K'diwa: A Steamy Novel of Interspecies Romance, by Jim Kirk

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by branwyn

Summary

Jim wrote a romance novel, just to prove he could. Then someone leaked it on the public Starfleet server, and suddenly Jim’s embarrassingly smutty and sentimental Human/Vulcan love story is all over campus.

Luckily for Jim, no one knows that he’s the author.

Unluckily for Jim, someone forwarded the novel to the staff of the Vulcan embassy. Now, every Vulcan in San Francisco is reassessing the logical merits of taking Human bondmates.

(A little more angsty and plotty than it sounds, but still ridiculous.)
Chapter 1

“Someone’s in a good mood this afternoon,” Leonard says, as Jim stalks towards his table from across the cafeteria.

Jim slams his lunch tray down on the table and leans into Leonard’s face.

“Was it you?” he demands.

“Was what me?” says Leonard, all innocence.

A muscle jumps in Jim’s forehead. “Today isn’t the day to test my maturity, Bones,” he hisses. “You know what I’m talking about!”

Bones heaves a long, dismissive sigh, and tries to scrounge up some sympathy for his roommate, who is clearly wound up in knots like a pretzel.

“Relax, young’un,” he says. “I got better things to do than disseminate your smutty literary stylings to the entire student body.”

Jim glares hot death at Leonard for another moment, then falls into his seat and begins shoveling chicken noodle soup into his mouth like a man who’s learned to eat even under even the most desperate circumstances.

“You still look pretty smug for a guy who didn’t do any ‘disseminating’,” he accuses, between bites.

“Yeah, well, just ‘cause it wasn’t me that stuck my foot out don’t meant it ain’t funny when you trip and land on your face.” Leonard beams at him.

“Bones!” Jim glances left, then right, then ducks his head furtively. “People are reading it.”

“You don’t say.”

“Someone uploaded it to the public Academy server last night at 0001 exactly. It’s 1230 now.”

“And?”

“And it’s already been downloaded fifty thousand times.”

“Well.” Leonard dabs at his mouth with a napkin. “If they kick you out of the Academy for—I dunno, smuttiness unbecoming?—then at least you’ve got a career to fall back on.”

“Goddammit!” Jim threw both arms in the air, then flung his spoon down with an explosive clatter. “It was supposed to be private. Like, an inside joke. Only you guys were ever supposed to see it!”

“Jim.” Leonard tries to sound patient, but he’s tickled pink and self-aware enough to know he’s bad at hiding it. “Writing ten pages of interspecies porn on a dare, now, that was an inside joke. But then you went and turned those ten pages into the first chapter of a damn romance novel.”

“To prove a point!”

Leonard’s eyebrows climb to his hairline. “Well I’d say you proved something, all right.”

“And, it was supposed to be a secret point!”
“Then you shouldn’t have told Gaila,” says Leonard, his voice far too level for Jim’s taste. “Or Gary. Or even—”

“You don’t really think it was Gary, do you?” Hot, bright spots of color start to glow in Jim’s cheeks, and it takes all of Leonard’s self-control not to make a crack about Jim being heartbroken and/or bitter about Gary dumping him.

(As far as Leonard’s concerned, Gary Mitchell is ten pounds of shit crammed into a five pound bag and Jim is well shed of him. But he can’t just come out and say that. Being Jim Kirk’s best friend is a delicate dance sometimes.)


The conviction in his voice seems to settle Jim a little. “Yeah,” he sighs, nodding. “You’re right, even Gary’s not that big of an—”

“No, you nitwit.” Leonard throws his napkin down on the table. “If Gary Mitchell was behind this, you’d be in a world more trouble than you actually are. Did you, somehow, fail to notice that whoever uploaded your little porn novel to the student server stripped all the ident tags leading back to you? And, instead of writing JIM KIRK in 42 point font across the top, they made up a female, Vulcan pen name to protect your precious privacy?”

The expression of stunned disbelief on Jim’s face answered that question. “You didn’t even look, did you.”

“I panicked,” Jim admits, which is rare enough and honest enough that Bones decides to lay off him a little.

Even if this is the most hilarious thing Leonard can possibly imagine happening without one of them having to get arrested first.

Jim’s got his PADD open, eyes skimming as he swipes through files. Relief softens his gaze, opening the door to a hint of confusion. “Okay, you’re right. My name’s not there. My name’s not anywhere—people are talking about the book, but no one’s talking about me.”

The big blue gaze he turns on Leonard is almost uncomfortably vulnerable. “So I’m safe, right? It’s still just between the five of us?”

Leonard would like to say yes. He’s not cruel, and this is obviously stressing Jim out to an almost irrational degree. But Jim asked for his honest opinion, and unfortunately for both of them, Leonard is a master at conjuring worst-case scenarios.

“That depends,” he shrugs. “Can anyone trace the name ‘T’Khara’ back to you?”

“Bones, I have done some shady shit in my life, but I’ve never pretended to be a Vulcan female.” Jim’s expression grows thoughtful. “Yeah, even with a wig, I don’t have the cheekbones for it.”

Leonard strangles his smile. “Then I would say you’re in the clear,” he says. “Until someone blabs, of course. And Jim…” He takes a deep breath. “Gary might not have started this, but you know how he gossips. If this thing’s gone as viral as it looks, I don’t know if he’s gonna be able to keep his mouth shut.”

Jim loses interest in his soup abruptly. The vein in his forehead jumps.

“Do you really care that much if people find out?” Leonard says, a little concerned for Jim’s blood
pressure. “Hell, it’s not like you did anything against regs. If this gets back to Pike, you just tell him it was a private document that someone released to the public without your knowledge or permission.”

Jim makes a small, strangled noise, like the possibility of Pike’s finding out has only just occurred to him.

“In fact,” Leonard sips the last of his coffee thoughtfully, “if I were you, I’d get out ahead of this thing and give Pike a head’s up now. If you have to talk to him, it’s gonna be way less humiliating if you do it on your own terms.”

Jim digests this simple logic. “You’re right,” he says at last. “It’s just, ‘author of steamy interspecies romance novels’ isn’t really in keeping with the badass future starship captain image I’m trying to build here, you know?”

Leonard knows next to nothing about non-medical computer systems, but he’s gained the general impression that computers in general start purring like cats once Jim starts whispering to them. “Are you really telling me you can’t figure out who uploaded the damn thing? You?”

Jim shrugs. “My money’s on Gaila, honestly. She’s got the infosec background to strip the file. And she’s…you know, she wouldn’t think the book was anything to be ashamed of.”

“She liked it a lot, as I recall,” Leonard nods agreeably. To Gaila, sharing Jim’s porn novel on the student server would probably be the equivalent of a doting mother sticking her first grader’s crayon scribbles on the fridge with a magnet.

“Exactly. And, insofar as she grasps things like Human concepts of privacy, she did cover my tracks. She definitely wasn’t being malicious.” For some reason, this makes Jim sound even wearier. “It’s probably one of those cultural things we don’t get. Like how she thinks monogamy is unnatural and unhealthy.”

“You’re saying maybe Gaila thought it would be selfish or something to not your share your steamy Vulcan fantasies with all of Starfleet—”

“Fantasies! I am gonna—” Jim’s mouth tightens, and he jabs a finger into Leonard’s face. “For the last time, Bones: Ophelia is a fictional character. She isn’t…me in a girl suit.”

“Maybe not entirely,” says Leonard, eyeing Jim shrewdly. “See, the thing about you is—”

“Fuck, Bones, spare me.”

“You don’t really like yourself all that much,” Bones plows on, ruthlessly. “Oh, you’ve got some obvious assets, you’ll admit to that, but you’ve got the worst case of imposter syndrome I’ve ever observed.”

“What kind of syndrome?”

“Look it up later. What I’m saying is, Ophelia has all the parts of you that you don’t mind admitting are okay. Like your brains. And your pretty gold hair, and your sky-blue eyes.”

“She’s got blonde hair and blue eyes, like 80% of all romance novel heroines in the history of literature!”

“Pre-First Contact, sure. Not so much these days. You may not have noticed this, growing up in Inbred, Iowa, but the way you look? All those recessive traits?” Bones chuckles and shakes his head. “Folks would look twice even if you had a face like the broad side of a barn.”
Jim’s mouth twists, because he knows Leonard is right, but the closest he comes to admitting it is grumbling something about how he’s not the only blonde in Starfleet.

Bones informs him that this says a lot more about Starfleet than it does about human genetic diversity.

Jim scrubs a hand over his face, then backtracks shamelessly.

“So it’s got to be Gaila, right?” he says. “So all I have to do is talk to her. I explain my concerns, she promises never ever to spill the beans about who T’Khara is, and my worries are over. Right?”

Leonard decides not to address the fact that Jim’s apparently decided to forget all about Gary Mitchell and his big mouth.

He leans back in his chair with his fingers laced behind his head, his spine popping pleasantly. “I just had a thought,” he says.

“Oh?” says Jim, reluctantly.

“You know there’s a Vulcan in Starfleet. Professor Spock? I’ve got a xenobiology lecture with him in about ten minutes. He’s managed to make at least one of his students cry every single day this semester.”

Bones relates this fact in the respectful tones it deserves.

“Great, so he sounds like an asshole. What about him?”

“Well, I was just thinking—I hope he doesn’t get offended that someone tried to pass that steaming pile of dribble off as the work of a Vulcan. He might get curious.” Leonard cocks an eyebrow. “You do know what they say about curious Vulcans.”

“Nice try, Bones.” Jim gathers his tray and rises. “But I’ve already got enough on my plate without worrying about some Vulcan I’ll never meet. Also, no one says anything about ‘curious Vulcans’. There is no proverb or axiom like that in any Federation language. This has been your daily reminder that I am, actually, a genius.”

“Now, you didn’t have to get all ornery, Jimmy,” Leonard calls after him, as Jim stalks away to the recycler. “Just for that, I’m joining your new book club!”
Stoval gazed at the woman, who had made herself seem impossibly smaller than she already was by hunching her shoulders and drawing her knees to her chest.

It was impossible to gaze upon Ophelia in this state and not speculate how easily he could lift her into his arms—take her to some secluded place of his choosing. Sexual dimorphism in Humans was extreme, by galactic standards; in few races were males so much larger and stronger than females. Though Human females compensated for the evolutionary disadvantage of their frailty with increased pain tolerance, resilience, and durability, when it came to contests of purely physical strength, they were among the most vulnerable beings in the Federation.

It was commonly said that a Vulcan possessed three times the strength of a Humans, but that estimate was true only of human males. Compared to Ophelia, Stoval estimated that he possessed something like five or six times her strength.

Why did that thought arouse him? Why did he find himself drawing closer to Ophelia’s chair, an illogical possessiveness thrumming in his veins? The sadness and discomfort which caused her to fold her limbs up in that precious, yet distressing manner, summoned an answering protectiveness in him.

She trusted him. She had said so, and here was the proof. Surely she would not allow him to see her looking so vulnerable otherwise. And yet, Ophelia had witnessed him terminate the criminal at the drinking establishment. Perhaps she was only afraid of him, and thought submissive postures would appease him. That thought displeased him greatly. Ophelia, of all beings, should never be frightened, not of him. Her weakness called to his strength, gave it an purpose: to protect her from any and all who wished her harm.

Stoval’s hand came to hover over the back of Ophelia’s exposed neck. Her face was buried in her hands, but the sweet tips of her rounded ears were bared to his hungry eyes. Slowly, the tips of his fingers descended…

There is a knock at the door of his office.

Spock jumps like a guilty child and swiftly makes the offending document disappear on his PADD beneath a file of grading spreadsheets. “Enter,” he calls, hiding his reluctance with iron self-control.

“Captain,” he says a moment later, as the door swings open to admit the figure of Christopher Pike, who greets Spock with an uncharacteristically sheepish smile.

Pike waves him back down before Spock can rise.

“I was hoping to catch you before you left for lunch,” he says, which is when Spock notices that Pike is holding a bag that emits pleasant, appetizing odors. “You like banh mi, if I remember correctly?”

“Your memory is, as always, exceptionally retentive,” says Spock, setting his PADD aside as Captain Pike produces disposable plates, forks and knives, napkins, and finally a carton of fragrant sandwiches. Pike serves himself and gestures for Spock to do the same.

Spock wraps a napkin around one of the sandwiches and removes it to his plate.

“It was most generous and thoughtful of you to provide us with such a pleasant meal, and to take the
time from your busy schedule to consume it with me.” Spock’s eyebrows lift when Pike pushes a cup of tea across the desk towards him. He tries it; it is still hot, and pleasantly spicy. “I can only conclude, since such practice is not habitual with us, that you have some dire news to impart, and the purpose of this meal is to ‘soften the blow’, in accordance with Terran custom.”

Pike’s eyes widen, then he chuckles. “No, Spock. To be honest, I think of you every time I get banh mi from that place. Besides…just for today, I thought you might want to avoid the officer’s mess.”

“Oh? For what reason?”

“Ah.” Pike looks suddenly awkward. “I, ah, assumed you’d heard.” He clears his throat. “There’s a bit of sensational reading that’s gone sort of viral around campus. Harmless stuff, but kind of racy. Uh…explicit.”

Illogical, indeed, irrational as it is, Spock feels an urge to lock his darkened PADD safely in his desk drawer.

“If you are referring to the fictional work entitled "K’diwa," you correctly assume that I am familiar with it,” he says, proud of the even tone he manages. “Indeed, I could scarcely be otherwise, as the text was forwarded to me this morning by forty-two of my students, and, somewhat more alarmingly, by twelve of my colleagues.”

Pike runs a hand over his face, sighing softly. “Have you had a chance to, uh, look it over?”

Spock had opened the document the moment he was able to gain a free moment to repair to the solitude of his office. By Human standards, he was a speed reader; it had taken him only twenty minutes to arrive at the crucial midpoint of the novel’s dramatic arc.

In the privacy of his own mind, Spock is willing to admit that he had felt a moment of irritation when he was forced to pause in his reading to answer Pike’s knock. He attributes this to the empirically-proven efficacy of the ancient Terran three-act dramatic structure.

“I have glanced over the first ten chapters,” Spock admits. “The author has some flair for engaging dialogue, and depicts scenes of physical violence with a clinical accuracy that bespeaks combat training. There is also the interesting point of the Vulcan protagonist, and the author’s depiction of Vulcan culture. Though it is absurd to presume that the work was composed by a Vulcan, I am finding that it provides a Human perspective on my people which is rather…illuminating.”

Spock reaches for the cucumber sauce. “But I confess, I do not see what this has to do with my perceived reluctance to appear in the mess at my customary time.”

“Ah.” Pike takes a deep breath. “The thing is, it looks like the…I mean, the document hasn’t been published anywhere except the Academy server. So odds are, the author is Starfleet. And the…pseudonym is Vulcan, and there’s only one Vulcan officer in Starfleet.” Pike leans toward him slightly. “Are you following me here, Spock?”

Of course Spock is following him. He is simply too busy chewing to reply immediately. This is why Vulcans customarily eat in silence.

Masticating and ruminating fill the next two minutes and thirty seconds, at which point Spock folds his hands and surveys his former captain across the desk.

“I take it that there are those among the student body who are speculating that I am the author of this novel,” Spock says evenly.
“Look, anyone who knows you knows the idea is ridiculous. But…” Pike shrugs. “Not that many people know you.”

“I see,” says Spock.

Pike tilts his head. “You’re being awfully quiet over there. I didn’t break you, did I?”

Spock is aware that Pike is speaking in jest, but the metaphor is apt. He does feel less than optimally functional. However, there is only one cure for terminal distraction: the condition will continue until he has the opportunity to resume reading.

“Under the circumstances,” Spock says, “knowing that the opinions and attitudes expressed in this piece of fiction are being attributed to me, I think it would be best to fully familiarize myself with the remainder of its contents without delay.”

Pike looks faintly relieved, for reasons Spock cannot fathom.

“I was hoping you’d feel like that about it. See, the Student Oversight Committee for Xenodiversity got in touch with me this morning. They’re concerned that the book might be…insensitive. Offensive, even. But since there aren’t any Vulcans on the committee…”

“It is for me to read, and to discover whether offense has been given.” Spock nods, already waking his PADD and moving the document back to the head of his queue. With his other hand, he reaches for his tea. “I am prepared to commence immediately. Thank you for bringing this delicate matter to my attention.”

Pike winces slightly as he rises. “Yeah, speaking of delicate. If you’re gonna read it here, you, uh, might want to lock your office door. It’s not the kind of book I’d read at work, for choice.”

Demonstrating the wisdom which Spock has always respected in him, Pike waves his farewell and makes his exit without forcing Spock to meet his eyes. There are…reasons why Captain Pike might consider it ill-mannered to mention such things to Spock. But the incident took place several years ago, and on another planet, and besides, all the other members of that particular landing party are deceased.

When Spock takes up his PADD again, he finds himself rereading from the first chapter. He has an eidetic memory, so a review of the material is not, strictly speaking, necessary. And yet, now that he is reading for a specific purpose, i.e. to scrutinize the interactions between the Vulcan scientist Stoval and the Human poet Ophelia for any hint of sentiment that might be deemed unbecoming for a Starfleet officer to express publicly, the review is not entirely illogical, either.

He contents himself that there is no evidence of xenophobia, as a Vulcan would define it, anywhere within the first 15,000 words of the story.

By the time he finishes Chapter Thirteen some five thousand words later, Spock has stopped consciously looking.

Really, the absence of xenophobic language and character stereotypes scarcely makes up for the author’s sheer cultural ignorance of Vulcan mating practices. Surely common sense should suggest that one should not attempt to portray what one has never experienced, yet the Human author (for there is no doubt in Spock’s mind that the author is Human) had yielded to no such restraint.

The results are…extremely frustrating. Spock feels such a degree of agitated sympathy on behalf the protagonist, Stoval, that there are moments during reading when he fidgets in his chair.
Due to the statistically improbable number of situations in which Stoval is required to defend his Ophelia’s life or honor, it is logical and plausible that a Vulcan in his position would begin to feel a deeper desire for his hapless Human companion. Protectiveness was delicately, yet inextricably, intertwined with other key Vulcan mating drives. Since Ophelia gave no indication that she would not find Stoval’s advances agreeable, there was no reason Stoval should not have proposed bonding with her at least five chapters ago.

The omission of any mention of bonding was, in fact, so illogical that it was nearly surreal. It was as if all the characters suddenly had three fingers instead of four, with no explanation given for the change in their physiology.

Suspension of disbelief was insufficient in the face of such implausibility. Perhaps one might infer that a conversation regarding Stoval’s cultural bonding requirements had taken place “off the page”, as it were. Maybe Stoval had asked Ophelia to bond with him, but some logical obstacle had prevented the bonding from actually taking place. Perhaps he wished to take her home to Vulcan for a traditional bonding ceremony. Or perhaps, like many Vulcans, Stoval was too telepathically weak to undertake a bonding with a psi-null Human without the aid of a priestess.

It was even plausible that Ophelia had been frightened by the idea of submitting to a mating bond. Humans were not accustomed to telepathic contact, after all, and Ophelia had been subjected, throughout the novel’s plot, to a maddening—Spock takes a centering breath—to a distressing and unnecessary amount of peril, including several incidents in which violation of her body or mind was threatened or attempted.

Spock’s frustration is only logical. Even to the weakest of preliminary marital bonds would have spared Ophelia at least two abductions, as well as a particularly disturbing assault attempt in Chapter Nine—a scene which lingers in Spock’s mind like a bad taste clinging to his tongue.

As the only child of a planetary ambassador, Spock cannot pretend that he led other than a sheltered existence, prior to departing Vulcan for Starfleet. But his years in the service, including two years of active Starship duty, have broadened his horizons considerably.

He has seen much, and forgotten nothing.

Spock had told Pike that he recognized the voice of experience in those scenes in the novel which depicted hand to hand combat, and the use of small arms and melee weapons. The evidence of relevant real-world experience could not be feigned.

In a similar fashion, Spock can detect the ring of authenticity in Ophelia’s thoughts, emotions, and behavior after she is separated from Stoval in a rough drinking establishment on a remote starbase. Her Vulcan protector has scarcely been gone a moment before she looks up to find herself surrounded by three menacing beings. All of them are far larger and stronger than she, and all of them grow angry with her when she attempts to decline their advances.

Her awareness that escape is not possible, that help is not coming, is conveyed so unsparingly that it makes Spock’s throat feel tight, as though his airways are swollen and compressed. Likewise, Ophelia’s humiliation and relief when Stoval appears in due course to liberate her makes Spock’s face burn with heat, forces him to set the PADD aside for a moment and take another centering breath.

He has never read anything like it. He wishes he had never read it at all. He would wish to erase it, and whatever experience had inspired it, from all of time and existence.

Spock finds it necessary to meditate, briefly, at his desk, in order to control the physical symptoms of
his revulsion. He does not continue reading until his perspective has been restored.

When he takes his PADD up again, he finds that his previous irritation with the author’s ignorance of Vulcan custom has melted away.

In its place is a sentiment almost like…regret. Regret that the author had no way of knowing how seriously a Vulcan would guard the safety of a Human whom they cherished.

Vulcans are by nature possessive of those nearest to them. But it is likewise the ethical duty of every Vulcan to protect those weaker than themselves. Spock would not abandon one of his cadets, much less a prospective bondmate, in a drinking establishment such as the one in which Ophelia had been menaced. Stoval’s inexplicable behavior was as sure a sign of the author’s inexperience as…other scenes were proof of their expert knowledge.

But how had the author—a Starfleet cadet, judging by the known evidence—come by this jarring mixture of innocence and experience? How could they understand Vulcans so well, yet also so little?

Most perplexingly: whatever had inspired them to write a romantic novel from the point of view of a Vulcan scientist in search of his “soulmate”?

Spock finds himself suddenly curious whether any of the other one hundred and twenty-seven Vulcans currently resident in San Francisco have lately been seen in the company of a member of Starfleet.

Since every Vulcan in San Francisco except for Spock is attached to the embassy in one capacity or another, a simple comm to his father will no doubt produce the information he seeks.

What Spock will do once he has obtained this simple information, he is not yet sure. But it is not wholly illogical to, on occasion, obey the promptings of impulse.
“Oh, sweetie.”

“Hnngh.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. It was only a little bit your fault.”

Jim disagrees, silently clinging to his self-loathing like the filthy, tattered comfort object it is.

“I still don’t understand why I couldn’t just delete the file,” Gaila says absent-mindedly, as she rubs soothing circles into Jim’s back, and Jim attempts to asphyxiate himself with one of her furry pillows. “Stripping it was easy, but every time I deleted it, it came back. Like a virus. It was weird.”

Without changing position, Jim feels around blindly until he finds a portion of Gaila he can pat. “You saved my ass,” he says tonelessly. “It’s still creepy that you monitor all of our network activity, but you saved my ass, so I’m not complaining.”

“We really need to work on detoxifying your masculinity,” Gaila says, rolling her eyes. Jim can’t see her, but that tone of voice always comes with free eye-roll. “You should be proud of your fictional baby! Everyone who’s read it is very impressed!”

“No.” Jim heaves himself upright. “No, no, no, they’re not impressed, Gaila. They’re curious. They’re nosy. The only reason they’re still talking about the damn book after all this time—”

“Three days is ‘all this time’?” Gaila blinks.

“—is because they want to know who was a big enough moron to store their goddamn porn in an academic work folder that gets automatically backed up to the public server every 24 hours. It was a goddamn amateur move, Gaila. If you hadn’t caught it, my disgrace would be permanent.” He heaves a sigh. “They’re all mocking me. And the worst part is, I deserve it. I deserve to be mocked.”

He means it. Not locking that file down under a mile of code is easily the stupidest mistake Jim’s made since he joined Starfleet. And that, coming from a cadet who spent last summer on an elective survival training simulation in Antarctica, is saying something.

“You’re not a moron.” Gaila’s tone is still soothing, but it’s starting to take on an impatient edge, like she wants him to hurry up and be soothed already. “It’s not your fault that someone’s stalking your network activity.”

Jim lifts an eyebrow.

“That someone other than me is stalking your network activity. Someone who does not love you or have your best interests at heart. That’s the creeping part.”

“Creepy,” Jim corrects her automatically.

“Look, I covered your ass because I knew you’d react like…this,” Gaila waves a hand to encompass the totality of the hot mess that is Jim Kirk in this moment, “but that doesn’t mean I approve of your squeamishness. It’s the 23rd century. If people think that you writing a sweet, hot, funny—”

“Please stop.”

“—thoughtful, groundbreaking novel is a disqualification for being a Starship captain, then
something is very wrong with their idea of what a captain should be,” she finishes sternly.

Jim blinks at her. Gaila puts her hands on her hips.

Jim sighs, chastened.

Gaila drags a basket of laundry out from under the bed and dumps it on the bed, all over Jim’s legs.

“I’m going to get drunk.” Jim says, as she starts shaking a pair of uniform trousers until all the socks fall out of the legs. “I’ve got an off-campus pass I’ve been saving for a rainy day. Come with me?”

“I’m already drinking with Nyota tonight. I’d say you should join us, but you aren’t exactly good for her stress levels.”

Jim can’t argue with that. “Since when does Uhura drink on week nights?”

“She had a date yesterday. She was really excited about it, but the guy turned out to be a jerk. You know.” Gaila’s mouth sets in a flat line. “Grabby.”

“Wait, what? What the fuck, is she okay?”

“Oh, she’s fine, just pissed. Actually, when I saw her this morning she looked kind of smug. I guess the Vulcan ambassador commed her personally to apologize for her date’s behavior? He said he’s never had a problem like that with any of his staff before and he’s investigating it personally. Nyota said he was really embarrassed. Or, you know. Vulcan-embarrassed, which is—”

“Oh, Uhura. Got a date with a Vulcan.” Gaila isn’t the type to sugarcoat things; if she says Uhura is fine, then Uhura is fine. Which means Jim can pivot from being concerned to being indignant. “And she didn’t tell me?”

Gaila’s laugh is a silver, tinkling thing, as lovely as it is destructive to Jim’s ego.

“Stop laughing at me! Come on, even you have to admit that’s cold!” Jim throws a sequined pillow at her. “Uhura’s the one who dared me to write about Vulcans in the first place.”

Honestly, Jim understands that he’ll never be Uhura’s first choice of confidante, but she could have given him a heads up. As like, a professional courtesy.

“Mm.” Gaila arches her eyebrow. “Well, I definitely wouldn’t bring it up now. I don’t think she’s all that into Vulcans anymore.”

“Yeah, no, I—I wouldn’t do that.”

Jim leans against the wall beside the bed silently for a few moments while Gaila bundles her socks into pairs.

“Didn’t you say you were going to get day-drunk?” she says finally.

“Yeah. Have fun tonight, tell Uhura…I don’t know. Make up something she’d want to hear and tell her I said it.”

Jim hoists his bag and submits to one of Gaila’s mandatory cheek-kisses on his way out the door.

* 

Jim really isn’t the type to get day drunk (anymore). Nor does he do a lot of drinking on weeknights
(anymore).

But there is such a thing as an exception for mitigating circumstances, and boy, does Jim ever have some circumstances.

It’s just after 1500, not even dark yet when he leaves Gaila’s. Back in his own room, he changes his cadet uniform for his other uniform—tight jeans, a black t-shirt, and a leather jacket. Bones isn’t back from class yet, which means he has a shift tonight, which settles the question of whether he’d let Jim drag him along for the company.

The walk to the transport station is short, and the shuttle ride is quick. Jim’s jittery enough to be grateful.

Earth spacedock isn’t Jim’s usual watering hole by a long shot. Both finances and laziness tend to limit him to the usual three or four bars near campus that Starfleet officers patronize on the regular.

Tonight, however, he’s looking for anonymity.

He doesn’t know what’s wrong with him, but that’s pretty frequently the case. All he knows for certain is that when he’s in this kind of mood, he usually ends up A.) getting his face pounded at the bar, or B.) getting his ass pounded in an alley or a bathroom, or C.) both, hopefully not by D.) the same person. Although that is not outside the realm of possibility, either. Not when he’s like this.

Jim doesn’t want to fight or fuck tonight, but that doesn’t mean it won’t happen. His life is just like that sometimes.

Spacedock bars comes in every flavor, from classy and upscale to the worst dives imaginable. Jim’s sampled all of them. Granted, he can’t really afford the chic little cocktail lounges, but in slightly nicer clothes he can get away with nursing a soda water until he inevitably catches the eye of someone in a good suit, with deep pockets.

Hell, Jim’s pretty sure he could get away with it even in the leather jacket. But tonight, he just wants to blend in—as much as he ever does, at least.

Luck is with him, because there’s space at the bar at the first place he tries. Jim settles in with some lightly watered Jack, in honor of his best friend.

Maybe Gaila has a point about that masculinity thing. He actually hates whiskey. As soon as he’s too drunk to care how cool he looks, he’ll switch to Cardassian Sunrises.

He’s been warming his seat for about two hours and has just ordered his first Sunrise when the barstool next to him gains a new occupant.

If Jim had been looking for company, he would have checked out his new neighbor right away. Instead, he gives it a minute, for decency’s sake, before glancing over.

He very nearly falls off his stool.

It’s a Vulcan. There’s a Vulcan sitting next to him. At a bar. And he’s looking at Jim. Like, he’d been staring at the side of Jim’s head before Jim looked around, so when Jim looked over the Vulcan’s eyes were just…there. Waiting.

Jim doesn’t say any of the first three things that come to mind, because all of them are profanity.

“Hey,” he manages eventually, and even then his voice comes out sounding strangely high pitched.
The Vulcan’s mouth creases at the corner. Magnified by a thousand, and the expression would probably look like a small smile. He lifts his hand in the *ta’al*.

“Tonk’peh,” he says. “I offer you my name: Makal, son of Valon.”

“Uh, Jim Kirk. Nice to meet you.” He returns Makal’s salute, then angles his hip back on the stool. “You…don’t come here very often, I’m guessing.”

“Indeed not.”

“Yeah, I can’t say I’ve ever seen a Vulcan in a bar before.” Jim hasn’t actually seen a Vulcan up close like this since he was sixteen, but he isn’t quite drunk enough to bring that up. “Wait, let me guess. You’re here conducting some kind of xenological field study on unsuspecting, drunk-off-their-ass Human subjects?”

“An intriguing speculation, but I am not a xenologist,” says Makal evenly. “I am only here because it is necessary to my purposes.”

The pronouncement comes across as pompous, but Jim can’t tell if that’s on purpose or if that’s just Makal’s face. “You need help with something?” he prompts, curious despite himself.

“In a manner of speaking. I require the assistance of a partner for my experiments.”

Before Jim can even start unpacking that statement, Makal suddenly rises from the barstool to stand at his full height.

Jim’s not short, but Makal stands around 6’6, and Jim gets uncomfortable when people loom over him.

It’s not that he thinks the guy is trying to be threatening, but when Makal leans in, it takes all Jim’s years of practice standing up to way worse people to keep himself from flinching. He hasn’t been physically intimidated by another person since he knocked Frank’s ass into the wall on his eighteenth birthday, but…Vulcans.

He knows his face is under control, but Makal can probably hear how fast his breathing’s gotten.

Makal’s eyes, flat, black, and intent, rest on the side of Jim’s face and neck. The hair stands up on the back of Jim’s arms.

“I must confess, I had thought the appeal exaggerated,” says Makal, still burning a hole into Jim’s face with his gaze, “but with proximity, I can see the attraction of Human ears.”

Jim blinks, then bursts into peals of helpless laughter.

“I did not realize you would find my remark cause for amusement,” says Makal, arching an eyebrow. Jim’s laughter dies abruptly. He checks Makal surreptitiously for signs of anger. Jim isn’t sure what anger would even look like on a Vulcan, but Makal seems fairly unperturbed.

“I’m sorry.” Jim shrugs. “It’s just, no one’s ever praised my ears before. I’ve never commented on anyone’s ears, and that’s saying something.”

“You are practiced, then, in the art of paying compliments to persons you find appealing?”

“I guess,” says Jim, looking Makal up and down. Not in the “I’m devouring you with my eyes” way, but in the “what even is your deal” way. “Wait, is that why you’re here? To…practice giving
compliments?”

“I was under the impression that compliments are considered essential to successful Human courtships.”

Stunned, Jim blinks at Makal. He wasn’t expecting to be *right*. “Oh, sure,” he says cheerfully, waving his hand. “I mean, sometimes. Depends on the person. And the compliment.”

For a moment, Jim thinks regretfully of all the effort he put into arranging a plausible meet-cute between Stoval and Ophelia at a Federation-wide linguistics conference in deep space.

If he’d known that, apparently sometimes, Vulcans just walk up to Humans in bars, chapters one through three would have been *way* easier to write.

Makal nods gravely, as though Jim has just imparted an important nugget of wisdom.

“Despite our surroundings, and your flagrantly revealing attire, you have an air of innocence about you. I was pondering why this should be the case. You are clearly an adult, and exceptionally aesthetically pleasing; thus, it is logical to assume that you are not lacking in carnal experience.”

Jim’s mouth falls open.

For just a second, Makal’s hand twitches, like he’s about to reach for something. “The shape of your ears is consistent with the roundedness of your general physiognomy. Mature Vulcans do not share these traits, but Vulcan children do. Perhaps this has influenced my perception.”

Jim doesn’t laugh. He *can’t* laugh again. It would be unkind. Makal is obviously trying, here, and he doesn’t seem like an asshole. Not that Jim’s known him very long.

“I hate to break this to you,” Jim tells him, quirking the corner of his mouth in a wry smile, “but being told I look like a kid isn’t really a turn on. Kind of the opposite, actually.”

“You misunderstand,” Makal murmurs. “I would have no interest in you if you were a child. But you are Human, and though you appear strong for your species, you would nonetheless be quite fragile in my hands. I came here with the intention of inviting a suitable Human to be my companion for the evening, yet now I find myself concerned that this would not be a safe activity for you.”

Jim freezes for a long, awkward moment before he finds his voice again. “Vulcans really value directness, don’t they?”

“Indeed.”

Makal has big hands, with long, slender fingers. When he lifts his hand to brush the shell of Jim’s ear with the backs of his knuckles, Jim shudders on reflex.

Makal’s eyes stay on him as Jim turns back to the bar and takes a minute to finish off his last drink. It’s his fifth drink of the night, and for some reason it’s stronger than the first four combined.

He blinks watering eyes and shakes his head. He needs to start making his excuses; day-pass or no, he can’t be shitfaced when he gets back to the Academy, or he’ll get written up.

“The thing is, Makal…” There is a part of Jim that cannot believe he’s about to say this, even if the imaginary Bones that lives in his head is expressing vehement approval of his life choices right now. “I didn’t really come here tonight looking for…companionship. So, I’m flattered, but there’s no need to worry about the logistics of how to fuck me without breaking me.”
In a week, or a month, Jim will probably have a night where he’s lonely and horny, and then he’ll start thinking about that time he had the chance to take a Vulcan to bed, and curse his past self for not acting on the opportunity.

Tonight, however, he can’t shut off the part of his brain that says getting snapped in half, accidentally or otherwise, by an ultra-strong Vulcan six inches taller than him will probably not improve his ultimate situation in the slightest.

It’s possible Jim is spiraling into some sort of depressive funk.

“You deny me,” says Makal, in a haughty tone that doesn’t quite conceal a hint of wounded pride, “yet, you are aroused. This is due to my proximity, is it not?”

Okay, so Makal’s cheekbones are definitely doing things for him, and that trick with his ear had turned Jim’s knees to water. Jim likes Vulcans, duh. That’s not the point.

“Arousal does not equal consent,” Jim says, a little more gruffly than necessary. “That’s Federation law, which is something you should really be familiar with before you go climbing into bed with Humans. We take that shit kind of seriously.”

Makal’s face darkens in an olive flush, and Jim immediately feels guilty for getting so defensive. He’s never seen an embarrassed Vulcan before.

“Hey, don’t sweat it.” Jim considers patting Makal consolingly on the shoulder, then thinks better of it. He waves the bartender over and lets her scan his credit chip. “The night is young. If a Human is what you’re looking for, you’re in the right place.”

Makal frowns down at him. “Yes, I am aware. You are the Human I desire; you are here; therefore, I am in the correct location.”

“But, I’m about to not be here anymore.” Jim shrugs his jacket on. He has a little more trouble with the armholes than is strictly dignified. “That’s not a coy invitation to follow me, by the way. I have a curfew, I need to get planetside.”

Technically, Jim still has a couple of hours before curfew, but between the unexpected encounter with a horny Vulcan and the fact that his knees are a lot wobblier than they ought to be for amount of alcohol he’s put in his system, he feels that now is the moment for retreat.

“Curfew?” Makal’s face smooths. “Of course. You are a cadet at Starfleet Academy.”

Jim gives him a lazy ‘Fleet salute. “Pleasure meeting you, Makal, and best of luck on your quest for Human booty. Handsome guy like you should have no trouble at all.”

“Your words are illogical.”

“Yeah, we do that.”

Jim beats a path back toward the spacedock transporter station, despite pitching sideways and nearly falling, twice.

When the edges of his vision go fuzzy and grey, he groans, low and furious, because seriously, how much can he fuck up in just one week? But denial is pointless.

He’s not just drunk; he’s drunk and drugged. And it’s his own damn fault. After Makal showed up, Jim stopped paying attention to anything else, including his drink.
Hell, Makal could have done it. Jim hadn’t been able to look away from those hungry eyes long enough to pay attention to what his hands were doing.

By the time he reaches the transport station and gets his number for beam-down, Jim is completely numb, except for a prickle at the back of his neck that tells him someone is watching him. Before he can get too worried about it, his number is up, and as soon as he rematerializes on Academy grounds, the only thing he can think about is not vomiting all over the landing pad.

He locates a bathroom, submits to nature’s just punishments, then stakes out a spot on a bench within eyeshot of the technician’s station and takes out his comm.

This isn’t his first rodeo. Either he’ll metabolize this shit eventually and lurch his way back to his dorm, or he’ll pass out on this bench, and the techs will call the emergency number on his comm. Which is Bone’s number.

He really hopes he can stay conscious, because Bones has predictable reactions to statements like “I got drugged at a bar”, and Jim doesn’t have the energy to talk him out of killing anyone tonight.

He slumps into the corner of the bench shelter. Halfway between sleeping and waking, he feels a warm hand clasp his arm.

“My concerns were valid, I see.” Jim’s eyes can’t focus well enough to get a good look at who’s hovering over him, but the voice that had complimented him on the roundness of his ears is unmistakable. “Your gait was unsteady when you left the drinking establishment. I surmised that you were in no condition to see yourself safely home. It is fortunate that I took it upon myself to follow you.”

“Makal,” Jim says, too wasted to be embarrassed by how much he’s slurring. “I’m gonna, like…pass out, or throw up on your sandals any second now, so—”

“You cannot spend the night alone in a transport terminal while you are in an impaired state.”

Makal picks up Jim’s comm. Thank God, Jim thinks.

But instead of calling Jim’s emergency contact, Makal simply pockets Jim’s comm and picks up Jim. He’s gathered up so swiftly and suddenly that if Jim still had a body that obeyed his brain, he’d be fighting, flailing.

Yet it’s as if the shift in his center of gravity is the signal his body was waiting for. The universe is spinning. He’s weightless, floating, and the sounds of the world around him seem to be coming from a long way away.

Fucking Vulcans, is his last thought, before his eyes roll back in his head.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Just to clarify about the warnings: there isn't going to be any on-the-page rape or sexual assault in this story. I use warnings pretty broadly, and between that happens to Ophelia, to Uhura, and stuff about Jim's past, I thought the rape/non-con tag was appropriate.

Really glad so many of you are enjoying my first Star Trek fic!

“Cadet Uhura, I presume?”

The voice echoes in the long corridor where Gaila and Nyota are sitting on a bench, looking over their PADDs and killing time until they have to meet their study group for Intergalactic Civics.

Nyota startles, slightly; she’s been a little jumpy for the last couple of days. But professionalism takes over, bringing her up off the bench and to attention. Gaila follows, and they both look up.

Gaila sucks in a low breath. “Is it me,” she hisses, low in Nyota’s ear, “or are Vulcans just everywhere, lately?”

Nyota steps on her roommate’s toes discreetly. “Professor Spock,” she says, as the tall, lean figure wearing instructor’s blacks comes to a halt a polite distance away from them. “Yes, I’m Cadet Nyota Uhura. Can I help you, sir?”

She’s already signed up to take Spock’s Advanced Xenolinguistics course next semester, but until now, Nyota’s only seen him from a distance. In fact, she’s been studying Spock from a distance ever since he first took up his post at the Academy at the beginning of the academic year, but despite her best efforts, she’s never been able to think of a good reason to approach him.

Had Spock sought her out just a few days ago, Nyota would have guessed that he wanted to make sure her command of Vulcan was really up to his teaching standards, since she’s been given special permission to skip both the introductory and intermediate courses taught by his non-Vulcan colleagues.

That’s probably not why he’s approaching her today, however.

She has a sinking suspicion that he’s here to talk about Krevak.

Nyota’s been on worse dates, that’s for sure. She’s even had to fight off worse guys—Krevak was still a Vulcan, and had (eventually) yielded to logical threats.

She’s never been the type to internalize blame before, but she does blame herself for this, a little. Her…curiosity about Vulcans had blinded her to Krevak’s qualities as an individual. He was certainly attractive, but deep down, Nyota isn’t certain that she wouldn’t have been equally receptive to the attentions of any of his Vulcan colleagues.

It was humiliating, really. She had let her guard down around Krevak much faster than she would have if he’d been Human. He had seemed like the “ideal” Vulcan—gentle, respectful, non-demonstrative. And he had been, right up until the moment he hadn’t. Nyota reproaches herself for
having been so naïve, and halfway believes that she got what she deserved for making the most basic xenocultural etiquette blunder it was possible to make.

But she’s not allowed to say any of that out loud, because Gaila will hit her. They made a pact, and after study group, they’re going to seal it with mojitos.

So many mojitos.

“I see you are acquainted with Cadet Vro.” Spock gives Gaila a polite nod, and Nyota watches as her friend positively glows under this notice.

Not a lot of people at the Academy bother to learn Gaila’s name, even if they interact with her regularly. They call her “the Orion” when they’re being polite.

Nyota supposes that Spock thought it was logical to take notice of one of the only other non-Human members of Starfleet, but her estimation of him still rises a notch.

“Professor,” says Gaila, beaming.

Spock glances from Gaila, to Nyota, then at his shoes. In contrast to his bowed head, the line of his body is straight and severe in his black uniform.

Nyota reminds herself to blink before he looks up again.

“If you are busy, I will not detain you, Cadet. I sought you out at the suggestion of my father. But the matter is not immediately pressing.”

His father. Sarek, the Vulcan Ambassador, who’d commed her so unexpectedly yesterday morning. She’d nearly denied the call when the ID of the Vulcan Embassy flashed on her screen. But curiosity had won out, and Sarek’s face, familiar to her from history books and news holos, had appeared before her, in real time.

She’d nearly dropped her comm.

Did Sarek tell Spock why they’d spoken? She hasn’t informed her Starfleet superiors about the assault, which is, technically, against regulations. Nyota hasn’t interacted with Spock nearly enough to guess whether he’ll consider the rules important, under the circumstances.

“I happen to be free at the moment,” she tells him, because she knows she won’t be able to relax and properly enjoy mojito night if she’s got a 9 am appointment with Spock hanging over her head. “I suppose your father mentioned that we spoke yesterday?”

“Indeed.” He arches an eyebrow, and Nyota reads the shape of it as curious and bemused. “My father explained that, when you contacted his office to report the criminal behavior of his aide, you conveyed a willingness to allow the Embassy to deal with the matter internally, declining your right to involve either Starfleet Security or the municipal police. He wished me to inquire whether you are still resolved on this decision, or whether you have reconsidered involving outside authorities.”

Good, thinks Nyota. An easy question, to start with.

“Allowing the Embassy to deal with the matter internally lessens the risk of word getting out. People would talk about something like this, and that would both discredit the Embassy and put my reputation at the Academy in jeopardy. And, frankly, sir,” Nyota’s smile is sharp and tight, revealing no teeth, “I didn’t speak with your father for long, but I still got the strong impression that Sarek was planning to make Krevak’s life miserable in ways the non-Vulcan authorities could only dream of.
Under the circumstances, I deemed it logical to let the Ambassador discipline his staff as he sees fit.”

Spock’s mouth twitches at the corner, and Nyota, who thinks she’s beginning to decode Spock’s body language, recognizes amusement in it.

“Indeed,” he says. “I see no flaw in your logic. I shall convey your continued resolution to my father when I speak with him tonight.”

He looks away, then, and tucks his chin towards his chest, his body language shifting subtly. “My father is investigating a…most peculiar phenomenon which has lately arisen amongst his Ambassadorial staff.”

He pauses, mouth open, as though he is searching for the language to express something he finds too strange for words.

“My father wishes me to put you on your guard. It is possible that Krevak will not be the last Vulcan who solicits you for companionship. If at any time you are…made uncomfortable by the attentions of a Vulcan suitor, my father suggests, and I concur, that you should bring the matter to my attention immediately. Even before contacting Security, though you should do that as well, if necessary.”

Nyota deconstructs this short speech, trying to find some way of interpreting it that doesn’t boil down to, “Professor Spock’s dad told him to be my bodyguard, and Spock is down with it’.

“What, if you don’t mind me asking, was the Ambassador’s logic for this suggestion?” she says faintly.

Spock sighs. Not impatiently, but with an air of something like resignation. “It would simply be…safest, for all involved, if I was the first on the scene in the event you are the target of any further aggression from a member of my species.”

Nyota’s mind is processing at Warp 5. She knows as much about Vulcans as it’s possible for a curious Human with access to Starfleet archives to find out, and something about Spock’s suggestion doesn’t quite add up.

“Forgive me,” she says, slowly. “But my understanding is that Vulcans are somewhat territorial, particularly when they feel challenged by another Vulcan. Wouldn’t your presence simply escalate the situation?”

Nyota feels Gaila jab her in the ribs. She just twitches and steps away. She’s anything but oblivious to the fact that Spock is making her an extremely generous offer. But she doesn’t understand, and she needs to. More than she needs to play Whitney Houston to Spock’s Kevin Costner.

“You are more than passingly familiar with Vulcan practices, I see.” He’s arching both eyebrows at her now; she hopes that means he’s impressed. “Your question is logical. First, however, I should tell you that I find it difficult to imagine that there is more than one Vulcan in this city capable of behaving as Krevak behaved toward you.

“However. On rare occasions, Vulcans seeking a mate become…compromised. They have impaired logic and understanding, and they revert to…primitive behaviors. Yet, Vulcans are conditioned to respond to certain cultural tropes even when a higher order of reasoning is beyond them. Indeed, that is the purpose of preserving them.”

“Cultural tropes,” says Nyota, blinking.

“As your superior officer, I am entitled by ancient custom to protest an undesirable courtship. In
simply because it is simple. I stand in the place of an elder member of your own clan, with the same right to intervene on your behalf. I will not be perceived as a rival, and therefore am unlikely to, as you say, escalate tensions.”

Nyota stares at him for a long moment. She’s not sure when she stopped breathing, but she’s a little lightheaded, so it might be a good idea to start again.

Any second now.

“Oh my god,” Gaila whispers, high pitched and highly audible. “That is like, so sweet!”

“Gaila!” Nyota hisses.

“What?” She looks from Nyota, to Spock, and back again. “He basically just offered to be your scary big brother, how is that anything but precious?”

The only thing preventing the ground from opening up and swallowing Nyota whole is the faint flush dusting Spock’s cheeks.

“That is both a simplification and an overstatement,” he says eventually. “Yet, I suppose, the comparison is not altogether unapt.”

Well, Nyota thinks, that settles it, doesn’t it? An offer of protection, extended by the head of Spock’s clan, accepted by his heir, can’t be refused without giving offense.

That’s what she’ll tell Gaila, later, at least.


Spock blinks, and Nyota chooses to believe that it’s because her accent is just as good as she thinks it is.

“The honor is to serve,” he says finally. “I will send you my comm information tonight so that you may contact me in an emergency. Before I leave you, is there anything further you wish to convey to my father?”

“There isn’t, but I would like to ask you a question.” Nyota waits for Spock to nod. “You said that other Vulcans might approach me. How did your father come to this conclusion?”

Spock bows his head again, and this time it looks exasperated.

“My father believes that…for reasons difficult to determine, many members of his Ambassadorial staff have suddenly elected to pursue intimate relationships with Humans. One might almost describe it as a fashion, or trend.” Spock’s voice is devastatingly inflectionless. “Cadet Vro, though you are not Human, you should perhaps be on your guard also. For unclear reasons, it seems these…curious Vulcans are particularly drawn to Starfleet cadets.”

Nyota and Gaila stare at Spock with identical slack-jawed faces.

“Professor, I don’t know how to ask this,” says Gaila, “but has someone checked the water supply at the Embassy?”

Spock ducks his head. “If only the matter could be so simply explained, Cadet. But I am certain the Ambassador will get to the source of the mystery in time.”

Nyota watches as epiphany dawns like a summer morning on Gaila’s face.
“It’s the book!” she hisses, grabbing Nyota’s arm. “Someone must have sent them Jimmy’s book, and now—”

“Gaila!”

“Oh, shit!” Gaila claps a hand over her mouth, panicked, as Spock takes a quick, interested step forward.

“Are you by any chance referring to the fictional work entitled *K’diwa*?” he says urgently. “Is the author known to you?”

“I—” Gaila’s hands flutter wildly. “I promised I wouldn’t tell. I mean… it’s not against regulations, is it Professor? He didn’t do anything wrong? Shit, I didn’t mean to say anything.”

“Kirk won’t blame you,” says Nyota, patting Gaila’s arm and ignoring her indignant squawk. “Sorry, but there’s no point anymore. We all know Gary enjoys messing with Kirk way too much to keep his mouth shut forever. People are going to find out. At least Professor Spock isn’t a gossip.”

“Jim Kirk?” says Spock, his face beyond unreadable. Like, marble statue levels of unreadable. “That is the name of book’s author?”

Gaila just stands there, looking heartbroken, because, for reasons that completely escape Nyota, her roommate feels the same way about Jim Kirk that most people would feel about a lost puppy too damaged to come in out of the rain. It’s baffling. Normally Gaila’s an impeccable judge of character.

Nyota sighs, and turns back to Spock, squaring her shoulders.

“Sir, we are acquainted with the cadet who wrote *K’diwa*. The file was uploaded from his PADD to the student server by mistake, and he’s now very concerned that someone will use it to discredit him. He’s understandably anxious to keep the matter private.”

Nyota wouldn’t call it blackmail, but logically, if Spock is going to make an exception to protect one cadet’s privacy, he can make an exception for another.

“I assure you, I have no desire to censure or expose him,” Spock says, his tone reassuring, his eyes positively animated. “In fact—”

Just then, Spock’s communicator chirps. He cuts himself off, removing the comm from his pocket and tapping at the screen.

A moment later, his face turns white in the glow of the blue light.

“You must excuse me, an urgent matter has arisen.” Spock snaps his comm shut and looks down at them. “Do not hesitate to contact me if you have need. Dismissed, Cadets.”

He doesn’t even bother waiting to acknowledge their salutes before walking away from them, eating up the corridor with his long, exceptionally well-tailored strides.

“Wonder what lit a fire under his testicles,” Gaila says thoughtfully.

“His ass,” says Uhura, distracted.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”
Spock’s communicator lies on the passenger seat of his hover car, where he had tossed it thoughtlessly while flinging himself behind the control panel.

The message he received 7.45 minutes ago is still displayed on the screen. Spock is fighting the temptation to look at it again, though this would be an unsafe maneuver while his vehicle is under manual control. And he cannot switch to autopilot, or the vehicle will automatically obey all posted speed limits, which does not suit Spock’s purposes at the moment.

The message, which he has committed to memory, reads:

**Embassy1**: To Commander Spock, greetings. A Human male has been given shelter at the Embassy due to incapacitation resulting from the use of intoxicating drugs and alcohol. He has been identified as a Starfleet cadet. The Ambassador has indicated that I might refer the matter to your discretion. Signed, Makal, son of Valon.

Attached to the message is a single still image of the cadet in question. He appears to be sleeping. The side of his face is pressed against a flat embroidered pillow. He is wearing a leather jacket, rather than cadet reds. Blonde hair falls over his smooth forehead, and fine, almost invisible eyelashes brush the thin skin below his lower orbital socket.

As would virtually any other member of Starfleet, Spock had instantly recognized the face of the most high-profile cadet to have enrolled in the Academy in recent years. Indeed, Jim Kirk’s name, and face, were familiar to Spock from the Federation history texts he had studied during his early education on Vulcan, long before he joined Starfleet.

The famous image of Jim Kirk—a holo taken when Kirk was still a young child, standing with his mother and elder brother at the ten year memorial service for George Kirk and the lost crew of the *Kelvin*—is over twelve years old now. But the cadet’s features have changed remarkably little. His extraordinary resemblance to both his famous parents marks him like a brand.

In terms of Kirk’s Starfleet career, Spock knows only what he has heard. Kirk is not enrolled in any of Spock’s classes, nor, as a command track student, is he ever likely to be. But he is well-regarded in the Computer Sciences division, and Spock’s own department head has mentioned in passing that Cadet Kirk is something of a coding prodigy: unorthodox, entirely self-taught, yet shockingly effective.

(It is frowned upon for instructors to “poach” cadets from their declared academic tracks; otherwise, in Kirk’s case, Spock is certain that Dr. Kelar would have made the attempt.)

If the popular reports are to be believed, Kirk is equally as adept at charming sentient beings of every gender and species into his bed for short-lived carnal dalliances as he is at coding. But popular reports also assert that Kirk is a felon, whose criminal record was made classified so that Starfleet could enfold George Kirk’s son into its ranks without any undue embarrassment. Likewise, Kirk’s instructors are almost evenly divided into two factions: those who believe that Kirk is destined for greatness, and those who believe that his irreverent attitude towards authority undermines all the rest of his potential.
It would be illogical for Spock to take a stance on this issue until he has met and assessed Jim Kirk for himself.

Or it would be, had Cadet Vro and Cadet Uhura not, only minutes ago, informed Spock that Jim Kirk was the same cadet whose identity Spock has devoted much of his free time over the last three days to discovering.

The psychological profile Spock created to aid him in tracking down the author of *K’diwa* is not especially consistent with Kirk’s public profile. Indeed, it almost entirely contraindicative, save in one respect. Kirk’s admirers and his detractors are united in their assessment of his unusually high intelligence. Spock has already concluded that this is a quality which the author of *K’diwa* must possess.

His reasoning is simple. Starfleet Academy requires a strong background in science and information technologies, even of those cadets who do not specialize in the sciences per se. In Spock’s experience, there are few beings who possess equally strong aptitudes in both the sciences and the arts. It is likewise his experience that the rare individual who possesses both aptitudes in equally high degrees must, necessarily, possess an especially complex and sophisticated mind.

Spock himself is exceptionally proficient in early Vulcan lyre music, which only supports this conclusion.

In any case, he is not troubled by contradictory evidence. As a scientist, it is his duty to accommodate his theories to the evidence which exists. Spock feels a pleasant thrill of anticipation at the thought of collecting new evidence personally, once he has retrieved Kirk from the Embassy.

Directly competing with this…emotion is the unpleasant negative anticipation Spock feels when he considers what, precisely, he may find when he reaches the Embassy.

An Embassy which, according to Sarek, is currently staffed by any number of unbonded Vulcans who have apparently selected the cadets of Starfleet Academy as their preferred subjects for informal experimentation in Human/Vulcan sexual compatibility.

Knowing this, and having seen the holo of the stranded, sleeping cadet (the taking of which image violated any number of Federation privacy laws, and Spock will be speaking to his father about Makal’s trespass) Spock would have come to retrieve him, even if he had not recognized him.

Even if he had not been in almost frenzied pursuit of the mind which had given birth to *K’diwa* since the moment he finished reading it.

As Spock had just explained to Cadet Uhura, he has a duty, as a superior officer of Starfleet, to intervene when a cadet’s safety is compromised. Another officer might not perceive any danger in Jim’s present situation, but Spock is not other officers. He is Vulcan. He knows Vulcans. And he does not trust Makal, or his colleagues, to practice perfect restraint in the presence of so beautiful a Human, in so vulnerable a condition.

It is best for all involved that Spock remove the cadet from his current surroundings as quickly as possible.

Nonetheless, Spock might still have managed to obey the posted speed limits, had he not been struck by a deeply uncomfortable realization.

Since the image of Jim was cropped to show only his head and shoulders, Spock was unable to determine whether the cadet had been left to rest on a sofa in one of the Embassy’s public sitting
rooms, or whether he had been put to bed in a private guest chamber. He finds both prospects worrisome and distasteful.

Leaving Jim in a public room would expose him to the potential scrutiny of many Vulcans, which amplified the chances of his encountering a Vulcan with…faltering discipline.

But if Jim had been stowed away in a private guest chamber, he would be infinitely more vulnerable to any Vulcan compromised enough to try to claim him while he is in a compromised state. Likewise, in a private chamber, Jim is at a greater physical remove from any staff members or security personnel who might intervene on his behalf.

Spock’s duty in this matter is clear, and that duty would not alter even if Jim were not a person in whom he has taken a considerable degree of non-professional interest.

The non-professional nature of his interest does not alter the execution of his duty in any way, save that he arrives at the Embassy 8.34 minutes faster than he would have otherwise.

* 

Jim has lost consciousness in public and awakened afterwards in strange places often enough to know the score. He’s been struggling towards lucidity for a few minutes now, but his eyes stay firmly shut. Until he knows where he is and who he’s with, it’s just easiest if the other people in the room think he’s still out of it.

There are other people in the room. In the same way that he knows he isn’t hurt or in immediate danger, and that he’s been put somewhere relatively comfortable to rest, he knows that the eyes of at least two people are trained on him like he’s a specimen under a laser scope.

Jim’s “la la la, totally asleep over here” ruse seems to be working, however, because the other people in the room start talking about him like he can’t hear them. Or rather, they’ve been talking about him, but they don’t suddenly stop like they’ve noticed that enough of Jim’s brain has come back online to track what they’re saying.

“He is a Starfleet cadet?”

“Saavon. You have completed your task?” A noise, like the shuffling of a stack of PADDS. “Yes, he is a Starfleet cadet. His identity scans confirm.”

The female speaker—Saavon?—is briefly silent. “He is not attired like other Starfleet cadets I have seen.”

She sounds distinctly more curious than judgmental, so Jim mentally tallies another win for the leather jacket ensemble.

(Bones keeps telling him that he needs more than one change of civilian clothes. Jim keeps trying to telling Bones that, while the Federation universal basic income was sufficient to keep Jim housed and fed as a teen after he quit school, it didn’t exactly stretch to luxuries. Like, say, two leather jackets.)

“That is logical, as I did not meet him on the grounds of Starfleet Academy.”

Jim’s starting to recognize the male speaker’s voice. Mikal? No, Makal. The “nice Human ears you’ve got there” Vulcan from the bar.

Wait.
Had Jim been hallucinating, or had Makal really swept him up in his big, meaty Vulcan arms seconds before Jim fucking fainted? All he has a fuzzy memory of being weightless, his head lolling against a hard shoulder.

Actually, yeah. Now that Jim’s head is clearing up, he distinctly remembers getting up close and personal with a shapely Vulcan ear after Makal hefted him into his arms. Not quite the way he’d fantasized his first Vulcan ear experience, but an experience his brain saw fit to retain, apparently.

Makal is still talking, sounding like he’s reading Jim’s file off a PADD. “He is a second-year cadet at Starfleet Academy, with a…remarkably impressive academic record in a broad range of subjects. He retains his top class standing from term to term, despite taking an accelerated course, with graduation predicted at 3.7 academic semesters from today’s stardate.” A pause. “Curious. His disciplinary record does not reflect the focused intelligence necessary to perform at such high levels. It is most illogical.”

Jim is both kind of offended, and slightly nervous, because his disciplinary record at Starfleet is well-nigh spotless. Makal wouldn’t be describing Jim’s legal history as “curious” unless he’s somehow accessed Jim’s classified files.

Hell, for all Jim knows, Makal has the necessary clearance. He never did tell Jim exactly what his job was, except for “not a xenologist”.

Jim had passed out so quickly after Makal found him at the transport terminal that there hadn’t really been time to get anxious about what, exactly, the guy planned to do with Jim’s limp, unresisting body.

But…Uhura’s bad luck with her skeevy Vulcan date aside, the fact that Jim was among Vulcans still had to mean something, right? Something different than if he was among humans.

The year he’d spent on Vulcan after Tarsus was the only time in Jim’s entire life he’s ever felt really safe. He knew not everybody had accepted him, that Vulcans in general had a xenophobic streak a mile wide when it came to off-worlders integrating into their society. But Vulcans took that pacifism shit pretty seriously, and that had counted for a lot to Jim.

“He is a remarkable specimen of Human male youth,” says Saavon. “Does he have a mate?”

Jim nearly laughs. He’s starting to think the Vulcans in this city could seriously use some xenodiversity training in the Human art of subtlety.

“Our conversation was brief,” says Makal, toneless. “I did not inquire as to his bonded status.”

Jim will give him that. The subject of partners hadn’t really come up during the 30 seconds it had taken Makal to go from “hello”, to, “I want to fuck you so hard I’m afraid I’ll break your ribs”.

A computer terminal somewhere to the left of Jim pings suddenly. He hears the brush of long robes trailing thick carpet, and then a few moments of silence.

“The computer has completed its analysis of your findings, Saavon. The cadet ingested a cocktail of human and Orion hypnotics.”

Saavon makes a low noise of disapproval.

“Those who use such substances recreationally do not usually ingest them in liquid form, preferring to inject them by hypospray.” Makal’s voice drips with distaste. “It is therefore reasonable to assume that the intoxicants were administered to Cadet Kirk without his knowledge, no doubt by suspending
them in the alcoholic beverage he was consuming.”.

Makal had freaked Jim out, just a little, back at the spaceport, and he can’t deny that he’d had a very weak heart attack when he realized the giant Vulcan had followed him to the surface. But maybe that was just Jim’s damage. Sure, Makal’s kind of an overbearing chauvinist. But from what Jim’s been hearing, both Makal and Saavon also appear to be ordinary, logical Vulcans, trying to figure out what the hell they’re supposed to do with the unconscious Starfleet cadet who had narrowly avoided being assaulted or kidnapped or both, thanks to his dumb luck in piquing the curiosity of the world’s nosiest Vulcan.

Bones has a saying for situations like this; something about the good Lord having a soft spot for kids and idiots. Jim, according to his best friend, falls into both categories.

“These…drinking establishments,” says Saavon, with a note of strangely emotional disgust in her voice. “I do not understand why they are permitted to continue operating. Criminal assault of one kind or another appears to be the inevitable result of visiting them. It was illogical for the cadet to be in such a place unescorted. Is it possible that he is unaware of his many desirable attributes?”

Desirable. Huh. Not the first thing people usually think to call him once they’ve seen him passed out in a puddle of his own drool. He’s getting to like Saavon.

At the same time, the asshole part of Jim really wants to roll over and shock the logic right out of her by pointing out that you don’t have to be a 22 year-old hottie to get assaulted. Sometimes it even happens to dirty, skeletal, acne-afflicted teenagers.

“It is illogical to suppose that every Human establishment which sells ethanol for recreational consumption is a thriving scene of criminal activity,” says Makal, dryly. “We must remember that the Dunap is a work of fiction. No doubt Ri-fainu Kitausu availed themselves of the convention known as ‘artistic license’ in order to better suit facts to the novel’s dramatic structure.”

It’s not until Jim hears the unfamiliar words that he realizes Makal and Saavon been speaking Vulcan this whole time. Well, he knows what the words mean, sort of. Ri-fainu is “unknown” and kitausu means “writer”, but Makal used them as a compound word, and for all Jim knows, that might change their meaning completely.

On the other hand, dunap just means “book”.

A small, anxious knot forms in Jim’s stomach, as an unwelcome suspicion unfurls in his mind.

In all his panic about K’diwa going viral across Starfleet, it had never once occurred to Jim that someone might forward it to people outside Starfleet. But clearly, Jim is an idiot. Of course someone forwarded the Vulcan/Human porn novel to the freaking Vulcan Embassy. Just. Of course they had.

Times like these, Jim is reminded that he’s not eighteen anymore, and that most of his fellow cadets are still complete fucking children.

“I find your logic wanting,” Saavon declares to Makal, her voice cold and haughty. “Tonight, you entered a Human bar to seek Human companionship. It was the first such attempt you have ever made. In less than one Standard hour, you managed to make the acquaintance of a highly superior Human. And almost immediately after, that Human was incapacitated by drugs of a kind typically administered with the intent to facilitate sexual assault.” Her voice is positively withering now. “I am aware that the Dunap is a work of fiction. However, I believe that much of its interest lies in Ri-fainu Kitausu’s realistic depictions of life as experienced by vulnerable beings who live outside the Federation’s protection.”
“I assure you that the establishment where I encountered Cadet Kirk was well within the borders of Federation space,” says Makal, with a tiny, Vulcan sigh. “The Ambassador has replied to my message. At his suggestion, I have contacted his son. Since Krevak’s reprehensible conduct towards a female Starfleet cadet earlier this week, the Ambassador is most anxious that there be no further difficulties with Starfleet personnel. No doubt he trusts the Commander to handle the matter discreetly.”

Makal’s voice falls low. “It is possible that the Ambassador will feel I have placed him in an undesirable position by bringing Cadet Kirk here in this condition. The situation may lend itself to… misinterpretation.”

“Illogical,” says Saavon instantly. “You did well to bring him here. You could not have left him alone.”

“Your colleague is correct. Your actions were both logical and praiseworthy.”

Jim doesn’t even realize he’s speaking Vulcan—in a voice that crackles like a mile of gravel road—until he opens his eyes to see Makal staring at him. A Vulcan female stands beside him, wearing embroidered robes in the same style as his. She’s staring too. She has long hair piled up on her head in an elaborate braid, but the fancy ’do doesn’t hide the fact that she appears to be about 16 years old.

Great, so Jim just spent ten minutes allowing himself to be ogled by the underage intern. That’s not disturbing at all.

Makal steps forward. “It is pleasing to see you awake, Jim Kirk,” he says. “I ask that you not attempt to rise. We could not administer an antagonist to the chemicals you ingested, as we were unable to access your complete medical files. Fortunately, Saavon is an accomplished biochemist, and was able to determine that the dose you were given could be safely metabolized by your body within a few hours.”

Jim blinks up at Makal and starts to push himself up on one elbow. Instantly, Saavon darts forward, as if to shove him back on his ass.

Jim freezes.

“Your body is fighting the effects of a potent combination of illicit drugs designed to render you unconscious or impaired for many hours,” Saavon tells him primly. “It is necessary that you remain prone for another 33.4 minutes, as you may otherwise grow disoriented and fall.”

Jim blinks at her. She’s sort of unbearably adorable in all her youthful earnestness. It reminds him how long it’s been since he was around teenage Vulcans.

He sinks back down on the sofa. “You my doctor?” he says to Saavon.

“Negative. The Vulcan Embassy is not outfitted with medical facilities.” She flushes, for some reason. “I am a biochemical research fellow. As Makal has said, I performed your blood tests. I estimated that you would regain consciousness approximately ten minutes ago.”

“Huh. Sorry, didn’t mean to be late to the party.” He twists his head a little, trying to take the room in. “Not to change the subject, but where am I?”

Jim knows he’s not imagining it this time: Makal sounds downright flustered. “You are in one of the public areas of the Vulcan Embassy. I am a senior ambassadorial aide, and thus my living quarters are located on these premises. I was…uncertain where else I might safely bring you.”
“Right.” Jim glances at Saavon, who is looking between them with an expression of avid interest. “Saavon, I’m sorry, would you mind if I spoke to Makal alone for a minute?”

Saavon leaves then with protest or farewell. Jim waits until the door shuts behind her.

“Look, Makal, I get that you were trying to do me a favor, and I’m not ungrateful. But it’s really important I get back to the Academy. If you could get me my communicator, I can call my roommate, he’ll come get me.”

“Cadet Kirk, you have been asleep for quite some time. I am afraid it is already well past the hour of your curfew. Fortunately, I have already arranged a solution.”

Part of Jim can’t help but be suspicious that Makal is going to offer to cuddle him all night and drive him to school in the morning, but he bites his tongue and waits.

“The son of the Vulcan Ambassador is an instructor at Starfleet Academy. His name is Commander Spock. I presume you are aware of this, since you must have been a student in his Vulcan language classes.”

Jim’s mouth falls open. “I don’t know Spock. My roommate takes his ethics course, so I’ve heard of him, but I’ve never even seen the guy.”

Makal arches an eyebrow. “Curious. Your accent suggests that you were instructed by a Vulcan.”

Jim doesn’t say anything.

“Regardless, Commander Spock replied to my message promptly and declared his intention of retrieving you.”

Jim tries to smile. “Great. Thank you, Makal.” He sighs. “A Vulcan commander, huh? Guess I’m getting written up after all.”

Makal frowns. “Commander Spock is aware that the circumstances of your tardiness were beyond your control. It would be illogical for him to censure you.”

“You’ve never been in the military, have you?”

“No. I am a senior diplomatic aide.”

“Okay, so we’re just waiting for the Commander, then.” Slowly, Jim pushes himself into a sitting position, though he doesn’t try to stand just yet. He can feel the marks that the pillow left on the side of his face. He scrubs at his eyes, vaguely aware that Makal is gazing at him in keen fascination. “Let me ask you something then, since we’ve got time to kill. Why did you really bring me here? I’m pretty sure I specifically told you not to follow me from the bar.”

“Negative. You informed me that I was not to interpret your words as an invitation to follow you from the bar. I am under no impression that you wished for such an outcome, but I calculated that the amount of alcohol you had ingested did not sufficiently account for the degree of impairment you demonstrated when you walked away. At first, I meant only to see you safely to the spacedock station, but your condition only worsened the longer I observed you, so I deemed it logical to ensure that met with no misfortune once you reached the planet’s surface.”

Jim props his heavy head in his hand and squints at the tall, shifty Vulcan. “You just told me what you did. I’m asking why you did it. What’s a random Starfleet cadet to you? Why bring me to the Embassy instead of just alerting the station techs?”
Makal gives him an exceptionally blank look. “I felt it my duty to see to your safety.”

“You’re pretty committed to my safety for a guy who talked to me for five minutes in a bar.”

Makal glances to the side, slightly, and his mouth twitches. “Perhaps that is so,” he says quietly. “Yet, as someone once wrote: is it not the duty of every being to use whatever strength they possess to protect those who are weaker than they?”

For one heart-pounding moment, Jim feels stone sober, like he’s flushed all remaining traces of the drug out of his system in a profusion of cold sweat.

Makal is quoting *K’diwa*. Makal is unknowingly quoting *Jim*, to prove a point to *Jim*.

The irony is brain-scrambling.

“You—you’ve read that book?” Jim says hoarsely, before he can stop himself.

Makal adjusts his shoulders in a gesture that might have been a shrug, on a Human.

“All the staff of the Vulcan Embassy thought it…prudent to become familiar with the contents, once a copy was forwarded to us.”

“Prudent?”

“My superior, Ambassador Sarek, is the only Vulcan ever to have bonded with a Human female. It was logical to determine whether the Ambassador’s privacy had been somehow compromised. That proved not to be the case, yet there are other significant points of interest in the story.”

Jim knows he’s skating on exceptionally thin ice at the moment, but he’s literally dying of curiosity. He never expected to get the chance to hear a Vulcan’s opinion on his story. “Such as?”

Makal looks thoughtful before he answers.

“The first Vulcans to settle on Terra and take Human mates did so long before Vulcan initiated first contact with Earth. No other planet or its people have ever influenced Vulcans to behave so illogically before. It sparked much interest and debate amongst our xenoanthropologists. Yet, *K’diwa* enabled me to understand this phenomenon to a far greater degree than all their studies. Indeed, after reading it, I found myself…regarding Humans in a new light entirely.” He clears his throat. “I have begun to hypothesize that, of the Federation races, my people are uniquely drawn to yours. There are many logical reasons why—”

Just then, Makal’s PADD beeps. He looks down.

“My apologies, Cadet. Commander Spock has arrived and wishes to see you immediately. I must go to meet him. I will return shortly.”

A second later, Jim is alone in the room.

For a few seconds after that, Jim looks at the windows in the room, wondering what floor he’s on and whether, in his semi-stoned condition, he could manage to climb down without killing himself.

Vulcans are one thing. A Starfleet Vulcan, on the other hand…

But there’s no point deluding himself. He’s a wreck, he’s exhausted, and the only thing he’s equipped to do at the moment is lie back down on his pillow and rest his eyes until he has to face his official dressing down.
So that’s what he does. Seconds later, he’s asleep again.

Chapter End Notes

I’M SORRY. I really intended for this to be the chapter where Jim and Spock meet face to face, but it just kept getting longer and longer. Bear with me for one more update and I promise no more teasing. :-D
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

 Have some Makal POV. And some Spock POV. And, also, some Jim POV. All in one chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Commander Spock is standing in the Embassy’s southern antechamber when Makal arrives to greet him. Despite the hour, the Ambassador’s half-Human son is still dressed in his Starfleet uniform. He has removed his cap in deference to Starfleet protocol, which states that heads should be bared within doors. He holds the cap tucked under one arm, which seems inefficient to Makal.

Commander Spock turns to face him while Makal is still at the far end of the corridor, thus demonstrating that he possesses a Vulcan’s full range of hearing. Rumor has it that in spite of his hybrid status, Spock’s physiology is almost entirely Vulcan. The few Human deviations he presents are cosmetic, not functional in nature.

His eyes, for example.

They track Makal without deviation as the distance between them shortens. Spock’s eyes are…most expressive. Makal is not skilled at reading the finer nuances of emotion in a pair of Human eyes, but even he cannot mistake the heat in Spock’s gaze. He is angry at being inconvenienced, perhaps. Cadet Kirk had seemed certain that the Commander would deal harshly with him, and though Makal had assured him this was illogical, he does not know Spock well enough to be certain if the Commander will see the matter in its proper light. He has never interacted with the son of his superior in any extended capacity, despite the fact that he has been a member of the Ambassador’s personal staff for twenty years—most of Spock’s lifetime.

It is illogical to feel intimidated by such a youth, whatever his clan, however prodigious his intellect, no matter how unorthodox or illustrious his career.

Makal does not understand why Commander Spock continues to stare at him in that fashion.

When he draws close enough to speak without raising his voice unduly, he greets Spock with the ta’al. “I am grateful you have come,” he says.

“Where is Cadet Kirk?” Spock says, returning the salute, but not the greeting.

“He is resting in one of the public rooms.”

“How did he come to be incapacitated, as you said in your message, while visiting this Embassy?”

Makal does not fidget, but the question, and the flat tone in which Spock levels it at him, makes him almost wish for such a relief. He had not realized that he would be required to lay his own recent actions open to Spock’s scrutiny.

Briefly, and omitting irrelevant details, Makal outlines his chance encounter with Cadet Kirk, including his observation of the cadet’s impaired gait, and the loss of consciousness which made it necessary to remove the cadet to a more secure location.
Spock, who seems to possess something of Sarek's capacity to intimidate by demanding attention while withholding outward reaction, listens without blinking.

“It would have been more logical to alert the technicians at the transport station that the cadet was in need of medical attention,” he intones, when Makal has finished. “By removing Kirk from Starfleet grounds, you obstructed his access to resources, medical and otherwise, that his condition might have required.”

Makal stiffens. “My immediate concern was that he not be left in the care of strangers while he was incapacitated.”

“Curious,” says Spock. “That same concern compelled me to respond to your message as a matter of urgency. In bringing the cadet to the Embassy, you indeed committed him to the care of strangers. Your…brief barroom acquaintance does not alter this fact.”

Makal can think of no logical reply to this, so he says nothing.

Spock takes a single step forward.

“Cadet Kirk is a member of Starfleet. The petty officers who man the transporter station are also Starfleet, and faithful to their duty. You should take this fact into deeper consideration, should such an unlikely confluence of circumstances ever occur again.”

Makal swallows, and nods.

Spock places his hat on a table containing informative brochures used by the tour guides who sometimes conduct school groups on educational visits to the Embassy. “I should like to see Kirk now.”

Though some small part of Makal feels an illogical regret that he will soon be deprived of Jim Kirk’s uniquely compelling company, the greater part of him will know only relief once Spock has collected his stray cadet and departed the Embassy grounds.

Silently, he turns and begins walking towards the sitting room, knowing that Spock will not need to be told to follow.

*

“He woke, briefly, just before your arrival, but it would appear that he is sleeping again.” Makal, having opened the door to the sitting room, pauses when he spies Kirk lying inert on the sofa. Spock stops just behind him.

He looks past Makal to Kirk’s sleeping form, and then there is a tiny noise, like Spock is catching his breath.

“We were able to perform the necessary scans,” Makal says softly. “Though I recommend the cadet see his personal physician tomorrow, he has processed the majority of the toxins that were placed his system. Lingering symptoms include fatigue, deep sleep, and muscle weakness.”

Spock gives him an exceedingly sharp look. “Do you mean to say that he was intoxicated against his consent? Your message gave no indication that a crime had been committed against the cadet.”

“He ingested the alcohol willingly. I believe the bartender may have been responsible for drugging him, but I have no evidence to this effect.” Makal had thought long on this subject during the ride back to the Embassy, while the warm weight of Jim Kirk’s golden head rested against his thigh. The
contact had been unavoidable; the vehicle had not been spacious.

“Did you witness it?”

“I did not. My theory is founded on conjecture. However, I was present when the cadet was served his final drink of the evening. The drugs were powerful and fast-acting. Had they been added to any of his previous beverages, he would have been incapacitated long before my arrival.”

Spock is Vulcan, so it is unnecessary for Makal to add that, had any person tampered with Jim Kirk’s beverage in Makal’s presence after it had been served, it would not have gone unnoticed or unremarked.

“He seemed quite concerned by the fact that he has inadvertently broken Starfleet regulations related to curfew,” Makal adds, casually. “He expects to be disciplined for it.”

“At what time did the cadet leave the bar?” says Spock, sounding distracted.

“Shortly after 2200 hours.”

“He was not due back in his dormitory until 2300 hours. He returned to campus in ample time. What followed was not in his control.”

Makal murmurs his agreement. Then, remembering his duties as a senior representative of the Embassy, he starts to inquire whether Spock requires any refreshment.

He glances over at Spock, the query on the tip of his tongue, only to find that Spock no longer appears to be full aware of Makal’s presence. Instead, the young Vulcan’s overly bright Human eyes are trained on Jim Kirk, as though the mysteries of the universe could be explained by the gentle rhythm of the rise and fall of his chest.

Makal wonders, with a pang of dismay, whether his own fascination with the Human youth had been equally transparent. If so, he is grateful no other Vulcans were present to observe it. Spock’s unguarded display of interest is unseemly in a Vulcan, but Makal is hardly fit to pass judgment on him.

It would seem that Cadet Kirk possesses a knack, as Humans say, for inciting Vulcans into foolish behavior. But this is not his fault either.

As Makal continues to regard Spock, he finds himself wondering, suddenly, whether this proud young Starfleet officer has also read the Dunap— and whether he is aware that he is not the first Vulcan who, after reading, had found his perspective on Humans permanently altered.

“I thank you, Makal, for seeing to the safety of my cadet,” Spock announces, without bother to look at him. “I am here now. I am sure you have other concerns to attend to.”

Makal hesitates. “If you do not wish to wake him, there is a hoverchair—”

“I have no pressing need to be elsewhere. There is sufficient work to occupy me until the cadet wakes. I trust our continued presence will be no imposition to the staff.”

Not in the least, Makal assures him, and bids him a peaceful evening.

Just before he turns down an adjacent corridor, he looks back, to see Spock shutting the door of the sitting room with a curiously decisive thud.
The tableau before Spock puts him in mind of the Terran fairytales his mother read to him when he was very small.

Jim Kirk lies sleeping on a sofa 2.5 meters away from the chair where Spock sits watching him, PADD neglected in his lap.

He should be working.

He cannot look away from Jim.

If the cadet were merely beautiful, Spock would not be so distracted. His beauty can be admired in a holo; it is an immutable aspect of his appearance.

Sleeping, however, he is both beautiful and…open, in a way that Spock doubts many people have ever been privileged to witness.

He has heard many opinions on the subject of Jim Kirk’s arrogance. The one source Spock would consider reliable, Captain Pike, has never used that word to describe him. “Troubled” is the nearest to a pejorative Pike has ever used in reference to Jim Kirk, but he had said it only once, softly and with respect, the same way he speaks of officers recovering slowly and painfully from injuries sustained in the line of duty.

Troubled. Drugged against his will. Sleeping.

Vulnerable.

This is the sum of the first-hand data Spock has managed to collect about Jim Kirk so far.

Spock opens the file on his PADD containing the text of K’diwa, and taps the bookmark that will take him to the desired passage.

“Stoval, we’ve known each other for months. Why say nothing to me before now?”

“Because you would not have believed me before now, k’diwa,” said Stoval. “You have been hurt and betrayed by those who should have protected you, with this result—that you do not trust easily. I realized long ago that, if I were to have any hope of winning you, first I would have to prove myself to you.”

He walked towards her, not slowing or halting until he came within arm’s reach. Ophelia shrank against the bulkhead, but he did not retreat. “I have killed for you, and if necessary, I would die for you. I desire you, not for a single night, but for a lifetime. I would have you for my bonded mate. Will you consider my offer?”

Ophelia stared at him, her eyes swimming with pain and confusion. “Ever since we met, when you weren’t saving my life, you’ve acted like you want to wring my illogical Human neck. There were times—” She chokes a little. “Times when I would have given an arm or a leg just to think you cared about me a little bit, that you weren’t just protecting me because you decided it was logical to make sure I didn’t bite it. Fuck, I wasn’t even sure we were friends until a few days ago!”

“I have been able to think of nothing since the day we met save for the danger haunting your steps.” Unable to bear the distance any longer, Stoval places his hands on either side of Ophelia’s head and
curves his body around her like a shield. “Beloved, you consistently misinterpret my fury towards those who have harmed you as hostility towards yourself. I am aware that you do not believe that you deserve to be guarded from pain or harm, but I do not share your belief. My behavior confuses you because you do not understand your own worth.”

Slowly, Stoval lifted a hand to brush away the tear rolling down Ophelia’s soft cheek. “I do not know how to convince you that you are precious to me, save by treating you as though you are precious,” he said softly. “If there is anything more I might do to overcome your hesitation, you have only to name it.”

When Spock had finished reading *K’diwa* for the first time, he had closed the file with an illogical, dismayng sensation of loss.

It may be that the book has found favor with his father’s subordinates, but to them, *K’diwa* is no more than an hour’s worth of titillating entertainment. That it had inspired their illogical experiments, treating Human youths as if they were interchangeable test samples, is proof of this.

None of his father’s people can see what Spock sees in Ophelia and Stoval’s story: the many threadbare patches where the author is so unnervingly present that it had felt, while Spock was reading, as though their two minds were touching.

That link, though ephemeral, had been the realest thing in Spock’s world, until the story ended, leaving him without a means of sustaining it.

If Jim Kirk is indeed the author of the passages Spock has pored over nigh-obsessively for three days, then it is useless and untrue to pretend that Spock does not know him. Spock is convinced that he knows Kirk to the very core of his aching soul.

But Jim Kirk does not yet know Spock.

Never before in his life has Spock desired to open himself up to the understanding of another person the way he wishes to do with Kirk. Now, he does not even know how to begin trying.

He is aware that Humans, particularly his cadets, find him excessively blunt and abrasive—even, at times, unkind. Spock has always attributed this to unavoidable cultural misunderstanding, but such reassurances are not sufficient in this case. He suspects that if he should appear superior or aggressive towards Jim Kirk in any way, he will likely lose any chance of forging a lasting connection with him.

Stoval had been fooled, in *K’diwa*’s early chapters, by Ophelia’s brash, independent manner. She displayed no vulnerability in his presence, and he concluded that she possessed little in the way of sensitive feeling. Stoval had discovered his error in time, but not before he had wounded her deeply.

Spock does not wish to lose Jim as soon as he has found him. He must meditate on how to avoid such an outcome.

Spock guides himself into the meditative state by focusing on a remembered image of his mother. Amanda Greyson, slender and delicate even by Human standards, possessing an intelligence that rivals her Vulcan husband’s, and a ferocious depth of loyalty and love for her half-Vulcan son.

If his mother knew what Spock knows, she would see Jim as Spock sees him. She would know how to act, what to do.

He pictures her standing in this very room. Sarek has been Ambassador to Earth for many years; no
doubt Amanda has been here in truth, at some time or another. In his mind’s eye, Spock sees her lower the cowl of her gown and look across the room towards the young man on the sofa.

Jim has rolled onto his side, hugging an embroidered cushion to his chest, as though for some reason he requires the comfort.

Spock imagines his mother smiling softly. He can nearly feel the exquisite gentleness that radiates from her presence. Amanda would understand instinctively, as Spock does, the gnawing hunger for gentle affection that lies behind Kirk’s exuberant veneer.

With quiet steps, Amanda crosses the room and kneels at Jim’s side. She lifts one small hand and brushes fine golden hair away from Jim’s forehead.

She would wake him quietly, with a whisper and a feather-soft brush of her hand against his cheek, as she had woken Spock every morning until he was old enough to adhere to the self-imposed discipline of a schedule. Amanda would speak softly to Jim, offer to fetch him water or tea. He would be thirsty when he woke; dehydration was a lesser side effect of the drug, and could lead to headache and muscle cramps.

Spock ends his meditation several minutes later with a new clarity of purpose.

Jim is not ill, but when he wakes he will feel as though he is. Spock has never cared for an ill person before, but Amanda had nursed him through several minor childhood illnesses.

Spock will take her for his model now, as he has done, consciously and unconsciously, in so many other things.

*

The soft clank of metal coming to rest against glass has Jim upright before he’s completely awake. When Frank put the bottle down, it meant he was done drinking for the night, and that meant—

“I apologize,” a soft voice says from somewhere above him. “I had not thought the noise would wake you.”

Jim blinks. Sees walls covered in scarlet tapestries, elegant non-Terran scrollwork designs in the wooden furniture.

He smells something fragrant and spicy, and notices that there is a tray on the table in front of his sofa. It holds a pitcher of water, a glass, and a steaming tea cup.


He’s safe. Trapped in a painfully awkward social situation, but safe. Jim forces himself to let go of the breath he’s holding.

“There is tea,” says the voice again, and that’s when Jim realizes that it’s not Makal. It’s someone—some Vulcan—he’s never met before. “It is a native blend, so it may not be to your taste. You must drink the water, however. You were experiencing muscle tremors in your sleep. You require the fluid intake.”

“I was told there weren’t any doctors here,” says Jim, craning his neck upwards to get a glimpse of his mystery companion.

Military discipline really gets under your skin, even after just a year and change into the Academy.
Jim clocks the uniform first, the rank insignia second, and within seconds he is wide awake.

“Commander,” Jim croaks, pushing himself halfway off the sofa in an attempt to come to some form of attention.

When the Vulcan in the black Starfleet uniform takes hold of his arm and pushes him gently back down, Jim doesn’t resist. Probably because Spock’s face is inches away from his, his expression blank, his eyes…

They’re not like Makal’s eyes, but there’s an intensity in them that Jim is starting to think of a Vulcan trait. They hold Jim’s gaze relentlessly until Jim has relaxed back into the sofa cushions.

Spock releases him, a little too quickly, and folds his arms behind his back.

“Cadet Kirk,” he says. “Are you experiencing any lingering disorientation?”

Jim opens his mouth and shuts it a few times. “I’m honestly not sure.”

A small, worried-looking crease appears between Spock’s eyebrows. “Perhaps I should not have delayed taking you to Starfleet Medical.”

“Oh, no, sir, that won’t be necessary. I’ll be fine, I’ll just…drink my water.”

Spock hands him the glass before Jim can reach for it. “The entire glass,” he admonishes, with a fussy primness that reminds Jim a little of Saavon.

Jim studies Spock over the rim as he drinks, grateful that he can’t be expected to talk while he’s pouring sixteen ounces of water down his parched throat.

Jim’s never seen Spock before, not even at a distance—if he had, Jim would definitely have remembered. His sleek dark hair reflects a halo from the overhead lighting, and the streamlined proportions of his body suggest fitness, strength, and non-Human grace.

Well, Jim would probably be light on his feet too, if he was living on a planet where the gravity was only about 70% the gravity of his homeworld.

Jim thinks over his next words carefully as he finishes the water.

“Sir, I’d like to apologize for inconveniencing you like this.” It isn’t hard to sound penitent; defiance and bravado would require energy he doesn’t possess at the moment. “If Makal had waited to ask me, I would have told them not to disturb you. My roommate would have come to get me.”

Spock arches an eyebrow, and somehow Jim knows that the gesture is meant to convey, not judgment, but rather a quiet amusement.

“Then, as your roommate cannot leave Starfleet grounds at this hour without breaking regulations, it is for the best that I am here instead. Your own tardiness will be excused, as Makal has explained that he likewise neglected to secure your consent before removing you from Academy grounds.”

Jim finds himself smiling slowly, feeling the taut, hunched muscles of his shoulders start to relax a little. He really hadn’t expected Spock to be this easygoing, not after Bones’ story about all those crying cadets.

“Makal meant well, I’m pretty sure.” Jim scratches his head, then frowns, and starts trying to pat his hair back into some semblance of order.
“I find myself distinctly uninterested in his motives.” Spock hesitates, then takes a seat in an armchair which has been dragged close to Jim’s sofa. “Despite the unorthodox manner of your arrival here, I trust that you have been treated well?”

Spock’s voice is…less expressionless than before. If he were Human, Jim would read him as curious, concerned, and maybe even just a little bit tense, as though he is genuinely afraid Jim might answer in the negative.

What would Spock do if he decided that Jim’s treatment at the Embassy fell short of his standards? Give Makal a good old-fashioned Starfleet dressing down? Or maybe Vulcans had even sicker burns that they only used with each other. Like calling each other “illogical”, and then walking away before the other guy could defend his logical reasoning.

“No, everyone’s been cool.” Jim deliberately keeps his voice nonchalant. It’s not a lie. Nothing bad or scary happened to him at the Embassy.

Spock lifts that eyebrow again, and this time, it looks skeptical. “Indeed. I am glad to hear it. But I trust you will have no objection to returning to campus once you are fit to do so?”

“No, sir. I’m ready to leave on your order.”

Spock…sighs. It’s a really Human-sounding sigh, not like Makal’s short, aggrieved huffs.

“There is no need to stand on protocol,” he says, and his voice becomes incredibly gentle, for some reason. “We are not currently on Starfleet grounds, and I am appearing in uniform only because there was no opportunity to change before I received word of what had befallen you. Unless it is your own wish, I do not intend to bring the events of this evening to the attention of the Commander of Cadets.”

Jim snorts. “If you’re worried about Pike finding out, you should know I’m probably just gonna tell him sooner or later. Probably sooner.” He winces, remembering that Bones had given him the same advice about the novel. “There’s no point trying to hide anything from him. Interfering bastard.”

Spock stares at him, looking consternated, even a little disappointed, and Jim opens his mouth to attempt to explain that words like “brat” and “bastard” are terms of affection between him and Pike, really.

Then Spock’s brow wrinkles, and he studies his hands for a moment.

“Wildly, illogically, and with the infinite variety of expression that is only to be expected of an infinitely creative people,” Spock murmurs.

Jim blinks. “I’m sorry?”

“It is how my mother described to me the manner in which Humans speak. It was…one of the many parting pieces of advice she gave me, before I left my homeworld for Earth and Starfleet. My mother is—Human, and therefore I was raised in a bilingual household. However, my mother has adapted to speaking Federation Standard as Vulcans speak it—formally, and with restraint. As I learned primarily from her, I speak the language in the same manner.” A soft, nostalgic look crosses Spock’s face. “She felt the need to caution me that in Human societies, Standard is often spoken very differently.”

“Wildly,” says Jim, getting it now. “Illogically.”

“Hyperbolically, ironically, creatively.” The corner of Spock’s mouth tips up. “I confess, I was
particularly concerned to discover that, in certain contexts, words sometimes mean the opposite of their formal definition.”

Jim grins, and decides to be bold. “Give me an example?”

Spock blinks at him, and flushes slightly. “I toiled extensively to deconstruct the etymological history of the term, ‘bad-ass’ my first year at the Academy. I cannot say that I succeeded in deepening my understanding significantly, but I deemed it wasteful to devote any more time to the study.”

“Oh my God.” Jim covers his face with both hands, laughing helplessly. “Come on, you teach xenolinguistics. You can’t be that hopeless with idiom. Perhaps you allow your colleagues to harbor an incorrect estimation of your facility with the language, in order to test the depth of their perception.”

It must be his surroundings, because that’s the second time tonight he’s slipped into Vulcan without consciously meaning to. But when he sees the way Spock’s eyes widen, and how his flush deepens, he can’t bring himself to regret it.

Jim had already concluded that tonight is not his night to fuck a Vulcan, but it’s almost weirder to be teasing a Vulcan, and to see that Vulcan blush under his teasing like a teenager.

Oh. Oh God, is that why Spock had reminded him of Saavon earlier?

Jim could be flattering himself. Or it could be the remnants of the Orion joy juice he got dosed with scrambling his brains. But there’s got to be a reason that Spock is being so…so warm towards him, when Vulcans are normally so private.

Jim tries not to think about how long it usually takes before he lets anyone in deeply enough to coax this degree of answering warmth out of him.

Maybe it’s because Spock’s half-Human—Jim wasn’t shocked by that, he’d put it together already when Makal said that Ambassador Sarek had a Human wife. Or maybe it’s just because he’s lived with Humans for a while now, including for two years in close quarters on a Starship. Whatever the reason, Spock actually seems to knows a thing or two about how to get along with Humans when he wants to.

Jim could bring himself to feel pretty flattered that someone like Spock would care about getting along with him at all. But considering he’s already met one Vulcan tonight who went majorly off-script, he also can’t help feeling a little nervous about what Spock’s attentiveness means.

Jim knows more about Vulcans than a lot of Humans, but he still doesn’t know how to interpret the fact that Spock’s eyes have barely left Jim’s face in all this time.

He’s never mind being looked at, but he’s starting to realize there is something thrilling about feeling seen.

Almost as if he is following Jim’s thoughts and finding them embarrassing, Spock clears his throat. “Shall we determine whether you are capable of walking the distance to my vehicle?” he says, rising from his chair and extending his arm.

Jim is 99% percent sure that if there’s any weakness in his legs now, it’s not because of the drugs. But he lets Spock help him up anyway, and when Spock makes no move to extract his arm from Jim’s grip, Jim decides it’s fine right where it is.
As Spock enters his security code to open the Embassy doors, Jim looks over his shoulder, down the long expanse of corridor behind them.

In the distance, he sees a figure that might be Makal raising the *ta’al* towards him.

When Jim turns around again, Spock’s nostrils are flared, and the line of his mouth is tight. Jim tenses reflexively, and Spock, who must have felt Jim’s fingers dig into his arm or something, loses all the sharp edges instantly.

The dedicated attention with which he guides Jim through the parking garage feels almost like an apology. By the time Jim is strapped into the passenger seat of Spock’s hovercar, allowing Spock to shut and secure the door behind him, he is relaxed again, a little sleepy.

“Rest,” says Spock, as Jim’s lolling head jerks upright. “The seat controls are located beneath the thermostat. You may recline for the duration of our trip.”

But Jim falls asleep with his head against the window, lulled by the smooth motion of the vehicle and the quiet, secure presence of the Vulcan beside him.

**Chapter End Notes**

PS: I'm a professional writer and I've got a couple of novels for sale. If you'd like a link to my books, lemme know.

I never know exactly how long my stories will end up being but I'm guestimating that we've got two more chapters to go.
Leonard wakes up the way he always does after a long shift—in an instant, miserably lucid, aware of every aching bone and overused muscle in his body. Unlike a normal day, however, he’d been woken by his own alarm, not Jim’s. The kid tries to be considerate, but Leonard’s used to being on-call, both as a father and as a doctor, so he’s probably in the top percentile of lightest sleepers in the galaxy.

He rolls onto his side, facing Jim’s half of the room, ready to throw a pillow at his roommate before he woke up too late to shower before class.

But Jim’s bed is empty. And not just empty: still neatly made, like Jim had left it yesterday morning.

Anxiety crashes over Leonard in a boiling wave, making him forget his lingering exhaustion. He kicks his legs free of the blankets, lunging for the communicator on his bedside table.

If Jim’s didn’t come home last night, then something is very wrong. Leonard might be one of the only people who knows this, but Jim’s party-boy reputation is 90% propaganda and bluff. He studies so much (and not just for his classes, the kid’s PADD stays glued to his hand no matter how far ahead he is in his coursework), that Leonard’s the one who usually has to push him out the door on a Friday night. Even geniuses need to take breaks now and then, and apparently, it falls to their long-suffering best friends/roommates/doctors to see that they do.

Jim’s stayed out overnight on the odd Friday or Saturday, but he’s never not come back to their dorm room on a weekday before.

Already operating on emergency autopilot, Leonard nearly deletes the single unread message waiting for him, because it’s not from Jim. It’s from Leonard’s ethics professor, of all people.

He’s so frantic to get Jim on the line that it takes him a second to remember that Professor Spock doesn’t communicate with his student by private comm line. Hell, he barely communicates with his students at all.

Where did Spock get Leonard’s personal comm number, and what the hell was he doing calling at… Leonard checks. At 0600 hours?

He taps the notification with a sinking feeling, and sure enough, Professor Spock pops into view, ears and all.

“Dr. McCoy.” The dark head dips in a nod of greeting. “I am calling to inform you that your roommate, Cadet Kirk, is presently asleep in a guest chamber in my apartment. Due to… a complicated series of events, he was taken last night to the Vulcan Embassy, for his own safety, after being drugged by persons unknown. Embassy staff contacted me to retrieve him, but en route to the Academy, the cadet fell into a heavy sleep and could not be roused.” Spock glances at something
off-screen for a moment before returning his gaze to the camera. “Cadet Kirk mentioned you at several points throughout the evening, so I deemed it logical to notify you of his whereabouts. I have also learned from Kirk’s records that you are his personal physician. I suspect that he would benefit from the attention of a medical professional this morning. Captain Pike has excused Cadet Kirk from classes today, and has also cleared your schedule between the hours of 0800 and 1330. I would like to invite you to my home in order that you may see to Cadet Kirk’s wellbeing. You will find directions to my location attached to this message. It would be appreciated if you arrived no later than 1100 hours, as I will need to depart then for the Academy.” He nods again. “Spock out.”

Leonard gapes at the screen for a long moment after the image winks out.

There’s a possibility Leonard’s Baptist childhood hasn’t been completely flushed out his system yet by years of scientific study, because, deep down, he really doesn’t believe in coincidences.

Four days ago, when Jimmy’s ridiculous little pornvella started making waves amongst the student body, Leonard had joked about what would happen if Spock ever got wind of it. Now he’s got Spock calling his personal comm to let him know that Jim is in his apartment, sleeping off a rough night at the goddamn Vulcan Embassy.

Leonard doesn’t know how the one fact leads to the others, but he knows that it does. He can just… feel it.

Leonard surges off the bed and kneels in front of the small medical safe he keeps under his bedside table. Between Jim’s allergies and his…everything else, Leonard’s had to stock their damn dorm room like a clinic pharmacy. But that won’t do Jim any good if Leonard leaves something important halfway across the city. He wishes Spock had been a little more specific about what kind of drugs Jim got dosed with, though if he hasn’t had a violent reaction by now he’s probably safe. At least, Leonard’s assuming that Spock would have mentioned it, or at least looked a little less calm, if Jim had had some kind of dangerous reaction on his watch.

On the other hand: Vulcans. Who even fucking knows, when it comes to them.

Packing the medkit takes him fifteen minutes. Showering, shaving, brushing his teeth, and shucking on his uniform (he opts for his Starfleet Med uniform rather than his cadet reds, since he’s apparently doing this on liberty, and he’ll take any excuse to avoid those damn pajamas) takes only ten.

He’s out of his dormitory and hopping the first transport shuttle to Spock’s end of town by 0805. By 0847, he’s knocking on the door of what he sincerely hopes is Spock’s apartment.

“Doctor.” The door opens so quickly that Leonard would swear Spock had just been standing there, waiting. “Thank you for arriving so promptly. I am sorry that it was necessary to disrupt your morning.”

Spock is already immaculately dressed and pressed in his own uniform, not a hair out of place. His expression is just as blank and uncommunicative as Leonard’s used to seeing it from behind the instructor’s podium in class.

The fingers of his left hand, however, twitch slightly at his sides. It’s the closest to an agitated gesture Leonard has ever seen on Spock. It makes him wonder if it’s just possible that Spock’s not as relaxed about having a passed-out cadet in his spare room as he’s pretending to be.

“That’s fine, sir,” says Leonard, in as professional a tone as he can manage. “You’d be surprised how often Jimmy disrupts my schedule.”
Spock frowns. His bearing is already stiff, but if possible, his back and shoulders become even more rigid.

“Am I to understand that this is not the first time Cadet Kirk has required your medical services due to being criminally assaulted?”

Leonard gapes at him, until he realizes Spock is referring to the drugs. Prolonged exposure to Jim has conditioned Leonard’s brain to jump straight to assumptions about blood and antibiotics and dermal regenerators.

He’s not happy Jim got dosed, but it’s Jim, so it could have been a lot worse. Leonard still isn’t over Jim’s Gary Mitchell days, even if Jim claims to be.

“You might could say that,” he says, slowly, when he realizes Spock is waiting for an answer. He clears his throat. “Mind if I come in, see the patient?”

Spock breaks off staring at him with a confused little blink. Almost like he’s flustered or something.

“Of course,” he says, backing away from the door to let Leonard through.

Spock’s apartment is a damn sight fancier than an Academy dorm, and a lot more spacious. There’s more than one room, to begin with, and the view from the bay windows is pretty spectacular. He follows Spock past a kitchen and dining area, down a short corridor containing three bedrooms. Only one door is open, and that’s where Spock stops.

As soon as Leonard peers around Spock and sees Jim curled up on the thick pallet on the floor, he automatically clicks over into medical mode—meaning that Spock stops being his professor, and his host, and starts being someone who needs to get out of his way.

“We’ll need some privacy,” he says, not making it a question.

Spock gives him a small nod, and Leonard brushes past him to kneel at Jim’s side.

Breathing sounds okay, and it looks like he’s in a normal state of heavy sleep. His hair is limp and sweat-damp, and his cheeks appear slightly flushed. That could be fever, or could just mean he’s gotten overheated under the blankets.

Leonard busies himself calibrating his tricorder, waiting for the door to shut behind him before he gets down to business. It takes a surprisingly long time before Leonard hears the latch click; it’s almost as if Spock was reluctant to leave them alone. Leonard doesn’t especially like that thought, but he shifts it to the back of his mind for the moment.

He’s learned a thing or two, in over a year of living with Jim, about how not to wake him up, so instead of bellowing in his ear or shaking him by the shoulder, Leonard just brushes the kid’s hair back out of his face, scratching his scalp a little, like the golden retriever he clearly was in a past life.

“Jimmy,” he says. “Jim, hey. Wake up now. I gotta check you out.”

Jim begins to stir reluctantly, mumbling and shifting and clutching the blanket closer to his chest. Leonard frowns. Jim’s not a heavy sleeper any more than he is. In fact, Jim’s normally up like a shot at the slightest noise, and Leonard’s never known him to be this relaxed in an unfamiliar environment.

“Bones?” Jim mutters, without opening his eyes.
Leonard exhales gustily. “There you are. You had me worried, I was about to drag you into the shower. Can you open your eyes, try to sit up?”

“…I mean, probably, but do I have to?”

“I’m serious. I still don’t know what happened to you last night. Your Vulcan savior didn’t tell me a whole lot.”

“My Vulcan…shit.”

Leonard should have predicted this, really. Jim’s either on or off, no in-betweens, no middle gears.

He leaps up off the mattress, looking around wildly, like he’s trying to remember how he got here, or like he thinks he’ll find a Vulcan looming in a corner somewhere.

Then, after about five seconds, his knees start to buckle.

“And what did I tell you about your low blood pressure?” Leonard arches an eyebrow, allowing Jim to collapse back onto the mattress without interfering. “You can’t jump straight out of bed like that. Your plumbing doesn’t like it.”

“Fuck my low blood pressure, I got fucking roofied last night,” Jim snaps, dropping his face into his hands like he does when he has a headache.

Leonard starts rummaging for the relevant hypospray. “Well at least you remember that much,” he says, not unkindly. “I’m sorry that happened to you. And I’m grateful it wasn’t worse.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

That’s exactly what Leonard’s afraid of. “Well then, you can tell me all about it.”

“Hah.” Jim snorts. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“I know you landed at the Vulcan Embassy last night, so my threshold of disbelief is a little higher than normal. Lie back now, I’ve gotta scan you.” Leonard waits for Jim to assume the position, then lets his tricorder do its thing. “So. Why the Vulcan Embassy, of all places in creation?”

“Because that’s where my helpful Vulcan stalker decided I was going to spend the night.”

Leonard nearly drops the tricorder, spinning around to stare at the bedroom door like Spock might bust through at any second.

“Nothing.” Jim waves his hand vaguely. “Not Spock. Some Vulcan who works at the Embassy. Is Spock still here? This is his place, right?”

Leonard feels a thundercloud brewing between his eyebrows. “Yeah, it is, and yeah, he’s here. Don’t change the subject. Didn’t that lowlife who got fresh with Nyota work at the Vulcan Embassy?”

“Not anymore. Ambassador Sarek personally shipped his ass back to Vulcan last night. According to Spock, at least. I think he mentioned it. I was at the Embassy for a few hours. Sleeping, mostly.”

“And Professor Spock was, what, just in the Vulcan neighborhood?”

“Nah, they called him, they—” Jim’s mouth splits open in a jaw-cracking yawn, and Leonard rears back from the fumes of his morning breath. “They probably figured, you know, I’m Starfleet, he’s
Starfleet, he’ll know what to do with this Human we accidentally kidnapped.”

Which doesn’t even begin to answer Leonard’s questions, but they can wait until Jim’s had his hypos, something to eat, and a strong cup of coffee.

“Spock said you fell asleep in his hovercar and wouldn’t wake up,” he can’t resist mentioning.

Jim shuts his eyes and lets his head flop back onto the pillow. “I find that humiliatingly easy to believe.”

“Hmm. Well, your system’s clear of all but trace amounts of the drugs, and it doesn’t look like they did you much harm. You know you’re goddamn lucky.”

“Yeah, I sure feel lucky.”

“I mean your allergies, Jim.” Leonard’s learned how to channel his anxiety over Jim into other emotions that Jim can process more easily. Like exasperation, and impatience. He adds a glare for good measure. “At this point I’ve got a pretty good grasp on the binders your system reacts with when it comes to standard Terran pharmaceuticals, but I haven’t exactly had a chance to cross-reference with illegals, much less alien illegals.”

“Believe it or not, Bones, it did occur to me that I might have a reaction. I just wasn’t in any condition to do anything about it. I could barely walk, much less manage an epi.”

Leonard squeezes Jim’s ankle reassuringly through the blanket. He doesn’t like it when Jim jokes about his health, and he’s even less thrilled with the thought that Jim was wandering around God knows where last night, drugged and unable to do shit to defend himself.

It’s too goddamn early in the morning for Leonard to figure out how to channel that complicated batch of emotion into a joke, though, so he keeps concentrating on the medicine.

“All right,” he announces eventually. “You only need two hypos, one for the dehydration and one for the pain. Don’t even start.” He raises a finger warningly. “I can tell just by looking at you that you’re in a world of hurt. You’re a mess of muscle cramps, and I know you got a headache. Wanna stick yourself, or should I do the honors?”

“Bones, I really don’t—”

“Too slow,” says Leonard, and jabs his neck, listening to Jim’s outraged howl with the satisfaction of a man who has just restored order to a small portion of his world.

*  

Spock boils water for tea in the kitchen, anticipating that Jim will require hydration and sustenance once Dr. McCoy has finished examining him.

The doctor does not seem to know, or to care, that his normal speaking voice is perfectly audible to Vulcan hearing, even from the other side of a closed door. And Spock, it must be admitted, does not go out of his way to avoid listening.

He is reassured by the doctor’s conclusion that Jim is over the worst of the night’s effects.

He is somewhat less reassured by the intimacy that apparently exists between doctor and patient. But then, the complex nature of Human friendships has always eluded him.
If, as McCoy had reluctantly confirmed to Spock, Jim is regularly in need of specialized medical care, it might explain why they continued to live together after their first year at Starfleet, when Housing had assigned them as roommates. Spock supposes it is natural, if not entirely logical, for an unusual degree of closeness to develop between friends who have shared quarters for so long, particularly if one of them is...vulnerable, and the other a caregiver by training and disposition.

Indeed, Spock should be gratified that Jim has such a dedicated friend, especially since his research into the cadet’s background would seem to indicate that he is essentially bereft of family.

Spock has been experiencing a state of deep contentment since making Jim’s acquaintance formally the previous evening. He was satisfied by the easy manner in which he and Jim were able to converse, as meaningful verbal communication is essential to forging connections with psi-null individuals. And he had been...unexpectedly moved by Jim’s willingness to let Spock guide him, literally and figuratively, when it became clear that he was too unsteady to make his way to Spock’s vehicle unassisted.

During the drive, as Jim snored softly in his passenger seat, Spock had allowed himself to contemplate a vision of the future in which they might become more than mere acquaintances. At that time, it had not occurred to him that there might be an obstacle in the way of that goal, in the form of a pre-existing relationship between Jim and another person.

The possibility of that obstacle, however, had suggested itself as soon as Spock set eyes on Leonard McCoy and seen him, not as a student, but as a person close to Jim Kirk.

Though not quite so aesthetically pleasing as Jim, McCoy’s features are undeniably...symmetrical. More saliently, McCoy possesses the bearing of a mature individual, one who had been a husband, father, and doctor in his life before Starfleet. And he is evidently devoted to Jim, or he would be not have responded to Spock’s invitation so swiftly.

Spock can only suppose that such qualities must be attractive to a person so unburdened by permanent connections as the semi-orphaned Jim Kirk.

As McCoy appears to be an unexceptionable individual, Spock can think of no objection to him as Jim’s partner, save that Spock does not want him to be.

He never meant to bring Jim home with him last night. There had simply been no alternative; Jim could not be wakened, and any attempt to return him to his dormitory in an unconscious state might have created a scene embarrassing to all involved.

Suddenly, it occurs to Spock that Jim might not remember any of their interactions from the previous evening. Retrograde amnesia is a common side-effect of the drugs he had unknowingly consumed. It is quite possible that, even now, he lies in Spock’s spare room with no clear idea how he came to be there. McCoy is not capable of explaining, since Spock had not troubled explaining matters to McCoy.

It has only been twenty minutes since the doctor’s arrival, but as Spock finishes assembling a breakfast large enough for three, he finds that each additional minute Jim is hidden from view increases his anxiety by an exponential factor.

There must not be foolish misunderstandings between himself and Jim Kirk. Even...even if it should happen that Jim is not free to entertain Spock’s personal overtures, he cannot bear the thought of there being any ill will between them.

Spock has not had a friend since he left Vulcan, but he hopes that friendship, at least, is not too much
to hope for between himself and Jim Kirk. To find him, and then never see him again, never discover how he learned to speak Vulcan with a fluency that rivals Amanda’s, never confess that he has read *K’dwa* and ardently wishes to discuss the story with its author, to never establish any degree of intimacy with the inestimable creative mind which had brought it into existence…

If Jim cannot be Spock’s alone, he and Spock must still be *something* to each other. In this, Spock will not yield.

He believes in nothing so illogical as fate, and yet, some things are inevitable. When two hydrogen molecules merge with one oxygen molecule, the substance, water, is produced as a result. This is an immutable truth of the known universe.

That Spock will, for the rest of his life, long for and require some form of connection with James Kirk—that is another, equally immutable truth.

Spock is so deeply immersed in his thoughts that he does not hear footsteps, nor any of the other obvious signs that Dr. McCoy is making his way to the kitchen door.

“All right, Professor, Jim’s getting cleaned up, so I’d like for us to have a word while we’re waiting for him. You don’t mind, do you?”

Were it not for Spock’s fine motor control, he would have cut his finger while slicing a melon. He sets the melon aside turns to face McCoy, knife still in hand.

“What do you wish to discuss?” he says politely.

McCoy folds his arms over his chest, and his mouth gives an unpleasant twist. “To start with, I’d like to know why it is *no one* thought to take Jim to a hospital after he got roofied.”

Spock starts. McCoy doesn’t miss it, and the line of his mouth relaxes a degree or two. “He’s fine, I’m not saying he’s not. But you had no way of knowing he *would* be. You don’t understand about Jim. He’s got so many allergies to so many different kinds of drugs that it’s pure dumb luck he didn’t go into anaphylaxis.”

The environmental controls on Spock’s apartment are currently set to accommodate Human norms, for Jim’s comfort. But the chill that comes over him then has little to do with the external temperature.

“I was unaware of his medical condition,” he says numbly.

“Yeah, and that’s why you should have taken him to the hospital. *Sir.* You *knew* that you didn’t know.”

Spock exhales, placing the knife in the sink and carrying the platter of fruit to the table. “While Cadet Kirk was at the Embassy, a Vulcan biochemist performed scans to determine whether he was in danger of an incipient medical crisis. Or so I am told. Given that he was awake and alert enough to hold a coherent conversation by the time I arrived, I assumed that he was past the point of any potential danger. If I erred in this, I apologize, and will likewise apologize to the cadet.” He sighs again, this time not troubling to conceal his vexation. “As to the actions of the Embassy staff, I am in agreement with you. The aide who…assisted Kirk last night should have taken him directly to Starfleet Medical, or rather, simply notified nearby members of Starfleet, who could have done so with greater efficiency. I do not believe he is aware of the degree to which his actions were self-serving.”

“Self-serving?”
Spock is not fluent in the nuances of Human emotional expression, but even he can hear that McCoy’s tone has turned menacing.

“He has a personal interest in Cadet Kirk. I believe he wished to keep him close, as it were.” He holds up a hand to forestall the furious words clearly about to work their way out of McCoy’s contorting mouth. “I have already brought his highly questionable behavior to the attention of his direct superior.” Spock turns his attention to the tea, which has steeped for the requisite amount of time. “Regrettably, there has been a recent trend towards indiscipline amongst the Embassy staff.”

McCoy snorts. “Oh, I’m well aware of that. This makes two of my friends they’ve messed with.”

Spock looks up at him sharply. “Who, besides Cadet Kirk?”

“Nyota. Cadet Nyota Uhura.”

Spock exhales, and relaxes marginally. “Yes, I am acquainted with Cadet Uhura. At the Vulcan Ambassador’s request—”

“Your father’s request.”

“—yes, my father, Sarek, is the Vulcan Ambassador. Yesterday, at his request, I sought Cadet Uhura and spoke with her at some length regarding her wishes. Krevak has by now been dealt with in the manner she prescribed. My father spent the evening seeing to it. The timing was unfortunate, as he would otherwise have been present to restore logic to the proceedings at the Embassy.”

“Yeah, Jim said something about your dad being a bad-ass.”

>Spock’s heart gives a lurch in his side. He averts his face hastily.

He had been alone in the car with Jim last night for 89.43 minutes. The drive had been an exceptionally long one, because Spock had nearly reached the Academy before he realized that the only way Jim was going to reach his dormitory was if Spock carried him, and that this might prove an irresistible invitation to unsavory gossip should they be seen, as they inevitably would.

Prior to that point, however, Jim had awakened long enough, once or twice, to exchange a few sentences of conversation with Spock. The first time, Jim had said, “Hey, do you know what’s going to happen to that piece of shit who tried to rip my friend’s shirt off? I heard he was on your dad’s staff.”

Spock had been shocked—neither his father nor Cadet Uhura had specified the precise nature of Krevak’s indecent actions, though he knew the cadet had disclosed all relevant details to Sarek. Sarek had attempted to substantiate her account by requiring Krevak to submit to a mind meld. Unsurprisingly, Krevak had declined the mind meld, which, to other Vulcans, was as good as an admission of guilt. Sarek had dismissed him from his staff and confined him to his quarters.

As soon as Spock had relayed word to his father that Cadet Uhura remained resolved in her decision to leave the matter in his hands, Sarek had personally retrieved Krevak from his quarters, and personally conducted him to the freighter which would return him to Vulcan.

Not in the usual nine days, but in 8.6 months, when the freighter was next scheduled to pass by the Eridani system.

Jim had laughed when Spock told him, a high, thrilling scale of notes that made the tips of Spock’s fingers tingle, just as they had the first time he attended a live performance of Bach’s partita no. 2 for violin in D minor. Spock had been incapable of not smiling in response, though he did not know if
Jim had seen. He had fallen asleep without speaking again, a hint of laughter still clinging to his lips.

“I was not certain he would remember that portion of our conversation, as he was drifting in and out of consciousness at the time,” Spock admits, and allows himself to feel relief. “I trust, then, he is not suffering from significant memory loss?”

McCoy shrugs, the action weary and resigned and relieved all at once.

“As far as I can tell, he’s no fuzzier than he would be after any other night of moderate drinking. I’d still like to kill the son of a bitch that dosed him, but to be honest, this might do Jim some good in the long term.”

Spock’s brows draw together. “In what way?”

“Kid runs himself pretty ragged, but no matter how tired he gets, he never sleeps well. That kind of thing takes a toll on you, and Jim’s already being medicated for borderline immunosuppression. He’s gonna get bad sick if he doesn’t cut himself a break.” McCoy sighs, running a hand back through his thick brown hair. “Anyway, I’m guessing those drugs probably gave him the best night of sleep he’s had since—hell, since he was a kid, probably. It might even help reset his circadian rhythms. I can hope, anyway. The real problem is that he always takes a stack of PADDs to bed with him. Terrible sleep hygiene, but does he listen to me?”

“I realize your question is rhetorical, but I feel certain the answer is no.”

Unexpectedly, McCoy’s mouth widens in a grin, and he gives a soft laugh. “Yeah,” he says softly, still smiling. “Jim’s a stack of book on legs, but he’s powered by 100% pure cussedness. That’s stubbornness, with just a hint of spite,” he elucidates, seeing Spock’s no doubt obvious confusion.

“I thank you for the vocabulary lesson, Doctor McCoy.” Spock brings the kreyla and the broth to the table, followed by the teapot and a pitcher of juice. “Please have a seat. I hear Jim approaching.”

“This is for us?” McCoy’s eyebrows arch impressively high, for a Human.

“Indeed. You are both my invited guests, and given the relatively short interval between the hour at which I contacted you and the time of your arrival, it is logical to assume you had no time to eat before leaving campus.”

“You hear that, Jim?” says McCoy, as Jim rounds the corner, shuffling into view. “Spock made us breakfast.”

“Shit.”

Spock watches, concerned, as Jim rubs his eyes. His face, and strands of his hair, are damp from scrubbing. He is wearing the same clothes he slept in, though he has left off the belt and untucked his exceptionally tight shirt.

This has perhaps made Jim more comfortable, but it certainly has not made him more decent. Quite the opposite.

“I should have done this,” Jim says, gesturing to the table. “On Vulcan, guests who stay overnight make breakfast, to thank their hosts. I should have...set an alarm or something.”

“Cadet Kirk.” Spock begins.

“Please, can we still be Jim and Spock for a little while? At least until we’re both in uniform again?”
“Jim,” says Spock, easily. “You were unconscious when we arrived here last night. I had to carry you from my vehicle. I had no expectation that you were familiar with Vulcan domestic customs, let alone that you should trouble yourself about them when you have been unwell.”

Jim opens his mouth, and somehow, Spock knows it is to form another argument.

“Please. Sit down, and eat. I know that Doctor McCoy has recommended you take food and drink as soon as possible. Though most of the foods are Vulcan, I believe you will find them palatable. They are all foods that my mother is fond of.”

“I, uh, I love plomeek, actually,” says Jim, reaching for his broth first. “I haven’t had it in ages. This is amazing, Spock.”

“Did you acquire a taste for plomeek at the same time you acquired near-native proficiency in the Vulcan language?”

It is, perhaps, a demanding question to ask of someone over breakfast, particularly when they are as bleary-eyed as Jim, but Spock can no longer contain his curiosity.

Jim, however, has frozen, his spoon still in the bowl. He keeps his eyes trained on the soup. Spock looks to McCoy, to see him giving the top of Jim’s head a concerned, knowing frown.

“Yeah, actually,” Jim says eventually. “I guess it was pretty much the same time.”

Spock nods, not daring to press the question any further.

Silence falls over the table, which is customary in Vulcan households and therefore not a source of awkwardness or discomfort for Spock. Jim finishes his broth quickly, along with two pieces of kreyla, then asks Spock if he can borrow his PADD.

“Certainly,” says Spock, inputting the passcode and handing it to Jim.

“And I’ll just make use of your facilities, excuse me,” says McCoy, rising. “I’ll get the dishes when I come back, Spock, so leave ‘em.”

Spock looks up, intending to inform the doctor that this will not be necessary, when he catches sight of Jim’s face.

Jim is staring at the PADD, mouth agape, with two spots of hectic color standing out high on his cheekbones. His eyes are impossibly wide, and his brow is flat and stunned.

“You’re reading my book,” he says dumbly.
When Jim comes back to himself, he’s no longer seated at Spock’s breakfast table. He’s not even indoors.

He’s kneeling in a patch of thick grass in a small garden lot between two tall buildings, with no clear memory of how he got there.

Which is starting to feel like a theme in his life, lately.

A hedge of thick, flowering green shrubs separates the garden from the street. On his knees, Jim is effectively hidden from the view of casual passersby.

He notices the lightheadedness before he realizes that he’s hyperventilating. Immediately, Jim tries to get control back over his breathing, by counting, the way Bones does with him sometimes after he’s had a nightmare.

Even with his eyes tightly shut, however, he can’t stay focused.

Jim doesn’t remember putting the borrowed PADD down, or getting up from the table, or walking out of the apartment, even though he must have done all of those things. He doesn’t remember if he gave Spock any kind of explanation for leaving, or if Spock had tried to stop him.

He doesn’t know where Spock’s building is, or how far away from it he’d managed to get before finding and taking shelter in this garden patch.

Bones is going to be pissed at him for making a bunch of fuss over nothing. He keeps an anxiety hypo in his kit that can stop a panic attack in seconds, for pretty much exactly this purpose. Jim’s pretty pissed at himself for not grabbing it before he wandered out of Spock’s apartment in a fugue state.

Jim’s got to hand it to himself—he really hit the jackpot this time. He’s pretty sure he’s managed to mortally offend a Vulcan, a superior officer, and a good person who’s been nothing but kind to him, all at the same time.

He wants to throw up. He tells himself it’s just the adrenaline.

“I caught this morning morning’s minion.” Jim gasps the words out of air-starved lungs, trying to set the rhythm that will help him find his center again. “Kingdom of daylight’s dauphin. Dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding—in his riding of the rolling, underneath him, shit.”

The fingers of both his hands dig into the earth, uprooting small clumps of grass, pressing black crescents of dirt into his fingernails.

He’s crouched like an animal, his forehead pressed against the thick grass. He feels his face grow
wet with tears. His body convulses in teeth-chattering shudders, though it’s warm outside.

In moments like this, it’s as if his body doesn’t even belong to him anymore. It’s like trying to pilot a malfunctioning shuttle that won’t respond to manual override. Jim’s nothing but a passenger at the mercy of useless outdated programming.

He’s fine. He knows, deep down, that he’s fine.

He feels like he’s dying.

Somehow, even though he doesn’t hear a sound, not even the rustling of grass beneath Starfleet-issue boots, Jim senses it when Spock finds him a few minutes later.

He’d been hoping for Bones, if anyone. Why would Spock, of all people, even want to come after him, unless it’s to vent his outrage and disgust?

Well. If that is why he’s here, he’s entitled to say what he needs to say. Jim’s just going to be a little distracted until he can breathe properly again.

All of a sudden, warm hands wrap themselves firmly around Jim’s biceps and begin lifting him to his feet. Reflexively, Jim tries to force his legs to support his weight, but he can feel how watery his knees are. He knows that if it weren’t for Vulcan strength holding him up, he’d be flat on his ass again in seconds.

“Jim. There is a bench 1.5 meters to your left.” Spock’s mouth is so close to Jim’s ear that Jim can feel cool breath against the side of his face. “I will assist you in reaching it.”

It isn’t a request so much as a warning. Effortlessly, Spock maneuvers Jim sideways and downwards, until Jim feels the bench seat pressing against the backs of his knees.

Spock sits beside him, close enough that their legs brush together. They are silent for a few seconds, during which there is no sound except for Jim’s shaky, too-rapid breaths.

Spock’s fingers circle Jim’s wrist. He inhales sharply.

“You are terrified,” Spock says, his voice gone high and startled. “Jim. I do not understand. What has frightened you?”

Incapable of forming sentence-like thoughts, much less forcing them out of his mouth, Jim just shakes his head. His eyes are still shut, and he can’t bring himself to open them and see how Spock must be looking at him right now.

He hunches over, resting his elbows on his knees, leaning his face against his hands. He can feel the dirt on his palms mingling with the tracks of tears on his cheeks, and decides it’s only appropriate that the mud on his face be literal as well as metaphorical.

“I believe that you must be experiencing an anxiety attack,” Spock says, his words slow and measured. “As I understand it, the condition is not dangerous, but your suffering is evident. Tell me what I can do to assist you.”

Jim’s a little impressed that Spock even knows what a panic attack is—he doubts Vulcans get them—but he can’t bring himself to tell Spock that there’s nothing he can do, that only time, or hardcore sedatives, will make him functional again.

Most people are kind, at first, when they notice that someone else is in trouble. But when it turns out
they can’t help, that nothing will help, they leave. Nobody likes to feel powerless for long, even
when they aren’t the one who’s hurting.

“Jim, please.” Spock’s tone is urgent. “I—I am not capable of sitting idly by while you are in
distress. If you cannot direct me in how best to aid you, I must retrieve Doctor McCoy.”

When Jim doesn’t respond, Spock’s fingertips dig into his arm, just hard enough to be
uncomfortable.

Spock doesn’t seem to notice. Jim doesn’t care enough to pull away.

“I require your assurance that you will remain seated here until I return with the doctor,” Spock
insists.

Jim nods. Still, Spock hesitates.

It’s strangely easy for Jim to read Spock right now. There’s no internal feedback to distract him from
the low pulse of worry emanating from Spock like a subspace beacon, because Jim’s own mind is
blank, like a room with white walls, empty and clean.

The fact that Spock is genuinely concerned for him just makes Jim feel even shittier. It’s possible that
Spock is more comfortable expressing emotion openly than another Vulcan would be, but Jim can’t
help thinking that it’s his fault—that his irrational behavior is confusing Spock so badly that it’s
compromising his control.

“I know that you are in no condition to explain at the moment, but it troubles me that I cannot
identify the trigger that provoked this extreme stress reaction,” says Spock tightly. “You were
evidently surprised to discover that I am familiar with K’diwa, and indeed it has been explained to
me that you are anxious lest it become widely known that you are its author. But as I have no
intention of exposing you, there is no reason for your fear.”

Jim chokes a little, which is what happens when you try to laugh and suck oxygen down constricted
pipes at the same time.

Spock tenses against him. One large hand comes to rest against his back, and without quite meaning
to, Jim leans into the support.

Another minute or so passes, then Spock stirs reluctantly.

“I am going back to my apartment for Doctor McCoy. I will return in approximately five minutes.
Remain here.”

For a guy who had insisted last night that there was no need for the two of them to stand on protocol,
Spock seems pretty comfortable ordering Jim around when it suits him. But it’s not like Jim has
much will of his own at the moment. Everything sucks and there’s nothing he can do about any of it.

He might as well sit here and wait, as instructed.

Besides, even if he were in any shape to outrun a Vulcan, Jim can’t avoid Spock forever. He’s
Starfleet, and Spock’s his superior officer. If he wanted to, he could just order Jim to report to his
office tomorrow morning, and Jim wouldn’t have any choice but to obey.

He listens to the light tread of Spock’s retreating footsteps. Once he’s certain he’s alone again, Jim
lets himself slide off the bench and back onto the thick grass. His pulse starts to slow again once he’s
in contact with green growing things and rich, fertile soil.
Eventually, he manages to open his eyes. The morning sunlight is shaded by the high garden walls. Jim looks up at a patch of blue sky and breathes so deeply he can taste ozone.

*I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dappled-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding of the rolling level underneath him steady air…*

The Vulcan family that took him in after Tarsus had attempted to teach Jim the rudiments of meditation, to help him control the thoughts and feelings he was trying, and failing, to bury. They’d figured out pretty quickly that traditional meditation techniques wouldn’t work for Jim, but instead of giving up, they’d adapted to his Human differences. T’Silla had researched Terran methods of trauma recovery; she was the one who had suggested that he memorize a poem to use as a focal point, an artificial structure to impose on his disordered thoughts until natural order was restored.

He’d been safe on Vulcan, for a while, but that safety had been snatched away from him too soon, and now, every fond recollection of his time there threatens to reawaken the old, howling sense of loss.

Writing *K’diwa* had actually helped with that, for a little while. He’d poured all his comforting memories of Vulcan into Stoval, then made him bond with Ophelia so she’d never have to lose him the way Jim had lost his foster family.

Except, once he’d finished writing the story, the contrast between Ophelia’s happiness and the reality of Jim’s past had been pretty depressing. He hadn’t realized just how messed up he was over that until…pretty much now.

Jim is scrubbing listlessly at his face, trying to dislodge the film of dirt he’s acquired, when Bones coming tearing into the garden through a gap between the hedges. He dashes over to Jim and lands on his knees, like he doesn’t even care that he’s getting stains on his normally pristine Med uniform.

“Jim.” Big hands cup the sides of his face, then come to settle on his shoulders. “Easy, I’ve got you. I’ll fix you up. You’re gonna be okay. Breathe, now.”

For once, Jim doesn’t even make a token display of objecting when Bones produces a hypo. He barely feels the sting when it’s applied to his neck; he doesn’t know if that’s because he’s numb all over, or because Bones is being especially gentle with him.

“All right.” Bones leans back, capping the empty hypo and returning it to his kit. “Give that about two minutes and you should be right as rain.” He sighs heavily, looking Jim up and down. “Christ, I go to take a piss for two minutes, and all hell breaks loose. What in the world happened?”

Jim shrugs.

Bones taps the underside of Jim’s chin. Jim twitches away, and Bones squints into his face.

“Spock said you ran like hell after you saw that story of yours loaded on his PADD. What’s going through your head, Jim? You know damn near everybody in Starfleet’s seen the stupid thing by now.”

Jim might have made an attempt to answer, if he hadn’t caught sight of Spock hovering a few meters away. The Vulcan stands straight and tall in his black uniform, hands clasped behind his back. He looks, once more, serene, poised, and entirely controlled.

Jim ducks his head, shying from the dark, intense gaze.

Bones looks over his shoulder. Seeing Spock, he starts to open his mouth—probably to tell Spock to
mind his own business, or something even more colorfully rude—but before he can say anything, his comm goes off.

Jim’s lived with Bones for long enough to recognize the three high, sustained beeps as an emergency medical summons.

Cursing, Bones yanks his comm from his pocket, frowning over the message.

“Complication with one of my post-surgical patients,” he says tightly. “Goddammit. Jim, I have to go, I don’t have a choice.”

When Jim only nods, Bones rakes his eyes over him a second time. Whatever he sees, or thinks he sees, makes his face crumple.

“Do you want to come with me?” he says gently. “I have to work, but I can put you in a quiet room somewhere, come and check on you when I get a break.”

Jim tries to draw enough breath to tell Bones not to be an idiot, he doesn’t need a babysitter, when Spock clears his throat, startling them both.

“If Cadet Kirk has no objections, I am perfectly capable of seeing to his welfare while you attend to your medical duties, Doctor,” he says. “I understand it is not an ideal solution, as I can only conclude that I am, somehow, partially responsible for his present state of agitation. But I am willing to render whatever assistance you prescribe.”

“Didn’t you say you have a class to get to in a couple of hours?” says Bones, climbing to his feet.

“I have informed my students, as well as Captain Pike, that I have canceled my classes for the day. I am therefore at liberty to remain with Jim for as long as required.”

Jim, still sitting on the ground, draws his knees up to his chest and tries to ignore the fact that two tall people are standing nearby, literally talking about him over his head.

“Jim?”

For a second, Jim thinks Bones is going to grab him and haul him back up onto the bench, the way Spock had done earlier. It looks like he’s thinking about it, at least.

Instead, he sits on the bench himself and rests a heavy hand on Jim’s shoulder. Jim leans against his legs, craving the contact, though he knows it can’t last.

“Truth, now,” says Bones gently. “You gonna be okay if I leave you here with Spock?”

Jim just nods again. He’s not going to make Bones feel bad about going to work, not when he knows that wild horses couldn’t tear Bones from his side if there wasn’t a patient out there who needed him even more.

Judging from Bones’ frown, Jim’s weak nod wasn’t exactly the reassurance he was looking for. But he sighs heavily, gives Jim’s shoulder a parting squeeze, and stands up.

“Spock, a word,” he says, and sets off without waiting to see if Spock will follow.

Spock does follow, of course, and Jim manages to catch enough of their brief exchange to hear Bones explaining how and when to use the hypos he’s apparently leaving in Spock’s custody.

Anyone forced to babysit Jim during a panic attack should be given the option of rendering him
unconscious, if necessary. That’s only fair.

Finally, with one torn, fleeting glance over his shoulder in Jim’s direction, Bones strides off down the sidewalk in the direction of the transport station.

Jim stares after him for so long that Spock’s reappearance makes him jump.

“It has been several minutes since the doctor administered your medication. Have you begun to feel its beneficial effects?”

Jim automatically performs a self-inventory. He doesn’t feel numb anymore—well, his ass, a little—and when he clears his throat, he finds that he can force words out with an effort.

“Yeah,” he says quietly, to cover how hoarse he sounds. “Yeah, the worst of it is over.”

“‘It’?” Spock tilts his head curiously.

“The…feeling.” Jim waves his hand vaguely. “The fear, all of that. It’s mostly under control now.”

“You were far more than merely afraid.”

Before Jim can try to argue the point, Spock stuns him by sinking to the ground, legs folding neatly under his body, similar to a meditation posture. He’s facing Jim, and their knees are almost touching.

Spock clasps his hands in lap and looks at Jim without quite meeting his eyes.

“I am aware that you would have been more comfortable had Doctor McCoy been able to remain with you,” Spock says quietly. “I hope, however, that my presence at this time is not… uncomfortable.”

Jim can feel a whole army of nasty, composure-destroying emotions howling at him from the pit at the back of his mind, but they’re muffled and indistinct behind a wall of anxiety blockers.

“I feel like I’m the one who should be asking you that,” he says, too depleted to be anything but honest.

Spock gets that little line between his eyebrows that Jim thinks of as a pre-frown. “I do not understand what you think you have done to make me uncomfortable. Our acquaintance has not been of long duration, but I find you to be an intelligent, sensitive individual, with a fascinating perspective on topics of mutual interest to us both. I have enjoyed our admittedly brief interactions, despite the unfortunate circumstances leading to our initial introduction.”

Jim feels heat surging into his face. He’s been complimented by Vulcans before, but there’s a world of difference between hearing Spock call him fascinating, and listening to Makal evaluate his aesthetically pleasing ears.

“Give it time,” Jim says, desperate to lighten the mood. “I’m told I get a lot less charming once you’ve known me for longer than 24 hours.”

“The evidence does not support this hypothesis. Leonard McCoy has been your roommate for two academic years, and he is manifestly devoted to you.”

There’s something almost too expressionless about the way Spock says that. It reminds Jim of how T’Silla sounded whenever she suspected that Jim was telling her only half of a story, though what Spock thinks he might be concealing about his friendship with Bones, Jim can only guess.
“Bones and I met on the recruit shuttle in Iowa,” Jim shrugs. “We both joined Starfleet because we didn’t have anything else going for us. I guess that was a good enough reason for us to stick together.”

Spock’s eyebrows do not look satisfied by this explanation. “I understood from the doctor’s records that he has a family—a daughter, at least.”

Jim’s not surprised that Spock looked Bones up, or that he remembers details about his family. He is a little surprised that Spock hadn’t mentioned Jim’s mom or brother. Spock’s probably had a look at Jim’s file, too.

“Bones hardly gets to see his daughter,” Jim tells him. “The divorce was pretty contentious, and now his ex is punishing him by playing keepaway with Joanna. He’s got partial custody, but she won’t make any accommodations for his academic schedule or his commitments to Starfleet. He’s only seen Joanna once since he joined up.”

Spock’s eyes widen dramatically. “Such deliberate interference in the bond between a parent and child would not be tolerated on Vulcan.”

“Yeah, well, it’s technically not tolerated here, but Bones can’t bring himself to fight his ex on it as hard as he should. Part of him still loves her, I guess.”

Spock still looks confused, and even, maybe, slightly offended on Bones’ behalf, which makes Jim feel like his stomach is twisting into knots.

This would all be a lot less painful if Spock wasn’t so freaking nice.

“Look,” he says, the word coming out as a croak. “About…all this.” He gestures vaguely at their surroundings. “You deserve an explanation. It’s just difficult to put into words.”

“Negative.” Spock folds his hands neatly in his lap and regards Jim placidly. “You do not owe me any kind of explanation. I will, however, gladly listen to anything that you would like to tell me.”

Jim sighs weakly. Needing some kind of distraction, he plucks a few blades of grass and begins weaving them together.

“When I saw my story on your PADD,” he says slowly, “I…mean, I don’t remember exactly what was going through my head in that moment, but it made me realize what a colossal asshole I was for having written it in the first place.”

“I know how seriously Vulcans take their privacy. Especially when it comes to…mating, bonding, all of that. Making up a story about a fictional Vulcan is one thing, but a sexually explicit romance novel is probably the most presumptuous, culturally disrespectful thing I could have written.” Jim shrugs. “I’m Human. It wasn’t my place. That’s why the story was supposed to be private. Something no one would ever see, except for me and a few of my friends. I was…mortified when I realized the file was out there, Spock. Do you know the etymology of that word? Late Modern English, with a Latin root that means death. I literally wanted to die of embarrassment, and the only reason I didn’t is because no one knew I was the author.” He blinks. “Except you, I guess.”

Jim doesn’t phrase it like a question, but Spock seems to hear the plaintive query in his tone.

“I was informed that you were the author of K’diwa by Cadet Gaila Vro, who imparted the information unintentionally. She was distressed by the fact that she had compromised your privacy
and requested that I treat the information as confidential. I have done, and intend to continue doing so.”

He sounds so calm, so completely unbothered, that Jim has a hard time believing that he’s not covering for much more complicated emotions. Then again, that might just be Jim’s Human bias talking.

“It was bad enough when it was making the rounds at the Academy,” he mutters. “But now other Vulcans are reading it. I can’t even imagine how embarrassing that must be for your family, under the circumstances.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “The Vulcan and Human protagonists of your novel bear virtually no resemblance to my parents, nor does the novel’s plot in any way reflect the circumstances of their courtship and bonding. My family’s privacy remains unthreatened by your work of fiction.”

It is a relief to hear Spock say it, but Jim can’t help but wonder if Spock is just going easy on him because Jim had a panic attack in his kitchen.

“That’s what that horny Vulcan from the Embassy said, but I bet—”

“Of which Vulcan are you speaking?” Spock interrupts. His expression is suddenly cold, almost menacing.

“Um.” Jim averts his gaze hastily. “The one who asked you to come pick me up. Makal, I think was his name.”

He can’t see Spock’s face, but he can see his hands, resting on his knees, as they curl into fists.

“I was already aware that his behavior towards you last night was highly suspect, but given the soubriquet you have bestowed upon him, his conduct must have been even more inappropriate than I realized.” Spock is making a palpable effort to keep his voice even, but there’s a razor edge to his tone that Jim doesn’t know exactly how to interpret. “Considering the lengths Makal went to in order to gain possession of your person while you were in an impaired state, it is not unreasonable to infer that he may have taken advantage of you in your weakened condition. Is this indeed the case?”

The abrupt shift in Spock’s manner, from mild, soft-spoken conversational partner to righteous authority figure, makes Jim’s head spin. He’s not sure what to say now—the last thing he wants is to be a source of any more drama back at the Embassy.

Spock seems to sense Jim’s hesitance, and maybe even the reason for it. A hint of remorse softens the line of his mouth.

“I apologize for the forcefulness of my questioning,” he says. “But considering Cadet Uhura’s recent ordeal, I believe my concern is logical.”

“Uhura.” Jim opens his mouth, then shuts it, then hunches over, face buried in his hands. “Jesus,” he says through his fingers. “That was my fault, wasn’t it?”

“Please clarify.”

“Last night, Makal implied that most of the Embassy staff had read the book. I mean, that’s why he was hitting on me at the bar—he said it completely changed his perspective on Humans, and that’s why he went looking for a Human to hook up with.” Jim inhales deeply. “So the same thing must have happened to Uhura, right? I mean, it’s not like there were a lot of Vulcans looking to date Humans before last week. If it weren’t for me, she never would have met that asshole.”
Spock doesn’t reply to this right away, but when he does, his tone is downright Arctic.

“You must cease this irrational thinking. The blame for Krevak’s offenses belongs solely to Krevak.” He pauses. “Is it possible that you are attempting to switch the focus of this conversation from yourself to Cadet Uhura because you do not wish to tell me that Makal is guilty of a more serious offense than you have yet disclosed?”

“Wait, what? No, Spock, come on—"

“There is no logic in protecting him,” Spock continues, as though Jim hasn’t spoken. “Indeed, concealing his offense would be most unwise, as Vulcans can be exceedingly tenacious in pursuing those who have captured their interest.”

“I—I’m aware, but—"

“Makal’s fascination with you is beyond question. As his behavior has grown unpredictable, it is not outside the realm of possibility that he will continue to seek contact with you. If this occurs, you may require protection which only I am capable of providing.” Spock sits up a little straighter, squaring his shoulders. “I urge you to speak frankly to me, Jim. Though I sense that you are inclined to assign fault to yourself while absolving others of responsibility for their actions, you must not feel shame or guilt for anything Makal has done to you. He is Vulcan, and many decades your senior, and his manner when I spoke with him last night betrayed his own awareness that his actions towards you were unacceptable.”

“Oh, I know, I know, just give me a second.”

Slowly, carefully, Jim climbs to his feet. His legs feel wobbly, but he manages to stay upright by holding onto the bench. He turns his back to Spock and shuts his eyes, fighting to keep a tenuous grip on his control.

He isn’t prepared in the slightest when Spock rises from his kneeling position and crosses to the bench, taking hold of Jim’s shoulders and gently, inexorably, turning him around until they are standing face to face.

Jim sees the uncertainty in his expression, and that’s when he realizes that Spock has positioned his hands this way because he is deliberately copying Bones’ gesture from earlier, as though he had been studying the doctor’s Human-comforting technique.

Despite the fact that touching Jim like this has clearly taken Spock out of his comfort zone, his grip is warm and reassuring, and Jim doesn’t feel the slightest urge to shake him off.

“Forgive me,” Spock says gently. “I have overwhelmed you. If you are well enough, perhaps this would be an opportune moment to return to my apartment.”
“You know you don’t actually have to babysit me,” says Jim feebly, trying to sound less exhausted than he feels. “I can just go back to my dorm, catch up on my sleep.”

Spock lifts his chin. “I assured Doctor McCoy that I would remain with you until he has fulfilled his work obligations. I intend to keep my word. I will return with you to your dormitory if that is your preference, but as my residential building is only thirty meters from our present position, my apartment would appear to be the more convenient of the two options.”

“Yeah?” says Jim, scratching the back of his neck. “Which of those options will convince you that it isn’t necessary to get Makal fired and shipped back to Vulcan on a slow freighter?”

Spock exhales loudly. Jim thinks it might be his version of sighing in exasperation.

Since he isn’t actually trying to make Spock regret choosing to spend time with him, Jim takes a moment, trying to arrange the right sentences in the right order in his head.

“When I first met Makal, he propositioned me in extremely blunt, borderline discourteous terms. He was pretty obviously unhappy with me when I turned him down.”

Jim releases his death grip on the bench and starts walking towards the short, paved path that leads out of the garden towards the city sidewalk. Spock joins him immediately, but Jim falls back to let him take the lead, since he doesn’t actually have any idea which direction they should be going.

“I know he wasn’t the one who slipped me the roofie, but I couldn’t rule him out as a suspect at first. So I was pretty alarmed when I realized he’d followed me to the transport station. He grabbed me just as I was starting to lose consciousness, and since I had no idea where he was taking me, or why, that was alarming as well. Frankly, waking up on a couch in the Embassy was a relief compared to some of the scenarios that crossed my mind.”

“But?” says Spock, guiding Jim subtly towards the left with a light touch to his back.

“But, once we were at the Embassy, he pretty much turned right back into a boring, respectably buttoned-up bureaucrat. He didn’t try to hit on me again. I got the sense that he was a little embarrassed by the way he’d acted at the bar.”

They’re walking at a slow pace, no doubt for Jim’s benefit. “I know bad guys, Spock, trust me. Makal could use some intercultural sensitivity training, but he’s okay. Not a hero, not a villain, just… kind of clueless.”

For once—maybe for the first time since they’d met—Spock doesn’t seem to have a ready reply.

“I have no reason to believe that your judgment is anything but trustworthy,” Spock says, pausing on the sidewalk. “If it is your recommendation that Makal undergo sensitivity training, I will pass this advice along to my father. There may well be merit in the idea.” His mouth twists. “Perhaps the entirety of the Embassy staff would benefit equally from such an intervention.”

“Boring lectures are the cruelest punishment Humans have ever devised,” says Jim seriously. “I think that would be quite fitting.”

Spock’s mouth twitches, and something warm steals into his eyes.

“You are a most remarkable person, Jim Kirk,” he says. “It was unfair of me to interrogate you in the manner I did just now. I regret causing you additional stress, but I hope you will attribute it to no
worse motivation than the desire to see you safe, and preserved from further suffering. I…would like for us to be friends. I am not in the habit of making social overtures of this nature, but our acquaintance is already of value to me. It is a connection that I would wish to preserve.”

Jim ducks his head to hide the stupid grin hijacking his face. “Just remember what I told you. We’re still on the honeymoon. Give it a day or two before you decide you want me to stick around for good.”

Spock lifts an eyebrow. “Unnecessary.”

Something about that single word, or the way Spock says it, makes Jim’s mouth feel dry.

Just then, a hovercar, parked illegally about ten meters down the sidewalk, blares its horn at top volume. Jim jumps, and even Spock turns sharply in the direction of the vehicle.

Then the car pulls forward. The roof retracts, to reveal Christopher Pike seated behind the control panel.

“Spock, Jim,” he calls out cheerfully. “I was starting to think I’d missed you.”

Chapter End Notes

Content warning for descriptions of extreme anxiety and panic attack.

Also, guys, I am recovering from a major dental procedure so I am basically hanging around all day being druggy and sore. It would make my LIFE if you would comment and just tell me which (if any) part of the chapter you liked best.

BTW, blanket permission is given for translations, artwork, and any related works, just let me know so I can check them out.
Nothing, in recent memory, has shocked Chris Pike as much as the sight of Spock, standing in a garden with Jim Kirk, gripping the younger man like a life preserver, while Jim scrubs tears out of red-rimmed eyes.

To begin with, Pike had no idea that Spock and Jim even knew each other until 0530 hours this morning, when he awoke to the chime of his comm and found the following message in his queue:

Captain Pike,

Late yesterday evening, I was informed that Cadet James T. Kirk was drugged against his will by persons unknown while patronizing a drinking establishment in Earth spacedock. A senior aide assigned to the Vulcan Embassy who was in the vicinity at the time observed the cadet’s incapacitated state and took steps to remove Kirk to Embassy grounds for his own safety. I was contacted shortly afterward to assist the cadet in returning to the Academy. As Cadet Kirk was still in an impaired condition, I instead brought him to my own dwelling, where he slept the night in my guest chambers.

Though Embassy staff took steps to ascertain that Cadet Kirk would suffer no serious lingering effects from his ordeal, I have invited his roommate and personal physician, Dr. Leonard H. McCoy, to come to my apartment this morning and examine the cadet himself, in order to determine whether further medical intervention is required.

I therefore request that you approve one day’s leave of absence from duty for Cadet Kirk, to facilitate his recovery, and one half-day’s leave for Dr. McCoy, so that he may attend to his patient without acquiring unexcused absence from his morning classes.

Respectfully,
Spock

The story of Pike and Jim’s very first meeting, following a 4-on-1 dust-up with a gaggle of overzealous Security track cadets in a shipyard bar, is old news to Starfleet’s rumor mill. But it’s given rise to a lot of other rumors about Jim that are less grounded in fact. He’s George Kirk’s son, he’s got a colorful juvenile record, and compared to most Starfleet cadets, he doesn’t have a lot of formal education. People have trouble reconciling these facts with the brilliant success that Jim’s made of his Academy career so far. Everyone watches him—not just the gossips, but the brass.

Jim is intelligent enough to understand that. Pike knows that he knows better than to get into pointless bar brawls, or sleep around indiscriminately, or do anything else that could jeopardize his future at Starfleet.
Starfleet is all the kid has, and he doesn’t mind admitting it if you ask him.

So Pike was more than a little taken aback to hear that Jim had been out drinking on a weeknight, let alone in the kind of dive bar where he’d be at significant risk of this kind of assault. The only thing that surprised him more was the fact that he’d heard about it from Spock.

Pike had checked, just to set his mind at ease, and sure enough, Jim’s off-campus excursion had been duly authorized. And tracking him by his comm signal revealed that he had returned to campus well within the boundaries of his curfew.

How Jim had ended up at the Vulcan Embassy after returning to the Academy, Pike still had no idea. Spock’s terse summary of events was surprisingly uninformative, even as reports from Spock go.

Spock is a stickler for accuracy, but he doesn’t always recognize the need for context.

Pike ended up spending most his morning organizing a low-key Security investigation into last night’s activity at the bar where Jim was drugged. That inquiry, and the preliminary reports it has generated so far, kept him fairly busy until 1030.

The knowledge that someone had slipped his protégé a date-rape cocktail made Pike furious on a level that Spock, perhaps, could not understand. At least, that’s what Pike thought until he received a second comm from Spock that left him even more deeply baffled.

Captain Pike,

This message is to notify you that I have canceled both sections of my Ethical Dilemmas in Xenocultural Relations class, scheduled to meet today at 1100 hours and 1600 hours, respectively.

After examining Cadet Kirk, Dr. McCoy concluded that his condition will require monitoring for the rest of the day. However, as the doctor has received an emergency summons to Starfleet Medical, rendering him unavailable until further notice, I have volunteered my services as a substitute caregiver. Cadet Kirk will remain in his present location until Dr. McCoy is free to return for him.

My students have been notified of the cancellation and given an assignment to complete during the allotted class period. I will hold extended office hours tomorrow, so as to be available for questions.

Respectfully,
Spock

Spock’s dedication to duty and deep sense of personal responsibility are part of what makes him one of the finest officers Pike has ever worked with. But “duty” doesn’t really explain…this.

The thing is, Spock is also a stickler for regs. As Commander of Cadets, Pike should have been informed about an assault on one of his students the second Spock got wind of it last night. The fact that he’d waited until the following morning raises a lot of questions.

If he were dealing with any other officer—any other instructor—who, by his own admission, had taken a drugged up cadet home with him for the night, and was now canceling classes in order to continue “monitoring” that cadet in an off-campus location, Pike would have broken land-speed records ordering medics and a Security detachment to that officer’s home.

But this is Spock, whom Pike trusts implicitly.
Even, though Pike never imagined he would have to make this call, with Jim Kirk. Which is saying something.

Most senior officers would probably assume that a kid capable of kicking the asses of four burly Security cadets before he’d received a single day of formal close combat training needed to be watched primarily for the safety of others. That’s because most senior Starfleet officers don’t know anything about Jim except what it says in his file.

Pike, who’s put a lot of effort into slowly winning Jim’s trust over the last couple of years, is a little better informed than his colleagues. He watches Jim more closely than anyone, but it isn’t because he’s afraid Jim is going to start a drunken bar brawl for no good reason. His fears for Jim are of the exact opposite sort. When people mess with Jim, when they hurt him, Jim just internalizes the blame. It never crosses his mind to seek help—last year’s debacle with Gary Mitchell was proof of that.

Starfleet screens for the kind of complex trauma that Jim experienced in his early life because it’s way too easy for someone with a death wish to find what they’re looking for in the service. Jim’s not that messed up, at least not anymore, but there’s a reason Pike saw to it that Jim was living with a doctor.

Leonard is as invested in Jim’s continued survival as Pike is, but he’s way more paranoid. So whatever is going on with Spock and Jim at the moment, Pike supposed it said a lot that Leonard was willing to leave Jim alone with Spock for an indefinite length of time.

If things went according to plan, Pike had every intention of making Spock and Jim his first and second officers aboard the Enterprise in a couple years’ time. Seeing how they relate to each other now could prove a valuable glimpse into the future of his command team.

That’ll be a good enough excuse, for anyone who needs one.

Twenty minutes after receiving Spock’s second message, Pike left the spacedock investigation temporarily in Number One’s capable hands, and took a drive over to Spock’s apartment.

During that drive, Pike suddenly found himself thinking back to another message he’d received from Spock—this one back on Monday, just a few hours after their lunch together.

Captain Pike,

Attached, please find a copy of the document containing my findings pursuant to your request that I evaluate the text of the novel entitled K’diwa for xenophobic and culturally insensitive content.

To summarize, I find nothing objectionable or offensive in this work of fiction.

As a matter of curiosity, do you have any suspicions regarding the identity of the author?

Respectfully,
Spock

Pike hadn’t replied to that message. He knew who wrote the damn book. Not because he did any detective work; just because he read it.

To Pike, the only mystery was, where in the world did Jim find time to write a novel without falling behind in his coursework? He was starting to suspect the kid didn’t get nearly enough sleep of a night, even with Leonard breathing down his neck.
It was only natural for Spock, as a Vulcan, to be curious how a Starfleet cadet knew enough about his people to have the ability, or the desire, to wax poetic about them for over 40,000 words. Jim’s secret appears to be safe from the rumor mill so far, but Pike is wondering now if Spock might have done some discreet detective work of his own. He can’t exactly draw a straight line from “Spock was curious about the author of that book”, to “Spock is keeping Jim in his guest room”. But he’ll be damned if there isn’t some kind of connection.

If this were anyone but Spock…

A little after 1100, Pike parked his car down the street from Spock’s place and knocked on the door. When no one answered, he took a stroll down the sidewalk, remembering Spock’s fondness for the little community garden in the lot next to his building.

Spock is there, all right. Jim is there too, looking like ten miles of rough road. Which is concerning, but not shocking, under the circumstances.

The look on Spock’s face, though? That is a shock.

Spock is a deeply empathetic individual, although most people don’t look past the Vulcan mask long enough to notice. You have to watch Spock’s actions, not his facial expressions, to grasp the depth of his compassion when he’s faced with other people’s suffering.

Usually, at least. Today, emotions like compassion and protectiveness and bewildered affection are stamped on Spock’s face in a language any sentient humanoid could read.

Except for Jim, because even though he’s leaning his weight into Spock, he’s not looking at him. Something in his face, his posture, makes Jim look young and abandoned, a beacon broadcasting a distress signal in the clear. Except the message in his downcast eyes said, “You can’t help me. That’s ok. I’m used to it.”

Jim has honored Pike with some painful confidences, but when he speaks of his past it is always in a detached, almost academic manner. Like it was someone else’s pain, and torture, and starvation, and God only knew what else that Jim had seen fit to spare Pike from having to know about.

There have been times during their conversations when Pike knew Jim was in pain, he could feel it—but Jim has never willingly shown it to him. Even now, Pike is only seeing it by accident.

Jim has known Spock for approximately 12 hours, most of which he spent unconscious. Yet somehow Spock has already managed to slip past all his barriers, get to the beating heart of the hurt and frightened young man Jim keeps locked underneath the golden mask of the Command cadet.

Spock shuts his eyes, and he leans into Jim like he wants to makes time stop around them, like he is awestruck just by virtue of their proximity to one another.

The only other time Pike has seen Spock exhibit even a fraction of this kind of tenderness openly, it was the day he introduced Pike to his mother. Then, too, he had looked as if he was charged with protecting something vital, something precious, and fragile.

Pike is fascinated, but as soon as the shock wears off he turns away, feeling ashamed of his unwitting voyeurism. He gets in his car, drives her up the street, and waits for Jim and Spock to head back his direction.

If there had been any doubts in Pike’s mind about the significance of what he had just glimpsed, they vanish as soon as he honks his horn at their approach.
Jim jumps like he’s heard phaser fire. And Spock steps in front of Jim so quickly that the movement itself is a blur nearly imperceptible to the eye. Even though Spock has to be aware that there’s not much logical chance of a car horn being prelude to a threat, he had reacted, not to his own logic, but to Jim’s fear.

Pike wonders if Spock understands this aspect of his own nature well enough to recognize his feelings towards Jim for what they are.

He might be inclined to give Spock a helpful hint or two, but he wants to see how Jim feels about the situation first.

As soon as they recognize Pike waving at them, Spock and Jim come trudging obediently up the hill to his car. Pike looks them over and sees two underfed, underslept, emotionally exhausted idiots who ought to be committed to Medical for a weekend just to teach them a lesson.

“Lunch,” Pike announces, in his best Captain’s voice. “Get in, boys.”

Dutiful members of Starfleet that they are, Spock and Jim climb into the back seat without arguing. Pike struggles not to point out that, once upon a time, Jim would have claimed shotgun. Even if he was the only passenger. *Especially* then.

“Thai or Vietnamese?” he asks, pulling away from the curb.

Spock defers to Jim, who defers back to Spock, who says that it makes no difference to him what he eats. Jim says the same is true of him, but having to make decisions is a little beyond his capacities right now. His speech is slightly slurred. Spock accepts this without further argument, and selects Thai.

Pike inputs the GPS and the car takes them to a Thai restaurant.

“Oh, uh,” says Jim, halfway there. “Peanut allergy?”

Pike and Spock glance at each other in the rearview mirror. “How about Italian?” says Pike, and Spock nods his approval.

*“I hear you had a rough night, Jim,” Pike says, when their pizza arrives. “And a rough morning too, apparently.”

Jim blanches slightly and clears his throat, spreading his napkin in his lap. “Ah, I’ve had worse,” he says lightly, but his tone doesn’t match his eyes.

“Not recently, you haven’t. That was a trend I wanted to encourage.” Pike picks up the spatula and serves everyone a slice. “There anything you want to tell me, Jim?”

Jim blinks. “I mean, you have Spock’s report, right? He was there for most of it, and I told him the rest. I doubt he left anything for me to add.”

*Nice try, Jimbo.* “It wasn’t a report, it was a voice memo.” He senses Spock getting fidgety, so he turns his attention slightly to the left. “Spock? Anything you want to add?”

“All right then.” Pike knows what Vulcan stubbornness can be like; better to switch focus until
Spock forgets to be defensive. “We’re looking into who drugged you, Jim.”

“Oh?” Jim’s reddened eyes widen, startled.

Pike smiles reassuringly, he hopes. “I’ve got some security footage of the bar crowd from last night. I want you to have a look at it and tell me if you see anything.”

“Anything, like…?”

“Anything that stands out to you.”

Jim nods, and accepts Pike’s communicator, where the video is pre-loaded

“Spock, you can look too, if Jim says it’s okay,” Pike adds, mostly just to see what will happen.

Immediately, Spock turns fierce, pleading eyes on Jim. The expression is wasted effort, however; Jim doesn’t even bother to look at Spock before passing the comm to over to him.

Spock takes blatant advantage of the pretext to lean a little closer to Jim. He holds the comm up so they both can see it, and presses play.

From the way Spock’s eyes are tracking, Pike can tell that he is making his own list of observations, tucked away safely in that eidetic memory of his.

“Captain, I’m sorry,” says Jim after ten minutes, during which he picks at his half-eaten slice. “I think I might be stupid now. You know, they always warned us that drugs make you stupid, back in school.”

“You are recovering from a series of traumatic events, it is irrational to demean your intelligence simply because—”

“What series?” Pike interrupts.

Spock frowns. “I beg your pardon, Captain?”

“I’m aware of one arguably traumatic event. How many more since last night that I don’t know about?”

Spock’s mouth opens. And then closes it.

Pike has finally caught his Vulcan officer without a ready answer. He should mark this day down in his calendar.

“Spock is under the kind but mistaken impression that I possess qualities like dignity,” says Jim, “so he’s trying to figure out how to answer your question without mentioning my panic attacks.”

…And now Pike feels like shit for giving them a hard time. “Last night or this morning?” he says, gentling his voice.

“Morning. I was too sleepy for panic attacks last night.”

“I see.” He darts a glance at Spock. “Leonard give you something for that?”

“Yeah, but I’ve concluded that my anxiety is at least partially medication-resistant. Bones will tell you that’s not medically possible, but neither are half my allergies, apparently.”
“And…Spock, you volunteered to stay with Jim…afterwards?”

Spock lifts his chin. “If you are inquiring whether I was aware of Jim’s profound anxiety when I volunteered to remain with him in Dr. McCoy’s absence, the answer is yes.”

Spock’s not getting any less defensive, apparently, but Pike pretty much just learned what he wanted to know. He changes the subject gracefully. “Spock, did you see anything noteworthy in the video?”

“Yes, although only one of my observations is of likely relevance to the investigation. I believe I can point to an individual who intended to follow Jim out of the bar, only to change his mind when he saw that Jim was already being followed by a Vulcan.”

“What the fuck?”

It’s one of the rare occasions Jim’s ever used hard profanity in Pike’s presence. He holds himself to surprisingly high standards of professionalism, for a kid with his background.

“Indeed,” says Spock, his voice so soothing and so gentle that Pike double-takes to be sure it’s actually Spock talking. “The individual in question was seated at a table behind and to the left of your position at the bar. The video shows that he does not move from the table or attempt to approach you until you leave the bar at 2255 hours. Then, he rises, and it seems as if he means to walk after you. Makal moves more quickly, however. The man resumes his seat and orders another drink.”

“Show me,” Jim demands, and it’s impossible to tell whether the trembling in his voice is due to anger, fear, or some mix of the two.

Spock immediately runs the video back to the precise time stamp and lets Jim press play. With his finger, he taps an image on the screen, pausing playback. Two more taps, and the image zooms in the man’s face

“Jesus, he looks a little bit like a million guys I know.” Jim turns his whole body away from the communicator, and Spock immediately hands it back over the table to Pike.

A moment later he rests a hand on Jim’s back, and Pike starts to feel as if he should excuse himself from the table. Maybe just pay the check and be on his way while he’s at it.

But Pike’s still not certain that Jim is responding to Spock, or if he’s just on autopilot, susceptible to the first strong, protective personality he encounters.

Yes, he knows he’s not Jim’s dad. Yes, he’s protective of him anyway. Kindness is Jim’s Achilles heel. Pike doubts that Spock went looking for Jim’s weaknesses on purpose, but it seems he found them anyway.

“This isn’t going to be straightforward,” says Pike gruffly, startling Jim and Spock back to attention. “All we have right now is the a bartender’s claim that a Starfleet cadet gave her the drugs and paid her to put them in Jim’s drink.”

“A cadet, huh?” Jim looks down at his plate and grimaces, pushing it away.

“Jim, I can guess what you’re feeling, but this isn’t your fault.” Pike leans towards him over the table. “We’re not doing the Gary Mitchell thing all over again, all right? You want to be a captain some day? You have to start trusting other people, the way you’re going to have to ask them to trust you when you’re the one sitting in the center chair.”
“Gary Mitchell is…a former romantic connection?” says Spock carefully.

Jim sighs, and nods.

“Did he…hurt you?”

Jim digs his teeth into his bottom lip so hard Pike’s afraid it’s going to bleed.

Pike’s never confronted Jim over this before—had hoped he would never need to—but he has to
know Jim’s learned his lesson about keeping the wrong kind of secrets.

“Jim,” he says, “if I really believed you were getting into as many fights as you claimed you were,
back when you were lying to everyone about your injuries? I would have drummed you out of the
service myself.” Pike shakes his head as Jim’s face falls. “I should have said something, but I kept
hoping you’d tell someone on your own. You know. *Before* you ended up with a broken arm and no
way to fix your face before Leonard found you and figured out what kind of game you were
playing.”

Spock looks incredulously from Jim, to Pike, and back to Jim again, who averts his face sharply from
the scrutiny.

“I trust that Mitchell was taken into custody once the truth came to light?” Spock asks, in the high,
imperious tones of an Ambassador’s son.

“Jim won’t go on the record.” Pike shrugs. “My hands are tied.”

And there is that *look* again, like Jim breaks his heart just by existing. Spock has no excuse this time;
he *knows* Pike can see him. It’s like he can’t help himself.

“Have you interacted with Mitchell recently?”

“Sure.” Jim shrugs. “He’s a member of my study group.”

“The same study group of which Cadets Vro and Uhura, and Dr. McCoy, are also members?”

“Yeah, that’s the only study group I’m in in.”

“Then he is one of those who knew of *K’diwa* before it was published on the public server?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

Spock takes a breath. “Then is it not possible that Cadet Mitchell is the person who has been stalking
your network activity?”

“What is this, and why am I just now hearing about it?” Pike demands.

“Because you’ve been busy all week.” Jim arches his eyebrows at him in a look of mock reproach.
“I have an appointment scheduled with you Friday.”

“Well, we’re here now.” He spread his hands expectantly. “Lay it on me.”

Jim sighs quietly. “So…you know that there’s this…story everyone’s been reading.”

“Captain Pike is familiar with *K’diwa*,” Spock says promptly. “It was he who formally brought the
book to my attention.”
“Great. That’s, that excellent news.” Jim shakes his head and looks at Pike. “So, dumb question, you know I wrote it, right?”

Pike can’t help smiling. “It could have been another Starfleet cadet who lived on Vulcan for a year and regularly pulls unexpected skill sets like the ability to write novels out of his ass, but yeah, I liked you for it.”

Spock startles visibly. Jim blushes, staring at the tablecloth like he can lose himself in the pattern and just disappear from view.

Pike scratches his eyebrow to cover a wince. Of course, Jim hasn’t had a chance to get Spock caught up on his history. It’s Pike’s fault for forgetting they just met, despite the fact that they have the body language of two people who know each other intimately.

Eventually, Jim lifts his chin and clears his throat. “Someone has been performing routine checks of my network history, sir. That’s how the story got made public. I guess it was the only embarrassing thing they could find in my academic folders. Luckily, Cadet Vro was able to alter the file so it couldn’t be traced back to me. But she couldn’t delete it off the network.”

“Cadet Uhura mentioned something about a person named “Gary” who has a “big mouth” and was likely to tell others that you are the author of K’diwa. Was she referring to Gary Mitchell?”

Jim nods. “He was the first person who came to mind,” he admits. “But Bones disagreed, so I just stopped thinking about it.”

“If you’ve got any evidence it was Mitchell, I can order a seizure of his terminal and devices,” Pike offers, knowing it’s a stretch.

“I definitely don’t have proof, sir. To be honest, computers aren’t Gary’s strength anyway.”

“What is his strength?” Spock says coolly.

“He’s terrifyingly charismatic,” says Jim instantly. “Like, cult-leader level charisma. If you let him talk to you long enough, he can make anything seem like a good idea. He gets in your head.”

Pike notes that Spock, the telepath, reacts to this statement with considerably more alarm than Pike feels. Come to think of it, there is a note in Mitchell’s file about his psi rating—Pike will look it up later. It’s probably not important.

Spock and Jim get messages on their comms at the same moment, which makes every other head in the restaurant turn their way. Blushing, Jim looks at him. “It’s Bones. He’s done at the hospital, says it’s time for me to come home. He’s such an old man, it’s hilarious.”

“I can drive you back to the Academy, Jim,” says Pike. “I’m going there anyway. That won’t violate the terms of your pledge to look after Jim, will it, Spock?”

Spock swallows hard, and the unflappable Vulcan exterior begins to reassert itself. “Certainly not, as I could scarcely leave Jim in more responsible hands than yours, Captain.”

Nobody had much of an appetite, so Pike gets a box for the pizza. In the back seat of his hovercar, Jim and Spock are trading comm numbers like a couple of nerds flirting after class by pretending they just want to study together.

“You know what, Spock? Jim here’s been after me to teach him how to play chess. Why don’t you give him lessons? Since you’re pals now.”
When Jim’s head perks up, the look Spock sends into the rearview mirror at Pike is one of mingled annoyance and gratitude.

Chapter End Notes

References to domestic abuse between Jim and Gary Mitchell, serious physical abuse implied.
“You know, everyone calls chess a game of logic,” says Jim, resting his chin on one knuckle as he surveys the board between them. “I’m not convinced.”

Spock has not been paying their game the attention it deserves. Other things compete for his focus. The way that Jim surveys the board between them, for instance. The shape of his fingers as he manipulates pawns and knights into an opening gambit. The sunlight illuminating all the differently-colored strands of hair that, together, make up Jim’s shade of “blonde”.

Playing chess outdoors in a public park surrounded by other players embroiled in their own matches was not what Spock had in mind when he pictured giving Jim lessons. But Jim had selected the location, and now that Spock has seen Jim smiling in the sunlight, he cannot imagine a more suitable location. Logically, he should see Jim in sunlight as often as possible.

“Would you care to expand upon your argument?” says Spock lightly, nudging a bishop through an opening.

“Bishops,” says Jim. “Perfect example. Why do they only move diagonally?”

Spock opens his mouth, staring at the board. As a scientist, the question “why” is usually uppermost in his thoughts. But when it comes to certain things—like centuries-old games with long-established rules—Spock is more Vulcan than scientist, content to master traditional methods without inquiring too deeply how they became traditions.

“The diagonal movement of bishops provides balance to the vertical and horizontal movements of rooks and the semi-circular movements of knights.” The answer falls from his lips by rote.

“Sure, but why are the diagonal-moving pieces called bishops?” Jim leans back in his seat, clasping his hands behind his head. There was quiet confidence in his smile, a teasing light in his eyes.

Nothing could be more unlike the shattered, monosyllabic cadet who had clung to Spock in a garden yesterday morning. But this side of Jim is, somehow, all the more captivating for the contrast. Spock has seen the depths of Jim; now he is beginning to glimpse the heights, and he is dizzied.

Spock’s eyes fix on the black bishop that is currently menacing one of Jim’s knights. “Bishops were once highly ranked members of the historical Roman Church, which was a significant political force in the history of Earth’s western hemisphere,” he offers. “After royalty, prestigious representatives of the church wielded the greatest authority. In terms of rank, it is logical to place bishops on either side of the queen and king.”

“Except on a chessboard, bishops are worth the same as knights, who definitely didn’t wield the same level of authority in feudal society.”

Spock blinks, re-evaluating his hypothesis. “The set-up of the board also represents a logical
distribution of resources. The pawns, which have the least value, are ranged defensively in front of the pieces. The most highly-valued pieces, the king and queen, stand at the center, bracketed by useful but less valuable bishops and knights, while the vulnerable corners are defended by the rooks.”

“All of which makes sense, but we’re getting away from my original question. If this is primarily a game of logic, why name the pieces after people?” He picks up his king and twirls it between his fingers. “Well. Not people, really. Resources. Except for the pawns. The pawns are definitely people-people.”

Spock frowns. “That was not your original question.”

Jim waves a hand dismissively. “It was, sort of, but—never mind. Want me to just tell you what I think?”

“You evidently wish to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing.”

Jim performs the rapid eye movement that Humans often refer to as a “double-take”.

“We’ll come back to the fact that you’ve read Jane Austen later,” he says, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Okay, here’s how I see it.”

They are only three moves into their game, so Spock does not object when Jim resets the board, presumably to better illustrate his point.

“The bishops,” Jim says, tapping his queen-side piece, “stand next to the king and queen, because that’s where bishops stood in the feudal courts: right next to the seat of power. A bishop wouldn’t hesitate to flaunt his proximity to the king—or the queen, and it’s important that there’s one for each, because those two weren’t always on the same side—but, the bishop has to move diagonally, because he isn’t, officially, supposed to be all that involved in politics. As a representative of the Church, he has to operate—sideways. Not out in the open, but indirectly, through channels of influence.”

Jim lifts his head and searches Spock’s face, presumably for signs of understanding that are not present. The corners of his eyes crinkle.

“You’re aware, of course, that Human languages have a funny habit of imposing spatial values on intangible systems,” he says, quickly placing the three pawns, knight, and two bishops back in their former positions. Spock checks against his memory, but Jim has made no errors. “Honest people are straight with you. Criminals are crooks—crooked. Someone who’s confused has it backwards. If they’re deliberately misunderstanding you, they’re twisting your words.”

“I am familiar with this category of Human idiom,” says Spock dryly.

“Right, but the idiom goes deep, Spock. Any concept that got embedded in our language and hadn’t become obsolete by the time Late Modern English was codified into Federation Standard can be regarded as fundamental to our thinking as a species.” Jim taps his queen side bishop again. “Bishops move diagonally, not because there’s any logic to it, but because that’s how these things work in real life. Rooks move in straight lines, because they represent fortresses—main strength, strong enough to plow down anything in its path. Knights can jump the other pieces because they represent people on horses. When was the last time we fought wars on horseback? The 20th century?”

Jim shrugs. “All I’m saying is, if this was a completely logical game, it would either be an abstract mathematical system without the anthropomorphized elements, or it would be a simple history lesson
—the entire board would be filled with pawns, maybe some knights, and all the rest of these guys would be on a hill somewhere, watching their people get trampled and buried alive under mounds of corpses.”

Spock blinks. The cheerful light has vanished from Jim’s eyes suddenly. “Corpses?” he ventures.

Jim releases a deep breath, then shakes his head. “Don’t ever let me go on history tangents,” he says, in a voice of mock reproach.

Then he glances at the board, as if in afterthought, and says, “Check.”

Startled, Spock eliminates Jim’s increasingly troublesome bishop, and makes certain to castle on his next turn.

“You are surprisingly well informed on a wide variety of subjects,” he observes. “Given the irregularities in your educational background, it is logical to suppose that you undertook to supply the deficiencies of your schooling through prodigious self-directed study.”

Jim gives a small huff of laughter. “You make it sound like it was deliberate. It wasn’t. I was just a bored kid with nothing to do but read.”

“And all that you have read, you remember, despite the fact that, like most humans, you do not possess an eidetic memory.”

“I definitely don’t remember everything,” says Jim, seeming to grow even more amused. “At least, I would hate to think I was permanently occupying my valuable mental real estate with the contents of all the trashy spacedock novels I’ve read.”

“The fact remains that you possess a breadth of knowledge and understanding that far exceeds the expectations imposed upon Starfleet cadets. You appear to be equally conversant in those disciplines once referred to as “humanities” as you are in engineering, computer science, and command tactics. It is logical to be curious how you acquired such expertise, and how your unusual background will inform your command style one day.” Spock watches as one of Jim’s pawns approaches and overtakes his knight. “I have made a study of Starfleet’s most successful captains, of which Captain Pike is a sterling example. During our time serving aboard the Faragut together, it often transpired that he, too, demonstrated unlooked-for expertise which often proved valuable to the success of our missions.”

Jim is still smiling, but Spock can tell that something he had said has made Jim uncomfortable.

“To clarify,” Spock adds, “I am saying that I believe your future Starfleet career will be successful, for more reasons than are apparent merely by reviewing your Academy record.”

“And you’re curious how I acquired those extra qualifications, so to speak,” Jim says, plunging directly into the heart of Spock’s inquiry, while ignoring Spock’s effort to bracket his assessment with inoffensively complimentary observations.

“It is logical to be curious,” Spock repeats himself, and decides to allow Jim to promote his pawn while Spock concentrate on the white queen still safely fortified behind a grouping of pawns. “Though I sense that your life before Starfleet was anything but peaceful, you nonetheless took steps to improve your condition, even in presumably chaotic circumstances. Therefore, there are no doubt valuable lessons to be extracted from your experiences.”

“What, you think that if I tell you why I wasted my time reading about ancient European history as a kid, you’ll unlock some magic formula for improving the cadet class as a whole?” The words imply
that offense has been taken, but Jim’s expression suggests that he is, again, amused. “It doesn’t really work like that, Spock.”

Spock is aware that Jim is beginning to grow uncomfortable with this line of questioning, but Spock’s curiosity is growing…unmanageable.

“Yesterday, Captain Pike mentioned that you resided for a year on Vulcan, presumably as a youth.” Spock looks Jim in the eye. “If the subject is not distressing to you, I confess that I would be deeply interested in learning how this came about, and what role your experiences on Vulcan might have played in shaping the person I am privileged to know today.”

Jim leans back in his chair. It is his turn, but unlike many of their neighbors who are timing their own game moves with chronometers, Spock had elected to conduct their first chess lesson under more relaxed circumstances.

“How I ended up on Vulcan is a much longer story,” Jim says eventually. “Which isn’t to say I wouldn’t be willing to tell you about it someday, but if my time on Vulcan is what you’re interested in, it’s best if I skip all of that.”

Spock nods his willing consent to Jim’s terms. In truth, he is just as pleased by Jim’s implication that he expects future conversations to take place between them as he is by Jim’s willingness to share a portion of his experiences now.

Jim sighs. His expression grows distant, detached, but Spock understands intuitively that Jim is not withdrawing from their social exchange, but rather, preparing himself to speak of potentially painful matters in the way that is most comfortable to him.

His withdrawal is analogous to the Vulcan practice of compartmentalizing emotions until they can be examined through meditation. Yet, on a Human, it suggests something more than emotional discipline.

During Spock’s service aboard the *Farragut*, Spock had once commended one of the ensigns in the science division for her exemplary emotional detachment. Captain Pike, who was taking his report, had listened carefully to Spock’s description of the ensign’s restrained and decorous behavior—and then, to Spock’s bafflement, he had contacted Dr. Boyce to examine the ensign for signs of emotional trauma.

“I understand that this is confusing for you,” Pike had explained to Spock afterwards. “But Humans aren’t supposed to repress their feelings to this degree. When they do, it’s usual a sign of a depressive disorder, which can be fatal when left untreated.”

Spock, to Understate the matter, had been deeply discomfited to realize that an ensign under his direct supervision was suffering the early stages of a potentially terminal illness, and that he had been blinded to the symptoms by own cultural biases as a Vulcan. Since then, whenever the exuberance of the Humans around him has proven a challenge to his equanimity, Spock has made a point of reminding himself of that conversation, and of his own limitations.

Earth is his mother’s world. It is still in the process of becoming one of Spock’s.

“When I was fourteen, some…stuff happened,” Jim continues. “When it was over, I was in really bad shape, physically. I was in sickbay on the *Shenzhou* for a while, but eventually I realized that they were only keeping me because they couldn’t find anyone to take me in. My mom was on a tour in deep space, and my—there wasn’t anyone else.”
Jim clears his throat and plays with the black pawn he captured in his fifth move. “Eventually, a Vulcan science vessel beamed over a team of researchers who were—they wanted to talk to the doctors about something. The day they were being given a tour of sickbay, I was having a meltdown.” He laughs a little. “You’d think that would make any Vulcan run for the hills. But T’Silla walked right up to me—I was standing on the counter so I could kick anyone who tried to pick me up—and said, cool as you please, ‘I am T’Silla, a recent arrival on this ship. What is the nature of your complaint with the treatment you have met with here?’

“That took the wind right out of my sails. It had been a long time since anyone had talked to me like I was halfway intelligent, instead of some kind of wild animal.

“I don’t remember what I said to her, but she spent some time talking to my doctors, and she came to visit me in my room a lot. And then, one day, she said that she had received permission from the Federation to foster me until my mom was available, and that I’d be living with her and her family on Vulcan. Her bondmate, Sakal, was an agricultural engineer on the plains east of Vulcan’s Forge—you know. A very long way away from nothing. They had two little girls, just old enough to walk, T’Vael and T’Vara. She—she said that she understood I had no wish to be a burden, so she explained that, while I would be considered a member of the family, they would nonetheless be grateful for the presence of an additional responsible person who could help them manage the twins when one of them was called away for work. Which happened a lot, actually. She…read me really well, from the start. I mean, she was right. I had nothing left but my pride. I wouldn’t have let myself take what she was offering, no matter how much I wanted it, if she hadn’t shown me a way I could contribute. Earn my keep.”

Spock releases a breath he had not realized he was holding. “This T’Silla sounds like a wise Vulcan.”

“My thanah ko-mekh.” Jim smiles softly. “T’Silla was the only person in the family who spoke fluent Standard, so… I had to spend two weeks in bed recovering, anyway, and I decided that learning Vulcan would keep me from getting bored. Every day, I practiced what I’d learned on Sakal and T’Silla over dinner, and they would arch their eyebrows at me until I whittled my accent down to size. They couldn’t have my shitty Vulcan grammar corrupting their kids’ verbal development, after all.” Jim laughs, and the convulsion of his shoulders causes tears to spill down his cheeks. “Man, I spent so much time watching Vulcan public educational broadcasts for toddlers. It helped with my aural sensitivity, which is always the hardest part for me in learning a new language. It was such a relief when T’Silla gave me permission to start teaching the girls Standard, and we could watch Starship Sesame Street together.”

The sight of Jim’s tears makes Spock intensely uncomfortable. They are in a public place, where his vulnerability cannot be concealed, and where Spock can do little to comfort him, physically. It makes him long for the relative privacy of the garden.

But Jim’s smile persists, even as the tears dry. “I’m not sure how the Vulcan school system would have coped with having me as a Human student, but T’Silla’s family lived so far away from a major city that even the twins were going to have to do their schooling remotely by vidcom. I was given aptitude tests and given a slot in an online class, and I got through—four levels? before I had to leave.”

Spock’s mouth falls open. “You completed four complete educational units of a Vulcan curriculum at the age of fourteen? Were you in a class with your agemates, or were you placed with younger children?”

“Oh, Spock, no need to look so shocked.” Jim lifts an eyebrow at him. “Yeah, I was with the other
“Jim,” Spock considers his words delicately. “Your official records give no indication that you completed Vulcan secondary education to end of the sixth form. Your records give the impression that you are a grade 10 high school drop-out.”

“Ooh, ‘grade 10’. Hey, is your mother from Canada, by any chance?”

Spock is shocked enough to forget his lecture for a moment. “Do you mean to say that this an identifiable regionalism of Canadian Standard?”

“C’est vrai,” says Jim. “Americans would say 10th grade. British English speakers would say…something about levels, or forms.”

“Fascinating,” says Spock. “And you have deliberately changed the subject. Why do your Starfleet records not accurately reflect your impressive academic accomplishments?”

Jim bows his head. “That’s…part of that longer story I said would have to wait for another day. Sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize.” Jim’s emotional state had fluctuated distressingly when speaking of his Vulcan foster family. Spock could sense intense grief, and a suffocating weight of loss hovering around Jim like a cloud, when their names crossed his lips. “Can you speak of your departure from Vulcan, or is that too part of the longer story?”

Jim swallows. “I told him that he and T’Silla and the girls were my family, and I’d rather die in the Forge or anywhere else before going back to Frank. Sakal asked me why. And I…told him. I’d never told anyone before.”

“But this did not prevent your being taken from Vulcan,” says Spock, a dim, horrible suspicion unfolding at the back of his mind. “Were you returned to your step-father?”

“No. Sakal and T’Silla stopped that, at least. I went back to Earth to a Federation group home in Chicago. I was emancipated when I was sixteen, and after that…well, let’s just say this is the longest I’ve spent in one place since then.”

“Have you remained in touch with T’Silla and her clan?” It is an indelicate question, but, Spock is beginning to suspect, a necessary one.

“No.” Jim crosses his arms over his chest, the gesture defensive. “No, I wasn’t allowed, at first. Then I didn’t have the credits for a inter-planetary vidcall. Now…it just feels like it’s been too long, you know? They probably don’t even think about me anymore.”

“Jim.” The urge to touch his fingers to Jim’s face, to his hand, to any part of him, is almost overwhelming. “I feel quite certain that is not true.”

Jim exhales loudly. The movement with which he dries his damp eyes is no doubt intended to be
surreptitious. “So. Look at me, crying over Vulcans. I’m amazed we aren’t both dead of the irony. All right, Kirk, game face. Let’s play chess.”

He grins at Spock, and the fact that there is a trace of genuine humor underneath the brave mask makes Spock wonder how a Human such as James Kirk is even possible.

“I wish to thank you for meeting me today,” says Spock, after several minutes of thoughtful silence have passed. “I was not certain whether the prospect of spending additional time in my company would be congenial to you.”

“Spock, you’re the one giving me lessons, here, I should be thanking you.”

“You would have learned more in a single hour playing the computer than I have taught you this morning.” The board provides an excellent excuse for Spock to avoid eye-contact. “Though I can see that your interest in learning the game is sincere, I confess that I would have been agreeable to meeting you today for almost any purpose.”

Jim seems not to hear him at first. Then his head jerks up. His eyes are wide.

“Really?” he says, far more quietly than when he had been lecturing Spock on the balance of power in medieval courts.

Spock takes a breath and moves his knight almost hastily, without bothering to calculate future moves. “Given what transpired on the night we met, as well as yesterday morning, it would not have been unreasonable if you had developed negative associations with my company.”

“That’s…really not how I see it.” Jim moves a piece, but Spock does not bother to check which one. “From my perspective, I got myself into trouble, and you were gracious and generous enough to get me out of it and take care of me afterwards. Why wouldn’t I value your company, when you went to so much effort to be kind to a total stranger?”

Now is the moment for Spock to speak. Yesterday would have been more appropriate, had Jim been in a more fitting state of mind, but Spock was not sorry for the necessary delay.

He is not at all certain how Jim will feel about him, once Spock has told him all that there is to tell.

“You had already ceased to be a stranger to me before Makal summoned me to the Embassy on your behalf,” he says, exerting iron control over an emotion that wishes to become apprehension.

The change that comes over Jim’s posture is subtle but unmistakable. He grows still, his movements slow, his gaze grows fixed and unwavering.

Too late, it occurs to Spock that Jim, who is still being stalked by persons unknown, may misconstrue his meaning in a most unfortunate way.

“Yesterday, at the restaurant, I told you that it was Captain Pike who brought K’diwa to my attention.” Spock continues staring at the board, his place entirely forgotten. “While it is true that he did so, I had already begun reading it before I spoke with him. In fact, I—neglected responsibilities and curtailed my office hours in order to create time to read it without interruption.”

Jim’s expression is still quite blank, by his standards, but there is no evidence of ill-will in the tone of voice he employs. “You almost make it sound as though you found it interesting,” he says.

“It is of the most profound interest to me. Indeed, I can scarcely do justice to the…the unexpected complexity of my emotional reaction.” Spock takes a breath to steady himself. “Suffice it to say that
before I knew your identity, I cherished the hope of one day meeting the author of *K'diwa* and discussing the book at length. I had…many questions.”

“Okay.” It appears that Jim has also temporarily lost interest in their game, because he looks only at Spock. “So that’s how you felt before you knew I wrote it. What about after you found out it was me?”

Spock thinks back to his conversation with Cadet Uhura and Cadet Vro. “I learned that you were the author of *K’diwa* approximately 2.3 minutes before I received Makal’s message that a Starfleet cadet was being given shelter by the Vulcan Embassy. The…timing of these two revelations had a significant impact on the manner in which I processed them. Initially, I was gratified simply to be able to put a name to the extraordinary mind which had created so rich and imaginative a story. Before I had the opportunity to meditate upon any further actions I might wish to take, however, I learned that you were incapacitated and in the care of individuals whose motivations I could not fully trust. At that very moment, I was discussing with Cadet Uhura the circumstances of her distressing encounter with another Vulcan, employed by the Embassy. I…was concerned what might befall you there if I did not swiftly intervene.”

Jim digests this silently for a moment. “Was it a different kind of concern than you would have felt for any other cadet in the same situation?”

“Yes. And no. That is to say, I do not believe I would have acted differently had I been asked to assist another cadet, or if I had not recently learned that you were the very individual whose identity I had been seeking. But, being in possession of these facts, I believe my…emotions were considerably more engaged than they would otherwise have been.”

“Huh.” Jim stares at him until Spock manages to pry his eyes from the motionless chessboard and look at him. “I apologize if this is an indelicate thing to ask, but…how would you describe those emotions?”

Spock blinks at him. The sunlight is very bright, but that is not why he finds it difficult to hold Jim’s gaze. “Fear,” he admits.

Jim looks startled. “Why?”

“I was afraid for your safety. And, selfishly, I feared that you might meet with behavior from other Vulcans that would leave you disinclined to accept any overtures from myself.”

“You were already that certain that you wanted to know me? Just based on reading *K’diwa*?”

Spock has noticed that Jim rarely refers to his book by its title. Usually, he refers to it as “the story”, with contextual allowances for use of the indefinite article.

It is just possible that the reason he does this is because he cannot conceal his accent, or lack thereof, when he speaks Vulcan. Spock has already concluded that Jim’s fluency in the language, like his education, is a secret. There is no note of it in his file, though it mentions his varying proficiencies in Orion, Tellarite, Andorian, Klingon, and Romulan.

“Yes,” says Spock. “I was certain. I am still certain.”

He pauses. He is very close to crossing a line, to giving away pieces of himself he has never considered parting with before. Ordinarily, this would be reason to pause, to reassess his motivations and the potential consequences of their actions.

But when Spock thinks of what little he knows about Jim’s past—and about other things he had
surmised when he knew him only as the author of *K’diwa*—he understands what a monumental undertaking it must be for Jim to trust anyone, as he had done when he told Spock of his foster family.

If Spock wishes for Jim to take the risk of trusting him even further, then Spock must be prepared to give of himself in ways he has never done before.

“All my life, I have striven to be the ideal Vulcan, but I am very far from being one,” Spock tells Jim blandly. “Though my physiology is almost entirely Vulcan, my Humanity affects my capacity for emotional control. However, my mother’s heritage has also gifted me with a vivid imagination, which I find that I cannot regret, nor would I wish it otherwise, even in exchange for a more perfect grasp of logic.”

Jim appears to be fascinated, which Spock chooses to interpret as a positive indication that he may proceed.

“When I was a child, my mother often read to me from Terran works of fiction. When I was old enough to begin formal schooling, I declared that I no longer needed anyone to read to me.” Spock’s mouth twists, remembering the expression on his mother’s face, which he can now identify as disappointment. “However, in secret, I read to myself. I progressed quickly through the Terran literary genre known as the novel, consuming every major work which has been translated into Federation Standard, French, Chinese, or English. On the rare occasions I was ill and confined to bed, I read from waking to sleeping. There is no equivalent to the novel in Vulcan literary tradition, as you may know. Our plays and epic poems are the nearest we have to fiction, but they are not the same. An expert trained in the field of literary theory could doubtless describe these differences using precise terminology, but I have no such training. In…my own, imprecise, words, Terran fiction is unique in its capacity to act as a kind of *katra* bearer. The book is a vessel which contains the eternal imprint of another being’s mind and soul. Sometimes, the author’s presence seems so near, it is as if they passed through the same room as I only moments before, and a hint of their fragrance remains. Many times in my life, my loneliness has been mitigated by the sensation that an author and I were meeting, mind to mind, on a plane of mutual recognition.”

Spock takes a deep breath. “I have studied my own Human nature in the mirror of Human fiction all my life. By necessity, I have learned how to see my face in many Human faces.” He swallows. “But never, in my entire life, had I see myself in another Vulcan, until I read *K’diwa*. Jim, I can scarcely explain how it felt. It was as if you had looked into my mind across time and space in order to reflect my innermost thoughts back to me from the pages of your book. To feel so known, from so far away…it was a most transformative experience.”

He forces himself to finish. “So vitally important did I find it to tell you all of this, that had I had not discovered your identity when I did, I do not know what measures I might have been driven to.”

Silence falls. Spock, who has a demonstrably poor grasp of what Humans do and do not find offensive, cannot help fearing that he has made some sort of grave misstep.

When he can no longer bear the suspense, he looks up to find Jim gripping the table with white knuckles, his eyes wide and round and brimming with tears.

“Forgive me,” says Spock, deeply alarmed. “You have misunderstood my intentions. My words were intended as high praise. Please do not be distressed.”

Jim’s mouth wobbles. Then, in an instant, his tragic look is overcome by a fit of what Spock can only describe as “the giggles”.

“Spock,” he says, tremulous but grinning. “Only you could just…say all of those incredible things,
and then think you’d insulted me.”

Spock looks down, flushing. “You appeared to be on the verge of weeping,” he says. “I could only conclude that I had hurt your feelings in some manner.”

“No. No, Spock, sometimes I...get the sniffles, because a brilliant Vulcan scientist just told me my novel about a Vulcan scientist was important to him.” Jim clears his throat. “I mean, I get the feeling you’re usually pretty hard to impress.”

“Indeed, that is so.” Spock tilts his head. “I must admit that I am relieved. I feared that when I confessed my keen and prolonged interest in you, you might not react well. That you might experience trepidation, or even fear.”

“But you told me anyway,” says Jim, and his smile does not vanish.

“To do otherwise was unthinkable.”

Jim’s smile grows softer.

Spock, emboldened by the seeming perfection of the moment, feels a precipitous, and yet nearly ungovernable urge to ask Jim’s permission to initiate a formal courtship.

Until a Human Starfleet cadet, sitting at a table a few meters away from them, aims his PADD at Jim and captures his image.

Before Spock can stalk over to his table to demand the cadet identify himself (so that Spock can write him up for at least six offenses), two more people on opposite sides of the park square lift their PADDs and do the same thing.

Spock and Jim stare at each other, mutually baffled. Then, Jim’s comm begins to vibrate.

Having started, it does not stop. After Jim fishes it from his pocket, it nearly jumps out of his grasp before he can get it open.

“Okay,” says Jim, slowly. “Okay. Okay, okay. It, uh, it looks like the cat’s out of the bag.”

Spock has to access the archives of his eidetic memory to translate this idiom. “The cat in this case is...?”

“Gary went on the record with an underground student gossip tabloid. Told them—everything, I guess. Or his version of ‘everything’, which is bound to—”

Jim stops himself and bows his head, breathing deeply.

Spock’s reaction to this is not entirely logical. Or, seen from another perspective, it is the most logical thing in the world.

He gets up and crosses to Jim’s side of the table. Jim isn’t expecting it, so he doesn’t resist when Spock plucks Jim's communicator from his hand.

Seating himself astride the bench, his body separated from Jim’s by only a few inches (close enough to shield him from almost anything) Spock quickly scans the messages that are coming in. They arrive in such rapid succession that each name only appears onscreen for a fraction of a second.

Spock quickly bypasses all notifications, and resets Jim’s comm to accept messages only from known contacts.
This slows the torrent to a steady stream. Spock scans the subjects and first lines for indications that a message may be upsetting, or contain mockery or abuse; he deletes twenty-seven of them, then places all of Jim’s contacts on silent mode, except for himself, “Mom”, Captain Pike, the various numbers assigned to “Bones”, Gaila Vro, and Uhura.

This leaves five messages, four of them from Cadet Vro, one from Dr. McCoy. These, Spock returns to Jim unread.

“Wow,” says Jim. “Are you sure…I mean, some of those could have been important?”

“If anyone has a legitimate need to contact you, then, depending on the reason, they will attempt to reach you either through Captain Pike, who is your advisor, or through Doctor McCoy, your roommate and physician. Anyone who is daunted by such a screening process can have no urgent or pressing business to discuss.”

“I suppose that’s logical.” Jim gives him a wobbly smile.

Spock examines Jim closely for signs of heightened anxiety. Despite his shallow breathing earlier he no longer seems to be exhibiting acute symptoms. He is, however, clearly feeling abashed and exposed, his lower-level anxiety within the bounds of his control, though still painful to witness.

Again, Spock is tempted to do as he did yesterday, when he could not determine whether Jim’s respiratory distress was a medical or emotional concern, and simply touch his fingers to Jim’s bare skin. But there is no sufficient cause this time. And he is not bold enough to simply ask.

“So, uh.” Jim indicates his communicator. “Gaila’s declared an emergency study group session. At a bar. Bones and Uhura say they’re coming.” He darts a quick glance at Spock. “I know you don’t really drink, but…”

“Yes,” says Spock.

“Yes, you drink?” Jim’s brow furrows.

It must have taken a truly unthinkable degree of emotional neglect to reduce a person as brilliant as Jim to this level of stammering incomprehension every single time he is presented with evidence that he is valued.

“No, I do not consume ethanol for recreational purposes,” says Spock patiently. “Yes, I nonetheless wish to accompany you to the bar, so that I may come to know you better by witnessing your interactions with your friends. Also, because I would not be separated from you.”

“Spock…” Jim shakes his head, laughing. “Man, are you sure? I can’t help questioning your taste.” His tone indicates that this is supposed to be taken as a joke. The trembling of his hands suggests otherwise.

“I would prefer that you refrain from questioning my taste, as I believe it is considered impolite. Also, a pointless exercise, since taste varies from one individual to the next, and thus your distaste for yourself is irrelevant to my marked preference for you.”

Jim scrubs at his face with one hand. “Marked preference, huh?” he says, voice muffled.

“You are more familiar with Vulcan customs than any Human I have encountered, apart from my mother. I believe you can guess what I am referring to.” He waits for Jim to lower his hand slowly and give Spock a stunned look. “If you are prepared to hear my declarations now, I am prepared to make them. But I understand that Humans and Vulcans are not the same, and that Humans generally
prefer longer periods of courtship before forming permanent intentions. I am fully willing to accommodate you in this.”

They sit in silence for nearly five minutes while Jim, his expression glassy, meditates on this.

“You’re springing this on me now,” he says slowly, raising an accusing finger at Spock, “to distract me from the fact that everyone in Starfleet is suddenly aware that the famous James T. Kirk is the author of ‘a steamy novel of interspecies romance’. Aren’t you?”

Spock lifts his chin primly. “I would do much to spare you the pain of your unnecessary anxiety, Jim,” he says. “But that does not make my words any less sincerely meant.”

Jim exhales.

In a very small voice, he says, “Can we just go meet the others at the bar for now?”

“Certainly,” says Spock, taking care to rise first, so that he is in a position to assist his intended from his seat.
“Groundbreaking!” Gaila declares, emphasizing her point by banging her empty glass against the table. “I said it, and I stand by it, until someone makes a valid argument to disprove me. Which you can’t do. Because I’m right.”

Spock, seated across the table from her, raises an eyebrow. Jim, sandwiched between Spock and Leonard, tries to hunch down low in his seat.

Nyota, sipping red wine at Gaila’s left, had spotted Jim and his unobtrusive yet menacing Vulcan shadow first. Or rather, she’d seen Spock, gotten very excited for a moment, and then noticed that Jim was hovering behind him. “What the hell are they doing here together?” she’d hissed, grabbing Gaila’s arm.

Gaila, who could read the possessive pheromones that Spock was exuding from all the way across the bar, had just smiled. “Oh, they’re boning,” she said cheerfully. “Or they will be, if Professor Spock has anything to say about it.”

Nyota had looked mildly nauseated after that, but she was way too curious not to be welcoming when Jim and Spock arrived at the table.

The crowd in the bar tonight is the perfect size. There are enough people milling around on the dance floor to create the right Saturday-night energy, but not so many that Gaila can’t get the waiter’s attention when it’s time for a new round.

Despite the fact that most of the people who come here are connected to Starfleet in some way—this is the only bar in walking distance of the Academy, which is how it became their regular spot in the first place—no one’s bothered Jim about his novel yet.

Getting the study group together tonight had been Gaila’s idea. The second that Gary’s interview had gone live, her comm had started blowing up with messages from…basically, everyone who knew that she and Jim were friends, which turned out to be a lot more people than Gaila realized. Since there was no way that Jim’s messages weren’t blowing up at least twice as fast, and given Jim’s attitude the last time they’d discussed the possibility of his identity being exposed, her first instinct had been to lure Jim into the safety of his friends’ company as quickly as possible. The invitation to get drunk had just been the bait.

She’s not surprised that Jim came, but the fact that he’d brought Spock with him was at least the second most interesting development to come out of this whole “Jim wrote a secret romance novel” situation.

“I believe your description is apt, Cadet Vro,” says Spock quietly, which makes Jim give Spock a baffled look through the hands that are covering his face. “In certain respects, Jim’s creation is quite unique. As I understand you to be using the colloquial definition of ‘groundbreaking’ to suggest that
*K’diwa* takes for its subject themes which have rarely ever been explored in Terran fiction, I can only agree with your assessment.”

“Thank you, Professor Spock.” Gaila beams at him.

“Hey. It’s Saturday, none of us are in uniform, and the ‘Professor’ is hanging out at the same shitty bar as the rest of us.” Leonard lifts his glass at Spock, which Gaila understands is his way of making the distinction inclusive, rather than exclusive. “Under the circumstances, everyone here can damn well be on a first name basis.”

“Or last names,” says Jim quickly, raising his own glass to Nyota. He then slams the contents—half a cup of watery whiskey—down his throat, and his eyes immediately start to water. Sometimes Jim forgets how much his alcohol tolerance has dropped since he joined Starfleet.

Nyota lifts her head suddenly. Her former, skeptical look has been replaced by her “nerd in search of knowledge” expression. She peers across the table through narrowed eyes. Gaila braces herself.

“Okay, now I’m actually curious,” she says, addressing both Gaila and Spock. “Both of you are brilliant, so what is it you’re seeing in Kirk’s smut novel that the rest of us aren’t? Because I have had to listen to a lot of people talk about Kirk’s story this week, but mostly all they talk about are the sex scenes.”

“I write excellent sex scenes,” Jim points out hurriedly, missing the look of mingled consternation and heat that passes over Spock’s face.

“You do, sweetie.” Gaila reaches across the table to pat Jim’s arm—and only his arm, because Spock is watching. “For a male.”

Jim makes mock-offended noises, while Leonard, tucked into the corner of the booth, loses himself in a giggling fit. He’d been here for an entire hour before even Gaila showed up, and is well on his way to being adorably drunk by now.

“My point is,” says Nyota repressively, “Not many people are expressing opinions about *K’diwa*’s literary merits, one way or the other. And I’ll be honest, I only skimmed it myself. So I’m curious why both of you think so highly of it, when even Jim is embarrassed by it.”

“In this case, I believe the source of our differing opinions lies principally in the fact that, by your own admission, you did not read the book thoroughly enough to make a true appraisal of its merits,” says Spock, in the gentle, brutal tones that have sent so many students out of his classroom in tears. “But as to Gaila’s contention that *K’diwa* explores previously uncharted literary ground, this is a simple and verifiable fact.”

Nyota frowns, but it is Leonard who speaks.

“Now, wait a minute. Last week, I sat in a dentist’s office for half an hour with nothing to do in the waiting room but watch some godawful soap opera about some Vulcan/Human love triangle. You can’t be saying Jim’s the first Human to write about made-up Vulcans.”

Gaila’s mouth pops open at the same time Spock opens his own mouth to speak. Their eyes meet.

“Please,” Spock nods, deferring to her.

“It isn’t the fact that Stoval is the main character, or even that he’s boning a Human chick,” Gaila says excitedly. Her book club had turned out so boring. Nobody had really brought any ideas to the table. Gaila has been bursting with this ever since Jim started sending her chapters to proofread. “It’s
about the *gaze*.”

“You mean how Stoval’s staring at Ophelia like a lovestruck idiot all the time?” Leonard chuckles into his whiskey.

Spock, whose eyes are boring holes into the side of Jim’s face at that very second, averts his gaze almost guiltily.


The three males sitting at the table look at her blankly.

Nyota’s eyes widen. “Wait, shit,” she says, turning to Gaila. “Ok, admittedly, I only read a little bit, but I…think I know what you’re talking about? I can’t believe I—damn, Kirk.” There is a new respect in her eyes when she looks over at Jim. “That was smooth.”

“I have no idea what any of them are talking about,” says Jim, looking plaintively at Leonard.

“Stoval becomes enraptured by the shape of Ophelia’s ears,” says Spock, and the table falls silent.

When he notices that four expectant faces are turned to him, Spock’s shoulders straighten, and he assumes his classroom voice. “With regard to Ophelia, almost from their very first encounter, Stoval exhibits the characteristic possessive and protective behaviors of a courting Vulcan male. Yet he does not become consciously aware of what he has been doing until after a—scene, in Chapter Nine—”

“Ooh, that one.” Gaila winces. “Good call putting a content footnote on that chapter, Jim.”

Jim says nothing, but his foot finds hers under the table and his toe rubs her ankle comfortingly.

“After Stoval has returned them both to the shuttle and secured Ophelia’s safety, he finds himself newly aware of her aesthetic and sexual appeal. While appraising her attributes, Stoval becomes fixated on Ophelia’s distinctly Human traits. Her ear, in particular: the roundedness of it, the semi-transparent pink membrane which reminds him of the interior of a seashell.”

“And do you have any idea how rare that is?”

Nyota, clever girl, had caught up to Gaila and Spock almost immediately, and is suddenly bursting with enthusiasm over her new revelation. Leonard and Jim both flinch under her regard.

“Terran literature since First Contact has had a terrible representation issue when it comes to non-Human characters,” she tells them enthusiastically. “Human authors *always* frame the non-Human characters as weird and exotic. Sometimes they get to be sexy, too, but always in this really objectifying way.”

Gaila nods. “Orion females are lucky to even get speaking lines. The last story I read with an Orion character, she was described as ‘the green hottie with the tits he’d gone three rounds with last night’. That was it. She didn’t even get a name.”

Uhura gestures to Gaila, with a “see?” gesture. Leonard’s eyes widen, and Jim looks dismayed, while Spock looks blandly unsurprised.

“Frankly, that’s why I didn’t bother reading the book all the way through,” Nyota says, shrugging semi-apologetically. “I was expecting lots of horny passages about Stoval’s tall, muscled form and his pointed ears and green skin—"
“Green is quite erotic, to be fair,” says Gaila, smiling sweetly when Leonard blushes.

“But, instead, you wrote Ophelia like she was the exotic one. All of her Human differences are portrayed through the filter of Stoval’s perspective. His point of view is treated as the default. That’s…” she trails off.

“Groundbreaking,” says Gaila smugly, sipping her mojito.

Jim finally straightens up in his seat, but it’s only to open his mouth and spread his hands pleadingly.

“I wasn’t thinking about any of that,” he says bluntly. “I mean, I see what you’re saying, but I wasn’t, like, trying to strike a blow for equal representation. I was so deep in Stoval’s head that it just made sense to show the reader how he sees Ophelia, how a Vulcan would see her.”

“I’m not claiming to be any kind of literature expert,” says Leonard, darting a smug sideways glance at Jim. “But how exactly is it groundbreaking for a male writer to sexually objectify a female character, hmm?”

Jim scratches the back of his neck. His cheeks, which had started turning pink almost as soon as he sat down, are flushed crimson at this point.

“I had to make Ophelia hot,” he says forlornly. “She turned out way more messed up and combative than I thought she was going to be, and it started feeling less and less believable that someone like Stoval would ever fall in love with her.”

Spock jerks in his seat like someone has slapped him, but doesn’t, to Gaila’s disappointment, actually say anything.

“And I don’t really know what Vulcans find hot about Humans, if anything,” Jim continues, “so I just made her look as unlike a Vulcan as possible. I figured that would intrigue him, and once I had it down on the page, it seemed to work. As soon as Stoval notices all that Human stuff about her, he’s basically doomed.”

“Doomed?” says Spock, sounding alarmed. “In what way?”

Jim looks at him, confused.

“At the novel’s conclusion, Stoval and Ophelia are bonded. They have returned to Vulcan, and Stoval is preparing to present her to his clan as his mate. Are you suggesting that, if you were to write a sequel, it would be revealed that their bond was not, ultimately, successful?”

Gaila sucks tequila down through a straw, her eyes glued to the soap opera unfurling across the booth from her.

“What?” Jim laughs. “Okay, one, I’m definitely not writing a sequel. Two, no, as far as I’m concerned, Stoval and Ophelia get their happily-ever-after on Vulcan. The novel is pure wish-fulfillment, in case you hadn’t noticed. I wasn’t about to tear them apart, like—”

Jim stops abruptly, clearing his throat.

Spock’s eyebrows immediately begin to droop in concern.

“I just meant, doomed, like, Stoval was doomed to love her,” Jim finishes explaining weakly. “They were in an enclosed space for months with bad guys chasing them. It was over for him the minute he started pondering all the differences in their comparative physiognomy.”
“I actually loved that part?” Gaila cuts in, startling everyone into looking at her. “Jimmy, you don’t understand. Every single time someone cites that ‘Vulcans are three times stronger than Humans’ statistic, I want to tear my hair out. I’m like, first of all, it’s interesting that you can pull that factoid out of your ass, but did you know that Orions are almost twice as strong as Humans? No, is always the answer. Plus, it’s like—have you seen Humans? Do you not understand how many different kinds of Humans there are?”

“Yeah, that statistic is incredibly androcentric,” says Nyota, to Jim’s visible shock. “I enjoyed that part too, when Stovał notices the sexual dimorphism gap among Human males and females? Like Gaila said—Spock might be three times stronger than Jim, but Jim, much as I hate to admit it, is probably at least three times as strong as me.”

“And I am genuinely sorry for that,” Jim says, provoking giggles from most of the table. Everyone thinks he’s joking, but he’s not, which has a lot to do with why Gaila loves him.

“But you went and called that ‘statistic’ out from the point of view of Vulcan logic, Kirk. That’s pretty bold stuff.” Nyota smirks at him, not ill-naturedly. “Now that people know who you are, I wouldn’t be surprised if you started getting speaking invitations from university English departments, and book stores. Stuff like that.”

“Hard agree,” says Gaila. “Jimmy, I’ve never read another story written by a Human that even tried to assume an authentic non-Human perspective before. That’s important, to me, as an Orion living in the Federation.” She looks slyly at Spock. “I bet it means something to Spock, too.”

Spock arches an eyebrow. “Indeed. Jim’s novel appears to have had a significant effect on the greater number of Vulcans living in this city.”

All of a sudden, Jim swears viciously under his breath and drops his face into his hands.

“The ear thing,” he whispers. “How did I miss the fucking ear thing, I am such an idiot, oh my God.”

Spock intervenes before Gaila has to, which gives Gaila the opportunity signal the waiter for more mojitos.

“Jim, I would prefer that you not demean yourself in my presence,” he says seriously. “My instinct is to defend you against insult, and this would prove logistically complicated.”

Leonard laughs so hard that he has to rest his head on the table. Gaila looks down at him fondly. He probably shouldn’t drink anymore tonight, but she’s not his mother.

“Please explain what you are referring to when you say, ‘the ear thing’?” Spock continues relentlessly, like the world’s most patient interrogator.

“It’s just something Makal said,” Jim shrugs dismissively.

“What did he say?” Spock demands, refusing to be dismissed.

“Who’s Makal again?” says Leonard, seeming to sober up by at least three drinks in the space of a few seconds.

Jim looks around and notices the expressions of keen curiosity that Gaila and Nyota are directing his way. He sighs.
“Okay,” he says, “so, Thursday night, I went to a bar, and I got hit on by a really horny Vulcan with zero chill.” He makes eye contact with Uhura, as if to distract himself from the bristling Vulcan at his side. “When he was hitting on me, Makal said something, like…he used to think the erotic qualities of Human ears were overrated, but now that he was seeing mine up close, he was starting to see the appeal. It was…weird. So weird, I mean, someone complimenting your ear should not be that intense? He was very intense.”

Jim looks around the table. “But here’s the question. Have Vulcans ever been attracted to Human ears before? Or did a handful of Vulcans just start thinking of them that way because they read my book? Because, if that’s the real reason I had to listen to someone blatantly objectify my ear, right to my face, then I’m guessing karma is responsible.”

Spock leans into Jim until their arms are pressing together. Jim leans back into him—automatically, unconsciously, like trusting Spock at his back is already the most natural thing in the world to him—and Gaila nearly melts.

“Now that you mention it,” says Nyota slowly, “Krevak wasn’t that obvious, or I never would have agreed to go out with him. But, in hindsight, he was a little too fixated on how tiny and breakable I was compared to him. At first, I thought he was trying to be considerate of our differences, but then…you know.”

Jim looks at Nyota with the hugest blue eyes. “I am so—”

“Kirk, I will kick you if you apologize for that.”

Leonard begins inching away from Jim, presumably putting some distance between their legs underneath the table.

Spock clears his throat. “Illogical though it would be, I too feel oddly moved to apologize on behalf of the males of my species. There has never before been such a string of such incidents in the history of Vulcan-Human diplomacy. The behavior of his staff has proven to be a source of serious consternation to my father.”

Spock is blushing very slightly—Gaila is a little more attuned to the fluctuations of a green-tinted complexion than the others—and she has a sudden flash of insight.

“Oh no, Spock,” she assures him hurriedly. “It’s okay if you think Jim’s little round ears are sweet and sexy. You respect Jim, and you care about him. That makes it totally different.”

Leonard and Nyota choke on their drinks at the exact same moment, Leonard staring between Jim and Spock like they’ve suddenly sprouted a third head.

“You didn’t know?” Gaila says, as three sets of eyes begin to glare at her. “I mean, they walked in together. And Jim’s never brought anyone to study group before.”

Jim isn’t glaring at her, but he is squinching his eyes shut, like he’s trying to make the whole table go away. Spock, the only person who looks completely unperturbed, touches Jim’s arm, then says, “You do have an advantage in this area which the others do not possess, Gaila.”

Gaila is pretty sure that’s a spark of amusement she sees in his eyes. “Well, yeah,” she says. “But you guys are pretty obvious even to the pheromone-blind. At least, I think so.”

Leonard has switched his narrowed gaze from Jim and Spock, to just Spock. Uhura is trying to disguise the fact that her eyebrows have climbed to her hairline by staring into her drink.
That’s when Jim decides to up and abandon ship.

“I…um, I’m gonna dance,” he says, slipping underneath the table and crawling around Spock in a move that leaves the Vulcan stunned and green in the face. Jim emerges on his feet next to the table and rubs his hands together. “Who’s dancing with me? Bones?”

“Hell, no.”

“I don’t mean you have to dance with me, with me.”

“Still no.”

“Fine. Gaila?”

She’s danced with Jim a thousand times, but Spock’s possessiveness is kind of a libido killer. Which is exactly what nature designed those pheromones to be, and for good reason. Getting in between a Vulcan and his prospective mate would be like trying to commit suicide by climbing the partition at the dangerous animals exhibit at the zoo.

“Gonna sit this one out,” she says. “I’ll watch you from here.”

Jim pouts.

Gaila can tell that Spock is equally torn between hoping that Jim will ask him to dance, and dreading that he will ask him to dance.

“I’ll dance with you, Kirk,” says Nyota, sounding as though she can’t quite believe she’s volunteering.

“Really?” Jim looks stunned.

“Yes, unless you’re just going to make it weird. I feel like dancing tonight. And as I recall, you have a few moves.”

“Just for that,” says Jim, reaching for Nyota’s hand, “you see someone you actually want to dance with, and I will help you reel them in. Scout’s honor.”

“He wasn’t actually a Scout,” says Leonard casually, like he corrects people on this regularly.

“You’re on,” says Nyota, and she and Jim disappear down a few steps and into the crowd of dancing bodies below them.

Well. To Gaila, at least, they seem to disappear. But she’s fairly certain that Spock has a target lock on both their positions, judging from the way he glares at their retreat.

In the corner of the booth, Leonard tips his head back. A few seconds later, he begins to snore gently.

“She’s not a threat,” Gaila tells Spock, dropping the pretense now that they’re as good as alone. “Jim and Nyota have a very childish, sibling-style relationship, but when they flirt, it’s just another way for them to be competitive. She’s only dancing with him because, when they go out on the floor together, no one ever looks at anything but the two of them. And Jim knows that.”

“They do have an appreciable combined aesthetic appeal,” says Spock, sounding distracted. Either Uhura is behaving herself, or whatever she’s doing to Jim is turning Spock on, because most of the jealousy has faded from his expression.
“You haven’t known Jim for very long, have you?” she says.

It’s a gamble, getting a Vulcan to open up at the best of times, but Gaila senses that Spock is desperate to talk to someone about Jim. She wonders if he even has any other friends.

“On the night that I met yourself and Nyota for the first time, you may remember I was called away suddenly,” says Spock quietly. “The message I had received was in regards to Jim. I met him for the first time after I arrived at the Embassy.”

Gaila blinks. Even for a Vulcan, that is moving fast. “So you’ve known him a little over two days, now.”

“That is essentially correct.”

“Wow,” she says softly. “You must be terrified.”

Spock stiffens. “I am unaware of—”

“You didn’t know Jim until a couple of days ago, but you’d heard of him, right?” Gaila prompts. “You know what people say about him.”

“Within minutes of meeting Jim, I had cast aside any preconceived notions I may have possessed regarding his character.”

“That’s good.” Gaila nods approvingly. “Because just about everything they say about Jimmy is cowshit.”

Spock’s forehead wrinkles. “Is ‘bullshit’ not the expression?”

“Oh, right.” Gaila tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “The way it works is that Jimmy shows up here, looking like he looks, and by morning, three different people will be claiming they fucked him. And he never denies it. That way, no matter how many people he turns down, no one will ever suspect that he’s actually more or less celibate.”

This, finally, makes Spock turn and look at her. He appears gobsmacked.

“I was aware that his reputation for licentiousness was grossly exaggerated, if not entirely fabricated,” he says faintly. “But I…did not expect that.”

Gaila is Orion; the only one in Starfleet, one of less than 5000 living on Earth. There is a reason Orion females get automatic refugee status under Federation law, and everyone knows what that reason is. Including Spock, though he’s far too well-mannered to allude to it.

“People who grew up like Jimmy and I did either go wild or completely shut down when it comes to sex,” she says bluntly.

It takes Spock about three seconds to begin processing what she’s just implied. She watches his eyes fill with dread, then denial, then, finally, with a heat powerful enough to consume cities.

It doesn’t frighten Gaila, because that same anger lives deep in her heart, a perpetual combustion that powers everything she does.

“Fucking everybody, or fucking nobody—either way, it’s a tactic to make sex feel less important. Less powerful,” she continues. “Because, then, all the ways people have used sex to hurt you can also feel less important. Less hurtful.”
Spock looks a little bit like he’s going to faint.

“Occasionally, Jim would go home with someone,” she says, careful to use the past tense. “Not often. Jim’s a complete puppy dog when he likes someone, and that kind of energy tends to attract a certain…type. The partners he’s been with in the past weren’t always as careful with him as he needed them to be. I worry, you know?” Gaila reaches for her glass. “Actually, I’ve always thought he’d get along well with an Andorian, or a Vulcan—someone from a culture with dominance-based mating behaviors. That way, he could get what needed without it being some kind of toxic power struggle.”

“When the appropriate amount of time has passed, I intend to ask Jim’s permission to court him formally, with a view to bonding in the future.” Spock says this very quickly, as if he thinks that Gaila’s some kind of matchmaker with a list of Andorian and Vulcan rivals for Jim’s hand.

“But that’s for Jim, because you’ve already made up your mind,” says Gaila, her right cheek dimpling.

Spock releases a breath. “Indeed.”

Bless Leonard—he stopped snoring a few seconds ago, and Gaila’s pretty sure he’s awake again, but he’s acting like he’s still asleep. She’s not sure if it’s because he wants to eavesdrop, or because he’s trying give Spock his privacy.

“Jim trusts you,” she says, with emphasis. “Do you have any idea how long it takes him to trust new people, normally? This absolute fuckery that Gary’s pulled is going to make it even worse. Jim really cared about him, once.”

Spock’s eyes narrows. “Jim mentioned that Gary Mitchell was once a member of this…study group. Are you expecting him here tonight?”

Gaila points two fingers at her eyes, then points the same two fingers at the front entrance. “I have eye-balled every single person who has walked through that door since I got here. That’s the whole reason I got this table.”

The toothy smile she gives Spock makes him blink, suddenly. On anyone else it would have been a flinch. She knows what she looks like—dangerous, feral. It isn’t a side of herself, of her own Orion nature and upbringing, that she shows very many people.

But this is for Jim, and Spock deserves to know that he’s not fighting a one-Vulcan battle against all the different kinds of darkness that keep trying to put out Jim’s light.

“If Gary has any sense of self-preservation, he’ll stay the hell away,” she says. “But if he is stupid enough to show up, I plan on getting to him way before he can get anywhere near Jim.”

Spock gives her a look that she’s inclined to think may be respect.

“As Mitchell is also a Starfleet cadet, your…pre-emptive efforts to defend Jim might well leave you vulnerable to charges of criminal assault. I am not certain that even the testimony of your friends would be sufficient counter-evidence to protect you from a conviction and a stain upon your Starfleet record. I, personally, would find it regrettable if, in your laudable desire to protect your friend, you should also become one Mitchell’s victims.” Spock folds his hands and straightens his shoulders.

“Should you indeed spy Mitchell’s appearance, I request that you simply inform me of the fact. I am more than qualified to remove him from the premises swiftly and discreetly, and as a senior officer I have the authority to do so without risking censure.”
Gaila resolutely doesn’t let herself shudder, not even in the good way.

“You know about Gary’s past with Jim?” she ventures.

“I know enough.” Four short syllables, all very clipped, and very, very angry.

“So, you know that Jim trusted Gary, opened up to him, cared about him—and that Gary paid him back by fucking around on Jim and then beating the shit out of him every time someone noticed Jim was hot. And you know that Jim protected him, for months, because he believed Gary every time he said it was Jim’s fault—"

The plastisteel table, painted to look like old-fashioned slab wood, is beginning to take on permanent indentations in the shape of Spock’s fingertips. Well, good, Gaila thinks. Spock needs to be honest with himself about this, and if he can’t even hear the short version of the story without mentally imploding, then he’s in no shape to look into Gary’s smug, smiling face and hear whatever poison he’s saved up for the occasion.

“Knowing all that,” she repeats, “do you really think you can just…make Gary go away? Or do you think that there’s a chance that, maybe, just maybe, you’ll twist his smug head right off his shoulders instead?”

Spock opens his mouth, then shuts it again. He spends about a minute meditating on Gaila’s suggestion.

“At the very least,” he says, finally, “I should join you in confronting him, since he may be less likely to attempt physical violence against you if I am nearby.”

Gaila frowns. “You do know that Orion females are a lot stronger than a Human male Gary’s size, right?”

“Then, together, we should present a truly formidable front. One that may impress upon Mitchell the seriousness of our intent.”

She tries not to smile, but a few seconds later she caves and beams at him.

“That works.” She pats his arm over his jacket. “You’re really very lovely, you know that?”

He flushes, and she doesn’t really expect him to answer.

Except, then he bows from the neck, like the smooth-ass Ambassador’s son everyone at Starfleet forgets he is, and says, “Likewise, I have so far gathered only favorable impressions of yourself.”

Gaila grins.

“You wanna dance?” She tilts her head curiously. “I know some Vulcan dances, and if you have any sense of rhythm, I bet we can adapt them to this beat.”

“Would that not distract you from your stated goal of minding the entrance for signs of Gary Mitchell?”

“No, Gary’s not that slick. I can still watch for him, and this way we’ll be closer to the door.”

Spock considers this, and arches an eyebrow, as if surprised. “Your logic is sound,” he says. “Very well.”

He rises gracefully from the booth, something Gaila has never seen a male of any species pull off
before, and offers Gaila his arm. She grasps his sleeve and springs to her feet with a giddy smile.

“If only you weren’t so taken that I could smell it from outside the bar,” she sighs playfully.

The corner of Spock’s mouth puckers in a badly-suppressed smile.

*  

“Where’s Jim?” bellows a voice in Gaila’s ear about twenty minutes later.

It’s Leonard, looking rumpled and worried.

Spock has just spun Gaila—or rather, his hand had hovered above hers while she twirled on tiptoe, giving the impression that he was spinning her, while they avoided skin to skin contact—and it takes her a moment to reach a complete standstill.

“I just saw him,” she says, dismayed. With every twirl, Gaila has been scanning the bar. She knows she’s seen Jim at least three times since she and Spock left their table, but now that Leonard’s asking, she can’t remember how long ago the last time was. “Spock!” she shouts, reaching out to tug at his jacket. “Where’s Jim?”

Spock’s head whips towards the northeast corner of the room, and his panic when he doesn’t spot Jim in his last known location is visible even to Leonard.

“Y’all two, check the restrooms,” Leonard orders, accustomed to taking charge whenever there’s any kind of crisis over Jim. “I’m gonna—check someplace else.”

“She’s going, and she can’t help thinking he shouldn’t go there alone.

“Just. Bathrooms, Gaila. Then come find me outside.” Leonard tears himself away.

She can tell that Spock wants to follow him, and so does Gaila for that matter, but she trusts Leonard’s judgment. “Come on,” she tells Spock, nudging at his back until he has no choice but to make a path through the crowd for them.

They sweep the tiny bathrooms in under 30 seconds and immediately start back towards the front of the bar.

“Not there,” calls Gaila, when Spock’s steps turn towards the main door. “Side door.” There is an alley outside where people smoke. And urinate. And fuck. And…other things.

Spock hasn’t even grasped the door handle before an explosion of vicious yelling and swearing becomes audible from the far end of the alley.

Spock nearly tears the latch out of the antique wood wrestling the door open, and Gaila runs after him, hot on his heels, as the echo of Leonard’s voice comes roaring towards them.

“You sonuvabitch, I oughtta kill you!” He screams so loud that his voice cracks. He sounds furious enough to cry.

When Gaila finally spots Leonard a second later, he’s weaving on his feet, clutching a bloody fist to his chest. A man lies on the damp pavement at his feet, groaning faintly.

A few feet away from them, slumped against the wall with a hand clamped to the side of his head, is Jim. His eyes are screwed up with pain, but Gaila looks at him and looks at him, and she doesn’t see any blood, no bones hanging at funny angles—nothing to explain why Jim looks like that, why he’s
breathing so hard, why he’s holding his skull like he has the worst headache—

“Gary was doing something to him when I got out here.” Leonard doesn’t look at anyone. His fists are clenched at his sides; he sounds wrecked. “He was hurting Jim. He had ahold of Jim’s face, and—and Jim was crying, he was begging Gary to stop—”

There is a moment of silence, into which falls the sound of a tiny, hitched breath.

“Jim.” In an eyeblink, Spock is at Jim’s side. He peels off his jacket and tries to wrap it around Jim’s shoulders, but as soon as Jim takes his hand off the wall he starts to list sideways. Spock catches him, holding him stable with one hand while getting the jacket on him with the other.

Spock leans close to Jim’s face, studying him, grazing the tips of his fingers lightly against Jim’s brow. He murmurs inaudible words in low, soothing tones. Gaila thinks some of them may be in Vulcan.

Gaila looks away, at the ground, where Gary’s face is just a groaning mask of blood. Leonard is still standing over him, like he’s afraid Gary might try for Jim again if he relaxes.

“I never hurt nobody that bad on purpose before,” says Leonard, so low only Gaila can hear him. “I never thought I could.”

The pain in Leonard’s voice is so raw that Gaila wants to throw up.

“Jim’s mind has been violated.” Spock’s voice cuts through the alley like the beam of a laser scope. “You did well to stop him by any means possible, Leonard. It would be ideal if Mitchell were rendered unconscious until Jim has recovered from his influence. Can he safely be sedated?”

Leonard begins trembling head to foot. “You gave Jim brain damage, you sorry sack of shit?” he hisses.

For a second, Gaila thinks Leonard is about to line his boot up with the side of Gary’s head. Then he breathes deeply: in and out, in and out.

“He’s fine, more or less,” he tells Spock. “I busted his nose up pretty good, but his only real problem is that he bounced his head when he hit the pavement. He didn’t lose consciousness, though, so sedation won’t hurt him. I just don’t make a habit of carrying hypos to the bar with me.”

“I’m guessing someone’s already called medics,” says Gaila. She can see at least five different people staring at them through the windows of the bar, three of whom are on their comms. “Security too, probably.”

Spock steps briskly from Jim’s side, bends down next to Gary, and reaches for his neck.

There is a jerk of his wrist, and an audible snap.

For a long moment, Gaila is not entirely certain that Spock didn’t just break Gary’s spine right in front of them. Nor is she entirely certain that she won’t be helping him dispose of the body, if that turns out to be the case.

“There may be damage to the collar bone,” Spock tells Leonard. “A…sometimes unavoidable side-effect of the nerve pinch.”

Spock rises and goes straight back to Jim, who is still hunched against the wall, hiding in the bulk of Spock’s jacket like a child with a blanket.

“Jim,” Spock says, ghosting the back of his hand over the fine, short hairs at Jim’s temple. “You can hear me now, so I ask you to heed my guidance. Do not strain yourself any further. The pain in your head will begin to ease soon, along with the sense of invasion. Allow the process to happen naturally. You cannot make it happen faster by trying harder. Relax.”

Gaila inches closer to Leonard, pressing against his side until Leonard turns and tugs her into his arms. He is comforting himself by comforting her, which is practically the only way people like Leonard ever get any comfort at all. She can feel him trembling, as if his rage from earlier is still searching for an outlet.

They are still standing there, all of them—Gaila and Leonard holding onto each other, Spock trying to make Jim invisible to prying eyes in the shadow of his arms—when campus Security arrives a few minutes later.

At first, the Security officers take one look at the state of Gary and try to arrest Leonard. But Spock rises to his full height and presents the ranking team member with his Starfleet identification, since he isn’t in uniform. Spock informs Security that, since he is assuming personal responsibility for all parties to appear before Captain Pike the next morning, any arrests are unnecessary.

It’s difficult for most people to argue with a commander, and no personnel on the scene appear interested in trying. Gary is whisked away in a med shuttle; Jim is released on the promise that he won’t spend the night alone.

“I must take Jim to see my father,” Spock says, rising with his arm firmly around Jim’s waist.

“What for?” says Leonard hoarsely.

Spock looks at Leonard. Then he looks at Gaila, for the first time since they ran out into the alley together. His mouth pinches with worry.

“Leonard,” says Spock. “Can I rely upon you to ensure that Gaila and Nyota reach their dormitory safely?”

Something inside Gaila cracks open with the weight of unexpected relief. She could get herself home, obviously—like, of course she could, but—

Leonard doesn’t bother replying aloud. Gaila thinks maybe he nods at Spock, but all she’s conscious of is the arm tightening around her waist.

Jimmy’s survived worse than this. Much worse. So has she. And if you have to, you can get through it without help—at least, she always could—

But it’s such a relief, being able to bury her face and her tears in Leonard’s shirt instead, for once.

“All right, darlin’,” Leonard says hoarsely. “All right, it’s gonna be fine now.”

Even though she’s not really sure if he’s talking to her, to Jim, or to himself, she tries very hard to believe him.
CW for the aftermath of off-screen (telepathic) assault which subtly triggers Gaila for other kinds of assault.
When the pain in his head forces Jim to open his eyes, he finds himself lying in an unfamiliar bed with Christopher Pike sitting in a chair next to him.

Immediately, Jim begins struggling to sit up, and just as quickly, Pike reaches out and sets a heavy hand on Jim’s shoulder.

“Slow,” he says, squashing some pillows down to support Jim’s back. “Slowly. That’s it. You’ve probably got the mother of all headaches. Here. Drink some water.”

Once Jim is leaning against the headboard, and Pike has finished fussing over the cushions like the world’s most awkward nursemaid, he presses a glass into Jim’s trembling hand and helps him lift it to his mouth without spilling.

Jim takes one sip and discovers that he is ravenously thirsty. He gulps half of the water while evaluating his surroundings. There are tapestries on the walls, and the velvet brocade blanket Jim is lying underneath weighs about 80 pounds. He’s pretty sure he was sweating in his sleep.

“Where the hell am I,” Jim rasps, “your secret boudoir?”

Pike’s mouth quirks up at the corner. Jim can see a spark of humor in his eyes, and more than a spark of relief. “I guess if you can still be a smart-ass, your brain can’t be all that damaged,” he says, leaning back a little.

Jim sets the water down, thinking fast. If Pike is here, someone must have called him. Which means that something must have happened. But Jim’s not even sure how he got here. Everything that happened after he and Nyota split up on the dance floor is a blur.

For a moment, at least. A few seconds later, it all comes rushing back.

There had been a familiar face, half-glimpsed in a crowd of bodies—Jim had panicked, stumbling outside for air—then there was a hand, clamping down on his jaw—and pressure, pain, terror, a scream that wouldn’t leave his mouth but still seemed to reverberate through his whole body.

Jim shoves at the heavy covers and pushes past Pike before the captain can stop him. He makes it to the en suite just in time to puke into the toilet, and not on the carpet.

Jim kneels on the cool tile floor, bracing himself against the wall. He has just enough energy to feel grateful that Pike is giving him space, instead of trying to be helpful.

By the time Jim stumbles back into the room with the tapestries, he’s thinking more clearly, and his surroundings—the décor, at least—seem a little more familiar.

“This is the Embassy, right?” says Jim, his throat burning. “I swear, I’m going to start having
nightmares about this place.”

“Spock made the call to bring you here,” says Pike. He sounds like he’s keeping his voice low for Jim’s sake, which Jim appreciates; the headache got a lot worse while his body was doing its best to turn itself inside out. “Starfleet Med doesn’t have a lot of resources for treating psychic injuries. Spock thinks his father can help, but they both said it was better to let you sleep as long as possible first.”

Jim looks down at himself. Just like the last time he woke up in the Vulcan Embassy without remembering how he got there, someone had removed his boots and jacket before putting him to bed.

He really hopes that it was Spock, and not Pike. Or Sarek. Or some random Vulcan with a newly-acquired fetish for Human feet, or something.

“How long was I down for?” he says.

“About two hours.” Pike gets up and guides Jim to a small sofa, making him sit. For the first time since Jim met him, he’s not in uniform, which gives Jim a better idea of how late it is, how quickly Pike must have taken action after receiving Spock’s call.

The dark jeans and fitted black t-shirt Pike is wearing underneath his leather jacket makes him look uncomfortably like the type of handsome older guy Jim used to pick up in cocktail bars when he couldn’t afford his own drinks. It isn’t the kind of thought that would ever cross Jim’s mind normally; he doesn’t seem to have a lot of filters at the moment, even in the privacy of his own head. Or the former privacy of his head.

Jim still doesn’t know what happened to him, exactly, but he feels kind of like he got fucked rough with no lube, only inside his skull.

He probably shouldn’t say that to Pike.

His mentor sighs and gives him a long look, fondness and exasperation and concern all jumbled together. “Why does trouble seem to love you, kid?” he says.

“It’s what the T stands for.” Jim can hear how macabre the worn-out joke sounds in his hoarse voice. “Uh, sorry you got dragged out of bed for this.”

Instead of serving back a witty retort, Pike just hands him another glass of water. There are three different water pitchers in the room, Jim has noticed. It’s a Vulcan thing, having to do with the symbolic value of water in their culture—an amenity offered to guests, like a mint on a hotel pillow.

“Take slower sips this time,” Pike tells him. “Don’t guzzle it.”

After Jim has swallowed enough to soothe his throat, Pike says, “I should tell Sarek you’re awake soon. Before I do that, though, I need to ask whether there’s anything you want to tell me. Privately.”

Jim knows what Pike is implying, but he doesn’t think—not like he can remember, exactly, not like a normal memory, but he’d got a pretty clear glimpse of the inside of Gary’s head before the pain washed everything away.

“Gary…had plans for me, but he didn’t get the chance,” says Jim, holding his glass in both hands and staring into the distance. “Bones got there, and…”
He shrugs. Then he screws his eyes shut. The pain is like a thick greasy smoke in his head; it feels the way the back rooms of shitty bars smell.

“Where’s Bones?” he says, when Pike doesn’t respond. “And Gaila? Gaila was…I think she was there. I don’t think she was…okay.”

“Last I heard, Leonard and Gaila were together. I got the impression he’s keeping an eye on her tonight.”

“Good.” If Bones can manage Jim at his lowest—and he’s proven, over and over, that he can—Gaila will be easy.

“He sent me two vidcom messages, both of which I have elected to delete, since I don’t want to have to present evidence against him if someone fishes Mitchell’s body out of the bay next week. Suffice it to say he’s upset, but he’s not injured. He didn’t give Mitchell the chance.” Pike lets out a small huff of laughter. “Laying Mitchell out with one punch like that—if every last one of his superiors wasn’t convinced that Leonard McCoy is the second coming of modern galactic medicine, I’d say he was wasted on med track.”

Jim knows that it’s supposed to be a compliment, but he remembers how Bones had sounded, screaming like he was in the kind of pain that medicine can’t heal. It was wrong, and it made Jim want to be sick again.

“He hates violence.” Tremors are starting in Jim’s hands again, so he puts the glass aside. “He’s only ever seen it from the other side, patching people up. I don’t think he’s ever hit someone outside combat training before.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Jim,” says Pike softly.

“Yeah.” Jim is clear on that. It doesn’t change the fact that shit like this never happened to Bones before they met.

“It wasn’t your fault. Listen to me.” Pike looks at him sternly. “Your friends care about you. You showed them the kind of loyalty you’re capable of, so they return it. I know that surprises you. I can even guess why. But it’s still true, and you know something else?”

Pike sighs, rubbing his hand over his mouth.

“Once you started at the Academy, I wasn’t surprised by your grades, or your performance. Given your intellect, and everything you had to survive just to make it to Starfleet, I expected excellence from you. What I didn’t expect, what I didn’t dare hope for, at least not this fast, was that you’d find family. I thought that would take years—maybe until you were posted to a starship. Instead, you came here, you looked at the people around you, and you drew the very best of them to your side. And that? That is harder than keeping top of your class three semesters in a row.”

The headache, Jim discovers, makes an excellent excuse for not replying to confusing, open-ended statements. He keeps his eyes shut.

“I don’t know everything about your past,” Pike continues. “But I know you’ve been on your own since you were old enough to operate a replicator by yourself. You don’t trust easily, and for good reason. But you’re going to be a captain one day, Jim. Being captain doesn’t mean having all the solutions all the time. It also means surrounding yourself with the kind of people who will have your back and help you find the solutions. You’ve achieved that, already, against incredible odds. And I’m…proud of you, Jim.”
Jim feels pretty sure that he’d be working his way up to a panic attack if Pike had sprung this on him any other day, but tonight, he’s frankly too tired.

He clears his throat. “You said Ambassador Sarek wanted to talk to me, sir?”

It’s a daunting idea, meeting Spock’s father—and not just because he’s a freaking planetary ambassador. Jim’s never met any of his friends’ parents before, let alone the parents of someone who…might want to be more than Jim’s friend.

“Yeah.” Pikes nods slowly. “First, though, I want to talk to you a little bit. About Spock.”

“What about him?” Jim says, croaking slightly,

Pike hesitates, like he’s picking his words carefully. “Did you and Spock know each other, at all, before Thursday night?”

“No, sir,” says Jim.

“Did you know he was taking you back to his apartment that night, instead of to your dorm?”

Jim casts his mind back, but that evening is pretty blurry. “I can’t remember exactly, but I think he must have told me. Or asked. I mean, when I woke up Friday, I wasn’t like, what the hell am I doing at Spock’s place? It was fine.”

“I know Leonard met you there pretty early the next morning.”

“Yeah. Spock made us breakfast, actually.” Jim scratches the back of his neck. “Friday morning was a little rough, but it wasn’t Spock’s fault. I, uh, found out he knew about the book, and I got kind of…unnecessarily freaked out over that. Bones was there, though, so he just gave me a hypo. I got over it pretty fast.”

Which is a lie, but Pike doesn’t need to know that.

“When I saw you two in that garden, it didn’t look like you were over anything,” says Pike flatly.

Jim’s head jerks towards Pike, startled. “You saw us?”

“I caught an eyeful. Then I about-faced and went to wait in my car. It looked like a private moment.” Pike pauses. “I’ve never seen Spock touch anyone it was absolutely necessary.”

Something miserable, coiled, and defensive in Jim unleashes itself. He knows Vulcans don’t touch people they aren’t close to. He also knows that Spock has touched him a lot, by Vulcan standards, and that he’s just…been letting it happen. Because Spock was there, and he seemed to want to, and Jim…

Jim is weak, in some ways.

“I guess he thought it was necessary,” he grunts.

“Don’t. Don’t be like that.” Pike’s tone of voice suggests that he knows exactly what Jim is thinking. “I’m only asking because…because two people I happen to care about very much somehow fell into each other’s orbits recently, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I’m just trying to understand how we got here.”

“I don’t know,” Jim admits. The couch is surprisingly comfortable, for Vulcan furniture, and he feels like he could go back to sleep if he tried, in spite of his throbbing head. “So much crazy shit
happened to me this week, you know? And Spock just happened to be around for most of it. He—I don’t know. We became friends, somehow. He’s smart, and funny, and interesting. Kind of insanely protective, admittedly, but I’m starting to think all my friends are a little insane.”

Pike gives him a steady look. “He has feelings for you.”

For a moment, Jim concentrates very hard on remembering to breathe.

“I know Spock’s interested in me,” he concedes, trying to keep his voice level, professional. “We hung out today. Played chess. It was nice. We talked some, and he…clarified his intentions. But we’ve only known each other for two days. Two intense days, admittedly.” Jim shrugs. “I’m not really sure Spock is motivated by feelings right now. Instinct, maybe.”

“Jim.” Pike leans forward, like he wants to make sure Jim is hearing him. “Right now, Spock is out there, trying to persuade his father to ask their clan matriarch to travel to Earth so she can evaluate the damage Mitchell did to you. Do you know who the head of Spock’s clan is? It’s T’Pau, Jim. And here’s the crazy part. The last time I was in there with them, Sarek was considering it.”

Jim feels a heavy weight start to form like a ball in his stomach. He presses his hands to his temples. “Sir, please tell me that you—you can’t let the Vulcan Ambassador bring the head of the High Council to Earth because of me. Please. I really need to hear you tell me that isn’t going to happen.”

When Jim was living on Vulcan, children younger than him used to whisper that T’Sai T’Pau didn’t even need to touch you to read your thoughts. Jim knows that isn’t true now, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t still terrified by the thought of having her to face her in the shape he’s in right now.

Pike huffs a small laugh. “I could persuade Sarek, maybe. Spock…I don’t know.”

“Then I’ll talk to Spock. He’ll calm down once he sees I’m fine.”

Pike gives him a sour look. “You are a lot of things, kid, but you are not fine. You’re in so much pain you’re sweating, and the only reason we’re having this conversation right now is because…” He stops, sighing. “I’m worried.”

“I have had headaches before, sir.”

“It’s more than a headache and you know it, but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then I’m sorry, I don’t know what we are talking about, Captain.”

Pike sighs and stands up, waving Jim back down automatically. He paces around a little and stops with his back to Jim.

“I’ve stood shoulder to shoulder with Spock on the bridge of a starship taking heavy Klingon fire, and never once seen him so much as arch an eyebrow. I’ve never even seen him unnerved, much less frantic. But right now, he’s…”

Pike shakes his head, gesturing vaguely with one hand. “I’m going light on McCoy for popping Mitchell in the face instead of waiting for Security, mostly because I’m damn glad he was there. More importantly, I’m glad that Leonard got there before Spock. Because I honestly don’t know what would have happened if Spock had found you first. I’m glad I didn’t have to find out.”

“It was an intense situation,” Jim demurs, or tries to.

“You’re not getting it.” Pike turns to face him again, his expression an unsettling mixture of authority
and uncertainty. “You want the truth? I think part of the reason Spock brought you here is because he knows Sarek is the only one who can stop him if he gets it in his head to walk into Starfleet Medical and snap Mitchell’s neck like he snapped his collar bone.”

Jim’s mouth falls open. “I… I don’t remember that.”

Pike continues like he hasn’t spoken. “The thing is, I’m only about eighty percent certain that Sarek would stop him. From what I’ve been able to gather, what Gary did to you is one of the most serious crimes a telepath can commit. At least, that’s how the other telepaths seem to feel about it.” He gestured toward the door, presumably indicating the rest of the Embassy and the Vulcans inside it. “When Spock was telling his father about you, he referred to you as his ‘intended’. Do you understand what that means?”

Jim knows exactly what it means. Just because T’Silla and Sakal lived in the middle of nowhere, it didn’t mean Jim never went into the cities, or talked with other Vulcans.

“Vulcans don’t make a lot of distinctions between an intended mate and a bonded mate,” he explains to Pike, dutifully, wearily. “Spock isn’t actually… courting me yet, though. He said he knew I wasn’t ready, that we should get to know each other first.”

“That was probably good enough for him before Mitchell assaulted you, but not anymore.” Pike’s mouth tightens. “If Spock decides that the only way he can protect you from Mitchell is with lethal force, Sarek can cover him with diplomatic immunity and ship him back to Vulcan before the body is cold.”

The shock is so intense that it makes Jim forget the pain in his head for a few seconds.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “I’m no Surakian, but even I can see the flaw in that logic.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Spock isn’t logical right now. And his father…” Pike scrubs a hand over his face. “I think maybe Vulcans aren’t all that logical when it comes to the people they care about. It’s looking like they’re pretty much like the rest of us, that way.”

“Sarek doesn’t care about me,” Jim declares bluntly. “He’s never even met me.”

“But he loves his son.”

Pike holds his gaze until Jim can’t bear it anymore. He ducks his head, resting his forehead in his hands.

“What do you want me to do?” he says roughly.

“I want to know what you want.” Pike takes a halting step towards him, then sits down on the couch again. “Son, please don’t shut down on me when I say this. I’m not trying to poke at old wounds, I’m just—”

“Worried,” Jim says, blinking irritably at the stinging in his eyes.

“About both of you. But you, more so. Always. Spock has a support system. You… have one too, but I worry sometimes that you don’t know it. That you won’t think to rely on your friends the way they rely on you.”

Jim looks at him, surprised. Pike’s face softens, and for a second Jim thinks Pike is going to touch him again, but he clasps his hands in his lap instead.
“Spock has a reputation for behaving like a walking computer, but that’s just his idea of professionalism. When it matters, he’s actually incredibly kind. Thoughtful, considerate. He may not always give you the reaction you’re looking for, but nothing you say to him is ever forgotten.” Pike smiles wryly. “And you don’t even realize it, until one day he walks into your ready room with a bottle of some stupid fizzy fruit drink you can only get on Starbase 5, because he remembered you mentioning that it was your favorite. Once. During a conversation you had two years ago.”

Pike adjusts his position very slightly, until his shoulder is brushing Jim’s. “Take it from someone who knows. The overwhelming force of Spock’s positive regard can make a person’s head spin. And that’s without taking into account—”

“How fucked up I am?” Jim tries not to sound bitter.

“If that’s how you choose to characterize the lingering effects of profound trauma, fine. I’m not here to argue semantics.” Pike looks at him across his shoulder. “Jim, you’ve been on your own since you were old enough to operate a replicator by yourself. You didn’t have people to look after you, to stand up for you when it mattered. And Spock knows that, or he’s figured it out. You could ask him for anything right now, and I’m not sure he’d be capable of refusing you. But if you do…get into this with him, I need to know that you understand what you’re getting into. That you’re not just trying to make him happy because you’re grateful, or flattered, or…”

“Overwhelmed,” Jim says quietly.

“Yeah. Exactly.”

“I’d appreciate if you would be frank with me, sir.” Jim looks steadily at Pike. “In your opinion, do I need to tell Spock, tonight, that we can only be friends, in order to keep him from throwing his career away, or starting some kind of interplanetary diplomatic clusterfuck?”

“Absolutely not. One, Spock is the only person responsible for Spock’s actions, present or future. No matter what he does, or what his reasons. I won’t have you believing otherwise. Two, no, I don’t think Spock is that far gone. Yet. I’m…slightly concerned about how he will react if Sarek finds that Mitchell’s injured you seriously. Just to soothe my own paranoia, there’s Security posted at the hospital, and I’ve had Spock’s visitor’s clearance to the whole of the Med plaza temporarily revoked.”

“Frankly, sir, if you really think Spock is capable of killing Gary while he’s lying defenseless in a hospital bed, I don’t want to be his ‘intended’ or his anything else.”

Jim didn’t stare Pike down deliberately. He was just too tired to adjust the position of his head.

“I did say it was just my paranoia, Jim,” says Pike, shrugging in concession. “That’s why they pay me the big bucks, you know. My finely honed paranoid instincts. But listen, interplanetary diplomacy aside, I don’t think you should decide anything important tonight. You’ve been assaulted and injured in ways we haven’t been able to assess yet. If Spock gets the bit between his teeth, I think between his father and I, we can talk him down. Spock listens to me, usually.”

“And Sarek can probably perform the neck pinch.”

“As Gary Mitchell will live to attest, Spock knows that move too.”

Pike’s tone of voice takes an unexpected turn for the sincere. “When I ask you to be mindful of what’s at stake here when you talk to Spock in a few minutes, it’s not because I think he’ll lose control and hurt someone. It’s because…Spock already sees his future when he looks at you. I know
it’s only been two days, and I agree, it’s crazy from a Human perspective. But, I think you of all people understand, that just because his feelings aren’t Human don’t mean that they aren’t valid. That you can’t trust them.”

Jim swallows, hard.

“You know,” says Pike, musingly, “apart from me, I think you’re the first real friend Spock’s made in Starfleet. That might be a good sign—that you could be good for each other.”

“Maybe.” Jim forces lightness into his voice. “But I can update your intel. He’s got plenty of friends now. I’m pretty sure Gaila adopted him tonight, they talked for like, an hour. And Uhura likes him, and likes looking at him, which I do not begrudge. Even Bones tolerates him pretty well, and you know that’s saying something.”

“I do.” Pike smiles, shaking his head to himself before he rises, wincing at the strain and creak of joints and muscles. “Okay. You ready for this?”

“As I’ll ever be, sir,” says Jim, forcing himself to his feet.

“No, sit back down. Sarek won’t mind—”

“Sir,” Jim interrupts as politely as he can, “since the situation is…delicate, I think it will really help if Spock sees me walk into that room on my own two feet. Proof of life, you might say.”

Pike hesitates, eyebrows grumping together. “By that reasoning, you realize, you’ll just make things worse if you happen to collapse in the hallway.”

“It’s a headache, Captain, not a broken leg.”

He heaves a huge sigh. “You are one stubborn pain in the ass, you know that?”

“I forget, occasionally, but then you always remind me again. Sir.”

Pike just shakes his head, then starts out of the room, Jim falling in behind him.

*

They pass a number of Vulcans on their way to Sarek’s office. They all stare as Jim and Pike walk past. For the most part, they’re staring at Jim, but Pike, he’s amused to note, turns a few heads as well.

Jim wonders if anyone’s yet mentioned to Pike that over the past week, his novel somehow got every Vulcan in the city hot and bothered re: the erotic merits of Human physiognomy.

If not, Jim wonders who he can pay to make sure that Pike never finds out.

Pike raps twice on the door of Sarek’s office, but it isn’t Sarek who opens the door. It’s Spock.

Spock, who looks haggard, white, and full of tense, brittle energy that seems to drain from his body the second his glittering his eyes move past Pike, to Jim.

“He’s, he’s, he’s, he’s, he’s…” he stammers, and before Jim knows it, Spock is neatly sidestepping their superior officer without acknowledgement, to close the gap between the two of them.

“Jim,” he breathes, and before Jim knows it, Spock is neatly sidestepping their superior officer without acknowledgement, to close the gap between the two of them.

Spock reaches for him with both hands, like he’s ready to pull Jim into his arms. But he catches himself at the last moment, and brings his hands to settle on Jim’s shoulders instead.
It’s the same way Spock tried to comfort him in the garden yesterday morning, mimicking a gesture that he knew would be safe because he’d watched Bones demonstrate it. And Jim knows, somehow, that Spock is restraining himself, for Jim’s sake, uncertain what right he has to touch Jim, so soon after…everything.

Jim is a creature of instinct. Always has been. Without wondering how it will look to Pike, or anyone else in the building, he leans into Spock’s grip, allowing most of his weight to rest in Spock’s hands. Then, without quite meaning to, he sags forward, bowing his head until his forehead is touching Spock’s chest.

Instantly, Spock’s arms clamp round him like bands of iron, carefully not crushing Jim in his hold.

“I…” Spock isn’t quite whispering, but his voice is very low and very close to Jim’s ear. “I feared—most irrationally—that you might not wake.”

“I’m all right,” says Jim. Not because he thinks Spock will believe him, any more than Pike had, but because he thinks that hearing the words might (illogically) comfort Spock anyway.

“You are not,” Spock breathes, his grip growing just a bit tighter. “But you will be. I shall ensure it, ashayam.”
Tell me about a part you liked and Spock will answer any question you have for him.

Sarek is much taller than Spock.

His hair is dark, with streaks of grey along the temples. He’s handsome, even elegant in his long embroidered robes, and just looking at him makes Jim want to stand up straighter and think serious thoughts.

His face is like Spock’s face, minus every trace of Humanity.

Earlier that morning—though their chess game feels like it happened a week ago now—Spock had told Jim that he was “very far” from being an “ideal Vulcan”.

At the time, Jim thought Spock was just talking about his illogical fondness for Terran literature. Now, he thinks he knows better.

Spock has one Human parent and one Vulcan parent. If Spock sees himself as a Vulcan first, if Vulcan is the standard he’s been trying to live up to his whole life, then of course, Sarek would be his role model.

But Jim only needs to take one look at father and son, facing each other in the corridor outside Sarek’s office, to understand the hopeless nature of the battle Spock is fighting.

Sarek doesn’t seem especially cold or forbidding by Vulcan standards. In fact, he reminds Jim slightly of Tudok, the Vulcan educator who began personally overseeing Jim’s remote learning program, once Jim started working ahead of his Vulcan peers in the curriculum. They have a similarly remote and scholarly air about them, gentle curiosity mixed with benign dignity. No doubt years of living on Earth, and being married to a Human, has worn the ambassador’s sharp edges down a little. There has to be a vein of real warmth in Sarek somewhere, or surely Spock’s mother wouldn’t have wanted to spend her life with him.

Even so, Sarek is so neutral, so effortlessly controlled, that his face looks like it might crack along the seams if he tried to smile.

Spock…isn’t like that at all.

Maybe Spock’s students do think of him as a walking computer, like Pike said, but Jim doubts any of them have interacted with enough Vulcans to have a basis for comparison.

The real difference between Spock and Sarek is that even when Spock is wearing that mask of Vulcan control, Jim can tell that it’s a mask. He can intuit the emotions that Spock is controlling based on the shape of the negative space created by their absence.

Compared to Sarek, Spock positively bleeds emotion. Differently from the way a non-hybrid Human would, but equally differently, Jim is beginning to suspect, from how a non-hybrid Vulcan would.
“Father.” Spock’s voice jolts Jim out of his reverie. He has released Jim from their embrace in order to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, but they are still practically touching. “May I present James Tiberius Kirk. Jim, this is Sarek, son of Skon, Vulcan Ambassador to Earth. My father.”

That’s it. Nothing about Jim’s Starfleet status, who his parents were, or why he’s here. But then, Spock and Pike probably told Sarek everything he needs to know while Jim was down for the count.

“All right,” says Jim, nodding to Sarek.

“It is an honor to meet you, Mr. Kirk,” says Sarek, surprising him. “Now that you are awake, we should not delay. Please join me in my office when you are ready.”

The ambassador turns without another word and disappears through the open door.

Jim nearly follows him, but at the last moment, he hesitates.

He finds himself looking questioningly, maybe pleadingly, at Spock. He’s not even certain what kind of reassurance he’s seeking, but Spock seems to read him with no difficulty.

“Sarek judged it wise to conduct his examination of your injuries in private,” Spock tells him. “I… deferred to his logic.”

Spock is averting his eyes, which suggests to Jim that Spock very much did not want to defer to Sarek’s logic, or anyone else’s, but is doing his best to restrain his dissatisfaction.

Pike, who had taken a discreet step back while introductions were taking place, speaks up. “It’s a delicate procedure,” he says, glancing very quickly at the office door, “at least, from what I understand. Sarek thinks you’ll be better off without distractions. But if you’re uncomfortable alone, we can—"

“No,” says Jim instantly. He’s not going to look like a coward in front of Spock’s father during their very first meeting. “I understand. It’s fine.” He swallows. “What…what’s the procedure?”

“During your time on Vulcan, did you learn anything of the kash-nohv?” Spock’s voice is softer, now that there is distance between him and Sarek.

Kash-nohv. The mind-meld. Jim’s read about it, but never seen it performed, and for good reason.

Abruptly, his heart starts pounding loudly in his ears.

“So, he’s.” Jim swallows. “Sarek wants to—"

“He will do nothing you do not wish him to do.” Spock cuts him off, his voice firm. “He will request your consent before taking any action, and if you do not give it, he will not reproach you for the refusal. What was done to you is a crime. Sarek will…accommodate your understandable sensitivity to further mental intrusion.”

“How can he do that and meld with me at the same time?” Jim looks at Spock, trying to ignore the way that Pike is studying him. Studying the two of them, together.

“It is best if my father explains what he wishes to do, and why. The psi-talent in my family line is strong, and Sarek has many more years of training and experience than I.”

Well, that answered Jim’s next, plaintive query, which was, Why can’t you just do it yourself?

“Jim, Starfleet doctors could scan your neural activity, but if there’s damage on the psi level, there’s
nothing they can do to fix it.” Pike gives him a grim smile. “Cheer up. At the very least, Sarek can probably take care of that monster headache of yours.”

“You are in pain?” says Spock, his voice gone high and sharp. He looks at Jim, white-faced. “Why have you said nothing?”

Jim just gives him a bewildered look. “I, uh…didn’t figure you’d have any aspirin on you.”

Spock’s nostrils flare irritably. Suddenly, he lifts a hand, and brushes his fingertips over Jim’s left temple.

Jim takes a quiet, startled breath, but he clamps down on the urge to jerk away.

“Permit me,” Spock says, his voice so low that Jim doubts Pike can hear. “Any sensation you may feel…should not be unpleasant.”

Not unpleasant. Jim might be hearing what he wants to hear, but that sounds like the way a reticent Vulcan might reassure a nervous Human that whatever he’s planning to do won’t hurt.

And Jim trusts Spock not to hurt him. He’s not sure how long that’s been the case, but now, in this moment, his feelings are clear to him.

Spock wouldn’t risk hurting anyone, if he could help it. Much less someone he regards as a…friend.

Jim wets his lips, then gives Spock a jerky nod.

Spock’s fingers press firmly, not painfully, into the side of Jim’s face. Jim shuts his eyes out of instinct and waits for…something. The sensation of ghostly fingers wiggling in jelly, perhaps.

Instead, Jim feels nothing. Literally nothing, save that the pain in his head begins to melt away, leaving a warm, spreading sensation of security and relief in its place.

Thirty seconds later, Jim opens his eyes again and stares into Spock’s warm, concerned gaze. “Holy shit,” he breathes, unable to look away.

Spock swallows, visibly relieved. He’s breathing a bit faster than normal, as though he was worried, or as though he had just exerted a great deal of effort without seeming to.

“You should find that the meld my father wishes to initiate with you is similarly non-invasive,” Spock says. “But if you become uncomfortable at any time, inform him, and he will adjust his approach.”

“Right. Okay.” Jim exhales slowly then squares his shoulders. “I’ll see you afterwards, I guess.”

“Spock and I will be waiting in the sitting room.” Pike gives a half-smile and squeezes his shoulder, before gathering Spock with his eye and setting off down the corridor.

Spock follows him, but pauses after a few steps, like he’s being tugged backwards by an invisible string. He turns around and touches the side of Jim’s face again.

It’s all Jim can do not to lean into the warm grip.

“Do not be afraid,” Spock says, firmly but quietly. “There is no one in this building who does not wish you well. I include Sarek in this.”

Jim nods, not trusting his voice. Spock looks into his eyes one last time, then executes a swift turn on
his heel and continues following Pike down the hallway. Jim watches him go until the sitting room door shuts behind him.

Then he turns, and walks into Sarek’s office.

Jim expects to find Sarek sitting behind his desk. Instinctively, Jim has decided to treat the ambassador as he would a Starfleet admiral, and that’s how an admiral would receive him.

Instead, Jim finds Sarek standing patiently in the middle of the room, his stance so similar to Spock’s that for a moment the similarities between the two Vulcans leaves Jim breathless.

Is this what Spock will look like in twenty years, or fifty? Jim can’t help but wonder.

Pike told him earlier that when Spock looked at Jim, he saw his own future. If that’s true, and if Jim decides he wants the same thing, then this stately elder Vulcan—Sarek, son of Skon, son of Solkar, of the House of Surak, tomasu to T’ai T’Pau—could be his father-in-law one day.

Jim isn’t sure how that makes him feel. His ability to imagine a future, any kind of future for himself, has always been limited. Probably because his self-estimated lifespan has never been higher than his present age plus five years.

That will have to change, though. If Jim decides that he wants what Spock wants, he’ll owe it to Spock to…try harder.

Bones thinks that Jim is scared of commitment, and he’s not entirely wrong; it just isn’t for the reasons Bones thinks. Jim doesn’t ever want to fail another person the way that his family failed him. He’d rather be alone the rest of his life than live with the knowledge that he’d done that to someone who loved him, someone he was supposed to take care of.

“Please be seated,” says Sarek, rescuing Jim from the rabbit hole of his thoughts. He indicates a long settee with a low back, against the wall.

They are off to one side, in a part of the spacious office that has been furnished for group meetings, or informal gatherings. The couch faces a semicircle of comfortable armchairs, and there is a low table in the center.

A steaming tea service sits on the table, on a burnished copper tray.

Jim, in obedient model cadet mode, sits on the couch, as he was instructed. Sarek joins him.

“Did you rest peacefully?” says the ambassador, leaning forward to pour the tea into two tiny clay cups.

Jim sniffs the air surreptitiously, and tries not to betray his relief that Sarek is serving them the spiced tea Jim actually enjoys, and not the tea that tastes like the red dust of Vulcan.

“Yes, sir,” he says, “I had a headache when I woke up, but it’s gone now. I’m fine, I think.”

Sarek tilts his head without averting his eyes from the teapot. “I meant to inquire whether your sleep was troubled by dreams.”

The problem with Jim being in model cadet mode is that he tends to avoid answering questions with specific answers whenever possible. It’s not even that he’s trying to be evasive; he just doesn’t like to give his superiors answers they didn’t want to hear, which is almost impossible when you’re not sure what they want.
“I wasn’t asleep long enough to do any dreaming,” Jim says. “It takes about three hours for Humans to enter the dream stage of their REM cycle. I was only out for about two.”

Sarek passes Jim a tea cup. The cup is cool to the touch, despite the steaming contents. Jim nods his thanks.

“My research into the matter suggests that the Human sleep cycle becomes irregular in the aftermath of traumatic events,” says Sarek blandly. “In such cases, it is not uncommon for memories of trauma to manifest as dreams within the first hour of sleep.”

…Okay, from now on, Jim is going to have to remember: Sarek is the same kind of scary-smart as Spock. Times however many years older than Spock he is.

Either Jim is going to have step up his bullshit, or just start telling the truth. Which, he can admit, will take a lot less energy.

Sarek drains his small cup of tea in a single swallow. “Spock described to me the condition in which he found you earlier this evening. His information is useful, but incomplete. I will be better able to assist you if you can provide me with a description of the assault as you experienced it.”

“It hurt,” says Jim shortly—not because he’s offended, but because that’s the first and most relevant fact. “I got the feeling that he was—prying. Trying to see things. And…he made me feel things. Remember things. Up here, I feel kind of…bruised?” Jim taps his head. “I can’t say I understand why, or how that would even work, but that’s the best way I know to describe it.”

He’s hoping that Sarek won’t ask him to go into further detail about which memories, exactly, Gary had been pawing at, or what kind of emotions it had triggered. If the ambassador intends to meld with him, he’ll probably see it for himself soon enough.

“Mr. Kirk.” Sarek is making a palpable effort to gentle his voice. He’s not as good at it as Spock, but Jim can still appreciate the intent. “The kae’at k’la’sa is one of the most reviled crimes known to Vulcan society. My son tells me that you speak Vulcan fluently. Are you familiar with this term?”

“No.” Jim’s heart starts pounding again. It’s the truth—he’s never heard the phrase before—but he knows the root words well enough to guess at a meaning.

“Standard lacks nuanced vocabulary for concepts related to telepathy,” says Sarek. “The nearest equivalent concept, however, is rape.”

Jim stands up so fast that he nearly drops his empty cup. Reflex allows him to catch it in his hand at the last second; he sets it on the tray with a clatter and takes a few paces away from the couch.

Sarek rises as well, but he remains by the sofa, watching him. Jim paces the office rapidly, struggling for control, and eventually comes to a halt next to an armchair.

His hands are trembling. He thinks he’s getting a headache again. Jim grips the back of the chair and forces himself to regulate his breathing.

Eventually, he risks glancing at Sarek, intending to apologize for the outburst.

But Sarek is watching him, not with annoyance, or even typical Vulcan blankness, but with open concern—maybe even just a hint of worry. Coming from a man who probably rations himself to five emotions a day, it’s startling enough to jerk Jim out of his downward spiral.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I was just surprised.”
Sarek frowns. “Apologies are unnecessary. You have suffered significantly this evening. Some reaction is only to be expected. Even Vulcans are prone to…outbursts, under these conditions. Please, come and be seated once more. For the next several hours you will find yourself prone to unexpected bouts of faintness and fatigue. Sustaining a physical injury would not improve your condition.”

Jim nods, staggering back to the sofa, half-collapsing against it. Sarek does not attempt to assist him, for which Jim is grateful. He does sit slightly closer to Jim, however, and Jim isn’t sure whether it’s intended as a gesture of support, or if Sarek is anticipating the possibility that he will need to restrain him if his “outbursts” become more violent.

“Before you joined me here, my son initiated a light meld with you to relieve your pain,” says Sarek, apparently deciding that there is no more time to be wasted. “When we meld, I will need to enter your mind on a deeper level than Spock did, though I do not believe you will be conscious of my presence. To use an analogy, I will be standing at a distance, surveying the shape of your mind as a whole.”

Jim nods. “Okay. What do you need me to do?”

“If possible, you should relax.”

“That is beyond my abilities at this time, Ambassador,” Jim says, switching to Vulcan.

Sarek blinks. “My son did not overstate your proficiency. Who instructed you?”

“My foster family and my teachers on Vulcan.”

“I know of only two instances in the last thirty years in which a Vulcan family fostered a Human child. You are James, the child from Tarsus IV.”

Had they been speaking in Standard, this would have been Jim’s cue to shut down. Mostly because Sarek is staring at him the same way everyone stares at Jim when the name of that fucking planet comes up in conversation. Like he’s looking at a ghost, someone who shouldn’t have survived, who shouldn’t be here.

But that was why Jim switched languages. Vulcan has the same dearth of vocabulary for emotional expression that Standard has for telepathy. Jim can only embarrass himself so much, as long as he’s speaking Vulcan.

“I was fostered by T’Silla, daughter of Prelok, and her bondmate Sakal, alongside their two daughters. I resided with them for thirteen months in their home on the eastern borders of the Plains of Gol.”

Sarek frowns, as if Jim has just said something troublingly illogical. “Did you leave the care of T’Silla and her family because your own family on Earth resumed caring for you?”

“No. At my request, Sakal arranged for an injunction to be filed against my step-father, which prevented him re-claiming custody of me.”

Sarek’s eyebrows do not unknit themselves. “On what grounds?”

“He was an unfit guardian.”

In Vulcan, a little nuance goes a long way. There’s no need to say anything else about Frank; Sarek now understands everything that is relevant.
“If he was unfit, why then were you not returned to the care of your Vulcan guardians?” says Sarek. He sounds, not stern, but official, like he’s using his ambassador voice.

“It was too late by the time the judge ruled on my case. I was already back on Earth, in Federation custody. Even if they’d wanted to foster me again, T’Silla’s family wasn’t…well off. They couldn’t just book passage on an interplanetary shuttle to come get me.”

There’s a reason Jim doesn’t usually talk about that year of his life. There’s a reason he doesn’t usually talk about his past, period. When he thinks too long about Vulcan, about his family there, the sensation of loss, of being utterly, helpless bereft, the way he’d felt as a teenager, comes flooding back over him. It makes him useless. It makes him weak.

“James.” There is a strange, sharp note in Sarek’s voice. Jim nearly flinches, except he can read Vulcans just well enough to understand that Sarek is conveying urgency, not anger. “If you are prepared, we should commence the meld now.”

Jim bites into lower lip until he forces himself to stop. “Ha, kevet-dutar.”

He holds his breath as Sarek’s hands rise to either side of his face. The ambassador’s fingertips, as they arrange themselves along Jim’s psi-points, are cold as ice.

He chants low in Vulcan, and then Jim is plunged into a deep dark ocean, something heavy clutching at his feet, dragging him below the surface.

*

“Spock.”

His father’s unexpected appearance in the doorway—94.3 minutes sooner than Spock had predicted—brings him to his feet in uncontrollable alarm.

It is small comfort that Captain Pike, who has been passing the time with him in a game of chess, reacts in a similar manner.

“What’s going on?” Pike says, his tone just short of a demand. “Is Jim okay?”

Sarek nods at Pike. “Mr. Kirk is unharmed, Captain, but he has need of my son. Sa-fu, come.”

Only the enormity of Spock’s respect for Captain Pike makes him hesitate long enough to give him a parting nod before he strides out of the room. His father is already walking ahead of him, but Spock catches up quickly.

“The meld?” he inquires.

“It did not unfold precisely as I intended.”

Coming from a telepath of Sarek’s ability, there was something chilling in that statement. Spock fights against outward reaction, even as fear makes his pulse quicken.

“There were complicating factors of which no one was aware,” Sarek continues. “James Kirk is not psi-null.”

Spock is so startled that he stops dead in the middle of the corridor. Sarek walks a pace or two more, then turns to face him.

It was logical that they should pause here, where Jim will not be disturbed by the conversation Spock
now finds it necessary to have with his father.

“What other complications existed?” he asks, as calmly as he can.

Sarek folds his hands into his wide sleeves and lifts his chin.

“In his mind, I found evidence of familial bonds—weak remnants of once-healthy connections with four telepathic individuals.”

Had a chair been available, Spock might well have chosen that moment to avail himself of it.

He is faint with horror, with self-disgust. Had he not particularly noted the raw, ragged pain in Jim’s voice, in his eyes, when he spoke of his time on Vulcan? Had Jim not confessed that he had written his novel as part of an effort to reconnect with his Vulcan past, only to discover the profound emotional consequences of confronting that loss?

All this evidence pointed in but one direction, yet Sarek had discovered in 43 minutes what Spock had been blind to for over 36 hours.

“You speak of his Vulcan foster family,” says Spock, his mouth very dry.

“That seems the only explanation, yes.” Sarek exhales, averting his eyes. “Until now, Mr. Kirk has not been consciously aware that the bonds ever existed, much less that they have been in place for many years.”

“But he is aware now,” Spock concludes. “And this is the reason for his distress?”

“Yes. And no.”

Spock quells the verdant rage swimming in his vision before he allows himself to say anything.

“Sa-mekh,” he says, through gritted teeth, “I request that you speak plainly.”

“Am I correct in believing that, at one time, Mr. Kirk shared a romantic connection with the man who attacked him tonight?”

Spock tastes bile, but he forces himself to disgorge the information. “Jim was romantically involved with Gary Mitchell for approximately four months, during his first year at Starfleet Academy. Mitchell abused him throughout their relationship. How is this relevant?”

Sarek’s face grows a shade paler, but he does not otherwise react.

“There is evidence that the bonding center of Mr. Kirk’s mind was tampered with, consistently, over a substantial period of time.”

Spock’s mouth falls open, but a second later he loses all memory of what he meant to say.

“I judge this Gary Mitchell to be an exceedingly powerful telepath, but so wholly untrained as to be incapable of disguising signs of his interference.” There is perceptible distaste in Sarek’s voice. “It has been more than a decade since Mr. Kirk was last in contact with his Vulcan family. By now, his familial bonds ought to be dormant, incapable of causing him further pain. Instead, I found that they were sensitive, agitated. I believe this to be Gary Mitchell’s doing. A trained telepath, even one with malicious intent, would not have needed to employ the same degree of force in order to achieve their purpose.”

“What purpose?” says Spock hoarsely. “What possible purpose, save to cause Jim suffering?”
“I can only conjecture. But given what I know of Mitchell’s character, he may have wished to retain Mr. Kirk as a mate after the point when Mr. Kirk would have dissolved the relationship.”

“I—how is this possible?” Spock has not stuttered in front of his father since he was five years old.

“A languishing familial bond, like Mr. Kirk’s, creates profound sensations of loss, as well as a… childlike hunger for closeness. These needs cannot be sated, unless the bond either grows dormant, or else is fully restored.” The thunderous placement of his father’s eyebrows bespeaks his distaste for what he is compelled to say. “I believe that Mitchell exploited this weakness in order to make Mr. Kirk emotionally reliant upon him. He is sufficiently telepathically receptive that Mitchell may have ensured his compliance through both means. By ensuring that Mr. Kirk felt the loss of his bonds, he was rendered vulnerable to—”

“There is no need to explain further.” Spock spins on his heel and walks away from his father. He gets as far as a table with a decorative vase that he would dearly love to smash against the wall, before he turns and walks back.

“What can be done for Jim?” he says, his voice toneless.

Sarek nods, as though he approves of the question. “I have constructed a temporary shield around the bonding center of Mr. Kirk’s mind. He is capable of dismantling it himself, but I advised him against doing so. For as long as it lasts, it will protect him from further assault of this kind. It will also spare him the pain of the sensitized bond.”

Sarek resumes walking, and Spock follows, now agonizingly conscious of every millimeter separating him from Jim.

“Once Mr. Kirk has…recovered, he will no longer be so vulnerable to emotional manipulation. He possesses impressive mental discipline, for a Human. He will find it easier to maintain his balance with the shield in place.”

“His balance?” Spock says.

His father looks mildly surprised. “Since you became acquainted with James Kirk, have you not found his emotions to be erratic?”

There is nothing illogical, nor even insulting, in Sarek’s words, and there is no reason, therefore, for Spock to bristle defensively.

“I suppose that they might be described as such,” he says, his voice clipped. “But there have been inarguable mitigating circumstances in each instance of diminished emotional control. Furthermore, Jim is remarkably resilient, and though he is susceptible to anxiety attacks, he is also capable of centering himself again with only minor assistance, of the kind which all Humans require.”

The corner of his father’s mouth turns inward by a fraction. “You speak of affection,” he says. “Physical contact.”

“Indeed.” Spock’s shoulders stiffen. “His friend and physician, Leonard McCoy, employs an integrated approach to treat Jim’s anxious outbursts. A combination of drug therapies and…as you say, affectionate contact. I have witnessed its effectiveness first hand.”

They have reached the door of Sarek’s office. It is, to Spock’s surprise, and sudden gratitude, locked.

There had been little time, before Jim awakened, to offer his father a truly adequate explanation of Spock’s personal investment in Jim’s well-being. But his actions, it seems, and perhaps his choice of words as well, had been correctly interpreted by Sarek nonetheless.
He has, it seems, accepted Jim as Spock’s intended bondmate, and at the same time accepted the traditional familial obligation to protect Jim as if he were his own son.

“As this Dr. McCoy is not present,” says Sarek, inputting his security clearance, “I suggest that you supply your intended with the efficacious treatment which he now requires.”

The door is open before Spock is able to fully process the fact that his father has essentially ordered him to go and...cuddle Jim.

“I shall leave the two of you in privacy,” says Sarek, reinforcing the hint. “I believe Captain Pike is waiting impatiently for news of his protégé. If you require anything, inform me at once.”

Spock steps toward the door, then turns back to Sarek. “I thank you, Father.”

“Thanks are illogical.” Sarek’s expression grows placid. “I have seen into Jim’s mind. Truly, he is...a remarkable young being. A challenge, perhaps, but nothing more easily obtained would suit you, I believe. In any case, I can find nothing to object to in your choice. He would be a credit to our family.”

For the next several seconds, Spock finds himself in the unenviable position of one who cannot cease gaping at his father.

Sarek turns, leaving Spock without an audience for his lapse in control.

“Your mother will expect an introduction soon,” Sarek calls from down the corridor.

Spock blinks and shakes his head. Then he steps through the office door, watching as the security lock pad turns from green to red. The door will open from the inside, but not from without.

He turns, then, casting his gaze across the small room, to find Jim lying on a sofa that is too short for his legs. His body lies at an angle, hips thirty degrees from the back of the upholstery.

Jim has thrown his arm over his eyes, probably to block out light. The expressive lower half of his face, including his lips, is exposed and vulnerable.

Spock takes a deep breath, in and out, and Jim lifts his arm. “Ambassador?” he says weakly.

“No, k’diwa,” he says, crossing the room in three strides to kneel at the sofa, next to Jim’s head. “It is I.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter was REALLY DIFFICULT TO WRITE.

It is the chapter many of you have been asking for, ie, a chapter in which Jim and Spock are alone, talking about their feelings, and [SPOILER] nothing bad happens to anyone. Like, what the actual fuck.

Plus, I had another dental procedure so...this was hard work. Please continue to reward me with your comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The following week, between the hours of 00:00 Monday night and 07:00 Monday morning, Gary Mitchell vanishes from Starfleet Medical. The exact timeline of the disappearance is impossible to establish, and relevant security footage from the hospital has been tampered with. There are no witnesses. The doctors who have been supervising Mitchell’s induced medical coma are baffled.

Captain Pike has no answers, or at least none he is willing to share with Spock. Which is infuriating—inasmuch as Spock is capable of harboring such sentiments towards a man he respects so highly—but more so is the fact that Jim, still on medical leave, appears neither surprised nor especially perturbed by Mitchell’s escape. Rather, it is as if he has been waiting for such news. Spock cannot tell whether Jim credits Mitchell with being impossible to contain, or whether he simply has no faith in Starfleet’s ability to secure him. In either case, he betrays no outward sign of increased anxiety.

Spock attempts to make allowances for the fact that depression, which restricts emotional affect in Humans, is to be anticipated in a survivor of traumatic assault. But this is not the first time Spock has noticed that Jim has rather low expectations of the organization he has vowed to serve with his life. Nor has Spock forgotten that Jim spent a portion of his adolescence aboard a Starfleet vessel, for reasons he has not yet seen fit to explain.

These two data points, taken together, suggest that Jim’s experiences with Starfleet prior to his admission to the Academy have given him reason to doubt that the loyalty Starfleet demands of its officers will ever be returned to him in full measure. Yet try as he might, Spock cannot imagine what those experiences must have been.

There are a limited number of scenarios in which the crew of a Federation starship would bring a child aboard. There is no precedent, to the best of Spock’s knowledge, for keeping a child aboard a starship for an indefinite period of time, merely because suitable guardians could not be found.

Spock does not press him for an explanation, because Jim has already indicated that he may be willing to share that story with him—one day. And Spock would rather gain Jim’s trust than circumvent him by researching possible answers on his own. Still, it is difficult to manage the tumult of his own emotional reactions to Jim’s distress when Jim is barely willing to acknowledge that there is any cause for said distress.

It is just as well that Jim’s physical condition prevents him being returned to active duty immediately. Though Spock trusts his father’s expert assessment that Jim will recover completely from Mitchell’s
attack, Jim remains almost unnaturally detached from the reality of his circumstances. To put it bluntly, Spock does not feel he can currently rely on Jim to be as vigilant with regards to his own safety as he should be. It would be more than Spock could bear to think of him wandering unaccompanied across campus in such a state while Mitchell’s whereabouts are still unknown. It is difficult enough to know that Jim is spending most of his convalescence alone and vulnerable in his room, guarded by nothing more than the bored ensign manning the Security cubicle at his dormitory, and a standard set of passcodes on his door.

Ruthlessly, Spock prunes his schedule of every expendable commitment—chess club, study groups, even the hours he normally devotes to his personal research—but he is still a Starfleet instructor, with duties he cannot rearrange or abandon. Every moment he can make available, he spends in proximity to Jim, but it is not enough to quell the anxiety that haunts him when they are separated.

At length, the strain is too much even for Spock’s self-discipline. On Thursday night, after he has dismissed his evening lecture, he takes his hovercar to the Embassy and approaches his father with a most unprofessional request: that Sarek use his superior security clearance to look into the circumstances surrounding Mitchell’s escape.

Which is how Spock learns that Mitchell has not, in fact, escaped at all.

Rather, he has been transferred, secretly, under heavy guard, from Starfleet Medical Center to a Vulcan medical vessel. The ship is presently en route to a highly secure facility which specializes in the treatment of telepathic patients. There, surrounded by Vulcan healers from whom he cannot conceal dishonest motives or malicious intentions, Mitchell will either be rehabilitated, or he will spend the rest of his life among those who are equipped to protect others from his anti-social tendencies.

The transfer orders, Sarek informs Spock, were issued by Captain Pike—at Sarek’s request. The captain, well aware that Starfleet is not equipped to control Mitchell indefinitely, had quickly acceded to Sarek’s logic that a telepathic race should assume responsibility for a telepathic prisoner, out of duty to the Federation.

Duty to the Federation or no, Spock highly doubts that Sarek would have taken it upon himself to intervene in Starfleet’s affairs, if Mitchell did not pose an ongoing threat to Jim. As matters stand, however, Jim represents the future of Sarek’s clan. It is thus only logical for Sarek to approach Pike with a…diplomatic solution to the problem of keeping Mitchell contained.

Vulcans do not thank other Vulcans for doing what is logically to be expected of them, so Spock does not express his gratitude to Sarek. But his relief is impossible to disguise, and his gratitude increases when Sarek does not choose to comment upon it.

The next evening is a Friday—six days since the attack, the last academic day before Jim is medically cleared to return to normal duty. Spock asks Jim over text to join him for a private dinner at his apartment. Due to the demands of his schedule, he had found it more convenient to visit Jim at his dormitory while he was still convalescing, so this is the first such invitation he has ever issued. Jim accepts, on the condition that Spock not pick him up, but instead allow him to make his own way from campus to Spock’s home. Grudgingly, Spock accepts his terms.

Spock is not adept in the preparation of Earth-based cuisines, and he is unwilling to experiment when Jim has so many allergies to be wary of, so he orders delivery from a restaurant he knows Jim particularly likes. Jim arrives thirty minutes before the food does, and they embrace briefly at the door. Jim had introduced this element of intimacy into their relationship, and though it is increasingly difficult for Spock to relinquish his hold on Jim after the customary few seconds of contact, his
control is still intact.

Marginally.

When the food arrives, they spread the cartons out over Spock’s table, and Spock ignores the irrational fear that Jim will bolt from the premises again, as he had done the last time they shared a meal in this kitchen.

While Jim winds noodles around his fork, Spock tells him of his conversation with Sarek, explaining why Mitchell had appeared to vanish from Starfleet premises, and the nature of his present whereabouts. Jim listens quietly, and does not eat until Spock has finished.

“Why would your father do something like that?” he says finally, after taking a single bite and chewing for longer than strictly necessary.

Spock thinks carefully about how best to answer. “Sarek respects you highly,” he says.

“I spent an hour with the ambassador, and we didn’t talk about anything except—what happened.”

“Nevertheless,” Asking Jim to accept that his worth is self-evident to anyone who has interacted with him on a more than superficial level is a losing battle. Spock will reserve his energies on that score for a more tactical moment.

“So he’s really gone.” Jim’s face remains oddly expressionless. “Or at least, we won’t be seeing him again for a while.”

“He is gone,” says Spock, restraining the urge to assure Jim that he will never see Mitchell again, regardless of what measures must be undertaken to ensure it. “Prodigious though his abilities may be, he is no match for the faculty of a Vulcan medical institution. I believe we may regard him as safely dealt with.”

Jim nods. Which is an acceptable response, but Spock cannot help but attempt to coax something more from him.

“Are you…displeased?” he ventures.

“No.” Jim looks up at him, surprised. “No, it sounds like an ideal solution, under the circumstances. I didn’t even think about a Vulcan hospital. It was…really good of your father to help him.”

Spock’s nostrils flare. “I do not believe Mitchell’s wellbeing was foremost in his concerns.”

“Maybe not. It’s still better than keeping him in a coma until he dies of old age, and Bones said that was the best idea anyone at Medical had come up with so far.”

“Agreed.”

Spock bites down on his protest when Jim pushes his barely-touched carton of spiced noodles away. He is still unusually pale, but his headaches are controllable with hypos now, and his sleeping patterns, according to Leonard, have more or less returned to normal.

“I will make tea,” says Spock, rising from the table. He snatches a carton out of Jim’s hand when he attempts to clear the remnants of their dinner away. “Please rest in the living room. I will join you shortly.”

Jim rolls his eyes, but they have had enough arguments recently regarding Spock’s desire to be of
assistance vs. Jim’s distaste for being assisted for Jim to understand the futility of re-engaging the conflict. He retreats to the other room.

Satisfied, Spock gathers and refrigerates the leftovers while the water boils for tea.

He carries the tray into the next room to find Jim sitting upright, with his eyes shut and his head tilted to rest against the back of the sofa. Recognizing the signs of incipient headache, Spock sets the tray down and produces from his pocket one of several hypos that have been entrusted to him by Leonard for this precise purpose.

Jim’s eyes open abruptly as Spock touches the point of the hypo to the side of his neck. He sends an ineffectual glare Spock’s way, and Spock reflects that there is something very satisfying about circumventing Jim’s irrational insistence upon self-sufficiency. Perhaps that is why Leonard seems to take delight in administering most of his medications by stealth.

Spock takes his seat on the sofa. Normally, he leaves some room between the two of them—enough to be respectful of Jim’s boundaries, while still implying that he is welcome to breach those boundaries, should he wish to.

Today, however, Spock sits close enough for their knees to bump together, and is encouraged when Jim does not startle or pull away.

“Your head?” he says, and Jim nods, very slightly. “Leonard’s opinion is that you are no longer suffering the effects of the assault. Rather, he believes your most recent headaches to be ‘stress-induced’. If you would permit me, I may be able to assist. Physical contact is required, however.”

“Uh, sure, that’s fine.” Jim looks slightly bewildered, but not wary, and complies with Spock’s request that he lie face down on the sofa.

Spock, kneeling on the floor beside Jim, arranges his fingers over the taut muscles that run upwards from Jim’s trapezius to the back of his neck. In order to manipulate them, Spock must exert more of his strength than he would typically dare employ against any Human, much less Jim. But the muscles are stiff, resistant, and in order to make them relax, some force is necessary.

“Ah, okay, okay.” Jim leans up on his elbows, breathing heavily, and meets Spock’s startled eyes. “That really hurts.”

Appalled, Spock snatches his hands back. “Jim, I am sorry—”

“No, that’s, uh, normal, actually. It’s my own fault—I haven’t been to the gym all week, so I haven’t been stretching like I should.” Jim takes a deep breath. “I’m probably going to make funny noises, but don’t stop, all right? Trust me, a little pain is worth it.”

Spock is not certain he trusts Jim’s reasoning, but his muscles are indisputably tight and knotted, and Jim presumably knows his body well enough to judge how much force he can withstand without injury. So when Jim flops back down onto the sofa, Spock digs the points of his fingers into his back.

He is incapable of ignoring Jim’s high, startled groan of pain. Equally incapable of not being affected by the way Jim begins to writhe under his hands, moaning like something tortured and hungry and needy all at once. But eventually, as Jim had promised, the pain seems to give way, leaving him in a state of dumb, utter relaxation.

Spock can feel the change through their points of contact, but he continues to grab greedy handfuls of Jim’s flesh, irrationally pleased by the way his hands, which have worked their way underneath
Jim’s shirt, leave bright white imprints against flushed pink skin.

Jim’s erotic appeal is…profound under these conditions, but Spock’s self-control still does not lapse. Nonetheless, it might be argued that Spock is, in a sense, taking advantage of him. Certainly, if anyone other than Spock were touching Jim this way, Spock would think so.

Already, he has begun to regard Jim as his. For Spock to allow himself to grow any more attached, without first seeking some sign of requital, would be…irresponsible.

“Jim,” says Spock, drawing away reluctantly from the feast at his fingertips. “May I ask you to resume an upright position? There is something I wish to discuss with you, and it cannot wait.”

“Um. Okay. Just—give me a second. I’m kinda wrung out.”

Spock forces himself to keep his hands at his sides as Jim slowly pulls his shirt back down and turns to face him. “What’s up?”

He takes a deep breath. “I wish to request your permission to initiate a period of formal courtship between us.”

The sudden stillness that overtakes Jim’s posture might have gone unnoticed by someone who has studied him less closely than Spock. But the red flush that highlights his cheekbones would be apparent to even the casual observer.

“Can you…” Jim rubs at his eyes. “Is it okay if I ask what that means, exactly?”

It is a reasonable and intelligent question. Coming from the author of K’diwa, however, Spock finds it surprising. He had simply assumed that Jim was either acquainted with a courting couple while he was a child on Vulcan, or that he had learned enough about Vulcan custom during that period of his life to accurately extrapolate beyond the limits of his experience.

“At the moment, we are friends,” Spock explains carefully. “As such, we socialize regularly, pursue common interests, and have a significant mutual investment in each other’s wellbeing. I have also made you aware that my emotions are…more deeply engaged, where you are concerned. You have been tolerant of this fact, and not retreated from our friendship in response.”

Impossibly, Jim’s flush deepens to a vivid scarlet, like sunburn. “Well, no. I…I guess I kind of knew you were interested, but that would never make me stop being your friend, Spock.”

“To describe my feelings for you as mere interest is to tread narrowly on the border dividing understatement from falsehood.” Spock looks at his shoes, too distracted by the innocent widening of Jim’s eyes to sustain a narrative while looking at them.

“I wish to court you, not because I am dissatisfied with our friendship, but because I wish to be a figure of even more significance to you. I am already certain that a committed romantic connection between us would be successful, and add immeasurably to our mutual personal happiness. I know that you do not yet return the fullness of my regard, but this courtship, if you permit it to progress, will allow me the opportunity to prove myself worthy of your esteem.”

Silence follows. When Spock can stand it no longer, he forces himself to tear his gaze away from his footwear and examine Jim’s reaction.

Unfortunately for him, Jim is biting his lower lip, a gesture which inevitably makes Spock’s fingers twitch with the desire to protect the bruised flesh from further abuse.
“And what about me?” Jim says. His voice is hoarse, but his eyes are wide and impossibly young looking. “What do I need to prove?”

“Nothing.” Spock reaches out and grips Jim’s forearms; to ground him, to possess him, it is no longer possible to tell the difference. “I have failed to make myself clear. In my eyes, you are already all that could be wanted. You are the choice I have made. My endeavor, if you allow it, is to persuade you to choose me in return.”

Jim’s chest heaves twice, his breathing fast enough that Spock frantically begins a mental catalogue of the anxiolytic hypos remaining from Leonard McCoy’s last visit.

“Okay,” he says. “So you’re…serious about this.”

“Deathly,” says Spock, without hesitation. “As I explained to you during our first chess game, I conceived an ardent curiosity to know more about you before I knew you as anything but the creative force behind K’diwa. Then, mere moments after your identity was confirmed to me by Gaila and Nyota, I was informed that other Vulcans had taken possession of you while you were in a defenseless condition. I found myself…overwhelmed by a protective impulse more powerful than I have ever felt towards any other person.”

Spock turns his face aside and forces himself to disregard the risk he is taking by speaking so frankly.

“As you depicted with such artistry in your novel, Vulcans—particularly, though by no means exclusively, male Vulcans—are territorial towards their mates. Once I became conscious of the fact that my peace of mind had become inextricably intertwined with your continued safety and happiness, there was no longer any point in denying my own wishes. All that remained was to make those wishes explicitly known to you, in the hopes that they are not fundamentally incompatible with your own desires.”

Jim stares at him. Then, quite unexpectedly, he laughs.

“Jesus.” Bright blue eyes peer at him through the half-lighting. “So you’re telling me that all that stuff I wrote in my story—like, Stoval wanting to crush Ophelia’s frail human bod in his strong Vulcan arms—that’s…real?”

Spock is aware that there is a difference between teasing and mockery, and that Jim is engaging in the former, at his own expense as much as Spock’s. Nonetheless, he cannot help responding slightly in the defensive.

“Under ordinary circumstances, Stoval’s possessiveness towards his Human mate would be considered…an extreme reaction,” he says stiffly. “The circumstances, however, are very far from ordinary. Ophelia is being pursued by Orion agents who wish to kill or enslave her. Moreover, she cannot so much as set foot in a drinking establishment without attracting the attention of unsavory characters who find her desirable and attempt to take advantage of her physical frailty. It is this, far more than any aspect of Ophelia’s pleasing appearance, which would provoke an unbonded Vulcan such as Stoval to regard her as rightfully his own.”

Jim’s expression sobers as he listens to Spock.

“You said the circumstances were ‘very far from ordinary’. And yet, here we are.” His expression turns wry. “So is this a case of life imitating art, or art imitating life?”

Spock blinks. “I do not understand.”

Jim shrugs. “Stoval’s reaction is extreme because he gets caught up in, let’s say, extreme
circumstances. But the circumstances aren’t all that far out of the ordinary for Ophelia.”

“Are they not?”

“Not if you read between the lines. I mean, think about it. The slavers are chasing her because she helped Arria and her sisters escape when she was just a teenager. And creeps have been pushing her around in bars since she was old enough to go to bars. She’s never had family or friends she could rely on. Her whole life has been like this.” Jim waves indistinctly. “It only seems extreme to Stoval because it’s all new to him. He’s brilliant, but he’s sheltered—hell, he’d never even been off-planet before that linguistics conference at the start of the book.”

Spock draws a short, sharp breath, as Jim’s words take on new dimensions of meaning.

“Certainly, Stoval has led a privileged existence,” he acknowledges. “But surely you would not argue that Ophelia’s life is typical of a young Human female whose profession is ‘poet’.”

“Anyone can be a poet,” Jim says dismissively. “But my point, actually, is that there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ existence—for Humans, Vulcans, or anyone else. Everyone’s circumstances are unique. Anyone’s life can change drastically in a snap of the fingers. Me, for instance.”

Jim leans back against the sofa, and Spock, reluctantly, releases his hold on Jim’s wrists. “I joined Starfleet. Had no idea I was going to do it until about an hour before I rode my bike up to the recruit shuttle. It changed everything. Now I’ve got friends, and a future to plan for. I’m still not a ‘typical’ Starfleet cadet, though. I’m too old, too damaged.”

Before Spock can open his mouth to argue any of these points, Jim plunges on. Spock is beginning to suspect that, though Jim is certainly not babbling, he is nonetheless becoming hyperverbal, as an anxiety response.

“Did I ever tell you what made me write K’diwa in the first place?”

Spock shakes his head. “I believe you mentioned something about a dare.”

“Yeah. Me and Bones and...the rest of the study group were kicking back one evening, and we got talking about other jobs we’d had before the Academy. It was a pretty boring conversation, to be honest. Most people who join Starfleet grow up knowing that’s what they want to do, so they’re basically professional students. Uhura’s a good example of that—not that she doesn’t have street smarts, but school’s been her whole life. Bones has never had a job that wasn’t related to medicine. Gaila’s never had what we would think of as a job, apart from waiting tables during the summer sessions. And then there was me. I’ve had tons of jobs. One of them…”

Jim smiles, the corner of his mouth trembling like he is restraining laughter. “One of them was writing erotic interspecies fiction for an online literary magazine. Two hundred credits per five thousand words. Shitty pay, but it was fun, and I could do it anywhere.”

Spock clamps down on the immediate instinct to demand the name of said literary magazine. “I take it that one or more of your friends doubted the veracity of your claim.”

“Uhura. Yeah. Told me to my face that she didn’t believe me. So, I wrote ten pages and texted them to her right in the middle of our History of the Federation lecture.” Jim grins widely. “The look on her face was priceless.”

For a moment, Spock contemplates how different the present landscape of his life would be if Nyota Uhura were not uniquely capable of agitating Jim Kirk into taking rash action.
Jim’s smile slips away, and he leans forward, resting his elbows in his knees. He looks at Spock for a long moment, as though searching his face for the answer to an unknown question.

“I’m not Ophelia,” he says. “But I didn’t make her up out of nothing, either. I have more history than a lot of Humans my age. Humans from the core Federation worlds, anyway. And…I mean, my life is different now. But Gary still happened. Stuff like Gary never really…stopped happening to me.”

Spock flinches, but Jim does not blink. “At the end of the book, I sent Stoval and Ophelia home to Vulcan because I wanted them to have a happy ending. I wanted them safe, stable, boring even. But…honestly, I’ve wondered. What if Stoval changed his mind? Would Ophelia even be attractive to him when he’s not saving her life all the time? The world can look really different when you’re not seeing it through a constant haze of adrenaline.”

Spock’s heart thumps loudly in his side. Though on the surface it would appear that they are having a civilized discussion about literature, he is fully aware that it has become a mere screen for their own situation. It is crucial that he choose his words with the utmost care.

“I cannot speak for Stoval, as he is a fictional character of your creation,” he says. “Speaking as myself, however, I can say confidently that I would relish a period of…boredom, as you put it.”

Jim ducks his head, laughing slightly. Spock cannot help giving him a small smile in return.

“Though the jeopardy which seems to follow you has acted as a catalyst for the rapid clarification of my own emotions, I do not regard it as necessary to the success of our courtship,” he continues earnestly. “I would see you safe, above all things. I would…welcome the chance to know you, and have you know me, under circumstances in which our feelings are not artificially heightened due to our biological stress responses. I certainly do not anticipate that my regard for you would lessen. Nor, I hope, would I damage my own chances of persuading you to accept my suit merely because my vigilance on your behalf is no longer crucial to your safety.”

For a long moment afterwards, Jim does not reply. He takes several deep breaths; to Spock, it appears that he is attempting to gather his nerve.

“Spock,” he says. “That’s…not really necessary.”

Both of Spock’s eyebrows arch to his hairline. “What is not necessary?”

“Persuading me.” Jim does not meet his eyes. “I’m, uh, pretty persuaded already. I mean, I still need time—we’ve only known each other for a week. But…you don’t have to make any kind of effort to win me over.” His laugh, this time, is self-deprecating. “I never worried about Ophelia changing her mind, you know?”

Slowly, careful to telegraph his movements, Spock reaches out and cups either side of Jim’s face with his hands. He feels moisture beneath his palms—tears, hidden from view in the dim light.

“Have you an answer for me, then?” Spock whispers.

“Yes. No. Yes—Jesus, Spock.” Jim wipes clumsily at his face. “How are you even real? I mean—sometimes I honestly don’t think I deserve you, you know? You’re too good.”

Spock makes a low, pained noise and leans in, touching his forehead to Jim’s.

“This,” he whispers, his lips within a hair’s breadth of Jim’s skin. “This is precisely the problem.”

Jim wraps his arms around Spock’s ribs, planting his face against Spock’s shoulder, where he fits
like he belongs. Shudders begin to wrack his body.

There is so much contact between them that their clothing becomes irrelevant; to Spock, it is as if Jim is broadcasting his thoughts in the clear.

Spock learns that he is the first person Jim has been emotionally intimate with since he terminated his association with Gary Mitchell almost a year earlier. More faintly, he receives the impression that Jim has often been hurt or harmed by persons who have touched him in this manner—that this has been the case for many years, since Jim was far too young for any intimate contact to be voluntary. There are only two people who have ever touched him with both regularity and kindness: Leonard first, then Gaila.

Jim has not known either of them for longer than eighteen months.

Spock hears a choked cry, only belatedly realizing that it has come from his own mouth. That is decades, that is a lifetime without affectionate contact, something that Humans require like adequate nutrition.

He does not pause to think his options through logically before bundling Jim into his arms and repositioning him on the sofa, where Spock may lie alongside him, offering his body as a barricade between Jim and the world.

Jim does not fight him. He gasps as Spock manhandles him into place, but he remains pliant, offering no defense.

They lie together in this manner for over an hour, face to face, Spock continuing to knead and stroke Jim’s stiff neck and shoulders. Jim leans into Spock’s chest as he works, shivering under his touch, and Spock continues to learn his Human from the inside out.

Jim’s blank, unaffected countenance is not a side-effect of depression; it is a ruse. He has been terrified of Mitchell since the moment he learned that he was being held at Starfleet Medical. Leonard works long hours there, and should Mitchell overcome his guards, Jim feared that his friend would become a target for revenge. Then, Spock had informed him of Mitchell’s escape. Jim had shut down outwardly, incapable of communicating the depth of his fear, because he knew how his friends would respond, disrupting their lives and schedules in order to provide him with the company he was desperate for. He could not, would not be such a burden to them.

Jim wants to believe that Mitchell is truly on a Vulcan ship, bound for a hospital staffed by healers equipped to deal with him. Yet some part of him expects, will always expect, to wake up in the middle of the night with Mitchell’s hand clamped over his mouth, because Gary liked to fuck with his head best of all, and what better way to do it than this—to escape, to let everyone think he was safely on Vulcan, and then—

“The hospital is not on Vulcan, but on the moon of one of our sister planets,” Spock murmurs, unable to withstand another moment of Jim’s uncertainty. “My father would not lie, nor would he fail to guarantee every detail necessary for your safety. Nonetheless, I am sorry. I should not have left you alone this week. I ought to have taken leave from my duties in order to adequately care for you. I deeply regret that we have seen so little of each other recently.”

“Spock,” Jim laughs, despite the fact that tears continue to roll freely down his face. “We’ve seen plenty of each other. Actually, now that I think about it, we’ve seen each other every single day since the day we met.”

“There has not been a day this week when I was able to spend more than 76.44 consecutive minutes
in your company. That is…grossly insufficient.”

Jim blinks at him in the darkness of the space between their bodies. “Insufficient, huh?”

“Grossly,” says Spock, and kisses him.

He has visualized and anticipated this moment more times than even he can count, yet somehow, none of his rehearsed scenarios match his present situation.

Even in the grip of his most ardent yearnings, Spock never dared dream that Jim would reach for him this way, as if trust was a foregone conclusion between them. He did not imagine that Jim would melt in his arms the moment their lips met, his fingers scrabbling at Spock’s biceps for support, mouth opening obediently at the first press of Spock’s tongue.

Anything, Jim seems to be saying with his body. Anything you want, it is yours for the taking.

It is a struggle, amidst the heat of his desire, for Spock to remember that Jim is more than his body. He forces himself to strain for the faint whisper of Jim’s thoughts; he hears Jim telling himself to calm down, this is Spock, he’s not like anyone you’ve ever known, just relax, this could be good for once.

Spock tears his mouth from Jim’s and breathes deeply, listening to Jim do the same.

“You—” he pants, only to realize that he cannot say what he’s thinking. No one must touch you save those who love you. You are too great a temptation; you will never be safe in lesser hands.

Spock leans back from Jim slightly, propping his head on his hand so he can see Jim’s face. He looks beautiful and dazed in the dim light.

“You did not answer my query,” Spock says, when he can breathe once more.

“I didn’t?” Jim’s tousled confusion is unbearably endearing. “Uh, which query?”

“I wish to court you,” Spock reminds him. “Do you consent?”

He knows the answer, but he also knows Jim’s fear. He must hear the words spoken aloud, for his own sake, just as Jim must say them, for his.

“Oh.” Jim tilts his head, and Spock cannot resist brushing the tips of his fingers over the swell of his cheekbone. “Sure. Courting. Sounds like fun.”

“It will be that, and many other things,” says Spock, and kisses him again.

Chapter End Notes

PS I am in the market for a beta-reader.

Duties:
--being online and available at least occasionally while I'm awake (I'm on US Eastern Standard Time)
--willingness to read chapters or portions of chapters ahead of publication
--ability to give criticism (I am not thin-skinned, you will not offend me) and willingness
to squee over the parts you like
--willingness to let me ramble at you about multiple possible outcomes for the last few
chapters of the story

Benefits
--my charming conversation
--that's literally all I have to offer unless you want copies of my books, or you want me
to beta a thing of yours! which I would happily do.

If the above sounds like a good fit for you, hit me up here or on tumblr (branwyn-says).
:-D
**transcript of chat log: user KIRK, JAMES TIBERIUS, CADET, ID = JTK2233**

JTK2233: hey bones hows it going

LHM2227: Well, look who it is. I’m just dandy. You??? How are the headaches?
LHM2227: That Vulcan voodoo still working for you or is it time for another EKG?

JTK2233: for the last time, stop CALLING it that
JTK2233: jesus bones way to be xenophobic AND old school Earth-racist at the SAME TIME

JTK2233: anyway I’m fine, and so is my head, and so is Spock, thanks.

LHM2227: Did I ask about Spock?

JTK2233: no but you should

LHM2227: Why.

JTK2233: bc Spock and I are courting now. officially.
JTK2233: and don’t act like you don’t know what “courting” means, you’re so southern you reek of overripe magnolia, it’s basically the same thing for Vulcans
JTK2233: but in person just call him my boyfriend pls. also, don’t freak out if he calls me his intended, that’s just Vulcan for going steady.

LHM2227: …
LHM2227: I don’t know who I want to kill more right now, you or Legolas.
LHM2227: And before you tell me that’s a speciest remark, just picture Spock in a blonde wig for a minute.

JTK2233: …
JTK2233: so how’s Gaila, hmm

LHM2227: Why, did you lose her number?

JTK2233: reliable sources tell me the two of you have been joined at the hip all week.

LHM2227: Well, if you’d bothered coming home at all this weekend, you’d know the answer already.

JTK2233: I WAS RIGHT
JTK2233: this is so great you guys are perfect for each other

LHM2227: now hang on
LHM2227: she ain’t exactly put a ring on it yet

JTK2233: BUT YOU WANT HER TO, OMG

LHM2227: Twist my words, infant, go on.

JTK2233: …that was way too mellow for you. OMFG Bones is she there. have you been making tender healing love in our dormitory while I’ve been sleeping over at Spock’s
LHM2227: Jim, you know I love you. But I’ve killed people I loved before.

JTK2233: goddamn bones chill ok no disrespect. I love Gaila. in a very platonic and sisterly way. and i’m serious, she needs someone like you.

JTK2233: you’re a mother hen. she actually thinks that shit is sweet and not annoying as fuck

LHM2227: Thank you, I think.

JTK2233: you know what this means

LHM2227: Don’t tell me I’m begging you.

JTK2233: DOUBLE DATE

LHM2227: I would prefer one of a selection of plagues.

JTK2233: noooo c’mon bones seriously it won’t be bad

JTK2233: I’m thinking the park, 1500, you guys bring your food, we’ll bring ours

JTK2233: we’ll just enjoy being out in the sun when it’s not cold as fuck for once

JTK2233: no locked doors, you can bail over a fake medical crisis any time you feel like it

JTK2233: oh oh, gaila is great at pretending to faint? just give her a cue and then insist that you have to take her straight home to bed

JTK2233: you would then be honor-bound to follow through

JTK2233: wink wink

LHM2227: THIS IS GAILALALA WE WILL BE THERE <3 :D

LHM2227: EVEN IF I HAVE TO CARRY LEONARD OVER MY SHOULDER

LHM2227: WE FOUND OUT I CAN DO THT LAST NIGHELRMGLER

LHM2227: Jim I swear to god if you don’t delete this chat

JTK2233: Leonard, this is Spock. I have taken temporary possession of the communicator, as Jim is currently incapacitated with laughter. I will presume to answer for Jim that this chat log will be deleted, per your request.

JTK2233: However, as I fear Jim will insist that I partake in this outdoor excursion regardless of your answer, I can only say that you and Gaila would make acceptable company.

LHM2227: …Gaila says we’ll be there.

JTK2233: Acknowledged. I will inform Jim.

**transmission deleted**

**transmission restored, authorization user JTK2233**

**file printed to hard copy**

**original transmission: delete [ (Y) / n ]**

* 

“He’s definitely going to break up with me now,” says Jim to Gaila, flopping backwards onto the
thick wool blanket Spock has procured for their picnic. “And I’m pretty sure it’s all your fault.”

“You two’ve been together officially less than a day,” Bones scoffs. “Whatever happened to the honeymoon period?”

“Yeah, I know, but I can’t really blame him. I don’t think Spock knew about cats before today.”

“I assure you,” says Spock, even as he lifts his chin to accommodate the black cat purring in his arms and trying to rub her head against his invisible beard stubble, “I was familiar with the existence of the common domestic shorthair cat prior to this afternoon.”

“But is this the first time one’s ever purred on you?” says Gaila, sounding strangely sympathetic.

Spock hesitates. “It is.”

Gaila nods, then turns to Jim. “It’s okay, Jim. Leonard says you aren’t allergic to cats. Spock can love you both!”

“You’re not going to get a cat, Gaila.” Jim tries not to choke on barely restrained laughter. “It would be illogical, or something.”

“Indeed, it would be unwise to take responsibility for another living creature when I may be deployed off-planet in the relatively near future.” Spock shuts his eyes as Kaiya sniffs his eyebrows. “Although, I believe that there was once a tradition of ‘ship’s cats’ amongst the naval fleets of Earth’s former nation-states.”

“That’s true! They had their own ranks and everything.” Jim pushes himself up on his elbow and grins. “Maybe by the time the Enterprise is ready for her shakedown you could talk Pike into it.”

“Number One, who is also fond of domestic felines, tried to interest Captain Pike in such an arrangement during our term of service on the Farragut. It would seem, however, that the captain is oddly suspicious of—as he put it—allowing ‘sneaky little assholes with knives attached to their feet’ to prowl his ship at liberty.”

“Well, that’s just prejudiced,” says Gaila, while Jim tries not to asphyxiate over the fact that Spock is capable of saying ‘sneaky little assholes’ just as blandly and evenly as he says everything else. “Oh, but if you were thinking of getting a cat, Spock, you should know they’re obligate carnivores. And their food stinks like rotting fish, usually.”

“Ah.” Spock’s brow creases, as though he is weighing this inconvenience against other factors.

Even though the picnic had been Jim’s idea, Spock had been oddly insistent that he be allowed to choose the exact location, and that they arrive at precisely 1500 to begin unpacking their supplies. Or rather, Spock had unpacked their supplies, because Spock seems to think this courtship business means that Jim isn’t allowed to do anything that might be construed as physical labor, as long as Spock is there to butt in and take over.

Arriving punctually, as Jim could have told Spock, is the equivalent of arriving fifteen minutes early, whenever Bones is involved, and counts as at least half an hour early, when you add Gaila to the mix. But Spock had been unperturbed by the tardiness of their friends, possibly because he was just as pleased the two of them would have the additional time alone together.

Spock had just finished arranging the contents of their lunch bags into a small but elegant spread on the blanket when Jim looked up and saw a cluster of figures cresting the grassy knoll and heading in their direction.
One of the figures was Bones, who was carrying a large wicker basket. The other was unmistakably Gaila, who had a blanket draped over her arm.

The other four figures were cats, trotting alongside Gaila’s heels on thin leashes, which were attached to slim, colorful collars adorned with name tags. And bells.

Even Spock had gaped for a moment at their approach. “This is not ordinary behavior for that breed of animal, is it?” he’d said, looking to Jim for confirmation.

“No it is not,” said Jim, choking on his laughter. “But why would that stop Gaila?”

Jim grinned as their friends approached, thinking, with some satisfaction, that Bones and Gaila made an unsurprisingly attractive couple. Especially in civilian clothes.

Bones, normally a terrible dresser, is wearing a white t-shirt today that actually fits, along with a pair of jeans that Jim had picked out for him ages ago, making them the only pair of non-Dad-jeans he owns. Meanwhile, Gaila, red curls tumbling loose down her back, is wearing a surprisingly flowy and demure white sundress that makes her skin look lush as new spring grass.

She isn’t wearing any underwear under the sundress—Jim isn’t a creep, he’s just helped enough of his girlfriends pick out their outfits to know the difference—but otherwise, she could have been on her way to church on a Sunday morning in Georgia.

The look is apparently having the desired effect on Bones, because he’s barely been able to take his eyes off her since they all sat down together—despite the fact that all four cats, whom Gaila releases from their tethers, immediately begin investigating the new surroundings, and the new people, and distracting everyone thoroughly from whatever they had been thinking about before.

Jim approves. Of the cats, because they make Spock’s face light up in a way Jim has literally never seen before. And of Gaila’s low-key seduction methods, because it’s clear that she knows exactly the right way to handle a person with Bones’s particular set of issues. Which are exactly the opposite sort of issues that most people have when it comes to dating Gaila.

The thing is, Bones isn’t the type to get hung up on a set of lush curves and forget about the person inside them. He already knows how to look past that, how to respect and care for Gaila as a person. Which is why Gaila is with him in the first place.

Bones’ trouble is the mile-high mental wall he’s built around romance, sexuality, and anything else that belonged to his life before the divorce. And breaching those defenses is going to take some heavy siege work, but Gaila—who stretches out and tangles her feet with Bones’ as soon as they get settled—is up to that challenge, Jim feels.

Once everyone, quadrupeds and bipeds alike, have been fed, the cats immediately start claiming the warm bodies of their choice for their post-prandial nap. Jim’s lap is quickly occupied by Kuwue, an overfed, orange-and-white blob with a remarkably loud purr. Spock is allowing his face to be groomed by Kayia, a slender, sleek cat whose black fur is remarkably similar in color, sheen, and texture, to Spock’s. To Spock’s hair, that is.

Meanwhile, Truyue, a fluffy grey with a majestic white bib and general air of queenliness, drapes herself across Gaila’s knees, while Prrirp, a lean brown tiger-striped cat, stands on her back legs with two paws planted on Bones’ shoulder. She’s grooming his hair, and occasionally his ear and eyebrow.

Jim does his duty as a best friend and ignores the fact that Bones is losing the fight not to giggle as
Prrirp repeatedly headbutts his face.

“How did you train these animals to such a high level of discipline?” says Spock, because of course he wants to know the science behind it. As opposed to Jim, who’s content to just bury his face in warm fur and let his mind blank out. Like at the hospital, when they give you the good drugs.

He doesn’t say the last part out loud, because he doesn’t want Spock to get curious about Jim’s history of hospitalizations while he’s sitting a mere four feet away from Jim’s overly-chatty personal physician.

“I found them starving under a bush near the Cochrane building last summer, so I wrapped them up in a blanket and took them to Admiral Archer’s house,” says Gaila, matter-of-factly.

Jim nearly chokes on a sip of spiced tea. “You—did you know Admiral Archer?”

Bones, who has clearly heard this story before, grins like a maniac. “No, she did not,” he says.

“No, I didn’t,” Gaila confirms, as though she’s not sure what to make of Bones’ delighted reaction. “But everyone knows about his dogs, and his house was closer than my dormitory.”


“Thank you, Spock,” says Gaila pertly. “Luckily, he was already awake—”

“What time was it?” Jim demands. He’s been friends with Gaila for over a year and a half; he can’t believe he’s never heard this story before.

“0230. But it was a Saturday! Who goes to bed that early on a Saturday?”

Jim covers his eyes with the hand that isn’t supporting Kuwue’s bulk. “A Saturday. Of course. Sorry, go on?”

Gail huffs. “He was awake because one of his beagles had just whelped prematurely, and only two of the puppies from the litter survived. They were too small, and not eating very well. So we decided to introduce the kittens to Arabella, the mother. She accepted them and nursed them, and that brought the puppies around, so they became littermates. By the time the pups were old enough to start being trained, Archer decided to train the kittens with them. Otherwise, the beagles would have been too distracted, wondering what their sisters were up to.”

“So your cats just…live in Admiral Archer’s kennels,” says Jim, not certain if this is the most amazing or the most horrifying thing he’s ever heard in his life. “And you just…visit the Admiral’s house whenever you feel like it? And he’s okay with this?”

Gaila’s eyebrows crimp together. “Jonathan is a beautiful soul,” she says, almost chidingly. “He’s one of the most compassionate people I’ve ever met.”

Jim turns slowly to face Spock, who is already looking at him, his eyes as wide as Jim has ever seen them.


Spock says nothing, but Jim can sense that his bewilderment has not lessened.

The thing is, Jim could almost see it, if it were someone like Pike—he pretends to be a hard-ass, but
he has a soft spot for strays and misfits, c.f., his recruitment and dogged mentoring of one Cadet Jim Kirk.

Legendary centenarian admiral Jonathan Archer, on the other hand, is semi-retired, and while scuttlebutt says he never hesitates to throw his weight around Starfleet Command when there are big issues at stake, he keeps a grudging distance from the Academy, having declared himself too old to deal with adolescent cadet drama.

Not that Jim blames him. He’s old enough to find the antics of his fellow cadets tiresome, and he’s barely 23. But that just means that Jim would have to be bleeding out and dying before it would occur to him to knock on the Admiral’s door at 0230 on a Saturday morning.

“There were lives at stake, Jimmy. He understood.” Gaila giggles as Truyue’s tail goes straight up in the air, her butt wiggling as she springs from Gaila’s lap to land on something crawling invisibly through the grass.

Bones shuts his eyes as Prrirp bats at the hair falling over his forehead. Jim has never seen his best friend look this relaxed. It makes him wonder, suddenly, if this is what Bones had been like before the divorce—before he found his wife in bed with another man and somehow lost Joanna as a result.

“You know, I reckon Gaila’s gonna be an admiral before she’s forty,” Bones declares, a propos of nothing. “And when you ask her how she did it, she’ll just say something vague and sweet, like, ‘the other admirals are very wise beings’.”

Jim laughs so hard that Kuwue digs her claws into his stomach to keep her balance. Jim stops laughing immediately.

“I believe your conjecture may be sound, Leonard,” says Spock, too distracted by Kayia’s abrupt decision to leap onto his shoulder to notice Gaila flushing under this affirmation. “These creatures are inveterate climbers. They are a—a tree-dwelling species in their undomesticated state, are they not?”

Jim is pretty sure Kaiya has needle sharp claws with the strength of pitons—cats like her always do, for some reason—but despite the fact that Spock has to be riddled with punctures and accruing new ones every time the cat adjusts her precarious perch on his shoulder, he never attempts to dislodge her. In fact, he tilts his neck to accommodate her.

Kaiya stares directly into the branches of the shade tree above them, and Jim starts trying to remember how long it’s been since he’s had to climb a tree to retrieve a trapped cat.

“Yeah, they’re pretty much built for climbing,” he says, diverting Kaiya’s attention by dragging a sprig of grass in a teasing pattern on the ground. “I mean, they’re ambush predators. The big ones still live wild in the nature preserves up north. If you ever go camping up there, I don’t recommend sleeping under trees. And if you hear something scream like a woman being murdered, that means one’s stalking you.”

Spock’s eyes widen even further, and one of his eyebrows disappears beneath his bangs.

“I never met your beat for knowing random shit about random things,” says Bones, finally seizing Prrip and arranging her in his lap, where she begins to purr under skillful petting.

“At one point in my life, I lived entirely off my winnings on quiz machines,” says Jim flipantly.

Bones opens his mouth to retort, but Spock cuts him off. “Leonard, may I ask you to restrain your understandable skepticism? If you challenge Jim’s claim openly, I am afraid that he may feel honor-bound to prove its veracity.”
“Huh. I reckon you got to know him pretty well after all.” Bones gives Spock a narrow, considering look. “Well, well. I guess it’s my birthday! Now that Spock’s signed up to be Jim’s permanent babysitter, I can finally go back to worrying about the little things, like, oh say, my patients.”

For a second, Jim seriously considers throwing a grape at Bones’ head, and the only reason he hesitates is because he has issues about food waste.

“I’m not sure you can take credit for that, sweetie. I think Spock found Jim all on his own.” Gaila winks at Spock, and Spock blushes, because Gaila has that effect on everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation.

“True, but I’ll reap some of the benefits, so I’m counting it a personal win.” Bones jerks his chin to the left, where Truyue is still stalking invisible prey through the grass. “Is Tru okay over there?”

Just as Gaila cranes her head around to look, Truyue takes off in hot pursuit of whatever local fauna has been unfortunate enough to catch her attention.

“Damn it. Truyue!” Gaila yells—maybe yodels—something in Orion (a language Jim had thought he was pretty fluent in, but apparently his vocabulary isn’t extensive enough to cover ‘things you yell at disobedient cats’.)

In one swift move, Gaila extricates her legs where they’re tangled up with Bones’, and leaps to her feet, darting after the cat in a cloud of whirling white skirts and streaming red hair.

“Should we assist?” says Spock. He sounds uncertain, but he is no doubt thinking that he is capable of running a good deal faster than Gaila. Possibly faster than the cat as well, though Jim gives them even odds.

“Nah.” He shrugs. “Cats get spooked pretty easily when strangers are after them. Better let Gaila handle it.”

Nonetheless, Jim, Spock, and Bones all watch closely as Gaila chases Truyue about 30 meters away to a low brick wall, where the cat stops, jumps up, and looks at Gaila, meowing piteously. (Jim just happens to be able to lip-read in cat, but he bets Spock could actually hear her and confirm.)

“So how long did it take before she introduced you to the kids, Bones?” says Jim, kicking his best friend’s foot with a wide grin. Gaila will come back to them in a moment, so this is Jim’s big chance to get some ribbing in.

(He isn’t afraid of retaliation, because whereas Gaila thinks it’s hilarious when Jim pokes fun at Bones, Spock…does not give off the aura of a person who would find it humorous if another man started making salacious inferences about his boyfriend’s private affairs.)

“She took me up to Archer’s place the day after—you know. The bar.” Bones clears his throat. “She said she needed some therapy. I had no idea what she was talking about—thought maybe she meant that Archer was mentoring her, or something. But I had beagle snouts in my face all afternoon, let me tell you.”

“Is Admiral Archer, indeed, mentoring Gaila?” says Spock, curiously. “To my knowledge it has been some time since he took a personal interest in the cadets of the Academy.”

“I know that Archer hates cadets. You know it, Jim knows it. But does Gaila care that she’s got the Admiral Jonathan Archer wrapped around her little finger? No she does not. Far as she’s concerned, he’s just her respected elderly pal who likes small furry creatures as much as she does.” Bones shakes his head. “I’ll tell you what, though, I saw that man’s face when she was talking, and mark
my words—if someone was hurting her, he’d fire a full photon torpedo array at whoever it was to make them stop. He didn’t even bother giving me the shovel talk. One glare was enough.” Bones preens a little bit. “I am the first person she’s ever brought over to meet him, though.”

“It is comforting to know that Gaila has such an ally,” says Spock readily. “The Academy—Earth itself—can be highly disorienting to off-worlders. I, likewise, depended a great deal on Captain Pike’s friendship and patronage during my first years at the Academy. Adapting to Human society was a challenge unlike anything I had ever faced. The Captain took it upon himself to smooth that transition as much as possible.”

“Wonder if all of Command is like that? Picking out secret favorites in the student body like horses at the OTB.” Bones chuckles. “I mean, speaking of photon arrays, I’m sure you’ve noticed that Pike’s taken to Jim like a hen with one chick.”

“People who live in glass henhouses, Bones,” says Jim distractedly.

He’s listening to what Bones and Spock are saying, but his eyes are fixed on the tall, dark-haired man—youngish, Human, judging by the way he’s dressed—approaching Gaila and Truyue from the other side of the brick wall.

He pauses, seems to say something to Gaila, and scratches the top of Truyue’s head. When the cat permits the attention, Jim tries to relax.

It isn’t that Gaila can’t take care of herself. She wouldn’t be here, in the Federation let alone the Academy, if she was helpless.

It’s just that Jim has been Gaila’s friend for long enough to know what tends to happen when she meets new people for the first time. Especially if she doesn’t have a friend with her, although even Jim and Uhura get included in the filthy leers and threatening stare-offs occasionally.

He doesn’t like the fact that he can’t tell what they’re saying, or hear the man’s tone of voice.

He really doesn’t like that he can’t see Gaila’s expression.

“Does Gaila know that man?” says Spock, as though he has just noticed where Jim is looking.

“Huh?” Bones’s head snaps up. “Who?”

In the distance, Jim watches as Gaila scoops up Truyue, who had flopped down to sun herself on the brickwork.

She takes a step backwards, and like a sudden storm darkening the sky, the energy between Gaila and the stranger changes. He says something, and the line of Gaila’s shoulders stiffens.

The guy moves a little closer to the brickwork. It’s a low wall, easy enough for a tall person to step over.

Maybe Jim is overreacting. He knows he has issues, he knows he gets triggered—and again, he knows Gaila can take care of herself.

He just doesn’t think she should have to, all the goddamn time, especially not when Jim is standing right here.

Suddenly, Gaila pivots away from the wall and starts marching back toward them at a quick clip. Truyue is clutched against her chest, and her tail is lashing like she’s not happy with the pace Gaila is
settling.

Bones, Jim, and Spock all watch Gaila tensely, unsure what to do, until she’s halfway to them. However, when she looks back over her shoulder, as if she’s afraid someone might be following, Bones swears viciously under his breath and springs into a jog until he meets her.

“Are you all right?” Jim hears him say. He sets a hand on her arm, trying to make her stop.

Gaila could break every bone in Bones’ body without breaking a sweat, and they both know it. He touches her like she’s fragile, anyway.

Jim adores him for that, and at the same time wants to tell him that it’s okay to just grab and hold on sometimes, that people like Gaila, and Jim, only insist on being independent all the time because they don’t really believe there’s another choice.

You have to be stubborn to break through that kind of resistance. Just ask Spock. He’s still trying, and Jim is still being…Jim. But Spock seems almost to relish the opportunity to prove that he can be patient, and persistent.

Except when Jim is hurt, or weak, or crying, and then Spock grabs him and holds him like it would take a planetary event to shake Jim loose from his grasp. Somehow, he always times it exactly right, and it is always exactly what Jim needs.

Jim knows that Bones wants to be for Gaila what Spock is for him, but he can’t just stand there and explain why they should get over themselves and cuddle, with Spock as audience for maximum awkwardness. They’re his two best friends. He’d have to kill himself if they both shunned him.

Gaila wiggles loose from Bones’s grasp. “I’m fine,” she says, sounding very determined. Too determined. “Fine. But we should go. Or I should, I should go. Right now.”

Bones’ face turns thunderous. He steps forward. Jim nearly walks after him, in case someone needs to restrain him from doing something stupid.

Spock, however, stops him, with a single touch to the wrist. He tilted his head towards Bones and Gaila. Watch, his expression seems to say.

“Darlin’ what happened?” The iron in Bones’ voice is wrapped in a velvet glove of gentle concern. “Was that guy back there giving you a hard time?”

“It’s nothing, I just—”

Gaila lifts her head, and her helpless look lands on Jim, and Jim understands instantly what she’s not able to say.

On the one hand, he knows how Bones feels. He’s furious. He wants to knock the guy’s teeth down his throat too.

But Jim also knows what Gaila is feeling—the humiliation, the instinctive need to hide somewhere safe, in a world where nowhere feels safe.

Tracking the guy down, hurting him, it won’t help.

Jim has no idea how to help Gaila right now.

He feels Spock’s bright, sharp eyes resting on him for a moment. Then Spock turns to face Bones.
“I chose this location for our outing due not only to its aesthetic qualities, but because of its proximity to the grounds of the Vulcan Embassy. If all of you will follow me, there is a concealed gate nearby leading directly to the Embassy gardens, which will provide us with both privacy and security.” He hesitates. “Gaila, you are welcome to remain at the Embassy as long as you require, but I feel I should warn you that my mother is presently in residence, and you are therefore unlikely to escape her attention, or her—I believe the expression is, ‘fussing’.”

Jim’s heart rate accelerates, because Spock’s mom. He did not wake up this morning prepared to meet Spock’s mother, the one Human Spock freakin’ idolizes.

“I don’t know about anyone else,” says Bones, his voice gruff, “but I reckon Gaila could use a little motherin’ right now.”

Spock looks to Gaila, who nods, which apparently settles it. Jim takes a deep breath and tries not to be annoyed by the fact that Spock built a security failsafe into their carefree Sunday afternoon picnic. No wonder he’d been so picky about the location.

Jim busies himself getting all four cats clipped back onto their leashes, and he’s relieved when Gaila takes the leashes immediately—he’d been by no means certain that the little beasts would behave for him the way they did for her.

“We may leave the rest of our picnic items here,” says Spock. “They will be gathered and returned to the Embassy by Security officers.”

“By the I-beg-your-pardons?” Jim halts their march toward the Secret Vulcan Garden by striding ahead of, then spinning to face, Spock. “The what, Spock?”

“Jim.” Spock’s expression is longsuffering. “I am the son of a planetary ambassador. Since childhood, I have been attended at all times by a small detachment of officers from my father’s personal Security retinue. My mother has one as well, when she is separated from my father. They maintain a discreet perimeter everywhere save the Academy and the grounds of Starfleet headquarters, which are secure enough already as to make personal guards redundant.”

While Jim is recovering from this information, Spock opens his communicator and begins texting someone rapidly. From the pauses between paragraphs, Jim judges that he is getting answers as quickly as he is asking questions.

“Gaila,” says Spock, and when he looks up from the communicator, his eyes are gentle again. “My father’s security officers have apprehended the man you were speaking with. They are holding him, pending further information.”

Jim could love Spock just for that—just for giving Gaila the choice. But he sees, with a sinking stomach, that she’s already shaking her head, which makes her hair fall over her face like a curtain.

“He didn’t break any laws,” she says, sounding tired. “He didn’t touch me. And didn’t actually threaten me.”

Jim believes her. They didn’t have to threaten you, when they were big enough. They didn’t have to do anything, or say anything, for you to read a violent future in their eyes.

“Criminal harassment is not limited to actions which bring the perpetrator into physical contact with the victim,” says Spock. “If he used threatening body language against you—”

“I didn’t let it get that far,” says Gaila, her voice clipped. “I walked away first. I know what he probably would have done, but that doesn’t matter, because I got away.”
Bones, whose expression is somewhere between “murderous” and “crushed”, strokes a hand over her hair. “Is that what got you upset? Did he look like he was gonna get mean?”

It’s the kind of question that could have been incredibly condescending, except Bones is clearly taking this as seriously as he would a medical diagnosis.

“Oh, I don’t know how to explain. It’s not important.” Frustrated, Gaila starts to pull away from Bones again.

“Hey, Gaila,” says Jim quietly, unable to help himself. “Would I get it?”

Gaila peeks at him through her hair. “Of course you’d get it, Jimmy,” she says softly. Rather than calming the ambient tension, this merely makes Bones and Spock look at Jim like there’s something he’s been keeping from them.

“Then tell me,” he says to Gaila. “I mean, it’s ok if Bones and Spock listen, right? I heard a rumor recently that they care about us, or something.”

Bones snorts, and when he wraps an arm around Gaila’s waist again, she allows herself to slump back against his chest.

Spock, as if not to be outdone, trails a warm hand up Jim’s spine and grips the back of his neck above the collar. It’s supportive, and unmistakably possessive, and if it had been anyone else Jim would have elbowed them in the face.

Since it’s Spock, he just leans in, and lets himself enjoy the feeling that someone has his back.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Gaila mumbles, sniffing. “I’m not really upset because of him. He wasn’t any worse than normal.” She takes a deep breath. “It’s just because you guys are here!”

“Oh.” Bones’s mouth falls open. “Do you want us to—?”

“No, I don’t want to be alone!” Gaila bursts out. “Don’t you understand? I’m always alone!”

For some ineffable reason, Bones looks to Spock for help, but Spock is looking even blanker than normal, and Jim senses his confusion.

The remains of lunch are starting to churn in Jim’s stomach, but he reaches for Gaila anyway.

“You’re always alone when this kind of thing happens,” he says, squeezing her hand. “They’re too smart to go full creep-mode in front of witnesses.”

He knows that by talking to her like this, he’s revealing as much about himself as about her, but that can’t be helped.

“Exactly!” says Gaila, her voice small, yet vindicated. “And you have to just keep going with your day, like nothing happened—”

“But not today,” Jim finishes for her. “It’s different, you feel different today, because you’re with us. You know it’s safe to let yourself get upset here, because you know we’re not going to let anyone sneak in a second shot while your guard is down.”

Gaila nods frantically. “And all of a sudden, for some reason, I’m upset about all the times it’s happened, even though this was nothing compared to—”
“Just because you have to deal with worse doesn’t make this nothing.” Bones, who has been paying careful attention to their interchange, jumps in at exactly the right moment. Jim knew he would, eventually. “Honey, you be just as upset as you want. No one here minds a bit. We’re in the same boat, we’re just too emotionally stunted to show it.”

Gaila laughs moistly, and Spock tightens his grip on Jim’s neck. Jim clears his throat lightly and blinks rapidly to get the water out of his eyes.

“If you will all follow me,” says Spock, once everyone’s taken a moment to breathe through their emotions, or intentional lack thereof.

It’s only a few more paces up the hill before they reach a thick row of hedges planted along a brick wall. Spock takes out his communicator, enters a long code (sixteen digits, Jim doesn’t count on purpose) then waves the communicator at a certain patch of shrubbery.

The bit of shrubbery swings wide, slowly, like a gate offering entrance.

Jim lets Bones usher Gaila through first. He follows, knowing Spock will be directly behind him.

* 

They are greeted by a staff member in Embassy robes as soon as they pass through the door of the atrium. Spock steps aside with him for a brief, hushed conversation in Vulcan.

Jim understands what he can hear, which isn’t a lot. Mostly he catches phrases like “security report” and “the privacy of my guests” and, finally, “my honored parents”.

The staff member ducks his head at Spock, then turns to Bones. “If you will follow me, I will show you to rooms where you may rest.”

“Your rooms are the guest chambers in the family wing,” Spock explains. “My room is directly across from yours. Jim and I will be there shortly.”

Bones nods, shooting one last look at Jim. “Come and find me if you need...anything,” he mumbles, and by “anything”, Jim knows he means “a hypo, in case Jim loses his shit as soon as you’re alone together.”

Jim appreciates the nod to his medical privacy, but now, thanks to being born contrary and stubborn, he has no choice other than to push his anxiety aside through sheer force of will.

“I didn’t know you had your own rooms here,” says Jim, once he and Spock find themselves alone.

It’s pathetic, even for small talk, but he’s not sure what else to say. This definitely wasn’t how he’d imagined their Sunday afternoon ending. And though he knows Spock doesn’t have any expectations of Human-style dates, except that they give him and Jim the opportunity to spend time together, Jim can’t help feeling like anyone else would have identified him as a disaster-magnet by now and bailed.

“By tradition, quarters are reserved for every member of the Ambassador’s immediate family,” says Spock blandly. “Indeed, were I not a member of Starfleet, it would be considered strange that I choose to reside apart from my parents, as I have not yet bonded or established a family of my own.”

“I guess that makes sense,” says Jim, locating a cushioned sofa that looks comfortable enough to collapse against. Out of deference to his surroundings, he doesn’t prop his feet up on the table. “I mean, it’s the same in a lot of Earth cultures.”
“Not yours, however.” Spock takes a careful seat beside him. “It is not…American custom, correct? Or do you identify regionally, as a mid-westerner, in the way that Leonard identifies as a southerner?”

Jim figures there isn’t a lot of mood to ruin, after the events of the afternoon. And Spock…

Spock is looking at him, not so much like he desperately needs the answer to this question, but more like his curiosity about Jim—his past, his upbringing, his whole life before Starfleet—is profound enough that he will take any random nugget of information Jim is willing to fling his way. Even something as trivial as Jim’s assessment of how American he is or isn’t, though to Spock, America is only interesting because it is the Terran nation-state where Zefram Cochrane happened to make his first warp flight, thus making it the logical location for Vulcan’s first contact with Earth.

The thing is, Jim could talk to Spock for hours about American history, western European history, African history, about how colonialism and the slave trade and the slaughter of indigenous populations and mass immigration and the sheer freakin’ amount of habitable land in the former United States had created a country where the meaning of words like “tradition” and “culture” depended entirely on the speaker’s individual context.

But Spock, if he doesn’t know that stuff already, could easily look it up. That’s not the kind of information he’s really after.

It’s Jim he wants to know about.

And Jim is going to have to start telling Spock the truth eventually. He deserves to know what he’s getting into before he digs himself in any deeper with this “I want to bond with Jim for life” thing.

“I left my parents’ house when I was twelve, Spock.” Jim smiles crookedly, but he doesn’t look at him. “We didn’t have traditions, because we were never a family. My dad’s death…ended all that, I guess. Mom was back in space before I could walk, my brother took off when we were both kids, and my step-dad…well, let’s just say, when he decided to send me off planet, I didn’t argue with him. I was glad to go.”

He can feel Spock’s gaze, riveted to the side of his head. “You have not returned to the place of your birth since your step-father sent you away?”

“My place of birth was the USS Kelvin medical shuttle number 37,” Jim snaps, because he used to repeat it to himself like a mantra every time he felt trapped in Riverside, every time he felt like the vastness of the night sky, with its blanket of stars and satellites and shuttle traffic, was only there to taunt him with how immense it was, how tiny his little speck of Earth was by comparison.

Then he sighs, because now he’s snapping at Spock, and if there is anyone who doesn’t deserve that from Jim, it’s him.

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“I went back to Riverside once,” he says, making an effort to control his voice. “It was after I left the group home in Chicago. I waited till I was eighteen so no one could sent me back, then I went to check out the old house. My step-father was there.” Jim scrubs his face. “I ended up breaking his nose.”

“For what reason?” Spock’s voice is chillingly blank, and Jim is glad he’s not looking so he doesn’t have to see the disappointment and disapproval in his face.

“For a lot of reasons,” says Jim dully. “Mostly? To prove that I could. That I was too big and too mean and tough for him to lay a hand on me ever again.” He snorts under his breath. “It worked, I
guess. He left town that week. Dunno where he went. Wherever Mom goes when she’s dirtside, I guess.”

“You…you are not in communication with your mother?”

“No.”

“How long since last you spoke with her?”

“I honestly don’t remember, but it was before I left Riverside. The first time.”

Jim sits in silence while Spock does the math, then process the fact that he has not spoken to his only living parent—his mother, and Spock worships his mother, Jim’s still not 100% sure if that’s adorable or if they’re edging into Norman Bates territory—since he was twelve years old. Almost half his lifetime ago, now.

“As a member of Starfleet,” Spock says, slowly, like his brain is still working, “it is unlikely she did not hear news of your enrollment in the Academy.”

“Maybe she did.” Jim shrugs. “But she didn’t get in touch with me, and I wouldn’t know how to get in touch with her.”

Jim can feel the weight of Spock’s frown filling the room. “That information is easily accessible—”

“Spock.” Jim forces himself to look at the quivering bundle of barely-suppressed confusion and worry sitting beside him. “I know. I could have found out where she’s posted any time I wanted. But there’s no point. We’re strangers to each other—we have been since a long time before I went off-planet. I told her what—what my step-father was like, once. She acted like she couldn’t even hear me. It was the only thing I ever needed her to do for me, to believe me and get rid of him.” Jim huffs a humorless laugh. “I spent a lot of time—too much time—thinking about it when I was younger, and I don’t think she ever…bonded with me, like mothers usually do with their kids. I was just a responsibility to provide for. And then, fate took me off her hands. So she forgot me.”

Spock opens his mouth—then closes it, abruptly. But his eyes are as soft and sad as Jim has ever seen them.

Just then, a quiet, indistinguishable noise makes them both look toward the door simultaneously.

A small, slender figure steps out from the shadows, approaching them with light footsteps. She’s female—Human—but dressed in a neat headscarf and Vulcan-style robes.

Jim has to blink a little in the dim afternoon light, but when his vision clears, he realizes that the woman has the most familiar-looking eyes he’s ever seen on a complete stranger.

Spock shoots to his feet. “Mother,” he says softly, his voice full of warmth.

Jim swallows, and tries not to burn into a cinder when Amanda Grayson’s warm brown eyes move from her son’s face, to his.

It’s obvious—so obvious that he doesn’t know how he’s supposed to think about anything else—that she was standing in the doorway for a while before choosing the right moment to enter the room. Which means she probably heard Jim’s entire sad-sack monologue.

There’s a reason he doesn’t usually meet his friends’ parents.
“And you must be James Kirk. May I call you Jim? And you’ll call me Amanda.” She reaches out and grasps Jim’s hand, solving the dilemma of whether to offer the ta’al or not before it can arise. “May I just say what a pleasure it is to meet the young man who wrote that delightful story.”

And then Jim died, and it was very sad, the end, he thinks hysterically, and prays for an earthquake to swallow him whole before he has to think through the implications of the fact that his Vulcan/Human porn novel had ended up, somehow, in the hands his boyfriend’s mother. Who just happened to be the only Human woman in history bonded to a Vulcan male.

“You have read K’diwa, Mother?”

Is Jim imagining it, or is there a slight crack in Spock’s voice?

Actually, yeah—considering that Spock had used the novel like a strategic guide to seducing him—to say nothing of how Spock must feel about the sex scenes—Jim can see how this is an awkward moment for Spock as well.

“Indeed, your father and I have both read it. Shall we have tea, and I’ll tell you all the parts Sarek had to ask me to explain?”

Her dark eyes dance with mirth, and suddenly, all Jim can think of is that now he knows what mischief looks like, if he should ever see it on Spock.

“Jim requires rest, Mother,” says Spock, his voice slightly too high-pitched. “There was an incident earlier—”

“Yes, I heard, which is why I won’t keep you long. I want to look in on that poor girl before I have to get dressed for some dreadful formal dinner your father’s been invited to. One cup of tea? And then I’ll leave you alone.”

Maybe Jim’s a little more midwestern than he wants to think, sometimes. “Tea would be lovely, ma’am. Amanda.”

Beside him, Spock heaves a very quiet, very resigned sigh, and scoots a little closer to Jim on the sofa.
“I was pretty freaked at first when the book leaked,” Jim says to Amanda. “Mostly because I knew it was only a matter of time until everyone figured out I was the one who wrote it. Actually, I’m not even sure what I thought would happen. I just assumed it would be…bad, I guess?”

Jim shrugs, with a sweet, humorous smile, as Spock’s mother laughs quietly, covering her mouth with her hand.

It is rare that Spock ever hears his mother laugh, but it does not surprise him that Jim can elicit such a reaction from her—despite the fact that the subject of their conversation is, in Spock’s opinion, no matter for felicity.

Jim has been “catching Amanda up” on recent events. Doing so necessarily required Jim to outline his recent ordeal at Mitchell’s hands, and though Spock admires Jim’s ability to do so diplomatically, skimming over the most disturbing aspects of the story and dispelling tension with ironic humor, he would, for preference, never hear Mitchell’s name spoken aloud again, much less hear his crimes made light of by Jim, of all people.

And yet, he knows that Jim is merely attempting to be considerate of Amanda’s feelings, and Spock can feel only tenderness towards him for making the effort.

His mind is in a state of some disorder, and such conflicting feelings are not helpful.

“T’im sorry,” says Amanda, to Jim. “T’im not laughing at you—I’m just imagining how I would have felt when I was your age. One learns to be less embarrassed by one’s own awkwardness as the years set in, but at 23, I would have felt like I’d swallowed hot coals.”

Jim’s eyes crinkle beautifully when he laughs.

“I mean, there was some humiliation involved, for sure,” he admits. “And there’s probably more to come—Christ, I haven’t even set foot in the mess since it happened. I’ve still got that to look forward to.” He scratches the back of his head, flushing. “But, uh…the way I see it, the events of the last couple of weeks ended up bringing someone pretty special into my life. So when you think about it, Gary actually did me a pretty huge favor.”

“Oh?” Amanda’s smile grows soft.

Jim darts a quick glance sideways at Spock and shrugs slightly, his smile crooked, tentative, and hopelessly endearing.

It is all Spock can do not to reach for his hand, in spite of his mother’s presence.

Amanda’s smile seems to fill the atrium with its soft glow, and Jim, still smiling, ducks his head to avoid her scrutiny. He looks precisely like what he is: an ill-treated orphan experiencing genuine maternal regard for the first time in his life. It is as if he doesn’t know how to behave under
Amanda’s steady focus.

The fact that Jim has just inferred that the manifold abuses he endured at Gary Mitchell’s hands were worthwhile, simply because they had caused his path to cross with Spock’s, does nothing to quiet Spock’s inner turmoil, but he keeps this to himself.

It is probably for the best that Amanda, in her delight and curiosity at meeting Jim, has not required Spock to participate much in this conversation. Spock could not muster the necessary lightness of manner to perform satisfactorily in a social role just now. But he is following Amanda and Jim’s exchange closely, and he finds it most satisfactory. His mother is clearly fond of Jim already, and Jim obviously reciprocates her regard.

Spock is likewise reassured by the fact that Amanda is the first Human who has not seen fit to comment on the comparatively rapid pace of their courtship. Both Leonard and Pike had expressed varying levels of concern, and Captain Pike had taken it upon himself to speak to Spock on the subject at some length on the night of Mitchell’s attack, while the two of them were awaiting the results of Sarek’s meld with Jim.

The captain had proposed that they pass the time by playing a game of chess. Both of them had been fatally distracted, making the match little more than a pretense of a diversion. After ten minutes, and four moves, Pike had suddenly lifted his head and fixed Spock with his gaze across the board.

“You know, Humans used to have a popular saying—something along the lines of, ‘you can’t love others until you learn to love yourself’.” Pike’s tone was difficult to read, his expression shuttered. “But science eventually proved that wrong. I don’t know how it works for Vulcans, or any other species, but Humans have to be shown affection and kindness on a consistent basis when we’re very young, starting from infancy, or our capacity for empathy doesn’t develop like it should.”

Pike had nudged a pawn forward, a perfunctory move that did little to advance his progress.

“So when you have a Human child who’s been neglected since they were old enough to walk, a child who continues to experience abuse and trauma throughout their adolescence, you usually have the makings of a fairly lonely adult. Someone who finds it difficult to trust, to maintain relationships. To take that blind leap of faith and reach out to other people, knowing they could be rejected.”

Spock, moving on auto-pilot, captured Pike’s pawn, but Pike barely seemed to notice.

“I don’t know how much Jim has told you about his past,” said Pike, and Spock’s heart immediately began to beat harder in his side. “His story isn’t mine to share, but I can tell you this much. Jim Kirk’s got no goddamn right to be—the way he is. Loyal, caring. Honest. Giving. I don’t have the faintest idea where he got it from. He was alone in the world the day I found him in Riverside. Had been since the day he left Vulcan.”

Pike closed his mouth abruptly, as though he had been on the verge of saying more, only to change his mind.

“And,” said Spock quietly, not certain whether he truly expected, or even wished, for Pike to answer, “before Vulcan?”

The captain shook his head slowly. “Let’s just say, there’s a reason I’m willing to work with Jim on those barely-restrained authority issues of his.” A muscle jumped in Pike’s jaw. “They come from a valid place.”

“I see.” Spock contemplated the board, unable to see a pattern, a strategy that would lead him to
victory.

“I need you to understand something, Spock, so I’m going to be very blunt.” Pike leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. “Jim is going to fall in love you. If you keep paying this much attention to him, he’s not going to be able to help himself. He’s not used to it, he’s got no defenses at all.”

Spock’s fingers fumbled on his knight, causing it to tumble to the first level. He flattened his hand carefully against the table top and did not bother to take it up again.

Pike’s eyes were intent, as though they were back aboard the *Farragut*, and he was conveying mission-critical information upon which lives depended.

“Jim can be a vicious little shit if you come at him aggressively. But you give him any positive attention at all, and…actually, that’s not even the problem. The problem is that I strongly suspect that there are times when Jim can’t tell the difference between actual kindness and the mere absence of abuse.” Pike shrugged. “I’m sure Gary Mitchell was charming when Jim first met him.”

Spock shut his eyes and drew a long quiet breath. “Captain. Do you mean to say—is it your belief that I have—taken advantage of Jim’s vulnerability in a time of—”

“No.” Pike cut him off. “Spock, I would never believe that about you. Understand me, I don’t disapprove of your closeness with Jim. It’s natural to develop strong feelings for someone you’re protective of, someone who’s trusted you with their vulnerability. Just—” he sighed loudly. “Dammit, I keep telling myself I’m not the kid’s father, but I can’t help it. This thing between you two looks pretty inevitable to me, and that being the case, I want it to work out. For both your sakes.”

Pike raked his fingers through his hair.

“Captain, any advice which you see fit to impart, I will hear gladly, and consider with all the seriousness it deserves.” Spock had swallowed, finding his throat strangely dry. “I, too, wish for…our relationship to ‘work out’.”

Pike nodded, and spoke in a flat voice.

“Jim’s going to try to run, at some point,” he said. “It’s a pattern with him. He’s got a serious deficit of self-worth, so if he ever gets it in his head that he’s failed you, or disappointed you, he won’t see it as something that can be fixed, because he thinks the problem is *him*, not—whatever the real issue is. He’ll remove himself from the equation, for your benefit. At least, that’s how he’ll see it.”

Immobilized by a sudden spike of intense anxiety, Spock had been unable to do anything but gape at the captain.

“So that being the case, the advice I want to give you is tactical.” Pike leaned forward slightly. “If Jim runs—when Jim runs—you *follow* him. If he blanks out in the middle of an argument and tries to walk out the door, you stop him. Don’t let him get away with it. Be gentle with him, but make him face whatever he’s afraid of.”

“I am…discomfited by the prospect of pursuing or restraining Jim against his will,” said Spock faintly. “Is this not behavior of the sort Gary Mitchell exhibited during their relationship?”

“If Jim is serious about ending things, you’ll know. But you can’t let him bolt in the middle of a blind panic. He’ll think he can’t come back, even if he wants to. And in the meantime, he’ll be incredibly off-balance, and he’ll think he has to handle it alone, and…there’s a chance he’ll get himself hurt
before Leonard or I manage to catch up to him.”

Spock took a moment to gather his wits, and his breath. It was all he could do not to stride out of the room in order to press himself futilely against the door of his father’s office.

“From your tone and manner of delivery, I would venture to guess that you speak from experience,” he managed to say.

“Yes,” said Pike flatly. “Yes, I do.” He fiddled with a bishop, but did not make a move. “Jim’s first year at the Academy, I had to lock him in my office three times, because I pushed him too hard to talk and he had a panic attack. The first time it happened, I let him go, thinking that was the right thing to do. The next time I saw him, over a month had passed, and he was in the hospital, lying about his injuries.” Pike’s mouth tightened. “He’d just started dating Gary.”

Spock stared, appalled understanding gradually creeping over him.

“I know it isn’t in the nature of Vulcans to pursue a partner they aren’t serious about,” Pike said after a moment, appearing slightly more collected. “I know you’d kill to keep Jim safe. I know you were tempted to, tonight. But if you want to protect his heart, and not just his carcass? You need to be prepared to be patient. And stubborn.” He gave Spock a small smile. “Fortunately, I happen to know you possess both qualities in abundance.”

To Spock’s immense relief, Sarek had entered the room and led him back to Jim’s side before he was required to think of a response to this extraordinary statement.

Discomfiting, even frightening as Captain Pike’s insight had been, Spock has come to be grateful to him for sharing it. It had made him surer of his footing where Jim was concerned, especially over the course of Jim’s week-long convalescence. In effect, the captain had validated the very instincts Spock has been attempting to suppress ever since the night he and Jim first met—namely, the Vulcan drive to pursue, protect, possess his intended. Giving reign to those instincts had relieved him of a considerable burden.

Spock cannot imagine watching Jim flee from his apartment and not succumbing to the urge to pursue. Indeed, when Spock had not known him for longer than an evening and a morning, Jim had fled his home. Even then, Spock had not hesitated to follow him, to gather him up off the ground, to attempt to soothe and protect and care for him—

Spock takes a deep breath and exhales silently.

Though it had been Gaila and Jim who had entered the Embassy in an emotionally compromised state, the condition seems to be proving transferrable. He is deeply unsettled, and he counts himself fortunate that there are no other Vulcans in the room to witness the signs of his faltering control.

“Well, I suppose I should be diplomatic and pretend that I’m not delighted that you and Spock have become friends,” says Amanda, jerking Spock’s attention back to the present. “But I can’t, I’m afraid. I’m thrilled beyond all measure, and I can’t begin to tell you how much I’m looking forward to getting to know you better, Jim.”

Jim’s face, since he began speaking with Spock’s mother, has gradually become brighter, more animated, than Spock has seen it since before Mitchell’s attack—since their chess game in the park, almost a week ago, in fact.

Now, he actually covers his face with his hand, as if embarrassed by the brightness of his own smile. Spock cannot help but drink in the sight.
Jim’s determination to be a supportive friend had given him the necessary focus to keep his emotions temporarily compartmentalized. However, Spock had touched Jim—deliberately, liberally—while he was counseling Gaila through her ordeal, in order to gauge his emotional state. Despite the frank and gentle wisdom he had dispensed to his friend, his own anxiety had been approaching acute levels by the time they were indoors.

Not having anticipated that they would encounter Amanda so quickly, Spock’s original intention had been to see to the welfare of their friends, then to take Jim alone somewhere and offer him whatever comfort he required. He is familiar by now with Human post-traumatic responses, and he is aware that Jim is experiencing a mild reaction, though Spock is at a loss as to what, precisely, had triggered it.

Spock has never been able to deny his mother anything, and that includes the opportunity to satisfy her justifiable curiosity about the Human Spock intends to make her son one day. Nonetheless, he had been concerned that Jim would find it difficult to hold a meaningful conversation with a stranger while he was in a compromised state, and had watched him closely for signs of worsening stress.

Contrary to his fears, however, this encounter with Amanda seems to have done much to restore equanimity to Jim’s state of mind. Furthermore, watching Jim gradually relax has allowed some of Spock’s own tension to dissipate.

Yet his mind keeps returning to his conversation with Pike. The captain clearly knew more about Jim’s past than Spock did; or rather, he knew details, where Spock had only deductions, inferences based on patterns of behavior.

Though Pike had said comparatively little, the things he had said all but confirmed suspicions that Spock has long dimly held. Now, a constant uncertainty gnaws at the primitive emotional centers of Spock’s mind, where the ancient bestial drives refuse to be assured that his intended is truly safe—not when the universe seems to contain a veritable abundance of persons who had harmed Jim when he was young and vulnerable.

“I’ll look forward to it ma’am, Amanda.” Jim clasps his hands on his knees. “The way Spock talks about you…I can’t imagine anyone loving a mother more. I’ve been curious about you for as long as I’ve known him.”

Amanda glances past Jim to hold Spock’s gaze for a moment. Spock would never be so disrespectful as to refuse to meet her eyes, but despite the continued warmth of her expression, Spock grows nervous, aware that she is more likely than anyone, even Sarek, or Jim, to see past the mask of his own composure.

“I’m planning a small dinner party, Wednesday evening, here at the Embassy,” Amanda says, rising from the sofa, Jim and Spock automatically rising after her. “We’re only planning on about a dozen guests, so it won’t be anything too stiff or formal. I’d like it very much if you and Spock would join us, Jim.”

Panic crosses Jim’s face, but he masters it quickly. “If…if Spock is free, then I’d be honored to come.”

“Oh,” says Amanda, with a wry smile, “I think Spock can find the time.”

Spock quells the illogical sensation that he is once again twelve years old and being committed against his will to a social engagement with the family of one of his peers, in the hopes that he will “make friends”.
He clears his throat.

“I do not believe that I have any previous engagements Wednesday evening, Mother, and therefore I will venture to pledge our appearance.”

To Spock’s consternation, Jim turns his head aside sharply—not to conceal distress, as Spock first thought, but to conceal a fit of giggling.

“I’m sorry!” Jim says, unable to look at anyone. “But seriously, Spock. I’m starting to think you learned Standard from reading Jane Austen.”

Amanda looks at Jim, wide-eyed. Then, she too bursts into high peals of musical laughter.

Spock considers excusing himself from the room.

“Well,” says Amanda, when she has regained her composure. “I should go and look in on Cadet Vro and Dr. McCoy before I have to start getting ready. Jim, I look forward to seeing you Wednesday, if we don’t run into each other any sooner. Just a warning, I might steal you away for lunch some afternoon, if I can find the time.”

Jim just smiles, and nods, though if not for the discipline of his training he might well have scuffed his shoe against the carpet. He is already beginning to retreat into himself again, and though Spock would ordinarily take this as his cue to remain close and offer comfort, his duty lies elsewhere for a few minutes more.

Spock is certain that Gaila is well, or soon will be, since she, like Jim, possesses remarkable resilience. Whatever she may require, he is likewise certain Leonard will do his best to provide it. But he also knows Amanda will not be dissuaded from checking on the welfare of her son’s guests, and that being the case, it is Spock’s role to perform the necessary introductions.

Spock takes his place at his mother’s side and offers her his arm. Looking pleased, and slightly surprised, she takes it.

Jim’s expression, as he watches the gesture, is suffused with a faint longing that Spock cannot easily interpret.

“Jim,” says Spock, gently. “I will return shortly, if you will wait for me here.”

Once more, Jim nods, giving him a bright smile, the sincerity of which leaves something to be desired. Spock senses that he does not wish to be alone, but that he is determined to say nothing, to not be a burden.

Spock must take Jim home quickly, before he succumbs in public to the urge to cage him in his arms, to hold him tightly against his chest, to erase all doubt in Jim’s mind that he is, of all things in the known universe, the worthiest in Spock’s eyes.

“Goodbye, Jim, dear,” says Amanda, and takes his hand, squeezing it gently. “We’ll see each other again soon.”

“I hope so,” says Jim, smiling back.

At the door, Spock casts a backward glance at Jim. But his intended has already paced towards the glass doors looking out on the garden, assuming a position of parade rest with his back to the door.

On auto-pilot, Spock conducts his mother towards the family wing of the Embassy. He does not
speak. This is the first time he has seen his mother in several months, and given her Human social needs, his inattention is inexcusable. But he cannot help himself; it is as if his consciousness is lingering behind him, in the room where Jim stands alone, washed in sunlight, trapped alone in his mind with his suffering.

Suddenly, Amanda tugs sharply on Spock’s arm, dragging him off to one side.

Though Spock is more than twenty centimeters taller than his mother, and outweighs her by over one hundred kilograms, the element of surprise, combined with Spock’s deeply ingrained instinct to always be mindful of his superior strength when making physical contact with her, gives Amanda the leverage to haul him into a supply closet and shut the door on them before he can utter either query or protest.

She rounds on him breathlessly. “Spock,” she says, in a voice that transports him back to childhood so quickly that it suggests the plausibility of time travel. “What is going on with you and that boy?”

Startled, Spock blinks. “I am courting Jim, in hopes of one day bonding with him,” he says. “Forgive me. I had thought that Father would have told you.”

“So Sarek suspected your intentions were serious, but nothing had been settled when he spoke to you last, and you’d only known each other a couple of days! And of course, after what happened with that horrible—with that vicious little—ooh.”

Amanda’s shoulders hunch up around her ears, as her eyes screw up tightly in what Spock recognizes as an expression of barely suppressed anger. He has rarely seen his mother in such a state, but he remembers well how she had reacted the first few times he came home from school sporting bruises and other evidence of his inability to assimilate with other Vulcan children. This is what the protective maternal impulse looks like, in Humans. Spock has cherished it, guiltily, since he was a small boy.

But it would seem that Jim’s well-intentioned effort to spare Amanda the worst was in vain; clearly, she is already fully informed, and has already arrived at the correct conclusions regarding the full scope of Mitchell’s guilt.

Spock cannot help feeling gratified that his mother has so quickly become invested in Jim’s well-being. He does not know what he would do if she disapproved of his choice.

At last Amanda exhales, and she seems to grow smaller, as though she had taken on additional mass in proportion to her righteous anger.

“After everything Jim’s been through recently, I thought perhaps you wouldn’t have had the chance to talk to him about serious matters,” she says, in her usual voice. “But Spock—you’re courting him? Really? And he understands what that means?”

Spock’s face grows heated. “Jim has consented to a period of courtship, and I have fully explained my intentions.” He hesitates. “That discussion…took place quite recently. Today was our first outing as a couple.”

“And it was ruined.” His mother gives him a sympathetic expression. “I am sorry, for you and your friends.”

Spock ducks his head. “While I am disturbed and distressed for Gaila’s sake, I must confess that my first concern lies with Jim. Merely witnessing her ordeal was sufficient to unsettle him. He is not entire himself at the moment.”
"Yes, I thought he seemed a little off-balance." Amanda’s tone is soothing, and Spock conceals his surprise that she was able to read Jim so easily on so short an acquaintance. "You know that I can find the guest rooms on my own, Spock, and I promise I’ll knock and introduce myself properly before I go in. Go back to Jim. He needs you."

Spock cannot keep the relief, or the gratitude, from showing in his face.

Amanda hesitates, and her hand, still resting on Spock’s sleeve, tightens in a reassuring grip.

“I’m so happy for you, my darling,” she says fervently. “Though I know how difficult all of this must be for you.”

“Difficult?” echoes Spock, blankly.

Amanda’s dark eyes are expressive. “Sarek would never tell you this, but he was—devastated after melding with Jim. Vulcans are so sheltered in some ways. There are societal problems that just don’t exist in telepathic cultures.” She sighs, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Some of the things Sarek saw in Jim’s memories, he had only an abstract knowledge of before.”

She blinks rapidly. “You’ve chosen to love a very brave, very hurt person, Spock. That takes a great deal of courage. But I know you will be good for him, and I can already see that he’s good for you. There is a light in your eyes that I haven’t seen since you were a very small boy.”

She smiles, ghosting her fingers across his face. “Go back to Jim, Spock. I’ll see you both soon.”

She leaves Spock alone in the supply closet, as if correctly supposing that Spock will require a moment to gather himself before facing Jim or anyone else.

“We support you, you know,” Amanda adds, pausing at the door to look back at him. “Both your father and I. You only have to tell us how we can help.”

When she leaves, Spock quells the impulse to call her back. He is not certain that he is good for Jim at all. And he does not feel particularly brave, at the moment.

*

Spock returns for Jim, and by the time they reach the exit, Spock’s hovercar is waiting for them—retrieved from the designated parking area by Embassy security. Their picnic things are neatly packed and folded and stowed in the rear storage compartment. Spock opens the passenger side door for Jim, and Jim gets in without even a token complaint about not being allowed to drive, which is how Spock knows that he is tired.

“Where do you wish to go?” Spock asks him, when he has taken his own seat behind the controls.

“Hmm,” says Jim. “What are my options?”

“My apartment, or your dormitory, or any other destination you care to name. I suspect, however, that…quiet and solitude would be congenial to us both at this time.”

“Ah. Um, yeah, if you need to be alone and decompress, you can drop me at my dorm. That’s fine.”

Spock looks at him sharply. “I do not require solitude from you.”

Jim looks at him, surprised. A small smile softens his mouth. “Alone together, you mean?”

Spock nods.
“Then we should probably head for your place. I don’t know when Bones will be back, or if Gaila will be with him.”

“The room is yours as well. I am certain that Leonard and Gaila would not wish to make you feel unwelcome there.”

“No, no. They wouldn’t. But since we have the option of somewhere that’s…more private…”

“Indeed,” says Spock, and programs his apartment as their destination.

The drive is fairly silent, so much so that Spock cannot help being reminded of the night they met. Less than two weeks have passed since then, yet already Spock finds it difficult to remember a time when Jim was not part of his life. His eidetic memory remains unimpaired, but events preceding Jim take on a dim, drab quality in his recollection, whereas everything that has happened since is as vivid as a fresh wound, the ache of it as precious to him as his own heartbeat.

Halfway back to the apartment, Jim bursts into a fit of giggling laughter.

“Your mom, man,” he says. “She’s kind of incredible.”

Spock permits himself a small smile. “I am pleased that you enjoyed your first meeting with her.”

“You really remind me of her. I mean, I thought the same thing when I met your father, but… meeting both of them really helps me see you. Like, the bigger picture of you.”

“Indeed?” Spock’s concern for Jim has not abated, but he cannot quell his curiosity. He delights in knowing that Jim thinks about him, wonders about him. It is only natural, as his own curiosity about Jim is matchless.

“When I met Sarek, I thought he was like you, but with something missing,” Jim says. “Then I saw your mom, and I thought, wow, yes, this. This is where he gets it from.” His head flops lazily, his gaze pointing in Spock’s direction. “All that sweetness. The gentleness.”

Spock feels heat rising in his face, but because it is only Jim watching, he does not make the effort to suppress it.

“That’s how you knew what to say to me when we met,” Jim continues. “When they told me you were coming, all I could think was, God, I’m stoned off my ass, I can barely sit up straight, and now I have to explain myself to another Vulcan. A Starfleet Vulcan. I thought you’d be…different. But you were so nice to me. I expected you to be a hard-ass, but you’ve never even yelled at me, even when I deserved it.”

Spock’s mouth grows dry. He remembers Pike saying, Jim can’t tell the difference between actual kindness and the mere absence of abuse.

“You have never deserved it,” Spock says shortly.

Jim blinks, then turns his gaze back to the window. “Don’t you think there’s a chance you haven’t known me long enough to know what I deserve?”

“No,” says Spock.

Another day, perhaps, he would take up the subject with greater intellectual energy, use the force of incontrovertible logic to shatter Jim’s flimsy, self-denigrating hypothesis.
Today, he hasn’t the energy for such games. Captain Pike had advised him to be patient when necessary, and stubborn when called for. He is not certain which quality is serving him now, but it seems to be doing the trick. Jim looks taken off-guard. There is no sign of the hunched, miserable posture he unconsciously assumes whenever he becomes lost to self-loathing.

“You’re really certain of yourself,” Jim says, after a silence in which it seemed he was waiting for an elaboration from Spock that did not come.

“I am certain of you,” Spock contradicts him.

Jim is still gaping at him when they arrive at the apartment a minute later.

Once they are inside, Spock finds himself acting without thinking; not in a fashion he is afraid he will later regret, but with an assuredness born of that unfamiliar thing, instinct.

He guides Jim directly to his own bedroom, where Jim has never been before. Jim is silent as Spock ushers him forward, startlingly compliant when Spock pulls the jacket from his shoulders, and when he kneels to remove Jim’s boots.

From his closet, Spock produces a sleeping robe. When he turns around again and sees Jim blinking at him with sleepy curiosity, he discards his original intention of handing Jim the robe and leading him to the bathroom to change in privacy.

They are courting, after all. This does not exceed what is permitted in courtship, even between Vulcans.

Keeping his movements deliberate, but slow, easy to anticipate, Spock pulls Jim’s shirt over his head, and Jim lifts his arms cooperatively. Jim unbuttons his own trousers, hesitating only for a second before lifting his hips from the bed and pulling them down to his ankles, kicking them away with bare feet.

Spock does not succumb to the temptation of gazing unduly long on this unprecedented display of bare skin. Instead, he helps Jim into the sleeping robe, even tying the sash, before walking back to his closet and changing into his own sleeping robe with slightly brisker movements.

He is aware that Jim is watching him as he disrobes, but Spock offers himself up to Jim’s perusal without embarrassment.

Jim is pulling the bedcovers back by the time Spock is finished. “What time is it?” he says.

“It is 21:34,” Spock replies.

“Later than I thought. So…I guess I’m spending the night? You don’t mind?”

For the eighty-seventh time since meeting Jim, Spock wonders how such a brilliant mind can be so selectively obtuse.

But then, he has learned the answer, has he not? Abstracted though it was, Pike had described Jim’s upbringing in highly specific terms. Neglected. Abused. Traumatized, with no respite, till he came to Vulcan, only to be torn from the safety of the family that had cared for him.

“If the decision were only mine, I would spend this night, and every night hereafter, at your side,” Spock says, because it seems that clarity is needed. “If we were to spend every hour of our lives together from now on, I would not ‘mind’. And tonight, in particular, I should not like to be parted from you. I know that you were distressed by the events of the afternoon, and I wish to comfort you.
Furthermore, Leonard has mentioned that you often have difficulty sleeping. I suspect you will find that is not the case here, in my bed.”

Jim blinks once, twice, then swallows tightly. “Why’s that?” he says.

Spock gets into the bed and reaches for Jim’s hand to pull him down as well. “Because here, you will be safe.”

Even shielding, Spock can feel the emotions, changeable as the sea, swelling inside Jim. Doubt wars with relief. Affection and desire are shot through with a mistrust that Jim knows, rationally, is unwarranted, but which he cannot control. Self-loathing tells him he does not deserve the comfort Spock is offering. The part of him that does not care what he deserves, only what he needs, longs to bury himself in Spock’s arms, to know that if the nightmares comes, Spock will be there.

Spock orders the lights off. Then, moving swiftly, he grasps Jim’s upright body in an escapable hold and flips him onto the mattress, on his side, half underneath Spock’s body.

Jim gasps, sounding startled, even vulnerable, but Spock immediately relaxes his hold, keeping one arm loosely but securely draped across Jim’s chest. Spock is only a few centimeters taller than Jim, but Jim is positioned such that Spock can rest his chin atop Jim’s head. He does so, and finds it imminently comfortable.

“Sleep,” he orders, his voice a low, satisfied rumble.

Spock waits, timing the rise and fall of Jim’s chest until his breathing grows regular and even. Only then does he close his eyes.

* 

The insistent chirp of his comm wakes him many hours later. Spock had slept by Jim’s side until the early hours of the morning, but after he had risen to meditate, shower, and consume a cup of tea, he found that he wished to return to bed.

He had not expected to fall asleep again, but apparently had done so.

The display on his comm indicates that the time is 07:37, and that the incoming video message is from his mother.

Spock slips quickly and quietly from the room, leaving Jim undisturbed behind him. When he has reached the kitchen, he accepts the call.

“Mother?”

His mother is not yet fully dressed for the day; her hair is only pulled back at the temples, the rest of it hanging long and loose down her back. She looks at him with wide, worried eyes, and Spock feels his heart rate increase.

“Spock,” she says. “Is Jim with you?”

Spock blinks.

“I apologize for prying, but is he?”

“He is.” Spock refuses to permit himself any embarrassment over this admission. His mother is well
aware that Jim is his intended.

“Would it be possible for you to bring him here, to the Embassy?”

Spock cannot hide how startled he is by the request. “If it is necessary, I can wake him. Mother, forgive me, but you seem distressed. Has anything happened?”

“Nothing bad!” she says hurriedly. “At least—I don’t think so. But I think it’s best that you and Jim get here as quickly as possible.”

“Jim will wish to know the reason. He may become anxious if I cannot explain matters to him.”

“Yes, of course.” Amanda draws a deep breath. “It’s Sakal. Jim’s foster father. He’s here, Spock, he’s just arrived. And he wants to see Jim.”
Chapter 17

Amanda sends a car for them; it’s out front and waiting before Jim gets out of the shower. He dresses quickly, barely pausing long enough to catch Spock’s eye before stalking out the front door.

Any other day, Jim would be searching himself for words to set Spock’s badly-concealed anxiety at ease. Spock was the one who’d taken the call, who’d had to wake Jim up, who’d explained why they were needed back at the Embassy. If the circumstances were reversed, and Spock were in his position, Jim would be a hovering bundle of nerves, too.

Right now, though, he feels hollow, like a gong still vibrating long after the blow’s been struck. There are no words, comforting or otherwise, in him. He’s present and distant at the same time—functional, but dissociating so hard he can barely feel his own face.

Spock would understand if Jim explained, but he can’t explain, so he’s going to have trust Spock to understand anyway.

The Embassy car is outwardly indistinguishable from any other pricy four-passenger hover vehicle on the roads. Inside, however, Jim can feel the heft and drag of a vehicle that is armored against everything from old-fashioned combustion explosions to plasma fire. It moves slowly through city traffic, though it’s early enough that they’re missing the worst of it.

Jim stares sightlessly out the window, and thinks.

The key thing is that he has to be a grown-up about this. Whatever happens, whatever Sakal has come to say to him, Jim has to take it like an adult, not like a bereft teenager who’d rather face certain death in an alien wilderness than face his reality.

He just wishes he knew why Sakal was here. Why now, after eight years? Does he know Sarek, or was he surprised when the Vulcan Ambassador to Earth knew Jim’s name?

They’re halfway to the Embassy before Spock speaks up.

“After your shared meld with my father, he informed me that you are not psi-null. I trust he informed you as well?”

This is so absolutely the last thing that Jim is braced for Spock to say that the metaphorical clamp on his tongue loosens up.

“Yeah,” says Jim, frowning at Spock. “He said I’m only slightly telepathic, but that my empathic abilities are pretty strong for a Human.”

“Indeed. And despite your lack of formal training, your mental discipline is excellent. I have observed that you only project emotions when you are highly agitated.”

“Oh.” Jim grimaces. “What kind of emotions are you getting from me now?”


“Okay, that’s enough.” Jim looks down, wrapping his arms around his middle, like he has a
stomachache.

Spock’s forehead creases. “I was not chiding you. I only wish to comfort you.”

Jim smiles, but he shakes his head and looks away again. “I wish you could. Right now, I think comfort would just…bounce off me.”

Spock reaches out and covers Jim’s hand with his. Jim looks down, then looks at Spock, who maintains eye contact as he threads their fingers together and squeezes slightly.

By Vulcan standards, it’s a more intimate act than a hug, but a hug would be overwhelming, and somehow, this is not.

“Your anxiety is understandable, but you have nothing to fear.” Spock looks up at Jim from beneath his eyebrows, and for an instant, his expression seems almost sinister. “My family would not have assisted him in making contact with you unless they found Sakal to be trustworthy.”

“No, I know. I’m not worried he’s going to…pop me in the mouth, or anything like that.”

It’s the truth. Bruises heal easy in comparison to what Jim’s afraid is going to happen when he sees Sakal.

Spock frowns. “I am unfamiliar with the phrase, ‘to pop in the mouth’.”

“I mean, I’m not afraid that he’s going to hurt me.”

“He certainly will not hurt you.” Spock is frowning openly at him now. “Why would such an idea even occur to you?”

“Same reason American English evolved a colloquialism to describe an act of child abuse with specificity regarding level of force.”

“I do not understand.”

“Yeah.” Jim scrubs his free hand over his face. “Ignore me, Spock. I’m useless right now.” He stares blankly at the privacy screen between them and the driver. “I don’t have the first clue what Sakal’s going to say to me, or how I’m going to feel when I see him. I don’t know if I’m relieved or fucking heartbroken that T’Silla and the girls aren’t with him. I don’t have any idea what’s about to happen, which means I can’t be prepared for it, and I fucking hate that.”

Spock opens his mouth, then shuts it again. He looks from Jim to the partition, and for a second Jim thinks he’s about to tell the driver to turn the vehicle around.

“I can only imagine what you must be feeling,” Spock says pensively. “Therefore, it would be illogical to presume there is anything I could do to make you feel better.”

Jim hears the helplessness behind Spock’s words, and feels his stomach clench.

“I can only promise,” Spock continues, “that I will not leave your side unless you ask me to do so.”

The idea of sending Spock away when he talks to Sakal hadn’t even occurred to Jim. But it probably should have.

“I want you with me,” Jim says, trying to be reassuring. “I do, but…Spock.” He chews his bottom lip. “It’s not going to be an easy conversation. You might…hear some things. All that stuff I don’t talk about, it could come up. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”
Spock’s expression is so unbearably gentle that it is difficult for Jim not to look away.

“At a reunion such as this is, it would be unreasonable to suppose that only comfortable and pleasant emotions will emerge,” he says. “Your concern is gratifying, but unnecessary. I am grateful that you are willing to let me accompany you. It is not in the Vulcan custom to abandon one’s intended when they are vulnerable. I should not like to feel that I had failed in that duty.”

“You are not failing at anything,” says Jim, locking eyes with Spock. “You’re not, so stop thinking that way. You’ve given me something no one else ever has. Time, Spock,” he says, when Spock looks confused. “You know, Gary threatened to break up with me unless I told him where my scars came from? Not you, though. You…you picked me, even though you don’t know everything about me. That’s…that’s everything, Spock. No one’s ever had that kind of faith in me before. Don’t second-guess yourself.”

Something suspiciously bright flashes through Spock’s eyes before he makes it disappear with a blink.

Jim scoots a little closer to Spock. “What I’m trying to say is that I trust you. This wasn’t the way I planned to do it, but I was always going to tell you. I’m just saying things could get intense. If it’s too much for you, or if you need a break, or—”

“Jim.” Spock cuts him off, his voice soft and quiet. “When we touch, there is a perceptible thread of tension, like the string of a ka’athyra, that runs through your consciousness. It is rooted deep in your mind, which means it is old, and has been there since you were very young.”

Spock dips his head and presses his lips to Jim’s forehead. “Though you have not shared the details of your history with me, I am…aware that Gary Mitchell was not the first person who hurt you. No matter what is said, I can only reassure you that I will not judge you negatively on the basis of anything that is said or disclosed in my presence.”

“You’re sure about that?” Because Jim, of course, has no trouble thinking of a few things that might change Spock’s mind.

In response, Spock places his free hand on Jim’s back—just under his left shoulder blade, where a prominent scar from Kodos’s whips tore through the flesh and healed without regenerators. The heat of his hand bleeds through layers of fabric.

“This meeting which awaits us is no cause for distress,” Spock says, gentle, but insistent. “I confess that I feel a deep curiosity regarding the formative experiences of your early life, chiefly due to the fact that I wish to gain a better understanding of how to meet your needs. But I do not believe that learning the details of your past can compromise me more than your present suffering, of which I am already aware.”

Jim bites his tongue to keep from apologizing. Spock would find it illogical, and possibly even annoying. But he keeps holding Spock’s hand, and silence falls between them.

They spend the last few minutes of the ride clinging to each other quietly, while Jim focuses on his breathing, mirroring the rise and fall of Spock’s own chest. He’s nearly content by the time the car pulls into the semi-circle driveway at the Embassy’s main entrance.

The hollowness roars up inside him again as soon as he and Spock are forced to let go of each other. They each climb out their own side of the car, and once outside, Jim is careful not to touch Spock, not wanting to embarrass him in front of other Vulcans who might be squinting down at them through the windows.
Spock looks annoyingly attractive and well-groomed, his instructor’s blacks showing not a trace of lint, or even a stray cat hair. Jim did his best, but Spock always manages to make him feel scruffy.

Realizing that this is probably his last chance to expel some nervous energy before he faces the lion’s den, Jim springs up the front steps two at a time, tucking his cap back under his arm as he marches up to the receptionist’s desk.

“Cadet James Kirk, here at Ambassador Sarek’s request,” he says, just as Spock catches up to him. “And Commander Spock, as well.”

“Indeed,” says the Vulcan, who does not betray the faintest surprise or curiosity about the presence of a slightly sweaty Starfleet cadet arriving at his desk, accompanied by the Ambassador’s son. He’s probably an aide on Sarek’s staff, sent to wait for them. “If you will follow me, Cadet Kirk, Commander Spock.”

Jim’s steps begin to slow as the aide leads them directly to Sarek’s office door, the paralysis of dread finally overtaking the agitation of nervous energy. The aide presses a button on the security console; a second later, the light flashes green.

The aide steps aside to let Jim and Spock enter. Jim doesn’t actually move until Spock ushers him forward with a hand to the small of his back.

“Father.” Spock nods to Sarek, who immediately steps out from behind his desk to greet them.


“These are rather extraordinary circumstances.”

Vulcan subtext is a lot harder to read when the Vulcans in question are speaking Federation Standard. The language allows for so many more shades of meaning than Modern Golic that a fluent Vulcan can hide in the shadows of ambiguity for a long time, if he wants to. But judging from his tone and stance, Jim’s pretty sure that Spock just demanded that his dad explain himself.

“They are indeed,” says Sarek. “Jim, it is gratifying to see you in better health. Your prompt arrival is also appreciated.”

Jim doesn’t have the nerve to tell him that adrenaline, not courtesy, had motivated that uncharacteristic burst of promptness, so he just nods.

Sarek is dressed more informally than when Jim last saw him. Somehow, his scholarly grey robes seem to suit him better than the grand, embroidered silk robe with the high collar he was wearing when Jim saw him last.

Sarek crosses his arms and his hands disappear into his sleeves.

“Amanda told you of Sakal’s arrival?” he says, somewhat hesitantly, as though even he is experiencing some uncertainty under the circumstances. Jim finds that oddly comforting.

“Yes. That is all we were told.” Spock’s voice doesn’t sharpen, exactly, but his intonation is so precise it could scratch glass.

When he darts a swift glance in Jim’s direction, the implication is obvious. Look at the Human, he might as well be saying. You gave him anxiety!

Jim supposes that, whatever his face looks like at the moment, it must support Spock’s implications,
at least in Sarek’s eyes. The Ambassador hones in on him with startling focus.

“Jim, I should like to explain that I never intended for Sakal’s arrival to come as a surprise to you. I meant to give you ample warning to prepare, even to refuse the meeting if that was your wish. However, Sakal made his journey from Vulcan in a shorter time than anticipated, and his arrival late last night surprised even me.”

Jim has a million questions, but Spock presses forward before he can get his mouth into working order.

“You knew of his intention to come to Earth,” Spock says.

“Indeed. I requested that he make the journey.”

Why? Jim wants to say, but Spock is still talking.

“And you are certain that this is the same Sakal who fostered Jim?” he says.

Sarek nods gravely, and his eyes do not leave Jim’s face. “He is indeed Sakal, son of Skall, father of T’Vara and T’Vael. Bondmate to T’Silla, daughter of Prelok—now, unfortunately, deceased.”

Every muscle in Jim’s body freezes.

“T’Silla is deceased,” says Spock, faintly, after a long pause.

“Yes. But it is only appropriate that any further information on that subject come from Sakal himself.”

Jim blinks once, then twice. T’Silla is dead. Of course.

On some level, Jim thinks he must have known that already. At least, it feels as if he knew it. The grief bubbling up in his chest feels old—a familiar, almost cherished ache in his mind.

He can feel his lungs locking up, but he doesn’t know if he wants to be sick, sob, or hyperventilate.

“Jim.”

He must be breathing funny or something, because Spock grabs his wrist—the way he does when he’s trying to take Jim’s emotional temperature.

Whatever Spock reads from him causes him to instantly lifts his fingers to Jim’s meld points.

“Peace,” he murmurs, and before Jim can protest or ask questions, a calm descends on his thoughts, like a muffling blanket of snow over a landscape of jagged ruins.

It feels strange, and slightly uncomfortable. But it’s worth it, because he can breathe again.

“Is he well?” says Sarek, and through watery eyes, Jim can just make out that he looks concerned.

“I’m fine,” Jim declares hoarsely, not ready for Spock and his father to start talking about him over his head. “Ambassador, may I ask why you invited Sakal to Earth?

Sarek nods slowly. He speaks slowly too, as though he is choosing his words with care.

“As we discussed when last I saw you, your familial bonds cannot remain partitioned behind a mental shield forever. That was a temporary measure. For the sake of your health, it is necessary
either to restore, or to sever, the bonds with your surviving Vulcan family members. They cannot
remain as they are. Both options necessitate that Sakal be physically present. Therefore, I invited
him.”

Spock, still holding onto him, feels it when Jim tenses up. As though Jim’s anxiety has prompted an
automated response, he turns to Sarek again.

“Father, though your intentions were laudable, it is not reasonable to expect Jim to be prepared, on
such short notice, to—”

“No, he’s right.” Jim hears his voice as though it’s coming from a long way outside his own body.
“You heard him, my brain’s messed up. That’s how Gary got to me, right? Sakal’s here, so, it’s
logical to deal with this now.”

If Jim had thought Sarek would look pleased by his citing logic, he was mistaken. The Ambassador’s
look of uncertainty deepens, and glances from Jim to where Spock is standing, just behind him.

“I understand that after so many years, the prospect of reuniting with any member of your former
family might provoke feelings of uncertainty.” Sarek walks slowly towards a window and twitches a
curtain aside, looking down at the grounds below. “It is…possible that I acted hastily. Having
glimpsed many of your memories, I was aware that, at one time, you desired very much to see your
family again. Lack of resources frustrated your attempts. However, determining the location of a
specific Vulcan is a fairly simple task for an ambassador. I…wished to do you a service.”

Jim shuffles backwards slightly, and hits a wall of immovable Spock, whose hands come round to
grip his elbows.

“If I have erred, I apologize,” Sarek adds. He finally turns away from the window, giving Jim a swift
glance, before returning to his desk.

Really.”

Sarek nods. “Sakal is waiting in my audience chamber. I can call him to join us now if you wish. But
I request that you permit Spock and myself to remain with you while you speak with him.”

“Spock isn’t going anywhere.” Jim frowns slightly at Sarek; maybe he wants to stick around because
he thinks Spock is going to need support for this as well. “If you want to stay…”

“I do not wish to infringe upon your privacy. However, as I am responsible for bringing Sakal here, I
am also responsible for any consequences of his visit. I shall endeavor to make myself unobtrusive.”

Jim nods. Sarek gives him, then Spock, a final look, before disappearing through an interior door of
his office.

“Come and be seated,” says Spock, indicating the sofa.

Jim shakes his head, squeezing Spock’s arm. “I need to be on my feet for this,” he says.

Only moments later, Sarek returns.

Following him is a Vulcan male, several inches taller than Sarek, with dark skin and short black hair
threaded at the temples with silver. He has high, aristocratic cheekbones and deep-set eyes, and he is
dressed simply, but elegantly, in the immaculate white robes of a healer.
Apart from the grey, he looks almost exactly the same age as he had the last time Jim saw him, through the window of a shuttle.

Sarek collects Spock with his eye, and both of them takes seats. Jim can feel Spock’s reluctance to put even a meter’s worth of space between them, but he follows Sarek anyway.

Jim and Sakal are left to face each other in the middle of the room, like actors, performing for a very exclusive audience.

Jim takes one step forward, then stops. Already, it feels like his knees are getting loose in the joints. He takes a deep breath, and realizes that it’s the first he’s taken in a while.

“I—” he croaks, looking blankly up at Sakal. White static starts creeping into the corners of his vision. Jim grips the back of a chair, knowing it won’t support him for long.

Sakal was never as unemotive as Spock or Sarek, or any of the Vulcans Jim’s met at the Embassy. Logically, of course, there was no need for a simple agricultural researcher to affect the lofty airs and graces of a member of the House of Surak. Jim has heard Sakal laugh—not often, but more than once—and he knows what worry looks like on that long face.

Right now, Sakal’s eyebrows are hanging so low over his eyes that he’s practically frowning.

“Sorry.” As soon as Jim tries to talk, he realizes his breathing has grown ragged. “Sorry, I just…I’m so sorry about T’Silla. It’s weird, but I think I kind of knew? I don’t know, I just—shit. Shit, I’m sorry—”

When his knees buckle, it is Sakal who catches him.

Jim has grown used to Spock manhandling him for his own good. But unlike Spock, who would have wasted no time sweeping Jim into his arms, Sakal lowers Jim gently to the floor. Kneeling to face him, Sakal grasps Jim’s arms above the elbow, a steadying grip that keeps their faces only inches apart.

“Jim.” Sakal’s deep voice sounds to Jim like an echo from his dreams. His black Vulcan eyes peer intently into Jim’s face. “There is much for us to discuss, and much for me to explain. I intend to answer all your questions. But you will be more comfortable if you take a seat upon the furniture provided for this purpose, rather than sprawling on the carpet.”

Jim nods, to show that he understands. Because he does. He’ll get up in just a minute. He opens his mouth to say this.

“Sakal?” is what comes out instead.

The corners of Sakal’s eyes crease with concern. He lifts a hand to touch the side of Jim’s face.

“It is I,” he says. “Do you doubt me?”

“No.” Jim shakes his head too quickly, like a child. “No. But—you. I thought. I thought, all of you —”

“I believe Jim is having difficulty emotionally reconciling your unexpected appearance with the fact that so many years have passed with no contact between you.”

Spock, who had shot to his feet when Jim collapsed, stands next to his father, who is still seated. His hands are behind his back, and his shoulders are stiff as a board as he all but glares in Sakal’s
direction.

Sakal looks at Spock, then looks away, blinking. He bows his head for a moment.

“Despite how it must have appeared, we did not forget you, Jim,” he says, his voice quiet, slightly hoarse. “Ever since the hour of our parting, you have been near my thoughts.”

Jim swallows around the massive knot in his throat.

Sakal lifts his hand again. This time, he runs a soothing hand over Jim’s hair, exactly as he’d done each time Jim had woken the entire house up with his nightmares, those first few weeks after Tarsus.

Jim hears a soft intake of breath from the couch, as though Sakal has done something shockingly un-Vulcan. But Jim could tell them, this is just what Sakal’s like.

Jim blinks a few times, scrubbing at his eyes in frustration.

“Please,” says Sakal, sounding firm. “Come and sit with me. Allow your intended to bring you water. It is his place.”

Jim will have to decide how he feels about hearing Sakal referring to Spock as his “intended” some other time. Sakal is already lifting him to his feet, and frowning as he does so.

“I would have expected you to weigh more at this age,” he says, his tone suddenly clipped. “Is your primary physician at Starfleet aware of your unique nutritional needs?”

“Sakal!” Jim, reddening, darts a look at Spock, whose expression is much too curious.

When he looks back at Sakal, and finds that he is carefully not-smiling, Jim realizes that he just played right into his hands.

“You must forgive me,” says Sakal, all innocence. “Since last we met, I have re-trained in a new career as a healer. It is only natural that I be concerned with your health.”

“Well, clearly I haven’t changed as much as you thought I would,” says Jim, as Sakal nudges him towards the sofa next to Spock, who does indeed have a glass of water waiting for him. “I was doing a pretty impressive re-enactment of that snot-nosed teenager you took in, just now.”

“You were not as you describe yourself.” Sakal sits in an arm chair placed at an angle with Jim’s end of the sofa. “Even when T’Silla first brought you to our home, you did not weep. You were mature, self-sufficient, and illogically convinced that your presence was a burden upon us.”

Jim can feel Spock stirring next to him, as if something Sakal said had struck a nerve.

“Sure,” Jim scoffs. “I never started bawling in the middle of the night, or—”

“I am curious what your Starfleet Ethics instructor must be teaching you, if you would count the actions of an unconscious or sleeping person to their discredit.” Sakal cuts him off, lifting one eyebrow expectantly.

Jim sighs and allows his head to drop into his hands. Immediately, Spock tries to press the water glass on him again.

Sakal steeples his hands in his lap. “Are you still suffering from any symptoms related to your recent assault?”
Jim’s head jerks up. “You know about that?” he says faintly.

Sitting at Spock’s right, Sarek stirs, and just like that the pieces fall together.

“Right, of course,” says Jim, looking down again. “You’re here because the Ambassador told you. Yeah, no, Bones—my roommate, he’s also a doctor—he says I’m good.”

There is silence in the room for a moment. Vulcans don’t make idle chatter, after all.

The house where Jim had lived on the borders of the Great Red Plain hadn’t been silent. With two tiny, illogical Vulcan toddlers running around, it couldn’t be. Jim wants to ask about T’Vara and T’Vael, whether they had been all right after T’Silla died, where they were now. But he can’t.

Sakal is being kind to him. He obviously cares enough about Jim’s well-being to come all the way to Earth for this…procedure, and Jim is grateful. He doesn’t want to presume by getting nosy. Vulcans are private about their families, after all.

“Jim.” Sakal exhales wearily through his nostrils. “I had been of two minds whether to speak to you about this today, but I sense that it is necessary. There were factors involved in our separation 8.3 years ago of which you are not aware. Firstly, it was not our intention, mine or T’Silla’s, that our last meeting should be our last. We intended to follow you to Earth and remain there until we were successful in petitioning for your release back into our care.” He hesitates. “In this, we were— prevented.”

Jim, assuming Sakal is referring to the cost of the journey and the disruption to their lives and careers, just nods. But Spock tilts his head. “Prevented in what way, might I ask, Healer?”

Bizarrely—at least, it’s bizarre to Jim—Sakal trades a knowing sort of look with Sarek, as though they are equals, rather than an ambassador and an ordinary Vulcan medical professional.

“No member of our family was able to obtain an interplanetary travel permit after your departure from Vulcan. In what was later ruled to be a random computer error, I, T’Silla, and both of our daughters, were individually and jointly prohibited from leaving Vulcan. The block on our travel permits remained impossible to circumnavigate for the period of 1.3 years from the day Jim was taken by the Federation welfare authorities.”

Sakal looks at his hands, and his voice falters.

“In the meantime, Jim, you had reached the age of sixteen, and emancipated yourself from the social welfare system. You became untraceable after that point. Which is not to say that we did not try. T’Silla was by far the superior researcher, and given sufficient time, I am sure she would have met with success in locating your whereabouts.” He pauses for a long moment. “Three years after you left us, however, there occurred a fault in the navigational computer of the public transport shuttle which T’Silla took daily from Shi’Kahr to the provincial border. The accident claimed seven lives. Including hers.”

“I grieve with thee.” The words, spoken in Vulcan, are out of Jim’s mouth before he is conscious of speaking.

Sakal meets Jim’s eyes, and there is an intensity there that Jim doesn’t know how to interpret. “I know that to be true,” he says gently.

Jim lowers his eyes, and feels Spock’s hand come to grip his shoulder. Sakal clears his throat.

“After the passing of my bondmate, it became necessary, for my daughters’ sake, to re-train in a
career which would keep me closer to the city. It is possible for two people to raise a family in the deep desert, without access to the amenities of a more populated area. It is not possible for one person to do so alone. Since T’Silla’s death, the demands of my training and the needs of my daughters rendered me incapable of continuing the search for you in a meaningful fashion. And yet, I thought of you daily.”

Sakal’s troubled expression grows openly sorrowful, and his manner of speaking becomes careful, almost hesitant.

“Jim, while you were romantically involved with the telepath Gary Mitchell, his abusive and manipulative behavior towards you created neurological surges in the bonding center of your brain’s psi-cortex.”

Jim takes a short, shocked breath. There is something deeply surreal about hearing Sakal say Gary’s name, especially in that tone of voice—the same flat tone Spock uses when he is concealing deep, troubled emotions.

“You do not have the ability to communicate telepathically across light years. I believe, however, that you succeeded in projecting emotions to me, through our weakened bond, even across that great void. The more disturbed your mind was, the more conscious of you I became—as though you were calling out to me for help. I could hear, but not answer.”

Pain splinters Jim’s chest, and his heart breaks all in a moment, like a dropped glass.

He’d been lonelier with Gary than when he was single. Gary isolated him, intentionally, trying to keep him from spending too much time with Bones, or Gaila. He’d even accused Jim of having an affair with Pike, no doubt because he was afraid that Pike would find out about him. And yes, sometimes it did feel like he was screaming, in his head, for someone to see, to notice, to save him when he couldn’t muster the will to save himself. Given what Sarek had told him about Gary manipulating his bonds, Jim supposes that Sakal’s words make sense.

But the idea that Sakal could hear him—that he’d been forced to listen, and do nothing, for years—makes Jim want to hurl himself off a bridge and into the bay. Given the choice, he would have died happily before subjecting Sakal to that kind of helplessness.

Sakal takes a shaky breath and forces himself to continue.

“When…Sarek contacted me,” he says, “I had already been aware that you had recently suffered some devastating injury. I was greatly relieved to learn that you were safe, and well looked after.”

Jim can’t look at him. He can’t look at anyone. His throat is so tight that he couldn’t speak if he wanted to.

This isn’t the first time he’s seen proof that the people who truly love him inevitably get fucked over just by associating with him, but it’s the first time he’s felt this degree of crushing guilt.

When Spock’s hand moves from his shoulder, to grip the back of his neck, Jim remembers what Spock said in the car. And here he is, in a room with three talented telepaths, emoting like a toddler having a meltdown.

He forces himself to take a very deep breath.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Sakal gives one sharp shake of the head. “It is in the past, with no chance of being repeated,” says
The words drop into Jim’s stomach like an anchor, but he manages to control his face.

Silence falls for a few seconds—Jim suspects that he’s making at least one or two of the Vulcans present uncomfortable with his quiet but unmistakably emotional displays. It is Spock who speaks next.

“I am curious,” says Spock. “After the computer error was discovered, did you request a copy of the technician’s report?”

Despite everything, Jim almost wants to laugh, because of course that’s something his nerdy computer scientist boyfriend would ask about.

Sakal looks at Sarek again. This time, it seems as if he is waiting for the Ambassador’s permission.

Sarek leans forward, and Jim and Spock both shift to face him.

“James,” says Sarek. “When I spoke with Sakal nine days ago, I found the circumstances which he related to me sufficiently irregular as to warrant deeper inquiry. A simple audit has since discovered that one of the programmers employed eight years ago by the Vulcan Transport Ministry accepted several large payments in exchange for maintaining the travel ban. The payments this person received passed through several intermediaries to reach him, but were ultimately traced to Frank Halley. I believe he is your step-father.”

Jim’s face and hands grow suddenly numb. His mouth falls open, but he doesn’t even try to speak.

Spock, however, sucks in a breath like a hiss. His spine straightens so fast that Sarek gives him a very slight quelling glance.

“I can only suppose that Mr. Halley thought he would have greater success in retaining custody of you if your Vulcan family could not appear in person to testify at the injunction hearing. Yet, while his interference prevented you being reunited with them, he failed of his intended goal.”

Jim hasn’t thought much about Frank since the last time he saw him. Yet somehow, he’s not even slightly surprised by what Sarek has just told him. In fact, it’s almost a relief to know for certain.

The fact is, Jim might have knocked Frank into a wall five years ago, proving once and for all that he was too big and too mean to be scared of some pathetic drunk bastard, anymore. But he never felt like things were really finished, between them. Jim’s always known there was another shoe out there somewhere, just waiting to drop.

“Well, he liked me suffering,” he says, unable to conceal his own bitterness. “So Frank would probably say it was still money well spent.”

The words hang in the air like poison gas; no one breathes. Spock’s grip tightens on his neck, but even he can’t seem to find words.

At length, Sakal lifts his head, and there is more pain in his expression than Jim has ever seen.

“James,” says Sakal, his voice ragged. “I have need to ask for forgiveness.”

Sakal doesn’t ordinarily call him James. None of them had, as T’Silla knew that he preferred Jim, and had referred to him that way when telling her family about him from the Shenzhou.
“We are taught that regret is illogical, but it is impossible not to feel a sense of loss.” Sakal swallows, but does not break eye contact. “My daughters and I were deprived of your presence in our lives for too many years. It is likewise impossible not to grieve for the needless pain you endured. When we took you into our home, we vowed to protect you. It was a promise we were unable to keep, and you have paid the price of my failures.”

“No,” says Jim sharply, almost panicked. “No, don’t say that. I owe you everything, just for that one year. I wouldn’t even be here if—”

His chest is getting tight. He has to remember to breathe, to make the conscious choice to suck each breath down.

Spock murmurs his name, his voice low and pained. Jim hears him, as if from underwater.

Suddenly, Sakal reaches for him. He grabs Jim’s wrist hard, squeezing it like he’s trying to communicate something essential, something words can’t convey. He breathes quietly for a moment. Then he releases Jim, and speaks.

“James,” he says. “Hear me. Our bond is weak, but it still lives. Allow me to join my mind with yours, and I will restore the family connections which should have always been there to comfort you.”

Stunned, Jim can only stare at him.

“What?” He doesn’t quite laugh, but he can’t hide his confusion, his incredulity. “But—but you’re here to have the bonds severed. I mean—aren’t you?”

He hates the treacherous way his voice goes high and cracks on the last word.

“What told you this?” Sakal’s eyebrows are suddenly thunderous.

“I—” Jim performs a quick mental review of the last half-hour of listening to three Vulcans talk at him. He almost swears when he realizes his error.

“Okay,” he admits. “No one told me. I just…assumed.”

Sakal shakes his head slowly. “Then let me make myself clear. Your mother is dead, and only time can heal the wound of her death. Your father, and your sisters, live, however. And we would know you again, Jim. I wish to become better acquainted with the admirable and accomplished young man you have become. Will you allow this?”

Spock is right there, pressed against Jim’s side. Sarek is not far behind him. They are both watching intently, and Jim knows why.

If Jim permits Sakal to name him as his son, then the same traditions that make Jim family to Sarek will make Sakal family to Sarek and Spock. The future of two Vulcan lines hinges on this decision—on Jim—and it’s so fucking ludicrous that it takes genuine effort not to burst into hysterical laughter.

Does he want what Sakal is offering? Yes. It’s humiliating, but the mere idea makes something desperate and needy rise up in him, makes him wish he were a child again, so he could just be selfish and take what he needs.

But it’s been eight years. Eight long, lonely years, most of which he spent drifting, aimless, out of control. He’s done things to survive, to kill the pain, that would make Sakal wince and turn his face
As damaged and broken as he had been after Tarsus, he’d gotten worse after he was forced off of Vulcan. And Sakal…Sakal deserves to know that.

“It’s been a while since the last time we melded,” says Jim, forcing himself to hold Sakal’s gaze.

“It has indeed.”

“I’m not the kid you knew anymore.”

“And yet, it was you who claimed to have changed less over the years than I supposed.”

“Yeah, that was a joke, Sakal.” Jim rolls his eyes. “You remember those, right?”

Sakal arches an eyebrow. “Your jokes? As I am Vulcan, they are regrettably impossible to forget.”

“Oh my God, I was fourteen—ugh.” Jim spreads his hands. “What I’m saying is, you don’t know…what kind of person I am anymore. You don’t know what you might be inviting into your family.”

It is a deeply loaded statement to make in present company. It’s probably the last thing he should be saying in front of Spock, let alone Spock’s father, who looks pretty disturbed.

Jim takes a deep breath.

“I’m not saying no,” he tells Sakal, who is still watching him. “I’m saying—you should meld with me first. After that, if you still want to restore our bonds, then…”

He looks at Sakal, a little helplessly, willing him to understand. But Sakal draws himself up, looking suddenly stern.

“Your proposition is flawed in several respects,” he says. “You are not a bowl obtained at the market. I do not need to examine you for cracks before purchase.”

Sakal manages to sound exasperated and look slightly heartbroken at the same time. “That is not what it means to be family,” he says, a little more gently. “As you very well know, sa-fu.”

Sakal isn’t descended from anyone famous. By Vulcan standards, his aptitudes are no more than slightly above average. What sets him apart from every other Vulcan Jim’s ever met is his uncanny emotional intelligence. Jim is getting roasted by the only man who ever tried to raise him right, because Sakal knows that it’s easier for Jim to cope with emotional overload if someone’s pretending to give him a hard time.

He’s manipulating Jim, shamelessly, and it’s working, and Jim hates it and loves it and wants to tear his own hair out.

“I believe the…bowl, in this metaphor, would withstand the inspection in any case,” says Sarek dryly.

Bewildered, Jim looks at him.

“If you require the endorsement of one who has seen inside your mind before you will believe that you deserve to be treated as a member your own family, I offer you mine.” Sarek tilts his head meaningfully. “I found nothing wanting in you, James.”

Jim doesn’t know how to answer that. He doesn’t even know where to begin. And he’s not at all
comfortable with the fact that Spock’s dad can make him blush.

He stands up, instantly waving all the Vulcans back down, including Spock, who looks furiously stubborn for a second before relenting. Jim walks over to the stand where the water pitcher sits and refills his glass, thinking.

The bonds have to be restored, or gotten rid of altogether. According to Sarek, his mental health is at stake, and Jim’s already unstable enough to know he can’t risk it.

Those bonds have been part of him for nine years now, but he didn’t even know about them until last week. If he loses them, the inside of his head will never be the same. Since he can’t tell the difference between the bond and…the rest of his mind, he has no idea if he’d be giving up something essential, or if he’d even notice the difference.

The inside of his head has never been a particularly comfortable place. A change in his interior landscape might actually be for the best.

But it’s not just about him. Bonds work two ways, and Sakal seems to want it. He’d clearly been shocked that Jim had assumed otherwise, so Jim knows he’s sincere. Not that Sakal has ever lied to him.

The problem is just—Jim doesn’t understand why Sakal wants it. He can’t wrap his head around the idea that he and T’Silla both hadn’t breathed a guilty sigh of relief once they realized they’d seen the last of him. He’s always been too much for people, especially the people he’s closest to. Everyone always benefits from breathing room, where he’s concerned.

Isn’t it possible that Sakal doesn’t know any better? That Jim has a duty to protect him from what he doesn’t understand? Sarek’s affirmation had been unexpectedly kind, but Sarek didn’t have pre-conceived expectations of Jim based on what he was like at fourteen. Sakal, Jim can’t help thinking, would probably react very differently to what he found in Jim’s memories.

Jim’s not even sure he remembers how to be part of a family. How to be anything but alone. He’s made some progress in that area lately, with Spock, but there’s a reason they’re going slow, that they haven’t come anywhere close to discussing the idea of bonding, yet.

Finally, Jim comes to a decision. He sets the water glass aside and returns to the couch, where Spock is speaking to the others.

“There is no pressing reason for Jim to make this decision now,” he is saying insistently. “Healer, I assume you have made arrangements to remain on planet for a time?”

“I have no business anywhere more pressing than this,” Sakal admits. “I have as yet set no date for my return to Vulcan.”

“Then,” says Spock, “perhaps we might resume this conversation tomorrow, when Jim has had the opportunity to meditate on these matters.”

“No,” says Jim. “That’s not necessary.”

Spock looks down at him, concerned. “Truly, Jim—”

Jim gives Spock a wry smile, then sits next to him, taking comfort from the way Spock immediately presses himself against Jim’s side.

“I don’t want to wait for tomorrow.” He looks at Sakal and Sarek. “But I could use an hour to
myself. Do you mind?"

“If that is what you require, I have no objection,” Sakal says somberly. “Your thoughtfulness shows good judgment.”

Despite his words, Jim is sure he sees a flash of pain in Sakal’s eyes.

“Oh,” he says. “I’ll, uh, walk around in the garden, or—"

“Unnecessary,” says Sarek. “We will give you the room.”

Jim, Spock, and Sakal stand up when the Ambassador does. Sarek and Sakal glide from the room, robes trailing behind them.

Spock lingers.

Jim’s about to apologize, because he knows it goes against Spock’s every instinct to do as he’s asking. But Spock cuts him off by pulling Jim into his arms. With a low noise that is part groan, part sigh of frustration, Jim rests his forehead on Spock’s shoulder, and Spock, after a second, begins to pet Jim’s hair, the way Sakal had done earlier.

“Jim,” he whispers.

“I’m okay,” Jim says.

“I am beginning to believe that we define that word very differently.”

Jim laughs, which is a relief, probably, to both of them. He lets himself lean heavily against Spock’s chest for a moment, and it strikes him, suddenly: he’s not drifting anymore.

Ever since he left Vulcan he’s felt homeless, even when he had a roof over his head. But not with Spock. Spock makes Jim feel like he has a place in the world, a place that Spock made for him. Even if Sakal gets a glimpse of the inside of his head and flees back to Shi’Kahr at warp, Jim will still be welcome at Spock’s side.

There’s a special kind of security that comes with that knowledge. It lowers the stakes slightly, knowing that what he has with Spock is something he can’t lose—that Spock won’t let him lose.

“Hey, Spock,” Jim whispers, shutting his eyes for a moment. “Tell me what to do?”

It’s a joke, mostly. But Spock goes quiet, like he’s thinking about it.

“What is it that you desire?” Spock says eventually.

“My…what I want isn’t the most important thing.”

“On the contrary. Your desires are all that is relevant.” Spock hesitates. “Do you wish to restore your bonds with Sakal and his daughters?”

Jim can’t answer that honestly, not out loud. “If I did, what if he changes his mind later? Once he gets to know me, he might decide—”

“He will not, Jim.” Spock cuts him off in that remorseless way he does whenever he’s decided that Jim’s too stuck in his own head to see things from a proper perspective. “Sakal already regards himself as your father. Indeed, it would seem that he has never felt otherwise on the subject. My own father has disapproved of many of my choices and actions in the past, but even so, I cannot imagine
him abruptly withdrawing all regard or concern for me. I am his son.”

“Yeah,” Jim mutters. “But that’s you.”

“Do you have an objection to restoring your familial bonds that is not based upon the premise that there is something wrong with you?”

Jim presses his reddening face against Spock’s shoulder, and decides to let silence be his answer.

“I know that you care deeply for your family, and I cannot believe they do not return your regard.”

Spock sighs, then takes a step back, running his hands down Jim’s arms. Jim looks up at him.

“You wished me to tell you what to do, and therefore I will make a suggestion,” says Spock. “Take this hour to meditate on the proposition that parental love is not meant to be earned, that it is gifted undeservingly to nearly everyone at birth. The fact that you were denied this does not mean that you are incapable of inspiring such selfless devotion. Indeed, I have seen remarkable evidence to the contrary.”

Jim blinks at him, slightly stunned, and Spock leans in to kiss his forehead.

“I will leave you to your thoughts,” he tells Jim. “In one hour, I will send Sakal to you.”

Chapter End Notes

If you need a visual reference for Sakal, he’s related to Tuvok (from Voyager), and resembles him somewhat.
“Are there truly animals on Earth capable of complex speech?” asked the four-year old Vulcan sitting on the sofa near Jim’s right shoulder.

“There are not,” declared her sister, who was sitting by Jim’s left shoulder. “Nor is there any avian life on Earth of that yellow coloration, save for small, flighted birds, such as canaria. They do not grow so large as the one called Big Bird.”

“They’re puppets,” Jim explained cheerfully, from his seat on the floor in front of the holoscreen. “There’s a Human actor inside Big Bird’s suit.”

“The purpose of this educational programming is to prepare young Human children for school, did you not say, Jim?” says T’Vara. “Do all Human educators wear animal costumes while teaching?”

“Nah, that’s just for TV. Besides, this isn’t what schools on Earth are like. This is actually fun. Muppets make way better teachers than most Human educators.”

“Will you costume yourself like Big Bird when you are teaching us Standard, Jim?” T’Vael looked him, wide-eyed.

Jim laughed freely. “On Vulcan? I’d di….I’d collapse from heat exhaustion if I tried wearing forty pounds of fake feathers in this climate.”

The door opens and closes, drawing Jim out of his memories.

“I was teaching T’Vael and T’Vara Standard when I left,” he says, eyes trained on the floor, where he is sitting cross-legged in a vague attempt at a meditation posture.

Sakal crosses the room silently and lowers himself to sit on the floor across from Jim.

“They are now the most fluent Standard-speakers at the Vulcan Learning Center, surpassing even the majority of their instructors. They have tested out of all available modules in the language.”

Jim blinks, whistling low. “You managed to get them into the Learning Center?”

“T’Vara and T’Vael show every sign of having inherited T’Silla’s academic aptitudes.” There was a note of subdued pride behind the statement. “Nothing was required of me save to submit their records.”

Jim knows that Spock studied at the Vulcan Learning Center when he was younger—had deserved to study there, because he was a freaking genius. But even if Spock had been less gifted, his place at the Learning Center would still have been guaranteed, simply because he was Sarek’s son. The Learning Center was that kind of school. Vulcans liked to pretend they were above making distinctions based on social class, but the practical reality was quite different.

Which means it is nothing less than remarkable that the daughters of two ordinary Vulcans from the deep desert had been given a the chance the be educated alongside the children of the planet’s elite. Even though it’s been years since Jim last saw T’Vara and T’Vael, he can’t help feeling a pulse of pride (and slightly vindictive satisfaction) that they’d received the recognition they deserved.

“How, uh, how do they like Shi’Kahr?” Jim remembers afternoons in the sun, the girls chasing the small, lizard-like animals that sunned on the rocks. “Even I miss the desert sometimes.”
“They have adjusted admirably to their new environment,” Sakal says. “Children are remarkably resilient.”

Jim hears the layers of implication in Sakal’s statement, but he just nods, and doesn’t take up the challenge.

Sakal steels his fingers. “Spock, son of Sarek, is widely spoken of in Shi’Kahr.”

As changes of subject go, it’s not exactly subtle, but Jim can understand Sakal’s curiosity. He shrugs.

“Spock’s the heir to the House of Surak,” Jim says. “That practically makes him royalty, by Vulcan standards, doesn’t it?”

Sakal arches an unimpressed eyebrow. “You know very well that Vulcan was never unified under a monarchial system of government.”

“Yeah, but it had a fuck-ton of feudal warlords, and Surak’s family ruled Shi’Kahr and the surrounding provinces until five hundred years after the Reformation. Sounds like royalty to me.”

“Does the social status of Spock’s family matter so much to you?” Sakal tilts his head curiously.

“To me?” Jim snorts. “No, not at all. I bet it matters to other people, though.”

“If Spock were not Sarek’s heir, I suppose it is possible that the people of Vulcan would find him less noteworthy, but he is a subject of general interest for several reasons.”

“I know. And people mostly manage to be assholes about that interest, judging from a few things Spock’s mentioned.” Jim gives a wry smile. “Well, if they’re gossiping about him now, just wait till they find out about me. How much you want to bet I could scandalize Vulcan society so hard they forget to care that Spock’s half-Human?”

“I am confident that you could accomplish most any goal you have set your mind to,” says Sakal in a dry voice, leaning back slightly. “Sarek informed me that you have accepted Spock’s proposal of formal courtship.”

For the first time, it occurs to Jim that Sakal might have… opinions about the fact that Jim is in a serious relationship with a Vulcan. Parental opinions, which isn’t something that Jim’s ever had to worry about before. Is Sakal trying to say he disapproves? Does Jim care if he disapproves?

“We haven’t known each other very long, but yeah. Spock is courting me.” Jim makes a face. “Sorry, he’s great and everything, but that word is still weird.”

“Did Spock explain to you what is entailed in accepting a Vulcan male’s offer of courtship?”

The hint of sharpness in Sakal’s voice erases all doubt in Jim’s mind. This is dad-talk, all right, and Sakal sounds like he might be planning to sit Spock down and ask him his intentions. It’s mortifying and weirdly gratifying at the same time.

“We talked it through,” Jim says casually, trying to set Sakal’s mind at ease. “I know bonding is the endgame. But I’m not rushing into anything, and Spock isn’t pressuring me. I need time. He gets that.”

Sakal seems to relax minutely. “He is admirably dedicated to your well-being.”

“It’s been a crazy couple of weeks.” It’s the same thing Jim said to deflect Pike. But Sakal is Vulcan,
“He has been deeply worried for you,” Sakal says. “You are scarcely accustomed to such devoted
caretaking. Perhaps you have found it…overwhelming?”

Jim squirms. His legs are starting to feel numb. “I don’t mind it, usually,” he admits. “It’s kind of
nice.”

Sakal nods at this. “I am grateful for his protectiveness towards you,” he says. “And I am pleased
you have found one another, not least because it created the means for me to find you.”

Jim clears his throat. “You were really looking for me all that time, huh?”

“Indeed.” Sakal swallows. “The first year of your absence was…an especially trying time for our
family. T’Vara and T’Vael refused to accept that your absence might be long term, or even
permanent. They inquired daily when you would return to us.”

Jim’s breath catches in his throat. “Do—they remember me?”

“They do,” says Sakal. “At present, they are at the hotel with a hired caretaker. They were…
displeased with me when I informed them that I would be attending this meeting without them.”

Jim stares, stunned. “I didn’t know you brought them to Earth with you.”

“If we are to restore your bonds, it is necessary that they be present.”

The unasked question hangs in the air between them. Sakal looks at him steadily, a study in powerful
emotion controlled by extraordinary patience. It’s a look that Jim knows well.

It was Sakal, rather than T’Silla, who had been the more nurturing parent, the one who took genuine
pleasure in playing childish games with the girls when they were young, who unashamedly set
Vulcan propriety aside when his children—including Jim—were hurting. Though T’Silla was no less
devoted to her family, and had put tremendous effort into helping Jim manage his emotions and
behaviors, Sakal was the one who watched Jim, who noticed when his coping mechanisms failed,
who learned how to distract Jim, or simply be present with him, when the flashbacks came.

“I don’t talk about Tarsus,” Jim finds himself saying, because Sakal is the only person Jim knows
who doesn’t flinch at the sound of that name.

“I am unsurprised,” says Sakal, apparently unperturbed by the shift in subject.

“I mean, never. At all. My advisor at the Academy knows I was there, but we don’t discuss it. My
best friend doesn’t know. I haven’t even told Spock yet.”

“I presume, then, that Spock is equally ignorant of the full scope of your step-father’s crimes, and of
the circumstances that led to your emancipation from Federation foster care.”

Jim sighs. “He knows there’s…stuff. He doesn’t ask, but I’ll have to tell him at some point.”

Sakal gives him a long, considering stare. “I see. You do not wish to burden Spock with a cracked
bowl, either. The same insecurities which cause you to hesitate in restoring our bond also motivate
you to exclude your intended from your confidence.”

“Jesus, you still don’t hold back, do you?” Jim huffs. “All right, fine, I’m an insecure mess. You
want me to admit it, I’m admitting it.” He leans his head against his hand. “You know I could have
found you. Easy. If I’d been looking.”

“Yes,” Sakal acknowledges.

“I don’t mean back then. The social workers wouldn’t let me anywhere near an unmonitored console, or I would have contacted you the next day, the next week, as soon as I got the chance. But once I got to Starfleet, I didn’t have an excuse. I just…”

“You did not believe that, after so many years, we would still wish to hear from you.”

The quiet disappointment is absent from Sakal’s voice this time, but Jim hears it anyway. Or maybe that’s their bond—what’s left of it.

After Spock left him alone in Sarek’s office, Jim had managed to meditate long enough to lower the shield that Sarek had built to guard the vulnerable, damaged bits of his brain. As a result, Jim is now conscious of his bonds in a way he’s never been before: the thin filaments connecting him to the girls, the more resilient cord that binds him to Sakal, and the jagged scar where his connection to T’Silla had been severed, five years ago, at the moment she entered brain-death.

Jim thinks back to where he was five years ago, but the only thing he can remember about being eighteen is punching Frank in the face. At the time, he hadn’t even questioned why he’d thought it was worth his while to go all the way back to Riverside just to have it out with him that way. Could the psychic recoil of having a bond severed by death make a person lash out the way Jim had lashed out against Frank? Had Jim sought him out because Frank was the one person on Earth who arguably deserved as much punishment as Jim could dole out, and there had been nowhere else for Jim’s grief and rage to go?

When he lowered the shield, Jim was prepared for anything: from the searing agony he’d felt when Gary grabbed his head in that alley, his dark eyes feverish with triumph, to the gentle, non-intrusive sensation of a mere presence, such as Jim feels when Spock touches his temples to get rid of his headaches, or to bring him back from the edge of a panic attack.

The reality falls somewhere in between. It’s almost like a bruise at the back of his mind, but when he presses against it instinctively, like he always does with bruises, the pain he feels is the pain of loneliness, abandonment, the same deep ache that had made Jim break bathroom mirrors when he was a kid, because he couldn’t stand looking himself, he was just as much a waste of space as Frank had always said, and it was no wonder nobody wanted him.

The more Jim dwelt on it, the more disgusted he was with himself. How the fuck had he missed this? How could he have ever confused ordinary grief with the desolation emanating from this starved placed in his mind?

“I want you to know, I never thought you guys were…too cold-hearted to give a damn about me, or anything like that,” Jim tries to explain faintly. “I just…”

“Jim.” Sakal covers Jim’s hand briefly with his own. “You do not need to explain any further. I understand.”

Jim takes a ragged breath, because he can’t afford to let himself believe that. What Sakal understands is that Jim has self-worth issues. And he does. But that’s not the whole story.

remember. Sometimes on accident, sometimes not. I got sent to jail. I hurt myself, I hurt other people. If Pike hadn’t found me when he did—"

“My specialty, as a healer, is xeno-pediatrics,” Sakal interrupts him suddenly.

The apparent non-sequitur alone is enough to shut Jim up.

“As such, and as someone with familial knowledge of your history, I can easily account for the experiences you describe by comparing them to the standard medical model. You are thriving to an above-average, verging on superior degree, compared to most Humans your age who survived comparable levels of trauma in their formative years.”

Jim blinks. “What was the size of the statistical sample in the study you’re referencing?”

“Jim.”

“It was a genocide, Sakal. My only peers are the other eight kids who survived. You know how they’re doing? Fine, almost all of them. Way better than me. Kevin’s graduating from the Academy prep school in a couple of years. Tom’s getting his Ph.D., and he’s a year younger than me.”

“Jim.”

“I wondered why, for a long time,” Jim persists. “Why I couldn’t just…cope, like they did. But it’s actually not that mysterious. Tarsus isn’t really my problem. I was fucked in the head way before I even set foot on the shuttle. Between Frank, and…the thing is, that’s probably why I survived, you know? Because I was used to fending for myself. Because I knew better than to trust what anyone was telling us, because people lie, they always lie—"

Sakal grips his arm bruisingly hard. It doesn’t hurt much, and Sakal probably doesn’t realize he’s hurting Jim at all, but it does the trick.

Jim blinks rapidly a few times. Then he takes a deep breath, and nods. Sakal releases him slowly, reluctance in his wary expression.

He is quiet for a moment before speaking.

“You have, unintentionally, made my point for me,” Sakal says. “You were given but one year of stability and safety in our home on Vulcan. One year—compared to the eighteen years or more of care, guidance, protection, and nurturing which young Humans and young Vulcans alike require in order to mature in a healthy and appropriate manner. The other survivors of Tarsus all came from stable, loving homes, and even those that lost family on the colony had family eagerly awaiting their return to Earth. Only you were unclaimed—until T’Silla met you on the Shenzhou.”

Jim’s not sure what Sakal’s point is, so he waits for him to finish gathering his thoughts.

“It is not at all surprising that, after being taken from us, and being placed in an environment where you were again subjected to daily abuse, you determined that you would be better off alone. And considering that you were but sixteen years old, with few resources and no support system, it is likewise unsurprising that you were forced to make choices which alienated you from societal norms.”

Sakal straightens. “What is far more surprising is that, by sheer force of will, you elected to take a different path when it was offered to you. One that has brought you here, now: a Starfleet cadet who has the recognition and respect of the Vulcan Ambassador to Earth; who has risen to the top of his academic class with expectations of an early commission; who has secured loyal friends, as well as
the devotion of a most praiseworthy young Vulcan.” Sakal fixes him with a steely eye. “That you have accomplished so much, Jim, bespeaks a resiliency in you which any logical being is compelled to admire.”

“That’s…” Jim shakes his head slowly. “Most of that, I can’t take any credit for, okay. Sarek only gives a damn because of Spock, and—”

“Jim. Do be silent.” Sakal manages to convey displeasure without moving a muscle. “I will not hear any more words of self-blame regarding the choices you made during a time when you thought yourself alone and abandoned. Those choices, whatever they may have been, enabled you to survive. And for that, I am…most grateful.”

Soft, late-morning sun is pouring through the eastern windows of Sarek’s study. Sakal’s white robes appear to glow in its light. For the first time, Jim can see the lines on Sakal’s face that prove the passing of the years, and something twists in his chest.

“You really want to be bonded with me?” Jim says softly.

Slowly, Sakal nods. “Though I did not realize that spontaneous bonding had occurred between us until the effects of your absence began making themselves felt, I have fought, over the years, to maintain our connection, weak though it was. It has always been my hope that one day we would meet again, face to face, just as we are now. I have greatly desired the opportunity to strengthen our bond, as is meet between father and son.”

Jim’s eyes squeeze shut involuntarily.

“Is it your wish to remain bonded to us?”

It’s only been a couple of hours since this bombshell landed in his bed and the aftershocks blasted him here to the Embassy. But it feels like it’s been longer—much longer. Jim feels like his defenses have been under siege for years. He can feel how weak they are, the places where the walls have crumbled away entirely. Spock wouldn’t think much of his mental discipline if he could see Jim now.

Sakal is reaching for him through those chinks; Jim can feel it. He wants, more than he can remember wanting anything in recent memory, to reach back for him.

And yet.

“Is there anything I could say that would make you change your mind?” he says, ignoring Sakal’s question for the moment.

Sakal tilts his head, appearing to take his question seriously.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “There is nothing. Jim, am I to understand that you desire the bond for yourself, and that your only objection is founded on the belief that the bond will, in some way, prove damaging, or distasteful, to me?”

Jim wonders, suddenly, what Sakal’s been doing over the past hour, because it kind of sounds like he might have been talking to Spock.

“Not just you, but the girls,” he finds himself blurting out. “You and me, we’ve melded before, we melded after Tarsus. I know you can deal with me being a mess. But the girls are, what, thirteen now?” Jim blinks, dismayed by the sudden realization that the inquisitive four year-olds he remembers are actual teenagers now—the same age Jim was when he was sent to Tarsus, in fact.
“Things are hard enough when you’re that age, and what if I—I don’t want to mess them up, you know?”

“If…” Sakal clears his throat. “If T’Silla should somehow, through miraculous means, be restored to us, our emotional response at being reunited with her would no doubt be highly compromising. There would be joy, certainly, great joy. But it would be mingled with the remembered anguish of her passing. Yet there is no question that we would claim her again, given the chance. Do you understand what I am saying to you, James?”

Jim clenches his fists, because his hands are trembling, and he doesn’t want to be weak, not now. But Sakal’s sharp eyes miss nothing.

He watches Jim for a long moment, and there’s something in his thoughtful gaze which reminds Jim, strangely enough, of Captain Pike.

“You did not answer my query,” says Sakal, at length. “Is it your wish to remain bonded to myself and to your sisters?”

Jim has never felt more trapped in his life. Not by fate or circumstances or anything but his own stupid, infuriating damage.

The word yes wants to come out of his mouth, but his mouth is like a tomb sealed with a boulder that he’s trying to roll away with his tongue.

It’s the frustration, more than anything else, that makes the tears start. Jim presses the heels of his hands into his eyes and hunches over, rocking slightly, aware at the very back of his mind that this is what he did every time he woke up with nightmares after Tarsus. And every time, Sakal—

—Sakal had done what he is doing now. Staying close, but not too close. Lifting his hand to Jim’s meld points; stepping just across the threshold of his mind, like the familiar, welcome visitor he’d eventually become.

It isn’t a full meld, but it’s sufficient to give Sakal the general impression of Jim’s thoughts. He rears back when the link breaks, staring at Jim. His hand falls from Jim’s face, to his shoulder. Instead of pushing Jim away, which he half expects, Sakal squeezes.

And then he yanks Jim towards him, wrapping his arms like bands of iron around Jim’s torso. Trapped in his gentle, implacable grip, Jim’s body relaxes against his will.

Instead of abating, the tears spring up fresh, like Sakal has kicked open a floodgate. But they come silently, seeping from his eyes like blood from a shallow wound. Sakal’s robe absorbs them.

“Sa-mekh,” Jim whispers, his voice strangled. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Peace. Peace, sa-fu, it shall be well.”

And then the fingers of both Sakal’s hands find Jim’s meld points. “My mind to your mind,” he says.

The opening line of the ritual invocation is an offer that Jim can accept without having to say that one word that stubbornly refuses to cross his lips.

Jim clutches Sakal’s arms for stability and finds him as steady as the ground beneath them. He takes a deep breath. “Your thoughts to my thoughts,” he whispers back.

And then there is darkness.
At the end of the darkness, there is a dim light, like the door to a distant room opening.

* 

Jim is asleep when Spock comes to collect him later.

Spock’s heart stills in his side when Sakal opens the door of Sarek’s office to him, and he sees Jim stretched out on the floor, his limbs neatly arranged and his face as pale as a corpse’s. A small pillow has been placed under his neck.

“He had a similar reaction to our meld.” Sarek’s words, spoken close to Spock’s ear, drag him from the morass of his morbid thoughts. “I suspect it is the consequence of his empathic abilities. He is particularly susceptible to emotional transference.”

It has been three hours since Sakal and Jim sequestered themselves here. “How long has he been asleep?” Spock asks Sakal.

“One hour. I judged it wise to remain with him until I was certain he was suffering nothing worse than fatigue.”

“Then it is done?”

Sakal nods. “The bonds are healthy. I was also able to assist Jim with his shields. We were unaware of his psi-status until after he was taken from us, or we would have taught him the disciplines long ago.”

Tension ebbs from Spock’s body. Sakal’s arrival had taken them by surprise, so there had been no opportunity for Spock to discuss the matter with Jim—to explain that he was in favor of restoring the bonds, and why. He can only be grateful that Sakal had managed to ‘get through to’ Jim, so to speak.

Now that Jim is in possession of three healthy family bonds, he will have a wellspring of strength and stability to draw from when he is feeling vulnerable. Spock predicts that Jim will benefit enormously from this. Moreover, he cannot help but hope that this positive experience with Vulcan bonds will make the prospect of one day bonding with him less daunting and alien to Jim than it might otherwise have been.

All in all, Spock owes Sakal a debt of gratitude. But it is difficult to feel at ease with this knowledge. For reasons that are difficult to articulate, Spock finds it unsettling to be in the healer’s presence.

“I will take Jim home now, if you have no medical objection,” Spock says.

He has been forced to sit idly by, for hours, while his intended suffered a profound degree of emotional agitation. Now, for his own mental well-being, Spock requires time alone with Jim. Time to touch his skin, to wrap his body around Jim’s like a protective cocoon, to bask in the peace of mind that comes only from knowing that Jim is perfectly, unassailably, safe.

“I have no objection,” says Sakal. “He may wake briefly, but do not be alarmed if he sleeps until morning.”

Spock gives the healer a short nod. Then he glances minutely at his father. Sarek’s face is unexpressive, but Spock feels the weight of expectation through their own familial bond.

Sarek is correct, of course. Sakal is owed all the courtesy due to the father of his intended bondmate. As a diplomat’s son, Spock understands the importance of observing such niceties.
He takes a moment to survey the Vulcan before him—one of the few beings in all the universe who had protected Jim, cared for him, when he was at his most vulnerable.

There is an air of amused patience to Sakal when he looks back at Spock, and Spock finds himself wondering if the discomfort he feels under the healer’s perusal bears any resemblance to the trepidation Jim has expressed at the thought of being left alone with either Sarek or Amanda.

“Jim and I often dine together at my apartment in the evenings,” Spock says smoothly. “I believe I can speak for him in saying that we would be honored if you would join us. Tomorrow, perhaps, at 19:00.”

Sakal’s eyebrows arch slightly. “I accept your invitation with gratitude.”

Spock hesitates, then adds, “Your daughters are, of course, welcome also.”

Truthfully, Spock is far from certain he will make an adequate host to two thirteen year-old Vulcan girls, but he suspects it will give Jim pleasure to see them.

Sakal’s mouth remains motionless, but his eyes are smiling. “My daughters will be most gratified. They are nearly as eager to meet you as they are to see Jim.”

“Indeed?” Spock cannot conceal his surprise.

“Theyir curiosity is only logical.” Sakal’s eyes appear to be twinkling. “You are their brother’s intended. I believe they…have questions.”

Spock can think of nothing to say to this, so he excuses himself from Sakal’s presence politely. His father’s aide brings a hover chair for Jim’s use, but it is Spock who deposits Jim in the chair and transfers him to the vehicle waiting outside.

On the way back to the apartment, Spock surprises himself by texting Leonard McCoy and explaining the events of the morning in brief. Leonard, predictably, replies that he’s coming straight over.

Spock’s territorial impulses will be satisfied once Jim is safely bestowed in his home again. Leonard’s presence will not disturb that fragile peace, as Spock has come to accept Leonard as his ally in the struggle to preserve Jim’s well-being.

The doctor may wish to examine Jim, sleeping or no, and Spock has no objection to his doing so. But that is not why he has contacted him. Sakal, as a trained Vulcan healer, would have detected any threat to Jim’s health, mental or physical. Rather, Spock has invited Leonard to his apartment in order to…talk with him.

This makes Leonard only the second Human Spock he has invited to his dwelling for social purposes. The first, of course, was Captain Pike, but it has been several years since Pike last entered Spock’s home.

When the car reaches its destination, Spock scoops Jim’s limp form into his arms and hurriedly makes his way indoors. Jim is a good size, for a Human, but as Spock lifts him without strain, he remembers Sakal’s remark earlier, regarding Jim’s nutritional requirements.

The Starfleet cadet uniform is generously cut, and Humans of all sizes are negligibly dense to one possessed of Vulcan strength. Spock is not certain he would be able to detect it if Jim were indeed underweight. Perhaps that is another matter he might bring up with Leonard.
Spock has only just finished arranging the bedclothes around Jim when the chime rings at his door. He gives Jim a final, parting brush of the fingers against his cheek before turning to answer it.

Though Humans are said to look especially peaceful when they sleep, as their conscious minds empty of the turbulent emotions that animate them in waking life, Jim’s repose has never looked especially peaceful to Spock. When he woke this morning, he found that Jim had gravitated away from him in the bed, occupying the smallest possible space at the very edge of the mattress. He was curled like a comma, his face tucked in towards his chest, one arm thrown over his head. It was unmistakably a protective posture, and Spock had ached to see it.

For the present, he has arranged Jim on his back, but Spock will not be surprised if he finds Jim huddled in on himself again when next he returns to check on him.

The chime sounds a second time, and Spock forces himself to walk away, shutting the door to the bedroom carefully behind him.

“Afternoon, Commander.” Leonard is waiting, his expression tentative, when Spock greets him.

“Thanks for keeping me in the loop. Jim’s lousy at it.”

“At ease, Doctor, and please come in.” Spock steps aside, giving Leonard room to slip past him, into the foyer. “I am sure Jim would have updated you, but we were scarcely given adequate notice ourselves before we were expected at the Embassy this morning.”

“Right.” Leonard shrugs out of his jacket, allowing Spock to store it in the coat closet. “So. Jim’s foster father really showed up, huh?”

Leonard has an air of reserved judgment about him, as if he is equally prepared to be calm and supportive, or angry and protective, depending on the circumstances.

“In fact, that qualifier is no longer accurate.” Spock speaks quietly, leading Leonard toward the kitchen table and indicating that he should take a seat. “Though Sakal is not Jim’s biological father, the bond between them is the legal equivalent of an adoption, in Human custom. It would be more correct simply to refer to Sakal as Jim’s father.”

“Huh.” Spock cannot tell whether Leonard’s indeterminate noise indicates approval or its opposite. “You know, this being Starfleet, people around here are likely to take it funny if George Kirk’s kid starts calling a guy with pointy eyebrows ‘Dad’.”

“In my admittedly limited observation,” says Spock, “Jim and Sakal tend to address one another by name. Or, occasionally, by Vulcan family titles.”


Spock arches an eyebrow. “‘Father’ is correct.”

“So, no one knew about these bonds until Gary went rooting around in that part of Jim’s brain.” Leonard’s tone is thoughtful. “But now that we do know about them, Jim’s suddenly Vulcan by adoption? Simple as that?”

Spock hesitates, then nods.

Leonard folds his arms across his chest. “Well, pardon me for mentioning it, but my understanding is that a whole lot of Vulcans got their feathers ruffled a few decades ago, just because your father got married to a pretty Human lady. You’re saying things have changed so much that folks are suddenly going to be okay with one of their people adopting a not-even-half-Vulcan son?”
Spock will find it easier to discuss this subject if he can keep his back to Leonard, so he begins making tea. An entire pot of tea, because it is logical to serve larger quantities when serving two or more people, and also because preparing an entire pot will take longer than preparing two cups.

“Our bonds are the foundation of our society, Doctor. The lack of outward emotional expression which Humans find so remarkably alien about Vulcans is due to the fact that such pointed displays are superfluous in a species that is capable of communicating emotion through touch. But, since it is customary that only bondmates, family members, and…exceptionally close friends make physical contact with one another, the bonds we maintain with those closest to us are the bedrock of our mental and emotional well-being.”

Spock measures the tea with the small disposable spoon included in the packaging for that purpose, and adds, “On Vulcan, objections to my parents’ marriage quieted considerably once it became known that they had successfully bonded in the Vulcan fashion. Humans were previously believed to be incapable of sharing their minds with a Vulcan spouse in this way.”

“So, the Vulcan on the street may not be thrilled that Jim’s Human, but because he has these bonds, they’ll at least pretend to accept him? Is that the gist of it?”

Spock shrugs. In truth, he has not devoted considerable thought to how Jim’s unique situation will be received on Vulcan. After all, Jim is no stranger to the workings of their society. He will undoubtedly have his own ideas of what kind of reaction to expect, should it become relevant.

“Vulcan custom particularly honors the kind of bond that Jim shares with Sakal and his daughters.” Spock is not certain why he is dispensing information to the doctor so freely, until he realizes he is nervous. He does not think he could be accused of babbling, but it is possible that this is as close to babbling as Vulcans come. “It is rare, possibly unprecedented. Spontaneous familial bonds normally only form in infancy. On occasion, a slightly older child who is adopted into a new family may form a bond with one person with whom they are especially close. Jim, however, bonded with all four of his family members when he was fourteen. I…am beginning to suspect that my father underestimated Jim’s empathic potential.”

“Better leave that be for now, Spock,” says Leonard, looking uncomfortable. “Jim’s had enough upsets recently without having to process the fact that his brain’s configured differently than he realized. Give him some time to settle.”

“That…is logical.” Spock is compelled to admit, as the water reaches a boil. He fills the tea pot, sets the timer, then busies himself pulling down tea cups.

“From a medical perspective, the main thing I’m getting from all this is that there’s no precedent for Jim’s situation. That means there’s no way for me or any other Human doctor to tell if this bonding stuff starts messing with his head the wrong way.” Leonard arches an eyebrow, studying Spock for a moment. “Pardon me if I’m being indelicate, but how well does your mother tolerate telepathic contact with your father? Does she suffer any side effects? Headaches, maybe?”

Spock blinks, torn between an instinctive impulse to guard his parents’ privacy, and the more rational understanding that Leonard’s medical concerns are legitimate.

“Not to my knowledge,” he admits. “But she would not necessarily speak of such things to me.”

“Would I be overstepping if I asked her about it?”

Spock contemplates what he knows of his mother. “As we are on Earth, and you are both Human, I think it would be acceptable, since it pertains to Jim’s health.”
“Well,” says Leonard, “I’ll be seeing her on Wednesday, apparently. I’m sure we can sneak into a deserted hallway for a minute.” He gives Spock a small smile. “Just do me a favor, and don’t let your dad get the wrong idea about my intentions.”

“If I were you,” says Spock, carrying the tea things to the table, “I would be more concerned with Gaila’s understanding of your intentions.”

“Oh, Gaila’s fine. She already thinks your mama’s her new best friend.”

Spock turned his head to conceal his own smile. Amanda had been late to yesterday’s function after all, because she had spent over an hour with Leonard and Gaila, and would not let them leave until they both promised to attend her dinner party Wednesday.

Gaila has already solicited Spock’s opinion on appropriate attire for the event, texting him three different photos of herself wearing dresses that—suffice it to say, Spock had deleted the pictures promptly, and informed Gaila that he was, regrettably, no authority on fashion, and that his mother’s perspective would undoubtedly be more useful to her. He made certain to include Amanda’s contact information in his reply, and much to his relief, he has received no further requests for sartorial advice.

“So,” Leonard says, as Spock fills their cups, and takes his own seat at the head of the table. “Sakal, Jim’s—father. He’s a healer, you said?”

Spock nods.

“And he says Jim is fine, just sleeping off the emotional transference?”

Spock nods again.

“All right. Now I’m curious. Why’d you ask me over? Doesn’t sound like Jim needs any doctoring. Or are you under the weather?”

“I am in peak physical health, Doctor, thank you.” Leonard’s hand is reaching out, as if to feel his forehead, and Spock bats its away casually. “I requested your presence because I—have information I wish to impart to you.”

Dodging Leonard’s gaze, Spock picks up his PADD, and transfers an contact ident card to Leonard’s PADD. Leonard opens it when it chirps, and frowns.

“Rhaella of Vulcan, attorney-at-law,” he reads aloud. “What is this, Spock?”

“She is the attorney my father recommended when I sought his advice on the subject,” Spock says, taking an unnecessarily large gulp of his tea. “My research indicates that she is a galactically recognized expert in family law and child custody settlements.”

Color drains from Leonard’s face at an alarming rate. “And what’s that got to do with me?” he says, a hint of menace in his voice.

“Shortly after I first met Jim, he mentioned that you are…entangled in an unfair custody arrangement with your ex-wife, and that, as a result, you are rarely permitted to see your daughter.” Spock is careful to keep his voice soft, lacking in judgment or challenge. “Jim expressed his negative feelings on the subject with some force. And truthfully, I…shared his sentiments. It is not just that you should be separated from your own child.”

Leonard simply continues to stare at him, his eyebrows arching to his hairline.
Spock takes a deep breath. “Jim is of the opinion that the reason you have not sued for a more equitable custody arrangement is because you have neither the time nor the resources to dedicate to a lawsuit while you are serving as a Starfleet cadet. Rhaella is willing to accept your case on a pro bono basis, in honor of your Starfleet service, and will only require your participation when strictly necessary. She is prepared to begin as soon as you sign the paperwork to retain her services.”

“I—” Leonard’s eyes remain glued to his PADD as Spock transfers the file containing the necessary forms. Spock has already filled in the details; Leonard only needs to sign them. “Spock,” he whispers, shaking his head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You need say nothing at all, Doctor.” Spock hesitates, wondering if it would be appropriate to elucidate the thought process which had led him to this course of action. “You will, perhaps, think me naïve, but only very recently have I come to gain a…visceral, as opposed to an academic understanding, of the privileges entailed upon my social position, and the difference these privileges have made in my life.”

Spock traces the rim of his cup with the tip of his finger, a gesture even he can recognize as uniquely Human, since Vulcans do not fidget. He folds his hands in his lap. “It is intolerable to think how much of Jim’s past suffering might have been averted, had it not been for mere want of money. Even now, it is only due to my father’s assistance that Sakal and Jim have been reunited. I might have done more, but such an intervention did not even cross my mind. I am…perhaps, more a theoretical than a practical being.”

Leonard, demonstrating that remarkable Human capacity for intuiting the existence of emotions which have not been outwardly expressed, gives him a sympathetic look. “Don’t blame yourself,” he says. “The past is the past. I can’t rightly begin to express how much I appreciate this,” he gestures toward his PADD, “but I can tell you, it’s no good tearing yourself up inside just because you weren’t around to fix Jim’s life eight years ago. Believe me, I understand the temptation. But it doesn’t help Jim, and it definitely won’t help you.”

Spock exhales shakily, and nods his head. “You have cared for and protected Jim as long as you have known him, and he regards you as family. I…I believe he would be most gratified if your daughter were to visit you here, in San Francisco. He has expressed some eagerness to ‘continue setting the worst possible example’ for her, in his own words.”

Leonard laughs and covers his face with his hands, shaking his head. “Jim broke up with Gary right before the spring break last year. There was no way in hell I was leaving him alone after that, with his arm in a sling, and Gary still prowling around campus. So I dragged him to Georgia with me.” He shakes his head. “By the end of the weekend, I was relying on Jo to keep Jim in line.”

“If she managed to do so, then she must be a uniquely resourceful child.”

Leonard smiles, still looking down at his PADD. “That she is.”

*

Jim is still asleep when Leonard departs shortly thereafter. He doesn’t stir, even when Leonard slips into Spock’s bedroom first and runs his tricorder next to Jim’s ear. When Leonard is satisfied that all is indeed well, he asks Spock to contact him, or at least make note of the exact time, when Jim wakes up in the morning. Then, lifting his PADD with a last, meaningful look, he excuses himself.

Spock washes the tea service and puts it away, sets the security codes on the doors, and dims the lights in the outer rooms. He cloves himself in the bathroom for his nightly ablutions, and enters his bedroom already attired in his sleeping robe.
Spock pauses in the doorway to look at Jim. Just as he had predicted, Jim is curled up with his back to the wall and his face hidden under his arm. The streetlight beaming through the windows highlights Jim’s hair in an extraordinary shade of copper.

When Spock woke this morning, Jim had been an orphan. Now, he is again a son and a brother, a valued member of a Vulcan clan in his own right. Perhaps it was irrational, but Spock had hoped it would make a difference—that the security of his bonds would influence Jim to feel safe and relaxed, even in his sleep.

Since it would appear that this is not to be the case, Spock will simply have to do as he did last night, and as he hopes to do for many nights to come: gather Jim into his arms, and project to his subconscious, through their shared points of contact, that he is safe, that no harm can possibly come to him here, like this. Sleeping or waking, Spock wishes nothing more than to be his armor, his fortress, his harbor, and he wills this knowledge into the emotional core of Jim’s being.

When Jim’s PADD, sitting atop a water glass on the bedside table, chirps a few minutes later, Spock reaches for it, simply to make certain there is no emergency.

The notification at the top of the list of missed messages indicates that Jim has a video message waiting for him from one Winona Kirk.

There is no emergency flag to indicate that the message heralds urgent news—either a death, or a time-sensitive matter of great importance. And it is sent from an address outside Starfleet, so Jim need not regard it as a communication from a superior officer, though Winona Kirk is ranked a Lieutenant Commander.

Considering these factors, the message can, Spock decides, wait until morning. It is possible that he is overstepping himself by making such a unilateral call over a matter that is arguably none of his business. Indeed, his heart pounds in his side, as he imagines the possibility of Jim becoming angry with him.

But in the end, he cannot help himself. Instinct tells Spock that this falls under the category of things he is allowed to protect Jim from. For one night, at least. In the morning, when his intended is rested and less vulnerable, he can do as he wishes with his mother’s message.

For the present, Spock will guard his sleep, and in the morning, he will wake at Jim’s side, ready to face the day together.
“Earth standard attire is somewhat deficient in aesthetically pleasing qualities,” T’Vael announces as she emerges from the portion of the hotel suite she shares with her sister. “Though it was gracious of T’sai Amanda to provide clothing for us, I do not wish to greet Jim dressed in this manner.”

“I, however, find no fault with the clothing T’sai Amanda has provided,” says T’Vara. She emerges from the interior chamber after her sister, looking first at T’Vael, then down at herself. “The fabrics have a pleasingly soft texture, and I believe they are better suited than our Vulcan attire to insulate us against the colder climate in this planetary region.”

Sakal glances over his daughters’ appearances, and does his best not to smile.

The birth of twins is an uncommon event amongst Vulcans, though less uncommon in T’Silla’s bloodline than in the general population of their species. However, amongst Humans, twin births occur frequently enough that they are not considered especially remarkable. As such, Amanda Grayson may well be familiar with the complex psychological and emotional dynamics that tend to develop between such sibling pairs.

Evidence for this lies in the fact that she had correctly intuited that T’Vael and T’Vara prefer, whenever possible, to attire themselves in a manner that enhances their differences, rather than their similarities—despite, or as Sakal suspects, because of the fact that they are, technically, genetically identical beings.

The eldest, T’Vael, does not cut her hair, preferring the practical elegance of traditional braided hairstyles which, in former times, were forbidden to all but maidens of the oldest and purest bloodlines. Though T’Vara, the younger by 32.3 minutes, is the only person who can arrange T’Vael’s hair to T’Vael’s liking, she herself prefers the short, sexless, uniform haircut increasingly favored by Vulcans of all ages and social classes. Her mother had worn her hair thus, as does Sakal himself.

Only the haste with which they were obliged to prepare themselves for an interplanetary journey had prevented T’Vael from packing the formal robes, hair ornaments, earrings, and other traditional accessories her grandmother had bestowed upon her when she completed her kahs-wan at the age of ten. There had not been enough time to arrange the stiff garments properly in her luggage without risking damage, though T’Vael had expended an illogical degree of effort in attempting to surmount this obstacle.

When they could no longer delay their departure for the shuttleport, T’Vael had remarked, with a trace of childish petulance, that Ambassador Sarek and his bondmate would no doubt be surprised by their casual appearance. Sakal is aware, however, that it is Jim’s opinion which truly concerns her.

Sakal makes a brief show of examining both of his daughters with a critical eye. T’Vara’s expression is bright and expectant, and she indeed appears to be at ease in the denim trousers, white blouse, and dark blue sweater which the Ambassador’s wife had sent to their lodgings, along with a variety of other items that would be useful on Earth, such as PADDs loaded with maps and Terran educational applications. T’Vara has tucked her PADD, and other items, into a sturdy grey cross-body satchel, which Amanda had also provided.

T’Vael, by contrast, is very nearly fidgeting in her own denim trousers, which are dyed a lighter shade of blue and cut along different lines than her sister’s. She plucks at the sleeves of her light grey blouse, adorned with ruffled fabric at the sleeves and neck, which is partially covered by a pale pink
cardigan.

Her hair, as always, is impeccably arranged, if not precisely suited to the style of her Earth-casual daywear.

“You both appear respectable, which is all that is required,” Sakal informs them. “Nor do I believe that Jim will take any special notice of your clothing, whatever you wear. However, T’Vael, there is sufficient time, if you wish to alter your attire before we depart. I do not anticipate that you will meet with the Ambassador or his wife until tomorrow, and therefore no offense will be given—today—if you prefer not to wear the clothes they have given you.”

T’Vael immediately stalks back into the bedchamber. T’Vara, no doubt aware that she will shortly be called upon to attend her sister, follows, with a resigned air.

Alone again in the suite’s small sitting room, Sakal at last permits himself a brief smile. After all the obstacles their family has surmounted in order to make their way here, to Earth, to the city where Jim resides, it is not difficult to be patient with T’Vael’s understandable, if not entirely logical desire to make a favorable impression on the brother she has not seen since she was four.

Many things which once were taxing to Sakal’s mental resources are easier, now that his connection with Jim is fixed and rooted as a proper familial bond ought to be. It has been less than 24 hours since their meeting, yet the difference is already perceptible.

Even the old, familiar pain of his severed bond with T’Silla does not sear his soul with quite the same fire as before.

For a time, after T’Silla’s death, every thought of Jim had filled Sakal with crippling emotions of failure and inadequacy. He could not help but feel as though he had betrayed his bondmate by abandoning the search for their Human son—the only son they would ever have, now.

Speculation is inherently unsound, yet, were T’Silla here, Sakal believes she would be satisfied. The years of separation, though regrettable, have transformed Jim into a fully mature adult who shows every sign of fulfilling the staggering potential T’Silla had sensed in him from the moment of their first meeting on the *Shenzhou*.

No parent could wish more for their child.

 Granted, the suffering Jim has endured, both before his arrival on Vulcan, and after his forced departure, cannot be considered desirable in any sense. Yet all beings must inevitably weather a degree of suffering, as part of the maturation process, and not even the most attentive parent can protect their child forever.

Sometimes, a parent can only hope that their children will survive for long enough to find their own path in the universe, their own kind of contentment.

This, Jim appears to have managed, despite formidable odds.

Vulcans are prone to reminding themselves, and each other, that regrets are illogical. Yet there are circumstances in which regret is unavoidable, and when regret is a function of empathy, casting it out is not desirable.

There is much to regret where Sakal’s dealings with Jim are concerned. His failure to suspect Jim’s capacity for forming spontaneous bonds is chief among them. Had it been known, the full weight of Federation law and Vulcan tradition would have enveloped their family to prevent any kind of enforced separation. Even the most traditional and xenophobic members of the High Council would
not have permitted a child who had bonded with their Vulcan caretakers to be removed from the planet against their will.

As Sakal had been the principal caregiver for their children even before T’Silla’s death, it was Sakal who ought to have noticed Jim’s bonds. He is a strong telepath—it is his only outstanding ability—and this should have enabled him to perceive that there was more to Jim’s profound attachment to their family than mere Human sentimentality.

But it was not until after Jim’s departure that the telepathic effects of separation began to be felt. All of them, T’Silla, their daughters, Sakal himself, had suffered, and their entire household was thrown into a long period of disorder.

It had fallen to Sakal to shield his daughters’ minds from the worst effects, while T’Silla endured crippling headaches, and his own controls nearly disintegrated under the multiplied strain.

While T’Silla lived, Sakal had placed his best hopes for finding Jim in her research abilities and her network of galactic contacts. But he also began to be curious whether it might be possible to reach Jim directly, telepathically, himself.

Many hundreds of hours of meditation later, Sakal had come to the conclusion that his telepathy would require additional training from a master of the discipline if he was to have any chance of succeeding. He and T’Silla began to discuss relocating their family to Shi’Kahr, so that Sakal could pursue training as a mind healer; then she died, and Sakal, unable to think logically enough to make new plans, abided by the one he and T’Silla had devised together.

All the while, Sakal had clung to that thin thread of awareness that connected him with Jim. He’d felt it as a single gossamer filament, stretched and suspended across a great void.

Once his healer’s training began in earnest, Sakal learned, through trial and error, how to strengthen the bond, turn the filament into a hard wire, then a thin but resilient cord, without dangerously depleting his own mental resources in the process.

The work of keeping his bond with Jim alive and open for so many years had been no easy feat. Sakal still is not certain whether it had been his own persistence, Jim’s unexpected empathic sensitivity, or the combined effects of both, which had made it possible.

He is likewise aware that all his efforts might still have been wasted, had it not been for the intervention of Sarek, son of Skon. Sakal is not yet fully acquainted with the story of how Jim became the intended bondmate of the Ambassador’s son. Yet Sarek was probably the only other Vulcan in the universe to whom the concept of a Human family member was not anathema, and who would not dismiss the loss of such as trivial.

Yet if Sarek were one of the few Vulcans who would have been inclined to help Sakal, he was one of even fewer who had the capability. The Ambassador’s resources had made possible in an hour what Sakal had devoted half his life and energy to for the past eight years.

And yet: the matter would never have come to Sarek’s attention, had Jim not become involved with Spock. Had Jim not suffered the kae’at k’la’sa, making it needful for Spock to commit Jim to the care of a skilled telepath.

Such a random confluence of circumstances, desirable and otherwise, had been necessary in order to bring about Sakal’s reunion with Jim that the odds were beyond Sakal’s ability to compute.

Yet, it had happened anyway.
Sakal has many thoughts regarding Vulcan logic, both its benefits and its limitations, but in the face of such extraordinary and fortuitous coincidences, there is nothing to say, save *kaidith*.

* Sakal is not entirely confident that Jim will be grateful to see him this morning, for several reasons. To begin with, their invitation was for dinner at 19:00, but he, T’Vael, and T’Vara will arrive at Spock’s apartment, where Sakal is aware that Jim has spent the night, just in time for midday meal.

They are further trespassing on the terms of their invitation by bringing their own food, though it was Spock who had offered to feed them. T’Vael, who has lately become deeply interested in upholding the Vulcan Way (the parts she approved of, at least) had insisted that they must provide Jim with the traditional welcoming meal they would have prepared for him had he returned to Vulcan to visit his former home, with his intended bondmate in tow.

Sakal had elected to find T’Vael’s argument logical. He is well aware that Spock, in a slightly less obvious way, is just as eager as his daughter to see the traditions observed, and prove something by their observation. But what did an unbonded male in his third decade know about cooking? The girls these days are scarcely less finicky in their appetites than they had been as illogical toddlers. Sakal doubts they would be able to tolerate Spock’s thoughtfully synthesized offerings.

He has another reason as well for choosing to call upon Spock at an unexpected and potentially inconvenient hour. Sakal is well aware that Spock intends to labor over his preparations for dinner this evening, in order to make a positive impression upon Jim’s family.

Sakal, however, wishes to “catch a glimpse” of Spock when he is…not quite so well prepared. As a Starfleet officer, Commander Spock should be familiar with the concept of surprise inspections.

“I am now prepared, father.”

Sakal permits himself a very small sigh of relief as T’Vael pauses before him, framing herself in the doorway.

He had not been certain what, precisely, T’Vael would think appropriate for the occasion of reuniting with her brother. He could only hope that logic would prevail, and she would not present herself in clinging desert silks that would swiftly become saturated in the perpetual rainy mist shrouding the city.

But T’Vael has done nothing more than trade the denim trousers and buttoned blouse for an ankle length black gown, tied with a purple and silk brocade sash, worn underneath a black wool robe with wide, subtly embroidered sleeves. It was high necked and long-sleeved, appropriate to the weather, and complemented her towering braids and long silver earrings. She wore boots, with heels that elevated her height by two centimeters.

It did not exceed what was appropriate to the occasion, but it had the effect of making T’Vael appear considerably more adult than her present age of 12.6 years. The illusion stirs emotions in Sakal that he will have to meditate upon later.

“I intend to ask Jim whether he is prepared to have his bonds with both of you restored today,” Sakal informed them. “This is why I asked to take special care in your meditations last night. Did you do as I asked?”

“Yes, father,” they said simultaneously, and for a moment, not even the differences in their ornamentation could disguise the synchronicity of their thinking.
“Very well. The Ambassador has provided us with the use of a chauffeured vehicle, which is waiting for us near the front doors of the hotel. We should depart, so as to cease impeding the flow of traffic.”

*

Two hours later, trailed by the Embassy driver who had pre-empted their attempts to carry their own groceries, Sakal knocks on Spock’s door. T’Vael and T’Vara stand to his left and his right, backs straight and heads high.

It is 11:00, an hour at which even Jim, recovering from the effects of their meld, should have risen. (And if he has not, that is something Sakal needs to know, for the sake of his health.) He therefore knocks persistently, until he hears a low groan in the distance, and then the faint thud of footsteps coming their way.

“Bones, I swear to God,” Jim is saying as he opens the door. And then, he stops.

His hair, which has grown a bit long on top, flops into his face, having recently been washed clean of styling products. His eyes are bleary, there is a red line pressed into the side of his face. He is shirtless and barefoot, wearingly only jeans, which show signs of having been tugged on hastily.

Jim blinks at Sakal for a long moment. “Weirdly, I am…not even surprised that you’re here.”

“We share a bond,” Sakal reminds him. “And I believe you came to know my habits quite well eight years ago. I have changed little, in essentials. Your sisters, however…”

Jim’s eyes grow round as he adjusts his gaze downward. His head whips from T’Vara to T’Vael. His smile slowly grows wide enough to assure Sakal of the quality of the dental care Jim has received at Starfleet.

“Hang on.” Jim’s eyes narrow. “I can do this. You…you’re T’Vael, and you’re T’Vara.”

“Affirmative,” say T’Vael and T’Vara, and Jim emits a tightly controlled screech, staring down at them with brightening eyes.

“Guys,” he says breathlessly. “Sorry, girls. Okay, I’m Human, and I’ve been living on Earth for the last eight years, so, forgive me, but I have to do this.”

With a speed and agility that does credit to his physical training, Jim sweeps T’Vael under his right arm and T’Vara under his left.

Sakal, anticipating what is to come, steps swiftly aside as Jim hefts both girls and begins spinning them in the hallway outside Spock’s door. Both girls are startled into delighted-sounding screeches.

“Ffffffaaahh,” says Jim, quite incomprehensibly, as he sets T’Vael and T’Vara on their feet again, dropping to one knee so as to be nearer their eye level.

He scrubs his hands over his face and grins, shaking his head. “I can’t believe this. You’re—you’re so big! Seriously, you’re just like, slightly short adults. Oh my God—have you started telling people they’re illogical yet? Are you old enough to do that, or do you have to pass some kind of Vulcan test first?”

“That,” says Spock, who had just now appeared in the doorway, “would be pointless, Jim.”

Jim looks over, and immediately bursts into laughter. The expression of glowing wonder has not left
his face.

Sakal knows his daughters well enough to guess that, were it not for the quelling, unknown element of Spock’s presence, they, too, would be smiling. Neither Sakal nor their mother had ever forbidden the girls from smiling, though they instinctively understood the potential repercussions of doing so in front of strangers.

“I missed you two more than I can express in words,” Jim tells them, his tone and expression grown abruptly seriously. “I thought about you all the time. I just…wanted to make sure you knew that.”

Neither of them seems to know how to respond, until T’Vael lifts her head and looks Jim in the eyes.

“We are now entirely fluent in Federation Standard,” she announces abruptly. “So is Father, as you have observed; he requested that we teach him, as our grasp on the language is superior to that of the majority of Vulcan instructors. The Terran lecturer who visited our year group at the Learning Center told our teachers that T’Vara and I speak with a truly native accent. When they questioned us, we informed them that our earliest lessons had taken place under the supervision of a native Terran speaker.”

Jim’s eyes grow slightly brighter. “I knew you two were going to kick ass,” he says, his voice rasping slightly. Then he clears his throat and nods at the doorway. “Hey, this is Spock, son of Sarek. He lives here, and I…stay here with him, when we both have the time.”

“Because you are courting,” says T’Vara, nodding helpfully. “When do you anticipate that you will bond? Will you return to Vulcan for the ceremony?”

“I, ah….” Jim ducks his head, his cough not quite disguising a laugh. “Spock, this is T’Vara, and this is T’Vael. My sisters.”

Spock raises the *ta’a* to the trio huddled in the hallway, and both girls return it. “Daughters of Sakal, I am honored to greet you as kin. I ask that you call me Spock. If you will all enter, I have prepared tea.”

Sakal does not miss the look that Jim darts in Spock’s direction. Compared to most Vulcans, and especially other Vulcan healers, Sakal is practically an expert in Human emotionalism.

In his son’s gaze, he recognizes both gratitude, and the beginnings of something that might be adoration. It is, Sakal can admit, an encouraging sign.

Jim ushers the girls into the apartment first, where he suddenly realizes that he isn’t wearing a shirt. He panics, running into the bedroom and slamming the door shut behind him.

The driver, still patiently holding their bags of vegetables and spices and bread, enters the apartment long enough to deposit his burdens before returning to his vehicle.

When Sakal crosses the threshold, walking past Spock’s gaze, he makes brief eye contact.

Sakal’s telepathy is strong. Spock, son of Sarek, is whispered to be the strongest telepath of his generation. But Sakal would not attempt to read him in that manner even if he believed he would be successful. There is no need.

Spock, son of Amanda, is half-Human. Sakal finds him nearly as transparently expressive as Jim. And right now, he is nervous.

It is, Sakal decides, another point in his favor.
“You are gracious to welcome us at such an hour,” Sakal offers. “It was T’Vael’s wish to prepare a traditional meal for Jim and yourself. As we have no cooking facilities in the hotel, I thought perhaps you would not be sorry to let another do the cooking here, for the change. Though at one time, Jim was a satisfactory cook, I do not know if his schedule permits him to maintain the skill.”

Spock inches back, and Sakal takes this to mean that he should cease lingering in the doorway.

“In fact,” Spock says, “the…events of the last week and a half have afforded little opportunity for either Jim or I to demonstrate our skills in the kitchen. We have been relying on my replicator, as the student dormitories are not equipped with them, and Jim was, for some time, too unwell to eat in the Academy’s dining facilities.” Spock locks the door behind them. “Though your…offer is unexpected, Jim will undoubtedly appreciate the chance to enjoy a meal that has not been synthesized.”

“You bet I will,” says Jim, emerging from the bedroom wearing a different pair of jeans, and a clean black t-shirt, with the Starfleet decal on the breast.

He veers into the sitting room, where T’Vael and T’Vara are seated decorously on the sofa. Wedging himself between them, he explains in a low voice how to connect their PADDs to the Starfleet server under his account—a perhaps over-generous gesture of trust, Sakal thinks wryly—then presses his lips to both their foreheads and promises to return soon.

“So, wow, you’re really cooking?” Jim says, rubbing his hands together theatrically as he approaches the kitchen. “I have definitely dreamed of this since I left Vulcan. The first time Spock gave me food, it made me so homesick I almost cried into my plomeek.”

“You did express some enthusiasm for the dish, as I recall,” says Spock, as he begins assisting Sakal in unpacking the groceries.

Sakal sets aside the items he has acquired for assembling a light lunch, as it is nearer to midday than to dinner, and they will not need to begin preparations for the evening meal for another three hours.

“But hey, weren’t we going to cook for you?” says Jim, washing his hands at the sink. “I thought that was the deal.”

“I took the liberty of altering ‘the deal’,” says Sakal. “As you say, I have not had the opportunity to cook for you in many years. And T’Vael was insistent that the welcoming traditions be upheld. Dinner will wait, however. Perhaps you would care to assist me in making sandwiches to accompany our tea? I believe I have acquired all of the ingredients which figured in your preferred recipe.”

“Kreyla,” says Jim instantly, listing the ingredients on his fingers—one of Humanity’s more oddly charming mannerisms, in Sakal’s opinion. “Greens of some kind, but not spinach; radishes or Vulcan fire-root; a soft cheese; and a sweet fruit preserve,” Jim recites instantly.

“My memory remains intact, it seems,” says Sakal, pushing the bag towards Jim.

Spock steps up beside Jim silently and assists as he sets the ingredients out and begins an efficient assembly-line approach to the construction of the sandwiches.

Sakal is suddenly visited by a strong flash of memory: Jim making an identical set of sandwiches, but with a harried hunch to his narrow teenage shoulders, because T’Silla and Sakal are both due to leave for work soon, and he will not allow them to leave without a packed meal. What if their transport broke down? he would say, when they attempted to explain that this was not necessary.
What if they became stranded?

The thought of any of them going hungry had terrified Jim as a boy, so T’Silla and Sakal had chosen to weigh this over their fears that Jim was still continuing to seek means of “earning his keep”.

In the present, Jim pauses, then puts down his knife and touches Sakal’s sleeve. “Hey,” he says. “You know I’m okay now, right?”

Spock’s head comes up. The line between his brows speaks of concern and mild confusion.

Spock is fully cognizant of the function of bonds, so it is not the understanding between Jim and Sakal that has confused him, but rather, Sakal’s evident emotional response to the simple task of preparing a meal.

“When he was a boy, Jim never allowed T’Silla or I to leave the house without first preparing sandwiches for us, or flasks of broth and tea,” Sakal explains to this young Vulcan, whose needs have undoubtedly been attended to by a fleet of invisible domestic staff all his life. “When T’Silla was due to travel long distances, as her work often required, Jim would fill an entire basket for her.”

“Going hungry sucks,” Jim shrugs, his voice so casual that no one could mistake it for genuine ease.

“Persuading you to consume an entire meal in a sitting was an ongoing endeavor during your time with us. And yet, all that while, you continued preparing meals for others.”

“It took a while for my appetite to adjust. Also, you know, my palette. No offense, but the food you grow on Vulcan tends to either be kind of tasteless, or—too much taste. Like, way more taste than necessary. But I made it work, eventually.”

“Jim developed a theory that there was nothing inherently unpalatable about tradition Vulcan fare,” Sakal informs Spock. “He merely blames us as a race for failing to grasp the logical merits of attaining skills in advanced cookery.”

“I should’ve put up a stand, sold my sandwiches at the mechanic’s outpost at the edge of the Bowl,” says Jim, finishing off the row of sandwiches with top slices of bread. “I could have started a trend and revolutionized Vulcan cuisine.”

There is a soft smile on Spock’s face as he looks at Jim. Sakal, however, has been watching him closely throughout the conversation.

He does not need to touch the young Vulcan’s mind to know that he is wondering why, at the age of fourteen, Jim’s digestion had been so impaired that it could not accommodate normal portions of food.

*  

They eat their sandwiches in the living room, around the large glass “coffee table”, and since Jim is the only Human in the room, the meal is silent. Searching for stimulation, as always, Jim pulls out his PADD, tapping at the screen.

At length, Spock glances over, sees Jim with the PADD, and freezes.

Curious.

Another three minutes pass, during which Spock remains tense. Then Jim says, “Huh.”
He looks from Spock to Sakal. “I’ve got a voice message from, uh...yeah, wow. From Winona. My, uh, my mom.”

“Are you not accustomed to being contacted by your Human mother?” says T’Vael, a hint of implied judgment in her voice.

“I, ah.” Jim glances over at T’Vael. “To be honest, I haven’t seen her or talked to her or heard from her at all. Not since I was about your age.”

Sakal inhales, deeply, slowly. Of course, it had been possible to infer that Winona Kirk’s neglect of her son had continued after his return to Earth, but there is something shocking in the confirmation, nonetheless. And not only to him. The girls look as though they have just been given troubling news about the health of their sehlat, Vorka. Spock looks very nearly ill.

Only Jim has retained any semblance of composure.

“I should, um.” Jim looks from side to side, then places his uneaten sandwich on a napkin. “I should probably listen this, it must be important. Spock, I’ll use your office, if you don’t mind? I’ll be right back.”

Spock, seated next to Sakal on the sofa, makes to stand and follow him.

Sakal leans forward minutely, catches Spock’s eye, and shakes his head.

Spock’s nostrils flare in a manner that is utterly Human, and, due to his extreme youth, far more amusing than it is threatening, though Sakal doubts Spock is aware of this.

“Whatever sort of message Winona Kirk has left for him, Jim is likely to be upset after listening to it, if only because it will be the first time he has heard her voice since he was a child,” Sakal explains patiently.

“I am well aware of that,” says Spock, his tone haughty. “It is my duty to be available to him when he is—under threat of emotional disturbance.”

“In what way are you presently unavailable?” Sakal counters. “You are scarcely two meters away from Jim. He is in a room to which you possess the passcode.”

Spock bristles, but there is nothing for him to say.

Sakal touches briefly upon the memory of a night, years ago, when Jim, after waking as usual from a nightmare, had attempted to hide from him under the bed. Sakal had been required to sit quietly upon the floor for hours before Jim finally realized that Sakal was not going to drag him out of his hiding place by force.

“Expressive though they are, Humans are like Vulcans when it comes to their most primal emotions, in that, the more uncontrollable the inevitable emotional display, the more privacy is desired. A wish that any Vulcan can surely respect.”

Spock glances at T’Vael and T’Vara, then lowers his voice. “Jim has been left alone to suffer for too much of his life. It is not my wish that he know that loneliness any longer.”

His tone is too controlled for the words to imply insult, but it requires all Sakal’s discipline not to take it as one.

“I remind you, again, that Jim is not alone,” Sakal says. “We are here. Allow him the opportunity to
choose to come to us.”

Spock stares at him with hot, dark, Human eyes, then nods slowly, reluctantly. “I thank you for your wisdom, Healer.”

Their mutual resolution holds for another five minutes, and then Sakal feels an urgent thrum of distress pulsing in Jim’s mind.

Spock’s eyes widen in the exact same moment. In silent accord, they stand and walk quickly to Spock’s study, where Jim has shut and locked the door.

He does not respond to their requests for entrance, so Spock inputs his code. They find Jim leaning over Spock’s desk, supporting his weight on his hands. His PADD has been cast to the floor negligently, or was perhaps dropped there in shock by nerveless fingers.

He doesn’t look up when Sakal shuts the door behind them.

“Did you know they were going after him?” Jim says, as soon as there is no chance of his voice carrying down the hall to where the girls wait.

The question seems to be directed equally at them both, and Sakal and Spock exchange looks of mutual bafflement.

“I do not know who ‘they’ or ‘him’ signify in your question,” Sakal ventures.

“Frank.” Jim sounds ill, as though the soft tissues of his throat are inflamed. “He’s been arrested. For the— the custody thing, the bribes. There were Starfleet officers involved, turns out. I didn’t catch all the details—she was pretty incoherent, screaming a lot.”

“She,” says Spock, comprehending and disbelieving all at once. “You mean to say that this was the content of the message left you by your mother? She makes contact with you for the first time in thirteen years, and it is to raise her voice because her husband has been arrested for his crimes against you?”

“Yeah, people don’t change all that much over the years, it turns out.” Jim releases a long sigh, then looks up, examining Spock, then Sakal. “Did you know? Either of you? Because that’s a situation where I really could have used a heads up.”

Sakal says nothing, but thinks of the stiffness of Spock’s posture when Jim first saw the message notification from his mother.

“I did not know,” says Spock, hesitatingly. “However… I suspect that if we were to ask my father the same question, we would receive a different answer.”

Sakal nods. “Logically, it could have been no one but the Ambassador. I myself was unaware of the full scope of your step-father’s role in events until only a few hours before you yourself were told. Spock knew even less than I. And neither of us possess the authority to order the arrest of Federation civilians.”

“That point is debatable, as Frank Halley committed related crimes on multiple Federation planets, placing him under the jurisdiction of Federation law enforcement agencies, including Starfleet.” He hesitates. “I did not pursue such a course of action, only because I supposed it to be contrary to your wishes, Jim.”

Jim begins to straighten at last. His face, when he lifts his head, is shockingly white, save for two

Spock continues to look uncertain. It is clear he does not understand the reason for the continuing intensity of Jim’s reaction.

Sakal, who does understand, wonders if it would be wiser to keep silent, or to facilitate Spock’s grasp of what is potentially at stake.

“The charges you named,” Sakal says to Jim, choosing his words carefully. “From what I gather, they all derive from incidents dating no earlier than eight years ago.”

“Yeah,” Jim rasps. “So far.”

Sakal is startled, and does not trouble to hide it.

Jim looks at him. He keeps his eyes trained on Sakal, though Spock is standing there, listening to everything he says.

“That’s the other thing Winona wanted to tell me. First, that I suck for ratting Frank out, and second, to let me know I’d better not complicate matters by bringing up, quote, those stories you told people when you were a goddamn baby, end quote.” Jim’s head lolls back against the wall suddenly, as though he’s lost the strength to hold it up. “I don’t know if someone asked her questions about back then, or if she’s just paranoid. Could be both.”

Sakal darts a glance at Spock, but he has donned a mask of absolute neutrality, as though he does not realize that such a display of iron control as good as announces the intensity of the emotion it is meant to conceal.

“If Federation law enforcement is investigating Frank Halley’s actions, it is logical for them to inquire into the circumstances which led to your being sent to live on a distant experimental colony where you had no family and no connections.”

Sakal can feel it, the instant Spock makes the connection—food deprivation, experimental colony, the *Shenzhou*—because Spock’s shields falter for a moment, and Sakal and Jim feel the molten rage slipping through the cracks in his defenses.

Almost as soon as the moment occurs, it passes again, and Spock’s shields are restored to their former strengthen.

The young Vulcan opens his ashen lips as if to apologize, then turns his head aside, eyes trained on carpet.

“Anyway…” Jim shuts his eyes tightly and rubs his forehead; he is developing a tension headache.

“My mother has a saying which I believe is well known among Humans—‘sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof’.” Spock sounds subdued, yet oddly determined. “Do not trouble yourself about the investigation at this time.”

He crosses, with hesitant steps, to where Jim still stands leaning against the wall. His hand circles Jim’s wrist loosely; Jim’s shoulders fall as though all the tension has drained out of him.

“My chief concern is your present emotional state,” Spock says, and now it is Sakal’s turn to be ignored, as Spock hovers over Jim in a way that almost hides him from view. “I—confess that I am shocked by your mother’s callous indifference to your wellbeing. I cannot imagine the feelings her words and actions must elicit in you, but if you are distressed, I would offer you comfort.”
Jim is silent. Then he raises his head and glances at Sakal, before looking back at Spock.

“I think I’m okay, actually,” Jim says. “I… I’ve got a family. If my mother doesn’t want to be part of it, that’s her loss.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

It's taking me longer than usual to finish the next full-length update, and I wanted to assure you all that I still exist and haven't been hit by a bus or anything, so I decided to post this scene to tide you over while I continue to water the keyboard with my sweat and tears. Chat logs are my favorite thing to write?

**transcript of chat log: user KIRK, JAMES TIBERIUS, CADET, ID = JTK2233**

*T'Vael-of-Vulcan: Good morning, Jim. As you can see, I have used your credentials and the device given to me by T’sai Amanda to create a sub-identity under your Starfleet account for my personal use. I judged this to be the most efficient means of maintaining contact with you for the duration of our stay on Earth.*

*JTK2233: uh wow, yeah, you sure…did that.*

*JTK2233: which is fine, just please try not to get me into any trouble*

*T'Vael of Vulcan: Please define the parameters of “trouble” as it relates to my use of your Starfleet account.*

*JTK2233: okay uh*

*JTK2233: don’t access my school files, especially the uncompleted projects, or someone might think I’m using your superior Vulcan brain to do my work for me*

*JTK2233: don’t read my chat logs with other people!*

*JTK2233: try to avoid Starfleet social media. if you can’t, don’t necessarily believe anything you read about me there.*

*JTK2233: and don’t contact any of my professors even if you think their lesson plans are sub-par. just kind of stay out of my academic subfolders altogether.*

*JTK2233: those are my parameters. do they need any clarification?*

*T'Vael-of-Vulcan: Yes, I have a query related to the third stated parameter.*

*JTK2233: great let me guess you’ve already been on hot.cadet-net.sf and now you have questions*

*T'Vael-of-Vulcan: Affirmative.*

*JTK2233: OH MY GOD*

*JTK2233: YOU ARE TWELVE*

*T'Vael-of-Vulcan: My clarification relates to a message thread in which your name appears more than 4000 times.*

*T'Vael-of-Vulcan: Are you indeed the author of a novel entitled K’diwa, which takes as its subject matter the courtship between a praiseworthy male Vulcan scientist who defends a brave and aesthetically pleasing female Human poet from the deadly pursuit of the slavery cartel she heroically defied as a lone adolescent?*

*T'Vael-of-Vulcan: Jim, 5 minutes have passed since my previous message. Are you still receiving?
JTK2233: T’Vael
JTK2233: I want you to promise me something
JTK2233: I want you to swear by the tips of your adorable pointed ears, got it

T’Vael-of-Vulcan: If, by “got it”, you are inquiring whether I understand you to be evoking a shared memory from my early childhood in order to emotionally manipulate me into making this promise, then yes, Jim, I get it.

JTK2233: PROMISE ME you won’t read K’diwa

T’Vael-of-Vulcan: Will you tell me the reason you do not wish me to read it?

JTK2233: …
JTK2233: [is typing]

JTK2233 Because it was published against my will and without my consent, which makes its widespread distribution a violation of my privacy.
JTK2233: also, it’s only a first draft, and I want to make some changes
JTK2233: especially if you’re going to read it I don’t need my kid sister pointing out my comma splices

T’Vael-of-Vulcan: T’Vara has been reading it for the past forty-seven minutes and she has not yet complained of any deficiency in your grasp of punctuation.

JTK2233: …
JTK2233: T’Vael will you please give the padd to your sister

T’Vael-of-Vulcan: That will not be necessary.

**new member added to group chat**

T’Vara-of-Vulcan: Good morning, Jim.

JTK2233: …
JTK2233: …
JTK2233: [is typing]

T’Vara-of-Vulcan: Is your device malfunctioning? I am receiving no text.

JTK2233: T’Vara
JTK2233: just
JTK2233: if you have any questions about what you’re reading, just
JTK2233: do me a favor and search a reputable archive, don’t rely on trashy spaceport novels
JTK2233: okay?

T’Vara-of-Vulcan: I believe I understand, Jim.

JTK2233: fantastic
JTK2233: that’s fine then
JTK2233: completely fine

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