you’d be repopulating. Just seemed like the most logical thing.'

'My genetic material from my mother’s side prohibited me—' Spock began.

'And about that,' Jim continued, voice warm despite the rapidly cooling temperature. 'It’d be one thing if you didn’t find somebody, or if you didn’t want to have a bunch of Vulcan babies of your own asking you insanely smart questions all the time, but you’re telling me that the—the Vulcan elders, or whatever you call ‘em—they didn’t let you, and that’s why you’re here alone?'

'I am not alone,' Spock said. 'I am surrounded by the majority of the surviving members of my species, and my contributions to the preservation of said species, while it may differ from the average, is vital nonetheless.'

Jim shook his head and did not bother to brush the hair that fell out of place over his forehead back where it belonged. He had left deep footprints in the sand behind him, though no matter how deep they were, they would not remain visible for long.

'I thought about it, though,' Jim said, quieter now. 'I thought about it more than I should’ve, probably.'

'Yet you did not let it interfere with your duties during wartime,' Spock replied. 'That is admirable.'

'What you did, all of this,' Jim waved in the direction of what they had left behind, ‘that’s admirable, too.’

Silence followed them as the landscape grew rocky and uneven. The sandy hills offered numerous ideal locations for private meditation, though as Spock approached his customary spot, meditation was not foremost on his mind.

'Tomorrow I will offer a brief tour of the Center for Fauna Preservation,' Spock said. ‘Species such as the wild le-matya and the domesticated sehlat will be reintroduced to the wild at such a time as their immediate extinction is no longer a threat. After that will be the general tour of the Narada Study facilities, followed by a question and answer session regarding the study’s findings thus far. That will be conducted by my associate, T’Pring, who has volunteered her time and expertise.'
‘Yeah,’ Jim replied. ‘You’ve thought of everything. That’s efficient as hell, Spock.’

‘I presume I am to accept that phrase as complimentary in nature?’

‘You don’t have to ask,’ Jim said. ‘I guess I’d better head back. You were looking to meditate, right? And part of the mission’s the same as it always is. We’re not supposed to interfere.’

‘There are circumstances in which the very act of observation alters the data being gathered.’

Jim sighed. ‘Yeah,’ he said again. ‘I know all about those.’

Spock could not name the sensation he felt upon observing Jim as he made his slow departure, gait uneven over the rise and fall of the dunes. It could not be labeled regret—and yet, there was something melancholy that brushed against his consciousness.

As he was nowhere near any of the Vulcan youth, the most sensible conclusion to draw was that the feeling had originated with Spock rather than elsewhere. It was unexpected, but not inexplicable.

Gradually, Jim’s retreat ceased to be a transitory stage and became a fact. He was gone. Spock pushed the knowledge to the back of his mind and breathed deeply in order to center himself.

Everything fell away, as it always had. If Spock’s meditation that night came with more difficulty than it had in the past, there were several new factors that could have caused it.

The following morning, the tour of the Vulcan Center for Fauna Preservation was relatively crowded, although there were stipulations in place to control attendance for the benefit of the animals, only allowing a limited number of visitors in at any given time. Spock and Jim had occasion to visit alongside a mere fraction of the away team; the rest were relegated to a later tour. In addition, there was a small class of young Vulcans who had never glimpsed the native species of Vulcan in the wild.

They would do so someday, but for now, it was important that they familiarize themselves with the different traits of each animal: which of them were dangerous, and which of them could be domesticated given time and effort.

Saavei and Selin were among the group of young students. They had located Jim amidst the other Starfleet representatives and had moved quickly to flank him: Saavei walking at the height of his elbow; Selin just below.

They were not human children, and therefore did not seek to hold Jim’s hand. Such contact would have been improper even for those too young to be fully habituated in the Vulcan way.

Jim had not commented on the appearance of his new retinue. Instead, he paid attention to Spock’s commentary as they made their way around the separate enclosures, pausing by a large, rocky outcropping that mimicked the favored hunting terrain of the le-matya.

‘I don’t see anything,’ Jim said. ‘You sure they’re in there?’

‘They are hiding,’ Saavei said.

‘Well, what are they being so shy for?’ Jim looked down at Selin, nudging him with his elbow. The young Vulcan did not balk at the contact, although he appeared confused. ‘You think they’re scared of you, big guy?’

‘The le-matya do not experience fear as you understand it,’ Spock said.
‘The le-matya is larger than I am,’ Selin confirmed. ‘To refer to me as a “big guy” is not a correct descriptor, given the context.’

‘However,’ Spock said, ‘it is true that the presence of a large touring group would cause the le-matya to remain hidden until they have observed what to them will appear to be our hunting patterns. It is a sign of wisdom, more than one of intimidation. They are clever and cautious creatures. Only after they have studied their enemy will they seek to establish their supremacy.’

‘Wouldn’t wanna run into one of those in the wild,’ Jim said. ‘Not unless I had a decent team with me, one that’d have my back.’ He looked to the children as well as to his officers, as though he believed both fell under the category of an ideal team. Saavei arched an eyebrow and straightened her back.

‘During the daylight hours, especially when the suns are at their zenith, the le-matya is in its least dangerous state,’ Spock added. There was no reason that the tour could not remain informative, with the proper guidance. ‘The extreme heat causes them to become sluggish, and they prefer to sun themselves until it is darker and cooler, when they must expend their stored energy in order to maintain their preferred body heat.’

As they were unable to view the le-matya more closely, they moved on to the next enclosure, where the domesticated sehlat were being fed by an expert trainer. Those that were strong and dominant were able to consume the majority of the food, while the runt of the latest litter had not yet found her footing among her stronger brothers and sisters. She ate, but in order to grow and gain strength, she would require more nourishment than she had claimed.

In the wild, she would not have survived, unless her intellect allowed her to overcome her physical weaknesses, or at least compensate for them. She would not have a scientist like Spock visit her on occasion to bottle-feed her proteins and vitamins in liquid form. Yet as there were few sehlat remaining, it was necessary to bolster their numbers by attending even to those that would under other circumstances be lost to the natural order.

She would be a child’s guardian sehlat someday, rather than one of those released to populate the deserts of New Vulcan. Even then, she required close attention in order to meet the standards for the role.

‘Hey,’ Jim said, while the Vulcan children and the members of the away team both took notes on their PADDs. ‘That little one definitely didn’t eat as much as the others. They kept pushing him out of the way.’

‘Her,’ Spock replied. ‘I am aware.’

The sehlat, who had not yet been granted a name, had come closer to the dividing glass, pressing her nose against it in Spock’s direction. It was playful, rather than foolish; the sehlat were on the whole intelligent creatures, with intellects that far surpassed the cleverness of the le-matya, and the runt sought only to gain Spock’s attention—a task in which she had succeeded. Then, once that attention had been secured, she gazed up at him, while Jim stepped closer to the glass, even going so far as to lean one elbow against it.

‘She’s smaller than the others, too,’ Jim said.

‘Because she is not as strong as her siblings, she is not able to assert herself during the time of feeding.’

‘Yeah, which only means she needs more to eat so she can get stronger, not less.’ Jim dropped one
hand toward the oval of moisture the sehlat runt had left on the glass with her nose and she observed his fingers curiously. The sehlat specialist had already departed to record the morning’s statistics in the log; the runt’s brothers and sisters were settling down to rest while they digested.

‘Are you a sehlat specialist, Commander Kirk?’ Saavei asked. ‘You speak with the conviction of an expert.’

Jim paused, but he found, as Spock had already known, that Saavei’s question was guileless. The search for knowledge was never accusatory. ‘Maybe not,’ Jim said, ‘but that doesn’t mean I don’t know to feed a sehlat when I know it’s hungry.’

‘Your logic, though it comes from a limited perspective, is sound,’ Saavei replied.

Jim turned to Spock, seeking that which Spock could not provide, for he did not know the true nature of the request.

Still, the tour of the sehlat breeding grounds had not concluded.

‘In the interest of furthering cultural understanding, it would not be untoward to introduce the members of the USS Enterprise’s away team—while under close observation—to a young sehlat that would not pose a physical threat,’ Spock said. ‘The runt of the litter is one such sehlat. Her gentleness and intelligence has marked her as a potential companion for a Vulcan child—a practice that was more common when her species could be found in abundance. Commander Kirk, if you would follow me?’

Jim seemed surprised, but not unwilling, and he followed. Spock led him within the enclosure, to the separate area—visible to the away team and the Vulcan students—where the sehlat runt had already predicted they would be, and was waiting for them. When she saw Spock, she stood on her hind paws in greeting.

‘Why, Mr. Spock,’ Jim said. ‘I think she’s got a thing for you.’

‘On the contrary,’ Spock replied. ‘I have a “thing” for her. That thing is, specifically, bottled formula—although, as you are an envoy to our people, I would be remiss if I did not offer you the opportunity to feed her yourself. She would only employ her fangs on someone she perceived as an enemy,’ he added. ‘Though they are large, sharp, and strong, they need not concern you.

‘Oh wow, well when you put it like that,’ Jim said, leaving it to Spock to infer what was implied by his statement, ‘how can I refuse?’

‘I am merely assuring you of what will not come to pass,’ Spock informed him. He had thought that this had been made clear from his words, and yet judging by Jim’s reluctance, he had made the opposite impression.

‘Yeah, Spock, about that.’ Jim began to crouch, then stopped himself with a wince. His bad leg was evidently bothering him more than he would admit, and he remedied his aborted action by sitting instead, crossing the leg that still retained its full mobility beneath him. ‘There such thing as protesting too much, you know. When you go out of your way to reassure someone that something’s not about to happen, it kinda makes them think that’s exactly what’s coming. Crazy, I know.’

‘It is illogical,’ Spock agreed.

Now that Jim had placed himself on eye-level with the runt, he was ready to receive the bottled formula, which Spock handed to him. The sehlat observed its passage with her eyes, then began to
creep forward in Jim’s direction—slowly, as she was wary of a scent she did not recognize, but coaxed by generations of genetic instinct that told her she was about to be fed.

For animals such as the sehlat who responded well to domestication efforts, such a trait was encouraged. It would impact negatively on the runt in the wild to learn to trust other, bipedal species.

Jim held still, the bottle of formula in one hand, and allowed the sehlat to approach him on her terms. She moved gradually but deliberately forward, until she sniffed his hand, licking the shaft of his boot where the leg of his trouser disappeared into the leather.

Jim’s mouth twitched, but he was careful to control any subsequent outbursts that may have occurred from a less restrained individual.

‘Tickles,’ he said, in a voice audible only to Spock.

Satisfied that Jim bore none of the qualities of a le-mata or other potentially dangerous creature, the sehlat runt crawled into his lap and began swiping at the bottle Jim held with her paws, as if to ask why he had not yet begun to feed her. It was only then that Jim laughed, rearranging his grip on the bottle to allow the sehlat to drink from it.

‘All right, you’ve got it. Guess it’s lunchtime. What am I doing, goofing around?’

To say that they had acquired an audience for their actions would have been inaccurate. There had already been an audience, one that had not come to observe Jim feeding a sehlat but rather to learn about Vulcan’s native fauna. However, it was also true that they were now being observed by a greater percentage of the younger students, who were interested in more than just the Vulcan animals in the enclosure.

It would not be unnecessary for them to learn about humans through more than encyclopedic entries and textual research. Humans were, in Spock’s experience, more than a sum of their biological markers; each one was unique, though they possessed qualities that could be generalized to their species as a whole, and it would be beneficial to the new generation of Vulcans to understand their closest allies in the Federation better than their forebears.

Of the examples that could be presented to them, a senior officer of Starfleet nursing a juvenile sehlat in his arms was not standard—but that was another lesson in humanity. Standards did not always exist, and judgments would have to be made based on deviations, rather than on an average.

‘She’s pretty heavy,’ Jim said quietly. ‘Wouldn’t think it, just looking at her next to the others. You do this for her often?’

‘When it is necessary,’ Spock replied. ‘Without the extra attention, she would not have survived.’

‘Yeah.’ Jim tucked the sehlat’s head in the curve of his elbow to provide structural support as she suckled at the bottle. Her hind paw kicked lazily at Jim’s bad leg, though he did not wince at the sensation.

‘It will be important that you only feed her once,’ Spock added, ‘as multiple feedings received from the same individual may cause the sehlat to imprint upon said individual.’

‘And that’d be bad ‘cause I can’t stick around for too long,’ Jim said, ‘which would mean she’d only end up missing me too much after I left. Got it. I wouldn’t do that to her, Spock.’

Jim turned his face down, hair parting to reveal the burn on the back of his neck, as he sheltered the sehlat from the fullest force of the overhead suns. In the shade and in the strong hold of Jim’s arms,
with the contents of the bottle nearly drained, her suckling slowed and her eyes drifted shut. Jim remained still so as not to jostle her, without realizing that it was no easy feat to wake a sehlat cub once it had fallen into a post-feeding sleep.

‘You need not exert such care,’ Spock told him. ‘Neither should you aggravate the condition of your body by holding a position that cannot be comfortable for you. If you would return the sehlat to my care, I shall place her in the appropriate area for her to continue her rest.’

Jim began to stand, the sehlat runt still in his arms, but Spock leaned down before he over-exerted himself and took her from him. This allowed Jim to move more freely, while Spock returned the runt to the general enclosure, placing her near to—but not directly among—the pile of her siblings. They would not accept her, and she had ceased to seek their acceptance. She rolled over in the sand when Spock released her, huffed a heavy sigh, and did not so much as open one eye.

When Spock returned to Jim, he was upright, brushing the sand off his trousers. Where the sehlat runt had licked his boot, a combination of sand and shed fur had stuck to the leather. Jim did not grin or chuckle as he sought to scrape it off.

‘Where to next?’ he asked.

They continued their tour, as Spock provided the information relevant both to the Vulcan students and the away team. There were no further noteworthy incidents, and while Saavei and Selin did not stray far from Jim’s side, they exhibited restraint in refraining from interrupting their lesson to ask him any more questions.

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Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Pillows.

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log—supplemental addition. Stardate 2255.33.

The tours of the general facilities here on New Vulcan have been completed. The remainder of the time spent on this planet will be devoted to scientific inquest. I have learned that the away team of the USS Enterprise will remain on the surface of our planet for fourteen local standard days, during which time I am to provide them with any supplemental materials they may require.

Now, I am to return to my regular duties, inasmuch as I am able, while still offering assistance to the visiting officers of Starfleet. I trust that they will have nothing negative to report to their superiors when they are debriefed after their departure.

Two full days of their mission have already passed.

Twelve full days remain.

*

On the third day of the mission, Spock did not have occasion to see much of Jim beyond the moments in passing that protocol demanded. They crossed paths with one another at scheduled mealtimes in the appointed locations, but addressed each other formally before Jim dined with his away team and Spock ate alone with his research. Jim did not seek to join Spock in order to avoid interrupting him, and Spock finished his meal before the Enterprise officers had concluded theirs.

The evening meal was another matter, as the diplomats of Vulcan had planned a traditional dinner for the team. Spock was in attendance as a Starfleet attaché, and he had been seated beside Jim for the duration of the evening.

‘Real Vulcan plomeek soup, not from a replicator,’ Jim said, after the bowl was set before him. ‘Never thought I’d have the chance.’

‘You will find that the experience is a wholly different one,’ Spock replied.

‘Yeah.’ Jim lifted his spoon to his lips, glanced around the table, then ate without blowing on the surface of the liquid, as the Vulcan diplomats had done. If he burned his tongue, he did not show it. ‘It’s different all right.’

‘It’s so purple,’ Montgomery Scott said, seated on Jim’s other side.

‘Scotty,’ Jim replied.

‘What?’ Scott stirred the contents of his bowl in fascination. ‘That was no insult. Purple’s one of my favorite colors. Granted, I’ve never had a purple soup before, but just like solving a transwarp equation with a glorified pre-teen and a fussy Vulcan—there’s a first time fer everything!’
“‘Fusty’,” Spock repeated. ‘This is a term with which I am not familiar.’

‘Oh boy,’ Jim shook his head, stirring the surface of his soup with his spoon to encourage it to cool faster. ‘Don’t get started with Scotty and his colorful language. Odds are, he made it up, but will you catch him admitting that? No; he’d rather give you a big, long speech about the special standing of the Scott family in the world of etymology.’

‘Only once did I ever do that, thank you very much,’ Scotty said. ‘And in my defense, I’d been drinkin’ at the time.’

‘When aren’t you?’ Jim asked.

‘I’m like a starship,’ Scott explained. ‘I do my best work when fully lubricated.’

Jim, who had been in the middle of lifting a spoonful of plomeek soup to his mouth, breathed out hard. The expulsion created something like a sneeze, spraying liquid outward from its point of origin. Spock made use of his cloth napkin to mop up the spill where it had reached the table.

Even amidst a room full of Vulcans, the scene was not overly disruptive. Those who were not trained in diplomacy to ignore minor outbursts were otherwise occupied with their private small dialogue or fully devoted to their dinners.

Although cultural exchange had never been Spock’s specialty, even he could view the dinner as a burgeoning success.

‘Mr. Scott has said something humorous,’ Spock observed, once the initial point of crisis had passed and it was clear that Jim’s airways were no longer obstructed.

‘Uh, yeah.’ Jim’s cheeks were red. He rubbed his palms on his thighs beneath the table, apparently embarrassed by his display despite the lack of attention it had drawn. Vulcans were curious, but they did not always make their curiosity evident to outsiders. ‘Explaining the joke wouldn’t really be appropriate for the company, Spock. You understand.’

‘Perhaps you will illuminate me later,’ Spock agreed.

‘No, no, I’m not signing up for that,’ Jim said. ‘I didn’t agree to—it’s just—never mind, all right, Spock? It isn’t that funny.’

‘I’ll have you both know ah’m hilarious,’ Scott interjected. ‘However, Mr. Kirk’s right: there’s a time and place for such things, and most of them aren’t around Vulcans.’

Spock was forced to concede that there might have been a subtlety inherent in the statement that he had missed. In private, he would research possible double meanings using the terminal in his quarters, but for now, it seemed most sensible to allow the moment to pass.

Jim was looking at Spock, the angle of his head tilted to give him the optimal angle of observation without drawing attention to himself.

Spock returned the gaze, though once he had met Jim’s eyes, Jim turned away to focus intently on his soup.

‘Well, at least it doesn’t taste purple,’ Scott said.

‘I was not aware you experienced synesthesia, Mr. Scott,’ Spock replied.
Their further attempts at small dialogue achieved varying levels of success. No one sought to relate the situation to ‘old times’ as was common amongst humans reuniting after a year or more had elapsed, which to Spock was a relief. There was nothing reminiscent of ‘old times’ in their topics of conversation or the location in which it took place; merely the individuals present were the same, and while their senses of humor had not been fully revised, events had altered them just enough that the change could not be ignored even momentarily.

The suns were setting when the meal had concluded and the Vulcans present dispersed to attend their nightly duties. Scott barely covered his mouth in time to obscure a massive yawn, then referred to his junior officers as ‘ducklings’ as he shooed them toward their temporary lodgings. He departed with a wink in Jim’s direction, which Jim did not return, and the meaning was another that was lost on Spock—though perhaps that had been the intention.

‘You wanna go for a walk?’ Jim asked Spock simply. Only the two of them remained. ‘Unless you’ve got—stuff.’

‘There will always be stuff,’ Spock replied.

Jim raked his fingers through his hair. ‘Tell me about it.’

‘There is little more to tell.’

‘No, it was— Are you up for a walk or not, Spock?’

‘My health is not in question, and I have fully adapted to the atmosphere of the planet,’ Spock said. ‘The same cannot be said for you, however.’

‘You don’t have to be concerned for my health,’ Jim replied.

‘It is true that I am not a medical officer of Starfleet, nor am I a professional in the field of Vulcan medicine,’ Spock said. ‘Nevertheless, as your leg remains an indicator of an injury that has not fully healed, all that is needed to diagnose the symptom, if not the cause, are rudimentary skills of observation.’

Jim’s face darkened, though this could just as easily have been a result of the night’s cloud cover as an emotional reaction. Once more, he observed Spock from an angle, as though he did not feel comfortable doing so directly. ‘Look, it’s my leg,’ he said at last, ‘and what I do with it’s my business. If it hurts, if it doesn’t hurt—that’s not gonna stop me from walking when I want to walk or running if I have to run.’

‘There is no need to aggravate a condition, however, just as there is a distinct line to be drawn between determination and stubbornness.’

‘You’ve gotta lay off the leg thing, Spock,’ Jim said. ‘You pulled rank on me once—don’t make me return the favor.’

It was true that Jim was an adult, and that adult humans were particularly mindful of that status, eager to reassert its truth into any conversation where they suspected it was being threatened. Jim was also a senior officer on a Starfleet vessel and a guest on Spock’s world—which meant that his comment about rank was not inaccurate, though it may have more strictly related to matters of diplomacy and hospitality.

‘Anyway,’ Jim said, voice gentling, ‘I’m in one piece, and the desert’s quiet at night, and I’m going for a walk. If you want to come with, come with. If you’ve got Vulcan things to take care of, I’m not gonna get in the way of that, either.’
‘I would not dislike your company,’ Spock replied.

‘Okay then.’ Jim gestured with one arm. ‘After you.’

‘The walk is yours. It is only proper that you decide upon the direction.’

‘Except this planet’s your specialty, not mine.’ Jim took pains to minimize the visibility of his limp as he walked; likewise, Spock did not draw attention to his calculations of what speed would not strain the injury, or how strictly he enforced that pace without allowing any variation. ‘So I figure you know all the prime locations, the best views—that sort of thing.’

‘The choice of preferred viewpoint is dependent upon that which the viewer wishes to see,’ Spock said.

Jim sighed. There may have been disappointment in the sound, though Spock could not be certain. ‘I guess it’s too much to ask you to surprise me?’

‘I believe the only way to achieve that goal would be to forego the necessity for an intended destination.’

‘Sometimes,’ Jim agreed, ‘it’s nice to just walk, and see where walking takes you.’

It was not within Spock’s nature, nor had he sought to nurture the proclivity. But there was a meditative quality to the act of walking without a terminus in mind, and after thirteen minutes had passed, Spock was no longer sure of who was leading whom in the cool night air of the desert.

‘Cold?’ Jim asked, after another three minutes. ‘Or, uh—not at optimal temperature?’

‘It is manageable,’ Spock replied.

Jim’s grin matched the wryness in his voice. ‘Right. Manageable.’

‘Do you seek an excuse of combining our body heat in order to prompt an embrace?’ Spock asked.

‘No,’ Jim said, then, ‘maybe. It’s not that easy. I hadn’t thought about it, but I can’t stop thinking about it.’

‘I cannot provide that which would satisfy two such conflicting desires simultaneously,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah.’ Jim stopped in place, moments before he crested a slowly sloping sand hill. ‘I know you can’t. That’s why I’m not asking you to—I’m not asking you for anything. You’ve got enough on your plate, Spock. So don’t think I’m asking.’

There was a second meaning to his words. This much was evident from his tone, although the meaning itself was not altogether apparent. While there had been a time when Spock had once been confident in his understanding of Jim, the additional years and distance between them had strained that confidence—and with good reason.

It would not have been accurate to say that they no longer knew each other. They had not ‘grown apart,’ a phrase Spock had heard shared between friends and colleagues after the Enterprise’s three-year mission, as well as when he was on Earth and before his relocation to New Vulcan, where that phrase was not in rotation.

But the mechanics of the system Spock once employed to relate to Jim had atrophied from lack of practice, which meant that he could not fathom Jim’s deeper meaning. He was only aware that one
existed, caught in the position of comprehending both too much and too little.

‘You are well within your rights to ask anything of me,’ Spock said instead of inquiring after Jim’s motivations. ‘As you have yourself pointed out, you are a guest and I am your host.’

‘That’s all we are to each other? A ranking officer visiting a Vulcan professor?’

Jim skidded in the sand as they made their way down a gentle slope, unable to throw out his bad leg and catch his balance. He did not fall, but the motion was ungainly, and the obviousness of it made him scowl. His mood did not seem receptive—and yet it had been Jim who had suggested they walk together in the first place.

Spock had committed himself to participating in the conversation and would not rescind that participation simply because the conditions had grown more inclement. He did not reach out to assist Jim when he stumbled, recalling that he preferred to regain his balance alone or not at all.

Human pride was still a concept with which Spock struggled, although he had come to understand that it was not a trait to which Vulcans could claim immunity.

‘We were—and are—friends,’ Spock began.

He had imagined that this fact would be self-evident, although judging by the direction the discussion had taken, his hypothesis had been founded on a rogue, erroneous element.

‘We were kinda more than that, Spock,’ Jim said. He glanced to one side when he should have been watching the path in front of him. ‘I mean, I’ve got my fair share of friends, but I’ve only got one you.’

‘I do not understand the concept of that which is “more” than friends,’ Spock replied. ‘That which is “other” than friendship, perhaps—but Vulcan affection is not categorized in a similar fashion to those that structure human relationships.’

‘We did the right thing,’ Jim said, changing his tactics. ‘What we were supposed to do. You did what you had to, and I did what I had to, only sometimes it feels like we only get together so we can leave each other again later. Or maybe you still think of me as that kid you picked up off a failed colony—who didn’t shower and stole your clothes and never knocked before entering.’

‘I am aware that you have grown since that period in your life, Jim.’

‘You just never saw it happen, that’s all.’ Jim kicked at a mound of sand, watching it disperse at the moment of impact, each grain swirling away from one another. The action disrupted his center of balance, forcing him to over-compensate in the opposite direction, and the wince that he could not hide at the pain this inspired was very real. ‘I know what I’m like right now, for what it’s worth,’ he said, dropping down to sit in the sand and plunging his hands into the dunes as though they were pockets. Spock remained standing. He did not know the purpose of the act yet, and could not know whether Jim would change positions as mercurially as he was changing topics. ‘I’m not gonna make captain, not while I’m in this condition. It won’t happen even with Admiral Pike’s recommendation because of my service. And I’m not even mad, not really. Sometimes I want to resign like you did, take the next shuttle to New Vulcan, and just be a mechanic, like I would’ve been if you hadn’t suggested I’d be—an asset to Starfleet.’

‘I do not understand,’ Spock confessed.

‘I see myself,’ Jim lifted one hand, trailing sand like water between his splayed fingers, ‘making myself useful, I don’t know, doing all the grunt work around here, lifting and hauling and sweeping
up, whatever I could. Getting sunburned, sweating it out, not fitting in, but that’s fine. I don’t even care about that. At the end of the day, I’d come home to you. We’d eat together and I’d—I’d kiss the hell out of you, Spock. Hold your hand. Touch you—’

‘You would not appreciate the way of life on New Vulcan,’ Spock said.

Jim craned his neck to look up at Spock’s face. ‘Wouldn’t I? How do you know? Hell, the kids like me. At least I’d have them around.’

‘“The kids” will grow older,’ Spock said. ‘There is no doubt of that.’

‘You mean they’ll grow up and learn better than to like me,’ Jim replied.

This was an over-simplification Spock could not allow to stand. ‘They will be otherwise occupied, as they will no longer have the opportunity to spend leisure time outside of their studies. Gradually, they will cease their communications with you.’

‘I’m used to being left behind, Spock,’ Jim said. ‘You know, when it comes to stuff like this, you don’t have to be logical about everything.’

‘In these times, more than ever, I must.’

Jim brushed the sand off his palm, scrubbing it against his thigh, before scrubbing his face with his knuckles. There was sand on his left eyebrow and a few grains caught on his eyelashes when he withdrew his touch, the latter of which he blinked loose. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I know you do. You’re amazing, you know that?’

‘Do you intend to remain seated for long?’ Spock asked. ‘I inquire in order to determine whether or not I should join you.’

‘I don’t think so.’ Jim levered himself up on his good leg, sand falling away from him as he stood. He had left another, brief impression in the dunes. ‘Look, I know you can’t forget any of what I said here—and I don’t even want you to forget. That’s the thing; I want you to remember. You’re basically the only one who does—the only one who can. You know me and I’m glad you do, even if that means I have to miss it most of the time. I figured I’d say as much as I could, while I still had the chance.’

‘Your candor is appreciated,’ Spock said.

‘Hey,’ Jim replied, ‘after you were always so honest with me, it’s the least I can do. You’ve taught me a lot, Spock. Least of all how to be a good first officer. All the rest—it’s harder to quantify.’

‘I do not doubt that your qualifications are unimpeachable.’

‘And you always know how to give a good compliment. Weird, mostly, but good at the same time.’ Jim rolled down the sleeves of his shirt over his burnt forearms, where the golden hair scattered over the backs had lightened under New Vulcan’s binary suns. ‘I’m not the only one who’s full of contradictions. I’ll tell you what—let me walk you back to your place?’

‘It will not be like “old times”, Jim,’ Spock said.

‘Exactly,’ Jim replied. ‘It’ll be like new ones.’

‘Then I accept,’ Spock said.
They crossed the desert side by side in the starlight. Jim did not speak; his leg was stiffer for his exertions, but this did not seem to cause him distress. Spock considered his words and his desires, the promises he had not made and those he had kept. He also considered—perhaps it was the closest he had come to an imagined scenario—what it would be like to return to a home where Jim awaited him. To be kissed; to have ‘the hell’ kissed ‘out of him’; to be touched. But these were considerations he could not articulate.

Vulcans were not by nature a race that required regular, physical companionship.

Compared to other bipedal mammals of similar intellectual advancement, they could be considered cold, almost self-sufficient. They did not live in large family groups, and did not make a habit of socializing outside of their studies and cultural rituals. It could be argued that this attitude had changed in recent years—the need to procreate had superseded other concerns, resulting in more homogenous family units than ever before—but Spock’s decisions and choices could not be attributed to the traditional mores of the species as a whole.

He had always lived alone.

While he had made room in his mind for the possibility that his lifestyle would change upon joining with the colony, it had not. He had never been given reason to consider that this had been a disappointment to him until Jim’s suggestion had left him with the impetus to contemplate it as something less, or something more, than fact.

His home looked as it always did when they approached it: the smooth stone structure had been built wide instead of tall; its windows dark with no one inside. Spock was not struck by the familiarity of its shape as it loomed on the horizon; it was his place of dwelling and nothing else.

It was not possible for a building to appear lonely, and still the comparison came to Spock unbidden.

The hour was not overly late, but there was little foot traffic outside. The sound of Jim’s footsteps was not the only noise in Spock’s head, though it was most prominent, as Jim was closest to him.

In many ways, both physical and otherwise, Jim had been closer to Spock than any other. He could acknowledge that without coming to a conclusion on whatever else Jim sought to offer.

Rather, his offer had not been an offer made in good faith. This did not mean that Jim had not meant it, but that Spock did not see any way in which it could be fulfilled. While Jim was injured and had accomplished more than most Starfleet officers did in the span of an entire career, he was young, his career only just beginning. And his experience had come at the hands of terrible circumstances.

It was possible that Jim was simply, temporarily, weary. The same conditions that had given him an extraordinary amount of experience in a short time had also given him more than his due of emotional strain.

Spock could have verified any of this by speaking to him, but it was not his place to ask.

‘Would you desire to come inside to accept the offer of a beverage?’ he said instead.

‘Because I look thirsty?’ Jim asked. ‘Or because you want me inside?’

Spock paused and turned so that they were facing one another, preferring to observe Jim not from an angle, but directly. There was sand in Jim’s hair; the front had been swept over his brow by the wind. He was flushed, and certainly he appeared to be in need of liquid refreshment, as the air on Vulcan was dry, and human biology had not adapted to a full desert environment. Whether or not he looked thirsty was not immediately relevant—the fact that he looked as though hydration was a
necessity was more pressing.

‘I do not believe you look thirsty,’ Spock said.

Jim waited.

The inside of Spock’s house was decorated and arranged very similarly to the apartment he had inhabited on Earth during his months of acquaintanceship with Jim, during which period their relationship had intensified. Naturally, there were divergences as well; he did not have access to the same furniture, and relied merely on an unaltered, personal aesthetic. The couch was in place where a couch should be; the table; the chairs; the few items of personal note on their shelves; the replicator; the Vulcan lyre; the reading material; a photograph of his mother; and so on. The windows were not curtained; the meditation alcove was. His bed was dressed with the same blankets, he favored the same dinnerware, and he had reason to believe that Jim would recognize elements of the place as specific to Spock, which perhaps they were.

Then, Spock considered how Jim would look when situated in the midst of these familiar elements, those that comprised the background to Spock’s daily routine. He did not spend more time in his house than was necessary for resting between tasks only he could complete. It was a bed in which he slept; it was a table at which he ate; it was a mat upon which he meditated. Were Jim to enter and inhabit the space, he would surely reach out to touch the photograph of Spock’s mother, or run his fingers down the length of the curtain, or stand before the window in the starlight, the moon reflecting the binary suns, and lean his shoulder on the glass, and leave a cloud of condensation on it from his breath.

He would leave. He could not stay. But memories would remain that had not been possible before.

Spock was not so sentimental that this would be something that he felt day to day. A presence could linger without providing distraction.

Jim was still waiting.

‘Jim,’ Spock said.

Jim swallowed, brushing sand off the side of his throat. ‘Yeah, Spock?’

‘I want you inside,’ Spock said.

‘Okay then. I can do that for you. I can fit that brief.’ Jim’s jaw tightened, though the lines around his eyes relaxed. ‘Wouldn’t mind sitting down for a while. You’ve got at least one comfortable chair in there, right? Don’t answer that. Even if you don’t—I’ll work it out.’

Spock entered the code chain for access and stepped inside, turning the lights up—though they remained dim—so that Jim, who followed close behind, would not trip over anything and exacerbate the state of his bad leg.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said quietly. ‘This is about what I was picturing.’

He stopped by the photograph of Spock’s mother without displacing it, observing it without shifting its position. As Spock had predicted, he was drawn to the window, leaning against it with his forearm, bent at the elbow, and resting his forehead against his wrist as he gazed outward.

‘Hell of a view, though.’

‘It was not built with a view in mind,’ Spock replied.
‘Figures. Doesn’t change what I’m seeing.’

‘What beverage would be your preference at this time?’ Spock asked.

Jim left an oval of condensation on the glass, moisture from his breath, which Spock could see even from a distance—the lone anomaly on an otherwise clean surface. When Jim noticed it as well, he wiped it clean with the sleeve of his uniform. ‘Anything, really. I’m not here for the drink.’

‘Nevertheless, rehydration is recommended at this time.’

‘I’m gonna accept because I’m gonna think of this as the way you care about people,’ Jim said, turning with a shuffle of his feet on the floor. ‘Water’s fine. I’m not too picky. Maybe one of those rehydration drinks you guys engineered to taste good to unsophisticated human palates.’

‘A modification of the sash-savas flavor that would be more agreeable to the taste buds of the average human tongue,’ Spock said.

He retrieved the bottle from the replicator, intending to bring it to Jim, but Jim chose to meet Spock halfway, despite the difficulty with his injured leg. Spock did not comment. The irrationality of the choice was obvious in its stubbornness.

Jim’s fingers brushed Spock’s as he took the bottle. The damp chill of the liquid beneath the plastic stood in sharp contrast to the heat of Jim’s skin, which was calloused where the plastic was wholly smooth.

Jim uncapped it with a twist and drank deeply. He pressed the knuckle of his left forefinger to the corner of his mouth to catch any errant moisture. He swallowed and sighed, the latter an indicator of satisfaction.

‘I was on the committee that developed the flavor profile for the rehydration drink,’ Spock said.

‘No wonder I like it,’ Jim replied.

‘The fact that I was involved does not necessarily indicate your enjoyment of the result,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah, actually, Spock—it does.’

Jim set the bottle, only half-finished, down on the table. Spock frowned, but only slightly. The drink had been engineered so that it would achieve maximum effect if consumed completely.

‘So,’ Jim said, ‘which of these chairs is the most comfortable? You know what? Strike that. You don’t know which of ‘em is the most comfortable, so I’ll have to test ‘em out for you. Take a sampling. Report back with my findings.’

Jim proceeded to do exactly that, making the rounds of Spock’s living space and lowering himself into the separate chairs, one by one. The couch was set at the central point between separate seating arrangements, organized for maximized conversational potential, although Spock did not often entertain multiple guests in his home.

There were not many occasions for socializing among the citizens of New Vulcan. Perhaps, in a few more years, their workloads would not be so demanding, and they would be able to put aside a few hours of each day for more recreational activities—but that time had not yet come.

Instead, Spock occupied himself watching Jim demonstrate his criteria for the assessment of a chair. He bounced to test the cushioning, rocking his body from side to side in order to determine its
spaciousness. While conducting these examinations, he kept his bad leg stretched ahead of him.

Whatever the trouble was—and Jim had been vague whenever Spock thought to inquire after the particular details of his injury—its source seemed to be centered mainly on the large joint. It must not have been able to pivot the way it should, causing stiffness in place of lubricated movement.

Spock did not wish to assume this was the result of wrongdoing on the part of the Enterprise’s chief medical officer, but it seemed that something should have been done to afford Jim a better quality of life.

It was not Spock’s domain to make inquiries, and yet Spock had retained one or two contacts in Starfleet who would provide worthy consultations. He resolved to contact them at the soonest opportunity.

‘I’m saving the couch for last,’ Jim explained, on the third of the three chairs in Spock’s recreational room. He leaned against the backrest, lifted his arms, and finally dropped them to his sides. ‘You know, I like your aesthetic and all, but your chairs are really suffering from a lack of arms.’

‘I am unfamiliar with this term,’ Spock admitted.

‘You know—arms, Spock.’ Jim arose from his seat, moving deliberately around the low, rectangular table that Spock used for setting out tea. At last, he descended onto one side of the couch, stretching his right arm across the low support that attached itself to the back of the overall structure. Then, he closed his eyes, punctuating his observable comfort with a sigh. ‘How’s a guy supposed to relax if he’s not being buffeted on all sides by pillowy softness? I mean—I could fall right out of one of those things.’

‘Your preference is noted,’ Spock said.

Were Jim to live on Vulcan, in this suite, the move would necessitate redecorating.

‘What about your preference?’ Jim asked. ‘Function over form—but over hospitality, too?’

‘Are you uncomfortable?’ Spock replied.

Jim rested his palm over his knee, rolling it so that it cracked and relieved internal pressure. ‘Actually, all this dry air’s good for my leg, at least. Back in San Francisco, I could always tell when it was gonna rain, ‘cause it’d be aching more than usual.’

‘How much does it ache per usual? Specifics would be appreciated,’ Spock said.

‘You’re not my doctor, Spock. Or a medical professional. I’m basically used to it. Just like you’re probably used to couches that feel more like benches than anything else.’

‘Remain where you are,’ Spock said. ‘I will return.’

Jim’s questioning gaze lingered even when Spock departed the room to appropriate the lone pillow at the head of his bed, in the room adjacent. He handed the cushion to Jim, whose questioning gaze only intensified.

“‘Pillowy softness’,’ Spock explained, though an explanation should not have been necessary.

Jim patted the cushion thoughtfully, testing its tension, placing it first on his right side, then his left, then behind him at the small of his back, before letting it rest on the table.
‘You mind?’ Jim lifted his leg.

‘I do not,’ Spock replied.

Jim placed his ankle and foot on the pillow, then leaned back with another sigh. ‘This is almost perfect. Almost.’

‘Perfection is an illusion,’ Spock said. ‘However, there are techniques involving pressure points known to a few Vulcan elders that may improve your condition.’

‘I don’t have a condition, Spock,’ Jim said. ‘Unless you count “Chronic Aloneness on a Couch” as a condition, in which case, the only person who can solve that is you.’

Spock stared down at the couch; Jim stared back up at him. ‘If a cure may be provided, I would not withhold it,’ he said at length, and sat beside Jim, their thighs and knees coming into slight contact.

For the third time, Jim sighed, but he did not close his eyes, which was common while expressing comfort or pleasure. They remained open, bright and blue, and fixed on Spock’s face. ‘Thanks, Spock. I’m feeling better already.’

‘You remain flushed. Perhaps more rehydration drink—’

‘Uh-uh. No thanks.’

‘It is becoming apparent to me that your stubborn nature may be a factor in the delay of your full recovery.’

‘I guess you could say almost dying a few times didn’t agree with me,’ Jim said. Spock lifted a brow. ‘Stop it; don’t do that. Don’t look at me differently. There’s not a single officer on the Enterprise—not just the away mission, but the whole ship—who didn’t almost die at least once the past couple of years.’ Jim’s expression tightened. It was reminiscent of pain, but not a physical one. Spock was reminded of then-Captain Pike when an officer under his command was lost: a sense of responsibility akin to grief, though there were rare few cases when a captain or commander did not do all within their power to protect their crew. For whatever reason, a reminder of the statistics had never been welcome. This was not a wound that a medical officer could be expected to cure. ‘I guess my luck still hasn’t run out.’

‘Luck is a randomizing factor,’ Spock replied, ‘whereas skill and determination are constants. It is far more likely that those are the reasons for your success.’

‘For my survival,’ Jim said.

Spock nodded. That, too, was an accurate term.

‘There were more people than I thought there’d be,’ Jim continued. ‘People I couldn’t let down.’

‘I do not know what it means to serve Starfleet during a time of war.’

‘Survival, though.’ Jim gestured, vaguely, most likely to indicate all of New Vulcan, though the motion was reserved. ‘You know about it.’

‘As do all species,’ Spock agreed.

‘Smells like your incense in here,’ Jim said.

Spock breathed in deeply, at the same moment as Jim did—reminded that the scents he took for
granted would not be commonplace for a visitor. Spock had indeed burned incense in his meditation alcove recently, and so the smell of it remained in the fabric of its curtain, permeating the air. The room also smelled of sand, and of Jim’s drink, and of Jim’s skin, the last being a combination of heat and sweat. It was no more than another collection of atoms, but the arrangement of those atoms was the deciding factor to what separated Spock from Jim: that which was, and was not, the same.

‘You think I could spend the night?’ Jim asked. ‘That smell always makes me sleepy.’

‘You could and you may.’ Spock paused. ‘Due to the physical difficulties you are experiencing, the conditions are the following: you must spend the night in my bed.’

‘Not because of the physical difficulties I’m experiencing,’ Jim said.

‘Spend the night in my bed,’ Spock replied.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said. ‘God, yes. Okay.’

*
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Your comments on Spock's cluelessness always make my day!

_Spock of New Vulcan, personal log—supplemental addition. Stardate 2255.34._

**THERE IS NO ENTRY FOR THE MORNING OF STARDATE 2255.34.**

* Spock was unable to forget—even for an instant—Jim’s presence in bed beside him, his heaviness and his heat as he slept and the tensions of his body whenever he began to dream. Though Spock did not know the nature of those dreams, he knew that they could not be pleasant.

He was not a medical professional; neither was he a medical officer. He did not seek to soothe Jim’s consciousness through his dreaming state. Instead, he acknowledged and appreciated Jim’s presence in bed beside him, his strength and his warmth, the color of his hair, the sound of his breathing, and the breadth of his chest.

He was noticeable—or worthy of notice—and not simply because of his recessive genetic traits. Jim drew attention not only because of his looks but also because of his exceptional behavior.

He possessed many qualities intrinsically prized among Federation races; more valuable still was that he did not seem overly aware of his positive attributes. It was not entirely logical to lend significance to an individual’s ignorance of self, but in terms of personality, the lack of blatant self-promotion was understood to be the preferable choice.

Spock was not possessed by the urge to touch Jim. It was not that he was aesthetically unappealing; the burns he had sustained on his first day on New Vulcan had faded to a deep golden color, darkening his skin at the back of his neck and his hands and arms where he had rolled back his sleeves.

By contrast, the color of his back and shoulders was pale, marked by freckles and a few other areas of concentrated melanin, which were commonly referred to by humans as the _beauty mark_. The resultant pattern did not resemble any star chart from the Alpha Quadrant, but that did not prevent Spock from appreciating the uniquely elegant configuration.

He did not require contact to welcome something with his eyes, and he did not need to put his hands on Jim in order to feel him nearby. The rise and fall of Jim’s chest warmed the air, still cool from the lingering night, with his breath. This smelled faintly of artificial mint from the solution he had used to scrub his teeth and tongue before retiring for the night. Spock’s bathroom had not been equipped with everything Jim needed before bed, but the replicator had compensated for his lacking supplies.

Jim had even commented that it was ‘just like home’ before he fell asleep, the meaning of which Spock could not parse. Then, of course, Jim was unconscious, leaving Spock to wait for the next opportunity to request clarification.

It did not trouble him to practice patience enforced by the necessities of Jim’s biology. Waiting was a
concept with which Spock was familiar. He did not often take stock of his own traits; there was little need any longer for such self-reflection. But as he observed Jim in repose, it occurred to him that persistence was most valuable, especially for someone who sought to overcome the difficulties presented by an attempt to join their separate perspectives.

Couplings between humans and Vulcans were rare, but Spock and Jim had already surmounted the odds. After all, Spock had researched the probabilities that faced a ‘long-distance relationship’ at the outset of his departure for New Vulcan. The numbers were not favorable.

Spock’s feelings for Jim, however, were a factor for which there was no accounting.

Jim shifted and the blanket slipped lower across his back, sliding to reveal his sacral dimple above the swell of his buttocks.

There were no noteworthy scars upon Jim’s flesh visible from this angle. As he slept on his belly, both his throat and chest were hidden from view, and Jim’s bad leg likewise offered no sign of injury from the back. The rest of him was covered in the blanket, though as morning came and the sun rose, that covering would grow too warm for his comfort.

Spock rested his palms on his thighs. His balance was impeccable and he did not shift his center of gravity in a bothersome fashion so that Jim’s sleep would not be disturbed. His back rose and fell; at times he sighed, for reasons obscured by the fall of his hair over his face on one side and the pillow he had appropriated on the other, a host of shadows in between.

This was not meditation.

Spock could be nothing other than grounded in the moment, weighted to the bed and to Jim’s presence therein, aware of every geometry provided by his limbs, every slope calculated by his physicality. His shoulders; the curve of his spine; the space between his splayed thighs, bad leg stiff while the other bent to compensate and provide comfort for his hips.

They had rested together—and now, Spock presided over Jim’s rest. When Jim began to stir beyond the general disturbances of unpleasant dreams, the even rhythm of his sleeping breath broken, Spock adjusted his equilibrium. The mattress shifted, and Jim shifted against it. He craned his neck, muscles stiffening, and opened one eye.

‘I’m not still dreaming, am I?’ he asked, his voice thick and dry from sleep. He cleared his throat retroactively, popping a vertebra in his lower back. Though they were close, the minimal distance remaining prevented Spock from knowing which vertebra it was. ‘Is this the part where you turn into a Romulan guard and I’m being held prisoner on the Narada?’

‘That would be impossible,’ Spock replied.

Jim’s mouth twisted, grinning while halfway through a yawn. ‘Say something only the real Spock would say.’

‘If your mind has not cleared from its unconscious state, perhaps you should not speak until you have reaffirmed that which is real and that which is illusion,’ Spock said.

Jim buried his face against the wrinkled swell of the pillow. He did not lift it to speak, causing his voice to be muffled and nearly incomprehensible. ‘Definitely something only the real Spock would say.’ He bunched his shoulders forward; the mattress rocked with his movement. Spock had already been jostled before Jim’s good knee bumped the side of his thigh—after which it, and he, froze, hands fisted in fabric, a glimpse of the burns on his throat suddenly visible through the fall of uneven
‘How long was I out?’ Jim cleared his throat again. ‘Feels like I slept forever. Woke up in a different universe.’

‘You slept for seven hours and twenty-three minutes,’ Spock informed him. ‘You have not engaged in an inter-dimensional slip during this time.’

‘Sounds like something alternate universe Spock might say,’ Jim replied. ‘I mean, no matter what universe you’re in, you’ve gotta be smart; that’s a constant.’

‘You appear to be hallucinating,’ Spock said. ‘There are multiple potential causes for this symptom, the primary candidate being dehydration.’

‘I’m fine, Spock.’ With a trembling of the muscles in Jim’s bare back, muscles tensing and tightening, his elbows bent and his arms strengthening, Jim pushed himself into a seated position. His knee cracked. The extent of his burn scars were now clearly observable; the lighting was more than sufficient to illuminate the random shapes, stretching from beneath Jim’s Adam’s apple to just below his sternum. Jim rubbed the back of his neck, then touched the scar tissue without hesitation before he noticed Spock’s attention and paused. The shadow from his bent arm obscured the reddened tissue, serving only to darken the color. ‘Doesn’t hurt anymore,’ Jim said. ‘That’s the whole point. It doesn’t feel a thing.’

‘There are therapies and technologies that could replace the deadened tissue,’ Spock said. ‘Yeah, I know. Ship’s CMO—you remember Bones, right? Leonard McCoy?—he told me about ‘em. Maybe someday. In the scheme of things, though, it never seemed too important.’

‘You seek to preserve the physical marks as a reminder of that which has transpired,’ Spock said. Jim blinked. ‘Like I could ever forget.’

‘Then why not act upon your chief medical officer’s advice for treatment?’

‘Okay, it’s definitely you,’ Jim said. ‘Since you’re not even waiting until after breakfast to ask the tough questions.’

Jim yawned into the back of his hand, watching Spock over the palm.

‘I was not aware of that point of etiquette,’ Spock admitted. ‘I will not forget it in the future.’

‘In the future, huh?’ Jim dropped his hand. Perhaps there had been more he had intended to say, but he chose to switch positions instead, relieving the pressure that kneeling placed upon his bad knee and rubbing it with his knuckles. ‘I’ll have to ask for clarification on that point, Spock. But after breakfast.’

‘I will provide a suitable morning meal,’ Spock said. ‘I still recall the parameters of the average human breakfast and its nutritional requirements.’

‘Lemme help you,’ Jim replied.

‘You are my guest, Jim.’

‘Yeah, and I wanna be a good one—good enough to get invited back sometime.’ Jim stood after levering his bad leg over the edge of the bed; he twisted, rather than stretching, resulting in a series of shadows.
cracking vertebrae. Though the sound might have been considered alarming to some, Jim sighed when the event had concluded, suggesting it had brought him pleasure, or at least relief.

Spock would not question that which brought Jim comfort. Vulcans did not consider happiness above security or place luxury ahead of their duties—but it seemed that this was a trait that could also be attributed to humans in times of great stress. Although it was not in Spock’s nature to reflect upon the things that made an existence relaxed rather than useful or productive, he judged that it had been a long time since Jim had been given the leisure to think about himself first and his commitment to Starfleet second.

This should not have been Spock’s concern, but he was as aware of what Jim did not have as much what Jim did. The construction of an appropriate breakfast meal seemed to be, in human colloquial terms, the least Spock could do.

“You are welcome in my home at any time, Jim,” Spock said. Jim’s shoulders relaxed, although he did not turn to observe Spock across the bed. “This invitation has never previously been extended, so I cannot say whether it is determined by a specific set of criteria. However, the assistance in the kitchen you speak of is not required.”

“Doesn’t mean it wouldn’t be fun, though.” Jim bent to gather his clothes from where they had lain strewn across the floor all night and holding them to his chest. “You don’t mind if I steal the bathroom first, do you? I feel like I’m working about three separate coats of sweat at the moment. Dried, dried, and fresh on top of that. I take showers more than I used to, for the record.”

He did not halt in making his slow, laborious process toward the bathroom in question. The impediment provided by his bad leg was exaggerated in the morning, no doubt as a result of being held in one position through the night. The joint and surrounding muscle had been given ample time to stiffen, and would no doubt benefit from the heat of a properly calibrated sonic shower.

“I will begin breakfast,” Spock said, by way of agreement. He considered what Jim had requested, then chose to add something additional. “If you wish to assist me once you have finished your morning preparations, I would not find this intrusive.”

Jim paused, leaning his shoulder against the doorway for balance. He turned to smile at Spock, who was struck by how natural it seemed to have another person—this other person, specifically—within his home.

Spock did not make a habit of entertaining, and he had never had occasion to host an overnight guest. While his inexperience should have made him eager to accept and incorporate Jim’s professed expertise, instead it only made him more determined to adhere to his interest in catering to Jim’s needs.

Although he was a guest, he did not have to concern himself with being invited back, because it was evident to Spock if not to Jim that he already belonged. At least, in a manner of speaking.

“All right,” Jim said finally. “Cool. I’ll see you soon, Spock.”

The bathroom door closed behind him. Spock listened for the hum of the sonic shower, only attending his business in the kitchen once it was audible.

Spock programmed the replicator for toast and an Earth-based fruit juice beverage. He recalled that Jim preferred large meals, for understandable reasons related to the trauma he had suffered in the
past, and programmed the replicator for eggs that had been scrambled as well as pancakes—which were not technically cakes made in a pan. For himself, there was porridge the way his mother used to prepare it: a Vulcan grain mixed with dried Earth berries.

‘Looks like I’m late,’ Jim said, appearing in the kitchen as Spock was setting the table.

‘No time of arrival was ever specified; therefore, unpunctuality is not possible.’

‘Late for making breakfast with you, I mean.’ Jim paused by the plate of pancakes and breathed in deeply. He balled the fingers of his right hand into a fist after having lifted his arm, perhaps to begin eating before he had taken his seat. ‘On time for eating it, though. So I’ve got that going for me.’

‘Where would you prefer to sit?’ Spock asked.

‘It’s your table,’ Jim replied. ‘Where do you always sit? I’ll sit somewhere else.’

Spock acknowledged this as a logical arrangement and sat in the customary place. Jim sat across from him. ‘The pancakes are yours,’ Spock said, ‘as are the toast, the eggs that are scrambled, and the juice of the orange. In most surveys, these are the most popular items for breakfast among humans enrolled in Starfleet Academy.’

‘I know I’m not gonna go hungry with you around, Spock.’ Jim buttered his toast with the pat the replicator had provided and one of Spock’s knives, the sound the metal made against the bread rasping and dry. He finished the first slice in only three bites.

Spock stirred his porridge.

They did not speak.

Jim could not with his mouth full—which it remained for some time, until the toast and eggs were finished, and only one pancake was left behind, Jim eyeing it contemplatively. Spock did not speak, as Jim had not spoken, and if something was missing, some element out of place, it had no name of yet. However, Jim did not appear dissatisfied, and Spock was not uncomfortable despite the intrusion of Jim’s presence, although Jim occasionally bumped Spock’s foot with his under the table while resettling his bad leg in a more relaxed position.

‘Your leg is bothering you,’ Spock noted.

Jim stabbed the last of the pancakes and dropped it onto his plate. ‘No, Spock. It’s not too bad.’

‘Your inability to remain still suggests otherwise.’

‘I’m touching you under the table because I wanna touch you under the table.’

‘Ah,’ Spock said.

Jim’s foot bumped his. Spock bumped it back. Jim’s final pancake was now gone.

‘Do you require more sustenance?’ Spock asked.

Jim patted his stomach. ‘Not right now, thanks. I’m trying not to act like I was raised by fungus on Tarsus IV.’ He paused, but did not grimace. His ability to speak the name of that place was a notable development. ‘But I’m gonna get the dishes, Spock, and there’s nothing you can say that’ll talk me out of it.’

‘I accept the proposal,’ Spock replied.
Jim’s cheeks had warmed from the heat of the food and the rising temperature of the day. Spock could feel the same heat emanating from his body when he leaned close to take Spock’s empty bowl away; he no longer smelled of dry sweat, having so recently showered, though there was moisture at the center of his chest on the fabric of the black, Starfleet regulation undershirt he wore. The scent of his body, combined with the scents of the food he had eaten and the deodorant he had applied, was entirely new.

Jim limped to the replicator and returned the empty dishes to be cleaned.

‘God, Spock,’ he said, facing the wall, one hand braced against it. ‘This is it. This is what I want.’

‘Surely there are more powerful replicators aboard the Enterprise,’ Spock replied. ‘As first officer, you would have full access to them.’

Jim laughed, resting his other hand on his hip. His back was bent. Spock watched him from behind, once again acknowledging the specific geometries of Jim’s body, the hard angles of his arms, and the weight he had gathered around his middle. He was strong, but his injury surely prevented him from the majority of aerobic exercises. The sunburn on the back of his neck would be cooled with application of a suitable ointment.

‘If I retired from Starfleet,’ Jim said, ‘you think I could stay here?’

‘Do you wish to retire from Starfleet, Jim?’ Spock asked.


‘You understood my decision at the time.’

‘Yeah. All too well. Hell, I still do. We could’ve used you, though—during the war. Everybody said that. And I kept thinking how much I wanted you there, but how glad I was you weren’t.’

‘A contradiction of desires,’ Spock said.

‘That’s about right,’ Jim replied. ‘What I mean is, knowing you were safe—safer than if you were serving on a Starfleet ship, heading off to meet the Narada—that was good. We just had to make sure the location of New Vulcan stayed classified, and I’d know you were okay. But I thought—I really thought you’d have a family, Spock. That it’d be easier if you did, ‘cause it’d be obvious then I didn’t belong. That I couldn’t be a part of that.’

‘Is that what you had hoped for?’ Spock asked. ‘To find something that you could not be a part of?’

‘Maybe,’ Jim said. ‘I don’t know. When you say it, it sounds totally irrational.’

To Spock, the explanation seemed sufficiently simple. However, he had known enough humans to understand the inherent contradiction in their words: just because a definition appeared straightforward did not mean that it was.

This was not the first time that Jim had presented Spock with the impression that there was a veiled nuance to the conversation he had missed. It was not immediately evident to him why Jim would wish to return to a place where he did not belong—and Spock had often heard of, and even occasionally sympathized with, the human desire to belong. It was in the very least unconventional for Jim to express an aspiration toward the opposite.

Because he did not comprehend the motivation at its source, the clearest way to proceed with the conversation seemed to be to inquire after it directly.
'It sounds irrational,' Spock agreed. ‘Perhaps this is because it is.’

‘Oh that’s helpful.’ Jim pressed the sequence for cleaning into the replicator, then turned to lean against it.

‘The attempt to comprehend is not inherently accommodating,’ Spock replied.

‘Yeah, well.’ Jim shrugged again, crossing his arms over his chest. He rubbed his fingers against the light golden hairs that covered his skin, touching the freckles on his forearm. ‘Call me difficult, I guess. If even you can’t understand me, I’m probably in trouble.’

‘Whereas difficulty is not an inherently undesirable trait,’ Spock said.

Jim paused where he had begun to slide down the wall in increments, his shoulders hitched up near the lobes of his sunburned ears.

‘You would say that,’ he replied. ‘You’ve got a head for puzzles. Very Vulcan of you.’

‘You are not a puzzle, Jim,’ Spock said.

It was true that Jim had presented conundrums at several key points during their acquaintance, but this was different. Jim was a person, and a person could not be solved by the traditional means employed to win a game of chess or to find the solution to a puzzle. Understanding another mind was an ongoing process, one that had no obvious point of completion.

‘Tell that to the inside of my head.’ Jim tapped his finger to his temple for emphasis.

‘If you desire a telepathic connection, you have only to ask,’ Spock informed him.

‘No, Spock, I was speaking metaphorically.’ Jim took his hand off his arm to run it through his hair. ‘I just—I thought if I didn’t belong here, then maybe it’d make more sense, us being apart all the time.’

‘Ah,’ Spock said.

‘Ah?’ Jim repeated. It was a prompt. He sought an explanation.

‘The human desire to make sense of that which is senseless,’ Spock said. ‘That we have been apart “all the time” has no deeper meaning other than the choices we have made and the duties we have performed.’

‘That sucks, Spock,’ Jim said. ‘I mean, I can accept it. But it sucks.’

Jim waited—for what, Spock was uncertain. His eyes were bright, his jaw set and strong, in stark contrast to the softness, the vulnerability of his mouth. There was something he needed; his longing was palpable but nameless. Behind him, the replicator chimed to inform them that its task had been completed, and was now ready to perform a new function.

‘Yeah,’ Jim said. ‘I’d better check on my crew. Make sure Scotty hasn’t led them all to riot without me.’

‘If you believe Montgomery Scott to be capable of exerting such negative influence—’ Spock began.

‘He is, and that’s why I like him,’ Jim said. He pushed off the wall, taking his command gold shirt off the back of the chair and pulling it on. He combed his hair with his fingers and paused before he clapped Spock on the shoulder, squeezing it gently, his palm warm.
‘I shall accompany you to the door, then make my own preparations to meet the away team for the day’s events,’ Spock said.

Jim removed his hand. ‘Sounds good, Spock,’ he replied.

*
Chapter Summary

Late because of work SORRY!

*

Spock of New Vulcan, personal log—supplemental addition. Stardate 2255.34.

The following is for my own records and not for the edification of future generations regarding the progress made on New Vulcan and its Vulcan Cultural Preservation Initiatives.

I am S’chn T’gai Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth. I will recommence my duties as guide and science liaison to the Starfleet crew of the USS Enterprise in twelve minutes and thirty-five seconds.

My schedule for the day was not delayed by the presence of an additional individual in my home. Therefore there is time to make this entry to my personal log.

To note: I do not make it a habit of inserting personal matters into the otherwise clinical record of my affairs.

When I consider the danger that Jim Kirk—

When I consider the danger faced by Commander Kirk of the USS Enterprise—

I know what is necessary. I know what is logical. I am gratified to act as I know Sarek would have—to devote my knowledge and my energies to the betterment of our people. I have seen a new generation of Vulcans born and though I cannot claim to be related to them by blood, I have nevertheless been instrumental in their process of gestation. I have presided over the laboratories in which they were conceived, their gestation monitored. They are now alive and healthy in the homes to which they have been assigned. Likewise, my education suggests that I have been a prime candidate for the Narada Study and I believe I have been an invaluable member thereof. The developments in technology that the study will ultimately provide the Federation will be equally invaluable.

Yet I recall a topic broached by Jim Kirk, an individual with whom I have been acquainted since stardate 2249.42.

It is a matter of belonging.

He sought to arrive at a place where he did not belong—perhaps that it would make it less difficult for him to depart.

What I must answer now is: Do I belong, or do I not?

*

Aside from the occasional gasp or swear word echoing from the direction in which Montgomery
Scott had disappeared in order to continue his private study of the Narada's fears of engineering, the docking bay was silent. Conditions were prime for Spock to consider, in uninterrupted peace, the self-repairing nanotechnology that could adapt to anticipated threats—and had adapted to them during the course of the Narada War, making the lone ship such a deadly opponent against the entire Federation fleet.

‘Indeed,’ T’Pring said of Spock’s findings when they met to discuss the day’s theories, ‘I have been informed by Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott of the phrase “the ship has a mind of its own”. Though the metaphor is crude and unempirical, it is not without accuracy—of a fashion.’

‘This is familiar to Commander Scott’s methods as I have previously observed them,’ Spock agreed.

T’Pring sat at the bare table beside Spock, steepling her forefingers before her mouth in deep thought. ‘I have also been informed, by Scott himself, that he is the one who developed the theory of trans-warp.’ Spock nodded. ‘He is not the man I would have expected, yet you confirm his contributions to the scientific field.’

‘He has a mind of his own,’ Spock said.

‘Indeed,’ T’Pring said again.

‘The nanotechnology of the Narada is beyond anything heretofore seen by any Federation species or allied species.’

‘I have also been informed,’ T’Pring continued, ‘that you were with Scott during the time of his development of the theory of transwarp, and that you made “minimal” contributions to the equation.’

‘It was one of the deciding factors that recommended me for inclusion in the Narada Study,’ Spock said.

‘The equation is both powerful and beautiful.’ T’Pring lowered her hands, folding them in her lap. ‘Stonn will care for our children when I visit Starfleet Academy to determine what, precisely, fosters the creativity of an educated mind. Subsequent to the completion of our part in the Narada Study, that is.’

Spock felt his eyebrows lift of their own volition. It was not conventional for a Vulcan to react to surprise in such an obvious manner, but it was possible that in having spent a significant portion of his recent days with humans again, Spock had begun to absorb and reflect their patterns of behavior. It was true that, while on Earth, he had discovered minimal means of communicating his thoughts and feelings efficiently. Though more stringent Vulcan traditionalists would not approve of this perceived assimilation, Spock had come to prefer facilitating comprehension over adhering to strict rules that only complicated the simplest interactions.

It was true that he had made sacrifices in order to become a member of Starfleet; however it was also true that he had achieved many goals while in Starfleet that would make it easier for other Vulcans to pursue a similar career path, if they were so inclined.

‘You intend to leave New Vulcan,’ Spock said.

T’Pring’s eyes were bright in the artificial light of the silo that housed the Narada. Amongst their peers, Spock had always found her conversation to be stimulating; it was not that her intelligence was exceptional—although it was—but rather that her willingness to entertain speculative lines of reasoning made her unique. A human would refer to her as possessing a “fertile imagination”.

She was never boring. This latest venture only served to solidify Spock’s predetermined conclusion.
‘Once our work is completed, I do intend it,’ T’Pring confirmed. ‘There will be several official presentations given on our findings. It is my understanding that a variety of firsthand accounts will be necessary.’

‘I see,’ Spock said.

He had not considered this fact, although now that T’Pring had broached the subject, he could appreciate that it was only logical. While it was possible to submit a simple data transfer of their findings to Starfleet—and while Starfleet engineers had arrived to work alongside the Vulcan scientists in their search to understand the Narada’s components as replicable—it would be beneficial to offer a pool of varying sources in order to achieve as comprehensive an understanding as possible.

It was not simply that the Narada had the nanotechnology necessary for to-the-minute repairs, but also that the ship showed signs of having adapted the shape of its hull and interior from that of a mining vessel to one built for transportation and combat. Though it was a ship and could not have possessed a natural consciousness, the Narada had been aware of its purpose and had restructured itself in order to better serve that purpose.

Spock would not compare himself to a ship—and yet, if an inanimate object could change to suit the needs of an evolving situation, then he could not hold himself to a lesser standard.

Spock, too, had a mind of his own.

‘You contemplate matters profoundly, Spock,’ T’Pring said. ‘And it is observable that you do so. Is it that your time among the humans of Starfleet has stimulated you to adapt?’

‘This is similar to the complex, responsive behaviors of the Narada,’ Spock replied, replying without answering. T’Pring’s right eyebrow arched, though if there was an element of approval in the mask formed by her lack of expression, Spock would never know.

Instead of pursuing their conversation, they exchanged their collected notes in order to confer on a single, cohesive report. In the distance, Montgomery Scott cursed loudly and passionately; there followed a familiar creaking sound that suggested he had discovered one of the Narada’s self-operating tendrils, which Spock understood had been employed to kill many of those who had succeeded in boarding the ship via a transwarp beaming.

‘Are ye a ship or a bloody octopus?’ Scott demanded. His voice echoed upward through the beams of the silo to the high ceiling. ‘Well, who has th’last laugh now, then? Hah! Haha!’

The laughter continued. T’Pring’s eyebrow remained raised. Spock signed off on their final report and T’Pring cosigned her approval of the product amidst the clattering caused by Scott.

Jim, Spock noticed, was conspicuously absent. His duties as a first officer did not demand that he be present or observe the Narada in the capacity of a scientist; he was required only to organize and preside over the crew under his care. Yet Jim’s intellect and curiosity—Spock easily recalled Jim’s contributions to the transwarp question and how vital they had been to its final solution—suggested that he should have been at Scott’s side not simply to restrain him, but to study the ship himself. That he continued to avoid the area was noteworthy.

‘If ye’re lookin’ for Jim—sorry, that’d be Commander Kirk, an’ never say I’m forgettin’ to call him by his proper title on purpose—he’s not about. Not here, anyway,’ Scott said when Spock approached him. Spock had done so out of concern for Scott’s well-being as well as out of concern for the state of the Narada. Despite the clamor, nothing had been destroyed. ‘If you ask me,’ Scott
continued, though Spock had not asked him anything, ‘it’s on account of that bum knee of his. Not that I’m a doctor or an expert, mind, but it was one of these wicked little beauties,’ Scott gestured to a nearby, metallic tendril belonging to the ship’s internal defense system, ‘that shattered th’kneecap when he was inside the belly o’ the beast rescuing Admiral Pike.’ Scott patted the tendril, his expression vulgar in its outright admittance of admiration and disgust. ‘Three months, Pike was missing. Damn near almost lost them both during th’ rescue, an’ we all joked how it’d’ve been better if we had, to avoid all the shouting from Doctor McCoy about it on the trip back, but…’ Scott trailed off, shaking his head. ‘I don’t blame him for givin’ this cruel queen a wide berth, and that’s all I’ll say on the matter.’

‘I had not asked you anything,’ Spock said.

Scott’s brow wrinkled as he squinted up into Spock’s face. ‘No, ye didn’t, did ye? So I supplied ye with the information that was necessary. I anticipated your needs. The Narada’s not the only one who can do that. Clever devils, both of us. Though I’m a mite less murderous and not quite so handsome.’

‘I cannot provide medical care for Jim’s knee, nor am I a counselor trained to offer emotional care,’ Spock said.

‘An’ thank God for that, I say. You’re th’best at what you do, and I’m th’best at what I do, but Jim—Jim’s the best, and that’s all there is to it. By the by, d’you think I could stay here for a while yet? We’re finally getting a rapport going, the ship and I are. Starting to communicate on th’same level.’

‘You will be supervised,’ Spock replied.

Scott moved closer, speaking in an exaggerated whisper. ‘So long as it’s not that T’Pring who’s doing the supervising. That one’s even scarier’n you are—don’t tell her I said as much. You lot can smell fear, whether or not you’ll admit to it.’

Immediately after this confession, Scott returned to speaking to one of the Narada’s many circuit boards—though he did not employ words primarily, offering coos, whistles and tuts as his experiments caused the tendril to twitch and jump. ‘We’re dancing, we are,’ Scott added, which was confirmation in Spock’s mind that he should depart.

Outside, the heat of the day had cooled from the night winds. The inclement weather and an oncoming sandstorm had not deterred Jim from maintaining vigil at the silo’s main exit.

‘If you are here because you are waiting for the errant member of your away team,’ Spock said, ‘I must inform you that Commander Scott believes he is dancing with the Narada, and did not appear likely to conclude his business in the near future.’

‘That’s fine,’ Jim replied. ‘I wasn’t here because I’m waiting for Scotty.’

‘The other members of the away team have already left the silo with another scientist, T’Pring, as their chaperone.’

‘Yeah. I saw ‘em on their way out and I gave ‘em clearance to turn in early if they want. Scotty said he was dancing with the ship?’ Jim grinned tightly. ‘Well, that’s Scotty for you.’

‘Are you avoiding the ship, Jim?’ Spock asked.

‘Scotty also needs to think inside his head more than he does outside of it,’ Jim said.

‘You are avoiding the question as well,’ Spock pointed out.
Jim hunched his shoulders, but the cause behind this sudden return to tension did not appear to share the same underpinnings as those behind the similar posture in Spock’s apartment. It was one of the more difficult to comprehend characteristics of human behavior: that they could exhibit the same physical behaviors for reasons that were diametrically opposed.

Spock had meant what he said—that difficulty was not to be construed as fundamentally negative—but if he was to be unfailingly honest, there were times when he courted frustration in his interactions with Jim. It was unfortunate that he did not know Jim better, and that he could not find it within him to create a dependable mechanism in which they behaved as two separate parts of a functioning whole.

Spock was more than simply human, but he had limitations, as did all members of any other species. In fact, it was possible that, given his dual heritage, he was possessed of twice the shortcomings—both Vulcan and human.

Jim licked his lips where they were chapped and hooked his thumbs under the waist of his black trousers, which were tucked high against the deep v shape constructed by his hipbones. In the absence of pockets, he had improvised an effective, if distracting, temporary solution. He toed at the sand beneath his boots with his bad leg, moving his calf awkwardly beneath the stiff joint of his knee.

‘Okay, first off, it’s not “as well”, because we still haven’t confirmed I was avoiding anything else to begin with. Secondly—avoidance is a touchy subject.’

‘One to be avoided, perhaps,’ Spock said.

Jim raised his thick eyebrows, a gesture that held no correspondence to the expression Spock had observed earlier on T’Pring’s face. It was an endless source of interest to him how two species that bore so much physical resemblance to one another could also be so different.

‘Was that a joke?’ Jim asked. ‘You’re getting better at those. Starting to freak me out, Spock.’

‘Personal improvement is nothing to fear,’ Spock said.

‘Keep saying that, Spock, and maybe someday I’ll believe it.’

There was no reason for Jim not to accept the wisdom in Spock’s statement. Spock, as always, had considered his words carefully before he elected to share them. His counsel was not and had never been given carelessly.

Jim nodded his chin to one side, indicating the path that would lead them back to Spock’s apartment. In a short time, he had learned his way around the outskirts of the burgeoning New Vulcan colony. It spoke well, as always, of Jim’s ability to adapt.

Spock would do well to emulate such strengths in his own personal life.

‘Figured I could walk you back to your place, at least,’ Jim said. ‘For the record, it’s half avoidance and half necessity. Paperwork. You never mentioned all the paperwork that went into being a first officer.’

‘At no point did the subject become relevant.’

‘I figured you just enjoyed it. All those logs to record.’ Jim paused to look up to the sky. Rather than focusing on the constellations, he seemed instead to watch the darkness. ‘You know the Enterprise had a collection of all first officers’ logs in the databank? All at the push of a button, if you were at
the right clearance level.’

‘I was aware of this,’ Spock said.

‘Of course you were. And of course you remembered.’ This was not an accusation, Spock determined after a brief, internal crosscheck, but merely an acknowledgement. ‘I’ve gotta confess—they were pretty good for nights when I couldn’t sleep. Listening to the lists and the mission summaries of a certain first officer, made without embellishment or any attention to the flow of a story, and suddenly it wasn’t too hard to drift off after all.’

‘A peculiar tactic to combat insomnia—yet harmless, if you found it successful.’

‘No side-effects,’ Jim agreed. ‘Well, not any side-effects that’d impede my ability to perform my duties.’

He had not yet begun to walk, despite his professed intentions. Instead, he lingered in the shadow cast by the silo, the majority of his weight resting on his good leg.

‘Do you recall the events of stardate 2249.62?’ Spock asked.

‘Uh,’ Jim said. ‘Not off the top of my head. Can’t all have minds of Vulcan steel.’

‘There is no such thing as purely Vulcan steel,’ Spock replied. ‘But that matter is currently irrelevant. On stardate 2249.62, you and I were beamed down to the planet Tarsus IV, prior to your departure from the USS Enterprise.’

‘Jesus,’ Jim said. ‘Okay, yeah. I remember that day, Spock. Not exactly easy to forget.’

‘As I recall those events, it had been upon your suggestion that we do so. Despite your reservations and your obvious discomfort, it was at your insistence that the trip was made.’

‘It was at your insistence that it wasn’t made alone, though,’ Jim said.

Spock nodded. Jim’s recollection was not inaccurate.

‘And now you’re waiting for me to pick up on Vulcan subtlety.’ Jim shook his head with a sigh; though the sound was rueful and Jim’s shoulders tense, his jaw was not clenched and the lines at the corners of his eyes were not tight. ‘Great. You always have to make things difficult, don’t you? Admiral Pike’s the same way.’

Spock nodded again.

Jim turned in a half circle, gaze traveling upward over the edifice of the silo. Already, the metal had been scoured by the sand and wind of the New Vulcan atmosphere, but materials had been chosen during the silo’s construction that would allow it to withstand the assault.

‘You’re saying we should probably head in there,’ Jim said at last. ‘That if a sixteen-year-old kid who stole a commanding officer’s sweater and refused to take a shower and didn’t know the first thing about Starfleet protocol knew that he had to go back to a place he never wanted to see again, then a first officer who doesn’t steal sweaters anymore and takes the occasional shower should definitely know the same thing.’

‘Not in so many words,’ Spock replied.

‘You coming with me?’ Jim asked.
‘Protocol insists.’

‘Gotta love protocol.’ Jim unhooked his fingers from the waistband of his trousers and wiped his palms on his thighs. ‘Well, let’s do this. I can’t argue with your logic, Spock—so I’m not gonna try.’

Spock removed his access card and swiped it through for entrance, followed by a fingerprint and retinal scan and the completion of three separate access codes, entered in sequence. Jim shivered, but only once, when the wind quickened; then, they were inside, where the temperature was strictly regulated in order to provide optimal conditions for the preservation of the *Narada*’s remains.

Jim had been within the silo on a single prior occasion; this was by no means the first he had made the ship’s acquaintance. They had entered from a direction that provided any occupants with an immediate view of the ship’s starboard side, where the majority of phaser damage had been dealt to the hull.

‘There it is,’ Jim said.

There were no sudden noises to pierce the silence; if Scott remained at work within, as he had suggested he would for the remainder of the night, then he had either at last discovered how to remain quiet, or he was too far away from them aboard the *Narada* for his exclamations to be heard. The latter seemed a more probable explanation.

‘So Scotty told you about how I got the leg thing, huh? I figured,’ Jim said. ‘Everybody looks at you differently after they’ve heard that story. Even you. Although the way you look at me differently is different from the way everybody else does—and maybe that’s why I don’t mind it as much.’

‘I had not been aware of any shift in the quality of my observation methods.’

Jim shrugged, waving a hand near to his chest. He did not step closer to the *Narada*’s hull. ‘It was one of those tentacles. Tendrils. Whatever they’re calling them. It came after me from behind, got me in the knee, pinned me down; I almost didn’t make it to the transport coordinates in time, but I did, and took a chunk of the tendril with me. Actually, the technology I brought back in my knee was still in enough of one piece to be salvaged for science.’

‘Shall we board the ship?’ Spock asked.

‘Jesus,’ Jim said again. ‘Yeah. All right.’

He kept his head held high, arms at his sides in a show of forced calm. His expression was detached, glazed with a cautious blankness Spock remembered from Jim’s early days on the *Enterprise*. To Spock, Jim had been so changed, so present, during his time at Starfleet, the transformation was especially conspicuous. Jim clenched his hands into loose fists and then shook them out deliberately, as if attempting to prove to himself that there was nothing onboard worth the resilient creep of anxiety that was seeping into his limbs.

Spock did not experience the sensation of regret as they climbed the ramp to enter the darkened hull of the *Narada*. He had allowed Jim to come to the conclusion of his own volition that it would be beneficial to his mental wellbeing to revisit the *Narada* in its disabled state. If Jim had not agreed, then they would not have come. Therefore, there was no reason for Spock to entertain a sense of responsibility for his suggestion or the consequences it engendered. He trusted in Jim’s capacity for growth as he always had. In turn, his belief seemed to stir something in Jim.

It was a relationship that had been built on a solid foundation of reciprocal usefulness.

Jim hesitated as they stepped out of the bright white of the silo and Spock went on ahead,
demonstrating the most straightforward path to follow.

Illumination within the ship was sparse unless a specific area was under study, and there were no scheduled internal studies of the vessel that day. There was only enough light to see by as Spock and Jim entered the fuselage. This did not trouble Spock’s Vulcan eyes, but he could see that Jim was squinting next to him, and he was aware of the increased rate of Jim’s heart.

‘Huh.’ Jim cleared his throat, the sound of it less intrusive than their muted footsteps on the metal flooring. ‘Actually, it looks smaller than I remembered.’

The taut quality of his voice indicated that he was lying, but as reaffirmation of the truth would serve no purpose in this instance, Spock did not bother to correct him.

‘Memory is often unreliable,’ he said instead. ‘This fact is heightened when dealing with traumatic events.’

‘That so?’ Jim nodded, catching Spock in a sideways glance. The set of his mouth was hard. Even in the faint light, Spock could see the muscles in his jaw working under the tanned flush of his skin. ‘Sounds like something a counselor would say, Spock. You been getting lessons?’

It was true that Spock had maintained a limited correspondence with Doctor Chapel, although he had not asked for her tutelage in either medical or psychological affairs.

‘No,’ Spock replied.

‘That’s good,’ Jim said. ‘That’s not really a career change I’d recommend for you, anyway. Don’t get me wrong, you’ve got a lot of strengths, but…’

Jim trailed off, running his fingers over the jagged shape of a command console. They had reached the bridge.

The captain’s chair—though it was so much more than the average chair occupied by Starfleet captains—was a ruined mess of wires and jagged metalwork, as the bridge had sustained massive damage during its final battle. Only a few steps beyond that, other consoles had been returned to an upright position during the study, and were surrounded by further wiring in varied states of repair. The scientists of the study had been forced to learn by overhauling ruined equipment with which they had little familiarity, comparing their progress on the bridge to lesser-damaged consoles and engineering in other locations on the ship.

The tendrils, which operated independently of one another, were nonetheless an element of a greater whole—what Spock had come to recognize as the Narada’s nervous system, with nanotechnology that seamlessly combined the organic with the inorganic. The ship was capable of reflexes that could not be explained by hardware alone; its sentience had been its greatest asset in battle, informed by the fearless ruthlessness of its crew.

‘The tendrils are currently non-operational,’ Spock said. ‘Given the risks, we cannot afford to give the ship full power.’

Jim stood over one, thick and still, his shadow falling across the dull metal.

‘They were fast,’ he said. ‘You wouldn’t think that just to look at them, but they moved like they didn’t weigh anything.’

‘We have observed their capabilities—in controlled environments—during the course of our study.’
‘Did you notice the part where they’re cruel?’ Jim stepped away, relegating his attention to the captain’s chair. ‘I’ve been hunted by plenty in my time, Spock, but these—they weren’t hungry; it wasn’t about survival.’

‘It was the ship’s learned behavior, its ability to adapt to the demands of its situation. We are aware that it was initially a mining vessel—but over the course of time, during the *Narada* War, it continued to evolve. Its crew demanded a war, and so it provided the means.’

‘Sounds so clinical, when you put it like that,’ Jim said. He held a piece of nonfunctioning metal in his hands; given the temperature within the silo, Spock knew that it would be cool, and he allowed the contact because it had never been a piece of machinery, merely a section of the chair’s most basic function: to physically support its captain. The wires that ran into the chair, however, were a smaller section of the *Narada*’s nervous system, less like a hard drive and more like neurons linked directly to a brain. At some point, there must have been a symbiosis between captain and ship, the likes of which Starfleet and the Federation could not have fathomed until now. As Nero’s hostilities increased, so had the ship’s, until it was the largest weapon Federation space had ever seen.

‘In these instances, the clinical way is the best way to quantify and qualify the facts,’ Spock replied.

‘This ship took almost everything,’ Jim said. ‘It destroyed Vulcan, wiped out half the fleet. And you come in to work on it every day.’

‘I come in to work on it every day that I am scheduled to work on it.’

‘It’s pretty incredible,’ Jim said.

‘However,’ Spock continued, ‘the study has almost concluded, and my presence will not be required for much longer.’

‘Gotcha.’ Jim put the piece of sheared-off metal back where he had found it. No one would know that it had been moved; his attention to detail meant that Spock had no complaints. ‘Just another job.’

‘Though one of unusual import to the Federation.’

‘Yeah, sure. Absolutely.’

‘My colleague T’Pring intends to accompany other members of the study to present our findings to Starfleet.’

‘The one with the,’ Jim swallowed, rubbing sweat off his forehead, ‘the kids, right? The one you were gonna marry, only you didn’t.’ Spock nodded. ‘That’s cool. Hey, Scotty’s terrified of her, so I’ll be sure to suggest him for volunteer duty, have him take her around San Francisco, show her a good time. I can’t be the only one working on my avoidance, right?’

The plan was sensible in theory—though in practice, it might not be as sound.

‘Though I have not submitted my candidacy,’ Spock concluded, ‘it has recently come to my attention that, given my position on New Vulcan, I would not make an unsuitable candidate to attend the presentation, as well.’

‘Huh,’ Jim said. ‘Is that so?’

‘If T’Pring is convinced of the logic in attending, while possessed of a family here, then to remain without a family of my own must therefore be illogical,’ Spock replied.
‘Yeah, and your mom might not mind getting the chance to see you again, either,’ Jim said. His voice was light, as muted as his footsteps on sand and metal alike—a reminder of the conditions to which he had adapted in the past, when his survival rested upon his cultivation of unnatural silence. ‘You know, speaking of family. Heading back to Earth for a visit—I know how you feel about the rain in San Francisco, Spock, but it’d make you appreciate all the scorching, miserable sand on New Vulcan even more when you got back.’

‘I would not plan on returning to New Vulcan,’ Spock replied.

‘Huh,’ Jim said again. He rested his palm on the arm of the captain’s chair, his shoulders bowed. Gradually, centimeter by centimeter, his shoulders lifted.

‘I have served my people to the best of my abilities,’ Spock added. ‘As I have provided them with all that I am able and they require no more of me, to remain past the point of usefulness would also be illogical.’

‘You mean because of your undesirable genetic material and all.’

Despite Jim’s self-professed distaste toward the topic in question, this was not the first time he had been the one to mention it. The repetition suggested a fixation of some fashion, although what Jim truly sought to discuss, or what conclusion he hoped to reach, Spock could only make an educated deduction.

Jim was fixated, for whatever reason, on Spock’s lack of worth in the breeding initiative.

In the absence of a proper explanation, Spock would have to take note of the consistency of Jim’s protests, recording the symptom without the cause.

‘Yes,’ Spock said.

He was unaware of any difference in his tone—and yet something caused Jim to lift his head, observing Spock through the dark of the bridge.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t—I didn’t mean—’He clenched his hand into a fist, narrowly missing slicing open the side of his palm on the derelict, jagged metalwork of the captain’s chair.

According to all the reports, the rogue Romulan known as Nero had been an impressive and merciless opponent in battle. Spock was not foolish enough to wish that he had been present during the series of difficult and dangerous conflicts that had ultimately prevailed over Nero and his crew. There had been terrible casualties. But it was true that there was a part of Spock that could recognize what he saw when he surveyed the Narada would never be what Jim saw, for he lacked the firsthand experience.

Spock did not mention his conclusion to Jim, understanding that it was neither the place nor appropriate time for hypothetical conjecture.

‘Though it is not necessary, it does not cause me any offense to hear the truth stated more than once,’ Spock said.

‘Yeah.’ Jim sucked his lower lip, until it slipped free of his teeth with a soft, wet pop. ‘I guess you’re not exactly the sensitive type.’

Spock allowed this inference to exist in its self-evidence, choosing not to agree to an obvious statement. Jim flexed his fingers, unclenching his fist and reaching out to touch the rough edges of the captain’s seat before drawing back. The gesture did not appear to hold any meaning, but rather
seemed to be a result of a more general uncertainty, such as Jim’s desire to occupy his hands in order
to distract him from his thoughts.

‘Let’s get out of here, huh? I don’t wanna get good news in the belly of the beast.’

‘Such superstition is entirely unfounded,’ Spock said. ‘I have worked within the Narada for several
days at a time, receiving all manner of news. This has not affected the outcome.’

‘Call me sentimental,’ Jim said.

‘You are expecting good news,’ Spock reminded him.

‘I’m thinking so, yeah. Or—who knows—maybe it’s too late and I already got it.’ Jim surveyed the
bridge in full, turning a complete three hundred and sixty degrees and leaving no section ignored.
The shapes of the shadows on his face shifted with each movement. At last, he was facing Spock, his
eyes on Spock’s face instead of on the hardware that surrounded them. He searched. Spock offered
what he had always offered—and, perhaps, something more. ‘I thought I was going to die here. On
this ship.’

‘I am relieved that you did not,’ Spock replied.

‘So am I,’ Jim said. ‘Are you telling me what I think you’re trying to tell me, Spock?’

‘That depends on what you think I am trying to tell you, Jim.’

‘You know what? Tell me outside,’ Jim said. ‘I’m done here. I came, I saw, I survived. Let’s go.’

The outside air was dry; the evening sandstorm had come and gone, passing them over and
reshaping the dunes in the process, as well as blanketing the tarpaulins that protected the land
transport vehicles outside the silo. Jim cleared his throat three times, grimacing at the third.

‘Sand up my nose,’ he said. He wiped it roughly. ‘Among other places. So you’re thinking about
relocating, huh, Spock?’

‘It is my understanding that it is currently summer in San Francisco,’ Spock replied. ‘That is the
season in which the local weather is least offensive to a Vulcan’s sensibilities.’

‘Yeah.’ Jim dug sand out from beneath his thumbnail with the opposite thumbnail. He stared intently
at his hands. ‘So when summer’s over, you’re gonna need a sweater to keep you warm, right? Just so
happens I’ve got one that’ll fit you.’

‘I have an adequate number of sweaters,’ Spock said.

‘Then you’ll have to take ‘em off so I can be the one keeping you warm,’ Jim replied.

Before Spock could respond and inform Jim of the illogic in his proposed plan, Jim tugged the
tarpaulin off the nearest transport vehicle. Sand dusted his hair and his cheeks after it had settled.

‘I’m driving,’ Jim said. ‘So get in.’

‘That is acceptable.’ Spock did as he had been instructed and Jim swung in beside him, behind the
control panel. It took Jim five point six seconds to familiarize himself with the settings before they
lifted off the ground, hovering to keep excess sand from getting into the engine chambers. The
engine itself was quiet, barely more than an unobtrusive hum.

Jim leaned back in the driver’s seat. ‘You think you’ll re-join Starfleet?’
‘That is one possibility. Another is to offer my assistance as an Academy professor, which would allow me to continue with my scientific studies in a way that would be immediately beneficial to the Federation.’

Jim nodded. They slid forward smoothly at a steady pace. ‘That’s cool, Spock. That sounds great.’

He guided the navigation system one-handed, blunt fingers moving quickly over the controls. He rested his other hand on the seat between them, his palm facing upward, his fingers relaxed. His throat bobbed thickly when he swallowed. He said nothing further, his open hand waiting. Spock knew what it needed; he knew that it needed to be something other than empty. That was what Jim had sought when he touched the captain’s chair on the Narada restlessly, why he sought to fill pockets even when he had none.

It was for the same reason that Spock had folded his hands behind his back, the fingers of one wrapped around the wrist of the other.

Too much time had passed.

Spock rested his palm against Jim’s palm, his long fingers falling over Jim’s shorter ones. Jim’s skin was warm, his pulse unexpectedly steady. He did not look down, which allowed Spock the strange and simple freedom to run his fingertips along the spaces between Jim’s fingers, his thumb curling against Jim’s thumb. Only a few grains of sand stood between them. The rest was skin on skin, the rounded press of the heel of Jim’s hand, the valleys in the center with lifelines running through and across them. Jim’s fingers curled inward, laced with Spock’s. The callused head of his index finger rubbed the knuckle of Spock’s, over and over the little mound.

‘You will naturally be serving as first officer on the Enterprise,’ Spock said. Though his throat was not troubled by the sand, his voice was uncharacteristically rough.

‘Actually,’ Jim replied, ‘I’ve got shore leave coming up.’

*
It is my birthday...enjoy some Spirk!

To Amanda Grayson of Vulcan and Earth. Stardate 2255.35.

Mother, it has come to my attention that my business on New Vulcan has reached an agreeable conclusion. To remain after that conclusion would not benefit the colony—nor would it benefit me. Neither would it benefit an individual of our mutual acquaintance, James Tiberius Kirk, who would prefer that I refer to him as Jim.

I shall do so henceforth.

I send this communication to inform you that it is my intention to return to Earth, where I will be able to further the interests of New Vulcan while simultaneously employing my training from Starfleet Academy. This is clearly the most logical choice. It happens that the most logical choice also coincides with the choice that I would make if logic were not a factor. However, as we are both aware, it is.

It will not be undesirable to be reunited with you.

Mother, I do not deem it untoward to inform you that I have missed aspects of your person that could be provided only by you.

I will contact you again when the arrangements have been completed.

* 

As Spock had suspected, the High Council of New Vulcan was not opposed to his leaving. While it was true that he had provided useful services in his time on the colony, it was also true that another of his race could now easily continue his efforts. There was nothing Spock had done on the surface that was considered irreplaceable. He himself, lacking a family of his own, was classified as an outsider. In point of fact, he always had been, and always would be.

It was not the first time Spock had made the decision to leave his peers and a planet for which his species was named. He had never been cast out by his own people—but when his choice had been presented, he had never been stopped by them, either.

It was, in the end, the only rational outcome.

It did not trouble him, as it once had, to be thought of as lesser than his colleagues; however, Spock thought that perhaps he had taken for granted the appreciation he had been granted at Starfleet for his inimitable performance.

Although he would not compare himself to other first officers, most notable among them Jim Kirk, Spock could not forget Admiral Pike’s intimation that Spock had been valued highly as an irreplaceable member of the crew, or how simply Pike had confided that Spock was the best first officer with whom he had ever served.
Spock had no reason to entertain such considerations for the benefit of his ego alone, but it would have been folly not to factor them in to come to this conclusion: that he could be of use on Earth and in Starfleet in a way he could not now, nor ever, be on New Vulcan.

This was what the members of the council had recognized, although they would not couch it in such flattering terms.

Spock found himself thinking, unbidden, of what Jim would say were he to have been present for the consultation. He was abruptly relieved that humans were not permitted within meetings of the High Council, for traditional reasons, which had grown increasingly important since the destruction of Vulcan.

Jim had a tendency to speak before he weighed the potential outcome of his words. This, however, was only a secondary concern to the greater threat—the times when he weighed the potential outcome, knew the trouble they would cause, and spoke anyway.

While he had not been admitted into the council chambers, Jim was waiting for Spock when he exited them just after high noon: leaning against the hood of the transport shuttle he’d been driving without ever admitting this was due to the limitations of his leg.

Spock resolved that one of the things he could do—perhaps one of the things no-one else would do on Jim’s behalf—was to consult a well-trained physician, such as Leonard McCoy, in regards to the state of Jim’s damaged nerves and tendons and see what could be done in terms of physical and other regenerative therapies.

‘Don’t tell anyone,’ Jim said, ‘but I don’t always trust that High Council of yours to make the best decisions. The most logical, sure, but the best? No way.’

‘There is no one to tell,’ Spock replied.

This was the truth; Spock’s transportation to Earth would be settled with Captain Gaila of the USS Enterprise, and pending the conclusion of the away team’s mission, the ship would depart New Vulcan’s orbit within a matter of two more days, three at the most. There were few individuals to whom Spock would be required to bid farewell. T’Pring would accompany him the other scientists to San Francisco. Spock’s students at the academy would be informed of his departure, introduced to his replacement, and would find a new teacher’s methods of instruction equally sufficient.

Considering the attentions they paid to Jim, it was all but certain that they would note his absence more than they did Spock’s, due in part to the unfamiliarity of Jim’s appearance and personality, but also because they were aware of the exceptional quality of Jim’s spirit—however instinctive and unrefined that awareness might have been. They would not voice their regret that Jim was to leave them, however, and in time, though their memories of the Enterprise’s first officer would not fade, their regret would diminish exponentially. If they thought of him occasionally, they would do so as a point of internal reflection and general inquiry, rather than as indulgence in harboring a personal disappointment.

‘I guess you could tell me, then,’ Jim said. ‘You know you can tell me anything.’

As that seemed a curious statement to make—factually, it had never been a point of contention— Spock boarded the transport shuttle, taking the passenger’s seat, allowing Jim to escort him back to his home, where Spock would have to begin the process of packing his belongings in preparation for his relocation.

‘Four hands are better than one,’ Jim told him, cutting the engine when they arrived. ‘And if I didn’t
want to help, I wouldn’t have to offer; I know. Leg and all.’ He stepped out from behind the dashboard onto the leg in question without wincing. ‘Truth is, I could use the exercise. Let me help, Spock.’

‘Very well,’ Spock said.

There were few items within Spock’s private quarters that he considered his; they had travelled with him from Earth and would now return there with him. Spock considered the etymology of the word belonging in Standard before he opened his suitcase and set the items of note within it: the ‘snow globe’, though the snow itself was a crude approximation of the real thing, given to him by his mother for his tenth birthday; the framed picture of his family when they had numbered three instead of two; the scale model of the first diplomatic transport upon which Ambassador Sarek had served. There was Spock’s lyre, four sweaters knitted by his mother, and the blanket that had been his since early childhood: a thick black fabric, close to Earth’s velvet, with bronze embroidery at the base. It had been Sarek’s childhood blanket. It was what humans referred to as an heirloom.

Jim assisted Spock in folding the sweaters. While attending the third, Jim paused, bringing the fabric up to his face to smell it. When he realized Spock was observing him, his cheeks colored.

‘You just smell the same as you always have, that’s all,’ Jim said.

‘You do not,’ Spock replied.

‘Yeah, and that’s a good thing, right? Considering the whole no-shower thing I was doing back then.’ The color on Jim’s cheeks did not fade. He also did not relinquish his hold on the sweater, running his fingers along the weave. ‘This one’s nice. Way softer than it looks. How come I’ve never seen you wear it?’

‘It is likely that you will have occasion to see me do so in the future,’ Spock said.

Jim tucked the arms gently in toward the chest, attempting to smooth out the wrinkles after he had folded the garment according to Starfleet uniform standard. He ran his thumb along the collar, then placed the sweater atop the other two and wiped his mouth with the backs of his knuckles.

‘My hands smell like you now,’ Jim said. ‘Maybe yours will, uh, have occasion to smell like me in the future, too.’

‘That is similarly likely,’ Spock replied.

He offered Jim refreshments and Jim did not refuse. They ate and Jim insisted on clearing the dishes from the table, continuing their conversation with his back facing Spock, his shoulders broad, while he loaded the replicator.

‘You checked back in with Starfleet yet?’ he asked. ‘See if they have any positions open for you? Not that they wouldn’t; I mean, people still talk about you. All the time. Granted, some of ’em are like Scotty, so they only do it when they’re drunk and complaining, but some of ’em are Pike, and he’s a war hero, so brass’ll listen to what he has to say.’

‘I have reached out to numerous contacts,’ Spock replied. ‘There are multiple options for careers to pursue, and I intend to be thorough in exploring these options before making any decision.’

‘Right, right.’ Jim set the last of the plates onto the replicator tray and rolled the door shut. ‘Might be weird, though—working with your mom in the science department.’

‘I do not see how it would be “weird”.’
‘Of course you don’t. Forget it.’

‘I do not forget, Jim.’

‘Spock,’ Jim said. He turned around, his shoulders pressed to the wall, his lips parted. They were chapped but that was deceptive; despite their appearance, they were generally soft.

Jim did not continue, despite having Spock’s full attention. Perhaps he needed prompting. ‘I have not ceased to listen.’

‘I was thinking,’ Jim began.

Again, he failed to continue. ‘I do not doubt that,’ Spock said.

‘Well, it’s just—’ Jim paused, in what by now had become a set precedent for beginning a thought without carrying it to its conclusion. If he had sustained cranial trauma that had gone unattended, it might have explained the continued exaggeration of a childhood trait.

‘Jim,’ Spock said.

It was not the first time he had utilized Jim’s first name as a prompt rather than to draw his attention. In the days following the massacre on Tarsus IV, Jim had required direction in order to progress a conversation. It did not trouble Spock to provide this service once again—especially knowing that others had extended themselves to make similar gestures during his first years in Starfleet. Whether or not they would continue to do so should he decide to return remained to be seen.

‘I mean,’ Jim said, ‘I could be way off-base here, but it seems to me like neither of us has all that much going on right now. At least, in terms of—you know, you’ve got no family; I’ve really got no family…’

‘There is my mother, Lady Amanda Grayson,’ Spock said.

‘True,’ Jim said, ‘but you aren’t married to her.’

‘That is not the traditional progression of a Vulcan maternal relationship,’ Spock admitted.

‘Thank God,’ Jim ran a hand through his hair, shifting to face Spock at the sink. There was color on the bridge of his nose and in the hollows of his cheeks, either from the sun during the drive or the exertion of helping Spock pack. He would have to rehydrate himself soon in order to avoid suffering negative effects from the heat. Spock made a mental note of this without interrupting. ‘Sorry. I feel like—I’m getting all off course here, Spock.’

‘I was not aware that there was a course to follow,’ Spock said.

‘Ouch,’ Jim replied. ‘Then again, I never said navigation was my strong suit.’

Spock found it difficult to believe that, as a first officer, Jim could be lacking in such a basic skill. However, it was true that the status of their conversation as it currently stood was not as clear as he would have desired.

‘It just seems stupid,’ Jim said, when Spock did not provide him with an appropriate reply, ‘not to at least—consider, you know? I don’t know. Picking things back up where we left off. I guess.’

‘That statement is far from conclusive,’ Spock pointed out.

‘Well, don’t agree too quickly there, Spock,’ Jim said. ‘You might get me thinking you’re on board.’
'I would first have to know where it is that I am boarding,' Spock replied.

'I was just thinking that if we’re both gonna be on Earth…’ Jim trailed off, hitching his right shoulder higher than his left beneath his ear. ‘We’ll have a lot of time to get to know each other. Again.’

Spock was not in the habit of repetition, but now did not seem like the appropriate time to mention his preference.

‘Except we already know each other,’ Jim continued. ‘I know you hate it when I repeat myself; you know how often I repeat myself anyway—so it evens out. Sort of. Spock, are you gonna make me get down on one knee?’

‘That would certainly depend on which knee,’ Spock said. ‘However, considering the physical exertion with which you have recently been tasked and the limitations of your body in its present state, I would not require this action of you without ample cause. Is there ample cause for me to demand it, Jim?’

‘What about rings?’ Jim brushed the hair back from his brow, scrubbing the sweat from his skin at the same time. ‘Do Vulcans even wear those? With their hands being so sensitive and all, I wasn’t sure about that. Might be some kind of,’ Jim swallowed, ‘thing.’

‘We have been known to do so on occasion.’ Though it would risk allowing the conversation to veer even further off course, Spock could no longer refrain from commenting on Jim’s curious demeanor and his inability to organize his thoughts. ‘It appears obvious to me now that you are not properly hydrated, and are suffering from the ill-effects of that state.’

‘No—no, Spock, I’m fine. As fine as I get, at least, which is—look, don’t distract me, all right?’

It seemed that Jim was doing a sufficient job of distracting himself without Spock’s assistance, but Spock nodded that he would comply.

‘You know how I kept my brother’s jacket?’ Jim asked. Spock nodded a second time. ‘And your sweater, but that was—different. You gave it to me, but only after I took it. Anyway, that wasn’t the only thing I kept. I’ve still got one thing that used to belong to my family and I’m hoping it still will, except I’m also hoping you’ll take it.’

‘Jim,’ Spock prompted once more.

There was his reservation where repetition was concerned, and then there was Jim.

‘Right; right.’ Jim rested his hand on the edge of the counter, close to the sink and to where Spock stood. His knuckles were tension-white, a remnant of another time. His hands were not as expressive as a Vulcan’s—which only meant he did not have to hide them as often as a Vulcan. Perhaps he knew what they revealed and, by allowing them to remain visible, he was clarifying that which he otherwise could not. He gripped the rim of the sink tightly. His back was straight and his eyes bright.

‘I’m asking you to marry me, Spock,’ he said. He opened his mouth as if to chuckle, but words, not laughter, were what came out. ‘Wear the ring that belonged to my dad. My mom saved it for a reason, and I guess—so did I. I don’t have it on me; don’t have the pockets for it. But it’s back in my cabin and I want you to have it. I want it to be yours—and a little bit mine.’

Spock could have easily considered the logic of Jim’s plan and weighed its rationale on a cultural, as well as a personal, scale. To do so would have been the height of common sense. It would not have been a difficult challenge to create a basic rubric by which to measure the benefits of marriage as an institution, as well as their suitability to engage in said institution, specifically with one another.
Spock did not consider it.

He instead considered that he had once asked his father why it was that he had married his mother—and that the answer he had been given had been wholly sensible. It had been the logical thing to do; this was something Spock could not question with the evidence presented to him by Sarek.

‘You’re not saying anything, Spock,’ Jim said. ‘So if you’re gonna say no, I’m telling you now, you should get it over with. Gotta admit there’s a hurt before you can start to heal. Right?’

His voice did not crack. He was not a boy of sixteen standing his ground but a man of twenty-two leaning on the counter in Spock’s kitchen for support—and looking to Spock for the same.

His eyes, Spock thought, were hope, in the sense that they were stubbornly hopeful: illogical, inconclusive, ill-conceived, but not unneeded. He offered that for which Spock had not asked, that which Spock had not considered his by nature or by design. If it was logical to accept, then logic was secondary to the curve of Jim’s mouth and the set of his chin, and the way a stray lock of sweaty hair stuck to his brow. Inconsequential as these details may have been to someone else, to Spock, they were what mattered most.

‘I, too, am a little bit yours,’ he said.

Jim’s shoulders slumped, but he did not look away. The smile began in his eyes, to which Spock paid his attention in full. No other thoughts distracted him or served to occupy, with maximum efficiency, his time.

‘Only a little bit?’ Jim asked. ‘No—Jesus, no, I’m just kidding. I’ll take it.’

‘It is already yours,’ Spock said.

‘I’ll keep it, then.’ Jim rubbed the counter, leaving fingerprints, streaking them into blurs. He tapped his fingertips on the surface. ‘No taking it back, you know?’

Spock covered Jim’s hand with his own. The warm, thrumming heat of Jim’s body chemistry was the result of specific equations, equations that Spock knew in full, but it was the result that Spock encountered, the flesh and the bone.

‘I should’ve gone down on one knee, though,’ Jim added. ‘That’s how it’s done. If your mom finds out—Jesus, when I have the ring, I’ll do it right.’

‘Repetition,’ Spock said, ‘is not necessary at this or any other time.’

‘Sure, it’s never needed.’ Jim’s mouth quirked to the left, as though he had thought of a joke that amused him, but he was unwilling to share the line of punch. ‘But how will I know when I’ve got it right if I don’t say things back to myself to hear how they sound?’

As Spock understood it, the purpose of conversation was so that both parties could enjoy a reasonable discourse. There was no need for Jim to doubt the effect of his words, as he had only to look to Spock in order to experience the sense of reciprocity that he so clearly desired.

Unless, of course, he intended to suggest that Spock had been neglecting his duties as a conversational partner—or a partner of any kind—and had therefore failed to provide Jim with a fundamental service.

Jim’s hand twitched beneath Spock’s and he exerted pressure, curling his fingers around to press them against his palm.
'That was a yes, right?' he asked. ‘Before. I mean, it seemed like a yes, but that’s not exactly the kind of thing you don’t want to be vague on. It’s an important question. And answer. Important exchange. And I know how much you appreciate clarity. So I figured you’d wanna be in on that. Making things as clear as possible. If it’s still your—your preference to err on the side of specificity.’

Jim bit his lower lip, the pink flesh under his teeth turning white at the central point of pressure. What was clear to Spock was simply this: that Jim was nervous and had taken extraordinary means to stop himself from continuing to speak as defense against a supposed, indefinite silence.

It was not necessary, but Spock could appreciate the gesture for what it was.

This close, Spock could smell Jim’s sweat; beneath that lay the sharp odor of detergent used in the replicator to clean and sterilize their used dishes. It was a curious mix of fragrances: one that lingered as Spock observed Jim’s hair, darkened by moisture at the nape of his neck, and the flush in his cheeks, which extended down toward the sides and the hollow of his throat.

It clear to Spock that he had been struggling to conceal the true force of his distress until he had arrived at the topic he wished to discuss. As Spock did not experience human emotions in a typical fashion, he could not properly assume a reason for this departure from the standard.

They had always been honest with each other. Spock understood that Jim felt comfortable in pointing out the elements of his behavior that he found distasteful—and, in turn, Spock could relay similar criticism to Jim if the occasion called for it.

They were comfortable with one another.

The point remained that comfort was not a necessity. Both of them had proven themselves more than capable of living without it.

If it was not needed but continued to make its demands known, then Spock could only conclude that it must be wanted.

Still, Jim waited. He had been made to wait years—not for the answer to this particular question, but for the opportunity to pose it.

‘Our partnership—’ Spock began. The word was accurate; it was also clinical. Against the flush of Jim’s hot skin and the scent of his hot sweat, his sun-bleached hair, his teeth on the swell of his bottom lip, the clinical was no longer appropriate. Jim swallowed. His throat bobbed with the tightening of small and powerful muscles, the thyrohyoid and omohyoid specifically. There were no freckles on his throat, for it was shaded from the sun by his chin and jaw, but there was one beneath his ear, beside the sharp point of his fleet-standard sideburns. It, too, bobbed when Jim swallowed, clenching his jaw through a tightening of the stylohyoid.

Again, Spock recalled, they were capable of living and achieving their goals without comfort to soften the difficulties with which they had been faced. Jim had been a boy on Tarsus, where comfort had not been even the shadow of an afterthought; he had been raised in the opposite of comfort, in hidden caves and on hard rock, in places where only determined weeds and blighting fungus thrived. It was the reason for his hunger and his silence, why he filled the latter with the former but remained unfulfilled. Soon after that, he had gone to war. The limp was only one visible indication of the scars that war had left on him.

The freckle had always been there, one point seven centimeters below the lobe of Jim’s round, un-Vulcan ear. His hand, however, had not always been below Spock’s.
‘Spock,’ Jim said. It was a prompt, soft enough that someone better versed in exercises of imagination might have been able to pretend it had not been spoken at all.

‘Jim,’ Spock replied, ‘when you are with me, do I bring you comfort?’

‘Uh.’ Jim squinted, the action forcing him to relinquish the tight press of his teeth into the soft flesh of his bottom lip. ‘Well, yeah. That and crippling fear sometimes, but it’s the good kind of—I’m saying yes. Comfort and a lot of other stuff you didn’t ask about, so I probably shouldn’t volunteer the information.’

‘Comfort is not a necessity,’ Spock said. Jim’s face grew pinched. This had been not the incorrect thing to say, while not being the right thing to say, either. ‘But I would prefer that you were to have it.’

‘That’s pretty romantic, Spock.’ Jim’s heartbeat was quicker than it should have been at rest, likely because it was compensating for Jim’s sudden refusal to breathe. ‘But it’s still not a yes.’

‘It is a yes,’ Spock said.

Jim’s hand, which had balled itself into a fist, began to relax, finger by finger. When the tip of Jim’s thumb grazed the hollow in the center of Spock’s palm and Spock’s lips parted, Jim brought Spock’s knuckles to his mouth to kiss them.

‘And that’s a promise,’ Jim said.

*
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Oh no. IT’S OVER?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TO: Amanda Grayson, c/o Starfleet Academy Science Department
Christine Chapel
Leonard H. McCoy
Montgomery Scott, c/o USS Enterprise
T’Pring of New Vulcan, Vulcan Embassy, San Francisco
Admiral Christopher Pike, c/o Starfleet Medical Outpatient Program

This communication serves to invite you, the mutual acquaintances of S’chn T’gai Spock and James Tiberius Kirk, to the ceremony of marriage to join them in a legal union. The event will take place on the afternoon of stardate 2255.67.

Invitees are permitted to attend with a guest of their choosing.

No refreshments will be provided.

*

On the afternoon of the civil ceremony, just after the documents had been signed, filed, and accepted, it began to rain in San Francisco. It had been decided that the ceremony should take place on a Sunday, as it would allow all their guests to be in attendance; after a period of concentrated thought, Spock had concluded that he would wear the ring that once belonged to George Kirk, Sr., on the finger that was reserved for rings indicating a state of marriage. It was not a strictly Vulcan practice—but it was a human one.

In this, Spock bowed to the traditions that were his on his mother’s side.

He had no ring of his father’s to offer Jim in return. This seemed an obvious and unfortunate oversight, though Jim insisted it did not bother him not to receive an equivalent exchange.

Spock would broach the subject of t’hy’la when the time was appropriate. He had not forgotten that which would honor his Vulcan side; he could not forget it. But he was on his mother’s home planet, with his mother beside him, the gray in her hair more pronounced, and the wet air far enough removed from the dry heat of the desert that

Jim’s hands shook when he slid his father’s ring onto Spock’s ‘ring’ finger. The cool metal had been warmed by Jim’s hands, the cinch of the band felt on every centimeter of skin it rolled along.

‘Too tight?’ Jim asked.

Spock shook his head. ‘It is noticeable, but not unpleasantly so,’ he replied.
‘So it feels good?’

For that question, Spock did not have a ready answer.

‘Never mind,’ Jim said.

Amanda Grayson kissed him on both cheeks—the right first, then the left—and they held one another for long enough that Spock considered it might be appropriate for him to look elsewhere. Doing so caused him to catch Christine Chapel’s attention, as she pushed a loose strand of wet hair behind her ear. Spock nodded.

‘It feels a little like I’d be remiss if I failed to point out that this is far from how I expected things to turn out when I met both of you.’ Chapel spoke in an undertone, loud enough for only Spock’s sensitive ears. ‘Or, rather, when I watched both of you meet each other.’

Spock recalled how Chapel had been instrumental in offering advice during the early days of his acquaintanceship with Jim and experienced a short-lived but undeniable swell of gratitude. While it was an exaggeration to say that they might never have come to this arrangement without her intervention, it was almost certainly accurate to claim that she had eased their interactions by a considerable margin. Subtracting the help she had lent Spock at the outset would no doubt have led to an increased length of time wasted on resolving miscommunications.

There had already been an excess of those. Spock saw no reason to aspire toward accumulating more.

‘I never told you this, but I actually had a bit of a thing for you—only in the early days, mind.’ Chapel stood at Spock’s shoulder, observing Jim with Amanda before she too averted her gaze.

‘I see,’ Spock said. When it appeared that he was expected to say more, he elaborated: ‘I was unaware.’

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ Chapel said. ‘It’s just funny, isn’t it? The way your perceptions change. You make a very good friend, Mr. Spock, even if that wasn’t what I’d hoped for you to be at first. And Jim Kirk over there—well, I’m guessing you didn’t think you’d be marrying him when you first clapped eyes on him.’

Spock recalled the shorter, malnourished frame of Jim’s younger body, his hair, matted with dust and sand, so long that it fell into his eyes. It had taken Jim a period of acclimatization before he trusted the sonic showers on the ship, and during that period he had concealed both his size and his distinctive odor in layers of clothing, some of the latter of which did not belong to him.

The contrast between that teenager and the man who clasped both of Spock’s mother’s arms in his hands as he spoke to her, and only her, was unmistakable, but they were the same person. That potential had always been there. It had merely taken years for them to be fully realized.

Jim turned, as if sensing Spock’s eyes upon him, and offered a wave. He had been on his feet for the greater part of the day, and the damp in the air was no doubt affecting his joint poorly.

They would retire soon to Spock’s apartment, as they had not yet agreed upon where to establish their shared domestic life.

‘Spock,’ Amanda said.

Jim shuffled away to give them their privacy, choosing to confer with Leonard McCoy and Montgomery Scott while Chapel and T’Pring joined in their own conversational efforts. Listening to
private interactions—while inevitable, given a Vulcan’s superior sense of hearing—was not encouraged, and Spock did his utmost to ignore the specifics of those separate exchanges.

‘Mother,’ he replied, focusing his attention on her instead.

Amanda rested her palm on Spock’s forearm. She did not attempt to take his hand with either of hers, instead applying slight pressure with her fingertips, too minimal to be termed a true squeeze, to the circumference of Spock’s wrist.

‘The day couldn’t be lovelier,’ she said. ‘And no, I’m not talking about the rain.’

Spock noted that it had begun to fall more rapidly. The pavement darkened under the onslaught while the ‘wedding party’ remained safely beneath the awning of the civil court where the license had been issued and notarized, delaying their departure until such a time as the downpour ceased, or at least lessened. According to the weather report, which Spock had consulted that morning, the precipitation would end by seventeen hundred. It was currently sixteen hundred and thirty nine, and Spock’s mother had made a claim about the event that she had almost immediately contradicted.

‘The day could, empirically, be lovelier,’ Spock replied.

Amanda patted him on the arm to release her hold. ‘Empirically, yes. But everything else, no. Working for the science department, I’ve had my share of the empirical; it’s about time I got a chance to enjoy something a little more personal, and certainly more variable.’

‘You do not disapprove of my choice in a partner,’ Spock said.

‘Oh, Spock—not at all. In fact, I happen to enjoy his company. I also approve of his taste.’

‘You share a similar palate?’

Amanda shut her eyes. Then, on what could only be described as an illogical impulse, she reached one of her ungloved hands out from beneath the awning, allowing it to grow wet as it was no longer shielded from the rain. When she withdrew her arm, returning it to her side, the hem of her sleeve was spattered with droplets, the fabric darkening as the pavement had. She touched the sleeve with her opposite hand, then touched her mouth—all gestures she would not have made on Vulcan. They were unfamiliar to Spock, since he had observed her primarily among Vulcans rather than with members of her own species. He may have known that she succeeded, inasmuch as any human could, at behaving in a way that was not natural to her. She had not changed since relocating to San Francisco; neither had Spock changed during his years on New Vulcan. Their perceptions of one another had changed, however, and perhaps their perceptions of self had also undergone a transformation.

As an afterthought, Spock mimicked his mother’s actions. The cool rain splattered against the back of his hand, beading on the metal of George Kirk’s wedding ring. There was nothing pleasant or unpleasant about the sensation; it was simply new and purposeless, and experienced despite its purposelessness. Spock would not forget it.

‘Here, Spock—let me,’ Amanda said. She touched Spock at his elbow, guiding him closer, then dried Spock’s hand without allowing for direct, skin-to-skin contact, using the hem of her other, dry sleeve.

‘Thank you, Mother,’ Spock said.

Chapel laughed. T’Pring, still standing beside her, did not. McCoy spoke brusquely to Jim, accusing him of carelessness regarding the progression of his physical therapy and his cavalier attitude toward
the injury of his knee. Scott then attempted to make a joke about McCoy’s attitude, which must have been unsuccessful, as Jim laughed, but McCoy grew more displeased rather than less.

Scott’s sense of humor eluded Spock at the best of times, as well. And, if it was not the loveliest of days, then it could at least be considered the best of times.

‘You’re very welcome, Spock,’ Amanda said.

‘Fine, fine,’ McCoy was practically shouting, ‘dash on home through the rain on that bum knee of yours with no thought paid to recuperation or learning to walk again before you start horsing around. Gallop before you trot, don’t listen to a word your doctor’s saying, see if I care—just don’t come crying to me when you find yourself wishing on your unlucky star that you’d listened to my advice back when I gave it to you.’

‘Bones,’ Jim said patiently, ‘it’s my wedding night.’

McCoy waved a hand. Jim met Spock’s eyes over the crown of Scott’s head.

‘I will now depart, Spock, son of Sarek, and Jim Kirk, spouse of Spock,’ T’Pring said. ‘The rain does not bother me. It is only a minor inconvenience.’

‘And oddly wonderful, isn’t it, after ages spent in the desert?’ Amanda added.

T’Pring neither confirmed nor denied the claim of wonder, as was sensible. She instead nodded to Spock once, then to his mother, and finally to Jim, then left at an unhurried pace, her black braids refusing to buckle in severity or structure despite the downpour.

The others left as the rainfall lightened. Spock’s mother had brought an umbrella at Spock’s recommendation and Jim refused to borrow it when she offered, so that she left with it open above her head.

Spock could see the glimmer of returning sunlight catching the silver in her hair. She was not wearing a scarf, which was understandable. There was simply no reason for her to do so here.

They had not spoken of Sarek since Spock’s return to Earth.

Initially, Spock had experienced some concern that his nuptials might present an unpleasant reminder for his mother of her deceased husband—yet she had not demonstrated any sense of remorse or reserve during the civil ceremony.

Amanda Grayson was a sensible woman, but she would always be prey to human emotionalism, the same as any of her kind. Spock had glimpsed her surreptitiously wiping away one or two tears from her cheek with her bare fingers. She did not choose to blame it on the rain, but she could have.

Their family was honest, sometimes to a fault.

‘I suppose I’ll let you two go and be newlyweds,’ Amanda said, after Spock and Jim had walked her to the door of her apartment complex—not on the Starfleet campus, but a mere two blocks away. The faint rays of sun filtering through the thick gray cloud cover made the fabric of her umbrella appear translucent. It resembled the helmet of a spacesuit built for hostile environments, a self-contained system of breathable oxygen for a Starfleet officer.

Spock’s mother was not a member of Starfleet, but she maintained a self-contained space even amidst company.
It was a trait Spock had sought to emulate in his formative years. Now, with Jim at his side, he had resolved to make room in that space for a second party.

It was as meaningful as any commitment Spock had ever made. He was far from the first Vulcan to marry and he was proof that Vulcans occasionally married outside of their race—yet in some ways, this obligation outweighed the one Spock had once made to Starfleet.

He had dedicated his life to his career—and the same would be true even now that his life was no longer entirely his own.

‘Goodbye, dear,’ Amanda said. She kissed Jim’s right cheek, and neither of Spock’s.

They did not run back to Spock’s apartment in the rain as McCoy had suggested. Instead, Jim slipped his hand into Spock’s along the way, their pace almost even, his fingers worrying the new ring on Spock’s finger. Spock allowed the gesture in order to provide a balancing counterweight for Jim on the slippery streets. Jim was not clumsy, but the limited mobility of his leg was a fact that could not be discounted.

He put his limited mobility to use once they were within the building, crowding close to Spock in the elevator with his bad leg braced thigh to ankle outside Spock’s. His fingers twisted the shape of Spock’s ring and he leaned in close, head braced over Spock’s shoulder to breathe in deep.

He waited for the turbolift door to open onto Spock’s apartment before he tugged him forward by their shared grip, pulling Spock into the room and pushing him back against the doorjamb.

‘Welcome home,’ he said.

‘Though this residence may not be a permanent one,’ Spock replied, ‘I am nonetheless able to acknowledge the sentiment.’

Jim kissed him without further dialogue, the skin around his mouth damp from rain. His lips were no longer as chapped as they had been on Vulcan, while the heat of his body, despite the chilly moisture on his clothing, overcame the local temperature. That temperature no longer applied. Jim’s tongue slid between Spock’s lips and then past his teeth and Spock welcomed him in.

He was capable of remaining clinical while simultaneously appreciating the physical experience both in terms of its separate elements, as well as the combined effect of those elements. He had learned that supporting Jim with a hand in the small of his lower back, specifically covering the lumbar region, was a detail that Jim preferred. If Spock remained standing and steady, braced against a solid wall or door, then Jim was able to part his legs and grind his hips into Spock’s thigh. The noises Jim made in response to the friction were muffled and small, panted into Spock’s mouth. He bucked in suggestion; Spock was unsure of what he sought at first, until Jim guided his hands lower. Spock gripped a curve of muscle. Jim moaned.

Though it was not yet truly evening, the principles of the wedding night still applied as ‘that which came after the wedding’. When Spock lifted Jim with the intention of transporting him into the bedroom, Jim paused, breathing erratically.

‘This isn’t ‘cause of the leg thing, is it?’ he asked.

‘I have researched the basic human marriage ceremony thoroughly,’ Spock said. ‘During that research, I found it mentioned on numerous occasions that the act of carrying one’s new partner over the threshold was one of considerable importance.’

‘Just checking,’ Jim said.
He was not heavy and Spock’s strength was not in question. As Spock knew the location of every item of furniture that stood between the front door of the apartment and the bed in the bedroom, he navigated around any potential obstruction without hesitation. Once he had arrived at the destination, he sat on the edge of the bed and assisted Jim with removing his trousers.

‘This,’ Spock admitted, ‘may be due, at least in part, to the “leg thing”.’

‘Yeah.’ Jim’s belly swelled with a breath he held a few beats longer than average before it was expelled. His fingers paused with Spock’s fingers on the waistband of his trousers before they flicked the button loose, stiff corners of fabric opening to point in opposite directions.

This would become routine: steadying Jim once more with a hand on the lumbar region of his back, aiding him in the process of stripping down to clean white underwear and a clean white undershirt.

‘You cold?’ Jim asked.

‘I am not.’

‘Good,’ Jim said. He rested his hands on the back of Spock’s head, cupping the shape of his skull. ‘How about the ring? It working out?’

‘In time, I will grow accustomed to the sensation.’

‘It okay when I play with it?’

‘It is not unappreciated.’

Jim’s grin shifted into the shadows as he bowed his head. He took Spock’s hand to spin the metal band in a slow rotation around Spock’s finger, sliding it up to the bottom knuckle, then down again to its proper resting place.

Though his leg was stiff, Jim settled into Spock’s lap, knees braced on either side of Spock’s waist. Spock’s hands found the lumbar region of Jim’s back, skin emanating heat through thin cotton. The swell of his belly, the dusting of darkening hair beneath the wrinkled hem of his undershirt where it rode up above his navel, and a scar between the twelfth and the eleventh thoracic vertebrae: these were memorized and catalogued not as samples but as proofs. Jim rolled into a rhythm that made him happy, loose; tensing only to relax again. He rolled the ring on Spock’s finger with his and the places where his fingertips touched Spock’s skin sent shivers, emissaries of Jim’s pleasure for Spock to feel and share.

Jim achieved orgasm while burying Spock’s name into Spock’s shoulder, his body bowed over Spock’s, his fingers clutching Spock’s hand. Afterward, he stroked that hand in apology with maddeningly soft touches, which allowed Spock to contemplate the eddies of Jim’s pleasure that still coursed through Spock’s axons and dendrites.

In this manner, Spock experienced the culmination of unparalleled pleasure.

Soon, Jim lay down, and Spock beside him. Jim shifted his attentions to the hair on Spock’s chest and belly below his shirt, touching him without purpose and seemingly without end. He applied slight pressure with his nails, tracing furrows just above the follicles. He appeared to derive enjoyment from this, and Spock derived enjoyment from Jim’s enjoyment.

‘I’m gonna need a comfortable chair,’ Jim said. ‘Just one. Something to sit in that doesn’t enforce strict Vulcan posture.’
‘Given your needs, I could have no logical reason to disagree.’

‘Small bed’s fine, though,’ Jim continued. ‘Having too much room always makes me feel like I’m—I don’t know what. I never sleep right, that’s all.’

‘The impact on your development by unsuitable conditions endured throughout your childhood remains notable.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Jim inched closer. ‘You’d better not be recording your findings in a personal log somewhere.’

‘I do not have to record them,’ Spock said. ‘I have committed those findings to memory.’

‘Well, I’ve got my own case study,’ Jim replied. ‘Classified intelligence within. Can’t share the findings with someone at your clearance level.’ Spock arched a brow. Jim laughed. ‘Hey, you’re the one who taught me how to conduct those case studies in the first place. You wanna blame somebody, just look in the mirror, Spock.’

Spock understood that this was not a literal suggestion, and that he did not have to leave the company of Jim in his bed to seek out a mirror. Instead, he looked at Jim, inviting him to comment on Spock’s lack of obedience.

Jim met his eyes for a moment, then averted his gaze. He lifted his hand as if to push Spock away, though the touch never connected. In spite of the contradictory nature of his reaction, he was grinning. This, Spock could surmise, meant that he was enjoying himself, contrary to the suggestion he had made that would have sent Spock elsewhere.

‘I finally get back onto a planet where blushing to death isn’t my default skin tone and you’re trying to push me right back there. Not cool, Spock.’

‘It is the prerogative of a husband to inflict minor discomfort upon his partner in a private setting,’ Spock said.

Jim’s eyes widened. His fingers ceased in their idle trail through the dark, wiry hair that covered Spock’s chest. He had expressed surprise upon first confronting its presence, but the attention he paid to Spock’s body had shown that he found it a favorable discovery.

‘What exactly have you been reading?’ He raked his nails across Spock’s chest, the sensation brief and sharp. ‘Not that I’m gonna start monitoring your terminal usage or anything—don’t wanna be one of those couples—but that seems awfully… Something.’

‘Unconventional,’ Spock supplied.

Jim did not often require his assistance in word choice; he was intelligent, if not as thorough as a Vulcan, and would often come to express himself better under his own terms if given the chance. But his head was drooping against the pillow, the frequency of his blinking increasing alongside each blink’s duration. It was evident that he was tired, and Spock did not feel that his aid had been offered without reason.

Jim closed his eyes and groaned a noise of assent.

‘Unconventional. When you say it like that, guess it is us. But I don’t want you getting any ideas. Unless—hey, unless I’m the one giving them to you.’

‘We have committed to giving one another a great many things,’ Spock told him.
‘Mm.’ Jim’s fingers began their slow exploration of Spock’s chest at a languid pace, following the shape of his ribcage beneath muscle and bone to find the dip of his sternum. ‘In front of witnesses and everything.’

‘We did not choose a place of residence,’ Spock reminded him.

‘Yeah.’ Jim splayed his fingers wide over Spock’s chest. Spock mimicked the action, palm remaining on Jim’s back. ‘Yeah, Spock. We did.’

As he slept, he dreamed. The dreams were both pleasant and unpleasant and both were foreign to Spock, far beyond his purview, centered around times and places when they had not been together. Spock could not monitor or quantify them. He only knew that they were, not what.

No further plans were made. Spock watched the stars over the crown of Jim’s head, through the bedroom window.

*

*Spock of Earth, Vulcan, and New Vulcan, personal log. Stardate 2255.68.

I shall resume my regular reports tomorrow. For now, I must make breakfast.

END?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and commenting and leaving kudos. I don't know what the future will hold for more Spirk fics...hopefully there will be some, but I know not what, and I know not when. You guys have saved me from bad feelings and loneliness and I am eternally grateful.

Extra special thanks to my lovely beta, mimblebee, who has given me SO MUCH to build on and grow with as a writer, and to pixiepunch, who encouraged me in the idea from the start.

All my love. Thanks for hanging with me and sticking it out for the long haul!

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