With the end of the five years mission on the horizon, the crew of the Enterprise is getting ready, making new plans for their future. Seems like Jim is the only one that has no idea what his future holds, all he knows is that he must break up with Spock, before it happens the other way around.

But just before their tour of duty is completed, an unexpected diplomatic mission is forced upon captain and crew by the admiralty, one that involves an ancient Vulcan ritual, invoked to determinate the fate the Vulcan people after their great calamity. That sacrament, however, also has the potential to destroy the entire Federation.

Fun times assured.

Notes

Hey everyone,

I am really excited to share this gigantic fanfiction with you (over 200,000 words!). I have been working on it for about four years. It is a tribute to the Kelvin timeline and to every
S/K shipper out there. As always, when it comes to fanfiction, nothing is mine; I claim no rights and make no profit.

Before we begin, there are things I believe you should know about this story:

1. It has a long, convoluted plot, which relies heavily on dialogs and focused on characters and relationships study. There is some action, and, of course, some smut, but those are not the basis or the aim of this story.

2. The story touches on sensitive subjects such as- race, gender, sexuality, social constructs, PTSD and many more. It would probably not always address those subjects in a way that aligns with your point of view. If that gap might bother you, please reconsider reading. This is why I tagged it as 'Not safe' and gave it a general content alert. I cannot and will not tag this story to death, but I'll try to highlight sensitive stuff before each chapter.

3. My main inspiration to this story was Brexit in the UK, but that's it, an inspiration, nothing more. What characters of 'Leave' or 'Remain' positions in this story say, do or believe is by no mean a reflection of my opinion on RL people taking those stands regarding Brexit. This story is no platform for my personal commentary on the issue, and any similarity it shares with 'currant year politics' is random and unintended. So please don’t use the comment section for real-life political debates, much appreciated.

Still here? I sure hope so.

And I also hope you'll enjoy this story as much as I did while writing it. I will try to reply to the comments, and am very interested in your opinions, criticism, and views. Just do it in a respectful way, thank you.

There we go, I hope it's not boring, and that you'd like it.
Prolog

The five years mission is almost done, and it has been a hell of a ride.

Just seven more months, and this amazing adventure will be over, and to be honest, almost everybody was on board with that idea. You see, they all have such big dreams and aspiration to follow once they disembark, and seems like it cannot happen soon enough.

And Jim?

Thank you very much for asking, yeah, really, thank you, but to be perfectly honest, he has no clue.

Because obviously, they are never going to give him another ship to wreck; come on, it was one major fluke that got him this captaincy gig to begin with, never to be repeated, ever. And a desk job? Sure, as if that is going to work.

Him and Spock?

Ok, whatever it is between them, sex, was never build to last. Just use your logic, will you? What are the chances that Spock is going to keep him around once this mission is over? Ranging from zero to none is the answer. Spock was meant for better and greater things, and it is fine.

It is all fine, no worries.

Jim has always managed to land on his feet, and had at least three more souls to spare. If he survived his father's death, his psycho uncle Frank, Tarsus 4, Nero, Khan, Krall and more …. So what's another toss up?

Let the dice roll.

Whatever comes next, Jim will handle it like he always did, like the survivor that he is, like the cheeky, cocky, punk that he had always been. There is nothing to worry about, trust me.

So, seven more months, huh? Everybody keep calm and gently handle the Conn, and when it's over and done, boldly move on, forward and beyond.

But then, of course, the Vulcans had to fuck everything up.
"And we are out of warp, sir." said the helmsman, side-glancing at his direction.

"Thank you, Mister Sulu." Kirk smiled and tapped on his touch-screen to hail Engineering "Are the new scanners ready, Mister Scott?"

"Ready as they come, Captain."

"Good, at your convenience, Scotty."

"Aye aye… scanners are operational…now,"

"On screen, Yorktown." Kirk beamed at their new navigator and second pilot, Chekov's replacement, who quietly smothered his resentment towards his nickname and worked his console.

"Star system 771/18 is displayed on full screen, sir."

All eyes on the bridge turned to have a look, and even Sulu couldn’t resist mumbling one of his 'Oh, My's

And yes, the view was wonderful, majestic even, one may say. The infant proto-planetary, B-type star system, only one million years old, shone like a blue sapphire.

The star's bright azure rays were filtered through the dense cloud of hydrogen, which was dotted with specks of dust and little ice particles, and was fractured into every known color of the rainbow.

Now, that was one glorious sight to see, a good enough reason to venture into the great black even if there was none other.

"Thank you, Dayton." Kirk took half a spin in his chair to get a better view of the science station "How's things at your end, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan did not answer immediately; he was completely submerged in the data running through his screens.

Kirk smiled fondly at his first officer. "Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, sir." The Vulcan straightened up in his seat. "The scanners operate flawlessly, the resolution that we are receiving has exceeded my preliminary expectations, this is…"

"Fascinating?" Kirk took a wild guess.

"Indeed, sir."

"What could be so damn fascinating about a pile of fast spinning dirt?" Asked Dr. McCoy as he stepped out of the lift and entered the bridge, taking his position between Spock's station and the captain's chair, a smug smile was smeared all over his face, as he obviously said that just to piss Spock off; it was one of his guilty pleasures.
"This pile of fast spinning dirt is a star system in the making." Spock answered calmly. "Given enough time, there might be life barring planets here. Don't you find this fascinating enough, Doctor?"

McCoy eyes returned to the main screen, giving the display a thoughtful second glance and then he shook his head. "Nope, call me when there are at least some bugs around here."

Kirk turned his chair towards his CMO "Did you come here just to irritate our science officer or do you have an actual reason to be on the bridge?" he asked and got a snarl in return and a PADD shoved into his hands. "What's this?"

"The report you've been squeezing me for, Captain, you ordered it handed over as soon as I put my stamp on it."

"Yes, I did."

Kirk now remembered, he wanted the investigation to end as soon as possible, so there would be no repetition of what happened a few weeks before, when an alien virus escaped its containment at a medical lab and ran loose in the ship. Luckily, it only affected the Andorian population which was less than 5% of the crew, and a cure was devised in time to save them all.

He got up, "Thank you, doctor. I'll read it in the ready room. Spock, you have the Conn."

"Actually, sir, I was about to ask permission to leave for the computing lab." Spock said with unease. "It appears that the standard model for this kind of systems is only 71% accurate, I have an idea of how to improve it, but it requires my return to the lab."

"Very well, then, Sulu, the bridge is yours."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk nodded and turned towards the ready room, at the edge of his sight he noticed that both Spock and McCoy were heading to the turbo lift together; it made him smile, because it was a small miracle every time those two shared a lift and managed to step out of it alive.

***O***

They had less than a year to their five years mission, or as Spock would say it- they had seven more months and three days to its conclusion, but he would probably also add the number of hours and minutes to the count.

And it seemed like everyone were counting even the seconds for the end of it, Jim would not blame them, it was a rollercoaster ride, not a walk in the park, as Starfleet tried to sell it to them back in the days.

They had giddy highs, but also agonizing lows, the most recent blow occurred only half a year ago, while docking at star base 13 for maintenance, when they have lost Chekov to a freak accident at Engineering.
The young Ensign had spontaneously tried to conduct an experiment, all alone at the Warp Nacelle, without letting anyone know, including Mr. Scott, and against every known safety protocol.

They found his dead body hours later, after have been electrocuted. Bones did his best to revive him, but it has been too late. Kirk had the pleasure to contact his family to inform them about what happened, and the Enterprise had to abort the schedule of that upcoming month to return to Earth for the funeral.

Uhura could not stop crying for days, Bones nearly drowned in his bottle, Sulu was pale like a death-eater for weeks and Scotty tried to give him his notice at least five times before giving it up, they all deserved a brake.

They all deserved to turn the page in their lives.

Was he a total asshole for not wanting this mission to ever end? He was probably the only one dreading it, since the unknown that lay ahead seemed to him more daunting than the great black. His life after this mission was a total riddle, wrapped in a mystery and boxed in an enigma, he was always an 'on the fly' kind of guy, but what would he do when finally grounded?

"Focus, James Tiberius, focus, this report won't write itself …" he mumbled and forced himself to sit down and set his eyes on the document.

Forty five agonizing minutes later, he had a list of eighteen corrective actions derived from that report and scheduled to be reviewed on the next internal audit set in two month's time.

With another never ending half an hour, he finished feeding the actions into the system and was ready to return to the bridge when the comm in the ready room chimed.

"Kirk here."

"There's a call for you from the Admiralty, sir." Said Uhura.

He could not help but frown, since he was not expecting such a call, and somehow, it always came attached to bad news.

"Do you know who it is?"

"A Yeoman named Evans, the PA of Admiral Archer."

Admiral Archer? That's as high command as you can get, that man was a walking fossil; and a legend too.

"Admiral Archer? Are you sure? "

Not every day would such a higher-up make a call, in fact, apart from Pike's calls back in the day, there had been none, and Pike was never really a higher-up, not to him anyway.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure." Uhura conformed calmly, and before he could catch his breath the call was through.

The man on the screen appeared to be a handsome young thing- blonde haired, green eyed, crisp uniforms and good intentions.
"Good day, Captain Kirk, I am Yeoman Finn Evans, honored to meet you, sir." He smiled brightly, and Kirk could almost smell it, the fresh out of the academy scent.

"What can I do for you, Mister Evans?" Kirk smiled his most charming smile right back at the PA, and the young man blushed slightly. As expected, yes, he could totally fuck him, would be the first time he tops in almost a year.

"I need to set you up on a date... I mean... I need us to find a date for a conference call with the high command. This is an Alpha one priority and it must take place within the next 72 hours."

Kirk lost his smile and started to sway in his chair, taking the information in.

Alpha one priority; the highest level of urgency that had existed in the fleet.

He did his best not to show his unsettlement, and returned now a more sever gaze to the young PA.

"We are scheduled to stay in star system 771/18 for the next four days, and the signal is strong here, so you can set up the meeting with the high command at their convenient. I only wish to know what it is about."

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Alpha one priority? Come on... Don't you think I deserve to know what we are about to discuss? Or would the Admirals enjoy watching me gaping?"

The Yeoman blushed again. "I am sorry sir, I am not in the know, however, I do believe that the relevant data has been sent to you, weeks ago, via your first officer."

Is that so? This was getting stranger by the minute; Spock had some explaining to do.

"Of course." Kirk breathed out, putting his charm back on. "I just wanted to make sure the information we've received is up to date. Is that the situation?"

"To the best of my knowledge, it is, Captain."

"Then we are good to go." Kirk declared and added a dazzling smile. "Set the meeting in two days time, at this hour, I'll be ready for you."

"Thank you, sir; I'll inform the Admiral. Again, honored to meet you, sir. Evans out."

Well, someone's honored, that's a good thing; he huffed and pressed on the comm.

"Kirk to Spock."

"Spock here."

Man, that voice was melted chocolate smeared on vice.

"Please join me in the ready room, commander."

"Right now, sir? I am in the middle of compilation, and it is at a critical stage, may I have another half an hour, please?"

Kirk frowned, what's half an hour? He just bought himself two days to prepare, but then again, just because his first officer has been fucking him for the past ten months did not give him the right to treat his orders as recommendations, and what's with this hiding information of an Alpha one
priority?
"Get your ass up here, ASAP, Mr. Spock."
"On my way."

***oOo***

"Reporting to the ready room, sir." Spock said as doors closed behind him with a soft swish, he lingered there at the entrance, upright and poised; arms behind his back, standing at attention.

With his immaculate appearance, flawless posture and steady gaze, he was the embodiment of the ideal Starfleet officer; he was also sex on a stick.

Angry; you are angry, remember?

Kirk had a hard time, pun intended, trying to keep his anger from evaporating into thin air, that Vulcan was his goddamn kryptonite, how could he not appreciate the view of his favorite alien?

All tall, at 6'2, lean and muscular, his lithe body hid the fact that he was as least three times stronger than the average human, and his graceful, athletic built never gave away the fact that his dense body weighted nearly 400 pounds.

"Sir?" Spock asked with a subtle tilt of his head.

So he has been ogling for a while, so what?

"It should take less than seven minutes to get from any point on this ship to any other, as it was built to this standard." Kirk practiced his commanding voice with substantial amount of success. "Does fifteen minutes count as ASAP to you?"

"I am sorry; sir, the main turbo lift on the labs deck was under maintenance."

"Irrelevant!" Jim let the insult distort his expression.

"I also took the liberty of finishing the stage of compilation I was at." Spock admitted, because Vulcans are perfect and would not lie after being caught bending the truth.

"Jeez, are you planning on standing there forever?"

Spock only raised one eyebrow as a reply.

Seriously? Is this your play? Are you pissed off because I interrupted your critical compilation stage? Childish much, whatever…

"As you were, Commander."

"Thank you, Captain." Spock finally removed himself from the doorway and took a seat opposite to Kirk, posing there like an advertisement for ergonomics, and awaiting further instructions.

This was so very confusing, Jim had to admit, and contrary to his hopes it was not getting any easier, even though almost a year have already passed.
They had an agreement between them- leave the professional aspect of their relationship behind as they entered their quarters, and postpone the personal aspect of it as they stepped out.

It might have worked for Vulcans, it might have worked for Spock and Uhura, but for Jim it was nearly impossible to do. How could he act on his captaincy and be so mighty cool while still feeling Spock's 10 inch cock deep inside of him, thanks to their morning session?

And how could he not be personally insulted when Yeoman Evans implied that Spock has been withholding crucial information from him?

"I just had a very interesting conversation with high command." Kirk started. "They want to set up a meeting in two days time, Alpha one priority."

"Is that so?"

"Alpha one priority, never had one of those before, isn't that the code for the outbreak of a galactic war?"

"One possibility, yes." Spock agreed. "But there are others."

"Such as?"

"Any threat to the well-being of the Federation would fall into the Alpha one category, and since there is a verity of them, speculating is pointless."

"But must I speculate?" Kirk pressed forwards, making sure they held each other's gaze. "Isn't there something you can share with me to help unveil this mystery?"

Spock's dark brown eyes appeared to be sincere and full of concern, and he also seemed a bit confused and even hurt, maybe Evans was a bloody idiot who did not know what he was talking about.

"I wish I could help, Captain." Spock answered.

Jim breathed his relief, and then he got up and started pacing about the room. "So a war, huh?"

"I wouldn't venture that far."

"Is it with the Klingons? The Romulans? A nasty new species?" he could not make up his mind if he was more worried or excited over the prospect.

"Highly unlikely, given the current state of affairs."

"But Alpha one priority, Spock! The admiralty would not make something up. Something is threatening the Federation's wellbeing, what would it be?"

"We can go through the most probable scenarios, if that pleases you, Captain."

No it doesn't, you stubborn hobgoblin.

What is it that you try to hide?

Why hide anything from me?

Ok, I gave you enough chances to come clean, and now is time to stop beating around the bush.
"The Yeoman I've just spoke with, told me that you are in the know, Spock, so again, I ask you, what is this Alpha one priority about?"

"Might be the Vulcans, sir." Spock admitted softly after a long pause.

"Say what?" Jim could not help but gasp.

Chapter End Notes

Stay strong, stay safe, take care.
Spock lowered his gaze, like a boy caught stealing candy, it was endearing and Jim would have cherished the moment if he wasn't too busy building up his anger again.

"So you do know something!"

Spock considered his words for a while before answering; it was clearly a topic he wished to avoid.

"I am speculating, but I have reason to believe that the high command might wish to discuss the recent tension between New Vulcan and the rest of the Federation. I received relevant correspondence this morning from Ambassador Sarek, but assumed we still had time to prepare, seems like things are lapsing at greater rate than I have anticipated."

Jim frowned at this, hardly believing his ears.

"What on Earth are you talking about? Are we heading to war? With the Vulcans of all people? Has the universe tipped over while I was sleeping?"

Spock averted his gaze again, to the table this time, finding its bolts rather fascinating. "Not war, captain, I would not venture that far…"

"Alpha one priority, Spock, what else could it be?"

"It is more complicated than that, sir."

"Please- enlighten me."

Spock took a deep breath before answering; clearly he was struggling to find the right words.

"The situation between the Federation and New Vulcan has been delicate of late." He started slowly. "Ever since the fall of Vulcan and the loss of the majority of our kind, there has been an emerging debate among the surviving members of our species, and now we are at a crossroad regarding our definition of the relationship with the Federation."

Jim blinked at him, trying as hard as he could to understand, but failing to do so. No way was he that stupid.

"Could you please try again?" he asked, smirking "Only this time, try to be a little bit more vague."

"Jim, please, I have already told you more than I was allowed to share."

"Is that so? I have reason to believe that the Admiralty had expected you to do just that."

"What leads you to this conclusion, sir?"

"I don’t know… maybe Admiral Archer setting up a meeting to discuss this topic in two day’s time?"
"Are you sure?"

"PA Evans said that all relevant data had been sent to me via my XO."

Spock posed to contemplate this for a moment, which seemed like forever. He retained his cold exterior as he turned back to look at his captain.

"Vulcans regards their privacy very highly as you must already know." He stated "I was under the impression that my communication with Ambassador Sarek and Admiral Archer was confidential. There was no indication Starfleet had expected me to get you involved, I had not been given a direct order nor received an expressed wish to share the contents of said communication with anyone on board."

Was this an elaborate effort to apologize? Jim could never tell.

"So you are in the know, and you have been withholding information from me!" Jim concluded, slamming his fist on the table. "How could you? For how long have you been keeping this on the hush? This is… this… a major disappointment, on the verge of betrayal!"

"Jim…"

"Don't Jim me! I call it as I see it!"

"This is a mere misunderstanding." Spock tried, lifting his dark brown eyes to meet Jim's blue ones. "I was never given a direct order from the fleet or the Vulcan high council to share this knowledge with you."

"A direct order?" Jim nearly spit the words out. "You needed a direct order to share an Alpha one priority!? Spock!! I thought we had trust between us! That we had open communication! That we were a good team!" Kirk said, and as his voice died out, he slouched into his chair, and surrendered to silence. He could not tell if he was more pissed off or horrified at this disclosure.

After a while spent in stillness, Spock decided to try again.

"Jim, this has nothing to do with our relationship, you know I value you deeply and would trust you with my life… however…"

"Oh… I knew 'however' was hiding there somewhere…"

"However, this information was not mine to share." Spock continued, ignoring Jim's remark. "Please understand this, only the Vulcan Elders can decide with whom and when to share this kind of sensitive Intel. I've received no indication for their wish to share it with the rest of this ship's commanding staff, and as I understand it, this subject was pushed into Alpha one priority only in the last few hours."

"And now it is out in the open." Jim sighed and straightened up.

"So it seems."

"Ok, alright then." Kirk massaged his throbbing temple trying his best to separate the personal and professional entanglement that was called his life. "Now that it is in the open, would you help me prepare for the meeting?"

"I most certainly will." Spock nodded. "I'd copy all documented data in my possession and transfer it to your personal directory."
"And you'd do it now? As in- before returning to your lab?"

"Right away, sir." The Vulcan stood up, again at attention. "Permission to leave, Captain."

"For real?" Kirk whispered in despair, but knew there was only one way out of this. "Granted." He mumbled and his eyes followed the Vulcan as he left the ready room.

His gaze then fell on the beige colored carpet for a while and then he collected himself and hailed his Yeoman.

"Rand here." the voice of the young woman was cheerful, oddly enough.

"Miss. Rand, what's on my menu today?"

"Just a second, sir… ok, you have a meeting with Mr. Scott regarding the upcoming emergency drill in Engineering, followed by a meeting with Mr. Hendorff and his security officers to review the updated docking protocols, your weekly meeting with the counseling board and dinner with Dr. McCoy. Should I send you the time table again?"

"No, thank you. Cancel everything but the dinner, something came up."

"Yes, sir."

"Know what? Clear tomorrow too, including alpha, and book me a briefing room instead."

Might as well.

"Sir; is everything alright?" she now lost her cheerfulness and sounded a bit more concerned.

"As I said, something came up."

"Of course."

"Thank you, Rand…oh… and if they all want to kill me, make them draw for it."

"Roger that."

This was going to be a long day.

***oOo***

He ended up canceling dinner with McCoy himself, after reading the data Spock had sent him, man, that was some heavy shit, killed his mood for socializing, and definitely made him lose his appetite.

It was the end of the Beta shift, and he found himself hiding in a sideways nook at the observation deck, in his favorite position, sitting at the edge of the windowsill with nothing between him and the great black but thin glass and the force field. If there's a sudden malfunction he would be sucked out into space within the blink of an eye, and both Bones and Spock had endlessly nagged him about this reckless habit of his, but hey, this was the best view ever, and one hounded percent worth dying for.
He gazed at the swirling mass of hydrogen, glowing in a soft blue hue, now that the star shine was mostly blocked away by the ship's position. He wondered what kind of life would eventually emerge out of this tiny cradle, and when it does, would the Federation still be there to greet it? Would the UFP even endure long enough to reach that point in time? And if not, who would take its role to protect and cultivate those precious young lives? Would there be anyone at all?

Boy, your brain's a depressing place to be in right now…

He heard the sound of footsteps as they echoed in the deserted hall, and it was clearly coming his way. He had already chased away Sulu and Bones, as well as the crew members who happened to use the hall when he arrived; they had let themselves out, noticing that their Captain had emitted his 'Leave me alone' vibe. Now who claimed that humans were psi-null?

So… who could it be?

"This is unwise."

Jim smiled without lifting up his gaze; he would recognize that voice anywhere, that sexy, panty wetting, deep voice.

"You can take it to the health and safety supervisor again, Spock, I don't mind the fines." He answered, smiling bitterly, slowly turning to look at the being that had managed to make both his heart and cock ache with the same measure.

Instead of sliding into their familiar banter, Spock did the unthinkable; he crouched and crawled into the hatch himself, finding his place across from Jim, so close that his body heat managed to warm up the space between them.

"Now you have me worried." Jim informed him, as Spock leaned against the frame and took into the beautiful sight outside.

"That makes the both of us." The Vulcan replied after a while, disturbing Kirk from admiring the way the blue light caressed his porcelain skin and glistening jet black hair.

"Why are you here?" Jim mumbled after a while.

"Why are you not in your quarters?"

Jim shrugged. "Don't feel like sleeping."

"Did I say anything about sleep?"

"Ho, you sweet talker, you… Don't you have some remodeling to do?"

"I have finished adjusting the boundary values and now the program is running independently, I expect first results in the morning."

"Good for you, now what part of 'I want to be left alone' didn't you get?" Jim asked, letting his annoyance to be heard and shown in a way he could only describe as bitchy.

"Human body language was never my strong point." Spock admitted and he truly looked slightly at lost.

"And there I thought you were a touch telepath." Jim mocked him just to spite.

"My telepathy requires skin to skin contact, as you know, yet only our boots are currently
touching." Spock noted, giving Jim's feet a gentle kick, ankle to ankle.

Jim mumbled his agreement and shrugged, turning his gaze back to the window to watch the scenery again, but after a brief moment of silence, Spock must have felt compelled to continue.

"Even if we were to touch skin to skin now, I'd never breach your privacy of thought without permission." He added "Humans were not made for prolong telepathic contact; it destroys their sense of self. I will never harm you this way. I always keep my shields up to the best of my ability."

"Even while having sex?" Jim teased with a smirk, glancing back at the Vulcan, this was interesting.

"Even more so, in that case." Spock conformed what Jim has already suspected, because if Spock had ever read his thoughts while having sex, he'd be in a whole world of trouble by now. "I only use touch telepathy to exchange emotions and pleasure, nothing more. You should always feel comfortable with me as with any other psi-null partner."

Well, way to go, you perfect idol of cold self restrain, even hot steamy sex won't distract you. Sometimes I think that you're just an over the top handsome robot.

"But why this 'telepathy boundaries' speech all of a sudden?" Jim asked and shook his head, stretching his limbs in their limited space.

"If I recall correctly, it was you who brought up the subject." Spock answered.

Oh, so it's my fault.

Kirk sighed and averted his gaze back to the view outside. "Well, fine, whatever, you can stay if you want to, but keep it quiet."

"As you wish."

And so they settled into a peaceful silence, at least on the Vulcan's part, because Jim was a different story. He wanted to find some serenity, inspired by the majestic view outside but could not help sneaking a peek at his beautiful first officer, and as he did so, he could not help but recalling what he had learned today, which led him back into his sense of irritation.

He gave up after a few minutes and kicked Spock's boot with far less gentleness that he himself had received, waking him up from his semi-meditative state.

"I can't believe that the Vulcans want out of the Federation!"

To this Spock answered with a slight tilt of his head, which earned him another kick this time, to the shin.

"And even worst, I can't believe you have been sitting on this information for more than three months now without a squawk!"

"One cannot sit on an abstract object." Spock noted with calm.

"You know exactly what I mean!" Jim glared at him, gaze set on kill.

"Do I?" The Vulcan answered softly.

"Of course you do! So where do we go from here?"
"To bed?"

"Hold it right there, mister! That's a new thing. Who taught you to answer one question with another?"

"That would be Miss Uhura. A most effective strategy while conversing with humans, it usually causes them to lose their train of thought and become more pliant. Is it working?"

"Nice one! No!" Jim huffed and a smirk rose into his lips.

Uhura, huh? Figures…that little vixen, he should totally find a way to make her pay for this.

"Jim, there are currently eighty seven highly developed civilizations, with profound intelligence and rich cultures who are members of the federation, and more join every year. Why would you be so upset over one species wanting to leave it? Especially a recently declined one?"

"Because it's the fucking Vulcans."

"I fail to follow the logic of your answer."

"Logic my ass…" Jim hissed and then sighed "The Vulcans were the co-founders of the Federation, Spock, they were the ones to make first contact with humans and pull us out of a horrible, dark post world war age. The Vulcans saved us, the Vulcans are… you."

Sentiment, I know, but fuck it.

Spock did not answer; just took a deep breath and returned to gaze out the window. He could be thinking about a million different things, or about nothing at all, Jim could never tell just by looking at his handsome, stoic features.

"Hey…" Kirk kicked him again with his boot, this time aiming for his thigh. "What would happen if New Vulcan does leave the UFP? To us, I mean…" he managed to narrow the question down before Spock could articulate a widespread speech.

"I see no correlation between our relationship and the Elders' decision on the matter."

"Full evasive maneuvers, Spock, well done." Jim smiled bitterly, man; he was so tired of it all.

"Our relationship is our own to govern." Spock made the effort to correct his course and somehow it touched Jim's heart. "Is this better?"

"Yeah, a bit better." He licked his lips, while nodding.

"Please don't confuse my efforts to achieve accuracy for an attempted evasiveness."

"I know, I don't." Jim sighed again. "I'm taking tomorrow's off bridge duty, so I could prepare for the meeting. Would you find the time to help me?"

Please don't make me turn it into an order…he begged with his eyes.

"I'll clear my afternoon. Would that be sufficient?"

Jim breathed in relief.

"That would be great, thanks. I think I've covered the basics but there are a lot of Vulcan innuendoes that I can't pick up." Jim reluctantly admitted, wondering if he will ever get Vulcans in
general and this one in front of him in particular.

"I'll do my best."

"Your best is the best, Spock, now let's go to bed."

"Yes, you're already past achieving the advisable eight hours of sleep."

"Did I say anything about sleep?"

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
"Captain Kirk? Malek here."

Jim took his eyes off a document and scanned the disarray of PADDs and printouts on the table before him, a mess which he had created while preparing for the meeting with the higher-ups tomorrow. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Would you please come to the bridge, sir?"

No, this is your Alpha shift, Lieutenant Malek, can't you handle it for more than three hours? That was what he wanted to say, but he was a nice person, so he didn’t.

"What is the Problem?" he asked instead.

"I need your assistance, please?" her pleading voice made him worry.

"On my way." He said, creating a storm of papers as he swiftly got up. He could make it in less than five minutes from briefing room #5 to the bridge, and he hoped that the ship would last until then.

Someone announced "Captain on the bridge." when he entered, he could not recognize the voice owner but he sure had the accent all wrong.

He located Malek standing at attention, while at her side, four security officers held down two crew members, Yorktown and Sulu?

"At ease." He said while assessing Dayton and Hikaru appearance, Sulu was nursing a bruised jaw and was bleeding from his lower lip, Yorktown was showing early signs of a black eye.

"What is this?" he asked.

The security officers released the men from their hold and they took their stand before him, embarrassed and shoe gazing, he was not getting an answer from them and so he turned to Malek. Tell me that you called me in just to break up a kindergarten fight? Was all he wanted to say, but wouldn't.

"Dismissed." He ordered the security guards, and then he turned to his alpha crew. "Officer Malek, to the ready room." He ordered. "Mr. Sulu, Mr. Parker, join us."

The four golden shirts entered the room, and Kirk gave them the chance to start talking, but none of them did.
"Mr. Sulu, would you mind explaining this to me?"

"Sir…" Sulu wiped the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand. "We received a request from the science department to get closer to the system so they could get a better reading. I gave the helm to Mr. Parker…"

"You didn't give it to me!" Yorktown protested. "It was my turn!"

"If you say so…" Sulu nearly snorted at the claim. "Anyway, I set an easy descending course and he ignored it, taking a sharp dive in."

"The science officer said that your course led to a position that was not close enough!" Dayton nearly growled at Sulu.

"With all due respect, Dr. Slikth is no expert in navigation, and could not understand that he was asking the impossible," Sulu answered. "You on the other hand…"

"I was handling it just fine!" Yorktown growled back. "You are simply unable to let someone else pilot the ship!"

"To crush it into an asteroid?"

"Would have not!"

"Would sooo too!"

"The force filed would have deflected it like a champ!"

"And then what? Start a fucking cosmic pool game?" Sulu now shouted and seemed like he was ready to punch Dayton some more.

"Hey!" Kirk shouted to calm the both of them down. "Let's keep this civilized, lady and gentlemen. What's the current ship's position?"

"On a safe orbit, after I corrected the course." answered Sulu.

"You had no right locking me out of my own console! You could have asked me nicely and I would've done so myself!"

"Idiot" Sulu huffed, not even bothering to look at the younger officer.

"See, Captain? He's not acting at all like a professional." Yorktown almost whined. "Calling me names, calling me an idiot!"

"Because you are one." Sulu informed him.

"Did you explain the situation to Ensign Parker with words before fists, Mr. Sulu?" Kirk asked the senior officer.

"I did, but this IDIOT would not listen."

"Where were you while this whole thing got out of hand?" Kirk turned to Lieutenant Malek and she blushed.

"I was in the ready room, talking with the science department, sir."
"You could have taken that call on the bridge."

"I know, Captain, I am sorry."

"Look…" Kirk took a deep breath to organize his thoughts, and he was pleased to know that the rest of them imitated him, taking a breath themselves and looking at him calmly while awaiting his judgment. "I don't have all the information before me, but let's not make this a formal investigation, alright?"

They all nodded, which was great.

"I have full confidence in Lieutenant Commander Sulu's judgment, so I do believe Ensign Parker took an unnecessary risk."

"The Force field was going to handle it!" Yorktown insisted.

"The Captain is speaking!" Lieutenant Malek rebuked him.

"No need." He smiled at her; he was holding his own without her help, thank you very much. He turned to look at Dayton in the eye. "There's more to it than just the force field, Mr. Parker." He explained patiently. "You have ignored the command of a senior officer, and you have almost violated the prime directive."

"The Prime directive?" all three echoed his words after him.

"Yes, the prime directive." He conformed. "This system was identified with a high potential to hold life at some point in the future, if you were to start this cosmic pool game, Mr. Parker, you might have been jeopardizing its chances. One can never know the influence of a small action over a chaotic system, Butterfly effect. Rings any bell? Do you understand this, Dayton?"

"I do, sir." The young man nodded, going a little pale, a violation of the prime directive was no laughing matter. The young officer lowered his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I lost my cool…" he said, struggling with tears. "I can take a beating, Captain…. but I'm tired of the name calling… Sulu called me a pathetic replacement back there and I… I… it was the last straw."

"Snitch." Sulu coughed "Crybaby."

Kirk ignored his helmsman. "You three lose a week of shore leave over this." He announced "And Dayton, you are suspended from piloting the ship until we have a one on one. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir." Said the young Ensign.

"Loud and clear, Captain." Sulu and Malek echoed.

"Yorktown, escort yourself to sickbay."

"Sir." The officer clicked his heels and left the ready room.

"Sulu, wait here. Malek, take back the bridge."

"Yes, Captain."

He walked her out, and after the door closed behind them, he stopped her and looked into her dark eyes. "Sonita, isn't it?" he recalled her first name.

She nodded. "I'm sorry." She sniffled "I should have handled it myself."
Oh, boy, those kids, so easy on the tear shed.

"I gave you this shift, Sonita."

"I know, I needed the Alpha hours, and I've let you down."

"I gave you this shift because I believe you can do it." He corrected her. "I still do; so no more hiding in the ready room, go there and own that chair, Lieutenant Malek."

"Yes, Captain." She smiled through her tears.

"That's the spirit." He nodded and waited a moment to let her collect herself and then watched as she marched into the bridge to take her seat again, now he had to turn back to the ready room and Sulu.

Sulu set on a chair, and gave him a weary look as the doors closed behind them.

"What were you thinking?" he asked, shaking his head with disappointment.

Sulu sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I Know, I was way out of line, I'm sorry." He whispered.

"Hikaru, please, you must understand...." Jim said softly and set besides him, placing his hand on the man's shoulder. "He'll never be Chekov, you have to let go."

***oOo***

"Captain! So good to see you at last!" Bones beamed at him at the entrance to the mess room, where he probably lurked for the past few minutes. Yeah, Bones was not going to let him ditch an appointment twice in a row, so when he invited him to lunch, Jim knew he had to accept or he will never hear the end of it.

Luckily, Bones liked to take his lunch just before the mess room closed, so it was rather empty and they could talk freely without worrying about the ship's circulation.

They shared a quick hug and while at it, Bones gave him a passive aggressive pat on his back, and one of his whitest smiles.

"Good to see you too, Doctor." Jim smiled back. "Shall we?"

They chose their meals at the station and found a seat at the corner of the mess room, away from the rest of the dining crew.

Jim was usually the one to pick the first subject of conversation, and he had no trouble to get it going on a positive note.

"Your report was very good, very informative and thorough. I've already fed it to the system, but I asked Spock to give it a second review, just in case."

"Thanks." Bones picked up his fork and knife and started working on his steak. "We've dodged the bullet this time, might as well make the most of it."
"Food looks good today." Jim noted after looking down at his plate.

It was their running gag.

The food was the same as every day, the exact same replica, in a matter of fact.

McCoy grimaced at that statement. "You have such low standards, Jimbo."

Jim hummed his agreement as his mouth was full of ham and mashed potatoes, and the doctor just shook his head.

"I was wondering," Bones said after a while they spent just eating in a comfortable, familiar silence. "About the day after, you know…"

There you go, Jim knew Bones was after something, everybody needed something form the Captain, this was part of the job, and Bones had that look on his face ever since they have set down to eat.

"The day after the five years mission?"

"That day, yeah." McCoy nodded. "There's an opening at Starfleet Medical Research Center, back on Earth, Vancouver, the department of Xeno- microbiology. I wish to submit my application."

"Sounds perfect, go for it."

"You know I'm not a Starfleet fan boy, but I do need the credits, the job's interesting enough, lots of advancement opportunities, I'll get to see Joanna on weekends and most importantly, I won't be stuck in space, floating around in a tin can."

"Seems like a wonderful plan." Jim agreed after finishing his main course and cleaning up his mouth with a napkin, he could read the unease on his CMO's face so he decided to help him. "What do you need?"

"Recommendations." McCoy answered and eased into his chair "There's a nasty competition; I'll need all the edge I could get."

"You know I'm your number one cheerleader." Jim smiled and took a sip of his black coffee. "I'll write you one that will drop jaws… or pants, if you want me to. What's the rush, though? We have, like, seven more months to go."

"The registration closes in two weeks time. And, Jim…Do you think Spock would be willing to write me one as well? As the XO, and the chief science officer it would go a long way."

"Sure he will."

"Would you talk to him? Make sure?"

"What are you like, five? Talk to him yourself, he won't bite you much."

"I don’t know about that." Bones lifted up his gaze to the mess room ceiling and sighed.

"I thought you two had a moment on Altamid."

"A moment, yes, long gone." McCoy breathed out, dramatic as always, and then he returned his eyes to his captain, giving him a scrutinizing gaze. "Fine, I'll talk to your boyfriend myself, but if he refuses I expect you to make use of your pretty blue eyes."
"That won’t be necessary; Spock holds you in high regard, even if he won't show it. But if he does
gives you hard times, I'll fuck him into it, no problem."

"Thanks Jim, very much appreciated, you truly are a good friend. Are you having this?" McCoy
pointed at the chocolate cake on Jim's tray.

"I thought you were on a diet."

"Split it in half and we'd both be."

"Deal."

"Up to the bridge next?" Bones asked, carefully watching Jim as he split the cake to make sure the
two halves were even.

"No, Briefing room five, got homework to do." Jim pushed the plate to the middle so they could
both share.

"What is this about?" the doctor asked. "You've been in hiding lately."

"I have a meeting with the high command tomorrow's morning."

"High command? Must be serious."

"Can't tell." Jim shrugged, who'd say he hasn't pick up a thing or two from Spock over the years.

"Well, the youngsters are creating havoc in your absence, had to patch up Yorktown and Sulu
today."

"Sulu is no youngster; he's my age- 31."

"Well, you're all babies to me."

"Said the 43 years old geezer." At the age where the human average lifespan was 150, with some
even reaching 170, being just over forty was still quite young.

"Hey, age is an attitude, not a number." McCoy frowned at him.

"Sure, if you say so. I should get going." Jim said, tossing his fork on the cleared cake plate,
smiling. "That's an extra half an hour at the gym that I'm looking at."

McCoy nodded and started drinking his coffee while Jim got up and picked up his empty tray.

"See you around, doctor."

"Where else could I go, Captain?"

***oOo***

"Captain."

The familiar voice pulled him out of his deep concentration and he let go of his PADD, letting it
fall on a pile of other PADDs and documents scattered on and under the table, and he turned to
look at his first officer.

Spock had a way of invoking so many different emotions in him, even with his impassive posture, affection, lust, admiration, love? Oh, that Vulcan would be the end of him.

"Hello, Commander." Jim smiled, placing his cup of coffee on the table as well. "There's no one here but you and me, no need for titles, come on in."

Spock nodded and entered the briefing room, reviewing his surroundings, particularly the disarray on the table and the floor. "I see that you've already covered a lot of data." He said, taking a seat near Jim.

"I have." Jim agreed. "But I still need your input to make sense of it all."

"That's what I'm here for. Where should we begin?"

"Let's begin with a kiss." Jim could not help suggesting, and as the Vulcan gave him his subtle version of a frown, made him almost chuckled. "Oh… Come on… we are all alone, no one can see, just this one little kiss, I could really use some stress relief…"

"Sir, regulations dictates…"

"For once in your life, Spock, fuck regulations!!"

"As you wish." Spock whispered and leaned closer to his hopeless human, placed his hands gently on the sides of his face, almost caressing his psi points, he seemed to linger, hesitating, but then he plunged in, and his burning lips crushed upon Jim's.

Jim moaned happily, bringing their chairs closer so they could press their chests together, while sending his fingers to run through that perfectly combed black hair that he loved so much to ruffle.

The kiss picked up heat, and soon enough Spock was almost eating Jim up, licking his lips with his rough tongue, seeking entrance to that wet, red mouth, and Jim opened up to allow it, his soft tongue meeting the Vulcan's one with joy and enthusiasm.

Spock now growled with a low voice, sending shivers down Jim's body, and his strong arms traveled down to the Human's waist, and before he noticed, Jim was picked up from his seat and placed in Spock's lap, without even breaking the kiss.

Those strong hands traveled even lower to grope the man's firm, round ass, and soon enough, they were rubbing their hardened members against each other, and the touch sent sparks that ran up and down Jim's spine, even though they were both fully dressed.

He really needed that.

His sex drive had always spiked under pressure. Was this a bit strange? That under extreme circumstances where most people would panic; shiver and cry; he only got hard? But hey, no judgment.

He really needed that.

But he couldn't have it.

Not the place or the time, Jimbo, his reason reminded him.

"Ok..., Ok..." Jim broke the kiss and stopped moving, blushed and out of breath. "My bad, bad
idea; we have work to do."

Spock growled in protest, his iron grip did not allow Jim to leave his place.

"Come on, Spock." Jim chuckled. "Let go."

"A moment."

"No, now." Jim wiggled in his effort to free himself, which only made Spock's member harder, and he growled again. "Come on, big guy, I'm sorry for the tease, I'll make it up for you tonight, I promise."

Spock struggled to gain back his self control; he breathed out and loosened his hold so Jim could return to his chair.

"Sorry." Jim said again, he had to remember that Vulcans were much like their heavy starships, it was very difficult to get them started, but once they were going, it was even harder to make them stop.

"You are correct; there's a lot to be done." Spock mumbled "My apology."

Jim gazed at Spock and wondered if he should tell him about his unruly hair, but the disheveled black strands looked so very sexy, so no, no telling.

"So, here's what I got… "Jim started on the topic "Since Vulcan's demise, about seven years ago, and more intensely over the past two years, there's been a group of reactionaries led by Elder Svern advocating an agenda of separation from the Federation. Am I correct?"

"Yes, you are."

"Seems like they are gaining more and more support on New Vulcan, and the people are divided roughly in the middle, with a buffer of about 15% indecisive members, you included."

"That's also correct." Spock said with a slight nod.

Spock's calm affirmation caused Jim a blunt ache in his heart, same as when he learned it for the first time, it came as a surprise to him; he was naive enough to think that Spock would be a part of the 'Remain' faction.

Was their growing relationship not a good enough incentive to make him choose this way?

There was so much of Spock that he didn't understand, but he must continue.

"In order to solve this problem without causing further conflict, the elders decided to utilize an old ritual called "Plak if-fee" to help them settle the matter."

"Right again, Jim."

Ok, he can't.

"So here is the first thing I don’t understand." Jim breathed, "Why are you indecisive?"

He could not help it, and it was more than a semi-personal question, but he deployed his innocent blue eyed gaze in hope to get his answer.

Spock called his bluff right away and raised an eyebrow. "I don't think that the high command
wishes to talk to you about my personal stand, captain."

"But why?" He insisted, adding a pout to his efforts.

Spock almost moved with unease on his chair. "Elder Svern and his faction have some compelling arguments, which I cannot dismiss."

"Compelling arguments? I have some of those too." Jim switched his gaze from innocent to seductive. If it had worked, the damn Vulcan showed no indication of it.

"I'd be happy to discuss the subject on our personal time." Damn Vulcan indeed. "As for now I suggest that we focus on getting you ready for the meeting."

"They want you there too." Jim recalled the message he received to his mailbox that morning.

"I know, I have been informed as well." Spock nodded again.

"So, Plak if-fee..." Jim continued. "I know that 'Plak' is translated to 'Blood', and that never means anything good. I thought Vulcans were pacifists; can't you use a referendum like normal democratic nations? Or any other method that doesn't involve blood shedding?"

"The Vulcans do not employ the democratic system, we find it illogical."

"The democratic system? Illogical?" Jim echoed.

"Indeed. For starts- this system assumes that all voices are equal and the same which lead to the next assumption that the largest group of individuals who shares a similar point of view should gain the upper hand and lead the nation. It is extremely illogical to regard all opinions as equal, and to derive from that- that the majority must be superior to a minority."

Spock paused and studied the look of Jim's face.

"Sir, if you want me to further pick apart the democratic system, it would take me approximately 6.8 days to get my point across, this is counterproductive."

Jim shook his head. "Yeah, I guess, let's save it for another day."

"Most advisable." Spock agreed. "I'll just say that the Vulcans relay on their council of Elders when it comes to the needs of the many."

"Only that this time the elders are unable to reach a decision, and much like the general population, they are split in the middle, hence, the 'Plak if-fee' was devised."

"Positive. The elders are as just as torn as the rest of the nation, and in an effort not to deepen the rift; this ritual is to be conducted. This is a measure we take when logic fails us and we cannot rely on it to provide solutions. Its roots go even deeper than post-Surak era, in the pre-reformed times, this ritual was rather brutal, two rival clans that wished to avoid a full blown war would select a few warriors to fight as their representative, and the triumphant group delivered the victory to their clan."

"That's bloody, alright."

"After Surak's teaching was accepted it became less blooded, yet the principle remained, two groups are selected and go through trials and challenges, and the one that gains the upper hand dictate the way the conflict would be resolved."
"Less blooded? Are you sure?" Jim almost snarled "There's an actual bloodletting ceremony at the start of the ritual."

"Yes, the bloodletting is an addition made after the reform, to please the gods of war by offering them blood, since the ritual itself is highly unlikely to deteriorate into violence. The participants take their blood oath in this act and suffer from a minor laceration as a result, nothing to worry about."

"Tell me about that blood oath."

"The blood oath is merely a symbolic act of the participants to show their commitment to the ritual since it is only performed at crucial junctions in history and there for must be taken seriously."

"And the death penalty? For violating the blood oath?"

"Post-Surak rituals are completely safe, sir, there are measures taken to insure that. If all partaking members show honest commitment, make their best efforts and do not sabotage their team's effort, everyone should end the ritual alive."

"Alive as in a duel to death between the team leaders?"

"Only in case of a tie, again, highly unlikely, the post-reform ritual is designed to minimize the risk for this occurrence." Spock shifted slightly in his seat, first time since the meeting, which only meant he lost his patience for this stream of questions. "Sir, I understand your curiosity regarding the fine details of the ritual; however, we should carry on."

Jim nodded and tried to integrate this new information into his previous knowledge of the Vulcan culture, but he was still far from fully comprehend the depth of this ritual, its implications and also could not imagine the kind of role the Federation would have him play in this inner conflict.

"When does Vulcan logic ever fail?" he asked at the end of a long moment.

Spock did not seem to be bothered by the tinge of mockery in his voice.

"It is only logical to expect a logic failure at some circumstances, it happened before, and safe to say that it will happen again. Logic, although highly renowned and a very reliable tool, might fail at one of three scenarios."

"Three?" sounds like a lot.

"The first - there's a lack of information which unable the use of logic, the second- there are too many variables to consider and a logical solution could not be computed in a reasonable amount of time, and third, which I think is most applicable here- the problem at hand is too symmetrical and logic would not favor one solution over another."

"I see. You know, Spock, nothing in the data you gave me shows how the Federation is involved; all I have is Ambassador Sarek updating Admiral Archer of what's going on, this is clearly an internal conflict." There was nothing in the data that Jim reviewed that could answer why the Enterprise had to be included in this mess either.

"I can only assume that the Federation is involved because it is within its interest to make sure that New Vulcan remains a member of the UFP. My educated guess, if you force me to make one, is that they want you there as a delegate, an observer, to make sure the ritual is fairly conducted."
"But why me? Why not someone from the brass? A fancy high ranked Admiral? Unless they were already marking me as a scapegoat in case New Vulcan breaks away?" Oh shit, now he managed to push himself into an unexpected corner, way to go Jimbo.

Spock blinked his inner eyelids, which he only did when irritated. "Please cease making assumptions based upon a hypothesis."

"Point taken." Jim smiled and turned his gaze to the disarray in the room "There are some reports here of historical Plak if-fee events and their impact on the Vulcan society; would you mind going through them with me?"

"Of course."

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit worried for not getting any feedback on the story yet, I hope you like it and enjoy your reading.
As always, take care.
Of All Aliens In The Alpha Quadrant

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Additional warnings: Explicit, also Jim has issues with assuming the passive position in sex.

Oh, god… if only his crew could see him now, which they can't, which is great, but if they could, what would they think of their captain? Sprawled like that on the mattress, naked upon the bed, legs spread wide open, moaning with pleasure, having a certain Vulcan on top of him, inside of him.

Now, there is nothing wrong with assuming the passive position in sex.

Nothing at all.

It is very enjoyable, and there's no shame in admitting that.

However…

Jim was never the kind of guy to lie down and take it. In his previous, very active sex life, thank you very much, he was the one giving it, mostly to women, but there were some pretty boys too. He was always in command, the one in charge; the one to take the active role.

Ok, not entirely true, he sometimes switched, or was totally passive, but it was always a onetime thing, with someone he never saw before and will ever see again. Not with the same person for solid ten months, not with someone he might consider, theoretically, for the sake of argument, spending the rest of his life with.

Yet, look at him, time after time, submitting to this powerful, male alien, how the hell did that happen?

Spock had tried not to breathe into his ear as his rough tongue licked the round shell, because he was no less fascinated with the human's round ears than Jim was with his pointy Vulcan ones, but you'll never have him admit it.

His strong arms were holding Jim in place, elegant fingers entwined into his soft, golden locks, palms steady on his temples, squeezing ever so gently, his heavy body pressed onto Jim's, and his wonderful, massive cock was leisurely pounding into him, in no hurry to reach climax, just enjoying their deep connection.

Who would have thought he'd wind up with a Vulcan? Of all aliens who inhabitants the alpha quadrant? He always assumed that if he ever ends up with someone, it would be an Orion or an Earth woman, because they were so hot, Betazoid females were hot too, but their telepathic ability to pry into his head was a bit daunting, and look at him now, with this one, a male Vulcan, so much stronger than him, a hundred percent top and a touch telepath, way to go, Jim.

Oh, but that huge, heavy cock was doing magical things to his prostate, sending him waves of pleasure with every thrust, oh yeah, baby… give it to me, hot and sweet, that's it, almost perfect.
"Harder..." he moaned, anchoring his heels on each side of Spock's narrow waist, close to his heart. "Faster..."

Spock adjusted his thrusts perfectly like everything else he had ever done. "Better?" he asked, whispering.

By god, he could come just from hearing that voice.

"Oh yeah, yes!" he almost screamed, so he closed his eyes instead, breathing in Spock's sandalwood scent and surrendering to the sensations of his body, there were so many of them, all forms of pleasure.

He felt Spock kissing his neck, licking his throat like a cat, using that rough feline tongue. His strong arms went down to caress his chest, clever fingers toying with his sensitive nipples. His double ridged cock pushed in and out of his loose, lubricated hole, relentlessly stimulating his sweet spot, bringing him closer and closer to a mind blowing orgasm.

To think that nearly a year ago, they had to spend so much time just preparing his entrance for penetration, now it was ready for use at all times.

To think that those hands could easily snap every bone in his body like a dry twig, to think that he had no control over this situation and he could only ask for things to happen or cease form happening like a two year old, to think...

Or... not to think at all.

Spock sped up his thrusts and sent his fingers to his psi point. Soon enough they had joined in the mind as well, sharing their sensations, their pleasure and ecstasy in a never-ending loop of passion and lust.

Oh, fuck!

Fuck me good! Fuck me deep!

Fuck me like we have forever, and we're running out of time.

"Spock, Spock... Spock!" he could hear himself whimpering, and a white searing orgasm erupted in his groin, lighting up his mind like an ultra supernova, overloading his every nerve end, flooding his brain, and he passed out, as he sometimes did, vaguely aware of Spock's own completion, releasing his hot seed inside his body.

***oOo***

When he opened his eyes again it was still dark and quiet, well into the Gamma shift. The displayed view outside was the now familiar, blue glow of the hydrogen cloud that they were orbiting.

He was in bed, cleaned, because he could not feel dry, cold semen clinging to any part of his body, and there was a warm blanket covering him.
Spock was in bed besides him, giving away that wonderful heat that Jim would always mistake for a fever a few seconds before realizing it was just a normal Vulcan feature.

He yawned and turned to his side, sending his hand across Spock's fuzzy chest and down to his waist to hug him; fingers briefly brushing over the scar that he had acquired on Altamid, a remainder of the wound that nearly claimed his life, for some reason Spock had not got it fixed yet. The Vulcan drew closer, and placed a kiss on the soft blonde hair.

"Hey." Jim murmured into his fully awake lover shoulder. "What time is it?"

"It is 02:43 AM, you should go back to sleep." Spock answered softly; his eyes were glowing with a bright shade of green, reflecting the scarce light of the dimly lit room, another Vulcan feature.

Jim has already known Spock well enough to figure out that something was troubling him, and so he placed a kiss on the hot shoulder, or arm; his still numb mind could not tell the difference. "Why are you awake? What is it?" he tenderly asked.

"Nothing." Spock replied softly still.

"Vulcans don't lie." Jim reminded him.

"You did not specify what 'it' referred to." Spock retorted; a hint of amusement in his voice.

"I wish to know what's on your mind." Jim sighed, getting into a sitting position himself, although his aching body protested against it. "Spock, please, I'm no touch telepath."

"I was thinking about the meeting with the high command."

What a disappointing answer, this was only part of the truth, might even be the smallest part of it, and they both knew it. Jim was deliberating his options, should he press on or go back to sleep instead?

"You know, we, humans believe that honest communication is vital for a healthy relationship." Insisting it is.

"We, Vulcans, think the same." Spock said; something in the way he pronounced 'Vulcans' opened a window to his bothered mind, but Jim could not fully comprehend it in his sleepy state.

"Remember anything from your Pon Farr?" Jim hesitated but decided to bring up the subject, the thing that had brought them together nearly ten months ago, they had to talk about it eventually, might as well be now.

"Bits and pieces." Spock admitted, reluctantly.

"Well I remember some more, unfortunately." Jim chuckled with unease.

"Kaiidth."

"Fuck Kaiidth, are we never going to talk about it?"

"Aside from the fact that this is a bad timing, what is there to talk about?" Spock turned to look at him, finally, carefully studding his face. "I recall it as a traumatic event for us both; better let it rest."

"Yes, it was a bit traumatic." Jim admitted reluctantly. "But there was a point there, near the end, when you connected our minds, remember? That was a very deep meld, right? We've been so close,
like we were the same person; it felt so easy, I sometimes want to have that again."

Yeah, with all the other wild shit that had happened, this was the part of that Pon Farr that Jim actually missed.

"I am sorry." Spock whispered with a sad undertone, almost too faint to catch, and then his voice got stronger and full of bitterness "I should have never melded with you that deeply, maybe not at all. Might have avoided all those complications, if I was strong enough, but I was out of control. I resisted the temptation as much as I could, but eventually failed." He clearly was angry, Jim noted, but he also noted that that anger was aimed at himself.

"No one can resist me." Jim mumbled with a sleepy smile, stretching his limbs and then sinking into his pillow. "It's kinda natural law." He bragged and then yawned.

"Kaiidth. You should never seek a mind meld so deep with a Vulcan, never again, not even with me; it is far too dangerous for your well-being."

"I know, you told me so many times now, but I sometimes miss it. Now it's like we have this invisible barrier between us that keeps us apart no matter how much we try to get closer, or maybe it is a force field that tries to push us apart? I don't know… I'm just mumbling here, maybe I should go back to sleep." He sank under his blankets, to find a cozy position and then closed his eyes.

"If only you'd make up your mind." Spock said under his breath, ever so quietly.

"What?" Jim yawned again, claiming more of the blankets to himself, he did not bother to open his eyes, though, but he could feel Spock stirring next to him.

"Go back to sleep." Spock whispered again, and lied back down as well, cuddling Jim from behind, pulling him into his embrace.

At its lax state, Spock's cock has depleted and was retracted back into its sheath, making it feel as if a hard, hot and naked Ken doll was snuggling him, of all the creatures in the quadrant, a male Vulcan, go figure….

No, just go back to sleep.

***oOo***

Jim woke up again at 04:27 AM, way before the alarm was set to go off. This time he was alone in the room, it did not bother him; Spock rarely spent the entire night. He usually got back to his own quarters to meditate, or whatever Vulcans did in their own rooms, but today he was probably already in his lab, analyzing the results of the readjusted model.

Vulcans only needed about four hours of sleep, as they needed only two cups of water a day to drink, and could function as usual on a diet of 200 calories per day for weeks. Spock's blood was green, his piss was blue (yes, even mister perfect sometimes forgot to flush down the toilet.), his ejaculation was bluish as well and tasted kind of sweet.

Jim never imagined that one day he'd know all those intimate things about Vulcans, but even with
all that knowledge, there still was so much about Spock that was shrouded in mystery, more than he cared to admit. His stance on the recent Vulcan-Federation crisis, for example, was just one of them.

Jim used the bathroom, took a long, hot shower, shaved, changed into his very formal uniform in honor of the meeting, and still had an hour to spare before Alpha shift so he dedicated it to his never-ending paperwork and then went to the mess room for breakfast.

"Coffee, black, no sugar, and a bowl of muesli with bananas and yogurt." He instructed the replicator, making his inner Bones really proud, and then he picked up his tray to wonder where he should take a seat.

As a Captain, even the most mundane, minute decisions he made had hidden meaning attached and could have unexpected implications further down the line. He had two options to consider, and he tried to work himself into choosing the less pleasant one. Uhura was alone at a table, presenting him with a rare opportunity to have a long overdue talk with her. At another table, though, Scotty and his merry minions have provided a much more attractive option.

Come on; do it! He mentally berated himself, be a grown up. Spock talks to her, why won’t you?

Scotty spotted him, smiled and raised a hand with an inviting wave. "Morning, Captain!"
Jim turned and smiled to him in return, still deliberating his next move.

"Would you mind helping us settle an argument, please?" Scotty beamed at him and then ordered his minions to make room for the Captain.

Coward, Jim decided and started moving towards them, leaving Uhura to her solitude. "Sure, what is it?" he said, placing his tray on the table.

"Help me convince those stubborn fools that I'm in the right." Scotty leered, and then snarled, mainly at Keenser who shook his head with vigor in response.

"Oh, not a problem, Mr. Scott is always right." Jim stated with a smile, looking at the merry bunch and earning some discontent murmurs. "So, what were you right about this time?" he continued as he set down.
The engineers were divided over choosing a method of re-calibration for the new scanners, and Jim was more than happy to join their friendly argument and contribute from his knowledge. Oh, and yeah, seems like Scotty was right after all, even if he started out in the minority.

As their meal and cheerful bickering went on, Jim was relieved to see at the corner of his eye that Carol Marcus had joined Nyota, so she was no longer alone, and now his old one night stand and Spock's ex were sharing breakfast, awkward much?

Speaking of Carol, it was McCoy who had asked him a few months ago if he would mind him making the move on her, and of course Jim didn’t mind at all, since they were on a starship and not in high school, but time had passed and Bones did not make his move.
Was the good doctor too shy or was it something else? Maybe he had a change of heart? Or maybe, since they had less than a year to the end of the mission, he didn’t want to bind Carol to Earth or him, if she didn’t want to.

If it works, don't touch it, was the motto nowadays, with the end of the five years mission in clear view, status quo was the name of the game, and as much as Jim understood it, he hated it just the same, it was so very boring.

Yet, he himself had this standstill with Spock and was too hesitant and weary to deal with it, so he was just to blame as the rest of them. Spock didn't bother either, so he guessed both of them were to blame.

By the time the engineers have resolved their differences, Dayton had walked in to mess room to seat with the two women. Much like Uhura, he owed that man a talk, but unlike the situation with her, he had the balls to do so.

"Good luck with the scanners." He told Scotty and his minions, once he was done eating, and got up. "Keep me informed." He added before leaving.

"Aye Aye, Captain." Scotty promised.

He joined the line to the disintegrator and in his turn, placed his leftovers there to be decomposed back into atoms. For a moment, he deliberated taking a detour to the labs and talk to Spock, but then decided to head straight to the bridge and at least set up the shift before giving the Conn to Sulu for his meeting with the high command, he had an hour and a half before that Alpha one priority.

On his way out he passed by Dayton to squeeze his shoulder tightly. "You, me, ready- room, half an hour." He said smiling.

Dayton straightened up on his chair and lifted up his gaze, he was pale and a bit frightened. "Yes, Captain." He answered.

"Have a good shift, everyone." He said to the open air, and the ones at the tables nearby who were looking at him smiled and nodded, because they were always looking at him, and thirsty for his words. He made sure to include Carol and Nyota in his gaze, and smiling still, he passed them by to exit the mess room.

From their blushed faces and shy mumbling of 'thank yous', he concluded that those women were definitely talking about him, or about Spock, or about him and Spock, yes, the joys of being a Captain.

***oOo***

Dayton was a nice kid, he really was, but he was also an unlucky one, because life was unfair, and being nice was not going to cut it, if your timing sucked. He was Chekov's replacement; he was good at his job, but not as brilliant, not as endearing and he definitely had the accent all wrong.

The poor bloke could not shake off Chekov's shadow, to a point where some people, Sulu, had
looked at him, Sulu, as if he was the one to blame for Pavel's death, Sulu.

There was only one advice he could give the boy- suck it up and roll with the punches, the mission was almost over and he was young and enthusiastic and there was no doubt he'll get his chance to glow, on his next mission, with a brand new ship, and its fresh, out the wrapper, crew.

But until then, a deep breath was in order.

Dayton listen to his speech without a word, he sat on the chair in front of Jim and was more interested in straightening up his shirt than looking at Kirk in the eye. He was a handsome guy, with silky auburn hair and hazel eyes, and rumor had it that he was very popular among the ladies, especially ones from the science branch.

"You have permission to fly again, Yorktown, just stay out of trouble." He gave the young helmsman his best bright smile and got a shy one in return. "You may leave now. good luck."

"Thank you, Captain." Ensign Parker answered, and got up, to stand in attention.

"Dismissed."

Dayton eased out of attention, nodded and turned to leave soon after.

Jim watched the clock on his screen, twenty more minutes to Alpha one priority, and he was as ready as he could, he reminded himself for the seventh time.

"Kirk to Rand."

"Hello, Captain."

"Please bring a pot of black coffee to the ready room." Better safe than sorry, he had no idea how long would this meeting take.

"Dr. McCoy said you should only have three cups a day and you already had two at breakfast, sir." She reminded him, since when did she keep tabs on his coffee consumption, and how?

"We won’t tell him, then, Yeoman, problem solved."

"Be right there." She agreed reluctantly, dramatically sighing.

Fifteen minutes later, she came in with a tray and a Vulcan trailing behind her.

"Mr. Spock." She turned and smiled to him. "Would you like some herbal tea?"

"No, thank you." He said and passed her by to take his place at the table.

"Thank you, Miss Janice." Jim smiled at the blonde as she set the table.

Five minutes to alpha priority.

"Anything else?" she asked looking at them both.

"That would be all, thank you." Jim answered. "You may leave now."

She smiled at them, somewhat mischievously, as if she expected them to do something naughty as soon as she clears out of the room, which obviously they were not going to, this time.
"Computer, lock the door, Captain's code Delta11" Jim said as soon as Rand left, they didn't need any random visitors to accidentally bump in and hear top, high command, secrets, yeah Bones, talking about you.

The computer beeped its affirmative and complied.

Alone in the room, Spock studied Kirk's appearance but said nothing.

"So how's your new model?" Jim asked his CSO, not the male who fucked him so good last night.

"It shows improvement, but there is still a long way to go." Spock answered with the pleasant courtesy he reserved for their working hours, which Jim could not hope to imitate.

"Do you need more time in this system?"

Spock shook his head slightly. "Negative, sir. Thanks to the new scanners we have obtained more than sufficient data, I can now continue the research regardless of proximity."

"That's good; Bones will kill me if we arrive late to our next destination. He cannot stop blubbering about Kepler 213-d."

"Yes, the planet with indications of Gallium based life forms, fascinating."

"He's planning on writing an article about it."

"As he should." Spock agreed and Jim peeked at the screen again.

Alpha one priority, one minute.

"I'm nervous." Jim admitted, scrubbing his head with one hand, ruining his perfectly styled hairdo.

"No need." Spock answered. "kaiidth." And he was as calm as a marble statue, pale and unmoving and annoyingly perfect.

Kaiidth was a Vulcan word that meant, if Jim remembered correctly 'What is, is.', oh and he hated that word.

"I wish." He breathed and looked at the clock again.

"Whatever task the high command has chosen to give you, it is only logical to assume, is within your ability to handle, or else it would be a waste of time and effort."

"You think?"

"You are a very capable being, Captain; remember that you have already saved Earth twice."

"By accident, I got lucky."

"Vulcans do not believe in luck, sir."

"Well, they should. And they are late." Jim noted after glancing at his screen again. "Kirk to Uhura."

"Uhura here."
"Is there something wrong with our communications?"
"Our communications operates perfectly, sir."
"Would you please run a diagnostic anyway?"
"As you wish, sir."
"Thanks."

Jim ended the communication and tapped impatiently on the table with his fingers, if it had irritated Spock he never showed, but after a while he forced himself to stop anyway.

"Have you ever been involved in an Alpha one priority?" he asked the Vulcan.

"Beta two was my highest, Captain, dealing with Khan, alongside with you."

"Nero should have been an Alpha one."

"I believe it so; had we known the extent of his plotting in advance." Spock agreed.

Jim breathed out and let the silence fill up the room again, worry crept back into his mind, but he has done his homework and was ready, whatever it was, he had Spock at his side to face it together.

His hand started tapping on the table again, to the rhythm of an old heavy metal song he liked listening to as a boy.

But then a very warm hand covered his own and made it stop, gently moving to entwine their fingers and press their palms together; a Vulcan's kiss. Jim almost gasped and looked up to see Spock's deep brown eyes.

"Whatever it is, we will face it together." The Vulcan whispered, echoing his thoughts, ho yeah; touch telepath, why did it keep on surprising him?

"The Admiralty, on the secured channel." Uhura announced. "Patching it through, audio and visual, sir."

Jim and Spock released their hands and moved away from each other.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant commander."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for your kind words on my last update. Feedback from readers is what keeps this engine going.

Although this story is 99% done, I do not think that I can maintain this killer updating rate for much longer, I also do not know if this is wise to dump everything so quickly on you, after all, it is a rather long fanfic, please let me know, if you have an opinion on this matter.

And as always in these trying times- stay strong, stay safe and take care.
See you later :-}
Jim moved the display to the wide screen that was placed on the entire wall in front of him, and one by one, the faces of the high admirals appeared. He counted twelve of them, nine humans, one Andorian, a Tellarite and a Denobulan, all co-founders of the federation, save the Vulcans, which was a troubling sign, but Jim could not afforded to be distracted by that, he had to focus.

Kirk has done his homework, he knew the Admirals names and resumes, and the humans were all relatively new to their positions, as the Admiralty had suffered a great blow, first by Nero and later by Khan, Barnett, Komack, Pike, hell, even Marcus, were all dead and gone.

"Enterprise, are you with us?" Admiral Archer asked, at one hundred and fifty four, he was still a remarkably handsome man, with light grey hair and chiseled features; he would have been retired by now if there was someone adequate enough to replace him.

"Yes, sir, we are." Kirk straightened up in his chair and gazed straight into the camera on the wall above the display.

"We apologies for the delay, we ran into some troubles connecting the Andorian home-world." Archer continued with a thin smile.

"My apology." Admiral Aruag nodded slightly, moving his blue antennas to the sideways and then up again.

"Now that we have everyone linked in, we can begin." Archer continued. "And since there are fourteen of us partaking in this conversation, let's start with reviewing the communication regulation. Admiral Adaline, if you may."

"Thank you, Admiral Archer." Said a dark skinned woman with a sever expression and commenced the review.

So they have surveyed the communication regulation, followed by the classified information regulation and the Alpha one priority regulation, and almost an hour later, everyone seemed a bit exhausted, well, all save one Vulcan.

"Now that all of us are on the same page, we could get started." Admiral Archer said, his worn-out smile revealed his relief at the ending of that tedious yet necessary debriefing. "Mr. Spock…"

Spock lifted his gaze up from his PADD to meet Archer's eyes on the screen, surprised by the fact
that he was approached first.

"You might be wondering why Ambassador Sarek is not joining us today."

If Spock was troubled by that absence, it was never shown on his face, however, he nodded attentively.

"The Ambassador was called back to New Vulcan a few weeks ago, and was ordered by the High Council not to partake in this conference." The Admiral continued, a slight hint of disappointment hid in his voice, or at least it sounded like that to Jim. "This leaves you, Commander Spock, as the Vulcan delegate in this forum."

Spock nodded yet again, his face remained impassive.

"So…" Archer now addressed the rest of them. "We are here gathered to discuss recent developments in the relationship of the Federation with New Vulcan. I assume you are all up to date on the matter."

A slight rumble of agreement came from the participants, and it pleased the Admiral.

"Good, so, to sum it up- Vulcan is considering leaving the federation, and in order to come to a decision, they would lead a Plak if-fee ritual, I assume you are familiar with its outline."

Again a wave of agreement passed through the listeners.

The old Admiral straightened up in his seat, and an unknown emotion passed through his features. Jim wondered if he was recalling his days with T'Pol, his very own Vulcan first officer, who, unfortunately, was killed on the surface of old Vulcan. Word said that they have been very close, in one way or the other.

Archer let go of his thread of though and continued with a pleasant smile. "As the Terran representative, I cannot stress enough how we wish to see this ritual's conclusion in favor of remaining. Vulcan is a valuable and an irreplaceable member of the Federation; its departure would harm us both practically and symbolically, in ways we cannot fully comprehend at this point of time. We also believe that it is within Vulcan's best interest to remain, given their current struggle to recover from the recant loss of their home world. I wish to know where the other members stand."

As permission to speak was given in the order of seniority, the Denobulan got the first say after Archer.

"We stand with Terra on this matter." The Admiral said with a hint of sadness in her voice. "The
Vulcan race is one of the oldest and most powerful in the galaxy, Denobula had always revered and respected them, however, we fear that their recent loss has clouded their judgment, and their wish to leave the federation is a rather emotional choice, an error that would cause more damage than benefit to everyone involved."

Jim could not help but sneak a peek at Spock, to see his reaction to the Denobulan outrageous accusation of the Vulcans being emotional. Yet, Spock gave nothing away save a slight uplift of an eyebrow, come and gone too fast to be noted by the others.

"Let them leave." The Tellarite representative said in a snarl, if only for the sake of argument. "A bunch of overrated snobs! Why bother begging and pleading? Give them two hundred years to mellow, and they'd come back crawling! Imploring us to take them back! They have, what, 50,000 members left? And one lousy planet? Barely tamed to their needs? They need us, and when they realize this and come around, we could achieve better terms at the re-entrance negotiation."

"I wish I could agree with you." Admiral Aruag said when he got his turn; his blue skin matched his cold posture. "But Andoria cannot stand with Tellar Prime on this one. Not for the reasons expressed by Denobula and Terra, though." He added. "We Andorians know at firsthand what it means to be an enemy of Vulcan, and I warn you all, do not underestimate them, even in this weaker state, they could be cunning and brutal foes if they choose to be. Their technology is far more superior to ours, and we all know that they have never disclosed their full capacity; need I remind you of the red matter, for example? Am I correct, Mr. Spock?"

Spock remained motionless as the Andorian glared coldly at him, unyielding under the harsh gaze. "Red matter was brought into this universe by Spock prime, Admiral. It was developed by future Vulcans in a diffract time line, here, we had nothing to do with it."

"Still, it was developed there in secret and without the notification or agreement of other members in the UFP. I care not for your excuses; the Vulcans pose an extreme risk to the UFP, in every universe, apparently."

"This is a mere speculation." Spock noted calmly.

"This is more than mere speculations, Commander." Admiral Aruag continued after a short pause where he studied Spock in silence. "We all know as a matter of fact that the Vulcans refuse to share vital technologies with us, that is, the technologies they admit to have. I wonder what else do they keep from us, in violation of the 'Discloser and Transparency' act. Andoria fear that if the reactionary faction gains the upper hand, we might find war at our doorstep, sooner than later. And so, I expect the Federation to take any measure necessary to reduce that risk."

At this, Jim frowned; it was almost as if the Andorian suggested an ultimatum to the Vulcans- stay in the Federation or pay dearly for leaving. It smelled like a provocation or even a threat.

And there he thought the Federation members were all about peace keeping.
He did not like this one bit.

The Andorian admiral continued- "Powerful as they may be, New Vulcan should learn that leaving the federation would be an illogical idea, and not worthwhile."

And at this point, Jim could not help himself.

"You speak as if the Federation has any say on this!" he interfered, "The Vulcans are free people! They have the right to lead their lives as they see fit!"

"You'll get your turn, Mr. Kirk." Archer rebuked him gently, with a small smirk "We should let Admiral Aruag finish and hear the Vulcan representative next."

Spock also eyed Jim with a hint of amusement.

What was he thinking as he charged mindlessly into the rescue? Shouting at senior Admirals? Spock did not require his help; he was more than capable of holding his own.

"Of course." Jim blushed to the tip of his round ears, damn his impulsiveness. "I'm sorry."

I'm in no way cut out for this political shit.

"Go on, Admiral." Archer said.

"As I was saying before interrupted…" The Andorian squint his eyes at Kirk. "I expect the Federation to formulate a list of sanctions to be imposed on New Vulcan upon resigning, be it severe enough to convince them not to do so. I want it done as soon as possible."

"Your point is clear." Archer reassured him, and then he turned to Spock. "Commander Spock, if you will?" Archer asked and all eyes turned to look at him.

If it was Jim, he'd crawl under the table and hide, but Spock was not Jim, thankfully so, and he did not crumble under the pressure of being the minority's representative at such a short notice.

"Thank you all for your input." He said in his deep voice, which also whispered filthy dirty words into Jim's ear, in the dead of night at the privacy of their bed.

Concentrate, James Tiberius, concentrate!
"Your concerns are understandable and appreciated, however, as Captain Kirk just mentioned; it is well within our rights to consider leaving the Federation and act upon it if the elders choose this as our course of action."

"No one is held within the Federation at gunpoint." Archer agreed, shooting a glance towards the Andorian.

"I assure you that even if New Vulcan does leave, it will be done on good terms and some sort of collaboration would be retained. This is an inner matter and we'd appreciate your understanding and cooperation."

"Understood." Admiral Archer confirmed and turned to look at Kirk. "Captain, if there's anything you'd like to add, now would be the time."

Kirk shook his head, still blushing; he had nothing smart to contribute.

"Very well." The senior Terran Admiral breathed. "Now we've reached the part where the Enterprise is involved."

Yes, here comes the part where he is assigned to be an observer of the ritual.

"A few hours ago, I have received the final details of the Plak if-fee from the Vulcan elder's council. The ceremony will take place in two weeks time, at a designated Vulcan science base, each team would be composed of six members, all must be young, under forty Earth years of age, and have military background. The Vulcans have already picked their team, and had specifically requested that the other team would be composed of Federation officers that serve on the starship Enterprise and would be led by you, Captain Kirk."

"Wait, what?" Jim nearly jumped out of his seat.

"You've heard correctly, Captain." Admiral Archer confirmed. "The Plak if-fee is set up to be Vulcans verses the Federation, and you'll lead the Federation team."

Oh, no… this'd better be a joke.

Wasn't it supposed to be an inner Vulcan matter? Why involve the Federation? Why the Enterprise? Why him?

"Is that an order, sir?" Jim asked, feeling his voice croaking as he spoke.

Why would the Vulcans be so cruel and lay this responsibility upon his shoulders? Running a
starship is cool, it's alright, but shaping up the future of the Federation? What were they thinking?

"If you force my hand, then, yes Jim, it is an order." Archer admitted, shifting with unease on his seat. "The Vulcan elders were very clear on the matter, if we refuse their terms, the ritual will be concluded in favor of leaving before it is even begun. We need you to do this, Captain Kirk, and we are counting on you."

No, no... bad, bad idea.

Jim eyed Spock for a few seconds, to be reminded of his promise that they were in this together, and it helped him to calm a bit down, so he returned to face Archer and the rest of the Admirals.

"If that's what the elders want... then... we cannot refuse them. I get to assemble my own team, right? Five Enterprise officers? Any officers?"

"Under the age of forty." Archer confirmed.

"I insist that one must be Andorian." Said Admiral Aruag.

Ok... he can pick an Andorian officer who is under forty; he knows one from the security department that came with high recommendations.

Oh shit! Bones and Scotty were out of the game, both too old to be included.

Spock, thought, was only 34 Earth's years old.

"Can I pick a Vulcan for my team?" He asked Archer. "Any young Federation officer that serves on board the Enterprise is mine to choose, right?"

Archer smiled awkwardly, and turned to Spock for guidance, but Spock said nothing; he did not confirm but did not object either.

Kirk saw this as a green light "Then I choose Mr. Spock." he declared, smiling at the Vulcan, those words felt strange on his tongue.

"You cannot choose Commander Spock, I'm afraid." Archer had to finally admit reluctantly.

Jim eyes flew right back to Spock, who set there unmoving, like an enigmatic statue.

"What? Why not? He falls into the specifications."
"Yes, however, he was already chosen by the Vulcans to be on their team." The old Admiral said softly.

"Are you sure?" Jim returned his attention to Archer, a cold icy fear washed over him. "Can they even do that?"

"I'm sorry, James, but they can, they can summon whoever Vulcan they want. I got the updated list an hour ago, and Mr. Spock is listed on the Vulcan's team." Archer repeated his claim. "We can do nothing about it, Captain."

"Did you know about this?" Kirk turned to look at his first officer again.

Spock slowly shook his head. "Negative, Captain, I was unaware that my name appeared on that list."

Damn, that was one sleek move to avoid the heart of the matter. Why was that man, Vulcan, creature, so hard to read?

Did he lie? Or bend the truth? And when he said that they were in this together, what did it mean? Why was he so goddamn hard to understand? Jim would not open this now, could not, but also could not help but feel angry and betrayed just the same.

They were in this together; alright, but from the wrong sides of it.

The riot in his head did not stop while Archer finished the rest of his speech.

"Now, Enterprise must return immediately to Yorktown where a Vulcan cruiser would be awaiting, to take you to a Vulcan science base for the ritual. You must choose your team by then, and debrief them. Let the rest of the crew believe that you are taken to New Vulcan for a conference, are you listening, Captain Kirk?"

He was, and he was not, but he nodded anyway and let the rest of conversation vanish into a black hole.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your time, please leave a comment if you want to make my day.
As the video conference ended and the last Admiral went off line, silence filled up the room and Jim lowered his gaze to the floor, finding the carpet very fascinating, much more fascinating than facing Spock or heading back to the bridge, hell, he could spend the rest of this shift just ogling that goddamn ugly thing.

"Captain?"

He winced; because of course Spock had to spoil the moment.

"Are you all right?"

He straightened up in his seat, and placed a well practiced smile on his lips. "Yes, I am, Spock, never the better."

"If so, I wish to return to my duties."

"Understood, commander, just one thing before you leave."

Spock, clearly in a hurry, just got up from his chair and was already halfway to the door before he was asked to stop, and turn back around. "Yes?"

"Did you know, as you stepped into this room, that the Vulcan elders have chosen you for their team?"

"It was discussed." Spock answered as if spitting out gravel.

"Did you know?"

"It was discussed, however not yet decided, Captain." Spock emphasized as if it mattered.

"The devil is in the detail." Jim smiled still, but it did not reach his eyes. "And since it was discussed, and you said you'd make a copy of all relevant data to help me prepare, why was it not added?"

To this Spock had a much more assured answer "I had no correspondence on that subject, it was only discussed orally."

"Orally?" Jim repeated and licked his lips. "Oh, really?" he tried to breathe out his anger

"Is there a problem, sir?" The Vulcan asked, looking so very impassive.

"Yes, we have problem." Jim answered honestly "But it will have to wait for our personal time. You may leave."

But for some reason Spock chose to linger now, trying to find a way to say something, struggling
towards it even, and on any other given day it might have drawn sympathy out of Jim, but not today, he had enough for this moment, so he got up himself, and passed Spock by to take back the captain's seat.

"Captain on the bridge." Sulu announced as he entered.

"Mr. Parker." He addressed the navigator and at the corner of his eye he could see Spock joining them and taking his place at the science station. "Set a new course to Yorktown, Warp seven."

"Sir?" Dayton asked, a bit taken by surprise, but Jim had already opened the public channel.

"All hands, this is Captain Kirk speaking, we have new orders to return to Yorktown as soon as possible. Yeoman Rand will post your updated schedule later on today. Kirk out."

"Destination- Yorktown base, warp seven, TOA – five days and three hours, standard time." Dayton informed him after he finished punching the numbers into his console.

"Thank you." He answered "Mr. Sulu, take us out."

"Yes, Captain." Sulu answered.

"Rand to Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"I've just heard your announcement; we need an appointment to work out the new ship schedule."

"Understood, meet me at my office after Alpha."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and I need you to remove me from active duty for the next upcoming weeks, I'll update you when we meet." "Sir?"

"Also, remove Spock, Sulu, Uhura, Parker, Sharel, and Marcus from active duty, as well; we will rearrange the shifts accordingly."

"What?"

"Arrange debriefing appointments with Sulu, Uhura, Parker, Sharel, and Marcus, scheduled in the Beta shift. Are you with me so far, Rand?"

"I hope so, sir." She sounded a bit miserable.

"Oh, and before I forget, please prepare letters of appointment for Scotty as active Captain and Dr. McCoy as active first officer, I'll sign them before we leave." "What? Leave? But… where to?" The poor Yeoman must have already had a stroke, and the rest of the bridge, save Spock, glared at him with nothing but open puzzlement, just as well.

He tried to casually shrug "The seven of us must attend a conference on New Vulcan." He explained, trying to sound very indifferent about it, like a reluctant captain on his way to a very boring and tedious mission, not like the total mess that he was. "Let's talk about it on our meeting."
"I see, Rand out."

"McCoy to Kirk!"

Oh yeah, the Gallium based life forms… Bones is so going to kill him.

***oOo***

While sitting in his office, developing a medium sized headache, Jim began to wonder if it was such a good idea to save the worst for last. On the one hand, he was already fluent with 'The Speech' after giving it four times already to four different people, but on the other hand, nothing could really prepare him for the next beeping sound at the door.

"Come in."

And there she was, beautiful as the first day he met her, walking in with such grace in her movements, her dark, intelligent eyes scanned him for all his worth and found him, as always, lacking.

"Ms. Uhura, thank you for coming, have a seat, please." He tried his best smile, but it was late and his face had already begun to hurt so he did not expect it to work its magic.

"Captain." She nodded gently and took the seat next to the desk, in front of him.

Was it just him, or did it get a bit colder all of a sudden? Was the climate control failing?  Nope, just him.

"I'm glad you could join me, there's something we need to talk about."

She glanced around his office, as if this was the first time that she's been there, folding her hands neatly in her lap, relaxing as much as she could under given circumstances.

Ten months ago, back at Yorktown, while they awaited their new ship to be assembled, she came knocking on the door of his apartment, with Spock trailing behind her, and she was a trembling, weeping mess, pleading and begging him to save Spock's life.

Because she could not help him herself, because they could not establish an empathic bond, because it was Pon Farr time for Spock and there was this fat chance that she'd end up getting herself killed while trying to keep him alive.

He understood nothing at that time, and still cannot say he understands everything now, but in order to save Spock's life and hers, she had asked him to put his ass on the line, in more ways than one, and as the good Captain that he is, he agreed.

Did she really expect things to go back to normal after that? To return to the way they were, like nothing happened? Was she disappointed when Spock broke up with her? Must have hurt her so to see how Spock and he became some sort of a thing, but did she really hate his guts and hoped he'd die?

Whatever.
She was probably counting the nanoseconds for this mission to end so she could get them both out of her life.

He might never know; he never had the nerve to talk to her about any of it; he never actually had the nerve to be alone at the same room as her since then, well, up until today.

"This is about the conference on New Vulcan, right, Captain?" She asked nervously and woke him up from his thoughts.

"Yes, it is." He confirmed and she relaxed further into her chair, she was probably against having a personal conversation as much as he was.

"Before we have this talk, I must inform you that what you are about to hear is top secret and cannot not be disclosed to any other, but the ones going to that conference themselves. Is that understood?"

"Yes, captain." She nodded.

It seemed to spark her interest, and she looked more attentive to his words.

"There is no conference in New Vulcan." He started the speech he gave before to Sulu, Parker, Marcus and Sharel, he already knew it by hard. "The Vulcan people are considering the possibility of leaving the Federation, but they are having a hard time deciding upon it. We are going to take part in an old Vulcan ritual that will determinate if they remain or leave the 'United federation of Planets'.

The ritual is called 'Plak If Fee', where two rivaled groups, each representing the opposite stand on the matter, are engaged in a challenge and the winning team will impose its stand on the losing one. We were asked by the Vulcan elders to make up the "Remain" team."

She almost gasped when he told her that the Vulcans want out of the federation.

It was a point in her favorite.

The rest of them took it rather lightly, it seemed like Uhura and him were the only ones finding the idea of a Federation without Vulcans a little bit disturbing.

"The Vulcans wish to leave the Federation?" She asked. "How come this is the first time I hear about it? Why would they do that?"

"I asked those same questions myself." He smiled, a true smile now, responding to her genuine concern. "You know how Vulcans are, fanatic about their privacy. It appears that they have been considering this ever since Vulcan was destroyed, almost seven years now without a peep."

"What is this ritual?" she continued. "Is it dangerous? Are we risking our lives?"

"No, it is not dangerous at all, Miss. Uhura." He assured her with a warm smile.

Which was almost true.

"Think of it as a friendly competition, like the Olympic Games or a Chess tournament, only if the Vulcan team wins they get to leave the Federation and if we win, they stay." He explained.

"And you chose me for 'our team', sir?"

"Yes, I hope you don't mind." He said, nearly blushing, there was not really a choice there, he was
expected to follow orders, and so was she, once he had picked her up.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Because you are my best pilot." He said to Sulu.

"Because you have such an impressive combat experience." He answered Sharel.

"Because you have an overwhelming wide knowledge of science." He told Miss. Marcus.

"Because you were on top of your graduating class." He smiled at Yorktown.

"Because, Lieutenant commander Uhura, you are one of the most capable people that I know. Your linguistics skills and diplomatic accomplishments are unrivaled. Your conduct under both normal and extreme circumstances was always impeccable. I cannot imagine doing this without you."

There, he said it, and there was nothing to it, because it was all true.

Still, she ogled him, a bit overwhelmed.

"There's a risk here, sir." She said after a while, evading his sweet trap of compliments. "If we lose, we will be forever remembered as the ones responsible for letting the Vulcans go."

So smart, so very clever, why did she have to be so fucking brilliant?

Oh, yeah, because Spock chose her as his mate.

Shame that it did not work out, though, for the three of them.

Would have made his life so much easier.

"You know I aspire to become an ambassador in the future, Captain, preferably on New Vulcan. I cannot have such a stain on my career." she continued, a bit worried.

"If we lose the challenge there would probably be no UFP embassy on New Vulcan." He had to remind her. "And wouldn't you want to help the Federation in its efforts to prevent the Vulcans from leaving? Would you relinquish this opportunity to make the difference?"

"Sir, I don’t even know if my contribution would be that significant." She sounded really distressed now.

"But of course it will! Do not underestimate yourself, Nyota!"

Boy, he always thought of her as miss perfect, he never imagined that she, of all people, would have self esteem issues.

"I don’t want a failure to become a stain on my career, sir, whether the Vulcans stay or not." She pressed on.

Wow, there was so much to unpack here.

Why was she so resisting? Was it resentment towards him? Was it hidden ire aimed at Spock? Was this only her fear of failure? Of taking risks? Let’s assume the latter and see where it goes.

He swallowed his unease before answering. "I have guarantees from both the high command and the Vulcan high council that all information regarding the ritual and the members participating
would remain classified for centuries to come."

Still, she glared at him, but her eyes were softer.

"I'm sure you care about this, Lt. Commander, and you don’t want to see the Vulcans go, and yes, the stakes are high, but so are the rewards. We all must take risks if we wish to make an impact, risk is our business. Will you join us?"

"I must, no? This is an order."

Jim breathed, he could tell her that yes, it is an order, or he could be honest and treat her with the respect she deserved.

"Actually, the only one under orders here is me. The admiral appointed me as the team leader and instructed me to assemble a team from the crew. I chose you, but I do not want to make an order out of it, if it is possible." He begged with his baby blue eyes.

"Of course, sir." She nodded, taking the hint. "I am in."

He beamed at her now, so grateful and relieved. "Thank you, Uhura, I am so happy to have you on our team."

"Thank you, for your vote of confidant." She hummed, contemplating the impact of her decision and then her smile turned a bit warmer. "So…. Humans verses Vulcans?"

"Pretty much so."

"But Spock is a human hybrid, is he on our team?"

"No, he is not. In fact, the Vulcan Elders chose him for the other team."

"Then we don't stand a chance."

"I think you may underestimate humans." He smiled gently.

"And I think you are definitely underestimating Vulcans." She smirked back.

"Why won't we just do our best? Huh? " instead of arguing, he handed her a stack of papers, the last copy of it. "This is all the background data that you need to bring yourself up to date with. Read and destroy when finished."

"Yes, sir." She nodded, looking down at small the booklet; it was extremely rare not to have something on a PADD. Only the highest level of secret documents was printer on paper.

"We are having a meeting tomorrow, the seven of us, to go through this background information, past rituals and outcomes. I suggest that you get your questions ready by then."

"Will do, sir." She nodded again with more vigor. "Would that be all?"

She was so relieved to see the end of this conversation, it was almost insulting.

"That would be all, Lieutenant commander."

Just do it.

Nyota got up with one swift and graceful move. "Thank you, Captain." She nodded politely,
glancing at the exit.

No time like the present.

"See you tomorrow." She walked towards the door.

Better late than never.

"Is everything alright, Captain?" she lingered, recognizing his inner struggle with her keen senses, and her eyes darkened with concern.

Speak now, or forever hold your piece.

"Miss. Uhura." He said, and could hear his heart beating like a hammer.

"Yes, sir?"

"May I… may I add a personal note?" could his face be burning red and freezing cold at the same time?

"Of course." She turned to lean on the wall and nodded, cold again, frosty and stiffen, as if preparing for an insult or a taunt.

"I want you to know …" he began with a stutter. "I wish for you to know… it is important for me to tell you that…" the hell with it! "I am sorry! For the way things have turned out with Spock. It was never my intention to come between you.

If it was not for the Pon Farr, I would have stayed away and let you both have your happily ever after. Not that you ever needed my authorization to have it… I mean… before the Pon Farr neither of you have ever breathed at my direction…. I mean… and I swear I've never encouraged him to break up with you, but he did… and we did… and I'm so sorry. "

"It's alright." She stopped his pathetic blabbering with a soft voice. "It is no one's fault."

"Are you sure?" he asked when he had again some air in his lungs.

"Positive." She nodded, cold but honest. "Placing blame is a waste of time, sir, and to be frank, I'm not so sure we were heading to a happily ever after anyway. I have moved on, so did Spock, and so should you. Sir."

Now it was his time to nod, as words eluded him.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Captain."

"Yeah, good night, Lieutenant commander." He forced the words out of his mouth.

She nodded again and left the room with a confident stride.

Her words echoed in his mind- move on… so should you… move on.
I feel the urge to get this story published as soon as possible, while the world is still partially sane. Lock-down is getting to me, and reviews are more than welcomed. Take care :-}
He could feel it burning in his bones, boiling in his bloodstream, that known restless feeling that was a mixture of anger and frustration with a small dash of self loathing that once drove him off a cliff with his daddy's car or got him into bar fights with random drunken thugs.

After seating on his ass for the whole Beta, rescheduling the shifts with Rand and delivering the same speech over and over again, answering questions to the best of his ability while keeping secret things secret, giving the fact that he was grasping at straws himself… and Uhura, he could no longer ignore that itchy feeling. Something had to be done about it.

He usually got rid of that screeching sensation in one of two ways, sex or workout, and since the only person on board this ship that he actually wanted to have sex with was also the one he wanted to murder, workout it was.

At the end of Beta, instead of joining McCoy and Scotty at the mess room, he went straight to the gym, not even bothering on changing into his training clothes as he entered the boxing arena.

"Computer, lock room, Captain Kirk, Delta11."

"Room is locked." The computer answered.

"Good." He ducked under the ropes and stepped into the center of the ring, eyeing the punching bag like it was Khan or a Klingon warrior or fucking Uncle Frank.

He circled around it, throwing experimental punches, observing the way it swayed, feeling its weight and texture, choosing his imaginary opponent, which to his surprise was someone so familiar and a stranger none the less.

"Hey you..." he sneered at him."I don't like you that much; you know that, do you? Something about your smile... and that hairdo, dude... are we going Captain here or a runway model? Huh?"

A punch.

"Don't you give me that look! I know that look! Those huge blue eyes got nothing on me! I know all your moves!"

Punch, right side kick, left side kick, three fast punching combos.

"Yeah, look at you! Little blond junky, so high on Vulcan cock... yeah, truth hurts, doesn't it?"

Punch, punch, punch.

And there it was, he lost it, charging at the bag with all his might, releasing all that pent up anger that was trapped inside him, accumulating like poison in his blood.
What have I become?

Why can't I kick the habit?

Since when did I let myself be so owned?

Why am I not allergic to anything Vulcan?

Pathetic.

Little.

Slut.

There was no space and no time, there was no ring and no boxing bag, there was only him and himself, exchanging blows, fighting with everything they had, and it will not stop and it must not stop until one of them gives up and drop dead.

"Captain!" That damn deep, sexy voice, but so... so alarmed?

Jim looked up to see that his favorite Vulcan had somehow managed to enter the boxing room and step into arena as well, and he did it so fast and without a sound, only to be discovered while blocking the way to the punching bag.

Was he transported in? So not cool, Scotty, but no way, the captain's code blocked transporting. So how?

"Spock! What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

Oh, yeah, the first officer and the ship's doctor were able to override the Captain's lock. Fuck.

"Captain! What are you doing?" Spock answered the question with a similar one of his own.

Thank you, Uhura.

He growled, and kept trying to reach the bag to continue punching it even if Spock stood between them. "Step aside, you're in my way!" he nearly growled as Spock blocked his every attempt.

The Vulcan ignored his request, standing there like a pillar of reason and calm.

"Do you know what time is it? It is past 22:30, you've missed dinner, and did not report to your quarters, and why are you not wearing protective gloves? Look at your hands, you're bleeding."

Jim halted his pointless efforts, straightened up and paused. Still panting, he glared at his annoying XO. "Are you my daddy, Spock?" he asked, waving his bruised fist at his first officer and watching with satisfaction as Spock recoiled. "I didn't think so either! There's a reason I've locked this room with my code! Get the hell out of here!"

As if it was even possible, Spock straightened his posture even more and blinked his inner eyelids.

"Do you want me to make it an order?" he pointed his blooded fingers at the impassive Vulcan.

Instead of answering, Spock did a very strange thing; he grabbed the punch bag, lifted it up and released it from its hook, then he effortlessly tossed it out of the arena and to a corner of the room just to step into its place.
"Here." He said, arms stretched alongside of his body, dark brown eyes glancing deeply into his own. "I'm the one you really want to punch. Do it, I won't resist you."

Jim could only smile at this, and run his gaze all around the room searching for an invisible audience, just not to look at that arrogant, smug bastard.

"Do it and be done with it." Spock insisted, oh so gallantly.

"I just might." Jim warned him, pointing a finger, smiling still. Vulcan or not, there were still places in his body where a well aimed punch could really hurt. "But why do you think this is all about you, huh?"

"You said you had a problem with me that is in need of solving."

Jim's smile got even wider "You got it all wrong, mister- WE have a problem, it's an 'US' thing. And FYI, you are the second person I want to punch, not the first."

"Do it. As long as it ends this useless outburst and gets you back into your less erratic state."

Oh… that arrogant, smug, son of a…!

Yeah.

A punch.

Straight into that noble, stuck-up nose.

And now he is bleeding, and it is green, and is all over the place.

Shit, shit, shit.

Jim shook himself up and hurried to grab the towel that was hanging on the ropes, and then he rushed back to Spock who was now crouched at the floor, dripping blood all over it, pale and overwhelmed.

He dropped to his knees, and pressed the towel to Spock's bruised nose, and then the Vulcan took over it and pushed his hands off.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

"Are we good? Is it broken? Should I get a doctor?"

Spock nodded to the first question and shook his head to the others.

Well, after a minute or so, the bleeding seemed to subside, and Spock removed the towel from his face, set down on the floor and took some deep breaths, regaining his composure and maybe some of his dignity.

"Sorry?" Jim tried, studding the dirty towel, and the stains on Spock's otherwise pristine blue shirt.

"Unecessary, Captain, as I recall I was the one suggesting the idea."

"I think it is 'Jim' time, Spock."

"Jim..." The Vulcan obliged, voicing it so softly. "I felt it, in your punch."
"You felt it alright." And he felt his hand too, hurting like a sonuvabitch, as if he ran it through a brick wall.

"So much anger and hurt. Why?"

"Why?" Jim could not decide if he was about to apologize or lash out again, so he tried a little bit of both "Really, Spock? Why? In the past few days you have been nothing but evasive, manipulating, and deceitful! And now you ask why?"

Spock got up, gently touching his hurt nose, and then turned his attention to rearrange his shirt. He did not look at Jim as he calmly answered "I object to those accusations; I was careful, responsible and respectful, dealing with a potentially explosive situation to the best of my abilities."

Jim snarled at him and got up too. "You call this your best? Hiding information from me? Subverting the truth? Flat out lying? Come on, Spock!"

Now those dark eyes searched and held his own, and there was a hidden unknown glow within them. "Have I ever lied to you?" the Vulcan asked, and Jim wished he could tell if he was hurt, disappointed or just pissed off.

"This morning you said we were in this mess together! But we are not! And you knew that walking into the room! And you lied!"

"I was abstaining from delivering unconfirmed information."

"Tomayto, tomahto!"

"What does an earth fruit have to do with this?"

"No, Spock! You don't get to play a dumb little hobgoblin! You know that if your team wins, the Vulcans are out of the Federation! You know the process, the risks and fallout. I might end up dead and still all the blame would fall on me!"

"You overreact, and you will very likely end up alive, and as to blame? It is not a logical outcome of this situation." Spock answered, not as calm and collected as he usually was. "And I've never lied to you! We are in this predicament together; regardless of the fact that we at the opposing sides of the aisle, which was only confirmed this morning!"

"Great, just great!" Jim mocked him. "Now everything is solved!"

"I have always answered your every question to the best of my knowledge and my authority! If you cannot see that then… then it is very unfortunate, Jim!"

Oh, such a sleek Vulcan way of reading the situation.

"Fuck you!" Jim found himself screaming now "Fuck you for not sharing an Alpha-one priority with me for fucking three months! Fuck you for joining the 'Leave' team! And fuck you for being such a patronizing prick!"

He was sure glad this room was soundproof, as he screamed himself hoarse, pacing fast in a circle around Spock as if they were in a boxing fight, and his fists were actually itching to punch again.

Spock had to spin on his heels in order to maintain eye contact "Jim, would you calm down already? You're exhausting yourself with this excessive behavior."
"Hear that? That's the patronizing prick talking!"

"Alright, I'm done." Spock stopped turning and raised his hands in defeat. "Clearly I have no way of assisting you at this moment, so it is best if I leave. There's an experiment in the lab that would benefit from my attention." He said and then stepped off the ring and started walking towards the exit.

"Hey!" Jim nearly screamed again "Don't you fucking turn your back on me! You always do that! Walking away! Always hiding behind your fucking duties!"

Spock paused and turned to look at him again. "What else can I do?" He asked with blunt rage. "I've been nothing but willing and cooperating! Yet nothing I ever do seems to bring you satisfaction!"

Satisfaction!

There and then, Jim just ran and jumped him.

Spock received him into his arms, puzzled but accepting. He grabbed him with one hand under his buttocks and the other supporting his back, as Jim wrapped his legs around his narrow waist like a smothering snake and started kissing him with passion.

"Hmm…" Spock growled as Jim pressed too hard against his wounded nose.

"Sorry." Jim moaned into the heated kiss. "Bed, now!"

***0***

Somehow, they have made it.

It was a miracle that they have made it with their clothes on.

One Turbo-lift to deck ten, then a hallway and another Turbo lift to deck sixteen where their rooms where, another hallway and then Spock slammed Jim against the wall, sliding him up towards the ceiling to gain access to his groin, with only the fabric of his pants, hiding his erection from Spock's hot lips.

"My room or yours?" Jim asked, and his voice came out a bit smothered since his head was pressed against the ceiling and his neck bent into an awkward position, for Spock to reach between his thighs and rub his face against his crotch. "Spock?"

"My room is tidier." Spock said, after reluctantly removing his mouth from Jim's still clothed cock.

"My bed is bigger." Jim insisted.

"Hiding under that mess? It is hard to tell." He breathed hot against Jim's arousal and sent shivers up his spine, that damn Vulcan.

"Whatever! Let's get in!" at the corner of his eye, Jim spotted two crew members walking the hall and heading their way, he wished to spare them all the embarrassment. "Put me down already!"

"Your room." Spock reconsidered "Let's keep mine clean." he lowered Jim back to the floor so he
could type the code on the panel to access his accommodations, 7 digits long agonizing sequence.

Such a close call, they both tumbled into the room as the door shut behind them, just in time to avoid bumping into those crew members passing by.

The room was dimly lit, messy and it smelled like aftershave and sweat, such a distinctly human mixture of odors.

They raced each other to the bed, losing their clothes on the way, and Jim only stopped to remove the pile of mess off the bed to drop it on the floor. Man, his dirty sheets were almost stiff with cum stains, ok, Spock was right, it was disgusting.

While he was coming to terms with the state of his room, Spock tackled him into the mattress, face down into the pillow. The Vulcan kissed his nape and spine, impatiently, passionately, heading south with each hot, rough kiss, and Jim smiled, because as much as he enjoyed rimming, there no way he was going to succumb this time.

He rolled over onto his back, put his arms around Spock then rolled them both again, so this time he was on top.

Spock allowed it with a smile of his own. They kissed again, a breathy, sloppy, mouth open kiss, and then it was Jim's turn to explore.

He kissed Spock's crook of the neck where he could feel his strong fast pulse and intense heat, Spock let out a soft moan as Jim started licking him, he was still pliant underneath him, letting the human have his way.

Jim went on to kiss those sweet, hot lips, his hands roaming all over the Vulcan's face, he was so beautiful, with his high cheek bones, chiseled jaw and masculine features, his skin was flawless and smooth, hot and dry, his taste alien, but Jim has already grown to like it.

He ran his fingers along the line of one up curved eyebrow. Everyone knew that Vulcans eyebrow arched upwards, but how many knew that the skull bones below followed suit?

"Jim..." Spock breathed, becoming impatient again, his arms ceased caressing Jim's back, and he gently turned them over again, and hovered above the human again. "Come on now, let me in..." he whispered into the human's ear, and turned to lick the round shell.

Although he was enjoying himself immensely, Jim felt like proving a point. He wiggled free of Spock's hold, and persuaded him to roll over again so he could climb on top.

Spock eyed him with a bit of puzzlement and a hint of a smile touched his lips. "What are you doing?" he asked as Jim opened a draw in his nightstand, searching inside for his bottle of lube that only collected dust for almost a year.

"Spock, please... just this once..." he asked, even if it did not go along with the dominant position he was trying to establish.

Spock nearly sighed at his attempt.

"We've already discussed this." He reminded his illogical human lover. "It is too dangerous for you; you'd risk a severe injury if you try to penetrate me."

"I'll take my chances."
"But I won't." Spock said and turned them both over again.

"I'm not a kid, for goddamn!" Jim protested "This is my choice, my responsibility."

"And this is my body and my responsibility!" Spock insisted looking into Jim's eyes. "The Vulcan anus is much smaller than the human's, and our muscles are tighter. You know you are not strong enough to penetrate me, and even if you succeed you might injure yourself while thrusting."

Spock looks like a solemn Xeno-biology teacher delivering that speech.

Hot, but also depressing, and so goddamn right.

Such a mood killer.

Or not?

"You also know that Vulcan males have no equivalent to the human's prostate gland, therefore it is not an erogenous zone for us, I would not even enjoy it."

You'll be a bottom forever, your dick and balls will wilt dry and die, and so will your ego, eventually.

So, how about a male Vulcan lover for life, huh?

Jim could not make up his mind as Spock started grinding his dripping, hot erection against his human hard cock.

"Should we continue this or not?" he purred.

That deep sexy voice.

Those dark chocolate eyes stared at him, as deep and tempting as the great black.

"Please, Jim, I need to get inside you. Now." He almost begged.

Such urgency.

So damn hot.

And so, once again, he found himself spreading his legs, and bending his knees to welcoming that impressive, double ridged cock into his eager rectum.

Soon, pleasure found him, with every well aimed thrust rubbing against his sweet spot, and it helped him put his ego and pride in that drawer alongside the forgotten lube, if only for the next few minutes.

And so he held on to Spock and let him lead them both into a mind-blowing, nerve-shuttering, orgasmic completion.

***0***

Later that night he woke up, restless again, so he took a much needed hot shower, then he paused at
the mirror to get a good, hard look at himself. He needed his busted knuckles treated, a haircut, and a few more hours of sleep won't go amiss.

Oh, yeah, and also- he needed to get it done.

It has been bothering him since the beginning and it only got worse as time gone by, from a whispering nagging voice in his head into a loud howling scream.

Be honest with yourself, things were not working out.

If any proof needed, just look at the past few days, a complete disaster, a failure on every level.

And no wonder.

After all, what did they have between them? Well, sex, obviously, hot, mind-blowing sex, but what else? Chess games? Dinners with the crew? Away missions? Yes, they were a good commanding team, but face it, Jimbo, once this gig is over, what will you ever have in common?

Come on, Spock is the son of the Vulcan Ambassador, a descendant of the fucking ancient royal family and the best XO in Starfleet, marked for the up and up.

And what are you?

An Iowa nobody, a good looking farm boy from a flyover state, joined Starfleet on a dare and was tossed into a commanding position upon the misfortunes of others.

Spock is way out of your league and he was already willing to ditch you, Uhura and the Enterprise at Yorktown if not for the Krall clusterfuck.

He's going to find himself a nice privileged Vulcan female and start an upstanding family, contributing to the battle against Vulcan extinction. Best case scenario, he'll stop by once every seven years to handle his Pon Farr.

Do it while you're strong enough.

Do it, before he does.

Do it while you have the chance, while you are still in control, because you promised, James Tiberius, you promised that no one is ever going to take control away from you, never!

He slammed his wounded fists on the sink.

Alright, enough pep talk.

It was long overdue, and it could wait no longer, and it was time.

So he got dressed, a white T shirt and grey slacks, and didn't return to his room, but crossed over to Spock's.

The heat of the room was always the first thing he could register, the pleasant scent of aromatic oils and sandalwood incenses was the second, and he could not ignore the way the room was immaculately clean and well organized, so it looked far more spacious than it really was, boy, they were opposites in almost every way.

He found Spock on his mat, freshly cleaned, clad in his silky Vulcan robes, assuming his meditative lotus position, but he had not started yet, because his eyes followed Jim's every move,
as he walked into the room and took his seat on a couch opposite to the mat.

"You sure sneaked out of bed quickly." Jim started the conversation already on the wrong foot.

"You were fast asleep; I wished not to disturb you."

"Well, we're passed that, so… I need to talk to you for a moment, is that alright?"

Please don’t tell me to come back later; I won’t have this kind of courage later.

Spock said nothing, but he did not object either.

Jim saw this as permission to go on, so he swallowed his unease and did his best to ignore the hammering of his heart. It was so hard, goddamn, why did it have to be so fucking hard?

"This… 'thing' between us, Spock, whatever it is… is not working for me." There he said it, and it was out in the open, and no one died… yet.

Spock said nothing still, did not move a muscle and Jim could not decide if it was making things easier or worse.

"I have always thought of myself as an independent, self-reliant kinda guy, you know… flying solo, taking others for joyrides, but always free… You get what I'm saying?"

He paused and waited for Spock to say something, anything, but the Vulcan remained in his position, calm and unmoving, only his intense gaze bore into Jim's eyes.

"With you it's like I'm a different person, you know? Stupid, needy, weak… I feel like a child, and I hate it! And it's not even your fault, I mean, you're mostly Vulcan and I'm human, so it was probably hopeless from the get go, you know… And it was fun while it lasted, yes, the sex was… wow… probably the best sex of my life, but I cannot go on like this. You see, I need to be the strong one, or at least on equal terms, and it's not happening here, never will, so…"

"So, I think we're done. We're done, Spock, I don't want to do this anymore.

"Now, this might be the shallowest way of looking at things; might be the dumbest reason ever but hey, I'm a shallow, dumb kinda guy… and I'm also kind of babbling here… You ain't gonna say anything? At all? Really?"

"Kaidith." Spock said this one simple word.

Fuck.

Not even a thank you for saving my life? That Pon Farr business? Remember?

Kaidith.

Is that what you have to say? After almost a year we've been together? D'you even know this was the longest relationship I've ever had? And it all comes down to this?

Kaidith?

Fuck you, Spock! Fuck you very much!

But Jim stopped himself before he'd say something really destructive and ugly, because he was not that person, he used to let everything slide; yet now he's that clingy, unstable, dramatic boyfriend.
And he was the one doing the fucking break up!

All the more reason…

So this ends here.

He got up.

"Fine then, if I get to live that long, and you still need me when it's Pon Farr, I will not refuse you."

Again, no comment, might as well be talking to the wall.

"Goodnight." He concluded and was about to leave, when Spock called out his name.

"Jim."

"Yeah?"

"Before you leave, I must thank you. You have saved my life more times than I care to admit, for this, you have my eternal gratitude. I am also glad you have reached a decision; you have been struggling for a while now. I hope that now you'll gain back your peace of mind."

"Thank you, Spock." He found himself mumbling, jees, the way Spock had with words. "I... I hope things work out for the best, for you too... Sorry that it turned out to be this way."

"If we are done, I wish to get back to my meditation."

Sonuvabitch.

Vulcans were such cold sons of bitches; maybe it is for the best if they leave the Federation.

"Ok... Spock, alright, I wish you the best of luck in that 'Plak if fee' thing, may the best team win; and I know we have a few more months of working together, but I believe we can manage it, since we are both professionals... so have a good night or meditation or whatever..."

"Goodnight, Jim." Spock said in his deep, smooth voice, his attention was clearly already somewhere else.

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He was so hungry when he returned to his room, it was past midnight and he had nothing to eat for hours, not to mention all the energy he burned in his psycho kickboxing practice and yeah, sex.

His personal replicator was programmed to produce nothing fancier than popcorn, and the mess room was already closed, and fuck, he was starving!

But wait, what is this? On his small kitchen counter? A take away tray from the mess room?

Still hot.

Sichuan Chicken! His favorite! How did it get in here?

Spock probably had brought it in before he went looking for him at the gym, and he hadn't notice it
before because of, oh well, sex.

He could feel guilty about this later.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and reviewing, my best regards to all.
Yorktown

Chapter Notes

I claim no rights to the songs mentioned in this chapter and make no profit of them:

1. Cotton Eye Jo
2. Wake me up- Avicii
3. Ring of fire- June Carter cash, Wyatt Merle Kilgore
4. Space Oddity- David Bowie

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Mature

Yorktown.

Not Dayton Yorktown, but Yorktown Yorktown, that magnificent snow globe floating in space.

It has already got off on the wrong foot.

The Vulcan high command informed the Space station that their Cruiser will have a 45 hours' delay, without supplying any form of explanation to go along with it.

On the other hand, an Andorian Battleship was already docking while the Enterprise arrived and a group of awaiting Andorians delegates snatched Sharel away as soon as they stepped into the reception hall, they all looked military and Jim didn’t like it, but he could not stop them either.

Regardless of the Vulcan's delay, the Federation's high command insisted that the Enterprise would return to its duties as soon as they finish uploading some supplies and Jim got an Email from Admiral Archer, informing him that the Admiral was also in Yorktown, and requesting Kirk to join him to a private dinner tomorrow at the hotel the Admiral was staying in. This was more than strange.

The wrong foot, indeed.

Even though only the alleged "Conference” attendees were expected to debark; Jim asked Bones and Scotty to tag along, so he could spend some time with his friends, and have a proper farewell party, instead of staring at the ceiling of his assigned room and counting the hours for the Vulcan ship to arrive.

Kirk scanned his surrounding as the lift door opened and they all stepped into Yorktown's reception hall. The place was not much different since Krall, it was still huge, impeccably clean, and busy with traffic.

"Reckon I can spare a couple of hours in this atrocity." McCoy put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "But not sober, care for a drink?"
Jim searched for Spock's eyes, what was he looking for? Approval?

"Go ahead, sir." Spock gave it anyway. "I have some errands to run."

Jim nodded and swallowed his hurt, it has been almost a week since he broke up with Spock and the Vulcan not only overcame it with such ease, but also acted as if their relationship had never happened, it was a blow to his ego, and maybe, just maybe to his heart.

Ok, not going there.

"What about you?" he turned to Sulu.

"Sorry, Jim, I think I'm going to vidcall Ben and then crawl into bed."

"And we are having a movie night." Uhura announced before she was asked, and got her hands wrapped fondly around both Dayton and Carol's waistlines and they all smiled happily. Yeah, yeah, enjoy yourselves and stuff it.

"Seems like it's only us, sir." Scotty concluded.

"Just us, then, the captain, acting captain and acting first officer." Jim placed a hand on a shoulder of each man, Scotty smiled and McCoy made a face.

"I'm never gonna forgive you this one." The doctor mumbled.

"Oh, come on, it's only for a month."

"Believe it or not, I'd trade it for the Vulcan's conference."

"Would you? It's going to be such a bore, Bones."

"And acting first officer will be peaches and cream."

"But on the other hand, you'd get to see those Gallium based life forms." Kirk tried.

"Hardly makes up for it." McCoy smiled bitterly.

They bid their farewells and each group went on their separate way, and as he followed Spock's graceful figure disappearing into the crowd, a sudden pang pierced Jim's heart, in seven months time, he realized, this departure would be forever.

Well, you wanted this, no?

Move on, already.

The three of them caught a shuttle heading downtown, and the shuttle operator gave them a recommendation to follow, and drove them to the busiest bar in Yorktown called 'The Honky Tonk', which they entered to the sound of 'Cotton eye Joe.'

"Oi! Gotta send this one to Jaylah" Scotty smiled with delight at the old classic.

"At the bar or a table?" Jim asked as they paved their way through the crowd of patrons.

"A table." McCoy answered.

"Table, aye." Scotty agreed.
"You're getting old." Jim concluded with disappointment.

"We're getting back onboard in two hours." Bones corrected him.

Well, yeah, that too.

They found a table at the far corner of the bar and settled, Jim picked the chair with the best view of the bar, there were some hot looking ladies seated there, and Jim was single again, and life was good.

A beautiful blond Orion waitress approached them. "Hey, Starfleet, what are you having?" She asked.

"Scotch, straight up." Scotty answered.

"Gin and tonic with a twist." Bones said with a warm charming smile.

"Have any Romulan ale?" Jim asked and the waitress recoiled.

"That stuff is illegal, sir." The waitress giggled.

"Fine, Vodka on the rocks, please."

"Coming right up." The Orion smiled and left them.

The songs changed, and now it was Avicii's 'Wake me up.'

"Oh… gotta send this one to Jaylah." Scotty almost jumped on his seat.

"How's the kid doing?" Bones asked him.

"Very well, the lass is on top of her class, gonna be a hell of an engineer."

The one good thing that came out of Altamid.

Oh… look at that hottie.

The blond came back with a tray and delivered them their drinks. "Have fun, Starfleet." She beamed at them before leaving again.

"Hey, Jim, cheers!" Bones pushed his drink on the table towards him.

Jim didn't even register that the waitress had come and gone and their drinks were served, he was too busy checking out this very attractive woman on the bar, she had the most beautiful mocha colored skin, not to mention her most impressive rack, and now he was sorry he brought company along.

He picked up his glass and drank slowly, wondering if his mojo was still in a good enough shape, and his eyes wondered back to that hot chick.

McCoy noticed and mocked him "God bless your heart, Jim, you've only broke up with Spock five days ago and already thinking with your dick?".

Jim downed the rest of his drink with a bitter smile, have been thinking with my ass for far too long, he wanted to say, but wouldn't. He waved at the waitress, pointing at his empty glass and she nodded.
"Here you go, sir." She came back a few moments later, with a new drink.

"One more for me too, please" Bones asked her.

"I'm good." Scotty answered when she eyed him; he was still savoring his scotch.

"Excuse me, miss, where can a guy go to have a good time around here?" Jim asked.

"Depends of what you call a good time." The Orion answered.

"What's the best club in Yorktown?" He rephrased.

"Oh, that would be the 'Sledgehammer', sir." The waitress answered. "All the beautiful beings go there, it's like an 'All you can eat' buffet."

"Vulcans too?" Bones taunted with a wink, and was so going to pay for it.

The waitress giggled softly. "I don't think so, sir; they are not that sort of people."

"Shame." Bones sighed.

Jim downed his second drink with one go. "Thanks for the tip, miss, can I have another?"

"For me too." Bones hurried to add.

"Sure." The waitress nodded and padded away.

"Are you planning on getting totally smashed, Jim?" Scotty asked, his worry came across even through the loud music.

"Oh yeah, but I'll save that for the Sledgehammer."

"Don't forget condoms." Bones reminded him. "There are always new STDs out there."

"Yes, daddy." Jim answered

Their new drinks arrived and this time they drank with leisure.

"What about Lieutenant Marcus?" Jim asked after a while, kind of out of the blue, causing Bones to choke on his drink.

Yeah, vengeance has been served.

"What about her?"

"Don't play dumb, you told me you wanted to make the move, and I waited and waited and nothing happened."

"Forget it." McCoy mumbled into his glass. "She's far too young for me, and I've heard from a reliable source that she's into one Dayton Parker. Anyway, she's reassigned to the Constitution along with our boy Yorktown after this five years mission is done."

"Really? Carol and Yorktown? Together?" Jim could see the disappointment on the good doctor's face. "Sorry about that, but you know, plenty more blonde fish in the sea."

"I'll drink to that." McCoy smiled once again, lifting up his glass of Gin and Tonic.
"What about you, Scotty?" He turned to his Chief engineer

"Me?" the man woke up from his daydream.

"Ready to become a Martian?"

After the mission ends, Scotty, alongside with Keenser were to take the Enterprise to star-base 2 on Mars to have it upgraded, a project that would take at least a year, so he'd be living there, on the Martian colony.

"Aye, Jim, what else could I do?"

"And after the upgrade?"

After that, he said he'd serve the Enterprise's next Captain, whoever it may be. View me at part of the equipment, Scotty had once said, unwilling to part with his silver lady.

"Dunno about that, Sir, but I'll go wherever she'd take me."

"So romantic." Bones grimed and drank the last sip from his glass.

Romantic or not, Jim felt that acidic grip of jealousy, every time he thought about handing the Enterprise to his successor, an illogical feeling to have about a tin can, as Bones and Spock might say.

Well, at least he won't get to meet that new Captain, and was relieved to know that Scotty will be the one delivering the silver lady to him or her; or whatever, and he hated them already.

"Speaking of romantic, do you have anyone in mind, Scotty?" Jim had to pry.

Bones shot a harsh glare at him, but he did not retreat, poor, shy Scotty.

"Well, I fancy someone alright, but I don’t think I'll ever have a go with her." Mr. Scott blushed "She's way out of me league."

"Really? Who is that mystery woman?"

"Leave the poor guy alone!" Bones frowned "Can't you see he's squirming here? Besides…" he turned to Scotty. "Miss Uhura has already applied for the diplomatic service last month. I've helped her with the medical check myself, making sure she was not allergic to anything Denobulan, where her internship will be."

"Bones! Giving away such private information? Isn't this a breach of the doctor-patient confidence?" Jim blinked at the doctor who just rolled his eyes.

"Well, I haven't told you what she was allergic to, have I?"

"Hmm…” Jim returned to his drink and listened to the song that was now playing, that old Jonny Cash's classic 'Ring of fire'.

They all stopped talking for a while, and Jim's mind wondered off, trying to figure out a plan for the day after the Enterprise, but how could figure it out he when he didn’t even know in whose bed he was going to end up this night.

"Well… time's up." Bones said after a while.
"Wait, what?" Jim protested.

"Our couple of hours are over, Jimbo."

"Time flies when you're having fun." Scotty agreed.

"Gotta get back onboard." The doctor got up and stretched his stiff body.

"I'll walk you to the shuttle station." Jim said, getting up, happy to realize his feet were still steady underneath him. "Drinks on me." He said and walked towards the pay register.

They got out of the pub and into the empty, nighttime Yorktown streets, well, kind of, the force filed filtered out all range of visible light, to make it a night. The weather was perfect as always, a bit on the chill side, the air was crisp and refreshing.

They walked for a while in the quiet streets, and let their ears rest from the loud music that still rang in them.

"Thank you." Bones said, after a while.

"What for?"

"Thank you for the recommendations." Bones added.

"That? You've earned it, pal."

"Read it last night, brought tears to my eyes." McCoy smirked. "Spock's too, it was beautiful."

"So you gathered the balls to ask him after all." Jim smiled with pride.

"Nope, actually I thought you were the one to talk to him." Bones mumbled with dismay.

"Me? No, I didn’t." Jim answered, a little bit baffled himself

"So how come he wrote me one?"

"Vulcans, touch telepaths?" Scotty reminded them both.

McCoy shook his head. "Damn green blooded hobgoblin."

***0***

After escorting Scotty and Bones back to the station and wishing them good luck as the acting command team, Jim decided that for the rest of the night he was going to give himself a gift.

Tonight he was going to forget about being a Starship Captain, the head of the team assembled to prevent the Vulcans from leaving the Federation and a man suffering from a mild heartbreak after ending an impossible relationship with an equally impossible alien.

For the rest of this night he was only going to be James Kirk, a single, 31 years old, male human, and he was going to have some fun.

At his designated, rather shitty room, of the Starfleet compound at Yorktown, he took a shower,
shaved and changed his clothes to a pair of old, worn out black jeans, a white T shirt and a black leather jacket on top. He completed the look with his black leather boots, which he still owned from the time before the academy.

Then he freed his hair from the strict military fashion and styled it into a messy, all over the place, yet contained mop of blonde hair.

He considered his makeup options.

After some deliberations he decided to be on the conservative side and only put some black eye shadows mixed with glitter that really brought out the striking blue color of his eyes.

Checking his figure in the mirror, he was ready for the Sledgehammer.

No, hold on, lube and condoms first.

Now he was ready to go.

After ordering an automated cab ride, he got out of his room and walked the corridor; passing by Spock's room which was next to his, then Sulu's and the rooms of the rest of the gang, on his way to the elevator.

Fuck this shit.

He turned on his heels, against his will and found himself retracing his steps and facing Spock's door again, and after struggling hard with his irrational impulse he gave up and knocked.

You stupid fuck!

He cursed himself after knocking, staring at the closed, kind of yellowish colored door, eyes wide open and mortified.

Is there anything in particular you want to say to him? Or do you just want him to see you dressed up like this?

Luckily, no one came to answer the door, and he could not sense Spock's presence inside.

Yeah, call him a lunatic, but he was actually convinced that he had developed a six sense of a sort to feel Spock's Katra, if that's the right way to call it, ever since he shared the Vulcan's Pon Farr, or maybe even before that.

There was no one there, and he was so lucky, and his cab sent his comm a signal that it had arrived.

Where was Spock at this late hour, anyway? Wasn't it past his meditation time or whatever?

Why do you even care?

Moving on.

He arrived at the Sledgehammer at its peak of activity. Damn, that place was huge, at the size of a docking bay, and at least ten meters in height.

He stopped at the entrance and let it wash all over him, the pounding sound of the EDM music, the bright flashes of light; the chill of the air-conditioning, the bitter taste of the smoke machines, the smell of sweat and alcohol, and the sight of those beautiful people dancing to the fast beat.
A wide predatory smile spread on his lips as he checked the crowd, men and women, humans and aliens, their bodies sleek and shimming with sweat, submitting to the rhythm, gracefully moving in sync, somewhere there, his lover for the night danced among them, and he was going to find her, or him, and take them home.

He breathed and entered, the bass backbeat hammered in his ears, adding to his exhilarated state, he made his way to his first stop, the bar.

As he walked in, he could already feel the stares he had been given. He was an attractive human male, and people noticed, and were already checking him out, he liked it, liked it very much.

"Romulan ale, double shot." He asked the bartender.

She was a hot alien female, with a bold head, huge black eyes and wicked tattoos.

She gave him an all knowing smirk and brought his selected bottle from below the counter. "If anyone asks, we don’t serve this shit here." She said while pouring him a glass.

"Your secret's safe with me." He promised.

A woman drifted close to the bar, human, with dark skin and a gorgeous mane, she was eyeing him forever and now made her move.

"I'll have what he's having." She said to the bartender and turned to look at him. "I don't think I saw you here before, are you new to Yorktown?" she asked, giving him a lusty once over.

"Just passing by." He answered. "TJ, Starship Enterprise."

"Kenisha Wong, docking bay 5." She offered a hand.

"Nice to meet you." Instead of shaking, he brought it to his lips and gave her a light kiss, she smiled at his boldness.

"So you're one of those Major Toms, huh?"

"Major what?"

"That's how we call you, Starships crewmen in Yorktown, here today, gone tomorrow, you know, after David Bowie's song."

"Yes, I know that one, it's a good song." He nodded, having his drink.

She shrugged "Gotta be a special kind of crazy to venture so deep into uncharted space."

"Yeah, didn't work out for Major Tom, did it?" Jim agreed.

"Want to dance with Ground control?" she offered after finishing her drink.

"Yes, I do." He answered.

He let her drag him to the dance floor, and they struggled their way to find a space on the platform for themselves. He didn’t recognize the song that was playing, ever since he started the academy he was phasing out of the clubbing scene, but as long as the human heart beats the same, all songs would be familiar enough, and soon he picked it up and danced, carefree and happy.

She moved closer to him, as the crowded engulfed them, and they made out, wet and hot, until two
Orion girls stepped in and introduced themselves, one took over him and the other claimed her. He smiled at her, and she returned the smile along with a shrug, and they both turned their attention to the beautiful Orion dancers. He kissed his new girl, and after the song ended they were already into heavy patting.

But then a large hand landed on his shoulder and forced him to turn around and face an unknown, very tall and massive, male Klingon.

"I'm sorry, is that your girlfriend?" he asked the huge thing, but the Klingon just growled and groped his ass.

No, no way….

He was totally topping tonight.

"Sorry, dude, not in that mood, maybe next time?" he chuckled and gracefully wiggled out of the Klingon's hold.

He found refuge in the mass of dancers and was relieved to find that the Klingon did not follow. So he danced solo for a long while, caressed by strangers, kissed by others, lost in the swirl of lights, the mesmerizing upbeat music, drunk and happy. He lost all sense of time and place; his mind was soaring, weightless and blissfully empty of all thoughts.

And then he stumbled upon him, a beautiful male human; dark blue eyes, soft brown hair, about a head shorter, lithe and so very cute.

"Hey, I'm TJ." He introduced himself after giving the guy a deep, sloppy kiss.

"Danny, nice to meet you." The young man answered, panting and a bit blushed.

Jim placed one hand on his narrow waistline and the other on his shoulder blade, pulling them even closer together, and then he leaned down to whisper in his ear. "My place or yours?"

"Mine." The guy answered with a breathy moan.

Jim put his most charming smile on "Lead the way, Danny boy."

****0****

The next morning, after the walk of shame back to the compound, and a much needed shower, he ran into the guys having their breakfast at the cafeteria, all but Spock, who was not in his room and whose comm was offline.

They ate an actually cooked meal, and planed their day off. Since Starfleet only ordered them to wait for the Vulcan cruiser to come pick them up, there was nothing else for them to do.

The sun was shining through the force field, the artificial weather was perfect, and everybody seemed to be in a good mood.

Nyota and Carol were about to go looking for new clothes and offered him to join them, Dayton
said he was going to visit his parents who were officers at the station, Sulu and Sharel planed on practicing Kendo at a local Doujou and asked him to join them too, he was mister popular again.

"You look extremely pleased with yourself." Carol teased him in good spirit.

"I just had a good night's rest." He answered with the smile of a cat that ate the canary.

"So what would it be?" Nyota asked and pushed her empty tray away. "Are you joining us girls, or go with the boys?"

Jim sneaked a peak at Sharel, if he goes with them, he might get a chance to ask him about his Andorian companions, but was it wise to pry into Andorian inner affairs?

"I think I'll go and meet Yorktown's mom and dad." He announced; giving Dayton a friendly tap on the back, but the man by his side looked alarmed and he slowly turned red.

"Relax, he's just kidding." Sulu snarled at the young man. "Come with us, we are having Chinese food after the practices, your favorite." Sulu practiced his tempting skills.

"But we are having a facial" Carol giggled and eyed him. "We managed to score an appointment for today, and you can join the ride." she lowered her voice with seduction.

"I could use a facial, right?" Jim considered.

"What?" Sulu reached over the table and cupped his Captain's face. "This is the face of an angel!" He shook his captain's head. "You don’t need a facial, come with us! Oh my, what's on my hands? Glitter? Captain? "

Hikaru waved his hands for all to see and assumed a shocked expression on his face.

It was like back at the academy, as they all started laughing, and it was infectious to a point that even Sharel joined in.

Jim chuckled and pushed Sulu back to his side of the table, and then a shadow was cast over them and they looked up to see Spock's tall figure looming.

Like children caught misbehaving, they all fell into silence and straightened in their seats.

"Morning everyone, Captain."

"Morning Spock, nice to finally see you, would you join us?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I came here to get refreshed and then be on my way."

"Where to?" Jim asked and felt stupid while the words were leaving his mouth.

"I have a meeting to attend, Vulcan affairs."

"I see."

"Have a good day." Spock bowed lightly and left the cafeteria without further delay.

Sharel narrowed his icy lavender eyes and watched as Spock left. "I'm not sure I can fend for the 'Remain' team, sir." He mumbled.

"And why is that?" Jim asked.
"Because I believe the Vulcan's departure might be actually a good thing."

Jim wondered how to address that, but luckily he didn't have to, because Sharel shook his white mane and huffed.

"I only wish my government would think the same."

Jim hummed and although he appreciated Sharel's honesty he wondered how committed was his team to this cause, because aside him and Uhura, the rest of the group probably thought this was just another away mission.

A Federation without Vulcan, without their advanced technology, without their guidance, their moral compass, their insight, he just could not imagine that, it would be a tremendous loss.

"Captain?" Carol removed him from his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"We are all good to go. Will you join us or the boys?"

Well, they had seven more months to go, and as a captain he wanted the smoothest ride possible, so, yeah, Nyota deserved some of his attention.

"Of course I'll join you, Carol! Girls just wanna have fun!"

And they did.

They went shopping, and he got himself some cool new outfits, and they had that pampering facial and he also got his very much needed haircut. They ate lunch at a highly recommended French restaurant and even managed to catch the matinee of the new Star Wars installment.

As the evening set upon Yorktown, they got back to the compound and his diner with the Admiral was due in an hour.

At the elevator he hugged the girls and thanked them for the lovely day.

"I had a blast, Nyota." He smiled as he released her. "I am really happy we broke the ice."

"Told you, I have moved on." She smiled back. "You know, after serving on a ship for five years, it is easy to think that your whole universe fits in there. But the universe is big and wide, Jim, and you're capable and bright and definitely not done yet."

"Nyota, you're making me blush."

"But she's right." Carol said, smiling as well. "After this mission is over, I'm joining the Constitution as a senior science officer! I'll be leading my own lab! And we'll be heading to the border of the gamma quarter, it is so very exciting!"

"It is." Jim agreed.

So Bones had his gossip right.

"I won an internship on Denobula prime" Said Nyota "I'm going to be a novice staff member of the Earth's embassy."

It has been a long time since he saw Nyota's eyes shine with such joy.
"I'm so proud of you both." He said, and he genuinely was.

Now, please don't ask me what my plans are.

"We are trying to get all the guys out for dinner; Spock might join too, would you?" Carol asked.

"I have a date, sorry." He was instructed to keep his dinner with the Admiral on the hush.

"A date?" Carol smirked. "Busy, busy…"

"Who is she? He?" Nyota asked.

"I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, promise, but I have to get ready; it's getting kind of late."

"Good luck then." Carol giggled.

"See you later." Nyota said and opened the door to her room and started shoving her shopping bags inside.

"Night!" Carol waved and disappeared into her room.

He picked his own bags up and entered his room as well.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the read, as always.
I'll be happy to get feedback from you, my fragile ego would be grateful as well.
I will not be able to post tomorrow, so see you the day after that.
Stay safe.
Because the meeting with the Admiral was meant to be on a low profile, he wore civilian clothes once again and used the public train to reach the hotel where the Admiral was staying.

Turns out that the hotel was located in the most fancy area of Yorktown and it looked more like a palace than a hotel, heck even the cleaning crew were dressed better than him.

"You are expected." The receptionist at the overly grand entrance hall said after he finished a short talk on the antique styled phone. "The second elevator to the left will take you straight to the penthouse, sir."

"Thanks."

Jim wondered why Archer insisted on such fancy accommodation, and the screw up part of him also wondered if the Admiral invited him for sex.

Just kidding, right?

Man is over one hundred and fifty years old.

And not everything is about sex, Sunshine.

Alright, then.

The elevator door opened to the wide space of the penthouse lobby, but before he could appreciate the view, someone shoved him against the marble wall.

"What the…?" he huffed in surprise.

Someone else scanned him with some sort of a Tricorder.

They were both huge thugs and just before he decided to fight them, he was released.

"He's clean, Ma'am." The one holding the Tricorder said.

The other, who held him against the wall, gazed at him with a blank expression. "Your comm, please." He requested, and snatched it from his pocket without waiting for an answer.

He heard the clicking of high heels on the polished floor before he saw a very tall woman standing in front of him. She was impressive, in her mid eighties or nineties, the prime of her life. She had a complicated hairdo of dark brown hair, and wore a tailored, dark grey suit that matched her steel cold eyes.

"Captain James Tiberius Kirk." She said and her voice was low but rich in expression. "Please accept my apology for the extra precautions. For all intents and purposes this meeting had never
occurred and we will deny its very existence, is that understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Jim removed himself from the wall and fixed his ruffled jacket, staring at the guards who gave him little breathing space.

"Good." She smiled at him and gestured with her head for the guards to back down. "I am Commodore Laura Flint, the head of the R&D branch at Section 31, nice to meet you." She held up her Starfleet ID, a holographic golden card, for him to see, and as far as he could tell, it seemed legit.

"Section 31?" He asked. "I had some dealing with you before, didn't end so well. Who's your new commander?"

She gave him a hard look with her cold grey eyes "I am not here to answer questions, I'm afraid."

"What are you here for, then? Why am I here? Where is Admiral Archer?"

"Walk with me." She offered.

He had little choice but to accept, unless he wanted to start a fight with her guards, he also had to admit that he got a bit curious.

She crossed the large entrance hall; and thankfully, her guards did not follow, then she sneaked a peek to see that he was in step, before opening the large wooden twin doors that led to the living room of the penthouse.

The place was huge, looked even larger than his bridge, and it was decorated in the most modern and luxuries sleek style, of black, white and silver.

On a snow white sofa, at the center of the room, set Admiral Archer, and he looked small, grey and weary, at the age of 154, the man should have already enjoyed his retirement, but since high command was devastated, he was probably asked to return to active duty, poor guy, and a living legend.

Jim immediately stood in attention.

"As you were." The old Admiral smiled. "Sorry about this, son."

"Do seat down." The commodore gestured.

Jim nodded and took his seat on the couch next to Archer, scanning his environment and noting the huge floor to ceiling window at the room's end, which revealed a wonderful view of the space station. They were so high up; he could see the curve of the horizon unfolding before him.

The Commodore came to seat across the table from them, watching him with open curiosity. "Would you like something to drink, Captain Kirk?" she asked.

"I'd have more of that brandy." The Admiral glanced towards a crystal bottle sitting on a tray to the side of the main marble table.

"I'll have the same." Jim said right after.

A younger woman that he did not notice before, maybe because her dress was as white as the furniture surrounding her, rose from her seat at a far corner of the room, and poured them both their drinks.
She was gorgeous, golden skinned, hazel eyed and had long, wavy, honey colored hair.

"There you go." She said while handing him his crystal glass, her voice was smoky and enticing.

"Thanks, miss….?"

"Commodore Flint's Yeoman."

"And your name?"

"Marry Sue?" She offered.

"Come on, that's not a name." he protested, smiling. "Is it?"

But the young woman has already returned to her seat, her lips sealed and a smirk on her pretty face.

"If you don't mind…" The commodore said with unhidden amusement, reclaiming his attention. "I wish to address the matter at hand."

"Which is?" Jim asked, as the subject was yet to be declared.

"Vulcan exiting the Federation." Admiral Archer explained.

Jim bought himself some time, drinking his brandy, it tasted like honey and sunshine, a very good quality, none replicated, very hard to come by. When the alcohol calmed his nerves, he dared to speak again. "Why would Section 31 be involved in inner Vulcan politics?"

"As I said…" The commodore breathed her impatience "I am not here to answer questions. Under article 14 section 31 of the Starfleet charter, I have the authority to recruit any Federation officer for any given mission, and if you let me speak, uninterrupted, I promise you'll understand exactly what I am expecting of you."

"Hold on, you're saying I just got recruited? For what mission?"

"Yes, as of now you are recruited, and I am your direct commander." The commodore confirmed. "We have little time for this debriefing, so please do your best to cooperate."

"Cooperate blindly? Without explaining anything or answering any questions? Fuck that." Jim called out bluntly. "If you know my record, Ma'am, I've already had some bad dealings with Section 31, so if you want something from me, you'll have to play nice."

If you don't, I am out of here, through the window if I must.

The young yeoman giggled. "He's got sass, alright."

The older one paused to reconsider. "An answer for an answer, is that accepted?"

"It is, my turn." Jim smirked and took another sip of his brandy, which was still mighty fine, then repeated his question "Why would Section 31 be involved in inner Vulcan politics?"

"Section 31 has long benefited from the Vulcan membership in the Federation." Commodore Laura answered dryly "We are concerned, now that they may leave, that we would lose their vital support."

Given willingly or without consent? He wondered.
The younger woman eyed him and smirked.

"Tell me, Captain Kirk… what do you know of the Vulcans?" The commodore continued.

"Whatever there is to know." He answered. "What they teach at the Academy."

"Jim, come on, you can do better than that, answer the commodore's question." Admiral Archer said.

"Yes, sir." Jim threw a glance at the old man and then returned to eye the older woman. "The Vulcans are an advanced humanoid species of the feline class. They prefer inhabiting M7 class planets, which are larger and hotter than Earth, have thinner atmosphere and usually orbit red dwarf stars. They have been observing Earth for thousands of years and made the official first contact after the legendary Zefram Cochrane had developed Terra's first warp engine."

"I'm impressed, go on." The Commodore looked pleased and encouraged him with a smile.

"They were among the co-founders of the Federation, when it was first established as a temporary mutual defense alliance that also included the Andorians and the Tellarites. About seven years ago they have lost their home planet, after a future rogue Romulan emerged from an anomaly with a powerful weapon and attacked them. They suffered a great lost and the survivors have moved to a new planet called New Vulcan. Is that enough?"

"It is sufficient." The commodore nodded. "But as you said, that is common knowledge. Is there something else you know, which is not so widespread?"

Not widespread? Well…

The males have huge, heavy cocks.

Are 100% top.

And fuck like gods.

"I don't follow you, and with all due respect I need to know where this conversation is heading." Jim said, staring straight into the commodore's eyes.

"Impatient, are we?" The older woman chuckled and turned to look at the Admiral.

The old Admiral sighed and leaned forwards to meet Jim's gaze. "Son, it is vital that you cooperate, the safety and future of the UFP might be in your hands right now."

Jim tried his best not to be alarmed by this statement, he hummed and took another sip of brandy; it tasted sweet on his tongue. "Asides from the 'Plack If Fee' thing, that you all must be aware of, I cannot think of anything else to add." He admitted.

"What about the rule of attraction? Have you ever heard of it?" the Commodore tried to give him a lead.

He put his glass down on the table and smirked, what was this? A test?

He thought he was done with those after graduating.

"The rule of attractions states that the more similar the species are; the more likely they are to make contact and establish some form of a relationship. That is why the Federation is a humanoid club and not an organization of blobby, plasma made beings, which may or may not rule the same
"Alpha quarter as we speak." He stated.

"That's an interesting way to sum it up." Marry Sue smiled at her senior officer.

The commodore agreed. "Very good, Captain, you must have been an excellent student back in the days."

"Top of my class." he smirked, and on top of some classmates too.

Marry Sue's giggle broke off the silence; she rolled her eyes at his arrogance.

He turned to gaze straight into her hazel eyes, so she lowered them and shifted her long, supple legs to cross them on other side.

Such a small white dress.

But what a nice comeback to his baby blues.

"Is there a point to this discussion or are we just having an academic discussion?"

"Of course there is." Marry Sue answered "Such little faith."

"Captain Kirk…"The commodore snapped him back into reality."It is your turn, I believe. Let me tell you what Section 31 knows about the Vulcans."

Oh… interesting…ok.

"The Vulcans are the most advance humanoid species in the Alpha quarter, so much so that it is almost a mystery why do they even bother to communicate with the rest of us. Our similarity factor was initially very small and is getting even smaller by the year. They have knowledge and abilities that stretches beyond our wildest imagination."

He listens with a frown, those sneaky bastards, he was not surprised to hear this, in fact, he himself, had suspected for years

"Unfortunately, they are also secretive, cunning and deceitful." She continued. "They are very good at controlling what information comes out about them. Their current capacity and limitations are unknown."

Again, this came as no surprise at all.

But hearing this from a top official still added some dramatic effect.

"Marry, if you please…" she glanced at her assistant.

"Yes, Ma'am." The younger woman grabbed her PADD and suddenly the light in the room dimmed and the glass of the windows went black.

From the ceiling, came down a three dimensional hologram of their section of the galaxy that started swirling slowly at the center of the room.

"Recognize this?" the alleged Marry Sue asked.

"That's the map of the Alpha quarter." Jim answered.

"This is Erath, and that's Andoria." Two stars started to shine brighter than their surrounding, one
yellow and one blue. "And this was Vulcan." A third star shone brighter red next to the other two. "Note the proximity of those systems, and their position deep within the quarter borders." Commodore Laura explained.

Jim set his eyes on old Vulcan, and recalled the day of its destruction; it almost brought him to tears.

"This is New Vulcan." A new red star ignited on the map, far away from the rest of them, in a territory that was bordering the quarter's rim. "Note its position at the edge of the beta quarter, near the natural zone between the Federations, the Romulans and the Klingon Empire."

"That's some bad company." Jim agreed.

"And not the only change." The commodore nodded.

"On the day Nero attacked, the Vulcans have lost about six billion people," Admiral Archer said. "Starfleet have managed to save about 10,000 from the surface, mainly children. They have lost their entire civilian population- artists, scientists, teachers, philosophers…. They were left with just over 54,000 members, most of which were on spaceships at the time or on remote bases, space stations and colonies."

"The survivors were soldiers, scientists and pioneers." Commodore Flint continued. "You see, it's not only that the Vulcans barley survived their calamity, the actual fabric of their society had changed profoundly. They are not the same, James; they are more aggressive, secluded, and mistrusting than ever before."

"Where are you headed with this?" he had to ask. "Are you implying that they may pose a threat to the Federation?"

Laura paused to consider her answer.

"I don't think so, son, not at this point in time, anyway." Admiral Archer said. "But we do believe that they have lost interest in Federation affairs and will not help us with the upcoming war against the Klingons."

"But the Plak If Fee ritual, if we win…"

"Even if we win, the Vulcans will find an excuse to reduce their involvement at the upcoming clash." Laura stated. "This is very unfortunate since the Klingons ships outnumber us five to one, and have superior weapons and firepower, not to mention their cloaking technology and a huge thirst for war. That is why we are so lucky to have you in a position to help."

The hologram show ended and the light returned to the room so suddenly, it almost blinded Jim for a few seconds.

"You are lucky to have me?" Jim mocked them. Not even my parents were lucky to have me. "Are you sure you got the right guy?"

"Are you the one to reprogram the Kobayashi Maru?" The commodore stared at him with her stainless steel gaze.

"When you say reprogram…."

"The Kobayashi Maru was written by a skilled Vulcan programmer who was using the cutting edge Vulcan computing technology. Are you the one that hacked it and changed its parameters?"

"Well, yeah?"

"Have you taken all the available courses of Vulcan technology at the academy?"

Damn, I am such a pathetic Vulcan buff.

Even before Spock.

"Yes, I have." He had to admit.

"Then, you are our guy." She finished with a decisive declaration.

"Why? What do want me to do?"

"Tomorrow you are boarding a Vulcan cruiser and gain access to their mainframe for at least a month." Marry Sue explained. "They have this device in their new ships, a detector which is able to breach the Klingon's cloaking technology. According to our sources it is cataloged as item 1127 at the Vulcan database and it might just tip the scales to our favor when war breaks out. We need you to hack into their system and download the schematics of that detector, and then send it back to Section 31."

"Succeed, and we might offer you a permanent job." Commodore Laura smiled.

But when he did not drop to his knees singing halleluiah, Archer gave him a solemn glare. "I know it looks shady, son, god knows I had my own reservations back in the days, but I've come to learn that Section 31 is vital to the Federation's security. This is an essential job with a profound impact, and a chance to do some good."

"You'll never get bored again." Marry added.

"No."

"Think about it..." Marry Sue whispered "All the excitement, and all the action you'll have, all that sex with those beautiful girls and boys..."

"No!"

"Come on, James!" Laura sneered at him "It is the best offer you'll ever get. Do you think the higher ups would ever give you another chance to play Captain? After your recklessness destroyed two flagships and a city? The only reason you still have the Enterprise is because the people love you and it gives the fleet some good PR. But you are a sham, Mr. Kirk! The only things going for you are your good looks and your goddamn luck, and you'll run out of them both eventually!"

"You're getting way ahead of yourself!" Jim stopped her "I'm not even talking about a career at Section 31!"

"So what are you referring to?" Commodore Flint asked coldly.

"You want me to steal top secret technology from our allies? You want me to break whatever trust is left between the Vulcans and the Federation? You know how crazy this plan is?"

"It is no stealing if you don’t get caught." Marry Sue noted.
"But what if I do get caught? I'm not perfect, you know." He leered at her.

"If you get caught, we'll deny everything." Laura answered with cold honesty. "The cover-up story would be that you wanted to sell the detector to the Orion syndicate. Your name will be forever ruined."

"And you may spend some time in a Vulcan prison." Marry added "We will get you out, eventually, don't worry; and you'll still have a job working for us. It is either this or the desk for the rest of your Starfleet career. So what would it be?"

"No."

"No?" the pout on Marry's beautiful face was priceless.

"This is not the Starfleet way; it goes against everything we stand for! Tell them, Admiral! Tell them that this is not the way things are done in the UFP!"

"There's a war coming, son." Archer only mumbled and looked down to his feet.

The commodore, however, looked as she was about to pull a phaser at him, and not set it on stun. "Are you refusing a direct order from your superior officer, Mr. Kirk?" she almost yelled at him.

"I wish I could." He smirked at her. "But this meeting had never happened."

"You don't understand! I can end your career in Starfleet! Better than that- I can ruin your life!"

"Be my guest!"

As if she could do a better job at it than him.

At this point the Admiral couldn't help but chuckle. "Told you he was a cheeky one, Ma'am" He said to the commodore.

"Look, I am not going to spy on our allies!" Jim tried to explain his position again "Think about it rationally- We have a major trust issues with the Vulcans as it is. This is really not the way to convince them to stay in the Federation! Are you truly willing to risk our relationship with Vulcan over one lousy detector? Come on! We should not spy on them! Why not ask them nicely?"

"We already did that and got turned down." Admiral Archer smiled sadly. "They said that if we obtain that detector we would be more prone to start the war with the Klingon Empire ourselves, instead of waiting for their first move."

Which made a strange kind of sense?

"Spying on allies is nothing new." Marry Sue added. "I'm a bit surprised, Captain; you never stroke me as the naïve type."

"The Vulcans were never above spying on their allies." The commodore added. "The P'jem incident with the Andorians, almost a century ago, rings any bell?"

"No, Ma'am, I didn't major in history, and don't confuse naiveté with backbone. Again, find someone else, please! Did you try Spock?"

He meant this as a joke, but from the looks on everyone's face it seemed like it did not land well.

"Commander Spock might be as equally qualified as you, but his loyalty to Vulcan is
unquestionable." Flint explained "assigning this task to him would only resolute in exposure. We will not take that risk, this mission is too important to fail."

"Don’t you understand what a rare opportunity we have here? The holy trinity of the right man in the right place at the right time? Think about all the lives you’d save when the war start." A furious Marry was such a beautiful sight.

"Here's an idea for you- how about not starting a war?"

"It is out of our hands, son." Admiral Archer said. "I wish we could have prevented it, but the Klingons' mind is set and there's probably no other way."

"There's always a way!" Kirk insisted.

"You are that naïve." The commodore noted "How disappointing. Would you reconsider on the grounds that you might be wrong and war is inevitable?"

"As I said before- no, and frankly, the Vulcans maybe onto something, the Federation could be the one starting the whole thing if you guys at Section 31 are involved. I already had the pleasure of confronting Admiral Marcus, and he was hell-bent on that for sure. So again- no. May I go now?"

"Jim, please! You are our last chance!" Marry now succumb to begging.

"Or the last defender of peace! You warmongers!" He almost shouted, and then tried to breathe deeply and control himself again.

The commodore studied him for a while and a smirk rose on her lips "This is what you are, Captain Kirk, all swag and no payoff." She mocked him "Are you worried that you couldn't deliver? Is that why you're so stubborn?"

"I'm no swag, Ma'am, but I am no spy either." He said calmly and breathed again. "Ok, this 'not-meeting' is over, I wish to leave now. Can I go or am I held here against my will?"

Marry; The Admiral and the Commodore all exchanged glares.

"No one keeps you here against your will, son" Admiral Archer answered.

"This is just one small device; it's not as if we ask you to download their entire warp system and weapons array." Marry murmured in disappointment.

"Don’t be upset, Marry." Her senior officer assured her. "As already mentioned, James is not the only one boarding this Vulcan ship tomorrow. We'd do as you say, and ask someone else, someone from your crew." The commodore promised. "Someone that may show a little more respect for authority."

"No, what? No way!" Kirk gasped, this shift of topic took him really by surprise.

"That Marcus girl, she is a weaponry expert, and still has some daddy issues over that Khan incident that we could exploit." Laura noted with a cynical smirk.

"Don't you dare." he pointed at the cold Commodore, as if he had any kind of leverage against her.

"And Lieutenant commander Sulu has a strong sense of honor and duty." Marry added with a smile. "We can play that."

"Speaking of play- Ensign Dayton Parker is just a pathetic little kid dying to make a good
impression…” Flint continued, nearly chuckling.

"Oh, and Lieutenant commander Uhura? She speaks fluent Vulcan, might be handy. The things she would do to get a position at the embassy on New- Vulcan…” Marry continued.

"Cut that out! You cannot do this to them!" Jim pleaded, panicking, his heart hammered so fast in his chest. "You're just going to get them ruined or even killed!"

"If they are stupid enough then yeah, but who knows? They might as well get lucky." Commodore Laura smirked again.

"Luck has nothing to do with it! And I forbid you to get anywhere near my crew!"

"That's an empty threat and you know it." The commodore mocked him.

"Speaking of the crew…” Marry reminded her officer.

"Yes, thank you, Marry." Commodore Flint nodded "James, you should know that if this plan fails, plane B is to use the Enterprise to engage with a Klingon bird of prey, destroy it and bring back its remains for investigation."

"What?" Jim asked, bewildered "The Enterprise is an exploration vessel, not a warship! This is suicide!"

"It is not perfect, but if you leave us with no other choice, it is the best ship we have, the cutting edge of our technology, and we will use it while you are still away, so you won't interfere." Commodore Flint, answered, unflinching.

Jim gazed daggers at the tall bitch and huffed in frustration.

It was like a blow to the guts, picturing the good doctor and the brilliant engineer facing hordes of murderous Klingons all alone, getting themselves and the rest of the crew killed, and his beloved silver lady destroyed.

No.

Hands up.

Time to give up.

"Fine, you win. I'll do it. Just stay the hell away from my ship and crew!"

Damn it.

The hell with it.

Who wants a desk job, anyway?

"I knew you'd come around." Marry Sue sweetly smiled. "Now let's get down to business."
Later that night, back in his shitty room at the compound, he was finished taking a shower when someone knocked on the door. For a second there, he thought that it might be Spock, but that did not feel right, just a stupid notion. He wrapped a towel around his waist and went to open the door.

Behind it, was none other than the beautiful young yeoman of Section 31, still in that tiny white dress.

"Hello, Miss Sue." He greeted her, half smiling, half frowning.

"Hello, Tiberius." She answered with a smirk.

"The name is Kirk, James Kirk." He insisted, but the reference seemed to be lost on her. "What do you want?"

"You forgot this." She said and offered him his comm.

"Oh, thanks." He snatched the small device and was about to close the door.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" she asked with a small pout.

"Should I?"

"I can make it worthwhile." She smiled seductively and lifted up the paper bag that she was holding.

"What is this? An olive branch?" he taunted

"No, actually it's a Johnnie Walker."

"Interesting." He stalled, trying to make up his mind.

"Come on, James, you're so hot! And I know you like me too… Can't we just put things aside for tonight and have some nice, one time, uncomplicated sex?" she offered with a husky voice and a tantalizing smile.

While he was still considering, she sneaked passed him into the room.

"Condoms?" she turned back to ask.

"Yeah, bed?"

"Oh, yes."

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact- Mary Sue was actually created as a parody in the Star Trek fandom of this perfect, self insert, kind of OC that everyone fell in love with while she saved the day. You can read further in Wikipedia, if you want to, I just wanted to make the tribute.

As always, thank you for reading, stay safe.
Marry Sue let herself out at four in the morning, she tried hard not to wake him up, but she did, and he could not go back to sleep.

The Vulcan shuttle was due to arrive at 19:30 and take them to where the 'Plak If Fee' ritual would be commenced, not much time left. As much as he tried to prepare himself and his selected team for the task, there was so much he could do, and now with Section 31 meddling, things would only get more complicated.

He really should use those last few hours to get ready, he should download as much Vulcan programming data as possible, refresh his Standard-Vulcan-Standard digital dictionary, create his illegal Ferengi grade, undetected tool kit at some anonymous replicator, and of course, make the necessary purchase at a sex shop.

And he should do none of the above from his room; better move on foot, and find a public terminal, like in a library or a data shop and use a fake ID.

So it's a good thing that he woke up early; many things to do.

Yup, you should really get out of bed now.

Nah, let's stay in and sulk all day.

A total misuse of the time you've got left- Get up.

Fuck'em all.

Jim, you are a Captain and a grownup, and you stink, get up.

Fuck you too.

Are you arguing with me? D'you know how illogical it is?

Is that my inner Spock speaking?

No, it is your very own common sense, remember having one? Up!

Ok, ok…up.

At half past five in the morning he was out of his room and ready to go. First stop was the cafeteria where he'd probably be the first client of the day.

Wondering around the empty mess room, he decided that it was less depressing if he eats his breakfast at the small garden outside.

Guess what?

Turns out he was not the only one who came up with that idea, and apparently, also not the first
Damn, Spock was so beautiful. In his grey sweater, the very one his mother had knitted for him, worn over a silky white shirt, and on top of soft black slacks, he seemed so relaxed at this early hour. His handsome face looked peaceful as he read from his PADD and his refined, clever fingers nursing a cup of steaming herbal tea.

Of course he had to look up and notice Jim ogling him while holding a plastic tray.

"Morning." Jim smiled, and was so relieved to get a nod in return. "Starting early today, huh? May I join you?"

"By all means."

Jim could feel his stupid heart beat in its cage as he closed the distance between them, as if they did not just break up, as if it wasn't his idea.

Spock said nothing else and returned to his reading.

Jim let him have his read for a while, he picked up his fork and knife and started eating, but it didn't take him more than two minutes to hate the silence between them.

"Spock?"

"Yes?"

"Are we good?"

Spock lifted his gaze from the PADD and raised an eyebrow. "This question requires some fine-tuning."

"Ever since I broke up with you..." six and a half days ago... "You've stopped talking to me, unless on duty."

Spock said nothing, just observed him in silence.

"I didn't mean for us to end up like this... I was hoping we could remain friends."

Spock said nothing still, and now Kirk was starting to feel very stupid.

"Never mind, guess I cannot eat the cake and have it too. It's strange, that's all."

"Indeed, there's no cake on your plate," Spock noted.

Jim blinked and made use of his chewing time to try and rearrange his thoughts. "It's a saying, Spock, I'm just sad things turned out this way. I wish we could have found a way to make it work."

Spock nodded and took a sip from his tea. "It is regrettable, but giving the cultural and psychological gap between Vulcans and Humans it was highly unlikely for our relationship to "Work" as you call it. I have reasons to believe that my relationship with Nyota would have eventually ended in a similar manner, had Pon Farr not sped up its demise."

"Your mother and father, though, they made it work."

Spock nodded again, sadness filled his dark eyes and Jim gave himself a mental slap on the head.
for mentioning Spock's mother.

"I suspect that Elder Sarek and lady Grayson were the exceptional. Kaiidth."

"You surly use this word a lot, Kaiidth." Jim murmured, he was already beginning to dislike it. "So, are we done? No more chess games? No more sparring at the Gym? No more mess room diners? Seven more months of ignoring each other?"

"Jim, as I understand human psychology, it would be in your best interest to keep away, at least for a while, until you regain your mental stability."

Mental stability?

Have I ever had one of those?

"I know. I miss my friend. That's all."

Spock almost recoiled at this. "This is counterproductive."

"Can't help it." Jim shrugged "I will always care."

His statement, though almost carelessly given, had triggered something within Spock, it was very subtle, but the Vulcan lost his peaceful expression and looked almost anxious. He shifted slightly in his seat and placed his cup down on the table near the PADD, and then he stared at his bare hands for an illogical amount of time.

"Spock?" Jim tried to lure him out of his shell, but he didn’t respond for quite a while.

When Spock finally met his eyes again, they looked hunted and he emitted this strange aura of profound sorrow.

"What is it, Spock?"

"In the past few days you have accused me of being evasive and manipulative." The Vulcan said in such a sad voice it made Jim grimace.

"Oh that? I might have been too harsh on you, sorry."

"But you were correct." Spock insisted and lowered his gaze to his hands again "I have deceived you in more ways than you might be aware of."

"What?" so much drama and it's not even six in the morning, how did that happen?

Spock was clearly struggling to find the right words or the courage to reveal his thoughts, and he could not meet Jim's gaze.

"Spock? Everything's ok?"

"Jim… "Spock began but could not continue, he took a deep breath and tried to tame his emotions, or so it seemed.

"Spock, you don't have to…"

"There is something I must bring to your attention." Spock interrupted him bluntly. "It is unethical to hide it from you, and selfish to try and keep it to myself."
"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I have bound you to me, during my Pon Far, I have bound you to me in ways you could not conceive or resist. I did so unintentionally, but, I did it none the less."

"Spock, you are being vague again."

Spock now looked up and met his glare. For a moment he said nothing and just stared at him, which was no less freaky than not looking at him at all.

"Are you ok?" Jim gave up after a while, murmuring and averting his eyes with discomfort.

"There's no logic in withholding this information from you." Spock concluded. "I think I owe you at least that much, and now is as good a time as any other, it might even help with your efforts to get free."

"I am free, Spock, what are you talking about?" he chuckled, changing his position on his seat.

"We have this empathic affinity between us, which I do not share with Nyota. That's why I had to come to you in my time." Spock explained "Your mind, it was so compelling, and I had so little self control, I should have known better, but I couldn't resist, I melded with you."

"I know, it was really awesome, and I was totally down with it, so why…?"

"You do not understand. Melding while in Pon Farr is more than a shallow connection to enhance the enjoyment of coitus. It was a grave mistake." Spock said and now his eyes left Jim's again, he looked hunted with guilt "I have made that mistake and struggled to correct it ever since."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked and realized his throat was dry, so he picked up his glass of water to drink.

"I was out of control, hungry and desperate." Spock said, voice hovering over the recollection. "Pon Farr is not only about the desire to mate but there's also a desperate need to form a bond. Your mind was so beautiful and seductive; I was unable to stop myself. I formed a bond with you, Jim, without your knowledge or consent, and against my better judgment."

"You did something to my brain? Without my knowing? Without asking?"

Spock gulped and nodded."I've created a telepathic bond between us, one so strong, that no matter how hard I try to shield you from it; it still binds you to me. So when you say that you will always care…"

"We're not bonded! I just broke up with you, remember?"

"Yes, as soon as I realized my mistake I have raised my shields up to help you regain your free will and make your own mind about our relationship. You have struggled to break free ever since, but I fear that this is beyond your ability."

"What does it mean?"

Spock almost smiled now, at the innocence in Jim's voice.

"It means that you cannot let go, that you are compelled to want me against your will, I am so sorry Jim, and you don't deserve it. You have saved my life and in return I enslaved you, but I promise you this- I am going to find a way to rectify this. I have no right to keep you from moving on."
Jim could not reply for a very long time, he could not understand half of it, and didn't like the sound of the rest of it.

And that is why, boys and girls, you must stay away from telepaths.

"So my feelings for you are not real? Were never real?" was all he could ask and his voice trembled against his best efforts.

"It is a possibility, yes." Spock admitted reluctantly.

"And you have no feelings for me either? Don’t answer that, I know- you Vulcans don’t do emotions."

"We are going to meet the elders at the ritual. I have already requested audience with elder T'Pau, she is the most capable mind melder in New Vulcan, and she could assist me in severing this bond, then you would truly be set free."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Telling you what?"

"This, all of this. Why not fix things up with the elders without involving me in this mess? I could really do without this extra burden, you know."

Ignorance is bliss.

"You wanted the truth." said Spock, looking somewhat confused. "You deserve the truth."

"Do I? Well, fuck the truth! If truth means that none of this was real. So this was all a telepathic mind control? You, tampering with my brain? Damn it, Spock! Fuck, whatever! You say you can fix it? Great! Fix it and leave me alone!"

"Jim..."

"No! You should have kept this to yourself! And clean up your own mess without involving me! I really don't need another clusterfuck right now!"

"It was you who demanded honesty." Spock tried to remind him.

"And now I demand you to get the hell out of my brain!" it was already too overcrowded to begin with.

"I intend to, with the help of elder T'Pau I believe I could remove the link between us. She has much experience in this field and I am confident in our success."

"Whatever," Jim stood up suddenly and felt an urge to put as much distance between them as possible. "Just get it done."

"Jim..."

"See you at 19:30." He said and started walking away.

"Jim?" Spock called after him.

But no.
No, no more talking.
No more thinking.
No more feeling!
Enough!

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"Earth to Jim?"
Kirk looked up from his PADD and it was Carol, so he gave her that look meant to send her off screaming, but she seemed to be already immune.

"What do you want?" he gave up.

"You're in bitch mode." She noted, and set down next to him on the vacant shuttle seat that he hoped would remain empty all the way from Yorktown to the Vulcan cruiser that awaited them in deep space.

He lowered his PADD and pulled out his ear-buds that supplied him with some heavy metal and a bit of sanity. "How may I help you?" he almost growled at her.

"Dayton and Sulu are fighting at the helm again; they make us look bad in front of the Vulcans; could you make them stop, please?"

"Why are they at the helm?"

"They asked the Vulcan pilots to try it out and the poor sods agreed."

"Why are they fighting? No, I'm off duty, handle it yourself."

"Sulu is your best friend."

"Dayton is your boyfriend."

"What? How'd you know? We've only started dating."

"I'm the Captain. I know everything."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly."

"Who was that girl at the docking bay?"

"No one, jealous?"

"Hardly."
That girl was Marry Sue, and she came to see him off.

She was so hot in her short, golden dress, her hair unbound, and her hazel eyes shone with amusement as he found himself compelled to approach.

"What are you doing here?" he asked when in whispering distance.

She smiled and tugged him into a semi-hidden corner for some privacy. "Kiss me goodbye, please?" she offered, throwing a glance at their audience, the coming and going crowd at the terminal.

He followed her gaze to meet Spock's eyes.

Spock returned his gaze and held it for a moment, before heading on to the check point to face a clerk.

"With pleasure." He murmured and let their lips meld together in a soft tender kiss. "Why are you here?" he breathed into the kiss.

"To relay a message." She moved her lips onto his ear and licked it.

He kissed her neck, smiling. "Section 31?"

"No, well, not exactly."

"Fine then, what is it?" He kissed her again; she moaned softly and leaned into his taller frame.

"You are doing the right thing, James, you will save billions of lives. The fate of the war is in your hands, and I have faith in you, you will succeed."

"I sure hope so." he licked her supple neck all the way down to her naked shoulder.

She sent her hands down to grope his ass. "This mission cannot fail…"

"Hmm…" he agreed and claimed her lips again."This mission might also end our relationship with the Vulcans."

He lifted his gaze again to search for Spock, but the Vulcan has already disappeared beyond the gates, from his crew, only Uhura and Sharel were left in sight.

She moved her thigh to pleasantly rub against his groin. "It is a risk we are willing to take."

"Sure seems so."

They kissed once more, with hot, wet passion.

"Don't fuck it up, then." She whispered. "But do fuck me again when you're back."

He smiled into the kiss. "What happened to the one time, uncomplicated sex?"

"You." She breathed.

He chuckled and released her from his embrace. "We'll have to see about that."

"We will." She smiled and leaned on him.

He stroked her soft hair. "Just keep my crew and ship safe and you'll get your second chance."
"Is that a promise?"

"If I'm back and everyone lives, then it is."

This won't be the first time he'd trade sex for life.

That precedent belonged to Tarsus 4.

"I'll do everything within my power to protect them." She promised.

For another round on his dick? Impressive.

There was no one from his team in the hall now; only unfamiliar passersby, everyone was awaiting him on the other side of the gates.

"See you later, Miss Sue." He smiled at her and turned to join his crew.

"Good luck, Tiberius." She called after him.

And now the shuttle started trembling with violence and removed Jim from his thoughts to see Dayton and Sulu almost exchanging blows at the helm.

The Vulcan pilots hurried to remove them from their chairs and replace them, and by so the ride became smooth again.

Both Sulu and Dayton left the helm, and marched straight to him.

"It was all his fault!" Sulu shouted "I told him not to touch that button!"

"I was only trying to compensate for your mess!" Dayton answered.

"Spock!" Jim interrupted them both.

"Sir?" The Vulcan came into view.

"Do they have brigs on the Vulcan cruisers?"

"All our military graded ships have a detaining facility, sir."

"Great. A night in the brig for the both of you! Make it so, Spock."

"Yes, Captain." Spock nodded.

"Wait, what?"Sulu asked.

"Sir?" Dayton pleaded.

"Sit down and shut up!!" Jim concluded and returned to his music.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks the end of the first act. I am in the process of polishing the second act and weeding out stupid mistakes, it would take some time so I might update only
every other day now.

As always, thanks for reading, and I would be very happy to get your feedback. Take care.
Hey everyone, I hope to find you well. Thanks for your lovely feedback, it really helps keep me driven and motivated. Now this chapter might come across as a bit boring, but is is a necessary set up for the second act, so... ok, see you soon.

"Approaching target in minuses one minute." One of the Vulcan pilots said on the shuttle comm "May I remained you that everything you experience from now forth is 'Plak If Fee' related and thus must remain secret under the penalty of a mind wipe."

Jim frowned at this, but everyone already knew this and agreed to the terms, or else they would not be here. And where here was? Jim plucked out his ear-buds and peeked through the window. The Vulcan cruiser awaited them in orbit of a nameless star system some light-years away from Yorktown. A lone star with no planets or proto-planetary cloud surrounding it was usually unlabeled; there were too many of them and not enough numbers and letters to come by. The starship was beautiful, massive and elegant, colored with the well known Vulcan rosewood colors pallet. It looked like a giant sister of the Suurok-class; with a very long cylinder shaped body, slightly curved, and a sharp thinning at both edges.

Yet unlike anything he had seen before, this ship had not one but three warp rings, the main, large one was placed at the middle section and two smaller ones were closer to the narrow endings. The surface of the ship was very smooth, and Jim could not detect any sign of mantle paving, or even a hint of where the sensors and weapons were placed and he wondered what its warp limit was, but chances were no one would supply him with this information. No wonder that they didn't want it to get anywhere near Yorktown, this ship was probably highly classified and the Vulcans didn't want the Federation to snoop around it.

"Approaching Deck eight's- shuttle bay, docking sequence has been initiated." The Vulcan senior pilot announced. "20 seconds to touchdown."

The shuttle approached the cruiser which seemed bigger and ever more impressive by the second, the docking bay doors opened, revealing a soft red glowing light from within, and the shuttle glided into that light and landed without a sound.

A few moments after, the doors opened and a stairway downstairs was formed.

The Vulcan pilots moved towards the exit and stood in attention. "Welcome on board the Vokau." The senior pilot said. "You may disembark."

"Thank you for the ride." Jim Picked up his duffle bag and his guitar case and nodded, "Sorry about the mess my pilots made."
The Vulcans just returned a nod, and it could mean a million and a half things from 'never mind that' to 'get the hell out of my face'.

So they walked out of the shuttle and into the reception hall of the docking bay.

Man, the place was huge; and impressive too, with a high ceiling and magenta colored pillars that formed wonderful geometric decoration from floor to roof.

The floor was decorated with a turquoise colored mosaic of some sort that reacted to the pressure of their feet and released a soft, dancing glow, similar to that of running water.

The hall was dimly lit, with soft red illumination, the air smelled of incense and perfume, there was a soft chime at the background, similar to a wind bell, and it all came together to established a very peaceful atmosphere.

It was overwhelmingly beautiful, and this was just the docking bay.

There was a welcoming party awaiting them as they stepped out of the shuttle and into the large hall, about six Vulcan officers and some security guards, all dressed in formal, military uniform of metallic silver and gold coloring. The officers looked a bit too old to be part of the ritual team, and one, whose shirt had thick golden brims stepped forwards and raised his hand, probably the ship's Captain.

He was a middle aged Vulcan with grey hair and severe expression, there was nothing notable about him, except maybe his bushy brows. "Live long and prosper." He said in standard, but with a heavy accent, and formed the Ta'al with his fingers.

"Peace and long life." Jim answered, struggling to form a Ta'al of his own.

"Welcome to the Vokau." The senior officer continued "I am Captain Setal and it is my honor to welcome you on board, esteemed warriors of the Federation, and of course you, Spock, Warrior of the 'Leave' party as chosen by the Vulcan elders."

"It is our privilege to take shelter under your roof, Captain Setal." Nyota answered, in fluent high Vulcan, saving Jim from mumbling something incoherent.

The Captain seemed to be pleased with her response; he nodded towards her but continued speaking in standard. "Our security regulations dictates that only the Vokau personnel may possess weapons, communication and analysis equipment, so I hope you don't mind surrendering those items to our guards." The captain informed them, and three of his staff stepped forwards, two carried an open box and one held a scanning device. "Of course every item will be kept safely away in our guests' storage room, and would be returned to you at your departure." He added to reassure them.

Jim frowned at this; and hesitated to comply. The Vulcan's demands were reasonable; time and again as Captain, he instructed guests boarding the Enterprise to do the same, but then again, strip this equipment away and you'd feel a little naked.

Spock, however, needed no further persuasion, he took a decisive step forward, and removed his Tricorder, phaser, universal translator, PADD and comm with efficient motions, then handed them to the Vokau officer who accepted them with a severe nod to place them in the box, the other guard scanned him afterwards to make sure he was clean, and then nodded in approval.

"Why would you take our translators?" Uhura asked, slightly alarmed.
"Translators could be used as recording devices and this cannot be allowed. My crew is fluent in standard so it should be easy to communicate with any of them." The Vulcan captain assured her.

"With all due respect, Captain Setal, I will not surrender my PADDs." Jim said, all his digital hacking tools and programs were on those PADDs.

The Captain nodded politely but did not back down. "We will supply you with our standard PADDs, Captain Kirk, as many of them as you'd need."

Well, none of his PADDs were anywhere near standard, and he needed them.

"According to Federation regulations PADDs are considered highly personal artifacts. If you respect our privacy, you will not take them away." Jim insisted

The captain nodded again; going a bit pale at the mentioned subject of privacy. "As you wish, Captain Kirk, personal PADDs can remain in the hands of their owners."

"Thank you." Jim tried to hide his sense of relief; the rest of his team stalled and looked up to him for guidance.

He breathed, stepped forwards and disarmed himself in front of the awaiting Vulcan security guard, who took his gear to store it in the box; the other guards scanned him for a moment, and then turned his attention to the rest of the crew. His team followed, Sharel made a face and Sulu ground his teeth, but they all obeyed without a fuss.

"Thank you for your cooperation." Captain Setal said after the exchange was completed. "Your wellbeing is top priority for us. Deck 11, where you'd be lodging is unpopulated, so you will not be disturbed. We have sealed and altered a part of it for your comfort, adjusting the temperature, humidity, gravity and other factors to suit your human needs." He eyed Sharel and added "We have also adjusted your personal quarters to suite Andorian preference as well, Lieutenant." Then he turned back to Jim "You'll find food, drinks, furniture and even some recreation means to make you feel at home. If you need anything else or find something lacking, please let us know."

"Thank you so much for your trouble." Jim answered this time, and he smiled until Nyota shoved an elbow into his ribs.

"Smiling is impolite." She whispered under her breath.

"Sorry." He mumbled and tried to assume a neutral expression, it was extremely hard to do.

"We run the ship on New Vulcan time table of 36 hours, however we will try to easy your way into that cycle, our efforts will include adjusted illumination, operation of the mess room at extended hours, and revised schedule appointments. We'll do our best, but I cannot guaranty an ideal situation."

"We appreciate your efforts." Nyota nodded.

The Vulcan captain now turned to look at his entourage. "Allow me to introduce you to my senior staff. This is Sabek- my second in command, Supak, my infrastructure officer, T'Elel - the head of the folding department…"

"Folding department?" Jim had to ask, and got a well deserved kick into the shin from Nyota.

"Space-time folding. Are you familiar with Warp technology, Mr. Kirk?" The Captain asked, sounding suspiciously concerned and Jim blushed like a three year old.
"We use deferent terms, that's all." he tried to reclaim his dignity but it was hard to do so while blushing.

Captain Setal finished introducing the members of the welcoming party and Jim hoped that Nyota got their names and titles correctly, because he couldn’t do it to save his life.

"The Vokau is our newest ship, our flagship, the first of its kind, and the only one so far to be assembled at the era of New Vulcan." The captain started talking about his favorite thing in the galaxy, his ship, with more than a hint of pride in his voice. "I cannot tell you too much, but it has unprecedented capabilities, and its primary function is to host and protect the council of elders at times of great peril. The name 'Vokau' itself means – 'Remembrance' and so it holds a promise to keep our heritage safe from harm. That is why this ship was…"

Bla, bla.

Brag, brag.

Boring, boring.

For a Vulcan, Captain Setal did like to talk a lot, but then again, the only Vulcan he knew well enough was Spock, and Spock was more than happy to let an entire shift pass without a signal word, unless something was fascinating… And Setal found his ship fascinating, as any captain should, and would, with all those unprecedented capabilities.

Speaking of unprecedented capabilities - what did a data stations look like on this ship? It was bad enough everything here was Vulcan, but did it have to be a prototype too?

Let's hope they did not change the programming platform while at it, but my life sucks, so they probably did, but they are Vulcans, and their basic programming systems had not change over the last 200 years, so why now?

How did we end up on an observation deck?

"No, Miss. Uhura, the ship has the capacity of harboring 10,000 passengers and crew members, but at this point we run it with a skeleton crew of 150. Along with the elders and other guests on board, there are currently 544 beings onboard, so we are at 5.44% of capacity."

The Captain answered Nyota's question when Jim rejoined the world, his short attention span be damned.

"Are the Vulcan warriors of the 'Plak If Fee' part of the crew?" she continued.

Jim sent her a mental kiss of thanks for taking the lead of the conversation, and was answered with her famous death glare.

"Yes, apart from Mr. Spock here, and a young scholar from the Science academy, the elders chose our ship’s finest young officers for the ritual. The council of elders is also already onboard. You will get to meet everyone tomorrow before the opening ceremony, take tonight for settling in and rest. And now, I am planning on giving you a tour of the ship, and run through some necessary protocols."

"What kind of protocols?" Jim asked.

"Just the standard ones, Captain." Setal answered "The static and dynamic alarm protocols, evacuation protocol, restricted areas protocol…"
The 'Do not hack my systems and steal my technology' protocol.

"Only the essentials, I promise you." The captain finished after reciting about twenty more titles.

Oh, yeah, Vulcans, fun.

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The bright side was that after the tedious go-through of the protocols, they got to see their lodging area and it was well beyond Jim's expectations, seems like the Vulcans went through great lengths to make them feel at home.

Their designated section was constructed of a large, spacious common hall, a kitchen, well stocked with fresh food, a dining area, and a lavish living room, equipped with a bar, some sofas, fluffy bean bags and comfy lounge chairs.

The living room also came with a huge TV screen, a play station and the state of the art music station.

As he checked the available database he realized that practically every movie, game, song or TV show that the human race had ever created was there at their disposal, and then Carol and Nyota emerged from behind him, practical squealing. "This is like the best shore leave ever!" Carol said with glee.

He turned to them and frowned, obviously the Vulcans saw too many frat house movies before designing this crib. "This is a diplomatic mission, Miss Marcus!" He reminded her, sounding much like his father, well, theoretically.

Now it was Sharel's turn to reappear from his room with a huge smile smeared all over his face. "Minus ten Celsius, perfect!"

"Booze, anyone?" Dayton popped out of their kitchen holding two bottles; he spent the last half an hour inspecting the cabins and evaluating the stock.

"Put it back where you found it!" Jim scolded the young helmsman.

"I'm going to take some pictures and send it to whoever that's gonna design the next starship quarters." said Sulu as he left his room to rejoin them.

Before Jim had the pleasure of yelling at them again the entrance bell rang and three security officers stepped in, alongside Spock.

"Oh, I've been waiting for you!" It was Jim's turn to smile. "Sulu, Yorktown, your escort is here. Take them to the brig, please, have them share a cell."

"Jim?!" Sulu gasped in surprise "You were not joking?"

"Not at all." Jim assured him as the guards approached Dayton and stood looming over him. "Hurry up now, we haven't got all night!"
Dayton returned the bottles to the kitchen, giving them one last gloomy look before the departure, and then he joined the guards without protest.

"Jim!" Sulu pleaded as the other guard came his way. "Come on! For real??"

"For real, Sulu, and you too, Yorktown, use this quality time to get your act together. See you tomorrow. Bye, bye now."

If the Vulcans found it odd that at their first night on board the leader of the Federation team requested them to put two of his men in the brig, they did not show it, they just nodded towards him and politely showed Sulu and Dayton out.

"Spock!" he called after one particular Vulcan before he got out of the door.

Spock turned on his heels to face him, and although he was still wearing his science blue, there was almost nothing familiar about him anymore.

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you settled in?" he asked, gazing into those dark, blank eyes.

"I am." Spock conformed.

"And your team, are they alright?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow "They are well."

"I mean, what are they like?"

"They are regular young Vulcan adults, sir."

"Yes, I'm sure they are, good night, Mr. Spock."

"Good night, Captain."
Hey everyone, hope you are healthy and still holding on.

Sorry for the information dump in this chapter, but I had to do it somewhere and this was the best way I could think of.

I hope you'd enjoy this chapter.

And they were left all alone in their quarters after that, and without Dayton and Sulu it felt even more eerie and quiet.

Sharel broke the gloomy atmosphere by suggesting he'd make a traditional Andorian dinner, and Jim took up on that and offered to help him in the kitchen while Nyota and Carol used the time to go through the information Captain Setal left for them, concerning the 'Plak If Fee' ritual.

The Andorian dinner was cold and far too salty for Jim's human taste buds, but he did like the Ice-fish dish, it was sort of creamy and rich in texture.

"Anything interesting?" he asked Nyota as he finished the fish off his plate.

"More rules and regulations." She said, drinking her Andorian tea, which was purple colored. "Did you know? We are not allowed to talk to the elders or even look their way all through the ceremony, unless they approach us first."

"Ok, reasonable. Anything else?"

"We must swear an oath not to disclose anything about the ritual to a living soul once it is over." Carol said, poking at her fish, obviously she did not find it appealing as he did. "Nobody's allowed to talk about the 'Plak If fee' for as long as they live."

"It's good that McCoy is not here, then." He smiled, but he really missed the guy and hoped that wherever the crew was, they were safe and coping. "We are allowed to discuss this experience with everyone on board here, who witnessed or took part in the ritual, so it is not that bad. Just keep it secret from everyone else."

"Under the penalty of death." Carol continued, and there was alarm in her voice.

"The penalty of a mind wipe." Uhura corrected her.

"No, death, I'm quite sure." Carol answered and they both looked at Jim.

"I've already cleared this up with Spock." He assured them. "For us humans and andorians it is a mind wipe." He smiled at Sharel who joined the conversation. "But since Vulcans are telepaths and most can resist a mind wipe, the penalty is therefore- death."

"Lovely." Sharel commented, sipping on his tea.
"Oh, come on, no one is going to die or end up as comatose, it is just a formality." Kirk assured them all with a soft smile "so we'd take things seriously and respect the proceedings."

"There's this opening ritual tomorrow, called 'The first blood shedding'" Carol said, and nervously giggled.


Jim couldn't help but chuckle, but the others did not find it quite as amusing.

"And there I thought Vulcans were peaceful folk." Sharel mocked and placed the last dish on the table, a desert made out of some sort of yellowish jell-o with some sort of black berries inside.

"What is it?" Carol did her best not to wrinkle her nose.

The Andorian struggled to find the right translation. "Jellyfish cake." He said smiling after a successful try.

"I'll pass." She mumbled as he started serving.

"So, first blood shedding?" Jim smiled and thanked Sharel for his portion "I'm sure it's just a name, Nyota, remember that 'Plak If Fee' is an old ritual from pre-reformed times."

She shrugged in return "I hope you're right, sir. I don't feel like shedding any real blood, mine or others. Oh, we also got information about the teams."

"Yeah?" Jim poked his cake and watched it wobble. "What did they write about me?"

"Read it yourself." Nyota answered "I'm not bloating your ego any further."

"What does it say about our rivals?" Sharel asked.

"Four of them served on the Sh'Raan and the Vokau over the past ten years, got combat experience clashing with Klingons who thought New Vulcan was an easy prey. One of them is a scientist from the New Vulcan academy and Spock… you know."

"Do you think he's alright, sir?" Carol asked all of a sudden. "Spock, I mean."

"Why not?" Jim answered "I'm sure he's happy to spend some time with his own kind for once."

"But he doesn't know any of them."

"It was noted that Spock went to school at the same year as Sobar and T'Heli. "Nyota answered. "Two of the officers in his team."

"But they were children then." Carol insisted "It is not the same."

"Why are you so worried?" Jim asked her, both he and Nyota were unease with those questions.

"I don't know…" She breathed. "He seemed a bit lonely?"

Jim and Nyota exchanged glares in silence.

"Spock is a very capable person." Nyota said with a reassuring smile. "I'm sure he's doing just fine."
"Thanks for the meal, Sharel." Jim said and pushed his plate of half eaten cake away. "It was very… enlightening."

"Tomorrow's night my turn." Nyota declared "I'll fix you up some of my Nanna's recipes."

"Sounds promising." Jim smiled.

"As long as it's not too spicy." Sharel agreed.

"Should we go say hey to Spock? See how he's doing?" Carol asked, out of the blue again, eliciting everyone's embarrassment once more. "We might even meet the Vulcan team and get to know them a little."

Jim searched for Nyota's eyes before saying anything, she seemed like contemplating on the idea then she shook her head. "It's nice of you, Carol, but it's not a great idea." She said.

"Why not?"

"I'm sure that they're having this night to themselves just like we do." Nyota answered "I believe we'd only make things more difficult for Spock; single him out, when he should be adjusting into his team."

"Nyota's right." Jim followed "What's the rush? Captain Setal said we would all meet tomorrow. If you want to, you can go check on Dayton at the brig."

Carol smiled and shrugged to that. "I'll pass, serves him right, he should stop acting like a spoiled brat and grow up."

"I'll drink to that." Jim sent his hand for his Andorian tea.

Nyota smirked and joined him to the toast.

After they cleared the table, and cleaned the kitchen, there was still time to kill. It felt so strange for Jim, not to have his usual night cup with Bones, followed by some paperwork, and then chess or sex with Spock, and then going to sleep before the next alpha shift. It was strange to be a guest on a ship and not its captain.

"Sherlock or Dr. who?" Carol suggested.

"Dr. Who?" Sharel repeated after her.

"Human vintage TV shows." Jim explained. "But I'll pass, I think I'll go to my room and sleep this jetlag off."

Or start working on my Section 31 project, just the same.

"Good idea." Sharel agreed "I think I'll do the same."

Carol shrugged with disappointment.

"Sherlock." Nyota decided "If it's just us girls, I want to drool some over my Cumberbatch."

"Oh, ace!" Carol giggled.

"Night, everyone." Jim smiled and entered his room.
One month to crack a Vulcan system was a daunting challenge, he had to make use of every bit of spare time he had, everyone on the Enterprise were counting on him and he wasn't going to let them down.

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He had the strangest dream.

Maybe it was because of the jetlag, the Andorian dinner, or the fact that he had spent the better half of the night poking at the computer system.

Maybe it was the 'Plak If Fee' related stress, finding himself surrounded by Vulcans, or maybe it was just Spock.

But there it was.

He had this bizarre, vivid dream.

And in his dream he was staggering in the desert, and dust flew around from every direction, hit his face and stung his eyes, and there was this low roar coming from far away, like a deep agonized moan of a wounded beast, and that smell, the pungent smell of molten rock, brimstone and fire.

He was stumbling aimlessly in the middle of this cataclysm, walking alongside a ridge of a mountain, dodging falling stones and battling the howling wind, and then, as the dust cloud rolled on and cleared the view, there he was, sitting on an edge of a cliff, calm as if in the middle of meditation- Spock.

Spock raised his eyes to meet him and actually smiled, which only reinforced the fact that this was a wacky, freaky dream, and the Vulcan didn’t even seemed surprised to see him.

"Jim." He greeted him calmly and turned back to stare at the abyss.

"Jeez, Spock, what's going on here? Where are we?" Jim asked, covering his nose and mouth to shield them from the horrible smell, he struggled to get a footing on the unstable ground and fought his way to reach Spock.

None of it seemed to bother the Vulcan, not even the fact that the edge he was seating on was about to collapse in a matter of moments.

"I should have anticipated this." Spock said, the sad smile on his lips lingered still. "My shields are at all time low, it has been a difficult day, shielding against so many Vulcans, the elders, Elder Sarek... I'm probably exhausted. I'm sorry I've dragged you into this place."

"Where are we?" Jim asked, and finally found his way next to Spock to sit beside him.

"Old Vulcan." Spock explained. "Under Nero's attack. I have committed this point of space-time to memory in such a way it is practically seared into my mind."

"Nero's attack? Spock, this place's about to fall into a fucking black hole! We gotta get out of here!"
"Please calm yourself." Spock answered with a grimace "It's only a dream. I sometimes drift into it, I'm sorry you had to tag along, my shields seem to malfunction, and I'm currently unable to wake up, but it would end soon."

"The fuck it would! When this pace is sucked into oblivion!"

"No… it ends some time before that." Spock says and his eyes now followed a small figure that just appeared, running on the hillside, engulfed in golden glow, that Jim had recognize as an attempted transporting. "It ends when I fail to catch her."

***0***

"Wake up, sunshine!" someone shook him violently at an unforgiving hour of the morning. He cracked open his eyes so see a furious Nyota hovering above him.

"What time is it?" he asked in a rusty voice.

"It is five o'clock and we have a breakfast to prepare!"

"Five o'clock?" He barely slept for two hours, then. "Prepare breakfast?"

Nyota frowned at him. "Didn't you get today's schedule? It was sent into everyone's mail."

"Yes, I did."

If only he had bothered reading it, though.

"So you should know that we are guests in this ship, and as Vulcan tradition goes, it is our duty to cook the hosts their breakfast on our first day."

"Cook?" he nearly wailed. "What happened to replicators?"

"Vulcans rarely use replicators." Nyota answered as if he should have known this from childhood.

"Cook for 150 Vulcans?" he yelped again.

"For 544, taking account the elders, staffers and other attaches. Get up! Take a shower and get shaved! You have half an hour!"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Nyota nodded with satisfaction and left the room soon after, and he should definitely start locking the door, before he messes up with the Vulcan systems any further.

***0***

When he finally found his way to the kitchen he saw his team already dressed up for cooking and there were two Vulcans who had joined them, one of which was Spock.
Before he could talk to Spock and ask him about last night, or ask Yorktown and Sulu how was their night in the brig, a bundle of articles was shoved into his arms.

"Here." Carol greeted him, her face all white with some sort of flour powder. "Get those on."

An apron, a head wrap and gloves, all white.

Nyota came to check in on him as he finished dressing up.

"There's your station." She pointed at a corner of the kitchen where one Vulcan was already working, not the Spock Vulcan though. "Leaf salad and roots stew, and it's the easiest one!" She blurted out before he even got his chance to protest.

"What happened to the replicators?" he shouted after her, but moved towards his station.

"We only replicate raw materials when absolutely required." The Vulcan at his station explained. "Food which is not prepared by a living person is lacking in essence and therefore is less nutritious."

"That's not a logical assumption." Jim snarled while reviewing the huge pile of muddy vegetables on their counter.

"No, it is no assumption at all." The Vulcan insisted. "However, I'm unsure that we have sufficient time to go through the theoretical background of this claim. How familiarized are you with 'Low Frequency String Theory'?"

"I'll clean and you'll chop?"

"Agreeable." The Vulcan nodded "I am Vedik, by the way. May I ask for your name?"

Jim realized how obnoxious and rude he was, so he turned to look at the Vulcan at his side, which was not Spock, but rather a shorter, a bit on the chubby side, young Vulcan. Same dark eyes and black hair and the same hideous hairdo though.

"I am James Kirk." He said and walked towards the sink to start cleaning the pile of vegetables.

"The Captain of the Enterprise! The youngest captain in Starfleet! The savior of Earth and the hero of the federation!"

Oh, look at that, a fan!

Jim chuckled softly and glanced around to see if anyone else paid attention to this, but luckily no one did.

"It's not like I did everything by myself, you know." He mumbled while holding an orange looking radish, trying to figure out if its leaves or root were the eatable part. "It was a team effort …"

"Leafs on the right for the salad, roots on the left for the stew." Vedik said helpfully. "Waste is illogical."

"Thanks." Jim mumbled again and glanced at Spock who did not notice.

He was working with Nyota on a pastry of a sort; they looked like a good team, why did they break up? Spock could have gone back to her after fucking him at his Pon Farr, and he could try and get back to her right now, no? They made more sense as a couple than him and Spock anyway.
"I don't have your exiting resume, I'm afraid." Vedik tried to keep the conversation going, while chopping the roots and leaves Jim gave him after cleaning them up. "I'm just a humble scientist, of the NVSA, just got here yesterday to join the Vulcan team for the 'Plak If Fee', at the elders' request."

"Interesting." Not.

"Yes, I was quite surprised to receive the invitation. I never thought I'd get a chance partaking in such an honorable ritual. This is, after all, a privilege reserved for great warriors such as yourself; not for meek academic scholars like me."

"What is your area of expertise?" Jim pretended to care.

"Materials science." Vedik answered "I helped designing some of the new equipment for this ship. It is a prototype, you know."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed." Vedik answered and started blabbering about his studies, something he could probably do for this entire duration.

Jim pretended to be interested in what the Vulcan had to say, but actually Vedik did start to get more interesting for different reasons though, he might fit into his plan of hacking the system.

While poking it last night, Jim realized that the access the Vulcans gave them was not only limited, as predicted, but pitifully suffocating. They have actually created a bubble for them to float in, a perfect isolated bubble which he might not have time to burst.

He found out that not only they were given limited access to data and facilities, they could not even send internal emails with their temporary accounts, they had a 'Read only' statues on the ship, so very frustrating and even insulting.

The only bright side of being locked up in a bubble was that whatever he does in his lodge would be completely isolated and won't be reported back to the mainframe, but there was limitation to what he could achieve in his room, so not as bright was that side after all.

His best course of action would be to gain one of the Vulcans' passwords, ride it to the engineering database and pull out the schematics, however, this strategy had two main shortcomings-

The first: It was too obvious, very traceable, none-defensible and therefore very high risk.

The second: It was very hurtful to the person whose password was stolen, and when it came to Vulcans, it may actually ruin his very long live, and make it very none prosperous. He had already felt really bad doing this to Gaila back at the academy, and he never wanted to do that to another being.

His next best course of action would be fishing, which means he'd hack someone privat account, but would use it as a bait to enter the mainframe, plant there a fake engineer profile, and have him retract the data. This was more subtle than straight up impersonation, and if done right could be irretraceable. However it presented the same shortcomings as the best course of action, although with lower probability.

His worst course of action would be hacking the system all by himself, it would be very difficult, time consuming, would require high skills and meticulous planning, but it would also be the safest route, and no innocent by-stander would get hurt. He'll try this first.
However, he should strive to get Vedik's access for his back up plans.

So get your nice on, Jimbo.

"So, Vedik…" He put on his best smile "How is working at the academy of new Vulcan compared to the old one?"

The Vulcan's eyes shone bright with delight.

"It is very gratifying that you've asked, Mr. Kirk, there are similarities but also significant differences between the two. You see…"

***0***

After serving the meal, and eating their share in the kitchen instead of the mess room, for some Vulcan reasons, they had some time to clean up and then Captain Setal came to greet them and send them off to a physical exam.

There was nothing Jim dreaded more than a physical exam, and to have it done by a Vulcan doctor? All of a sudden he felt like running into McCoy's sickbay and volunteer to have his everything checked.

His everything.

"But why do we need it?" he tried his best not to pout, because Nyota said it was impolite.

"We have to know your limits." The Vulcan Captain explained. "The 'Plak If fee' is still a dangerous ritual, and if we are not familiar with your current state of health, we might put you at an unnecessary risk."

Logical.

"But you can have access to my medical files. I'll sign any relinquishment document that you'll need."

"Thank you, Captain Kirk, but we prefer to run our own tests." The Captain continued insisting. "I assure you that none of our findings would be transferred to a third party without your consent."

Fair enough.

"But…"

"Jim, Sickbay, now!" Nyota commanded him.

"Yes, Ma'am." He sighed, bid farewell of the Captain and followed her.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, see you soon.
The Leave Team

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, I hope you enjoy this story so far.

So in this chapter the two teams meet at last, and I really hope that I managed to give each Vulcan character its own feel, so this won't be like: Vulcan A+Vulcan B+...+ Spock. Please let me know if you think I've succeeded doing that, I would love to hear from you, regardless.

Take care!

By the time he got through those exams, which were unpleasant as predicted and were done by the most unfriendly, humorless, cold hearted doctor he had ever met, Jim was so exhausted and in such a foul mood that even if he'd stumble upon Master Surak himself, the father of the modern Vulcan nation, somewhere there on the ship's corridors, he'd only mutter a few words to him, and not the nice ones.

It was late into the afternoon of the Vulcan's 36 hours cycle, or the actual human night time, but there was no way for Kirk to even catch a snooze, because right after the exams, they were scheduled to meet the Vulcan Leave team and get to know them a little, and after that, the opening ceremony was going to take place.

So he got himself cleaned up again, and then dressed in the official outfit that the Vulcans have supplied them for the ritual opening ceremony.

It was a two pieces, tailor-made suite, blood red colored, which happened to be very similar to the uniforms he wore as a cadet, back at the academy. He put it on and met his team at the common room of their dormitory.

They also put their uniforms on, and it had rather complimented them, except for Sharel, who's blue skin clashed with that vibrant color, and still, they all looked very formal and presentable, and seeing them all like this had it dawn on him, that the ritual was truly about to begin.

"I feel like a cadet all over again." Carol complained "Do you think it's on purpose?" she pouted at him.

"I think you look fabulous, Miss Marcus." Jim grinned at her, and now Dayton was glaring at him with a scowl on his face.

There was a chime at the main entrance door.

"Computer, open the door." Jim commanded, and the door swooshed opened.

Captain Setal stepped in to meet them at their dormitory and gave each a scrutinizing gaze, his severe facial expression did not show if he found what he saw pleasing or not.

"I see that you are ready." He noted "Allow me the honor of taking you now to meet your adversaries. Even though you were chosen by the elders to be rivals, it is most important that you'd
conduct yourselves in a logical manner and approach the competition level headed. I believe that this meeting would suffice to establish this atmosphere."

Would the Captain carry this little speech if they were a team of Vulcans? Jim was not that sure, but he said nothing and Captain Setal led them out the door to the turbo-lift, and then he ordered it up to Deck 7, and walked them through the maze of corridors to an observation room, where their rival team awaited.

Setal stopped before the last corridor. "They are waiting inside." The Captain said "We'll give you privacy to get to know each other. Is there any question you wish to ask before I leave?"

"Is there any coffee around here, somewhere?" Jim asked.

Captain Setal hid his surprise or offense well enough and nodded. "There's a small replicators that way." He pointed at the relevant direction "We have installed Coffee into the system."

"Thanks. Be right back." Jim hurried to follow the promise of coffee like a mouse after the smell of cheese.

He drank three mugs of that strong, black liquid before he could recall his name, and then spent some time wondering the passageways, trying to figure out where a male Vulcan would go to take a leak on this deck. They had to go only twice a day, but they must have had public restrooms, right?

While trying to find his way back, someone had reached out from somewhere and snatched him, pulling him into a deep, narrow hallway between two bulkheads.

"Hey, what the… Spock?"

"I must have word with you in discretion." Spock whispered into the dark gap between them.

It's been too long since they've been in such close proximity, and Jim could feel the heat that radiated from Spock's body; and god, he could smell him, how he had missed that sandalwood fragrance.

Spock was wearing the Vulcan's team uniform, a full body jumpsuit, colored a deep shade of green and so tightly fitted, like a second skin, which only made sense to wear if you had a retractable cock.

Thick, black gloves were also part of that uniform, to protect the wearer from unintentional telepathic touch, a good thing since Jim could not afford his mind to be read like an open book at the moment.

"I wanted to ask you something." Spock began, and was clearly struggling to find the right words. "Last night, I am wondering… did you happen to have an odd dream?"

Jim could hardly believe his ears. "What kind of an odd dream?"

"A flashback, a memory that doesn't belong to you."

"What? Yeah! Was this your memory of the destruction of Vulcan? Of losing your mother? How did you know I had that dream?"

Spock breathed out and lowered his gaze. "I had to verify, I must apologize."
"Wait… is this part of that telepathic link between us? Is that why I had that dream?"

"We had that dream, together, we shared it." Spock corrected him. "I was unwell and my shields were down, I am sorry you had to experience this side effect of… our entanglement."

Jim was now furious, it was one thing to have this crazy dream; it was another thing altogether to know it was all Spock's fault, doing that Vulcan mind voodoo, as Bones once named it.

"I told you to stay out of by brain!"

"I know, I'm sorry."

"You said you were going to fix it!"

"I will." Spock assured him. "But it would take a while longer; Elder T'Pau will make time to aid me only after the ritual is concluded."

"Why? That's weeks away! I've got enough on my mind as it is! I don’t need you there too!"

"Be certain this was a temporary malfunction, it will not happen again."

"I want you out of my head!" Jim hissed with fury.

"As do I, I've adjusted my shields; your privacy and mine are a priority."

"It'd better not happen again!" Jim raised his voice "I don’t need a ticket to your nightly horror show!"

"And I don’t need a front seat to your sexual escapades!" Spock raised his own voice and his fist banged against the bulkhead, just above Jim's head, leaving a dent in the wall.

Which was strange, after all, this was a Vulcan ship, build for Vulcan strength.

They blinked at each other.

"We are at risk of being late for the meeting." Spock said, calm and collected again.

"You're leaning on me."

***0***

Spock said nothing as they walked the corridors back to the meeting hall, and Jim found nothing to say either.

He had this major headache, that would not go away, and his brain seemed to pound against his skull like a motherfucker. It may have something to do with the fact that he had less than five hours of sleep in the total of the past two days.

Oh, Bones, where are you when I need you? You and your goddamn hypo-sprays.

When they reached the entrance, Jim looked up and to his surprise he saw the rest of his group awaiting him in attention, like a row of well behaved cadets.
"Sir!" Sulu announced.

"At ease, guys, what's going on here? Why are you not inside?"

"You are the team leader." Sharel explained. "And we should walk in together as a team."

Jim could not decide between blushing and shedding a tear, both horrible reactions, so he took a moment to avert his gaze just to be on the safe side.

"May we have a moment alone?" He asked, looking at Spock.

Spock nodded "You have 93 seconds before being late."

Jim waited until he entered the hall before looking at his team again, and deliberated the right way to begin.

"Are you alright, Jim?" Carol was the one to talk first, interrupting his line of thought.

He frowned at the surprise. "I'm ok, never the better."

"You don't act like you're ok, not since we left Yorktown." Carol insisted "You look a bit under, are you sure you are not sick or something?"

"I have a lot on my mind, that's all." Jim said. "And I'm glad we have this moment in private, I want us all to get on the same page."

Yeah, before they'll have a chance to snoop further, he geared up to the offense, giving each of his team members a steady gaze.

"Look, I know that we are among allies here, and the Vulcans have made every effort to make us feel at home, but do not be mistaken, this is not a field trip. The stakes are high, and if we mess this up, we'll be the ones who single handedly allowed the great nation of Vulcan slip away from the Federation!"

He posed for a moment to let his words sink in.

"Can you imagine losing one of the Federation's main pillars? One of the co-founding races? The ones that saved Earth, and helped build the best, most stable organization in the Alpha quarter? Would you let them go?"

"No, sir." Dayton mumbled and Sulu shook his head.

"No, Captain." Nyota agreed firmly.

"And if we lose, this could only mark the beginning of the end. This could be the start of a landslide that crushes the Federation. The Federation that gives security for your daughter to sleep soundly at night, Sulu, that allows hope for your kids' future, Sharel…. should we let this happen?"

"Of course not." Sharel answered.

"No, Sir." Carol said with passion.

"Good! So let's give it our all!" he gave a meaningful glare at Sulu's and Dayton's direction.

"We will, Sir." Sulu mumbled and Dayton nodded.
"You can trust us." Nyota nodded with resolve.

"And I won't let you down either." Jim promised; his voice steady with conviction. "Now let's get in, they're going to kick our asses for being late."

***0***

"You are 1.2 minutes late." were the first words the Vulcan team leader had ever said to him, as they entered the hall, he was a beautiful looking young male.

Damn it, must everyone on the Vulcan team look like an elf supermodel? Spock included. They were all tall, lean and graceful; and so very hot in their tight green outfits. The leader had rare blue eyes, complimenting his fare skin and jet black hair, but he was just a bit shorter than Spock who stood to his left, and for some reason Jim found that fact very satisfying.

That put aside, there was something about the 'Leave' leader that gave Jim an eerie feeling. He had this frosty aura around him, making the temperature drop as you get close. He sure looked discontent, as if someone forced him into the position of the 'Leave' team leader.

"I am commander Sobar, first pilot of the Vokau. You must be James Kirk." The leader said as compelled into niceties he had no interest in.

"Yes, that's me." Jim confirmed, suppressing a smile. "Captain James Kirk of the starship Enterprise."

Sobar gave him a cold, scrutinizing gaze before raising his hand to form the Ta'al. "Live long and prosper."

"Peace and long life." Jim answered, but did not try to return the gesture; he knew he sucked at it.

Sobar now turned to the woman at his right "This is Lieutenant T'Heli, the Vokau's second pilot and second navigator."

T'Heli was a stunning Vulcan female of dark skin and dark eyes, who shared Sobar's cold demeanor, and said nothing while staring at them.

"Lieutenant commander Kuvac, first navigator." Sobar now referred them to the third member of his team, and Kuvac nodded slightly, his skin too, had a very dark shade of green, and he had those amazing high cheekbones.

"Ensign T'Sel, a Vokau junior engineer officer." Sobar continued.

T'Sel was of course, a beauty, but unlike most Vulcan females, although lean, she had lavish curves, she also kept her hair long, held in a braid that reached her thighs, her eyes were rather slanted, which was also a rare feature among vulcans.

T'Sel glanced at him for a second, before lowering her eyes again, a delicate green flush rose upon her cheeks, yet like the rest of them, she said nothing.

"Mr. Vedik." Sobar continued after a short while, as if he was trying to recall the name himself "A
junior scholar at the Science academy of New Vulcan."

"We met earlier today at the ship's manual kitchen." The academic scholar said with a slight bow. "We prepared the salad and the stew dishes, I hope to your approval. If I may ask, Jim, what…"

Sobar clearly detested the chatter and cut Vedik in mid sentence "And last, as you already know him, Commander Spock." he concluded.

Spock nodded politely, without word.

Jim let his teammates introduce themselves with their own words, and the Vulcans bowed politely to each of them. Dayton made the mistake of offering his hand for a handshake, but quickly corrected himself and tucked it in his pocket.

"Welcome to the Vokau, I wish you all good results at the 'Plak If Fee'." Sobar concluded the introduction, with the slightest indication of apathy on his handsome face. "Please have dinner with us; the head chef prepared some Terran food which I hope would meet your standards."

There was a table set for twelve in the room, and a buffet loaded with plentiful dishes for them to choose from, and even though all of them were vegan, Jim was starving enough not to care.

And so he picked up a plate and loaded it with some rice, tofu and a vegetables pie, and then he sat in the middle of the table. Sobar and Nyota sat in direct opposite to him, Vedik and T'Sel sat to his left and right, he could also catch a glimpse of Spock, T'Heli and Carol, but the rest of the group were not in a comfortable line of sight.

As everyone started eating he preferred only to listen on the light conversation that developed between the groups.

"Do all of you support the remaining of Vulcan in the Federation?" Sobar asked Nyota, who was seated next him.

"Yes, we all do." She answered.

"May I ask why?" he inquired.

"Various reasons," Nyota answered.

"And your personal ones?" Vedik joined the conversation.

She gave it a bit of thought while chewing. "Well… mine is a selfish reason." She said at last "I believe that the Federation is better with Vulcan as a part of it, and I wish to serve there as a diplomat one day, I find your culture fascinating."

"That is a great compliment." Vedik nodded "I too, believe that leaving the Federation would be unadvised."

"You do?" Nyota asked, a bit taken by surprise. "So why are you on the opposite team?"

"Because we put aside private opinions and serve the Elders' will." Sobar explained. "Disciplined minds are cable of doing so."

"The elders themselves selected me for this task." Vedik confirmed "Refusing them would be illogical, and disrespectful."

Jim turned to look at Spock and wondered if he felt the same, but Spock's eyes were now shut to
him like windows with their blinds closed.

"Are you still undecided, Spock?" Sobar turned to face him; Jim could detect a hint of mockery in his mild tone.

"Indeed, I am." Spock answered calmly.

"This is slightly unexpected, giving Elder Sarek's position." Sobar commented blankly. "I wonder what that implies on Sarek's logic, if he could not persuade his own son to join him at the 'Leave' camp."

T'Heli lowered her glass to the table and scanned Spock with a quick glance. "I would not hurry to place fault upon Elder Sarek's logic." She said. "It might just be Spock's hybrid nature manifesting itself."

"A valid assumption." Sobar responded. "However, it does not remove my doubts regarding Elder Sarek, as I see no logic in creating such a hybrid to begin with. How human are you, Spock? Reason dictates that you cannot be more than 33.3%."

Jim was astound by the obnoxious prying nature of this question, would one Vulcan actually dare to do that to another?

But no one of the other Vulcans had protested against this violation of privacy, not even Spock, and they all sat there in silence and waited to see how the 'Hybrid' would react.

"I am 25.2% human." Spock confirmed without losing his calm.

"Remarkable." Sobar noted.

"I thought you were half." Jim could not help but comment; he regretted opening his mouth as soon as all gazes fell upon him.

"Humans always assume that because Lady Grayson was one." Spock explained. "This happens so often that I no longer see logic in correcting this error. Making the effort became pointless."

Not even for me? Jim wondered and it made him somewhat sad.

"At the state of current technology, it is impossible to create a full Vulcan-Human hybrid." Vedik answered. "The Vulcan DNA is constructed of a triple helix, and contains silicon in its bases; Vulcans also have 31 chromosomes where humans have only 23, so with all considerations, a 25.2% is a notable achievement."

"An illogical waste of effort; as I see it." Sobar concluded making Jim want to punch his handsome face.

"We have diverted from our objectives for this meeting." Kuvac said somewhere where Jim could not see his face and thank him for that remark, but he could appreciate that deep, smooth voice.

Sobar nodded in agreement. "I apologize." He explained. "Spock is one of a kind, and I find him rather fascinating. I also find you fascinating, Captain James Kirk."

Jim finished chewing before responding, he could not find a more proper thing to say than a "Thank you." and he muttered it without conviction.

"In fact, I find you all very intriguing." Sobar admitted. "None of us, besides Spock, has ever met a
human before, or an Andorian, for that matter."

"Indeed." Vedik confirmed.

"How come?" Carol asked.

"Well, the Vulcan academy has such high standards only Vulcans were able to meet, thus far." Vedik explained.

"The ships we have served on, both the Sh'Raan and the Vokau, are dedicated to Vulcan's inner interests, and so are run by a Vulcan crew." T'Heli added.

"Vulcan ships are designed for the exclusive use of touch telepaths." Sobar noted.

Jim almost choked on his food.

Fuck my life!

This is bad, bad news!

If what they say is true, it's not only hacking the system that he must deal with, but he also must figure out how telepathy was involved and come up with a human-Vulcan interface to bypass it. Was it even possible in the scale of a month?

Fuck, shit, damn it!

"Are you well?" asked T'Sel, who set beside him and watched him struggle to breath.

"Yes, I'm ok. Something went down the wrong pipe, that's all."

"A wrong pipe? Where?" She asked, confused.

"He's fine." Carol assured her. "Here, have some water." She gave him a glass from across the table along with a 'get your act together' glare.

Vedik watched him with fascination as he drank "Is it true about humans?" he asked shyly. "That they find a prolong contact with water enjoyable? And that they even developed recreational means involving it?"

"Yes, it is." Uhura answered. "We enjoy swimming, diving and playing in water. We also enjoy long baths and water showers."

"How odd." T'Sel almost appeared shocked while listening to her.

"I have tried a bath once." Kuvac admitted. "It was extremely wet."

The humans chuckled at this confession.

"Should I tell you about Andorians ice pools?" Sharel teased Kuvac and enjoyed watching the Vulcans try their best not to recoil.

"Only if you allow me to elaborate about sand baths." Kuvac answered in good spirit.

To Jim's surprise, the rest of the diner progressed smoothly and was even enjoyable, Sobar ran it with talent and grace fitting a diplomat and not a military officer, he almost started to like the guy, but maybe that was the effect of the alcohol floating in his bloodstream.
"We still have 0.5 hours to the opening ceremony. How about taking our drinks over there?" Sobar suggested as they finished eating, indicating the set of couches in front of the huge deck window, which featured the view outside- streaks of shooting stars, golden, yellow and white against the great black, as the ship warped its way into Vulcan space.

"Great idea." Jim agreed.

So they left the table and migrated towards the window, breaking into smaller groups. Nyota had an alert conversation with Kuvac and Vedik, Sulu chatted with Sobar and T'Heli about piloting starships, T'Sel and Sharel talked about poetry, of all things and Jim found himself gravitating towards Dayton and Carol.

Dayton was fixated to the window, watching the stars passing by with a mix of frustration and fascination.

"Something's bothering you, Ensign?" Jim asked the young navigator and pilot.

"Captain." Dayton acknowledged him with a slight confusion. "Everything is fine, it is just…"

"What is it?"

"I've tried to estimate the factor we are at; but I am not even sure this is warp at all. I bet this ship is moving faster than any ship the Federation got, sir. It is so strange not to know where we are heading, or the ETA."

"It's understandable." Jim nodded at the young officer. "I also find it strange, boarding a ship where I don't even know my way to the bridge."

"Jim…" Carol moved to a whispering distance. "Should we do something about him?" she asked, concerned.

"About who?"

"Spock." She answered and Jim noticed Spock glancing at their direction when his name was mentioned.

Should he remind Carol that Vulcans had a very keen sense of hearing which rendered whispering in the same room with them very rude and also pointless?

"He looks so alone…"

Yes, Spock was on his own, at the edge of the room, holding a glass of Vulcan wine, which was non intoxicating and therefore oddly named, and he gazed into the great black, looking so very solemn and contemplative.

"Sobar was so mean to him, the bastard…"

Now it was Sobar's turn to lift up his gaze from his conversation to meet Jim's eyes with a cold glare.

Yup, he had to put a stop to it.

Served the bastard right, though.

"I know you mean well, Carol." He said before she'd do more damage "But I'll say this once, hoping it will require no repetition- Vulcans are highly private folks, smothering them with worry
and affection would only cause more harm than good. Trust Spock to reach out for us when he finds it suitable, not the other way around. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

And he should do the same, right?

Hell yeah, he should stay far, far away as possible.

The bastard Sobar left Sulu and T'Heli and walked towards them, Jim watched him and grimaced on the inside, already forming an apology in his head. To make it worse, Dayton and Carol withdrew without a word, leaving him alone with the other team leader, those weasels.

"Enjoying the view?" Sobar asked, stopping near Jim and looking out the window.

"Yes, I am."

"So am I" Sobar agreed, "Even though I've seen it a thousands of times, I never get tired of it, it's beautiful."

Jim looked at him for a few seconds before deciding what to say, how could he befriend someone who had thought Spock's very own existence was redundant? Well, he should try being polite if nothing else.

"So many stars and so many planets out there…” he said to the Vulcan "And even after visiting dozens of them, I still cannot get enough. I always wonder- what else is there?"

Sobar nodded. "IDIC." He answered.

Infinite diversity in infinite combinations.

"Well put." Jim raised his glass and finished his drink.

"I have told you that I find you fascinating, Mr. Kirk." Sobar confessed. "A Captain, at such a tender age, and of an exploration ship, none the less…”

"Going boldly." Jim agreed and smiled against his best efforts.

"It requires a remarkable set of skills, being a Captain of such a ship, pushing the boundaries of the frontier, where everything could happen at any given moment, and the unknown might come a knocking with a moment's notice. Not to crumble under such pressure? Takes remarkable discipline."

Or extreme recklessness and an astounding denial mechanism, Jim added in his mind, which Sobar could not read, because there was no touching.

And there would be no touching Vulcans, not any time soon, not while hacking their systems and stealing their technology.

"I could not do it without my crew." Jim admitted. "A Captain is nothing without their crew."

Sobar nodded in agreement. "I too, aspire to become a Captain one day, of a border-patrol ship, though. Vulcans do not share the human's impulse of exploration."

"But that's all the fun."
Sobar raised his eyebrow at this, so similar to Spock's reaction whenever Jim said something he deemed outrageous. "It is illogical. The universe in infinite, exploring it via ships would never be an effective process."

"Yeah, but we love it." Jim shrugged "Sorry that my officer called you a bastard, by the way." he remembered and mumbled his apology.

His attempted apology had been ignored. Sobar's body had stiffened, and he pushed his hands to the sides of his body, in an effort to control his emotions.

"I wish to be honest with you, Captain Kirk." The Vulcan said, glaring at the window, the streaks of light danced on his pale skin. "I resent the idea that non-Vulcans are involved in this ritual. I find it illogical on one hand and a violation of our privacy on the other. I strongly disagreed with the Elders who approved it, but in my position, there was so much I could do. Please don't take it personally; though, I hope I could overcome this difficulty as we move forwards."

What could Jim say? He gulped and nodded, but before he could formulate any kind of response, Sobar continued.

"Have you come up with a strategy yet?"

"A Strategy?" Jim repeated with no understanding.

"To win the 'Plak If Fee'." Sobar explained.

"What kind of strategy should I come up with? We just need to win the challenge, no?"

Sobar blinked his inner eyelids at the stupid human.

"In addition to winning the challenges, you must also come up with a strategy to convince the Elders to agree to remain in the Federation. There are 21 members in the Elder's council and they are spit into 8, 8 and 5. You have to keep the ones already at your side and sway the indecisive and opposing ones. You can do so by devising your own challenges and undermining mine. Are you sure you know how this ritual is conducted?"

Oh, come on...

Give me a break already…

"After the ceremony I will be on duty, but I can send Vedik to assist you." Sobar continued after a short while, of which he probably used to gather up the facts, review the situation and conclude that Jim was in deep shit. "We have made a thorough job, analyzing each Elder's background, set of values and access points. We devised ways to approach each. I'll send you the report, and also an overview of the strong and weak points of every member of my team, and pointers to my opening speech."

Jim found himself gaping like a bagger given an unexpected generous handout.

"Why?" he mumbled. "Why are you helping me?"

Sobar gave him a stern, steady glare.

"You're supposed to beat me, not assist me." He tried to explain, gulping at his embracement.

Sobar's eyes were so clear and blue, that he could see their vertical pupils; all Vulcans had them, a
reminder of their feline heritage, but with Spock's dark eyes it was harder to detect that shape even in close proximity.

"Don't get me wrong, Captain Kirk, I intend on winning." Sobar answered at last. "I just want to make sure I overcome your best, and not worry that I had merely defeated your worst."

"I see, thank you, Commander Sobar, it is only fair that I return the favor and send you a similar report."

"Unnecessary," The Vulcan dismissed his offer without blinking.

Carol's right, what a bastard.

"I'll send Vedik." Sobar concluded turned his attention to the entrance, and in perfect timing, the doors to the observation hall opened. "Yes, the opening ceremony is about to commence." He commented as two doctors got into the hall, carrying each a hypo-spray, one of them, Jim never wanted to see again in his life.

"Why do we have doctors here?" Nyota asked, alarmed, finding her way to Jim's side.

"It is merely a precaution." Sobar explained. "They came to offer us a mild sedative for the bloodletting. Would you care for one?" he asked Jim.

"Are you taking it?" he asked the Vulcan leader in return.

"No, I can handle such a small inconvenient." Sobar answered coldly.

Jim understood.

This was a case of my cock is bigger than yours.

"I'll pass." He said at the Doctor who presented him with the hypo spray.

"I'll take it, if you don't mind, Captain." Nyota said.

Jim nodded his approval and the doctor pressed the hypo spray to her offered, tilted neck.

Carol asked for one too, and so did Dayton, he didn’t think less of them for it, Sharel and Sulu rejected the opportunity, and so did the whole Vulcan team, except for Vedik.

"The Elders are waiting." Sobar said after the doctors finished their duty. "Let's be on time for a change?"
Captain Setal greeted them outside and led them to the main gathering hall of the Vokau where the ceremony would take place. He told them they had ten minutes to freshen-up, before taking their seats inside.

Jim used this opportunity to drink another cup of coffee then enter the loo for a piss. He found Spock at the sink as he stepped out of his booth, and they washed their hands next to each other.

"Are you ok?" he asked the Vulcan after a few moments.

"I am well." Spock answered and viewed Jim through the mirror.

"Sobar had no right humiliating you in front of everyone." Jim said and turned to wash his face.

"He was merely inquiring about facts."

"Well, he picked up some lousy facts to inquire about."

"Facts are facts, attaching feelings to them is pointless."

"I don't know, I still think he was mean."

"Your concern is much appreciated, yet unnecessary." Spock concluded and left without even as much as another glancing at him.

Yeah? Fuck you too, Spock!

You really, really, really should stop caring, Jimbo.

This is really none of your business.

Well, not any more.

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Inside the gathering hall there was a stage facing an audience, and on that stage there were two rows of seats, one for each team, and in the middle was a speech stand under a spotlight.

The crowd was already pouring into the hall, Kirk could recognize the Vokau crew members by their silver and gold outfits, but there were also many other Vulcans in various civilian or military outfits, almost three times as many as the Vokau crew representatives, and surprisingly enough there were even some children as young as pre-teens that found their way into the hall.

Captain Setal told them to form two lines next to the stage and remain in attention until he calls for them to take their seat. Jim found himself standing next to T'Heli, who did everything she could to ignore his existence.
Few moments passed and the hall became silent, and then the lights turned off, leaving only the stage under soft illumination, an atmosphere of formality was cast upon the hall, and everyone recognized the weight of this inimitable historical moment that would determine the fate of Vulcan for eons to come.

"March behind me and take your seat." The Vokau's Captain ordered and started climbing up the stairs to the stage.

They did as told, and followed the Captain up the stage, Jim could feel the heat of the gazes that fell upon him, could breath in the tension in the air, and he did his best to stay calm and collected as he found his seat at the head of his raw, with only Nyota at his one side and the emptiness of space to his other.

He could see Sobar's handsome features caressed by shadows at some distance to his left, but could detect none other from his team. He tried facing the crowed but they were too, a mass of dark shadowy figures, so he fixed his eyes upon the only fully noticeable person in the hall, Captain Setal, who was in the middle of the stage, at the speech stand and he suddenly looked old to Jim and kind of hunched under the gravity of the moment.

The Captain threw a glance on the attendees before speaking "Please stand up to greet the council of elders." He asked.

Sobar and his team stood up in attention, so Jim and his team did the same, and the crowd got up to his feet as well. The doors opened and shone a blinding light into the hall, a raw of armed guards dressed up in silver and gold formed a secured path and their commander gave the signal. Then they entered, the leaders of Vulcan, the heart and soul of the nation, or more correctly- the mind and reason of the Vulcan people, twenty one elderly people, walking into the darkness, guided by the guards and their aides to their seats.

Jim tried to locate Elder Sarek within them but it was too dark to recognize one from another.

Captain Setal formed the Ta'al with both hands raised high, and after all took their seats; including the guards he reached the microphone again.

"May the light of reason shine upon this meeting, live long and prosper."

Jim made sure he was not obliged to form that hand gesture again and was relieved when none other formed it as Captain Setal let his hands down.

"Revered Elder T'Pau, esteemed Elder council members, admired warriors of the 'Plak If Fee', respected staff of the Vokau, and renowned witnesses from far and near, I am Captain Setal of the flagship Vokau, and I am deeply honored and committed to host this 'Plak If Fee' on board my ship."

The captain's words were accepted with profound silence, no one clapped their hands at this of let out even the slights noise, to the point Jim feared his breathing was too loud, and he wished that he could leave the stage and find a place to hide.

A hand softly touched his thigh, Nyota "Stop squirming." She whispered without moving her lips.

"Sorry." He mumbled, and that's why he hated ceremonies of all kind, he'd rather be tortured by a company of Klingons than seat one through, but there was no escaping this time.

The Vulcan Captain continued.
"The Plak If Fee is an old, sacred ritual to be performed in the shadows and never to spoken of it once it has been concluded. I remind you, we all took a vow of silence, and nothing of its specifics, save the ritual result, should ever be leaked to those who are not here today."

With this the Vokau Captain eyed the humans and the Andorian, with a cold warning in his gaze. Jim nodded, hoping everything would truly remain confidential and won't hurt any of his crewmen's advancement in the Fleet at the aftermath.

"It is only on rare occasions that we turn to the 'Plak If Fee' to guide us, and we do so with great reluctance, for it is an old, blooded, pre-Surak ceremony, where once warriors slaughtered one another, sacrificing themselves to prevent even a greater bloodshed.

"We have long since moved away from this violent path, but still we demand our warriors' full commitment to this ritual. We demand their hearts, minds and souls, to be placed at the feet of destiny, to be evaluated and judged. We demand nothing less, so we could rest assure that the outcome of this ritual would serve the Vulcan people well and set us on the correct path for generations to come.

"This is why we have gathered here today to declare 'Plak If Fee' and have the warriors to vow before this esteemed assembly, to give their Katra and life blood for its successful conduction and conclusion."

Nyota eyed Jim with worry, and now it was his time to send a reassuring hand to pat her shoulder and calm her down. There's no reason for this ritual to become deadly, but if for some misfortune reason it does, it would only be his life and blood on the line, his alone.

The Vokau captain continued.

"I am honored to welcome Elder Soval, the head of the 'Remain' camp to speak on their behalf, followed by Elder Svern the head of the 'Leave' camp to speak on behalf of his faction, and lastly, I am humbled and grateful to have Revered Elder T'Pau to speak for the undecided section and commence the bloodshed ritual. Elder Soval, if you please…"

The old Vulcan got up from his seat and was escorted to the stage by a young guard, where he and Captain Setal bowed towards each other and then raised hands to exchange the Ta'al. Setal stepped down and took his place in the front row, and Elder Soval approached the stand. He was very old, even in Vulcan standards, his body was frail, his face wrinkled and he trembled slightly as he walked, but his eyes were alert and shone with the wisdom of the years.

"Thank you, Captain Setal, thank you all, for attending this historical event." He said and a rare smile momentarily adorned his face, which made Jim immediately think of elder Spock, and how he missed him dearly.

"Vulcans do not lie." Soval opened his speech. "We find lying highly illogical. Lies consume too much effort, waste too much time and are likely to be exposed at some point anyway, so let me resort to the truth and be blunt about it.

"When we say we consider leaving the United Federation of Planets, we actually say that we wish to turn our backs on humanity.

"Fact is- the UFP is constructed of two hundred planets, 72% of them are occupied by humans. Fact is- there are 87 civilizations who are members of the Federation, the second largest one is the Andorian civilization which includes 27 billion members, the first is the Human civilization,
constructed of 56 billion members. There is no doubt about it – the humans are the future of the
Alpha quarter, maybe even the future of this whole galaxy."

Wow… Jim was never confronted with the numbers that way; he always admired the human drive
to procreate, or in his case, to have sex, but when it was presented like this, it seemed like the
humans were a real demographic powerhouse in the galaxy, but where was Soval heading with
this?

"I was fortunate enough to live long and prosper and serve as the second ambassador of Vulcan on
Earth. I have admitted on numerous occasions that I have developed an affinity for the human race;
it is a privilege of mine, at old age, to display such amount of emotion.

"The Human race is baffling, I can vouch for that, they can be vicious like Klingons, arrogant like
Andorians and stubborn like Tellarites, but they are also distinctively compassionate, gallant and
brave.

"Now, it is debatable whether the Vulcan race could overcome the calamity that was hurled upon it
at the long run. Some say that given our genetic structure, our physiological make up and out
telepathic needs; that we are doomed; that we have lost too many Katras; that too many bonds were
severed and the damage done is much too overwhelming.

"The data on this subject is insufficient and logic dictate further study is needed, but I can only say
this- whatever conclusion is reached eventually, it is illogical to turn our back on the humans as
they are the force that will shape the future of the alpha quarter, regardless of the Vulcan's fate.

"They still need our knowledge and our guidance, to keep them from falling into darkness and take
the rest of the galaxy with them. We may face extinction, and the only logical course of action is to
cultivate this young race and entrust them with our legacy so it won't die along with us.

"This is also why I insisted that the 'Remain' warrior team would be constructed of humans; and
not just humans but the brave men and women of the Starship Enterprise, led by Captain Kirk- the
hero who saved this council of elders, hundreds of other Vulcans, mostly children, and his home
planet from Nero's attack.

"I want you to see them fight for this logical cause and witness for yourselves their valor, their
intelligence, integrity and so many other qualities that makes the human race the worthy successors
of the Vulcan kind.

"Council of Elders, honored assembly, live long and prosper."

Soval ended his speech and the young guard helped him off the stage.

The Captain came back again to introduce the next speaker, Elder Svern of the 'Leave' party.

Svern rose up as invited, and by no mean he was an elder. He looked like a Vulcan in his prime,
strong and vibrant, he was tall and broad, a reminder of his military background; had a slivery hair
and bright, piercing eyes he used in order to glare at the crowd for a long while before speaking.

"Dearly gathered, witnesses of the 'Plak If Fee'" he opened with his deep, charismatic voice. "As
Elder Soval before me, I will also honor you with the truth, unapologetic and brutal as it may be."
He declared and let a momentary cloud of anger cloud his face.

"One may try and reason the claim that we should stay members of the Federation. Say that we are
needed, that we must shape its future; that we should use its support in these trying times. But truth
is none of that. Truth is that pride, and pride alone prevents us from doing the only logical thing
which is to leave that organization."

He stopped and viewed the line of Elders seat at the front of the hall, still unwilling to remove all sighs of discontent off his face.

"For the life of me, I cannot understand why we are here! Having this ritual, going through this turmoil, when it is so plain to see that the UFP is of no use for us, never has and never will be! We have created it for the sake of humans, we have founded it on pure sentiment, and we have invested in it unreasonable amount of time and effort, to a point where we neglected our own needs and let our guard down. And behold, we have paid dearly for that error!"

He stopped again, lowering his head, breathing his feeling away, although his clutched fists and ridged stand still gave him away.

"Pride is what stands in our way. We should withdraw, we should leave and focus our efforts on rebuilding ourselves, fight for our survival, find again our way. But no! Some are too proud to admit their mistakes and correct their path. So, they double down on their efforts to make us stay, regardless of the division that they are creating, regardless of the peril of extinction that we are facing. Vanity and arrogance blinds their eyes!"

He stopped again to regain his compose.

"Well… here we are today." He almost smirked now, and gestured towards Jim and his team, without hiding his contempt "Judge for yourself, the worth of staying in the Federation, and I hope this experience will be humbling enough for us to rectify our ways, if the destruction of our home-plant wasn't sufficient enough."

Oh, boy.

This is some serious shit.

He should really try not to fuck this up.

As his anxiety level rose, he skipped the part where Sven left the stage and the next speaker was introduced. When he looked up again, Elder T'Pau was already at the podium and about to begin.

She had a small, fragile figure, a bit hunched under the weight of the years, but there was energy to her, like a force field of strength and dignity that inspired the awe of the audience and held its attention.

"My beloved sons and daughters of Vulcan, dear friends form the Federation, I welcome you all to the 'Plak If Fee' and thank you for taking part in this great effort."

She started her voice full of warmth, and to Jim's surprise, also full of emotion.

"Ever since we embraced the teachings of Surak we have walked the path of reason, and it has lead us to great and wondrous things. Yet, there always comes a point when that path is unclear, where the road splits and we halt before it, unsure how to press on. I know this hindrance baffles us, fill our mind with confusion and our hearts with dread. There is no use of denouncing those emotions, dismissing them or bury them, it is only logical to feel this way giving everything we have been through and everything we've yet to face."

She paused and let her words sink in. It seemed like some of the crowd had accepted her bold choice of discussing emotions, and was relieved by it, and the other part of the listeners opposed it and resented the idea.
"We would only find our way again, if we admit our weaknesses and be humbled by them." She continued, probably talking to the less convinced part of the audience. "I, for one, do not fear to admit that the path is lost to me. There are too many variances to take into account, too many facts and factors. Stakes are high and time is short. What is our best chance of survival? Within the UFP or on our own? What would we gain by leaving? What would be earned if we remain? What would even count as survival? A survival of our Katra? Our culture? Set of values? Or only the survival of our material bodies and planet would do? For almost seven years now, we have failed at finding the answers, and the dispute is threatening to tear us apart.

"We have been torn apart once, but will never be torn apart again, we cannot afford it, so it is only logical to find a solution outside of our regular confinements, and this is why I invoked the 'Plak If Fee'. I have faith in the ways of our forefathers; I have confidence in their wisdom and will accept any outcome of this ritual, and so should you all.

"We will now take the oath and shed the blood of our warriors. Captain Setal, if you please."

The Captain came upon the stage again, and with him two young officers, one held a glittering gold bowl, the other a long, sharp knife. Jim could not help but stare at the blade, but he kept his gaze unblinking and his features calm and collected, whatever comes next, he had to remain strong for his team.

He could hear Carol gasp and Dayton softly hushing her, Uhura sent her hand again, clutching at his bicep, threatening to stop his circulation.

"Warriors of the 'Plack If Fee', stand up and take your vows." Captain Setal ordered.

Sobar glanced at him briefly from the other side of the aisle, and for a moment there, Jim imagined to see a sneer on the Vulcan's handsome face, but it had come and gone so fast leaving no lingering evident, then he and the rest of the Vulcan team sprung up to attention, so Jim clenched his jaws and got up as well with a resolve never to give that arrogant prick any opening.

The rest were not as quick to follow him, and they all did their best to conquer their fears and by doing so, they made Jim proud.

Captain Setal regarded the teams and nodded slowly with approval. "Elder T'pau, the warriors are ready at your command, you may begin." He said and the old Vulcan placed herself in front of Sobar.

They exchanged some words in Vulcan, which Jim could not fully hear or understand, but there was no misunderstanding the part where Sobar offered his wrist, stretching his arm forward, unblinking, and there was no hiding the knife that ran into his flesh and the blood that had gushed out to be collected into the bowl.

Elder T'pau nodded with approve and moved on to face T'Heli, who greeted her with the same calm.

By the time they had gotten to him, the bowl was half full with green blood, and some of it, Jim knew, belonged to Spock.

For some odd reason, Jim recalled something Bones had once said, about the necessity to overcome a natural bias when it came to bleeding, a bias which delayed the sufficient response of a doctor at the sight of a hemorrhage with the wrong color.

Well, yes, there was something to it, because the sight of that knife would be much more terrifying
if it was stained with red and not with this green. The content of that bowl looked like green curry soup, or one of those disgusting healthy green vegetables shakes that Bones forced him to try once, and had no alarming effect on him as he watched it.

But it should have.

It should.

"Captain Kirk!" Elder T'pau rebuked him.

Oh, yeah, that.

"Ma'am." He straightened up and focused on her eyes instead of the blade. "Repeat after me, please." She demanded. "I, James Tiberius Kirk, warrior of the 'Remain' clan."

"I, James Tiberius Kirk, warrior of the 'Remain' clan."

"Vow to shed my blood for the honor of my tribe."

"Vow to shed my blood for the honor of my tribe."

"And give my life and Katra in this 'Plak If fee'."

"And give my life and Katra in this 'Plak If fee'."

"To deliver victory to my cause."

"To deliver victory to my cause."

"May the gods of war bless you." The Elder finished and gestured to the officers to approach.

"With your permission." The young male officer raised the blade and awaited his agreement.

He smiled even though it was rude and offered his wrist. "Thought I was over cutting at seventeen…" he murmured as the blade was above him, it felt kind of nostalgic.

The officer did not respond, but moved the blade instead.

The cut was swift and precise; it was deep enough to draw blood but not too deep to cause actual harm. It stung and burned, but the pain was bearable and also weirdly welcomed, he could have handle much worst, and he had done himself much worst, over Frank and Tarsus 4 and other shit that happened in his life, like his father dyeing on his birthday, big brother Sam bailing out on him and other joyous occasions.

But that was beside the point, right?

The officer that made the cut bowed slowly, careful not to touch him, and left, while the one with the bowl stepped in to collect his warm, dripping blood.

Drop after drop, the red mixed into the green, and Jim somehow found it fascinating to watch.

"That's enough." The officer holding the bowl interrupted him with a whisper. "You may press your other hand onto the wound to stop the bleeding." She said and moved on to Uhura, who just yelped as the same blade ran through her flesh.
Jim was proud of her, because she stood tall and did not withdrew, he was proud of every one of them, specially of Dayton, which in his personal file it was stated clearly that he was prone to pass out at the sight of blood.

They didn't sign up for it.

None of them did.

They signed up for scientific exploration, for a diplomatic tour, for a peaceful endeavor. Instead they got Nero, Khan, Admiral Marcus, Section 31, Altamid, and now this?

Poor kids.

Well, in less than a year this string of bad luck would be over.

And as Sharel's blue blood dripped into the bowl, the bloodletting was over.

The officer handed Elder T'pau the bowl, now heavy and filled with blood.

The Elder accepted the offering and carried it with steady hands to the center of the stage, her steps slow and measured.

As she found her mark, she lifted the bowl up, looked at the crowd, who was watching her, breathless, and then she looked up and above. "Gods of war; hear us!" she called out loud with a strong steady voice. "For we have spilled our blood for you! Bless this 'Plak If Fee' and guide it into its designated conclusion! Slake your thirst with the blood of our finest warriors, and ask for no more!"

With that, she dropped the bowl onto the floor and let it crush with a clang, some of the blood spilled over the gathered and some ran on the stage's floor to flow down its wall and form a puddle at the feet of the first row.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Rules Of The Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had to scrub an almost black colored mixture of dry blood off his face and out of his hair when he took a shower later that evening, and he considered going to the med-bay to treat his wound like the rest of his team did, but then he decided to keep the scar as a souvenir, at least for a while, out of pure sentiment.

When Nyota knocked on his door and invited him for dinner, he refused her with a smile. He was way behind schedule, and if he doesn't speed things up, his beloved silver lady might end up destroyed, along with his crew on the Klingon's border, and this was not going to happen, over his dead body.

So the Vulcans might have taken away his phaser, and caged him in a cyber bobble, but he still had his old physical hacking tools, Ferengi designed, made out of none detectable polymers, served him well in his criminal phase, and smuggled on board in a small kit. Look at those beauties… he took his kit out of his bag and opened it on his mattress. He smiled hello to his lovely small screwdrivers and miniature hex keys, his tiny soldering iron and wire cutters.

It was time to try and burst the bubble.

His plan was to disassemble his room and search for any form of hardware that could link him to the ship's mainframe, any kind of microcontroller would do, one that regulates the lights, the gravity field, the oxygen level, whatever he could get his hands on.

He knew that Vulcans regarded privacy above all else, and that they would not dare to bug his room, or put it under any mean of surveillance, it was a taboo to invade one's sanctuary, unthinkable, would not even cross their minds.

So whatever he did in his private room was never going to compromise him, and if he's careful enough, this would go undetected even when he taps into the Vokau's mainframe.

Wait, first let's insert a sequence to lock up the door, to stop his snoopy crew from barging in, ok, done, and now was time to take advantage of this Vulcan weakness; they were too stuck up for their own good.

He has been working for an hour or so, systematically taking down the tiles off the floor and the walls, to see what's behind them, when there was again, a knock on his door.

They were probably trying to get his attention for a while now, considering the force that was put into the knocking, he must have been so submerge in concentration not to notice them of at least five minutes or so, they were, of course, getting worried.

He jumped to answer the door before the one on the other side breaks it down.

"Thank you so very much, really!"

He smiled at Carol who stood at the other side, huffing, and blocked her view as she was obviously trying to peek in and find out what the hell he was doing that kept his from answering the door for that long.
"Sorry for the wait, Lieutenant, kind of busy."

"Doing what?" She eyed him, unblinking.

"This and that." He gave her a sassy glare, had to, could not help himself.

"I don’t want to know." She decided, shaking her head with irritation. "The Vulcan named Vedik is here; says that Commander Sobar had sent him with some materials for you."

"Oh, yeah, forgot all about it."

"So what do I tell him?"

"Tell him to wait in the common room, I'll be right there; just have to change first." He smiled again and closed the door on her face.

"Hurry up, sir." She called from the other side "I don't know how to entertain Vulcans."

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After a meeting with Vedik that consumed much of his night, restoring his room to a reasonable state (that is- if someone walks in unannounced, they won't call security on the spot), working some more, and then skipping breakfast, someone eventually had to force him into lunch.

"So we're planning on settling in Seattle, find a nice house with a lake view, Ben will teach his first graders and I'd probably take a spacialiner job at the Fleet, flying back and forth in the solar system just to be home in time for dinner."

"Fascinating."

"We also talked about having another kid or two, Demora is kind of pushing us into it, she really wants a baby brother or sister, and we think that she deserves some company, now that she's old enough to enjoy it."

"So Emerald city, huh? Seems nice enough."

Sulu gave him an all knowing glance and smiled while shaking his head. "You mean, seems kind of boring."

"Yeah, that too." Jim admitted and turned his attention back to his bowl of Mac and Cheese.

"Thing is, I don’t care about your opinion." Sulu chuckled softly "Now shut up and let's eat." He said and returned to his bowl of vegan ramen.

And so they did, for a while, enjoying the serenity of their surroundings.

The Vulcan mass hall was huge, like over 40,000 square feet, with a ceiling as high as 20 feet at some points, because it was shaped like an arched dome.

It had wide spaces between tables, there was a soft yellow-green carpet covering the floor, drapes in all shades of yellow decorating the walls and there were pillars, actual smooth stone pillars dividing the huge hall into more private compartments. There was also a broad oval, floor-to- roof
window as a centerpiece on one of the walls that showed the view of their journey in space-time.

Yet, even though the hall was overwhelmingly extensive, it somehow managed to be intimate as well, maybe because of the soft lighting, the good acoustic design, for the sake of the sharp hearing Vulcans, or because there was a meditative music of bells and chimes in the background, just in the perfect volume to be heard but not to overshadow a conversation, or the presence of faint fragrance incense, sweet and spicy.

Even within this relaxing atmosphere, Sulu was clearly frustrated and before too long he couldn’t help himself. "With everything we've been through the past few years, I thought you'd appreciate a quiet life a little more, Jim."

"And I thought you were going to apply for the XO position on board the Hamilton, I remember writing the recommendation. What happened to that? When did you settle for dull domestic bliss?"

"I know it's dull, Jim, and it is boring, but it's Ben's turn, he has been waiting for me patiently for almost five years, fathering Demora all by himself, always in fear of getting that KIA latter from the brass, informing him of my death. So now it's his turn to have the life that he deserves. I'm lucky enough to have a home to return to after this mission is over."

Yes, you are, very lucky, Jim wanted to say.

"But you'd get bored; I know you and you will." He said instead.

"I will and I'd deal, it's called growing up!"

"Have no idea what you're talking about." Jim smirked and took another bite of his food.

"Glad it was you who broke up with Spock, just before he got his chance of kicking your ass out."

"Same here…” Jim agreed. "Now I can cash in on my leave days and go to Risa or another pleasure planet, party every night, fuck everything on two legs…"

"And then what?" Sulu insisted.

Jim shrugged. "Don't know… back to the farm growing corn, or… I know… a pirate! I always wanted to be a pirate."

"Everything is a joke to you." Sulu grimaced.

Jim interrupted him singing "Yo ho, yo ho, yo ho… a pirate life for me…"

"Cut it out!" Sulu pleaded, chuckling, and Jim mercifully did.

"I'd go by Captain Tiberius." He concluded with a sigh and glared up at the gorgeous ceiling. "Grow a beard and dye it red."

Sulu shook his head, smiling still. "You are a hopeless case."

"But you love me just the same."

"God help me, I do." Sulu chuckled.

"Oh, and I wanted to ask you about your quality time in the brig with Dayton." Jim changed the subject sharply, returning his blue eyed gaze back to Sulu "Did you find it useful? Have you two sorted things out?"
Sulu nodded and then shook his head. "He's a nice kid, but he keeps on rubbing me the wrong way."

"So maybe you'd teach him how to rub you the right way?"

Now Sulu blushed and nearly choked on his soup. "Come on, Kirk! I'm a married man! And he's just an annoying little kid, what's your excuse?"

Jim sighed, he knew he was being obnoxious, but he had that tendency, especially when pushed to his limits, and he was at his limits, after having less than two hours of sleep last night, and not much more at the nights before.

But speaking of obnoxious creatures….

Just look what the cat drugged in.

"Ignore them and they'll go away." Sulu said under his breath and lowered his gaze as the two of them stepped into the hall, Sobar and T'Heli.

The two Vulcans walked into the mess room, stunning in their tight green suits, flawless figures and graceful moves. They had trays of food in their hands, and were looking for a place to sit down and eat.

The huge hall was almost empty; they had every table to choose from, what were the chances they'd even notice Jim and Hikaru at the edge of the hall?

"Captain Kirk, Lieutenant commander Sulu, May we?" Sobar said, casting his shadow over Jim.

"Yes, of course, Commander Sobar." Jim answered politely.

Sobar nodded and took his place opposite to Jim, so he could stare him down to his napkin; T'Heli sat next to him, giving away lovely heat and sweet perfume.

"Are you well?" Sobar asked "Recovered from the bloodletting ritual?"

Jim tugged at his sleeve to cover the cut on his wrist. "Wasn't as bad as I imagined it to be." He stated smiling.

"What were you expecting?" T'Heli asked, cutting her leaf salad with her knife and fork, very careful not to touch him by accident, even though she was wearing her gloves.

"I have a wild imagination." Jim answered "you don’t really want to know."

"Mmmm…” T'Heli responded without looking at him or moving her lips.

Sobar, on the other hand, was ogling him to a point of discomfort, his cold blue eyes never blinked. "I trust you have read the material I had sent you." He said after a long, steady gaze. Then he turned his attention to the food on his plate, thank god for small graces.

Jim only wondered how he could stuff his face as fast as possible without being disgusting; so he could ditch the scene as soon as possible. "I never got the chance to thank you for that."

"Here is your chance." T'Heli said helpfully after a long awkward silence.

Hikaru burst into laughter, the asshole.
They were all looking at him, no way out of this.

"Thank you, Commander" Jim said.

"You welcome, Captain." Sobar nodded. "Although, a proper warning, this would be the last curtsey I grant you."

Take that curtsey and shove it where the sun doesn't shine.

Oh, wait, cannot do.

Must remove stick first.

"I surely hope so." Jim said instead. "It is only fair."

Sulu tried to smother his chuckles, the bastard, and now it was T'Heli's turn to stare at him while he was almost choking on his food again.

"Have you prepared your opening speech?" Sobar asked, after having some of his food, which was something resembling a steak, but was probably not.

"Not yet, no" Jim admitted.

"Talking points, at least?" Sobar insisted, making Jim dance in his chair.

"Nope."

T'Heli and Sobar exchanged glares now.

"The speech must be ready by tomorrow." The female Vulcan noted.

"Yeah…" Jim continued dancing in his seat.

"You should reconsider your task managing process." Sobar offered "It must be illogical, if your speech is not yet ready."

"Yeah…" Jim breathed.

Disassembling, and then later, reassembling his room, took much more time than anticipated. Luckily, however, it was worthwhile, he found one piece of hardware he could work with, a small microcontroller belonging to the ventilating system, it wasn't much, but it was a start. So he was busy all morning programming it, well into lunchtime, which he'd skip if Sulu hadn't dragged him by the ear to the mess room.

Sobar blinked his inner eyelids now. "I have told you before, Captain Kirk, I wish to win against your best, please don't embarrass me in front of the elders by not doing so."

"Don't worry, you're not leaving the Federation on my watch, Commander, you're stuck with us."

Sobar seemed to like his answered and was more at ease, he picked up on his food again, and so did the rest.

"But we have already won, you know." Sobar said after a while.

"Really? And why is that?" Jim inquired.
"The moment the elders had agreed to take humans for this challenge, the 'Leave' party had won. I can suspect why they have done so, but still, it was their downfall."

"That's a bit presumptuous of you to say." Jim commented without losing his cool.

"Please don’t take this the wrong way… but you have no chance. You don’t speak Vulcan, literally and figuratively, you have no Vulcan sensitivity, no Vulcan cultural context…"

"No pointy ears either." Jim agreed.

"There is no way you could reach the elders and change their minds, and there is also no chance for you to win my challenges. Say even if you do, and we reach worst case scenario, you are no match for a Vulcan. I'm sorry that you were placed in this position."

"I am fine with my position, Mr. Sobar, and we'll see how things play out."

Sobar nodded "I suggest a marker, someone to focus your efforts on, to give you an indication of how close you are to achieving your goals."

Jim crossed his hands on his chest and nodded, this was actually a good idea. "Go on…"

"I have my marker- Spock."

"Spock?"

"Indeed, when he moves from the 'undecided' camp to the 'leave', I’d know I have won. I urge you to do the same."

"I think so, yes, this is a great idea."

"Take time to consider who would suit..."

"No need"

"Huh?"

"I have already chosen my marker."

"So fast?"

"Yeah, why not?" Jim confirmed "You are my marker, Mr. Sobar."

"Excuse me?"

"I chose you as my marker. When you move from the 'Leave' camp to the' Remain', I'd know I've done my job."

Sulu ogled him with his mouth half open.

Both T'Heli and Sobar rose from their chairs at the same time. "I believe we are done here." The male Vulcan said.

"I agree." The female answered.

They both took off as fast as they could.

"Really, Jim?" Sulu whispered as the Vulcans gained some distance "Commander Sobar would be
your marker? For real? How would you even get…?

"Don’t know, don't care."

"The balls you have, sir…” Sulu mumbled and the Vulcans cleared out of the hall.

***0***

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, are you ready?" Kirk entered the common room, after an ice cold shower and two mugs of coffee. He found Dayton dozing off on a couch, he kind of envied him, but it was kind of cute, and still he kicked him at the shin.

"Huh, what?" Dayton jerked up into seating, and Jim shoved a PADD into his hands.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." Kirk beamed at him.

"Team meeting, already forgot about it, silly?" Carol reminded him; she removed her headphones and moved from another couch to seat next to the young man.

Jim handed her a PADD as well.

Sharel came out of his room, with a bit of a frost following him. "Am I late?"

"No, here." Another PADD delivered.

"Thank you, sir."

Nyota had heard the invitation and returned from kitchen with a tray, and on it were a water pitcher, glasses and some fruits for the meeting. "What did I miss?” she asked, as she set the table.

"Nothing, Lt. Commander, thanks for the refreshments." Jim answered and gave her a PADD once she was seated. "Where's Sulu?"

"He was with you." Carol answered.

"At lunch, but then we got separated."

"Maybe he's in the brig again?" Sharel suggested with a subtle sneer, he picked up some yellow looking fruits from the plate and started peeling their skin.

"Should I send someone to look for him?" Nyota asked.

"No need." Sulu just walked into their dormitories. "Here I am. I was with Kuvac at the gym, practicing fencing; turns out he is into it too."

"There you go." Jim gave him a PADD.

"Are we starting now? Could I get a shower first?" Sulu asked.

"And make us all wait? I don’t think so." Jim answered. "Take your seat."
"Away from me." Dayton hurried to say, wrinkling his nose.

To that Sulu just shook his head, set down next to Nyota and poured himself a glass of water.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?" Jim raised his voice and smiled when finally all eyes were on him. "I trust you all read the material sent to us by Captain Setal, I've summed it up in a style less Vulcan; you got a copy each."

"Great idea, sir, seemed like it was written by a computer." Dayton admitted under his breath and Nyota gave him a nasty glare.

Kirk nodded in agreement. "I also had a very successful meeting with Mr. Vedik last night, and he had sharpened some points for me." Now he got a nasty glare from Nyota. "What?" he asked her.

"You and Mr. Parker both could adopt some more diplomatic manners, sir." Nyota answered coldly. "The terms you use might offend some Vulcans."

"But there are none here." Sharel noted, smirking at her with some yellow juice dripping off his fingers.

Carol tossed him a napkin.

"I apologize." Jim sighed "Can we get on with it?" this was not a request.

Dayton straightened up a bit more, Sharel cleaned his hands, and Nyota rolled her eyes at them all.

"Please continue, Captain." She said.

"The rules of the 'Plack If Fee' are not that complicated, but in case you need some translation from the guide book captain Setal gave us- here it is, please review document number 3." He made eye contact with each of them, before continuing. It seemed like most would appreciate that help, Nyota included.

He waited so they'd all find the right document, and then continued.

"Each and every one of the ritual participants has 2 points in hand, which give every team 12 points, amounting to 24 points for both teams. Copy that?"

"Loud and clear." Sulu answered and the rest just nodded.

"Each two points are individual and cannot be passed, ignored or traded, even the team leader has no say in how each individual will handle them. In other words, you are the only owner of your challenge, understood? Can I go on?"

"Sure, sir." Sharel stated.

"So, in addition to our individual points- every elder leader- Svern for the 'Leave' party, T'pau for the 'Undecided' and Soval for the 'Remain' have 3 points in his hands and the rest of the elders have 1 point each, which totals to 27 points. Are you with me?"

"Yes, we are." Carol answered and picked some grapes from the plate to nibble on.

"So- the sum of points on the table is 51, and the team that grabs most of them wins. Note that this is an odd number so the chances for a tie are slim. How are we so far?"

"So far, so good." Said Sharel.
"Now, this part is a bit tricky, please don't be shy to ask anything, stop me or ask me to repeat myself. I don't mind, our objective here is to get on the same page. Ok?"

No one answered and he frowned to it.

"Come on guys, nothing to be embarrassed about, took me long enough and I'm blonde so if I can do it, y'all can."

"Hey!" Carol, the only other blonde in the team, pretended to be offended.

"So this is how we use our points- each of us can challenge one member from the other team, some of them or even the whole group all together. But it must be a well defined assignment with clear parameters for successes or failure. If they rise to the challenge, the two points of the challenger goes to them, if not, we get to keep them."

"Example?" Dayton asked, shyly.

"Sure." Jim obliged "Say Sulu takes his 2 points and personally challenge Kuvac to a hotdog eating contest."

"I hate hotdogs." Sulu interrupt. "Gives me the burn."

"Then meat pies?" Jim suggested.

"Vulcans don't eat meat." Nyota reminded him.

"Fine, apple pie eating contest! Is that ok? Can we get the move on? If Sulu eats more pies than Kuvac within a given time frame we win that challenge and get to keep Sulu's 2 points. Is that understood?"

"Don't we get 4 points?" Dayton asked.

"Why 4?" Sulu snarled at the Ensign. "Are you stupid or something?"

"Kuvac has 2 points too, idiot!" Dayton almost barked back at the helmsman.

"Mr. Parker, Mr. Sulu!" Jim huffed at them "Am I to assume you both enjoyed the Vulcan brig? Besides, Dayton's on to something. If Kuvac only accepted the challenge and Sulu wins then we earn 2 points, but if Kuvac not only accept the challenge but also challenges Sulu back, then we have 4 points to earn here."

"Double jeopardy?" Nyota asked.

"Something like that; yes." He nodded towards her, and she smirked like the teacher's pet.

"But if Kuvac wants, he can use his 2 points on another challenge?" Dayton asked.

"Indeed." It was Jim's turn to smile, he felt like he was doing a decent job at explaining.

"What if they both eat the same amount?" Sharel asked. "Or they both choke to death."

"Thank you." Sulu frowned at the Andorian who seemed unconcerned.

"Great question, Sharel." Jim sighed, yes this was difficult. "In that case, they both earn 1 point for the tie, or zero points for not finishing the task, but that would be to the discretion of the elders."
"Because they are both dead." Sharel confirmed.

"Could it be 2 points for tie?" Carol asked.

"For double jeopardy." Nyota nodded.

"Yes, you're catching on." Jim smiled again, yearning for his next cup of coffee. "We are almost at the end of it." He tried to cheer them all up, but mainly himself. "Svern, T'Pau and Soval will also use 2 of their points in a challenge, and they get to define it and they will judge who wins it. So in total- 30 points could be earned or lost through challenges, which is the majority of the 51 sum, and it also suits the goals of the 'Plack If Fee.'- That the victory lies in the hands of the warriors."

"But there are 21 more points." Carol reminded them all.

"Yeah, one point to each Elder to cast at the end of the ritual, according to his will and for the team that convinced him or her the most."

"Convinced?" Dayton wondered.

"During the time of the challenge each elder may approach each member of the teams to interview them or give them tasks, in order to help him or her make up their minds. You must cooperate with them as necessary, but we are not allowed to approach them, understood? The initiative must come from them and them alone. Any questions so far? Everything's clear? Yes, Sulu."

"Can I pass on a challenge and ask for another?" The man asked, chuckling with a small amount of unease "I mean, come on, who wants to eat so many pies? It's unhealthy, and proves nothing… sorry, sir, no disrespect; I know this was only a hypothetical example, stupid question."

"Not at all." Jim shook his head. "I'm actually glad you brought that up, because refusing a challenge without the Elders consent will cost the team 1 point, however, we cannot play dirty and ask for things we know are humiliating or offensive. Every challenge must be reasonable and negotiated. The Elders will have the last say on borderline cases, but we are here to play fair."

"Arbitrary challenges that have no merit will also reflect badly on our team." Uhura added "Remember that the Elders will cast their votes as well at the end of this mission."

"What she said." Jim pointed at his communication officer with a smile.

"We should plan our strategy very carefully then, to avoid a diplomatic disaster." Carol stated. "We cannot leave it to chance, can we?"

"Or to idiots." Sulu may have or may have not implied while looking at Dayton.

"Yes, we must play fair and be respectful." Kirk agreed "We cannot create a diplomatic incident on top of the already searing tension between the Federation and the Vulcans. We play clean and we stick to the Vulcan ethics."

"Vulcans and their ethics." Sharel snorted.

"Yes, ethics." Jim insisted "And it goes both ways, don't you know? The vulcans will not use touch telepathy on us, mind melds are, of course, forbidden, as well as the use of their superior strength."

"So what does that leave them with?" Dayton wondered and Sulu chuckled at him with disbelieve.

"Only their superior brain power and overwhelming logic." Nyota answered dryly.
Jim sighed and nodded. "Yes… I have a good reason to believe Sobar and his team have already made an elaborated, failsafe plan for the challenges, setting a trap for each of us, according to our individual weaknesses."

"Oh my…" Sulu mumbled.

"We're toast." Carol giggled nervously.

"Up against Vulcans? Yes, I think so too." Uhura agreed.

"Hey!" Jim intervened. "What's with this gloom and doom attitude? We are so going to win this challenge! And the Vulcans, sitting on their high horses; will never see us coming!"

Nyota crossed her arms on her chest and blinked at him, still not looking convinced.

"Maybe Sobar was right." Sulu mumbled, remembering their encounter in the mess room from earlier. "He said that we are bound to lose because we are not Vulcans, and we cannot compete with them in their own playground. We are humans, well most of us, and they are Vulcans, I mean, Vulcans! We all know Spock, right? The guy is super smart; he's almost perfect, so imaging going against six of them?"

"Imagination is unnecessary." Sharel reminded him.

"Sobar has a point, sir, we are at a disadvantage, at least when it comes to communication, most of us don't speak Vulcan, and even I hardly understand the subtext." Nyota agreed and went on "We have no understanding of their cultural nuances; we cannot begin to imagine what it is like to be touch telepaths…"

"Spock outmatches me on every science subject except perhaps weaponry." Carol admitted, and she would know, as the only science officer in the team, and as such, she was working directly under him.

"Then challenge him on weaponry!" Kirk answered, and he knew he had to break this mindset hard and fast, so they'd stay motivated.

They were all giving his suspicious glares, and he knew that he had to win them now, or things might spiral out of control. So fuck the Section 31 mess, fuck his own doubts and fuck the Vulcans for putting them at this position in the first place.

If there is anything within him that was somewhat worthwhile, it was his ability to defy expectations, and you can go ask Kodos, Khan, or Krall if they'd prefer having him dead… nope, sorry, cannot ask them because they are! Well, Khan is a sort of a Popsicle, and Kodos probably faked his death, but for all intents and purposes, they are. Now where were we?

"Challenge them on weaponry! Challenge them on fencing, on bonsai keeping! Whatever you are good at! Whatever you feel comfortable with! We are the Federation's finest! The Federation, remember? The largest, most prosperous, peace seeking organization in the alpha quarter! Created by humans! Led by humans! For the good of all!"

He took a breath and gave them his most fiery stare he could conjure at his state of fatigue. He was pleased to see most of them straighten up in their seat, and Carol and Sulu even graced him with a smile.

"We have nothing to cower at or keel over! We have nothing to feel inferior about! We are survivors! We outlived everything the great black has thrown in our way! Nero! Khan! Kronos!"
Altamid! Do not look down on yourselves! You are fearless! Creative! Adapting! We can do it!

Look…"

He posed to draw a breath and take a different, lower tone.

"The Vulcans may not admit to this, but they are at one of the lowest points in their history. They are broken- physically, mentally and spiritually… and they will die before acknowledging that.

We cannot let them. We cannot let the great nation of Vulcan go quietly into the night. When we were weathering and desperate, they came and pulled us back into the light. Now is our turn. They are relaying on us whether they realize it or not. We will not let them down."

"We will not." Carol whispered almost to herself.

"Hell, no. "Sulu nodded.

"I'd do my best." Dayton promised with a blush.

"You can count on us." Nyota summed it up with confident.

"Good..., good." Jim nodded.

Tired, he was so tired; it was even hard for him to stand. He had to wrap thing up before he collapses in front of them, and that would be harmful to his point.

"O.k, I need you to read document 4 and 5. They contain the personal information about the Elders and the Vulcan team; I want you to know them by hard."

"Yes, sir." Sulu nodded.

"I want each of you to construct six challenges for each opponent on Sobar's team, according to this data. Be respectful, but devastating, and give them hell, because they will surely be giving us some."

"Don't worry." Sharel smiled coldly.

"Be imaginative, daring, surprise them… surprise me. I know you can."

"Yes, we can." Carol smiled.

"We will meet this time tomorrow, and we'll discuss what you came up with and formulate our plan. Copy that? Is everything understood?"

"Sir… I have some more questions." Dayton said, blushing again.

Jim sighed, he was struggling to stay on his feet, every fiber in his body screamed for sleep, and he could not afford it, he needed to prepare his opening speech, and do some more programming on the microcontroller.

"Mr. Parker, please refer your questions to your team mates, and if you are still unsatisfied, I'd be more than happy to answer them at our next meeting. Fine by you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"
Please, god, no.

No.

They all just looked at him with a smile and a newfound courage.

Oh, yes.

Our merciful god, thank you.

"Dismissed."

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, as always thanks for the read. This was an info-dump kind of chapter, but there is no way of avoiding those. I hope it was not completely boring. Would always be happy to know what you think, stay safe and strong :-}
There's a point you reach when exhausted where you cannot run away from sleep anymore, and it jumps on you like a tiger pouncing on its unsuspecting prey. It finds you wherever you are and takes control against your will, and against your best efforts.

And then the weirdest dreams come to bother you, those unwanted, bizarre and most obscure dreams that you try to shake off, even while sleeping, and you cannot. You are weak and paralyzed, and they are forced upon your helpless, limp body, and weary, foggy mind.

He has been working for hours in his room, writing code and studding the microcontroller till his eyes hurt and the walls were closing in on him.

It was a mistake to take refuge in the common room after everyone else has gone to their rooms, but his room stank, and the couch felt so soft and cozy, it smelled nice and had this velvety texture. It was placed in front of a window and the light show outside had a hypnotic spell on him, gold and green and purple straight streaks passing by in a steady pace, in and out of sight. He even ordered the computer to reduce the lighting in the common hall to 20% so he'd get a better view, what the hell was he thinking?

He told himself he'd just rest his eyes for a while, only for a moment.

Big mistake.

He was asleep before he knew it.

And when he woke up, there was a blanket draped over him, and there was someone snoring softly by his side. A male, with glossy black hair and a muscular figure, Hikaru Sulu.

"Hey…" The man mumbled, he noticed Jim's stirring and it woke him up.

Oh, Hikaru was such a good friend, and he was genuinely worried, looking so adorable in his silk PJs, and so vulnerable at this state between sleep and wakefulness. He actually left his room, in the dead of night, with an extra blanket for him, and either fell asleep besides him by accident or to keep his company.

But Sulu wasn't just a friend, he was his subordinate, and he didn’t deserve to see his captain in that state. A captain should be a source of inspiration and confidence, not a reason for worry and concern.

You're such a shitty captain, Jimbo, you really don't deserve your crew.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Sulu with a sulk.

"Keeping an eye on you, I think, at least until I dozed off myself. How are you?"
He felt like he was hit by a bus.

"I'm fine, you worry too much." He tried to work his body into getting up, with little to no success. "What time is it?"

"03:45, ship's time."

"Fuck..." Jim hissed, he had slept for over five hours, five hours that he could have used for programming the microcontroller, or begin studding the HR or Engineering, or Communication regulations that were handed to them by Captain Setal, or start poking at the touch-telepathy-computer interface technology, hell, even start working on his opening speech.

Five and a half hours wasted! It made him want to cry.

"Are you alright?" Sulu voiced such deep concern; it almost brought tears into Jim's eyes. "Are you coming down with the flu or something?"

"I am five by five, Hikaru." Jim managed one of his most charming smiles; he gave him a friendly pat on the knee and finally managed to get up.

Sulu's eyes followed him as he started pacing back and forth in front of the window, giving him a suspicious glare. "I still think you should visit sickbay, better safe than sorry."

"You're channeling Dr. McCoy now, Hikaru. A bit spooky."

"Come on, Jim, you are too smart to dismiss..."

A subtle, but a distinct pulse of energy suddenly washed all over them. It made Jim's ears pop, and the delicate hair on his skin bristle. There was also a faint sound of a whoosh, running down the corridors, accompanied by a gentle breeze that stroke his face.

"Are we out of warp?" he asked the helmsman.

"We are out of something." Sulu confirmed "But I'm not sure it is warp, sir. Warp doesn't behave this violently."

"Could be the difference between Vulcan and human technology."

"Could be, but I don't think it's enough to explain this behavior, I wish I had access to the pilot's console, I bet that the amount of energy released right now is nothing like I've ever seen."

"Dayton said the other day that he was not even sure the Vokau was traveling in Warp at all."

"This might be the first smart thing that kid had ever said." Sulu agreed. "Damn, it is really wired no to helm the ship, sir, I envy Sobar so much. Do you think there's a chance...?"

"Nope, they are not letting you pilot the Vokau, better get that idea..."

"Attention, all hands." Captain Setal's voice ranged through the intercom. "The folding process has been concluded, we now continue via inertia to enter orbit at our destination, ETA 11:35 Am Ship's time. Further announcements will be made at arrival, Setal out."

The silence that followed this announcement was chilling cold.

Jim and Hikaru gazed at each other for a moment before Kirk turned his attention to the window. There was not much to see yet, just the great black with a tiny, shiny dot in the distance.
"Computer, magnify image by a factor of 1,000." Jim ordered the AI.

"Confirmed." The artificial male voice answered.

The view got larger, the dot got separated into two, this was a binary system and there were two stars orbiting each other, one huge compared to the other, and they were both flaring at each other, with random blasts of plasma passing between them, wrapping them both in a shiny, glowing shroud.

"It is beautiful." Sulu whispered.

Jim did not answer; his eyes were glued to the screen. The full scale of what Section 31 had claimed; has just dawned on him.

"I wonder where that base is." Sulu continued "This environment seems highly unstable and unpredictable; you must be very careful, placing a base here. I don't think that the UFP has the technology to do so and protect it."

"Hikaru, tell me please, what is the color of the main star?"

"The big one? I believe it's green. Why?"

"That star is green, alright." Jim echoed, frowning and Hikaru glanced at him to see that his Captain was deeply disturbed.

"Yeah, this is a green star, so?"

"There are no green stars." Jim stated.

"What? In the alpha quarter?"

"In the whole universe." Jim answered with unease "You'll need a deferent kind of physics and a brand new set of elements to get one."

"So what you're saying is…?" the horror settled on Sulu's face as well.

"I'm saying that the Vulcans are way ahead of the herd, that the Federation is a child's game in comparison. I am saying that the Vokau just took us to another universe, not a parallel one, not an altered one, not even a pocket one, but an altogether alien."

Which means that they were pretty much lost.

Which means that there is no Federation here, and no way to contact home.

Which means that they were totally helpless, and dependant on their hosts.

"You get all this from one green star?" Sulu wondered.

Jim nodded "If you know your theoretical physics, then, yes, you can get all this from just one green star."

"Then I don’t know my physics, sir." Sulu chuckled softly with unease "But back at the academy, I focused only on helm and warp technology, the rest didn’t hold my interest as much."

"That's ok, we all have our preferences."
"I'm not so sure the others will see this green star and come to your conclusion, well, besides Spock, I mean."

Jim breathed at the mention of that name, and then he shook his head. "Don’t point it out to them, please." He asked Sulu "They have enough on their minds as it is, I don’t want to spread panic."

"Understood."

"But what a sight, huh?" Jim smiled again, turning his attention to the bright side of the situation, enjoying the sense of pioneering. "We're probably the first humans to see this, a green star! How cool is that?"

"Oh, my." Sulu mumbled.

"Yeah." Jim smiled still.

He glanced at his helmsman in his PJs, and his smile turned tender and warm. "Hey, why won't you get back to sleep? We've got a few more hours till alpha shift."

"Only if you promise to do the same."

"I'll do the same." He promised, one day.

Sulu nodded and went to pick up his blanket off the couch.

"And Hikaru…" He stopped the young officer while facing the entrance of his room. "Thanks."

Sulu glanced back with a thin smile on his face, opened the door and disappeared inside.

A sudden pang in the heart.

Seven more months.

He'd hate to say goodbye.

***0***

Back in his room, he did everything he could to clear his mind and focus on the tasks ahead. He tried working on the microcontroller but hit a wall then got bored, so he turned to review Vulcan "HR" regulations in hope to find something there about their protocols, and could not sit still long enough to finish one, so he started working on his opening speech and got restless and jumpy, he had to stop every two minutes to walk the room in circles, like a caged animal, and to make things worse, he was getting horny as hell.

When they were together, Spock has been trying to help him overcome some of his issues, by teaching him Vulcan meditation and mantras. Poor thing had the patience of a saint, and was never discouraged by Jim's underperformance, but then Jim was the one to put a stop to his efforts.

The good doctor also tried to help, giving him prescription to every known treatment, from biofeedback, through asmar, and guided imagination to the oldest known drug- Methylphenidate, to which he had developed an allergic reaction, of course.
Eventually McCoy gave up as well, saying that the only way for Jim to relax was to put himself at a constant threat of imminent death, which also explained why being a captain of an exploration vessel suited him just fine.

And damn, that erection was not going anywhere.

It was always mixed up for him, anxiety and arousal, stress and lust; maybe they got tangled together when he was a boy, living under the same roof with a sadist that happened to be his mom's step brother. Maybe it happened on Tarsus 4, where he let Kodos men fuck him up the ass for food.

Well, who cares? Whatever! The past is dead, the future's a dread, but what was he going to do with this oh so present hard on?

For a second there, he entertained the thought of finding Spock's room and come knocking on his door, for a second.

"Computer, where is the ship's Gym?"

"The Vokau's main gym is located at deck 7." The pleasant male voice answered. "It is open at all hours; advanced appointment is unnecessary, general security clearance, however, is in need."

Wow, very informative, that computer.

"Thank you."

"Illogical inquiry, please rephrase."

"Fuck you, then."

"Illogical inquiry, please rephrase."

What the hell am I doing?

Gym time.

He changed his outfit and went looking for it.

***0***

When you come to think of it, as in being honest and truly willing to admit the uncomfortable, which goes against the narrative you have woven for yourself over the years, Jim had to admit that he knew nothing about aliens.

Sure, he saw them everywhere, and every day, he worked with some, he fought against others, he definitely did sleep with many. As a Captain, he visited xeno-planets and dealt with all sorts of civilizations, some unknown to the Federation before him, but it was all random, and brief, and none specific.

He never delved deep into an alien culture, an alien mindset; he never tried to see things from an
alien point of view. In every interaction, he always remained firmly within his human boundaries, filtering everything he saw through his human eyes.

It was always about what humans needed, what humans wanted, what humans would find useful, what humans could exploit.

So why did it have to dawn on him now? While wandering through the halls of the Vokau, kind of getting lost on his way from the gym to the mess room?

Maybe because of the green rays of light washing into the ship's halls from every observation window. Maybe because never was he on board an alien ship for this long, almost a full week already. Maybe because he was asked to represent a faction of an alien nation in a dispute he knew nothing of? Was this the reason why he struggled so hard trying to counter Sobar's arguments? The debate was set for tomorrow's night, and he still had jack shit.

Maybe it was because he knew nothing of Vulcans. Funny, but true. He knew so much about their technology, their programming, their logic, history, politics, heck, even their male bodily functions, but nothing substantial, nothing of core value.

He knew nothing of Spock, either, his now former lover of almost a year, not the first thing about him.

You know nothing, James Kirk!

Look at them.

Vulcans.

In their stations, or walking the halls, all alone or in groups, busy working or off duty.

Just look at them.

Gorgeous, graceful, impeccable.

Smart, strong, telepaths.

Boy, did they win the evolutionary lottery or what?

"Excuse me, sir." A male crewman stepped away from a station, tall and handsome, stunning in his silver Vokau uniform. "Are you lost? May I assist you?"

Fuck me?

No, no, no!

Bad brain!

"I'm looking for the mess room." Jim blurted out quietly; no one would accuse him of being a starship captain right now.

"Affirmative." The Vulcan male nodded "Please continue on your trajectory until you reach the next T junction, refer to your right, and continue 170 meters to the next T junction, at the center of it, there would be a lift. Take it to deck 5, and you will not miss it from there. 62% of the public area in that deck is the mess room."

"Thank you very much, sir."
"My pleasure." The Vulcan nodded and went on his way.

He did as the crewman said, and to no surprise he got into the mess room with ease, but there was a problem, unlike last time with Sulu where the place was practically deserted, this time it was full of Vulcans, having their breakfast. The place was not near to full capacity, but it was busy enough for him to feel stupid in his sweaty gym outfit.

Oh, great! There were some of the Elders in the line for the buffet, and there was no way to pass them by unnoticed. It was a damn good thing he was not allowed to approach them, so he could wait in silent until they finished collecting their breakfasts without being considered rude.

"Good day to you." He heard a familiar voice and turned to greet the speaker.

It was that beautiful female Ensign, T'Sel.

She wore the 'Plak If fee' green outfit on her dazzling, sensual body, and had her long, slick black hair held in a high, tight bun.

"Good day to you, too." He smiled, and caught her subtly leaning towards him, sniffing at his black sweatshirt. "I'm sorry, I came straight from the gym, didn't think it would be this busy, or I would have taken a shower first."

"The odor is interesting, yet not unpleasant." She commented, then alarmed, she added "Apologies, my curiosity overcame my manners. I hope to do better in the future; this is my first personal interaction with a none-Vulcan."

Should he warn her that curiosity killed the cat?

Was he even allowed to flirt with someone from the 'Leave' team?

No, Jimbo, behave.

"No worries." His smile widened, he could certainly relate. "Would you like to eat breakfast together?"

She seemed puzzled, did he say something wrong?

"Eating is a personal act." She mumbled, and then nodded swiftly. "Keep your company while eating? Was that what you meant? I'm sorry, my standard is feeble."

"Your standard is great." He reassured her "And we understand each other, that's all that counts." Jim continued to smile, until his inner Uhura elbowed him in the ribs for being impolite, then he tried to tone it down.

"Very well, we will eat together."

Now that the buffet was Elders-free, they could approach it and serve themselves.

T'Sel chose some red colored soup that he saw Spock prefer as well, forgot the name though, starts with a 'P', he chose something that looked like a cinnamon roll and hoped it would taste somewhat the same, and a glass of an orange looking liquid which he hoped would be similar to orange juice.

On their way to find a seat, they passed a table that was occupied by some very familiar Vulcans, one in particular, Spock.

Spock.
How he missed him so much that it almost hurt, missed his voice and his touch, his warmth, his proximity, his cock, his… everything.

No, don't do this to me! He scolded his brain. You broke up with him and for a good reason! Would you get over this already? That creature had used you! Manipulated you! Did his telepathic voodoo on your brain, trying to enslave you! No one gets to control you! No one!

He met Spock's cold gaze with an icy one of his own, and smirked with satisfaction when Spock lowered his eyes and rejoined his table's conversation.

There were four of them, Spock, Sobar and the elders Svern and Sarek, probably an unofficial meeting of the 'Leave' party. The elders followed Spock's gaze and looked at him too, then nodded and returned to their conversation, Sobar did not bother.

"Here is a suitable seat." T'Sel called to him, and he returned his attention to her. It seemed like it didn't bother her that some of her team members were meeting the Elders without her presence. She seemed more interested in his company, since she didn't even bother to acknowledge them at all.

Vulcans were strange folk.

The things you lean in mess halls.

They sat and started eating in silence, since none of them came up with something to say, Jim knew that she wouldn't mind if they speak not one word from start to end, and for some reason it bothered him.

"So, how are you today?" he tried, half way through his not cinnamon roll, which was kind of salty.

"I am as always." she answered "T'Sel, A female Vulcan." She answered with unease, and after some thought she added "This was an odd question."

"Yes, it was." Jim admitted, and drank his not orange juice which was sweet but obviously not orangey.

"Humans are odd." She said after some more deliberation, a light green blush adorning her cheeks.

"Yes, we are." He admitted again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, would love to hear from you, best wishes :-)
"Attention all hands, this is Lieutenant T'Heli, your second pilot speaking.

We are now arriving at our destination, Space base "Ipik". Due to the nature of our mission and the classification of the base, we have positioned the Vokau at a secured distance.

For those of you, who wish to visit the base, there would be three supervised tours launching later today. Please register at Lieutenant commander Kuvac in advance to secure a place onboard one of those tour shuttles.

Also note that communication with Home-world and other locations in the Alpha quarter will now be scarce and heavily regulated. For further details, please contact Commander Sabek, our communication officer and XO.

Lastly, let me bring to your attention that we will now adjust our ship's time to that of the Space base- so now again it is 08:25 am, be minded of that.

Thank you for your attention, T'Heli out."

Jim laid his PADD down on, as he listened to the broadcast. The good news were that he just gained three hours to work on his speech, the bad news were that he was not making much progress.

He deliberated an option to involve Nyota in this, but rejected it after some thought, he didn't want her to be burdened with this responsibility. If he fucks this up, he fucks it up all by himself; it was his job and his neck on the line, not anyone else's.

"Computer, display outside view on screen."

"Affirmative." The AI answered.

Jim turned to look.

Wow.

The Vulcans never ceased to amaze him, Ipik, what a beautiful, strange structure, that space base was, like nothing he had ever seen. It had the Vulcan preferred coloring palate of rosewood shads, and was smooth and elegant like everything they had ever build.

It took the shape of a sewing needle, narrow with one sharp end and an elongated, wide eye at the top. It stood erected in relation to the position of the Vokau, and reflected the green rays of the main stars, but also had a strange purple shimmer to it, it was not too obvious or steady, but took the form of a random flare here and there.

"Computer, magnify image by a factor of 10."

"Request denied."

"Denied?" Jim asked, a bit startled.

"Affirmative."

"Please explain."
"Due to its high classification, the Ipik space base is categorized as a protected object, and as such is limited for inspection; your security clearance does not allow you to manipulate its image."

"Computer, what is the distance between the Vokau and Ipik?"

"Request denied."

"Computer, what is the distance between the Ipik base and the main star of this system?"

"Request denied."

"Keep this up, buddy, and we won't be friends anymore."

"Illogical inquiry, please rephrase."

Before Jim could even wonder what all of that meant, there was a knock on his door.

"Are you decent?" he heard Carol ask.

"Me? Never." He answered and hurried to disconnect the microcontroller from his PADD and hide it under a heap of clothes, and then he threw a not so wet towel over the floor tiles that were still unscrewed and open.

"May we come in?" Carol asked again.

"We?" he slightly opened the door and peeped out to see the blonde officer and her young boyfriend.

"Hello." She beamed at him and waved her hand.

"How may I help you, Dr. Marcus, Mister Parker?"

"Have you heard the latest announcement? There are shuttle tours to the Ipik space base. Dayton and I wish to take one. Do you approve? Care to join us?"

Tempting, but he had so much work to do.

"Have you two finished constructing challenges for this evening team meeting? For each Vulcan team member? The six of them?"

"Yes, we have." She smiled.

Great, because he hasn't even started.

"Then go ahead, enjoy the tour, but I won't be joining you, sorry."

"That is perfectly fine, no worries." Carol said, with even a wider smile.

Dayton smiled too, shyly, and pulled at her arm to whisper something in her ear. She listened and her smile subsided, then nodded towards him and returned her gaze to Jim.

"Can we get in? We want to talk." She repeated her request.

He sighed, but would not refuse them. "Get in." he pushed the door open.

They let themselves inside, and while they were inspecting their captain's messy quarters for the first time, he closed the door behind them.
Carol took a sniff at the air. "This place reeks." She commented. "Smells like a freshman's dorm, I pity your past roommates."

Now, he could not tell her that he removed the microcontroller that was in charge of ventilation, could he?

"Just so you know, Dr. McCoy was even worst than me." He answered. "What is it that you wanted to talk about?" he asked and sat by his desk.

Marcus set on the edge of his bed, and Parker almost stepped on the towel while joining her; if he had done so, he would have fallen into the hole in the floor and might have twisted his ankle.

"I see you've looked into Ipik yourself." Carol commented, glancing at the window. "Do you know that they won't allow us to magnify the image?"

"I know." Jim confirmed.

"Don't you find it strange?" she insisted.

"I do, but we are in Vulcan territory, their territory; their rules." He answered as if it was that simple.

"But what have they got to hide?" Carol insisted. "And if they wish to hide it, why take us here in the first place?"

"Good questions, Dr. Marcus, I'm sure the Vulcans have logical explanations to everything, but by no mean they are obliged to share them with us."

"I just find the whole thing strange, that's all." She shrugged.

"We know Vulcans pretty well, but remember that they are still aliens. So yeah, it is natural that things might feel a little strange. Is that what you came here to talk about?"

The blonde turned to look at Dayton, trying to convince him to speak up with a glare.

"Mr. Parker?" he helped her encourage the kid.

"We are not in any known Vulcan territory." Dayton almost mumbles.

Interesting, Jim wondered, did he picked up on the green star as well? Chekov would have; no doubt about it.

"Care to explain this statement, Yorktown?"

Dayton blushed, but swallowed and nodded. "If we were in known Vulcan territory, I'd be able to locate some constellations that are distant enough to be viewed as the same from every corner of their new territory. I have scanned this space for the last few hours, and I have found none."

"Have you compensated for this system radiation?" Jim asked.

"I did not think about it, sir." Dayton admitted it. "I'll do it later, but I believe it will not change my conclusion."

"Something about this system gives me the heebie-jeebies." Carol added. "I cannot explain, because they took away all our analysis tools, I cannot back it up with facts, but those solar plasma bursts I saw upon arrival, acted strangely, as if the magnetic field here doesn't obey Maxswells'
Jim deliberated the right way to address their concerns.

He would not mock their intelligence by dismissing their observations, but he also wasn't ready to encourage their curiosity and get them into trouble, or give them reason to be alarmed. He had small room to maneuver.

"Carol, Dayton…" He began with a gentle smile on his face. "I am truly proud of you two. You are smart, diligent and above all- independent thinkers. Those qualities are highly valued and I am sure they will serve you well upon the Constitution. However…" there came the twist "There is something every crewmember on board an exploration vessel must understand and come to terms with. You, me, and every other creature in the Federation, were never, are not and will never understand everything. It is imperative that you cope with it and accept it, because otherwise it will make you insane."

They both nodded, Carol bit her lips, and Dayton placed a protective arm around her shoulder.

"You've raised some good questions, and you are right to ask them, but time is not in our hands to explore them, remember that we have a mission here, and we must focus; eyes on the ball, win the 'Plak If Fee'. The rest is static. Ok?"

Carol sighed, Dayton swallowed and nodded.

"The Vulcans are an advanced species, the most advanced in the federation; it is natural that we won't understand everything that's going on. I know you don't like it, I don't like it either; it is a major blow to the ego. But they will not harm us, we are safe here, and we have a mission. So again, when we are home, you can explore whatever you wish to, but here, we win the 'Plak if fee.' Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Carol smiled again.

Dayton huffed and blushed again. "Sorry to have bothered you, captain." He mumbled.

"Not a bother." He reassured him.

"Come on, let's go." Carol said, and got off of bed, but Dayton did not follow. She turned back to look at him with some puzzlement.

"I'll be right there." Dayton said "I just need a moment with the captain in private. Is that alright?" he asked them both.

Jim nodded and smiled, so Carol smiled as well and left the room.

"How may I help you, Yorktown?" Jim asked softly when they were left alone.

Dayton breathed, lowered his eyes and his hand toyed with the wrinkled sheet of his captain's bed.

"Mr. Parker?" Jim asked again when Dayton lingered.

"Sir, remember I had some questions you told me to refer to my peers?"

"Indeed."

"Well, I did, and got some answers, but there's just one left that I couldn't ask anyone but you."
"I'm listening."

"According to the Vulcans calculations, there's a 1.92% chance of a tie between the teams. Have you realized that?"

Hearing this made him frown, because he specifically asked for that information to be removed from their mission's preview. But now it's too late to deny it "Of course I did." He admitted "How did you come by that number?"

"I had breakfast with Vedik, sir, he explained the calculation, I didn't understand everything, but I got the bottom line."

Damn Vedik and his helpfulness.

"Tie would be a very unlikely scenario, Dayton; you need not worry about it."

"But what would happen if it comes to pass? I've looked at the documents you gave us, and there's no reference to that scenario. The Elders would not allow this ritual to end without conclusion, would they?"

Seems like the kid had finally found his courage, and Jim could not be more pleased, if only those were different circumstances. "The ritual will not end with a tie." he confirmed.

"So?" Dayton asked.

"There's no way we'd be that unlucky, you worry for nothing."

"I worry for 1.92%." the young man insisted. "I could not find anywhere a reference to this scenario."

"I know, I've asked the Elders to remove it, for motivational reasons of and they have agreed." There, he admitted to withholding information.

Dayton opened his big hazel eyes at this "When did you do it? Why?"

"Back on the Enterprise, to protect team spirit, I want us to focus on winning! Look, it is not going to happen, alright? We are going to win!"

"Sir, what would happen in case if a tie?" Dayton asked again, and knew he got on Jim's nerves, but was brave enough not to care.

"I don't get your angle." Kirk admitted. "I tell you, time and again, this won't happen, but you still insist."

"I insist, sir, because I think we deserve to know, I deserve to know if there's a chance we are not getting out of here alive."

Dayton's voice shook while speaking, and not with fear, his crew was brave and was ready to face death, proved it time and again. Dayton was angry because his Captain tried to protect him from the truth.

"I would not have agreed to this mission, if there was a risk to my crew." Jim reassured him. "You are all going to get out of this alive; you have my word for it."

"That's good to know, sir." The young Ensign seemed a bit calmer now. "But what happens if we reach a tie?"
Got to give it to him, he's relentless.

"In case of a tie, the Elders will give a tie breaking challenge to the two team leaders."

"What kind of a challenge?"

"I don't know the specifics." Jim shrugged "And I am not going to spend my time wondering about it, and get myself all worked up. I focus on winning, and I suggest you do the same. Now, I believe I have answered all your questions, Mr. Parker." Jim concluded. "And if you don't mind, I have some work to do."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir." Dayton got up swiftly and let himself out the room.

Better for them not to know, in a case of a tie, there will be a duel to death between him and Sobar.
"Alright everybody, let's sum it up." Jim called out as the group broke into small talks; they were starting to run late.

All eyes turned back to him, good, he loved being the center of attention.

"You've done a wonderful job." He concluded "We got some great ideas for challenges- original, creative and… challenging. We'll use three of them today, remember that we've got two rounds of challenges meeting, so let's not use all our ammunition today. We need time to see what happens, learn and adjust. So, we'll start with Miss. Uhura, Miss. Marcus and I. Any questions?"

"Yes." Uhura raised her hand. "Who do I challenge and on what? We have about four challenges for each contestant, that's a lot of options."

"I know." Jim smiled at her. "Use them wisely, choose on instinct, go with your gut feelings."

Nyota frowned at this. "Gut feelings?" She wondered "It's vulcans we're talking about."

"Precisely." He smirked. "That's how I almost always win against Spock on our chess matches. Let me have the first go and follow my lead, ok? More questions? Miss Marcus? Anyone?"

No.

They were all in the clear.

Good.

"Fine, this is the time table- in fifteen minutes we are having the challenge meeting, which will last about an hour. As for tomorrow, we can start working on the challenges given to us today, and tomorrow's night, around 30:00, we will have the opening debate, Elder Soval's challenge, which will be me against Sobar, and should last about an hour and a half."

"Man, that's a killer schedule!" Sulu protested, stretching on his seat. "I don't know about you, but I'm used to go to bed an hour after dinner." He glared at the door to his room with longing.

"We are on Vulcan time table." Uhura reminded him "They only sleep for four hours a night and their daily cycle is 36 earth hours long."

"Don't eat so much at dinner." Yorktown suggested.

"Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong." Sulu answered.

"Ladies and gentlemen, they are going to call us in ten more minutes, please don't waste them arguing." Jim said and got up. "I'm going to use mine for some coffee. Join me, Mr. Sulu." That wasn't a request.

Sulu followed him into their dormitory kitchen, a sulk on his face. "Can you believe the nerve on that guy? The smell of the academy is still stuck on him, and he…"

"Espresso, double, one sugar, extra hot?" Jim asked and Hikaru nodded and his sulk turned into a smile, he was pleased to find out Jim still remembered his preferred dose of caffeine.

Jim prepared their cups at the coffee machine, because Vulcans believed in DIY, and took a sip of
his sixth black coffee, or was this his seventh?

"You worked that machine like a professional barista." Sulu commented.

"Was one, paid the rent back at the academy."

"Thought Admiral Pike covered your bills."

"He offered, I refused, was already pulling enough strings for me."

"I miss him." Sulu hummed.

"Me too. Hey, how was your trip to Ipik?"

Sulu drank from his cup and shrugged. "I don’t know… interesting, strange…"

"Strange?"

"Yeah, felt kind of rushed, and very much controlled, with an overall vibe of- here is Ipik, there you have it, nothing to see here, move along."

Now it was Jim times to drink and hum. "What did you see?"

"We saw some labs, they told us that the main objective of that base was to harvest the star for exotic partials and use them for experiments. We met some crewmen, mostly scientists, showed us the particle accelerator at the center of the station, and got us to the docking bay to see the crafts that were used to harvest the star's plasma, nothing like I've ever seen before."

"Did you ask them why the star was green?"

"What? No!" Sulu rebuked him. "You told me yourself, not to mention it in front of others so we won't get in trouble."

"Just making sure." Jim calmed him down. "Have you been to the eye of the needle?"

"No. Told you, this was a cover-up tour, just for them to check the box."

Nyota approached them before Jim could ask anything else. "We've been called." She said, nervously.

"Good, let's get it over with." He said and gently rubbed her shoulder. "Don’t worry; you'll rock it, just like you always do."

Uhura peeked at him and flashed out a smile almost against her will. "You think so?"

"I know so." He beamed at her. "You cannot help it, it is in your nature."

***0***

When walking into a room, there were those few seconds before someone notice you and forces everyone to rearrange and refer to you. Those seconds were gold, you could learn so much from
them, and Jim never failed to make use of those brief moments of tremendous value, especially on diplomatic missions such as this.

The 'Leave' team was awaiting them in the same observation deck where they had their first meeting and diner, only this time they were accompanied by the Elders leaders of the challenge-Elder T'Pau, Elder Svern and Elder Soval.

The deck itself was empty, except for a circle of chairs in the middle, which instantly reminded Jim of AA meetings he sometimes bumped into as a kid back in Iowa, because of Uncle Frank.

Sobar and T'Heli were talking softly with Elder Svern at the window, which showed a view of the Ipik base, engulfed in green light. They huddled together and seemed a bit secretive, although they could not say anything without the rest of the Vulcans hearing them.

T'Sel, Vedik and Elder T'Pau were seated together and were also engaged in a conversation, although it didn't seem to carry the same weight as the one of the first group.

Soval and Kuvac set a few chairs away from them and also shared a few words, but that seemed like it was only a polite way of not completely ignoring each other.

Spock…

Spock was alone, at the edge of the room, near another, smaller window. He seemed sullen and unapproachable, like a beautiful stranger you'd pick up at a dark, smoky bar, take home to fuck and never see again.

Sobar turned to look at Jim with his cold blue eyes. "On time, for a change." He noted, the rest of his company only glared coldly at him and his crew, dropping the temperature of the room just with their attitude.

As if to compensate for that, Elder Soval looked up with a warm gaze, then he rose from his seat to greet them, which was a significant gesture considering his fragile state.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk." Soval almost smiled, welcoming each teammate with a nod "We didn't have the chance to meet in person yet. I wish you all good luck."

Jim almost frowned at the old man, why didn't he pay them half as much the attention as Elder Svern has paid his team? Seemed a bit unfair. Maybe he was too old for getting this much involved, but he could have sent another Elder from his party to aid them, like Elder Sarek helped Elder Svern with their team.

"Elder Soval, I'm honored to represent your section; I hope to meet your expectations." He answered respectfully.

"If half of what Admiral Archer had said about you is true, you'll have no problem exceeding my expectations." Soval almost smiled again.

Of all the elders, Soval reminded Jim of Spock prime the most, it has been about a year since his passing, and he was sorely missed.

"Please, join us." Elder T'Pau said from her seat. "Would everyone take their place, please? We'd like to begin."

T'Sel and Kuvac moved, and the elders, wearing their white robes, took to the three central seats, Elder Soval sat next to him, to his left.
The 'Leave' team took the opposite side to them, Sobar right next to Elder Svern, all wearing their deep green suits.

The 'Remain' team, in their red suits, occupied the rest of the circle, Nyota next to him, took the chair to his right.

"Welcome everyone, to the first challenge meeting." Elder T'Pau began, sitting at the center of the circle. "As I hope you all know, this meeting is the first of two, and will be used as a platform to exchange and negotiate challenges.

I assume you are all familiar with the rules- every team member must challenge once, and be challenged at least once. Challenges can be individual or for a group, could be one-sided or mutual, but must be fair and well defined.

We have 43.2 minutes left for this meeting, are there any questions? Would the 'Leave' leader, please, begin?"

There was a silence following her request.

Sobar glared at Jim, and he glared right back at him, Sulu got the same treatment from Kuvac and T'Heli studied Nyota with the same regard.

"Thank you, Elder." Said Sobar finally, not getting his eyes off Jim for a second. "I assume it is known to all, that I have reservations regarding the inclusion of none-Vulcans in this challenge."

"I stand with you on this issue." T'Heli confirmed.

"As do I." Kuvac added in his deep voice.

Sobar glanced at his teammates with contentment before continuing,

"That been said, I am well aware this was decided by the elders, and I have no authority to question their logic, however, it would be of tremendous help if we could assess the logical capability of this non Vulcan group.

It would rest my mind at ease to know that we are competing against beings that at least have the logical capacity of an average 10th grade Vulcan student. Would you accept this challenge for your team, Captain Kirk?"

"Please specify the terms." T'Pau insisted.

"Of course." Sobar nodded. "I want Captain James Kirk, along with his team, to take the end-year test of the Vulcan 10th grade. Together they should achieve at least on average a score of 112 out of 150, which is usually achieved by the average 10th grade students. Would you take this challenge, Captain Kirk?"

Jim smirked at him "You've gotta be kidding. 10th grader? That's a bit insulting, don’t you think? Why not take the admission test for the Vulcan academy? That would be a bit more appropriate."

"That would be inadvisable." Vedik, ever so helpful, mumbled from his seat.

"I'd be happy to oblige." Sobar almost snorted. "However, challenges must be fair, as elder T'Pau just stated."
"10th grader's test?" Jim insisted, looking at Elder Soval for some form of encouragement, but finding none. "Are you trying to humiliate us, Commander Sobar?"

"I find this whole ritual humiliating, Captain, but to answer your question- no, I am not trying to do as such. Will you accept my challenge?"

Jim would, but his ego wouldn't.

"Let's do this." Elder Svern interferred. "If you achieve an excellent grade on this challenge, 140 out of 150 or above, I give you my word that one of my team would challenge your team to the Vulcan academy admission test. Would that be agreeable?"

"It would, and I accept the challenge." Jim breathed, his ego barely satisfied.

"Next challenger, please." T'Pau hurried them up.

"That would be me." Vedik hurried to answer. "I would like to challenge Captain James Kirk as well."

"Be my guest." Jim turned his gaze towards the Vulcan scholar.

"I have been talking with Spock about you, Mr. Kirk." Vedik continued. "And I find you fascinating."

Yeah? Join the club.

"He told me about your nightly routine, playing some sort of a human strategy board game, which is called Chess, am I pronouncing it correctly?"

"You are." Jim confirmed.

"I wish to have the same experience with you." Vedik could hardly contain his excitement, practically hunching forward at the edge of his seat.

So now I am an experience?

"How about a tournament?" The Vulcan continued "Every night until the conclusion of this ritual, 21 games, and the one to achieve more victories would win the challenge."

Jim stretched in his seat and pinched his nose, what he really wanted to do is to get up and start running some laps, to vent out his nervousness.

"I don’t know, Mr. Vedik… 21 games? Seems like a huge commitment, remember that I'm the team leader and I have much to do."

Yes, like hacking your system and steal your stuff, lots and lots to do.

"A logical remark." Vedik agreed "Can we settle for 17 games?"

"More likely 7."

"But that would be unfair." Vedik insisted "Remember that I must learn to play while competing against you."

Bitch, please.
"I am sure Spock would be more than happy to assist you, Vedik." Jim said and threw a leer at Spock, who didn’t seem too keen on the idea. "He knows how to play, and better yet, he knows how I play. So 7?"

"That is a very logical offer, thank you." Vedik was clearly thrilled, his eyes glittered and his mouth gaped. "11 games, with the help of Spock, my final offer."

"Agreed." Jim said, wanting this negotiation to be done.

"We'll begin tomorrow, 33:00 at my quarters." Vedik concluded.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Mr. Vedik." Jim smiled with unease "But I think you should dedicate some time for practicing before jumping in. Take a day or two to learn the game and email me when you are ready."

"Accepted." Vedik seemed a bit disappointed, but the logic of Jim's suggestion was sound.

Jim glanced at Spock to see a quick angered flare lit up in his eyes.

No, probably just his imagination.

But let's irritate him some more, just for the fun of it.

"You got yourself a date, Mr. Vedik." Jim confirmed, with a big emphasis on the 'date' word and a bright shiny smile.

Of course it flew over Vedik's head, and drilled through Spock's.

Or so he hoped, and he also hoped that the next Vulcan would pick someone else to challenge.

"This is good progress, would anyone else of the 'Leave' team wish to declare another challenge?" elder T'Pau asked as Vedik settled back in his seat.

"I do." T'Heli answered, locking her dark eyes on Jim.

Oh, great, he fought his urge to flinch at the cold gaze, and nodded towards her.

"Mr. Sulu and Mr. Parker are your main helm crew upon the Enterprise, Am I correct?"

"Yes, they are, Lieutenant T'Heli."

"I wish to test their skills and team work, if that is agreeable. I offer a contest, the helm of the Vokau vs the helm of the Enterprise, Commander Sobar and I against Mr. Parker and Mr. Sulu."

"Please specify the terms." Elder Svern asked.

"Affirmative. The teams will hold a race at max impulse speed around the main star of this system, upon a Vokau shuttle of the Ta'hal type, the team that achieves the best time wins."

Jim gazed at Sulu, then at Yorktown, Sulu looked irritated, Dayton seemed unpleased just the same. Damn it, one of the shuttle pilots that brought them here must have tipped off the 'Leave' team about his dysfunctional helms duo, heck, might even be Spock.

Jim glanced at said Vulcan, and got a blank glare in return.

"Mr. Sulu; that would be your call." He said with an annoyed grunt.
"I accept the challenge, of course." Sulu started "But I want Captain Kirk as my co-pilot. At Starfleet academy everyone on the command track is also trained as a shuttle pilot, So Captain Kirk here; is just as qualified helmsman as Ensign Parker."

Come on, what are you doing, Hikaru? Please don’t drag me into this; I got enough on my hands already.

"Unacceptable." T'Heli answered without blinking "It is the helms crew I wish to challenge, not the commanding team."

Sulu send a distressed gaze at Jim, begging him to intervene.

Fuck it! They have to grow up, the both of them!

"T'Heli is within her right to challenge the helms team." Jim said with a sigh "But I believe that one race will not be fair. My crew needs time to study the Vulcan shuttle and learn how to operate it. So a Training session and a tournament of 5 races is my demand. 5 rounds around the star; and the best average result win."

T'Heli and Sobar exchanged glares.

"Agreed." T'Heli answered. "Simulation tutorials will be provided prior to the tournament."

"Thank you." Sulu said. "Very much appreciated."

"We have no further challenges for today." Sobar declared.

"If that is the case, let's hear the 'Remain' team's challenges next." Elder T'Pau commented, and again, all eyes were on Jim.

"My turn?" He asked, almost wiggling in his chair, trying to gather his thoughts like herding a mass of misbehaving Tribbles. Now was not the time to fuck things up.

He took a deep breath and focused on Sobar and how he'd like to make him squirm, but not in the good way, so he smirked at the Vulcan until he blinked his inner eyelids.

"Mr. Sobar, I understand your need to assess our logic capacity, I do, really, it is only logical. However, I want to test you in a similar manner, I want you and the rest of your team, to prove me that you are capable of understanding feelings and also able to communicate them."

Sobar recoiled a little. "I fail to understand the relevance."

"Well..." Jim shrugged as if indifferent "Your kind have been observing the human race for thousands of years, have been in direct contact with us for over a century, and now you want to disengage everything human? I just want to make sure you know what you are about to toss into the garbage can of history."

"And how do you suggest we'd show you that we understand and able to manifest emotions?"

"Easily." Jim shrugged again, puffing and rolling his eyes. "Humans believe that one of the best ways to display emotions is through music. I want you and your team to pick up a human song, preferably a classic, and perform it to the best of your ability. If you succeed, you get my two points."

Sobar almost snort at the suggestion. "Am I to explain why this offered challenge does not meet the
criteria?" he asked the elders.

"Please do." Jim answered.

Sobar only shook his head. "Nice try, Captain, next suggestion?"

"Are you refusing a challenge?" Jim asked almost with glee. "That's a -1 points for you, buddy."

"Sobar is in the right." Of all elders, it was Soval to back him up.

Thank you very much, not.

"There is no way of objectively judging the outcome of this offered challenge. How can you judge a display of emotions? How do you judge human music? We have no objective tools for this evaluation."

"Then let us be the judges, me and my team, we will vote on it." Jim offered. "We'd recognize a good performance when we see one. I promise you we'd be impartial."

"This is beyond ridicules." Sobar hissed.

"I find logic in Captain's Kirk offer." Elder T'Pau said with some hesitation. "We should rely on the humans' judgment, or else, having them in this ritual was an error to begin with."

"It was an error, and still is." Sobar had to say.

"Elder T'Pau's logic is sound." Soval said. "Do you agree, Elder Svern?"

"I would not disagree." Said the last of the elders.

"It is decided then, this challenge is valid, and refusing it would cost you a point, Commander Sobar." Elder T'Pau concluded.

"This is an unfair challenge." Sobar insisted. "We know nothing of human music!"

"I do." Spock said; the first words to come out of his mouth in this meeting.

God, did Jim miss the sound of his voice.

"You do?" Sobar asked, his voice did not betray relief or disappointment.

"Indeed, as a child, Lady Grayson introduced me to a variety of human music." Spock explained. "I have kept some samples for documentation."

"Fascinating." Vedik could not help himself.

Between all of them, Jim noted, Vedik and T'Sel showed the least amount of self control, he might find a way to use this to his advantage at some point in the future.

"I estimate we'll need a few days to rehearse before we are ready for the challenge." Spock continued.

"Three days?" Jim suggested; the first words he directed towards Spock in quite a while.

Spock regarded him and nodded. "Acceptable."

"I have no further objections to this challenge."Sobar concluded. "It will be met."
"Very well." Elder T'Pau said, moving her head to make eye contact with each one seated in that circle, after that pause, she continued "Would anyone of the 'Remain' team like to declare another challenge?"

Jim glanced at Nyota, she seemed pale and stressed, very unbecoming, and it made him worry. "Lieutenant Commander?" he encouraged her gently.

She nodded firmly, and then overcame her momentary panic. "I wish to challenge T'Sel." She declared.

T'Sel looked up and turned to gaze at Nyota. "Yes?"

"As Captain Kirk before me, I also wish to test your understanding and evaluation of the human culture, I hope you will not resist this time."

T'Sel looked at Sobar and he clenched his jaw ever so slightly. "We will grant this." He answered.

Nyota seemed very relieved now, seems like her Captain had done all the heavy lifting and carved an eraser path for the rest of them.

"I understand that you are interested in linguistics, art and literature. Am I correct?"

"You are." T'Sel confirmed.

"Then I wish to challenge you on it, I wish for you to translate the first ten pages of Hamilton's 'Lost paradise'. If your translation is adequate and catches the spirit of the text, you'll win the challenge."

"I raise again the question of the criteria." T'Sel said in an almost bored voice.

"I'll be the judge." Nyota offered, and since there was already precedence, no one objected.

T'Sel again exchanged blank glares with Sobar. "I accept the challenge, Miss Uhura and return the favor. I challenge you to translate an old ballade of a legendary ancient poet named Supat, he lived at the time where Surak's teaching was beginning to spread. His poem 'Lament number 447' was a milestone in Vulcan culture. I wish for you to translate it and submit it to my evaluation."

Nyota glanced at Jim and he shrugged, seemed fair enough.

"Agreed." Nyota nodded.

After a short pause, Elder T'Pau spoke again "We have 6.7 minutes left, anyone else wishes to step forwards?"

Now it was Carol's turn to look at Jim, but she smiled and looked very confident.

"That would be me, Elder T'Pau." Carol said, raising her hand. "I wish to Challenge T'Sel as well, this time as an engineer."

T'Sel did not look bothered, she locked eyes with Carol. "I'm listening."

"Well, I want to test your capability at reconstructing one of humanity greatest engineering achievements, and see if you could do so in time for the end of this challenge. If Vulcan's engineering is so far superior to that of humans, this will come as no problem."

"Go on." T'Sel seemed intrigued.
"I wish for you to build the first Lunar Lander, not from scratch, but to assemble it from its main parts. I will supply the blueprints and you could manufacture the main parts via replicators."

"That is a significant task, May I take Kuvac and Vedik as my assistants?"

"Yes, you may."

"Then I…"

"A moment, T'Sel…” Sobar interfered. "I suggest a better criteria than a time table."

"Which is?" Asked Elder T'Pau.

"A contest, Dr. Marcus will assemble a team as well and construe the first delta Vega Lander in a similar way. The team which finishes first wins."

"Please clarify your statement that this is a better criteria." Elder T'Pau demanded.

"Time consumption." Sobar answered. "A contest would motivate the team to complete the task in far less time than if it done as an insulated mission. I value time efficiency as any other Vulcan."

Great, more work for us, Jim sighed inwards, and glared daggers at Dr. Carol so she wouldn’t dare to pick him up for her team.

"Sobar's Suggestion is logical." T'Pau decided "A contest it is, Dr. Marcus, please chose two team mates as your assistants."

"I'd take Mr. Sulu and Mr. Sharel."

Good choice, Dr. Marcus, so very proud of you, Jim smiled at her, and she batted her eyes at him with mockery.

"Anyone else?" Elder Svern took his turn to manage the timetable.

"That would be all for now." Jim announced.

"Affarmitive." Elder T'Pau confirmed "I will sum this meeting up now:

Green1 challenged team Red for 2 points,

Green6 challenged Red1 for 2 points,

Green2 and 1 challenged Red3 and 6, for 2 points,

Red1 challenged team Green for 2 points,

Red2 and Green4, mutual challenge for 4 points,

Red4, 3 and 5 challenged Green2, 3 and 6 for Red4 for 2 points.

Total of 14 points are now on the table.

Does anyone object this summery?"

Elder T'Pau waited but there was no one to object.

"The schedule for this set of challenges will be provided at the end of this shift, in 5.3 hours, I
assume it will cover a week's time. We will meet again this time tomorrow for the opening debate at the main conference hall.” Elder Svern announce.

"This meeting is adjourned." Elder T'Pau announced.
"Come on, Jim, time to go." Someone shouted from the outside of his room.

He woke up with a gasp and tried to understand where he was, the Vulcan flagship, his dormitory room.

Was it safe? Yes, the large towel still covered the hole in the floor, and his microcontroller was somewhere inside a pile of dirty or maybe clean laundry. Good. He was resting his head on his desk, next to his activated PADD, displaying his opening speech which he was supposed to review and memorize. Not so good.

Damn it, he only wanted to rest his eyes for five minutes, he was probably coming down with the flu, might have caught it somewhere in Yorktown, great timing.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, yeah, are we late?" he reached for the door and let Sulu in.

"Not yet, but we might be." Hikaru entered with caution "The guys are waiting, we've got five minutes."

Jim searched and found his red outfit, tried to fix his wrinkled pants before putting them on, and then reached for the red jacket of his uniform, and put it on as well, all the while Sulu gazed at him with a concern.

"Better wash your face before we leave." His friend suggested.

"Yeah, right." Jim said and stumbled into his bathroom.

Facing the mirror over the sink, he noticed a trail of dry saliva stretching between his lips and left cheek, charming. He washed his face, with Sulu at the doorstep watching him with worry.

"Are you sure everything's ok? Seems like you're under a lot of pressure." Hikaru spoke over the noise of running water. "I'd be more than happy to help, if you only tell me what's going on."

"Nothing's going on." Jim mumbled into a towel, drying his face. "Now excuse me, I gotta take a leak." He almost slammed the door in Hikaru's face.

"Is something wrong with your ventilation system?" Sulu asked when Jim emerged out of the bathroom.
"No, why?" Jim grabbed his PADD and placed a hand on Sulu's back, it was a friendly pat, a shove out of the room or anything in between.

He made sure to lock the door before leaving.

He then rejoined Sulu, who wondered why Jim tested the lock three times.

His team was awaiting him outside of their rooms, in the common hall, and they all took the short walk to the lift and rode it in with tense silence.

When the lift doors opened at deck 7, it revealed three Vulcan guards waiting to escort them to the main conference hall, and with a surprise, Jim also noted two member of the council of elders awaiting them there as well, one of which was Soval, and the other he did not recognize.

"Live long and prosper." Soval greeted the group with a soft smile; the other elder only raised his hand with the Ta'al. "Allow me to introduce to you Elder Sadeg, from our 'Remain' party."

The elder was younger that Soval, had an iron grey hair and pale brown eyes.

"We have come to show our support and to wish you good luck with your opening speech." Elder Sadeg said.

Jim almost grimaced at this; he knew Vulcans did not believe in luck. He also knew this was a rare opportunity to talk to Soval, because they were not allowed to approach the elders. And lastly, he knew he only had time for one question before they reach the conference hall, so he had to pick a good one.

"Thank you, Elder Sadeg. Elder Soval, may I ask you a question?" and he knew he was rude for not waiting for approval before pressing on, but he could not deal with a refusal "What do you think we, as non Vulcans, have in advantages; which made you choose us for this Plak If Fee?"

Elder Soval smiled again. "Those are three questions, son."

Jim shrugged. "Could not help it."

Now Soval openly chuckled. "Answering those questions might jeopardize said advantages, I'm afraid." He spoke in riddles, as all Vulcans did, and time was up, they found themselves in front of the entrance to the hall.

Jim breathed out his disappointment, as Captain Setal greeted them with a scolding, mentioning that they were 46.7 seconds late.

"I might try to answer it later." Elder Soval promised as the rest of the team walked into the hall. "We still have some time, now let us take our positions."

So they walked in together, Jim appreciated the open support, and certainly was grateful for it, it was one thing to walk into that hall alone and another to be accompanied by the Vulcan head of your party.

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There were less Vulcans attendees for this event than for the opening ceremony, they only occupied half of the seats in the conference hall. All the elders were there, in their ceremonial white robes, but there was also another distinct group that wore golden robes, about twenty of them, and Jim wondered what their function was.

Both the green team and the red team took seats in the front row, on either side of Captain Setal, the elders were seated in the second row, and the golden robes sat in the third.

The stage was lit softly as before, only this time there were three podiums placed on it, two in the front line and the one in the center; was a bit behind them. The left podium was already occupied by Sobar, who looked a bit bored, but Jim knew that he was probably pissed because of the delay.

"Accompany me to the stage, please?" Soval requested.

"Of course." Jim nodded and gently held the elder's arm as they climbed the few stairs towards the stage. He was careful not to touch bare skin, although there was little chance of that, the robes were thick and Soval, like the rest of the Vulcans upon the Vokau wore gloves.

He led the elder to the center podium, then took his place on the one to the right, drawing his PADD from his jacket's inner pocket and placing it on the platform in front of him, all the time, his heart hammered in his chest, and his mind chanted – 'Don't fuck this up, Don't fuck this up!'

"Revered elders, dear assembled." Soval opened his speech. "Welcome to the opening challenge of the Plak If Fee. This is my challenge and I chose it to be a debate between the two team leaders, Captain James Kirk of the 'Remain' team and Commander Sobar of the 'Leave' team.

"The subject of the debate is of course- What would be a more logical choice for New Vulcan, staying in the UFP or leaving it.

"Now, I know this kind of debate was held in countless opportunities before, and we probably know all pro and con arguments by hard at this point, or else we would not have resorted to the Plak If Fee.

"And yet, I believe this debate has merit, because it allows us to hear a different perspective this time, the perspective of the Federation, delivered by a human, at first hand.

"This debate will be held by classic Vulcan rules. Both speakers will be given an opening speech, then there will be a debate, conducted by myself, and lastly, the attendees will have a chance at asking questions.

"The team in gold, presented here today, are all part of the 'Undecided' camp, they will be the judges of this debate, and will have a private vote afterwards, to decide who was the most convincing speaker. The result will be published an hour after the conclusion of this debate, and the winner will earn my 2 points for the challenge.

"Let us begin with the leader of the 'Remain' Team, Mr. Kirk if you…"

"Please, allow me one notification before we begin." Sobar interrupted before Jim could even start.

There was a mumble in the crowd; confused by this obstruction of protocol.

"Revered elder T'Pau, I urge you to grant me this minor deviation." Sobar insisted, glaring straight into T'Pau's eyes.

Jim tried to study the Vulcan, but as always, could not find any clue of emotion in his body
language, or in the tone of his voice, those damn Vulcans, but the interruption itself was a major giveaway, as well as the reaction of dismay in the crowd.

Sobar was not playing by the rules; he was a brilliant and unpredictable rival, the toughest type to beat.

Elder T'Pau regarded the young Vokau pilot for a brief moment, contemplating his request, and then she slowly nodded. "You may add your notification, Commander Sobar, just be quick about it."

"Thank you, elder. Respected council, honored guests and witnesses, ever since I've learned that none Vulcans will take part in this sacred ritual I have struggled to understand the logic behind it. I have failed.

"This failure is mine and mine alone, it implies nothing on the elder's logic or diminish the prestige of our rival team. However, I cannot treat the 'Remain' team as if I'm facing vulcans.

"I will not speak to them as such; I will not assume that they are familiar with Vulcan culture or sensitive to Vulcan nuances, and I will also not hold myself or my team back, in an effort to compensate for that.

"If that is in contradiction with this ritual protocol, I am willing to step down as a team leader and let someone else take my place."

There was a moment of silence, and everybody watched elder T'Pau to see how she will react. She kept her expiration sealed as her mouth shut for a long while.

"It is illogical to make such an announcement at this point in time, commander Sobar." She stated with calm, after significant quiet deliberation.

"My apologies." Sobar answered "I have assumed that I would be able to come to terms with it at the given timeframe, but as I said, I have failed."

"Yet, you took the oath." The elder insisted.

"Yes, I did."

"No one is expecting you or anyone else to treat the 'Remain team' as Vulcans, son." Elder Soval intervened from his stand. "Vulcans are Vulcans, Humans are humans and Andorians are… well, Andorians."

"Sobar is only asking permission to act freely; without taking into considerations factors that are not within his control, or understanding." Elder Svern explained and turned to look at the Elder Vulcan upon the stage. "Elder Soval, you have requested humans to take part in this ritual, and commander Sobar is struggling while trying to find the balance between your demand and the demand for this ritual to be conducted fairly."

Soval gazed at Svern and almost smile "This ritual will be conducted fairly, it is the council's responsibility to make sure of that, as we all agreed to include non vulcans. I recall you voting in favor as well."

"My curiosity, among other factors, was why I withdrew my opposition." Elder Svern answered.

Jim noted there was an undercurrent tension between Svern and Soval, and whatever was Sobar's point that he was trying to get across, he didn't understand it. As a human, Jim had only the
slightest idea what this argument was all about.

Vulcans.

Go figure.

"Time is short and this discussion is pointless." T'Pau concluded. "Commander Sobar, your notification is accepted. You were never expected to treat the 'Remain team' as Vulcans, and will not be held accountable for this ritual's way of conduction; however, you may not step down after taking the blood oath."

Sobar bowed slightly, his face blank and his gaze unaffected "Yes, revered Elder."

If Sobar had achieved something by this or was just publicly scolded, Jim could not tell.

Elder T'Pau threw a quick glance at the rest of the council by her side. "If there are no further remarks, I wish for this debate to begin."

"Yes, Elder T'Pau." Soval agreed and turned to Jim. "Captain Kirk, you may go ahead."

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Jim needed some time to collect his thoughts, and get back into debate mode again, after Sobar's interruptions.

Maybe this was his intention? Just throwing him off? Breaking his concentration? Was it known to him that he had attention issues? Did he have access to his medical files? Unlikely, those were private. So he was probably counting on it as a general human trade, which was kind of brilliant and nasty at the same time, but also…

"Captain Kirk?" Elder Soval brought him back to the ground.

"Yes, sir." He breathed deeply, man, he was tired.

Don't fuck it up! Don't fuck it up!

Shut up, I know!

"Respected council of elders, 'Leave' team members, Vokau crewmen, and honored guests, I grieve with thee." He opened; his voice came out hoarse to his surprise, seems like he could not control his emotions as well as he hoped to.

"There are no words to describe the loss, the pain and sorrow you must all feel. Each and every one of you has lost loved ones, bond mates, memories, and home.

"Sobar is right, I am a psi null human, sure we had our own disasters and misfortunes, but never did we have our whole planet crumble into itself, and implode into oblivion. Please don't resent me as I try to use my emotions and meek logic to have a shadow of an understanding of what you've all been through, then and ever since.

"I stand here today as a human, and also as the UFP representative, and I am at a great disadvantage because of both. I am aware that you hold the UFP guilty of mishandling the
situation, from its start with that historical distress call and as it stand today at the restoration efforts on New Vulcan, which you find lacking.

"I have read many reports on those subjects, I have spoken to Starfleet high command and to Vulcan representatives, and I am familiar with your arguments.

"However, whatever those arguments are, I want you to know, that I believe with all my heart, that the Federation is truly committed to New Vulcan's best interest.

"The system is not perfect, it is not as efficient as we'd like it to be; things are not moving fast enough and of course, that infamous red tape. We are not perfect, but we are here, with you, together we will restore the great nation of Vulcan and see it rise again.

"Now is not the time to leave the UFP, you need our protection, since 70% of your starship fleet was destroyed, in the attempted of defending Vulcan against the Narada. You need our technical support since New Vulcan is only 35% terraformed to suit your needs. You depend on UFP trade to get 80% of your raw materials, 75% of your borders are patrolled by star fleet ships.

"You are extremely unbalanced, demographically speaking- 48% of your population are elderly people, and less than 7% are under age; also worth noting- females of reproductive age only make 19% of your population. You know where you should focus your efforts at the moment.

"So as I said, now is not the time to leave the federation. You are, of course, free to leave at all times, but leave when ready, not at this vulnerable state.

"The Federation has let you down, the federation lost your trust, you are angry, resentful and hurt, but those are all feelings. Use your logic.

"You need the federation, at this point, you depend on it. And that is alright, that is perfectly logical, that is why the federation was created to begin with- to protect and nurture its members.

"I plea to you, let us do our job.

"The system is not perfect, but let us improve it together, to your benefit and to the benefited of all members for generations to come. The federation has faith in you; please don't lose faith in us."

There was a moment of silence following his speech.

He had to close his microphone, because he was breathing heavily, as if he just finished a marathon. He felt flushed and dizzy, like his body was burning, the floor danced under his feet. Was it because of the excitement? The strong gravity pull? The hot, arid air? Or, maybe they were right, Sulu and the others, maybe he was coming down with something?

He tried to focus on the Vulcans dressed in gold, but as expected, couldn't get a read from them, as they set unmoving, like marble statues, frozen in their seats.

"Thank you, Captain Kirk." Even elder Soval's voice hinted nothing. "We will now hear the 'Leave' team leader, Commander Sobar if you please."

Unlike Jim, Sobar seemed on top of his game, strong, alert and focused.

"Thank you, Elder, honored assembly, 'Remain' leader, Captain Kirk." Sobar now turned to look at him with his cold blue eyes, and a hint of a smirk on his lips. "I praise your noble effort at reasoning, it was inadequate but still worthy of commendation." Jim glared back at him, still panting, and his eyes flared with anger.
Fuck you, you arrogant prick!

Fuck you all! Leave the Federation and see if I care!

Sobar turned back to look at the crowd, that hint of a smug lingered on his lips.

"I believe we've just had a demonstration which supports my earlier claim. I cannot pretend that the 'Remain' team are Vulcans and cannot relate to them as such, so if you'd excuse me, I will adopt a more 'human' style for this debate." Sobar started.

What a stuck-up asshole you are!

This is what was just demonstrated here.

"There's a human saying that I am quite fond of, stating, and allow me to paraphrase- insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting different results."

Jim knew that phrase, it belonged to Albert Einstein's, a legendary ancient human genius, and he wondered what might have been his view of Vulcans.

Sobar continued.

"When do parties enter a mutual beneficial agreement? When they are convinced it would serve their best interests. Two conditions must be met in order to reach such an agreement, one- all parties must define and state their best interests, two- every party must be willing and able to assist the others, working towards their best interests."

Damn it!

Sobar gave him some bullet points to his speech, and indeed he was going to talk about Vulcan interests. Jim spent hours trying to gather enough facts to show where the Vulcan best interest should lay, but this was a complete new strategy. Jim should have known the Vulcan would find a way to bypass his efforts, but where was he going with this?

"The Vulcans and Humans, along with the Andorians and the Tellarite have founded the UFP in the year of 2161, in order to promote peace and prosperity in the region at the aftermath of the Earth-Romulan war.

"Founding the federation should have been a mutual beneficial agreement, but it was not, not for the Vulcans anyway. Both criteria for this agreement were not met at that point- first- Earth, Tellar and Andoria never openly stated their true interests, nor did they define them honestly, and second- said parties were never willing nor able to help Vulcan work towards their goals.

"It was an error to get involved with forming the federation to begin with. I attribute that error to two factors in the Vulcan psychic, first- is the pretension notion that we are the ones in charge of promoting peace and logic throughout the galaxy, trying to spread the teaching of Surak even among unsuitable races.

"Second- is our exaggerated confidant that if we had survived the pre-reformed horrors, nothing and no one would be able to hurt us, so we can take any risk while interacting with other species, and commit to any burden without fear of consequence.

"The Narada incident which led to the destruction of our home planet was the highest price we could have ever imagined paying for our false assumptions."
"Now we live in a never ending nightmare, and the only way to wake up is to correct the errors made by our ancestors.

"Making first contact with humans was a mistake, getting involved at the creation of the federation was a mistake, remaining would be a mistake.

"Are the Vulcans on the verge of insanity?"

Sobar concluded and nodded towards the crown, standing still and erect.

Elder Soval bowed his head while listening to the 'Leave' team leader speak, and now he lifted up his eyes and looked at him, then he looked at Jim.

"Thank you, Commander Sobar. We now enter the debate part, which will be structured as such. Each team leader may make one comment about what the other had said, and ask a question, that will be answered by the other before he can make his next comment. I ask you to be efficient, brief and fully honest. I will stop this debate when I come to the conclusion it had exhausted itself. Any clarification needed?"

"None." Sobar said.

Jim only shook his head.

"Very well, Captain Kirk, please begin."

Wow… this was a tough one.

So much like a verbal chess game, and Sobar was a brilliant player, placed him in a very difficult position, with little space to maneuver.

But if you wish to win a debate, you cannot go around in circles, like in chess, constricting traps and forming distractions, because you have to make an impact, something to grab the audience attention by, so your message would be drilled into their minds, and they will remember it and wonder about it, whether you're right or wrong.

"Commander Sobar, thank you for your compliment earlier, I do make every effort to be as logical as I can. I hope I understood your speech correctly, because, if I do, you claim that there is a direct line leading from the formation of the Federation to the destruction of Vulcan.

"I find it highly illogical to stretch such a line. Life is not a game of domino, the bricks do not align in such way that if you push one down, a hundred years later, there will fall another brick, just in a predicted and constructed way. Life is random, it is complicated, and it is a chaotic system. You can do your best and fail, or do nothing and succeed. Are you that sure, that joining the federation had doomed the Vulcans?"

"I am positive." Sobar answered "Although I know some of my kind would not agree. Until now, no one was able to produce a substantial calculation to describe the correlation between those two events. This is one of the reasons this ritual is conducting.

"However, regardless of my being right or wrong, this is a futile argument. The past is the past; no one is able or allowed to change it. It is the future that worries me, the future of the Vulcan people, my people. I want us to have a real future, a living, breathing future, and passing the baton to the humans just would not do. I refuse to be satisfied with securing our legacy alone, such as some Remainers aspire to. I want a vital, sustainable, real future.
"If you think we can achieve it by staying in the federation, it is your burden to proof, Mr. Kirk."

"But I have," Jim said. "Did you even pay attention to my opening speech? I have stated some of many facts which show exactly that. Leaving the federation at this point would leave you with what? No allies, no resources, isolated, surrounded by hostile powers, outnumbered. Tell me how this is logical, Commander Sobar, I truly want to know."

"Facts are fickle; don’t you know that, Mr. Kirk? You can always topple them, if you put in some effort. Let me address one of your facts. You say we are dependent on the federations for recourses? That it true. The cause and effect however? We are bound to the federation by tread treaties and regulations, and we are forbidden from establishing new trades with new partners just because they are not members of the federation.

"The problem does not end here, though. After the destruction of Vulcan and as time progresses, our federation 'allies' have become more and more bold with their bargaining. In the past, we have been able to trade goods for goods, but now, that we have no extra goods, they want to trade goods for technology, goods for scientific advancements, and when we tell them that we are unwilling, or that they would only misuse it, what do they do? Try and steal it."

Oh, fuck.

"I can provide evidence for this claim, the Tellarites and Andorians are at the lead of this trend, but they are definitely not alone."

"I am sure this is a fixable problem, Mr. Sobar." Jim mumbled.

"I was not yet finished." Sobar almost scolded him. "A few months ago, we needed to acquire a few tons of anti-matter for our fleet. We went through the known procedures and were informed that our request was pushed back a full year, because a new colony at Zeta Reticuli was at a critical state and won the priority.

"Also, few months ago, we were asked to supply a medical ship to assist another colony at 61 Cygni to aid with a radioactive disaster. We lost three doctors to that incidence, one was with child.

"Now I ask you this- do you really care? Are we truly a priority to the federation? Are you committed to our reconstruction? Or do you still see us as the mature, older, stronger race that must aid you with all its might? Until that might is no more?"

"Commander Sobar..." Jim asked, in horror "Are you presenting those allegations for the first time to a UFP representative?"

He truly wanted to know, because if it turns out this was already in the known, he was going to raise hell at headquarters.

"That's irrelevant." Sobar answered coldly. "Whether the answer is 'yes' or 'no', I have lost faith in the federation. It is spread too thin, mishandled, surviving one calamity after the other; woos war, and works against its own declared policies. It cannot be trusted."

"I beg to differ." Jim insisted "It might need some adjustments, but it is perfectly reliable."

"Funny, to hear that from you," Sobar almost smirk again. "A Tarsus 4 survivor. How could you, of all people, trust the Federation with anything?"

Jim could hardly believe his ears, his vision went black, and he reached for the stand so he would not collapse. "How did you come by this information?"
"This is besides the point."

"How DID YOU come by this information?" Jim found himself almost shouting.

"It was mentioned in your CV, supplied by Starfleet." Sobar answered reluctantly.

"Let us move to the Q&A part of this debate." Elder Soval intervened.

But it was too late.

Jim was twelve again, hopeless and starving, he was running and running, until he had no more air in his lungs, so he turned around to watch as two of Kodos' thugs were closing the distance between them.

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They hid in the forest, a bunch of them kids. At twelve years old, he was the oldest the lot. He promised their parents that he will take good care of everyone, you see, Kodos had deemed everyone under the age of eighteen useless, and being useless only meant standing in front of a phaser set on kill.

They hid in the forest, crazy with fear, lost, some mourning the death of their useless parents, and in case of Jim- his aunt and her husband, which did not make it to the Eugenics standards for living, as set by Kodos.

They ate what they could find, fruit grass, and leaves; whatever they could lay their hands on, even small carcasses of animals. They ate even if it only sated them for a few minutes, even if it made them sick minutes after, even if they risked death, because hunger was worst, hunger was slowly turning them into little monsters.

But winter was coming, and the food was running low. After one horrible night, where a little girl of five wept in his arms for hours because of hunger and despair, and all he wanted to do was kill her so she would shut up, and hey, make her his breakfast while at it, he know he could hide no longer.

There was this warehouse, at the edge of the forest where Kodos had kept whatever was left of the harvest as well as the emergency stock, it was well guarded, but hey, better face death than become a monster.

They chased him and caught him, the guards, and they made a deal. He'd get to have a bag full of canned goods once a week, and have an ass full of cock in return.

And he was grateful for it, believe it or not, those men could have easily killed him, and if Kodos had ever found out, they were facing death as well. But he was this beautiful child then, as his mother called it, it was his angelic phase, long blonde hair, bright blue eyes, lush pink lips, he was irresistible, actually, they were not to blame.

It was his choice, his call, and the responsibility was his alone.
An hour later, Sobar was announced the winner of the debate.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your time, I hope you enjoyed this update, my best wishes to all :-(
Jim tried it once more, and watched the parameters displayed on the graph. Both the temperature and the CPU load lines were surging exponentially until they reached their upper limit and the whole damn thing crashed! Again!

He kicked the wall with his foot in frustration, this was his fifth attempt just tonight, joining at least twenty more attempts at the past few days, ever since he obtained the microcontroller and turned his room into a hazard zone.

He just couldn’t find a way of balancing both the microcontroller primary function and the background programs he needed it to run, it created too much load, and it heated up and crushed every single time.

He’d give it this one more night before calling quits and turning to find a different path into the Vokau mainframe. Too much time already wasted.

Think, James T, think!

Outside of the box!

Outside of this stupid little box that cannot sustain all your clever programming.

Well, what can one expect of a ventilation microcontroller? No one would create a smart ventilation controller, not even the humans, it didn't make any sense. All it had to do was minding the air pressure and velocity. It was not designed to do such a complicated job as a…say… a replicator, so why bother investing in it more computing power than necessary?

There was so much code it could hold.

But it happened to be that this was the only piece of hardware he found in his room that was connected to the outside mainframe. Unfortunately.

So, minimizing is the key here.

But we've already tried it, the program is as minimized as it gets!

This damn thing is useless!

Or…

Or!

Or, it could be used to locate, connect and hijack another MCU! Say a replicator's MCU! Then upload all the programming to that zombie replicator and use it as a buffer and a mediator?
Interesting, James T, go on.

It would, however, take a whole lot of time.

Like feeding an elephant with a teaspoon.

But I got time.

Three weeks time.

Three weeks is workable, if you give up sleep completely, that is.

Man, I want some sleep.

Or alcohol, whichever comes first.

Ok, alcohol first, coding for replicator's take over after. Sleep? Fuck sleep.

Alcohol!

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There were some authentic, not replicated, booze bottles in their dormitory's kitchen; as claimed by Dayton, and if the rest of the gang haven’t finish them up yet, there was a bottle there with his name on it. He got up from his desk, determinant to get his hand on said bottle, and opened the door to the common room.

To his surprise, there was someone there already, someone was up, and had some stand lamps on, lighting the common lounge with a soft golden glow.

"Captain!" Nyota jumped in her seat.

"Sorry, didn’t mean to give you a fright."

"A heart attack, maybe." she relaxed into her couch again and gave him a little smile. "What are you doing up so late?"

"Looking for booze, what's your excuse?"

"What does this look like?" Uhura grimaced, she was surrounded by heaps of books; they all looked very old, rare and expansive. "I'm trying to translate the poem T'Sel gave to me. It is harder than I expected, not only the high Vulcan but the references to historic events, Surak's teaching, other philosophical ideas and… gosh, I hope I'd get the hang of it soon."

She looked a little lost.

"I'll get two glasses," Jim announces and got another smile from her.

He searched the kitchen counters and found a good earth brand of Cognac with a nice amber color, 40%, prestige, that would probably do. He opened it up and took two glasses from another counter.

Nyota put down the book she was reading and pushed some others to make room for the bottle and
glasses on the table, as she saw him returning to the common room. "Be careful, they'd kill me if I stain a page of those books."

Jim came to seat next to her on the couch; some books fell off as he wiggled to find his place, Nyota rolled her eyes at this and reached down to move them from harm's way, when she turned back to look at him he was already busy with the fixing.

Jim smiled and handed her a drink before grabbing his own. "Cheers." He raised his glass.

Nyota raised her own glass and looked at him with amusement. "What are we drinking to?" she asked.

"We're drinking to the fact that finally, after all those years, you allowed me to treat you to a drink."

Nyota now chuckled softly. "Cheers." She whispered and took a sip of the amber liquid. "It's good, very good, actually." She almost moaned.

Jim downed his dose with one gulp and fixed himself another in no time. "So, why are you up so late?"

"Told you already." Nyota sighed "That poem T'Sel gave me is complicated, very difficult to translate into English."

"But you've got like, a week to finish it."

"I know, I worry that I'd mess it up."

"No worries." Jim smiled into his half full glass "I've already messed it up so spectacularly tonight, for everyone to feel free adding some more mess of their own."

"Come on, those were just the first two points."

"But everyone saw the 'Remain' leader stutter, great first impression."

"Oh, that…" Nyota frowned "No one here is holding you accountable; Commander Sobar pulled an ugly one bringing up Tarsus 4."

Oh, this was sweet, he should have smiled, but all he could do was frown at it.

"Please don’t try to make excuses for me, Nyota. I should have overcome Tarsus a long time ago; it should not have been such an issue. I should have kept my cool, or at least brace myself for it, should have seen it coming miles away, I mean, Sobar is a ruthless bastard, of course he'd find where to poke at me."

"You're too harsh on yourself, Jim, what Sobar did wasn't very fair."

"All is fair in love and war." Jim stated dramatically, glaring at the ceiling.

"We are not at war, are we?" she asked, concerned.

"We are not at love, either." Jim mumbled and finished his second drink. The warm fuzzy feeling in his body, and the soft cushions of the couch made him want to fall asleep.

"Still, I thought a Vulcan would not stoop that low." Nyota continued with disappointment "Tarsus 4 was a personal and private disaster you survived as a kid. Of course, the personal details are
"confidential, but I've read enough official reports to imagine how very traumatic it was for you."

"Yeah… well… watching your whole planet get sucked into a black hole is also very traumatic." He said, stroking his throat, absentmindedly "I don't know if Sobar actually witnessed it, but as a touch telepath? As a bonded family member? Must have left some deep, never healing scars."

There was a moment of silence where Nyota finished her drink, poured herself a new one, and was probably thinking about what he said, while drinking. He also used that moment to fill up his glass again. Together, they were halfway through the bottle, a nice job. He finished his drink and sank into the couch; sleep has tempted him again, like an experienced lover.

"Help me understand something." Nyota said after that long while "I really have no idea why we were dragged into this. This is an inner Vulcan matter, what are we doing here?"

He could hardly open his eyes to look at her, wouldn't bother using his head to nod, or his shoulders to shrug, so he just hummed.

"I don't know either… seems like it was Soval's idea and the rest of them just tagged along." But then an interesting idea flashed in his alcohol soaked mind."Or... or maybe this was to punish and humiliate us, humans, maybe…"

"Say what?" she asked, surprised almost as he was.

"Yeah, when you come to think of it, if I was your everyday kind of Vulcan, like Sobar, maybe, witnessing the destruction of my planet, and knowing that the humans not only failed to help but were lucky enough to save their own, I'd start some resenting, even some hating. Now don't tell me the Vulcans don't do emotions, we both know Spock, they just tend to ignore them and shove them into a dark corner of their mind. So this whole thing might be just a subconscious tribunal."

"Tribunal, as if they put us on trial in hope to… what? Humiliate and punish us?"

"Subconsciously speaking, it might be the case."

"Wow…" she almost gasped at this."You should be the one entering the diplomatic service; you only pretend to be this dumb hick."

"Naah… I am this dumb hick, pretending to be a smart Captain." He mumbled.

It felt like floating, this combination of being mildly drunk, also probably sick, and so damn tired, put psychedelic colors swirling before his shut eyes. He should try this more often, this was an awesome mind fuck.

"Whatever it is, the reason, it's just sad." She finished her own drink and put the glass on the table, away from the books as possible. When Jim didn't answer, she grabbed him by his thigh and shook his leg. "Hey, if you're going to fall asleep, please do it in your own room."

"But I like it here."

"Yeah? I'm trying to study here, and I know you're gonna snore."

"Not gonna snore."

"So gonna!"

"Ain't going anywhere, deal."
"You big, bad, blonde infant!" she scolded him, irritated but smiling.

"Not that blonde." He mumbled, and hogged one of the cushions, to start drool on.

And it was true, he wasn't that blonde anymore, hadn't got enough sunshine in the past few years, so his hair faded into this mousy kind of shade.

He missed the sun, basking under its golden rays, on a sandy beach, the smell of salt in his nostrils, the sound of the waves in his ears, a cold beer in his hand, and a girl or two by his side.

Topless, rubbing sunscreen lotion on his shoulders.

Ok, stop it, Nyota's here and it is a public space.

One would be a human redhead, with huge boobs; the other would be an Orion with flowing dark hair, and long, long legs.

Enough already.

And they'd lean over him and kiss each other.

No!

"Go to bed, already!" Nyota shook him violently just before those two hot girls entered a smooching session. "I can't concentrate like this."

"Going, going..." he stumbled off the couch, and wobbled back to his room.

Back to the lab again.

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There it was; his last attempt, coding in place, just press start.

Jim swallowed a yawn and shook his cotton filled head, then sent his finger to the touch screen.

Here goes nothing.

He took a deep breath.

Start.

Please god; please make it work.

The Temperature and CPU load lines started to climb up.

Please god, I'll do anything you want, just don't let my crew die over of this, ok?

Rising still, but was the rate a bit slower than before?

God, come on, I think you owe me some, rings a bell? Tarsus 4? Uncle Frank?

Just saying.
Did the lines reach the upper limit?

No, almost, but no.

Steady as she goes… steady, now. Steady?

Yes!!! YES!!! I love you, god! Thank you, thank you! Thank you!!!!

He did a little dance on his chair, and then leaped out of it, jumping up and down in the room like an idiot, releasing all that pant up energy. He was no longer tired, no longer feeling sick, he was ready to run laps on every deck of the Vokau, hauling like a crazy person and scare the hell out of every Vulcan coming his way.

Yes! It worked! It worked!! It worked!!!

A very precise and efficient knock on the door disrupted his private celebration; it was too early for breakfast, and too late for everything else, but there was that knock again.

"Yes?" he ordered the door opened to a crack, to see an older, gaunt Vulcan in front of him, a Vokau personal. "What is it?" he frowned immediately.

"I'm sorry, sir." The Vulcan said and pointed to her PADD "I am Crewman T'Neni from Maintenance. It appears that there's a malfunction in this room's ventilation system. I am sorry to have come to fix it only now, we are running on skeleton crew and I had higher priorities. This would only take a few moments."

She tried to push the door to enter, but he blocked her way in, the Vulcan looked up to him and tried to hide her puzzlement.

"I'm sorry, but I will not allow this breach of privacy. Do you know what time it is?"

"It is 05:45, sir." She answered and hid her gaze in her PADD.

"It is way too early! At least in human standards. This is so rude! And there is no malfunction, run your diagnostics again."

"I've assumed you'd appreciate the ASAP response, sir." she mumbled. "And according to my readings…"

"Not now, I'm going back to sleep! And you are not coming anywhere near this room until I evacuate it!"

The Vulcan tech stretched her tall stature and stood firm. "Sir, there is a malfunction, but I respect your privacy and will not seek entry. However, I will run diagnostics again and if this malfunction puts the Vokau in any kind of risk, I will return to fix it with or without your permission. The needs of the many…"

He closed the door at her face.

"Outweigh the needs of the few." She finished from the other side.

"Whatever." He mumbled and listened as she walked away.

He allowed himself to breath now. Ok, that was a close call, and he got lucky, but there was no time for further delay, because they'll probably send reinforcement to deal with this irrational human next time.
Pity, he wanted to run some more tests, and fine-tune the program, but he would not dare pushing his luck any further, it was time to put the microcontroller back in its place, and hope things would work out.

Time to remove that stinky towel from that hole in the floor.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading, reviews are always welcomed, and I wish this never ending lock-down will end soon TT.
Hey everyone,

Thank you for reading this story so far, and I know it is a long one, so anyone here from the beginning (about a month ago, kudos to you, for hanging in there.)

I fear that I've lost interest of many readers already, because of not getting any feedback from many, I just hope some will take this journey to its end.

So please, your reviews are very important to me, and I'd be happy to hear from you.

Thank you and have a safe day :-) 

First thing in the morning, even before breakfast, Jim reported to the healing center.

"Hello." He smiled as the middle aged female Vulcan at sickbay on deck 4. To think that five days ago, she was the last person to stick her gloved fingers up his rectum was sad, just sad.

"Please state the purpose of your visit." She glared at him, with cold blue eyes.

"Well… I feel sick, Doctor." He beamed at her, much to her horror.

"I'll be right with you." She answered, taking a stand loaded with some test tubes from a counter and disappearing into an inner room.

She left him alone, in that very clean, very white, shiny sickbay. The beds in the room were so immaculate and the sheets so pristine; anyone should feel ashamed bleeding on them.

He waited for her for a few minutes, then got bored and started fiddling with some strange looking medical instruments within his reach.

When she got back into the room she did it so quietly, sneaking behind him, that he almost dropped a long glassy tube to the polished floor. He smiled sheepishly in front of her scolding gaze, and placed the tube gently back in its place.

"What symptoms are you experiencing?" she asked, while lifted her hand and started scanning him with a small, dark blue, crystal looking kind of device.

"General fatigue, muscle weakness, troubled breathing, headaches…"

"You're probably having difficulties adjusting to the Vokau's environmental conditions, larger gravity, hot and dry air, longer time cycle and such. Are you taking enough fluids?"

"I take fluids, yes." Alcohol is a fluid.

"I suggest you stick to the human diet, the Vulcan food is enriched with silicon and other rare minerals, that don't suite the human digesting system for the long run, might even act as a mild laxative."
Would Vulcan cum also act as such? Because that would explain some things.

She didn’t give him time to answer. "Diagnostic is completed. You are indeed dehydrated, you also have a minor infection in your respiratory system, and your liver and kidneys are operating under stress. Please lay down on a bed, sir."

"Lay down, why?" he asked as she used her superior Vulcan strength to, not so gently, push him towards one.

"Protocol stats that you should be given an earth-standard saline IV now. I have none on board but I can try to create it with distillated water and the salts we have here in the lab."

"What? No… no… I got no time for this…" he tried to resist as she placed a hand on his chest, pinning him the mattress. He jumped back up as she went to fetch a bag of distillated water from a nearby, medical grade replicator.

The Doctor turned and frowned at him as much as a Vulcan would frown. "Your cooperation is vital, Sir. Please lay down; I will prepare the saline in a moment."

"Hey, look… I'm in kind of a hurry, and an IV is an hour long procedure, even if you had one at ready." He said "As a doctor, you are obligated to present me with all the available treatments, and it is my right to choose the most suited one." Thank god for Bones and his patient's rights lectures.

"I've offered you the most logical treatment." She insisted "The least intrusive, and the safest one, given your allergies background."

"But all I really want is a hypo-spray, something to boost me up, keep me alert for longer hours, help me concentrate thought this Plak If Fee. Don't you have one of those?"

She blinked at him for a moment. "Of course we do, sir, but I would not administer you one."

"Why not?"

"The drugs I have here were never tested on humans."

"So what? I'll take my chances; we are not that different, aren’t we? I've got a nose, you have one, I have two legs, you have five fingers on each hand…"

"That's superficial, sir. Vulcans have four lungs, two livers and stomachs, and a digesting system twice as long as the humans. We have Strontium in our bones instead of your Calcium, our metabolism is completely different. There is no data on what this drug might do to a human body." She explained coldly.

"Give it to me anyway." He insisted.

"There is also the matter of the Plak If Fee, I cannot provide you with substances that might sabotage the fair conductions of the ritual."

"I am sick!" He started to lose his patience. "And I have to compete against a race that doesn't need as much sleep, is three times stronger, and placed in their natural habitat which is hostile to me! Now tell me, what exactly is fair about it?"

The Doctor stiffened her position if that was even possible, but her expression was contemplative and not as argumentative as before.
"Come on, let's try this once, we do not even know if it would work." He smiled again. "Worry about the rest of it if it doesn't kill me."

"Wait here, sir." She said and left the room again into one of the inner labs.

He let himself breath as she walked away, and yes, he was sick, and was about to get even worse if nothing was to be done about it. And he cannot afford to be sick, because then he'll fail his job, and if he fails his job, the Vulcans will leave the Federation, his crew will die at the hands of the Klingons and the Enterprise will be destroyed.

Now there's some pressure for you.

So sick is out of the question.

"I found this." The Doctor returned with a hypo-spray and faced him again. "This drug might work, it has been somewhat researched on other humanoids." She said "It is not a cure for any medical condition, but it might fit your described needs."

"What is it?" he asked, peeking at the hypo-spray, whatever it was, he didn’t like the packaging.

"This is a performance enhancer, usually taken in time of great need. Fighters used to take it before a long combat; my staff took it during severe emergencies to endure long shifts without collapsing, and sometimes it is given to children who show difficulty in meditating and studying.

"It enhances concentration, focus and maximizes brain functions for a long period of time. It will not heal you, but it might help you utilize your physical potential. But first, we must see if it even has the wanted effect on a human."

And so with no further ado she pressed it to his neck and injected him with something as cold as ice and still it burned like a nasty bug sting.

He could feel the drug immediately running through his veins, felt like acid, burning its way into every cell. He staggered on his feet and leaned on the bed through the worst of it, but after a moment, the pain was gone, and the cold heat vanished, and the world was crystal clear again.

He gasped, and the air didn't feel hot and dry as before, just refreshing, he blinked his eyes, because he could see new colors, hidden from his view before, his feet had a firmer foothold on the ground, his body was upright again. Time itself felt a bit slower, or maybe his mind was working at a faster rate. Whatever it was, it was wonderful.

"Thank you, Doctor, I think I'll take three." He pointed at the hypo-spray.

"I will relay this request to the Elders. If anything feels out of the ordinary, please return here without delay." She answered.

"Everything feels just great." He corrected her. "How much time will it last?"

"That wanted effect was reported as achievable with humanoids, but to answer your question- no information is available."

"I wish it would last for the whole ritual, might even up the odds a bit."

"As promised, I will relay your request to the council of Elders, but chances are they will refuse further treatment."
"Thanks, anyway." He smiled with all the gratitude he could master.

She didn’t seem impressed "Is there anything else I could do for you?"

"Got it, I’ll get the hell out of your sickbay now."

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"I swear to you, this is like public school all over again." Carol growled as she placed a tray of scones and a tea pot on the table, and then dramatically fell into her chair.

"So you spotted them?" Jim asked, ignoring her act.

"Yes, I did." She confirmed with a pout.

"And?"

"Elder Svern was with them, and so was Elder Sarek and one or two more, I'm not sure."

"One or two?" Jim frowned.

"Does it really matter?" She frowned back at him. "And don't send me again to count; ask someone else to play this little spying game."

"No need, Carol, the picture is clear." He took a scone and started spreading jam on it. "What do you make of it, Sulu?" he asked the man at his side. "Nyota?" he asked the woman in front of him.

They both shrugged, making him a bit more irritated than before, if even possible.

"What? Don't you find it strange? That the elders of the 'Leave' team are cuddling them all day long? All while the elders of our team stay away from us, as if we're a bunch of lepers?"

"I don't know, Jim…” Nyota sighed and poured herself some tea. "They all have their logic."

"But don't you find this strange? Here we are in a mess room designed to host 1000 people at a time, and there are more than enough seats, so why would Svern and his ilk chum up with Sobar and his mates through breakfast, lunch and dinner?" Jim insisted, chewing on his pastry with anger.

"Maybe they feel the need to encourage them, facing such formidable foes." Sharel said from his side of the table, a thin smile on his face.

Sulu couldn't help but chuckle.

Dayton looked at Jim with puzzlement, and then shook his head. "You worry too much, sir." He mumbled.

"I worry that there is something at play here; that we don't get." Jim insisted. "And as long as we don't get it, we're not playing the same game."

"Are you saying that they are setting us to fail?" Nyota asked, as a continuation of their late night
conversation.

He finished his coffee and shook his head. "No, that would be illogical." He said after a while. "Why bother with a Plak If Fee if the end game is pre-determinate?"

"So why are you so bothered over this?" Sulu asked.

Jim smiled again, shaking his head. "Something's fishy, and I don't like the smell of it. But you are right, I shouldn't let it get to me." he had to admit with a sigh. "We'll just have to play along and see what happens. Anyone joining me for the test after this?"

"We're heading to the simulation room." Sulu said, nodding towards Dayton. "Training time."

"Sorry, I have a meeting with T'Sel, Kuvac and an engineering team regarding our challenge, and I'm taking Sharel with me." Carol said.

"Fair enough."

"I'll come with you." Nyota said. "I'd rather do the test today and be done with it. It's a horrible thing, 150 questions in three hours, that's about a minute per question."

"Ten graders do it, Nyota, sixteen year olds." Jim reminded her.

"Sixteen year old Vulcans." Uhura corrected him.

"Well, yeah." He smiled still, but worry crept in to his gaze.

"I miss the guys at the lab." Said Carol all of a sudden. "I wonder what kind of crazy am I missing, being stuck in here."

"All kinds of crazy, now that Spock is away." Nyota answered smiling.

"Yeah, I hope there's a lab deck to return to when we're done." Carol agreed.

"And I wonder how the second helm team is doing." Sulu added "If Ensign Simmons is in charge, I bet he'd burn the impulse drive engine within a week."

"So it's already burned." Said Dayton "This is almost our second week away form the Enterprise."

"Is it?" Nyota asked "Poor Bones, a mother hen without its chick." She smirked at Jim.

"Nah, I'm sure he's enjoying his time off." Jim hurried to correct her.

"Maybe he'd start fussing over Mr. Scott." Carol suggested.

"As if Scotty would ever let him." Sulu chuckled.

Jim frowned at Sulu "Hey, I've never let him, and he did it anyway."

"That's because he loves you." The helmsman answered.

"Come on, really?"

"Everybody loves you, Jim." Carol batted her eyes at him.

"You're just saying this to piss Dayton off."
"We all love you." Dayton answered with a whimsy smile.

"You're making me blush." Jim huffed, and he really was beginning to turn red. "Sharel, please, help here?"

"I would if I could, sir." Sharel hummed.

"Come on, I totally fucked up the opening speech, Sobar wiped the floor with me. Didn't you see that or what?"

"Yes he did." Sulu answered "But it's only two points, you know, we'd compensate in no time." He sounded so sure in himself.

"Eyes on the ball." Carol reminded him.

"You guys..." Jim mumbled and turned back to his food.

***O***

Eyes on the ball.

Boy, those Vulcan drugs were the best.

He never felt so sharpened in his whole life, energized, focused, motivated, ready to handle whatever life was about to throw his way.

Bones should totally download that drug into his sickbay replicator; life will never be the same again.

He was pouncing the halls like a tiger, his feet light and swift, despite the gravity, his breath light and vigor despite the heat and dryness of the air.

"I'm nervous." Nyota admitted as they approached the library hall, where the exam would take place. "I hate huge tests like this, the ones that put life as you know it on the brinks. When I was young, I used to carry a piece of lemon to school every time there was this horrible test."

"A lemon?"

"To help me with my nausea, I used to puke a lot, started while studding for tests and went on until they were actually over. At College I always lost weight at the end of each term."

"Sorry to hear that; must have been tough."

"Starfleet academy was not much different, even though I managed better. How were your high school years? You were probably a jock, right?"

Yeah, he had heard that often enough, Jim smiled and shrugged "I never returned to school after Tarsus 4."

"You didn't? So what did you do?"

Jin sighed and decided on the short, clean version. "I had a runaway phase in Chicago for a few
years, and when my angel of a social worker, dragged me back to Iowa at fifteen, I studied at home, and finished the basics and the SAT's, even took the Starfleet aptitude test, just for the heck of it."

"I always envied you at the Academy, you know?" Uhura admitted with a smile "You made it seem so easy, enlisting with Admiral Pike's help, winning scholarships, passing all tests with distinction, all while banging everything with a heartbeat, cheating on the Kobayashi Maru and getting away with it..."

"Stealing your boyfriend. No wonder you hate me."

"No." She laid a hand on his arm as they stopped before the library doors. "That was not the direction I was heading to, Jim; I was going to say something else."

He lowered his eyes to meet her beautiful dark ones and a gentle smile spread on his lips again. "What were you going to say, then?" he asked.

"I was going to say that I overcame my negative feelings long time ago. Over the past few years, you've earned my respect and my gratitude, Captain, saving our lives time and again."

"The sentiment is mutual, Uhura, I hope you do well today."

"So am I, and Jim?"

"What?"

"If you breathe a word of what I just told you to anyone, you're toast, clear?"

"Loud and clear, Ma'am."

The doors opened before them and an elder Vulcan greeted them, she had long white, glossy hair, which she kept in a high bun, her eyes were honey colored and she was tall and strong, with a youthful face.

"Greetings, warriors of the 'Remain' clan, my name is Vellua, a member of the Undecided faction at the council of elders. I will oversee your test today. Come on in."

Nyota looked up to Jim, he smiled at her and she took a deep breath, then they both followed.

Elder Vellua led them deep into the huge library, passed the modern, state of the art tech section, through the old archive where they stored old hard drives and archaic electronic devices and even passed the section where there were actually books stored on huge, never ending lines of shelves and into a side room, which was oddly build.

"I apologies for taking you the long way around, but I didn’t want to disturbed the class that is now in session on the other side of this room." The elder explained.

Jim gazed at the room, it was dark and blank and empty, but then the elder took off a glove to operate a touch screen at the wall by the door.

The room came to life, the ventilation system kicked in to allow a flow of fresh, cold air, and there came a soft green glow from underneath ,then Jim realized that the room was actually composed of half sphere, submerged chambers, eight of them, that could contain a person each, and were at least two meters deep.
"This is our standard test room, but I assume that for a none-Vulcan it may appear a bit strange. Each student enters a test cell, there a ladder you can use to climb down. Once you touch the floor, the test program is activated; it is hologram based will react to your voice and eye movement."

"More advanced that the Kobayashi Maru." Nyota chuckled nervously.

"I'll take my chances." Jim shrugged.

"The test itself is multiple choices composed of questions that cover everything from logic to history and art. Of course, we have adjusted it for human use, but the rules are the same.

Three hours for 150 questions, the time is measured from the end point of each presentation. You can choose to skip a question, try to answer it later, or pass it altogether but lose points over it. However, mind that after you give an answer, it cannot be changed or edited, so be careful and take your time.

The test is personal, each one of you will get a different set of questions, it is an oral test and no aids are allowed. Any questions before we begin?"

"Is the test recorded?" Nyota asked.

"Yes, it will be recorded for the purposes of supervision and appeals, but it will remain highly classified, as all other materials regarding this challenge."

"Will we get breaks? I almost always need breaks…" Jim asked, a bit blushed, it made him feel like the problematic student he had been all these years ago.

"There are no breaks in Vulcan tests." Elder Vellua answered trying not to look too surprised at this strange request.

Well, thank god for Vulcan drugs.

It was the first time in his life that he felt like he could go through such an ordeal without desperately needing a break or a getaway. He felt sharp, centered and focused like never before in his life.

Imagine his life with this drug at his disposable, could have taken a whole different turn, could have gone higher places, good places… well… speculations and bygones.

"If you are ready to start, please step into a cell and activate the program with your voice. Say "Hello" or "Ready", something of that sort will do."

"Thank you, Elder Vellua." Nyota nodded, being polite for the both of them.

Jim just nodded and climbed down a ladder to one of the half spheres cells, and as he landed, the program activated and a pale blue light filled the little room.

"Hey, there." He said, waving at the wall, just in case.

"Indentifying James Tiberius Kirk, please confirm." Said a pleasant female voice.

"Yup, that's me."

"The testing program is ready at your command."

"Let's do it."
"Question number one: Consider the two following statements as true. Which offered statement is their derivative?

1. All cats are mammals.
2. Some black furred cats have green eyes.

The offered statements are -

- A. Some black furred cats have yellow eyes.
- B. Some green eyes cats have white fur.
- C. All mammals have green eyes
- D. Some mammals have white fur
- E. Some black furred mammals have green eyes
- F. None of the above can be logically derived from those statements.

Awaiting your answer for the next 72 seconds."

The question hovered in pale blue on one side of the sphere, and at the corner there was a countdown of seconds with a display of pale green light – 72, 71, 70…

Ok… so this is how it's going to play out.

Bring it on.

***0***

He was having this wonderful day, the best day he ever had onboard the Vokau, and everything was going his way and he felt uplifted and energized like never before.

At breakfast, his crew showed him so much trust and support, at noon he was finishing with the logic test Sobar had challenged them to take, and he aced it, with ease, piece of cake, he was focused, sharp and he didn't miss a bit.

The cherry on top had been awaiting him in his room, as he walked in after the test. It worked! And faster than anticipated! He managed to establish contact with a nearby replicator on deck, and the microcontroller had begun to feed the program into that replicator, slowly but smoothly, without crashing, breaking contact, or raising the alarm.

That is why he was in such a good mood as he prepared for his meeting with Vedik, the Vulcan sent him an invitation to his mail that morning, saying that he was ready for their first round of chess, after two days of practice.

Jim could not help singing in the shower, taking extra time to work on his shave, cologne and looks, he decided to give Vedik the full human experience of a date, minus sex, though.

He put on civilian clothes, the new ones he bought on Yorktown, a pair of sandy colored corduroy
jeans that just came back to fashion, a deep crimson satin shirt that was a bit too tight, and a pair of suede half boots, in a deep brown color to complete the look.

And he was looking mighty fine, he decided, smiling into the mirror, giving his hair the finishing touch, yeah, he was ready for the kill.

He thought he got that vibe from T'Sel, sexual interest, he was sensitive to that kind of stuff, and he suspected Vedik too, rarely was he wrong, but still, he had to remind himself that they were Vulcans after all, and his read of Vulcans was never Spock-on.

Still, he needed to win Vedik, it was a strategic move, he could make use of him for information, to learn about that touch telepath- computer interface he still needed to crack, to find information about this universe they were stuck in, to learn more about Vulcan politics and so much more.

Should he sleep with him if it would prove beneficial? No, it will never come to that. Vulcans were not bed-hoppers, very far away from it, hell, if not for Pon Farr, they'd probably go extinct. Besides, touch telepathy during the ritual was forbidden, and might even get his side project exposed.

So flirting only, but that was for the best, he had some good cards and he was going to use them, he just hoped he won't hurt Vedik on the way, he was a nice guy, and it would be a shame.

When finished, he walked out of his room into the common hall, and they were all there. Nyota on the couch, surrounded by her books, Carol and Sharel, sprawled on a carpet surrounded by blueprints and schematics of the Delta Vega Lander, Dayton and Sulu actually shared a PADD and were discussing the systems and operation of the Ta'hal type shuttle.

Jim looked at all of them and a warm feeling spread in his chest, he was so proud, they were working so hard, so devoted, so dedicated, he could not ask for a better crew.

"I'm off." He waved to them at the door, and chuckled when nobody looked up or paid any attention. "Don't overwork yourselves, kids." He added and left.

Smiling to himself, he walked the short walk to the lift.

"Deck 14." He instructed it, going where the 'Leave' team was lodged, where he had his date with Vedik.
At the age of eighteen, about five years after Tarsus 4, Jim had managed to convince the State of Iowa that he was fully recovered and had no further need for his state appointed guardian. He had to bend over the table at state's clerk office for that, but hey, the man signed all the papers.

Finally, he was back at Riverside and on his own, since his mother kicked Uncle Frank out of their property. He was tending the farm and had a steady job at a mechanic shop, fixing equipment ranging from farm drones and robotic hovers, to a variety of agricultural gear, some as old as diesel tractors and forklifts. He had a nice pay, was living in his family house and was independent and self sustaining.

He could see himself spending his whole life like this, managing the farm and fixing broken things at week days and having a party at weekends. Sometimes he spent a weekend in Chicago for clubbing, but mostly he went to the local bar, got a bit drunk and tried to find a fuck partner for the night.

There was no shortage of candidates, because Riverside was a Starfleet Hub, ever since they've build that shipyard at the area. There were many academy students who came to learn about spaceships construction at that dock, it was a mandatory course for all tracks, and they usually spent a week in before returning to San Francisco.

So he had a variety to pick from, beautiful humans and aliens, males, females and others, all warmed his bed for a few hours before forever disappearing into the great black, no strings attached, no complications, just the way he liked it.

And he knew he was fully recovered when he began to develop a sexual fantasy, about walking into that bar, and spotting this tall, dark and handsome type, a man, lurking in the shadows, that didn’t dance, or chat with others, just drank his beer and stared at him.

He fantasized about taking that man home, into his bed, and in contrast to his usual dynamics with past hook-ups, he'd let that man dominate him completely, have total command, take him apart and put him back together again.

He never acted on that fantasy, he was not the one to surrender that easily, to give another absolute control, but he saw it as a good sign, as a landmark, to confirm that he had overcame those Kodos thugs and what they have done to him, and was able to entertain such thought.

Besides, that tall, dark and handsome type? Never once showed up.

Jim even wondered if that type ever existed outside of his head.

That was, until he faced Spock at the academy as his accuser.

And now, the lift had stopped, the doors opened and Spock stepped right in.
God help his stupid heart that started pounding, and his stupid body that almost shivered with desire as Spock came through those doors. The Vulcan was gorgeous as ever in his tight, green, full body suit, and even more so, because he had let his hair grow a bit longer, and as of consequence, it got a little bit unruly.

Jim made sure to control himself, to remain still, stand upright and keep calm, making room for Spock, but maintaining a decant distance between them, and not engaging in an eye content.

"Deck 14." Spock said to the lift.

That low, sexy voice.

But it made sense; though, after all it was the deck where his room was located.

That's ok, that's alright, he can share a ride with Spock without falling apart, won't be long now. Jim breathed, trying to ignore Spock's proximity, his scent, his warmth, his domineering presence.

"May I have a moment of your time?" Spock asked all of a sudden.

A few more seconds was all they had, but Jim nodded, without looking at Spock, well not until the lift had violently halted and then he just had to look and see that the Vulcan had removed his glove and was touching the lift's pad.

"Did you just hack the lift and make it stop?" Jim asked; a bit unnerved.

"In a way." Spock answered "I overloaded it by giving it conflicting orders. In such a case its default function is to shut down and await maintenance. It is a vulnerability of the system. A Psi null being could do the same unintentionally just by touching it. A maintenance response might take up to an hour, though; the Vokau is understaffed and overworked."

This must be the reason why Captain Setal insisted that they don't touch anything on board.

"So now I am stuck here with you for an hour?"

"Not necessarily, I can resume the course at any moment if this bothers you, yet I truly wish to have a moment of your time." Spock confirmed, eyes on Jim, hand still on the touchpad.

Naked hand, beautiful, elegant, clever hand.

Onboard the Enterprise, Spock's hands were naked all the time, and Jim never thought of it as erotic, but here on the Vokau, among vulcans, he understood, how bare it must have felt, for a Vulcan to have his hands uncover, how vulnerable and exposed it must have made him feel.

"Very well, you got me, what do you want?" Jim asked, trying to keep his cool.

Spock nodded and let go of his hold, covering his hand with the glove again. He took some time before talking.

"Vedik expects me; I don’t want to be late." Jim reminded him.
Spock seemed irritated by the mention of the other Vulcan's name, but it could also be Jim's overactive imagination.

"It has come to my attention that you requested the head healer of this ship to supply you with a certain Vulcan drug, in order to enhance your performance in the challenge."

"Is that so?" Jim huffed, news traveled really fast around here. "Are you spying on me, Spock?"

"No. Your request was delivered to the elders' council this morning, and Elder Sarek saw it fit to share that information with me."

"So both you and your father are spying on me, ain't that great?"

"Jim, please, the elders will grant you your wish and allow you to use this substance, but you must reconsider, you are putting yourself at great risk."

"All of us here take risks." Jim reminded him "And as the leader of the 'Remain' team, I'll do whatever I can to win this challenge, just as Sobar will, just as you will, so do not dare patronizing me over this."

"This drug was never designed nor tested for humans; there is no way of knowing what damage it would inflict upon you, as a human and as an individual with severe allergies background."

Jim breathed again, he was not going to turn this into a fight; he was, however, going to be an adult about it, be calm and reasonable and have it finished as neatly as he can.

"Look, Spock, I appreciate your concern, but I am a grown man, capable of assessing risks and taking them. I've been doing so, successfully, I might add, for the past few years as a starship captain. If the elders can acknowledge that and honor my request, I demand that you to do the same. You are not my guardian, not my lover, and soon, not even my XO, so, please, drop it."

He knew his words were harsh, and even given in a soft voice, they were sharp like ice daggers, and he could almost feel Spock's pain as he received them, even though the Vulcan showed no sign of emotion whatsoever.

Instead, Spock broke eye contact and nodded, as if accepting the verdict, giving up the fight. He took a moment to contemplate, choosing his next words carefully.

"I know I've lost your affection, Jim, and I accept that. I hope, however, that I did not lose your trust. I want you to remember that we are still in this together; do not view me as an adversary, please."

"View you as an adversary? Never." Jim smiled politely at him, all but brushing him off. "Now, please get the lift going, will you?"

"Of course." Spock nodded and took off his glove again.

He touched the lift's pad, and so it started moving, and before any other word was said, there was deck 14, and the doors opened.

"I'll show you to Vedik's quarters." Spock suggested and Jim took up on his offer. They walked the corridors in silence, until Spock stopped at one door. "Here it is." He stated.

Jim thanked him and rang the bell, and Spock started walking away, when Jim realized he had no idea when will they have another chance to talk again, it was unlike the Enterprise, where they had
all the time in the world, and it was not going to get any better, so if you have anything to say, Jimbo, better say it now.

"Hey, Spock…." He stopped the Vulcan from walking on.

"Yes?"

"You want to talk trust, yeah? You want me to keep on trusting you?"

"Affirmative, Jim."

"Well, thing is…" better lay down the cards, no time like the present. "Thing is, Spock… this sun is green. It's green, let's start from there."

Spock nodded and Vedik opened the door.

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"Captain Kirk!" Vedik said with delight while opening the door, his eyes wide open and he almost smiled, but then he caught a glimpse of Spock and his expression turned more severe "Will you be joining us, Commander?" he asked the other Vulcan.

Spock slightly shook his head. "I have other obligations, Mr. Vedik, Captain Kirk, best of luck to you both."

"Luck?" Vedik murmured but Spock has already walked away, so he returned his attention to Jim, almost smiling again. "Come on in, Captain Kirk, the board is set and I've made some tea."

"Thank you." Jim entered the room, scanning it.

It seemed like the Vulcan team did not share a common hall and were taking private rooms on the deck. Vedik's was a medium sized room, made of a living unit with a minimal kitchen and a separate bedroom and washroom compartment, which he could only see the entry of, and would not venture into.

The living room was practical, clean and tidy, almost bare of any personal artifacts, except some objects stored on shelves, mainly books. At the center of the room were two armchairs and a chessboard between them; on a small table nearby there waited a tray with a steamy tea pot and two cups. The sight was so familiar; it nearly brought tears to Jim's stupid eyes.

While Jim was scanning the room, Vedik was scanning him, and when he returned to look at the Vulcan, Vedik almost blushed.

"You look wonderful, Captain, is that the correct use of phrase? My standard is not that good."

"Your standard is fine, and you can call me Jim." Jim smiled before remembering that it was impolite. "Here, a gift for you." He fished something out of his jacket pocket, a data stick. "I picked it up on Yorktown; it's an album of my favorite band, 'Benevolent Bystanders.' Ever heard of them? They were huge, like, five years ago, in the human circle, that is, I don't know if Vulcans appreciate Trip Rock…well, I hope you would." he stopped himself when he realized he was blabbing.
Vedik collected the stick with his gloved hands and glared at it, and he did so for far too long, enough to make Jim start cringing and regretting the idea, the Vulcan had that puzzled look Spock used to have whenever data refused to become comprehensive.

"Thank you." Vedik said after some painful moments "This was so kind."

"Just a simple data stick."

"I'll make time to listen to it, it is a priority. Please, sit down?"

Jim nodded and moved towards the armchair and looked at the game board.

"Yes, it is 2d, I apologize for it, but I could not comprehend the 3d version in given time." Vedik said, joining in and sitting across from Jim.

"It's ok, perfectly understandable." Jim tried to calm the Vulcan down, Vedik seemed so nervous and uncomfortable, ready to jump out of his own skin if Jim misuses a word. "I think I should thank you for choosing this challenge. It is a great opportunity for me, to finally have a one on one with a Vulcan Remainer, that is, if you are still one, the rest of them are staying away from my team like we were all sprayed by skunks."

"I am a Remainer." Vedik confirmed after sitting down. "Even more so, after your opening speech, care for some tea?"

Jim watched Vedik as he poured the hot liquid into the cups, asking for two sugars, and then accepting the steamy cup that smelled so good and sweet from Vedik's gloved hands. He tasted it carefully, and it was as fresh, and sweet as promised by its smell.

"I didn’t understand the skunk related part of your statement."Vedik bashfully admitted.

"Oh, skunks are Earthly mammals that spray a very smelly secretion whenever threatened, and if you get sprayed by one, well, let's say that you're a bad company until you get rid it."

"Mmmm…" Vedik nodded and turned his attention to his tea, so Jim did the same for a while.

"In Vulcan culture, the fact that you are left alone is a vote of confidence." Vedik said after a while "It means that that the Elders of your team trust you enough not to meddle, you should view this as a compliment."

"Should I?" Jim almost chuckled "I just lost our first challenge to Sobar, so, how that vote of confidence is going for them?"

"Interesting…" Vedik hummed again, and drank from his tea. "I assumed, like many of our faction, that you have lost on purpose."

"On purpose? Now why would I do that?" Jim almost chuckled again, but this time, frustration kicked in, damn Vulcans and their thinking process.

"So much like chess, sometimes you have to sacrifice pieces in order to gain in the long run."

Jim put his cup down, trying not to look so surprised, and he gave it a moment's thought, but came up with nothing. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Vedik , but there was nothing clever about my failure, I was aiming for the win."

Now Vedik put down his cup and looked a bit surprised, then worried "Well, whether you aimed
for it or not, there is something to gain from this result."

"You see!" Jim could not help but interrupt Vedik in mid sentence "That is why I want the elders of our team to talk to us, to guide us like the elders of the leave team do! That is why I am so glad to have this chance to talk to you!"

Vedik slightly recoiled and leaned into his seat. "Please do not put me in this position, Jim, we both took the blood oath, I do not intend to undermine my team's effort."

"Of course not! Would not dream of it, sorry if I gave that impression." Jim went pale and then blushed, he wanted to slap himself for jumping the gun.

Damn it, I hope I didn’t burn the bridge I still need to walk on.

"Let us focus on the chess?" the Vulcan suggested. "It is rather fascinating."

Jim nodded, and could not hold back a smile. "Sure, have the whites, and get the first move."

Vedik nodded, staring at the board for a long while. "This human game is so illogic…” he said, sitting still, never moving a piece.

"What are you talking about? Chess is one of the most logical games humans have ever come up with."

"Humans are illogical and so are their games. Why should I move even one pawn if that means I create a vulnerability while doing so?"

"Because the aim of the game is to capture the king, and if you don’t move a piece, you'll never get there."

"Which bring me to my next point- every move opens up a large number of pathways to continue and a human brain cannot process that much data to choose the most efficient pathway to victory. Most Vulcans would not be able to do so in a reasonable amount of time, as well, I among them."

"Yeah, I know, you just go with the flow, I guess."

"The flow?"

"Use your intuition, that is."

Vedik almost smile now "Our whole lives we are thought to ignore intuition and use logic instead, but here we are at this point and time, let it be so."

The Vulcan chose a random pawn and moved it forward, then leaned back into his chair with a clear sense of accomplishment that made Jim almost laugh.

He reached for one of his knights and moved it, instead.

The Vulcan studied the board for a very long while. "Interesting." Was all he mumbled at the end of it.

"Come on, you gotta move something or we'll never finish this game." Jim chuckled after a long agonizing wait, twitching in his chair.

"What is Commander Spock’s percentage of winning, playing this game against you? He never disclosed that information to me."
"Because it is irrelevant, we never kept tabs, we always used this game as an excuse to spend time together, enjoy each other's company and talk."

"Talk? About what?" Vedik asked, finally deciding about taking another pawn and move him to its next position. "May we have such a talk?"

Jim shrugged "Sure, we can talk work, science, philosophy, politics, personal stuff, whatever."

Vedik moved his eyes for the first time off the board and looked at Jim "Is that so? Randomly picking up subjects without preliminary preparation?"

"Sure, we kind of already having a talk, Vedik" Jim noted while moving his rook. "What do you want to talk about?"

Vedik lowered his gaze back to the board. "So many pathways to choose from, so little time." He almost whispered.

"Let me start then." Jim suggested, spotting the opening. "I'll ask you a question, and it is totally fine if you don't want to answer it."

"That seems fair." Vedik agreed and moved his right knight, making a huge mistake, but Jim decided on not letting him know.

"Why are you a Remainer?" he asked Vedik, moving his bishop.

"Oh, this is a very private question." Vedik declared but tried answering none the less. "I am a Remainer for many reasons; some I cannot disclose for the risk of undermining my team, but what I can say is, that as a scientist I see great value in cooperating with other species, diversity of thought that comes with the diversity of minds is a great advantage, which will be lost if we disengage."

Jim could not help but chuckle "You're a funny guy, Vedik, most of the Vulcans think the opposite, that they are so superior, there's nothing they can learn from any other race." He leaned towards the board to move his queen.

"I disagree." Vedik answered "I'll need to see some evidences which support this claim." He moved his left bishop while answering.

"Got no evidence, just my intuition." Jim said "Are you sure about that last move?"

"Why?"

Jim shrugged and moved his queen again "That is checkmate, my friend."

***0***

Vedik's eyes went wide open and he leaned forwards to the board to study the situation and come to the same realization, then he eased back to his seat and gazed into an unknown point in space, looking a bit stunned. "Fascinating…" was all he could mumble after a while.

"You'll get better with time and practice, I'm sure." Jim tried to console him.
"No, what I find fascinating is the human ability to create an intimate environment with a complete stranger." Vedik said, still gazing into space "I never had this kind of ease with anyone except my immediate family members. Humans truly are amazing creatures, and now I understand even more why they were chosen to represent the Remain faction." The Vulcan returned his gaze to view Jim with much scrutiny that almost made him turn red. "I wish my chess skills were better so we could have a longer conversation, Jim."

Should I?

Why not?

I'm not tired; my side project doesn't need me at the moment, and I can totally kick his ass and get more information while at it.

"Set the board again and we can continue."

Vedik's face lightened up and he hurried to restore to board to its starting position. "Thank you so much for indulging me, are all humans so pleasing?"

"Depends on our mood. Now, what would you like to talk about?" he reached his hand and turned the board so he'd get to play the whites now.

"Please pick the subject; I have no priority, as long as I don't sabotage the goals of my team."

"Let's get back to music, then, did Spock pick up a human song for the challenge?"

"Indeed, I was given the keyboard position, so very interesting."

"The Piano?"

"Synthesizer, I believe it is called."

"Really? So, is it a rock song? Pop? What's its name?"

"Commander Spock asked us not to disclose this information."

"O.K…" Jim decided on moving his knight first, just to spice things up, and the puzzled look on Vedik's face was worth it. "What does Spock play?"

"Lead guitar, I believe is the name. Jim, please, could we change the subject?" Vedik touched one pawn, then another one, then picked up his knight and mimicked Jim's move.

"Sorry, Vedik, curiosity got the better of me." Jim smiled and moved a pawn. "A change of subject, Huh? Ok, so I'm very interested in Vulcan technology, it is so advanced and remarkable, I'd really like to learn more about it, could we talk about that?"

"Affirmative, however, this is a broad subject and my knowledge is limited."

"Do you happen to know anything about this ship's touch telepathy interface?"

"I happen to know everything about it; in fact I was involved with its design." Vedik announced with undisguised pride. "What would you want to know?"

The slot machine just hit 777.

He could hear the cascade of coins pouring out.
This turned out to be a very good day.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, dear readers, I hope you enjoyed this post.

I think I’m gonna take a break for a while, probably be back at the end of next week. Reviews are more than welcomed, regardless :-)

Take care, stay safe, stay strong, I hope good news are on our way.
Hey everyone,

I tried to stay away for longer but I could not help myself, lol, after all, it is a long story and there are many chapters to post.

Thank you for your reassuring and kind feedback, you guys are great!

If only all days were that good.

At first it all seemed fine, everyone was occupied by their own individual challenges under the supervision of the elders, and nobody minded that Jim had practically secluded himself in his room for the next four days.

He was a busy bee, though, making a great progress on his side project for Section 31.

You see, the Vulcan mainframe was a mirror of the Vulcan mind, and as such, each department was well defined, self organized and private, they all had their own safety and communication protocols.

The Vulcans preferred it that way, it was on the one hand, more secure and manageable for individual admins, gave them better control over their database, but it also meant that the code was unnecessary bloated and that there were difficulties in communication between the individual compartments.

For Kirk it meant that he needed to hack each department independently- Vulcan resources, Engineering and Communications. It was time consuming on one hand, but it also provided him with two major benefits.

The first was that not every compartment was at the same level of security, and if judging from experience, the department of Vulcan resources should be the easiest target to begin with, leaving Engineering for backup, and Communications, that was probably one of the top secured segments in the mainframe to last, when he was better skilled and practiced.

The second advantage was that if he fucks something up, it would take time for the system to go into full red alert, giving him enough space to maneuver and fix his errors.

Yes, always look at the bright side, Sunshine.

He almost finished creating the fake profile of an engineer according to Vulcan resources known protocols, having him generic enough not to draw unwanted attention, but giving him enough volume not to be considered as an artificial bot that might raise red flags and, well, draw unwanted attention.

He was working off line on his different attack strategies and coding for each department, while waiting for the complete overtake of the replicator MCU, he could hack the system and install that
profile only after he grabs that replicator's microcontroller unit.

The only thing missing from said profile was its touch telepathy signature. According to Vedik, all Vulcans had their touch telepathy signature recorder and coded in the system, it was a great individual indicator, even more reliable and secure than human's finger print, iris recognition or any other biometric information.

Of course he should not try to invent that signature from scratch, he'd have to get some real data and tweak it a bit to form a new one. He already had a half baked plan to obtain that data, taking advantage of their system vulnerability.

He was at peak performance, mainly thanks to that drug he was allowed access to. His mind was crystal clear, his concentration sharp as a phaser beam, his mood sunny and bright, and his energy levels skyrocketed. Even his need for sleep has diminished into nothing, in fact, in those past few days he slept for three hours a night and was not found wanting, it was as if this drug has turned him into a Vulcan, it was awesome.

But he was not stupid enough to thing that all his problems were solved. He knew he was walking a fine line, and was heading for a certain crash, that might even claim his life. But what choice did he have?

It was either this or losing both the Enterprise and its crew, along with this challenge, the Vulcans and even the entire federation, if he goes to town with this scenario. Placing his life on the line was worth it, and he would gladly sacrifice himself in order to save those far greater things than his own ability to breath.

He just hoped to finish what he had started before his body caves in.

Drama queen!

Go back to work now, will you?

So he woke up from his light doze to the sound of his PADD chirping, he lifted his head from the table and peeked at the screen to see that the takeover was complete, the replicator's MCU was his to command.

Nice!

Playtime!

He smiled with a true sense of achievement, and started feeding the code into the controller, first stress test. He wanted to learn how much load he could put on the replicator without it losing its primary function, something that would alarm the system and put the whole operation at risk.

First stage was to locate the actual physical location of that replicator; this knowledge would have a tremendous value. He knew the replicator should be near, but there were many units on the ship and not too much time.

"Computer, please locate unit number 43001."

"Unit 43001 located- standard replicator unit."

"Where is it on the ship?"

"This information is classified."
"What? Why?"

"This information is available to maintenance staff and officers only."

"So… I guess I cannot ask you for a list of unit replicators sorted by number and location."

"You are correct."

"And the ones that programmed you are insane! Now why would that information be classified? What's the logical reason for it?"

"This information is classified."

"Fine! Have it your way! But know that you are no fun! At all!"

"Illogical inquiry, please rephrase."

"Oh, shut up!"

When the computer did not replay, he realized that it actually followed his order for a change. So annoying, it was one thing to order a computer as a Captain and another thing altogether to speak to it as a guest on a ship. Was there a way to bypass it? Sure there was.

He got back to his PADD and coded an order for the replicator to produce a single standard bolt, nothing to catch the eye of a passer-by, but large enough to notice if one knows what he is looking for.

It took the PADD a second to confirm that the item has been replicated.

Good, now all he has to do is get out and find it.

***0***

And so he stepped out of his room for the first time in four days, and he didn't even know what the time was.

It was night shift, so it seemed, because in the common room there was silence and dim lights and no one but Uhura was there, seating by the table with all of her books scattered around.

"Look who has finally crawled out of his hole…" she muttered and returned to her reading.

"Still doing that translating thing? I thought you were done with it." he answered with a not so very nice tease.

"I thought so too, until I got T'Sel's translation of Hamilton."

"And?" he decided to join her and seat next to her on the couch, picking up her PADD to view her work, she had made several drafts and added a lot of commentary.

"It was perfect, she had it nailed. The Vulcan was perfect, the text, and subtext were spot on, all the right emotional peaks were heightened, every cultural reference addressed, perfect!"
"Bitch." He answered and made Nyota burst into uncontrolled giggling that disclosed how tired she was.

"Yeah, I gave that bitch the perfect score; she earned it, unlike me… I'm not even finished yet."

"What is holding you back? Perfectionism?"

She was about to protest, but then she eased into her seat and nodded, a tear escaping her eye to roll down her beautiful face.

"Nothing is perfect, Nyota, not even me." He admitted in a tender voice and was pleased to see her unable to resist a smile.

"It is just that… So much is at stake… I cannot…"

"I'll give you the wise words of old Princess Elsa- Let it go."

"Don't you dare start singing!" she pointed a finger at him.

"Was not gonna." He smiled innocently.

"Was so totally gonna." She corrected him.

"Look, Nyota… whatever it is, it is finished, good or bad as it might be. Any more time spent on this would be just torture. Should I make an order out of it? Give her the work."

"But…"

"Do it."

"But I can still polish the edges."

"Give it to her now."

"I am sorry, my responsibility is…"

"An order it is."

"Jim?"

"Kidding, of course you have the last say, but really, Uhura, just do it, be brave, you did your best, and now is time to move on."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure you've done an upstanding job! So go give the translation to T'sel now and good riddance."

Uhura got up, nodding, picking up her PADD. "Yes, I think that you're right, sir."
So the replicator was not the one in the common room, so he went to their kitchen as the next option to find Sharel alone at the table, drinking. Alcohol consumption plus loneliness was never a good combination.

"Hey, Sharel, what's up?"

"Andorian ale, want some?" the Andorian picked up the bottle containing the blue fluid and had a gulp straight from it.

"Are we celebrating something?" Jim asked and there was no bolt in the kitchen's replicator. "Vodka and lime, a shot." He ordered and the replicator obeyed.

"Here is to my son's birthday." Shared toasted "Eleven today."

"That's a big boy, almost a man." Jim clank their drinks together, for the toast and then drank his shot at one go.

"Yes he is, sir, haven't seen him for more than a few days a year ever since I got enlisted, nine years almost, flew by so quickly."

"Give him a call, he'd be happy to hear from you."

"Would if I could, Sir, they denied my request." Sharel sighed and drank some more.

Oh, so that was the reason for the doom and gloom.

"What do you mean- they denied your request? Why would they?"

"The comm officer, Commander Sabek told me that contacting Andoria Prime from this position would take far too many resources and it was illogical to spend them on a birthday call."

"Heartless Vulcans." Jim patted the Andorian's back with sympathy. "I'll try talking to the Captain; convince him to make an exception."

"Would you do that for me?" Sharel eyes lighted up with renewed hope.

"No promises, but yes, I'll try pulling some strings."

"Thank you, sir!"

"No worries." "Thank you."

Jim nodded with a smile, he hoped he could talk some sense into the Captain, and as a backup plan, he could always ask a certain son of a certain elder for favors.

He left the kitchen and wondered where should he go looking next? The rest of this deck was sealed, just as Captain Setal had informed them. Chances are the replicators at the rest of this deck were not operational and probably shut down; so his unite was, logically, placed elsewhere.

So the only question was- up or down?

Up, he chose randomly and took the elevator to deck 8, since deck 10 and 9 were off limit, a
problem of itself, and started looking for a bolt and not finding one at any of the replicators at hand.

Maybe this was not such a good idea, Jimbo.

Why?

Maybe you took over a replicator in a secured location which is out of your reach?

I don't think so, secured units would have posed a bigger hacking challenge, I'm pretty sure this replicator is in a public location.

Maybe someone has already taken that bolt?

Now why would anyone do that?

I don't know… maybe someone had a sudden need for the most commonly used bolt on the ship? And there, behold… two bolts instead of one?

Are you starting a blame game here, Sunshine?

I don't know, should I?

***0***

Damn it! He thought this would be an easy task, that the replicator was located in their common hall, it was a logical assumption since he programmed his MCU to contact the nearest one, however; the nearest replicator was defined by electronic pathways and not by physical location.

And to make matters worse, he may never be able to find it, because he was unauthorized to enter certain decks that were limited to personal only. Yup, this was not the Enterprise, where he could venture anywhere he wanted to and not give it a second thought.

That said, the fact that he could not locate the replicator was a valuable piece of information all by itself, it meant that he should be extra careful with the way he operates it because there would be no way of knowing when his actions would be noticed.

Should he hack the maintenance database just to identify his replicator? Nah, unnecessary exposure factor, with little to gain.

Alright, deck 8, shuttle bay, replicator number 24, no bolt in sight.

But a shuttle was just entering through the force-field, to land next to him and the doors opened up, letting two humans out, and they were arguing loudly.

"You are so stupid, Yorktown, beyond belief! That maneuver alone cost us 40 minutes!"

"How should I know that the magnetic field in that particular region would not obey the navigating module predictions?"

"Told you one thousand times to switch to manual!"
"Also told me one thousand times to use the AI because my response time was too slow! So which one is it? You wanna be a Captain one day, Sulu? How about giving your crew none conflicting orders?"

"My crew would not be total incompetent!"

"Hey, hey! Guys!" Jim interrupted, before someone says something they'd regret.

Sulu and Dayton both turned to look at him with an expression of surprise, as if he had just manifested before their eyes.

"Sir, what are you doing here in such a late hour?" Sulu responded first.

"Could not sleep." Jim admitted. "Took a walk."

"Captain, you must have been worried about us." Dayton blushed. "We missed out ETA by 4.5 hours. Wasn't my fault."

"Sure it was!" Sulu contradicted him with a snarl. "Captain, would you please replace him as my co-pilot? He is impossible to work with!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sulu, but this is not the way this game is played." Jim breathed out in desperation. "The Vulcans will not have it."

"Sir, I have to inform you that Mr. Sulu here was reckless with his decision making. It takes almost twelve hours to fully circle this star with max impulse, and Mr. Sulu ordered two full rounds, knowing that it will take us about 24 hours. He brought us to a point of exhaustion that have jeopardized out safety."

"Speak for yourself, crybaby, I am fresh as daisy, it is so obvious you've never seen one day of combat in your life! Can we please stop this stupidity now, sir? I need some Yorktown-free time!"

"Mr. Sulu!!" Jim had to raise his voice now, angered, whatever it was; there was no excuse to show such disrespect.

"Sir." Sulu nodded, he understood.

Jim turned to look at the young Ensign, to poor thing was on the verge of tears. "Mr. Parker, please go to our quarters and get some rest."

"I'm not a child, sir!"

"Mr. Parker, it is an order."

Dayton breathed. "Captain, Lieutenant commander." He nodded to each of them and left.

They both watched as he disappeared into a lift, before Sulu spoke.

"Please don’t ask me a letter of recommendation for this one, sir."

Jim chose to ignore that. "May I have a briefing on that flight, Mr. Sulu?"

"Sure, captain." Sulu nodded. "Dayton and I took the shuttle today at 07:00, just after breakfast to have the first two laps around the star, I was well aware that it would take us about 24 hours and I was willing to take that risk, because T'Heli and Sobar have already finished their five laps and their average was perfect, only 1.2 hours longer than the theoretical minimum."
"Go on." Jim encouraged Sulu to continue after his voice faded into a whisper.

"So I chose a path for us, a bit closer to the star than the Vulcans took, but still in the safe zone, I wanted to finish the laps in 22.5 hours so we'd have a chance of winning. We started off just fine and were having a good pace, but after 14 hours into the flight the star got more active and it flared in a rate and intensity that put the shields under great strain.

Ensign Parker wanted to increase the radius to get away from the plasma bursts, but I refused, because I knew the shuttle could take it and I didn't want us to lose time on a vertical maneuver, I ordered for evasive maneuvers instead. We were coping for about 4 more hours, but then I've noticed we started developing a lag so I ordered Mr. Parker to switch to manual, because I noticed that the AI was taking a large safety factor that slowed us down."

"But Dayton said you were not happy with his respond time."

"Yes, that is true. Mr. Parker is inexperienced and it showed. His evasive maneuvers were inefficient and he spent too much time on vertical speed, we were opening a gap, so I asked him to switch back to auto-pilot after reprogramming its risk managing."

"And?"

"And he forgot to lower the safety factor of the shields so it was draining our fuel. I had to order him to switch back to manual before we were out. After that it became a bit chaotic, I admit, we tried several time to switch from auto to manual while optimizing the system, but we kept on having bad results and…. Jim, I cannot work with that kid!

He caves in under pressure; he makes stupid mistakes and blames me for them! This flight, sir, was a nightmare; I had to be the pilot, the navigator and the babysitter! We are going to lose this challenge, Jim, unless you take his place and we make perfect timing on the next 3 laps!"

"Calm down, Sulu." Jim said softly, and let the man catch his breath. "You know I cannot take Mr. Parker's place, the Vulcans won't have it."

"I know, Jim." Sulu breathed, lowering his gaze to the floor.

"A good commander must work with his team's flaws as well as their strengths, Hikaru, don't push Dayton too far, he's just a kid."

"Chekov was just a kid too."

"Well, Chekov is dead now, isn't he?" Jim had to harshly raise his voice now, despite the pain it cost, and Sulu sure flinched before his eyes. "Chekov took an unnecessary risk and paid with his life! You know how kids are; they think they'd live forever. We used to be like that too, remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't want Dayton to make a fatal mistake while trying to impress you! And I don't want you taking stupid risks while trying to impress the Vulcans!"

"We have to win, sir! What would you have me do?" Sulu looked at him; the pain in his dark eyes was obvious for all to see.

"Keep to one round at a time, and analyze this flight results before you take the next, compare your outcome to the Vulcan's one, and remember, Sulu, this star is green, this universe operate
differently than ours."

Sulu nodded to each command and gazed up to look Jim in the eye, smiling timidly. "Yes, sir… and what about Dayton, Captain?"

"Leave him to me."

"Yes, Jim."

"Good, now get some rest, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Sulu nodded and left for the turbo lift.

Jim could not linger to worry about it.

Now where were we before this interruption?

Oh, yeah.

No bolt in cargo bay either.

Should he bother trying deck 7 now?

Nah, a waste of time, back to the drawing board it is.

Chapter End Notes

So this is it for now, and I will try to slow down in order to give myself some time to work on the third act, which I still find a bit dodgy.

Please leave a review and make my day :-)  
Take care.
Next day was just as no good, not good at all.

He was up for a fishy start at it was; after spending hours trying to hack into the Vulcan resources system with little to no success.

The lag time between the points of sending the commands and receiving the feedback was so long, making everything confusing. It was so hard to keep track- signals bounced from the MCU in his room to the one in the replicator, to the mainframe of the ship and the ones in the VR department, with different speed and efficiency, and to make it worse, they were also disrupting each other, feeding each other with false data. It was like trying to have a private conversation with every single individual in a crowd of one hundred.

It was so frustrating.

So he gave it up and tried sleeping instead, but sleeping never came.

Not even after a long, lavishing session of wanking.

This never happened before.

He had always managed to masturbate himself to sleep, under any circumstances, be it in bed in his room, while Frank was in the next one, beating the crap out of Sam, or on Tarsus 4, while hiding and starving in the woods. He could do it even on shitty days of never ending red alert on board the Enterprise, when Spock was on duty and Bones barked at him to get some fucking rest.

Well…

No fucking rest.

Just tossing and turning in his sweaty, messed up bed, with a cacophony of sounds coming from his PADD, and a growing migraine in his head.

No sleep, no rest, no relief.

Don't do it.

Do it.

You promised.
You have no choice.

It is not safe.

Fuck safe, we are well past safe, like, by a month or so.

Don't...

Do it.

He opened the draw and fished put the hypo-spray, pressed it to his left upper arm and injected himself once, then twice, just to be sure.

A most welcomed sense of relief flowed through him as the Vulcan drug started flowing in his veins, gone was the edge of exhaustion, and gone was the pounding in his head, but for some reason his shitty mood was there to stay, a first, because up until now it had evacuated kindly with the others feels whenever he used that drug.

A cold shower, a shave, the brushing of his teeth and he was good to go.

He was not, however, prepared for the mayhem that awaited him in the common room so much early in the morning. His crew was there, all of them, but it seemed like they were screaming at each other. There were shouts, angry faces, glares, snarls and everything.

Oh well, coffee.

He crossed the room into the kitchen dodging every "Jim", "Sir" and "Captain" thrown in his way.

"One large cup, black with no sugars, extra hot." Ignoring the coffee machine, he ordered the replicator.

The hot steaming cup had materialized, filing his nostrils with wonderful, tantalizing smell. He picked it up and started sipping slowly, savoring the fresh taste of caffeine and its aromatic warmth.

But he could not hide forever, even if he wanted to.

He was still the Captain, and this mess was his to address.

So he got out of the kitchen and back into the common hall.

"Morning." He greeted them all, smiling and waving his free hand.

"Morning?" Carol scoffed coldly.

"Oh, really, Jim?" Nyota echoed her.

"More like an afternoon." Sharel corrected him.

Damn it, his time perception got really screwed up, seems like the Vulcan time table and his hacking efforts in perfect isolation were a bad combination.

"Come on now." Sulu added "What is wrong with you?"

"You must step up your game, sir! We are in a major trouble here!" Carol scolded him. "This is so much unlike you!"
Well, at least they stopped shouting at each other; Jim smiled and returned to his coffee.

"Give him a break, guys, he just got up." Dayton tried standing up for him, such a nice kid.

"He should have gotten up hours ago!" Carol now berated her boyfriend, this was never a good sign. "And help us with this mess, god, I feel like I am all alone in this mission!"

"Not everything is about you, Carol!" Sulu muttered at her. "D'you even realize I've just returned from a 24 hour's flight only to start working on the flight data? Do you think I have time or energy to help you now with that Delta Vega Lander?"

"Don't pretend this wasn't your own idea to make two rounds at one go!" Carol shouted back at him.

"The Vulcans have made all five rounds with one go! Five days ago! While we were still playing in the simulation room. Got a perfect score! We are so way behind!"

"Your problem, not mine!"

"With all due respect, Carol, I don't think Sulu would be too useful right now." Sharel snarled "His brain is not functioning, we'd get nothing from him but mistakes. Better let him rest."

"Rest? Do I get to rest?" Carol fumed "We are nowhere near completion! And I have worked for the past 60 hours on that sodding probe all by myself! You should have seen the looks I got from T'Sel, Kuvak and Vedik, felt almost like pity. And where were you all this time, by the way, Sharel? You were not operating a shuttle by mistake, were you?"

"Studying and taking that stupid 10th grade test." The Andorian muttered.

"Studying? Are you sure? I've been here every day this whole week and never did I see you study." Nyota entered the argument. "Half the time you were not even here!"

"Were you spying on me in your free time, Lt. Commander? I had things to do!" Sharel answered. "Don't you?"

"We were given this mission as a team, Sharel, Sulu! It is a huge task! And I was counting on you, silly me!" Carol was almost in tears.

"And what do you have to show for all that Studying? Your score? 95 Out of 150." Nyota continued "What a waste of time."

"Hey! I am a security officer!" Sharel snapped at the both of them "I was not selected for my job according to my Vulcan logical skills or my engineering abilities!"

"Or any other talent…" Sulu muttered.

"Shut up, Hikaru." Carol glared daggers at him "Your score was not that great either."

"Your boyfriend did the worst, though" Sulu chuckled and looked at Dayton who blushed pitifully "way to go, 84."

"Would have done better if you hadn't dragged me to the simulator for hours and hours! And what do we have to show for it? Nothing! The Vulcans took us by a stroll!"

"Because you're a shitty navigator as well as…"
"Ok, ok, just stop it!" Jim raised his voice after putting his cup down, and everyone fell into silence and stared at him. "You're just wasting your precious time and energy on this blame game!"

Carol and Sulu lowered their gaze while Nyota looked straight at him, Sharel breathed out, and Dayton ran his hand through his ginger hair.

"Look, we are all overworked, stressed out and frustrated! But the only way to solve problems is one at a time! So let's figure this out! Miss. Marcus, you go first."

The blonde officer nodded, and when she spoke, she kept it calm and brief.

"I spent 60 hours out of the last three Vulcan standard days, practically all by myself, trying to assemble the Delta Vega probe. I have made dismal progress and I could really use the help of Sulu and Sharel who were ASSINGED to that challenge with me. However, whenever I asked for their help I got refused."

"When I asked your help analyzing my flight's data you also refused." Sulu reminded her.

"Hold on, Mr. Sulu, let Carol finish." Jim scolded the helmsman.

"Serves you right, Hikaru! Walk a mile in my shoes!" Carol gave Sulu a mocking smile. "Oh, and I'm finished! And so is that challenge, if you ask me!"

"Childish, much." Sulu mumbled.

And then, they all looked at him, awaiting his judgment. He squint his eyes, trying to get his numb brain into cooperating "Mr. Marcus if I recall correctly, there's no time limit on that mission, is there?"

"No, just the first team that gets it done wins, sir."

"You work at the same engineering deck as the Vulcan team, right? How are they progressing?"

"Slowly." Carol reported "They haven't figure out just yet that there's a difference between the historical US customary units and the ones of the EU Metric system. It slows them down."

"You haven't pointed that out to them?"

"No." Carol shrugged "why would I?"

"Playing fair?" Jim suggested..

She only shrugged again "Well, I'll take all the advantage that I can get, sir, my call." The science officer reminded him "Besides, it is only a matter of time before Spock steps in and points that out."

"Right." Jim nodded "This is what we'll do-

Sharel, you must take over this project, and free Carol to help Sulu and Dayton analyze the flight data, keep an eye on the Vulcan team while at it, and report to Carol on their progress.

Carol, help Sulu finish that analysis as soon as possible so Sulu and Dayton could finish their rounds, because you'll need them available when Spock gets involved.

Anything else?"
Carol shook her head, Sulu and Sharel glanced at each other and nodded, Dayton and Nyota kept quiet.

"Great, good luck to us all." Jim concluded and before someone could say anything else the central comm system came alive.

"Attention on deck." Came the voice of Captain Setal "This is a reminder to all 'Plak If Fee' participants and guests. The meeting in the main gathering hall will take place within an hour, please make sure to be there on time. Captain Setal out."

Oh, yeah.

That message had a 'Humans, don’t you dare being late' writing all over it.

"A meeting?" Jim asked the crew, Sulu and Dayton looked just as confused as he was.

"We got the mail this morning." Nyota confirmed "The Elders commenced it. There are no special preparations required."

"Thank you, Miss. Uhura." Jim smiled at his Communication officer.

"If you were not in your room, hiding, you might have known that too." She added.

"Thanks again, Miss. Uhura."

***0***

So, they were late.

That being said, the gathering hall was dimly lit, the stage was set and illuminated, featuring 21 empty seats, in groups of 8, 5, and 8.

"Sorry." Jim whispered as he bumped into someone's leg in the dark. That someone was Sobar, and the Vulcan almost growled as Jim took the seat next to him.

"Greetings." Said someone, that was probably eyeing them this whole time, until they set down, because he started talking almost as soon as Jim's bottom had hit the chair.

It was Captain Setal that has climbed to the stage and glared at their direction, almost frowning while everyone of Jim's team had found their place.

"As most of you already know, I am Captain Setal of this starship, the Vokau, and I welcome you all to this gathering, which marks the halfway point of the 'Plak If Fee'.

To our brothers and sisters who just joined us from the 'Ipik' – a warm welcome to you, peace and long lives.

As you all know, we are in the midst of this historical ritual, which will influence our nation for eons to come. I wish to take this opportunity to commemorate the warriors of both teams. We are watching you; we know that you put your mind and soul into this challenge; we see how hard you work and how true you are to your blood vow.
On behalf of the Elders, the crew of this ship and everyone witnessing this event, I want to thank you. Live long and prosper."

The old Captain raised his hand forming the Ta'al, and let his hand hang in the air for a long quiet while.

"Now, we have summoned you here at the request of the elders' council. They wish to share their present stands and impressions from the ceremony up until now, so the warriors would have an understanding of current state of things and better their aim and efforts.

I welcome the council of elders to the stage."

The people in the crowd stood up in silence and formed the Ta'al as the elders entered the stage. They entered in three groups, all wearing silky white robes, but each group was also wearing a long, satin scarf of the same color.

Soval and his team wore a red one, Svern and his team wore a green one and the group in the middle, led by T'pau wore a yellow one.

When they all took their seats, the crowd set down and Captain Setal lowered his hand and spoke again.

"Before I give the floor to the council of elders, here are the results of the challenges so far:

Regarding Soval's opening debate challenge- the 'Leave' team gained 2 points.

As to Green1's challenge – the 10th grade end year test- the 'Remain' team gained 2 points as they scored an average of 112.5 point out of 112 required.

Green6 challenge of chess game tournament is still ongoing.

Green2 challenge of the star orbit race is still ongoing.

Red1 challenge of a musical performance is still ongoing

Red2 and Green4 mutual challenge of translation has ended with 4 points to the 'Leave' team.

Red4, 3 and 5 challenged Green2, 3 and 6 for Red4 2 points of the probe assemble is still ongoing.

So the current score for the teams is 6:2 in favor of the 'Leave' team.

And now, I give the speech to the elders, if you please."

The Elders Soval, T'Pau and Svern rose up to their feet and moved to the front of the stage.

Elder Soval was first to speak, a hint of a smile hovered on his face. "I'll be brief, because I know you are all curious about the next segment of this meeting. Therefore, I would only say that I am very pleased with the efforts of the 'Remain' team, I praise their tremendous efforts, and I am fully confident in their upcoming win. So I stand as before, a remainer."

Svern, who glared coldly at Soval while he spoke did not wait far too long to take his turn. "I'll be even briefer." He said drily with a frozen expiration. "My stand as a Leaver is unchanged."

T'Pau nodded in her turn "Such as the ones before me, I wish to note that both teams are giving us a good, honest fight, and an interesting one. My stand is the same- Undecided."
They bowed slightly towards the crowd and took back their seat.

Next to stand up was the elder next to Soval, but he did not walk forwards, just looked at the crowd before speaking. "I am Elder Sadeg, of the Remain faction, I stand the same."

He sat down and the elder next to him rose "I am Elder T'Enel, of the Remain faction, I stand the same." She bowed briefly and sat down.

The elder after her rose up, but did not look into directly the crowd "I am Elder Ketal of the Remain faction." He said with a deep voice "And currently, I lean towards the undecided. Those are the reasons of my change of mind…"

The elder explained his reasons, and the opening speech, was a major one of them, not because of the argumentation presented, but because of the impression he got from Jim, that he was unfocused, absent minded and confused.

Jim sank into his seat, hoping to vanish from the scene, while Sobar straightened in his chair, looking all smug and annoying.

One more elder of the 'Remain' faction revealed that he now leaned towards the Undecided, and two of the Undecided confessed that they were leaning towards the 'Leave' faction. Only one of the 'Leave' factions was swayed into the 'Undecided' one.

That Elder explained his change in position was influenced by the same opening speech, he saw Sobar's use of personal data to impact the other speaker as a sign of a weaker position, which required stooping to a low point in order to gain hold.

Now Jim breathed out his relief and smiled, while Sobar stiffened up in his seat.

But still, this was not good, Jim frowned in the dark.

This makes for 6 'Remainers', 6 'Undecided' and 9 'Leavers', if things stay this way; the Plak If Fee will probably go to the 'Leave' faction.

He glanced at Sobar to see if there was a hint in his body language to show that he was celebrating this small victory, but the Vulcan's face remained impassive, even though he clearly did the math as well.

They'd better start winning some challenges soon.

"And now for the final part of this meeting, I call the 'Leave' team to the stage." Said Captain Setal, as the elders evacuated the floor, and some crew members cleared off the chairs and placed other equipment instead.

Such as a Drum system, a synthesizer, bass, guitars and an old fashion set of microphones and amplifiers.

Was that what he thought it was?

"Apologies." Someone bumped into his leg as he passed by him on his way to the stage, Sobar.

Jim could only gape as the change of lighting, to blues and golds, pinks and purples such as in a rock concert.

Yes, it was what he had thought it was. This was entirely his fault; this was his stupid idea of a
challenge. Oh, hell…

Kuvac took his place at the drums, T'Heli and Sobar both picked the bass and second guitar, Vedik stretched in front of the synthesizer, T'Sel moved towards one microphone and Spock, with his lead guitar moved to the next.

God, was Spock drop dead gorgeous, the tallest of them all, the most lithe and chiseled at the same time, his hair was longer than ever before, and the lights glittered on his jet black strands and caressed his perfect, to die for, high cheekbones.

He looked as if he was uncomfortable under the spot light, but also very determinant to perform his duty, he glanced at the crowd and Jim tried to sink into his seat again, so he won't be seen.

Jeez, Spock must have hated him right now, for putting him and his team in those ridicules circumstances, but he kind of looked the part, to be honest, a rock-star persona kind of fitted him well, could have been easily mistaken for one of those Beatles.

Damn it, Spock spotted him in the mass, hard to disappear when you are one of the only two blonds in the hall.

The members of the Vulcan team shared a few swift glances before Spock stared "Greeting to all, I am Spock of the 'Leave team', and as part of this ritual we were challenged to perform a human song for the judgment of the 'Remain team'."

That deep, sexy, bedroom voice.

Wow, I really need to get laid soon.

As if, real soon.

I hope I can hold it off until this 'Flak If Fee' is over.

"I must warn you that human music is known to elicit strong emotions, even from the most experienced listeners." Spock continued "So, if you do not wish to expose yourself to that risk, I urge you to leave the hall now. We will wait for a short while."

Spock left the microphone and his place was taken by T'Heli.

She and Sobar played a few notes to adjust their guitars one to the other. Kuvac softly rolled the drums and Vedik bent his microphone to suite him better.

Some Vulcans indeed left the hall, including Svern, Sarek and two other elders from the 'Leave' team, but to their credit, most of the gathered remained seated and eagerly awaited the show to begin.

After a few moments it did.

Kuvac held up the drum sticks and banged them together "One, two, three…"

The synthesizer filled the hall with warm, somewhat familiar sounds, the drums, and bass guitar joined soon, and so did the main and secondary guitars.

T'Sel viewed her peers, waiting for her que, which came soon enough, so she pressed her lips to the microphone and started singing.
"Lying in my bed, I hear the clock tick and think of you
Caught up in circles, confusion is nothing new
Flashback, warm nights almost left behind
Suitcases of memories, time after...

Her voice was angelic, sweet and clear, oh so full of emotion.

"Sometimes you picture me, I'm walking too far ahead
You're calling to me, I can't hear what you've said
Then you say, "Go slow", I fall behind
The second hand unwinds"

Sobar and Spock join into the background to compliment her soft voice with their masculine ones.

"If you're lost, you can look and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting
Time after time"

It was a perfect harmony, drenched in feelings of urgency, sorrow and longing.

"If you're lost, you can look and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting
Time after time"

The males ended their part and now T'Heli stepped forwards, her voice deeper than T'Sel and a bit coarse.

"After my picture fades and darkness has turned to gray
Watching through windows, you're wondering if I'm ok
Secrets stolen from deep inside
The drum beats out of time"

T'Sel joined her to a beautiful female duet.

"If you're lost, you can look and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting
Time after time."

They played perfectly with each other, as if they had practiced for years. Every instrument was in tune with the others, Kuvac never lost a beat, Vedik gave them all a great electronic cover, the bass was on point and the guitars almost spoke to one another. Spock did a fantastic job at teaching this song to them; it was nothing short of spectacular.

Now Sobar, with his surprisingly pleasant voice continued.
"You said, "Go slow", I fall behind
The second hand unwinds…"

And Kuvac, Vedik and Spock joined in to give him secondary voices.

"If you're lost, you can look and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting
Time after time."

Now the females joined in.

"If you're lost, you can look and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting
Time after time"

And the song faded away with only T'Sel singing, with her pure, crystal clear voice-

"Time after time
Time after time
Time after time
Time after time…"

Jim had to chock down some tears, and so did many others.

It was a good thing that he didn’t start clapping right away, because no one else did. Some just raised their hands to form the Ta'al, some left without ceremony, others lingered in complete meditative silence.

Spock reached for the microphone again. "I wish to dedicate this song to Lady Amanda Grayson. Thank you for listening."

Chapter End Notes

Credit is where credit is due:

"Time after Time" Cyndi Lauper and Rob Hayman.
I claim no rights and make no profit.
Hey everyone, this was another favorite of mine to write. I promise you, though, this is the last chapter that has a heavy music theme.
I am hoping that you are all doing alright and keep your spirit high, I also hope to hear from you, and as always-
Take care :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Bloody hell, I hate them!" Carol huffed and puffed while walking back and forward in front of the couch he was sitting on. "Why do they have to be so goddamn perfect? Perfect score, perfect performance, perfect figure… perfect hair!"

"Would you please calm down already?" Jim smiled at her while fiddling with his acoustic guitar he picked up out of boredom. "Your hair is perfect too."

Carol glared daggers at him. "Oh, do shut up!"

"What?" he made an innocent face "It's so soft and blonde and flowing…"

"Jim, they are wining." Sulu stated with alarm. "There is nothing we can throw at them that will do the trick. Did you see the same performance as we did last night? They knocked it out of the park!"

"Well, yeah…" Jim winced and changed position on the couch "But Cyndi Lauper? I'd totally go with something way cooler, Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin. Hey, wanna hear my 'Stairway to heaven'?"

"No." Nyota answered.

And so did Sharel, Carol and Sulu.

Jim shrugged it off, whispering "Your loss." And he started a Radiohead song instead, keeping it quietly to himself.

"Just to be clear, we concede those 2 points to them, yes?" Carol asked.

Jim stopped playing and looked at her again. "Do we have any other choice?"

"I hate them!" She flared at him.

Nyota came to seat next to him, clearly, she was on the verge of tears, have been since the meeting with the elders. She leaned into his shoulder and mumbled with a trembling voice to his ear "It is my entire fault, I screwed it up and now they are going to leave!"

"Now, now…” he let go of the guitar, and allowed himself to throw a hand around her shaken figure, drawing her even closer to him."I'm to blame; I've pushed you into submitting that text before you thought it was ready, my bad, Nyota, please don’t cry."
But she did, and soaked his red jacket sleeve with her tears; he pulled her into a hug and petted her soft hair while the guitar fell to the ground with a thud.

"The Vulcans are going to leave." She moaned. "We are going to lose them."

Sulu came to seat next to her other side and gently stroke her arm.

"The Vulcans are here to stay." Jim answered "They'll try to run, but we will drag them back by their pointy ears. We will not let them make this fatal mistake."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Sharel asked.

"Eyes on the ball." Jim declared "I am winning the chess tournament against Vedik, Sulu and Dayton will find a way to win the star race, you and Carol will build the Delta Vega lender, and we have some more points to grab, so don't give up just yet!"

Nyota pulled herself up, running her hand on her wet face, wiping up the tears. "I'm sorry." She sniffed "I'm just so fucking tired."

Jim gave her one last embrace then released her from his hold.

They were all so fucking tired.

Officially, they had last night and this entire day for rest, but none of them did.

Carol, Sulu and Dayton were busy going over the flight data, trying to figure out how to shave some time off the next laps, so they'd have a winning chance.

Sharel was getting himself familiarize with the Delta Vega Lander project, and Carol did her best to help him, going back and forward between him and Dayton and Sulu, making Jim dizzy just by watching her.

Nyota took the task of preparing the crew for the interview stage that was due in three days time. The Elders wished to interview the crew, and she used Sobar's data to get them ready, giving them each some talking points and constructing a strategy for every interview. She had a hard time gaining their attention to prepare them, but she did a fantastic job.

He tried to juggle three things at once.

The first was to write a code to overcome the output-input mess he was stuck in, trying to get a handle on the communication between the two MCUs. He worked like crazy, hoping to stabilize the system.

The second was to be there for his crew, because he could not leave them struggling and hide in his room any longer, it was his job as a Captain and team leader to oversee their effort and supply feedback and advise.

The third thing was to prepare for his very own interview. Of all the elders, it was Elder Sarek who wished to interview him, talking about awkward. Luckily, Nyota has prepared him all the necessary background, saving his time and struggle.

Poor guys, they were all so very fucking tired.

Sulu picked up his glass from the coffee table and took a sip, only to spit it back in a second later. "I don't know what the hell this was, but it wasn't beer." He wiped his lips with disgust.
"The red wine is better." Carol informed him as he took his glass back to the replicator. "But don't get your hopes high." Seems like Vulcans did not know how to synthesize alcohol. "Dayton, honey, aren't you done yet?"

The young man that rested his head against the feet of another couch raised his eyes to meet her glance. "Mmmm, no, not yet, sweetie, sorry." He returned to his PADD, where he had charts and tables drafted from the flight data.

"Pity, I wanted you to come seat next to me, I could use a good back rub." Carol pouted.

"A minute, babe, just let me finish here."

"Thanks, darling."

"Darling, baby, Honey!" Sulu mocked them, returning from the replicator with a glass of wine "You're gonna make me puke."

Jim picked up his guitar again and continued to play the song he had started before Nyota interrupted him.

Dayton put away the PADD, then yawned, stretched and went to seat next to his girlfriend, and before too long, they were into some light smooching.

"Is there a point where we can call it quits and leave?" Sharel asked, standing near the window, to view the Ipik as it was slowly rotating on its axle, glittering in the green starlight.

Jim shook his head while playing "The Elders were the ones to initiate this challenge, so I believe they are the only ones that can cancel it."

"I miss my bed, is all." Sharel yawned loudly and wiggled his antennas as if to keep himself awake.

"I miss my bed too." Sulu added "Back on Earth, where you can open a window and feel the soft breeze on your face."

"Who in their right mind opens a window at night?" Sharel wondered "Unless they wish to invite the blizzard in."

"I want to go to bed for hours and hours." Carol moaned.

"May I join you?" Dayton smiled and kissed her temple.

Sulu spat his sip again into his glass "disgusting." He went to disintegrate it at the replicator and came back to join Sharel at the window.

Jim finished the song and was wondering which one to start next, as the Vulcan team stormed into the Rec room, all seemed in a bad mood, Sobar especially looked frosty.

"Oh, the blizzard is in." Sharel mumbled and Sulu could not help a chuckle.

"You are late." Jim said towards the Vulcans, astounded by the words that just fell out of his mouth.

"We are, by no means, late." Sobar corrected him with disdain. "We were awaiting the results of Elder Svern's appeal to the council. Elder Svern has tried to cancel this unessential event, however..." he did not finish his sentence, but sat down on a couch in front of Jim instead.
"Well, now you're stuck with us, bummer." Jim smiled at him and returned to his playing, he had the perfect new song to sing, and was not shy about it.

Sobar blinked his inner eyelids, and said nothing for a while.

Vedik and T'Sel went to the replicator to get themselves some herbal tea. T'Heli and Kuvac found a spot near the vast window, although away from Sulu and Sharel.

Spock sat down besides Sobar, surrendering to silence as well; and they both did their best to ignore Jim's singing.

"...I wonder how, I wonder why, yesterday you told me bout the blue, blue sky..." Jim sang deliberately out of tune. "And all that I can see is just a yellow lemon tree..."

Finally Sobar broke down and commanded "Stop this at once!"

"I'm turning my head up and... what? Why?"

"Because I said so." Sobar answered.

"Up and down, I'm turning, turning, turning around, and all that I can see is just another lemon tree, sing! La... La..."

"Mr. Kirk..." Spock intervened, almost pleading.

"Captain." Jim smiled.

"Captain." Spock acknowledged with a nod.

Jim let go of his guitar, smiling still.

"Thank you." Sobar blinked his inner lids again.

"Attention on deck 7, Rec room 5." came an announcement on the comm, filling the large hall with a deep rumbling voice "This is Commander Sabek. I hereby inform you that from this moment forward your room will be monitored both visually and audibly at the elders' request.

"The elders wish to observe your socializing dynamics as part of the 'Plak If Fee'. Please try to act as naturally as possible. The monitoring will continue for the next three hours until this session is over. On behalf of the council of elders, I apologies for the inconvenient.

"Sabek out."

And when the Vokau XO's voice died out, silence fell on the Rec-room, a deafening silence, the type of which you could drop a pin to the floor and listen to it dance until it settles.

The Vulcans in the room were motionless and quiet, emitting their snowy attitude, and the non Vulcans were stroke with unease and confusion, unsure of what to do, squirming uncomfortably under the weight of the stillness.

Sobar and Jim had engaged in a staring contest, light blue Vulcan eyes staring into clear sky human ones. They held each other's gaze for a few minutes until Jim quirked Sobar out with a smile, and the Vulcan blinked away.

"Is this the way vulcans normally socialize?" he asked the leader of the 'Leave' team "Because it's very boring."
"I'd rather not partake in this activity under such blunt breach of privacy." Sobar answered.

"I hear ya, brave rebel...." Jim breathed and looked up to the ceiling trying to locate hidden cameras or microphones but could spot none.

"I am also inexperienced when it comes to socializing with Humans, or Andorians, for all that matters." Sobar admitted unwillingly.

Jim shrugged "I'm sorry, bud, but this is the Elders' play, a bit kinky, but hey, I'm no judge. And as for socializing with humans? Come on, you've known us for a while now, we are no strangers."

"I beg the differ." Sobar insisted.

"Seriously, pal? You wanna tell me you've learned nothing about us humans ever since we've met?"

"Oh, I've learned some, indeed, all I ever wished to, and more." Sobar promised.

"Really, now?" Jim almost chuckled "What have you learned, then?" he was pushing the envelope, no doubt about it, but he was oh so curious.

Sobar glanced at Spock for a brief moment, and then turned to look at Jim again, it was very clear that he was annoyed, and was trying to select his words very carefully.

"Humans are... alluring, unreasonable and fickle. It is beyond me how one can keep their company for a substantial period of time without losing their mind."

Spock lowered his gaze, without a hint of emotion on his face, and yet, Jim could feel his discomfort, as if he had broadcasted it on the Ship's comm.

"Well, well... I'll tell you what I've learned about Vulcans in my years of contact, if you don't mind." Jim was worried about Spock but he smirked at Sobar instead "Vulcans are cold, smug and elusive. One can spend years and years with them and still know nothing substantial about them."

But they do have great, huge cocks, and they can fuck you to oblivion and beyond.

Spock looked up, meeting his eyes for a moment.

Those dark, beautiful eyes.

"It is unfortunate, then." Spock said in his deep, warm voice "That this is all we have to show for, after all this time."

"Hey, guys; don't look so sad!" Jim beamed at the two stern vulcans "It is not like we must marry and have kids. We just gotta stay in the same Federation, is all."

"Must we?" Sobar almost smirked now. "Mr. Spock, what is your current opinion on that matter?"

Spock changed his position in his seat with a hint of unease "I am still in the Undecided camp." He answered and thinned his lush, soft lips "I do find myself, however, leaning toward the 'Leave' faction as time progress."

Sobar's bright eyes now shone with victory "Interesting, isn't it? Even the Human hybrid is leaning towards 'Leave' now, a landmark, I might say."

"Yeah." Jim mumbled and breathed.
Damn it, they are winning.

"We have 2.36 standard hours until this interaction is over." T'Heli noted from afar.

Sobar nodded and fell into silence again, and so did Spock and the rest of them.

The humans and Andorian were of no help either, everyone kept to himself in quiet, making Jim wonder if he should even bother at all.

"Time flies by while having fun." he murmured to himself and because there was nothing else to do, and he was bored, he picked his guitar again and started singing quietly to himself. It was an old, obscure song, but one of his mom's favorites.

"Day, a long while ago I
Walked down dirt road and stood
In the time great
Stone walls lined the road
Black and white cattle roamed
In the fields, corn grewed up straight

These times have changed since my young life
And I never thought I'd see the day
There's houses in the cornfield 'round a fallin' down barn
And the old dirt road was paved
And the old dirt road was paved….

As he sang, he noted that no one tried to protest or stop him, not even Sobar, so he continued the song all the way to its end.

When he looked up again after finishing, to his surprise, he saw T'Sel and Vedik ogling him. They both pulled some chairs and were seating at the edge of their seat, listening to him with glittering eyes.

T'Sel even wiped a lonely tear when his voice faded, he blushed and so did she.

"Sorry about that." He apologized to her.

"No, no…" she breathed "It was beautiful. Your voice is so… so… so…"

"Thank you." He smiled as she struggled with standard. "Your voice is wonderful, T'Sel. Really, guys, I must hand it to you; last night was top notch, a job well done, congrats."

"Thank you." T'Sel nodded.

"Spock deserves most of the credit." Vedik smiled.

"We all worked very hard." Spock was quick to answer.

"T'Sel, I need to ask you something." Nyota could not help herself "Why did you reject my translation of Supat's poem?"

Jim turned to her and placed a gentle hand on her thigh, trying to stop her from perusing this topic, but it really had bothered her to the point where she simply ignored him.

"Please, I really need to know." Nyota insisted.
T'Sel withdrew to the back of her seat, and so did Vedik, she shared a glance with Sobar before facing Nyota again.

"I'm so sorry." The Vulcan said "your translation was too clean, too logical… rigid. I have consulted with Elder Vellua and Elder T'Prim who are both celebrated experts of the Vulcan literature. They both said the same. I am sorry, from the lower part of my heart."

Nyota sniffed and nodded "Excuse me." She got up "I have to use the bathroom."

"I'll show you the way." Spock volunteered and stood up.

Nyota needed a moment to consider, and she looked at Jim who smiled at her. "Ok, let's go." She said to Spock and they both left the room.

"Captain Kirk." Vedik said after they were gone "I wish to inform you that human music is fascinating, and even though I did not have time yet to listen to the sample you have provided me, I will make every effort to do so to in the next 36 hours."

"Thank you, Vedik."

"Now would you please play us some more?" he asked, in spite of Sobar's clear, yet mute objection.

Jim chuckled. "Sure thing." He pulled his guitar back up. "This is a classic, 'Obladi Oblada'."

He played a few more songs before Spock and Nyota returned to the room. Nyota looked a bit calmer than before, and Spock was unreadable, as almost always.

Spock took his place next to Sobar, and Nyota found a seat next to Dayton and Carol, both gave her a brief hug.

"Can we do something else?" Sobar asked when Jim finished another song.

"Of course." Jim agreed "What do you have in mind?"

A fight to the death, by the look in the young pilot's eyes.

"Karioke." Carol suggested.

"I don't think so." Sulu answered.

"Meditation." Kuvac offered and Spock shook his head to the negative.

Group orgy? Jim wondered without saying.

What's wrong with you?

Bad, bad brain.

Why everything is about sex with you, Jimbo?

"How about a game of chess?" Vedik suggested.

"What a great idea!" Jim smiled at the scholar. "We could pick it up where we've left it. Which is 0:5 in my favor." He reminded his opponent.
"Ho, no..." Vedik said, returning from the replicator with the chess board. "I do not wish to play beneath such scrutiny. I fear my performance will suffer under the watchful eyes of my peers and the elders. I'd rather watch you and Mr. Spock have a go, if you don't mind."

Jim looked at his soon to be former first officer "Ready if you are."

"Affirmative." Spock answered and they placed the board on the table and set up the pieces.

Jim looked at the 2D board and a nostalgic wave washed upon him. Many hours were spent like this, onboard the Enterprise, with herbal tea, a pleasant talk and good company, but were those memories his, or did they belong to the late old Spock who shared them with him on delta Vega? An echo from another universe?

"Black or white?" He asked this Spock.

"Black."

Well, he was always the counter puncher.

"This is fascinating." Vedik breathed, reminding them that they were not alone.

Jim smiled and pushed a pawn forward.

Spock mirrored his move with a pawn of his own.

And so did the game began, and soon the background faded away, and all external voices have been dimmed out, and in his narrow view, there were only him and Spock and the board between them.

Time also seemed to slow down, as Jim submerged himself in the battle of the minds between them. Spock was a worthy opponent, patient, cunning, and very experienced with Jim's moves and the ways to counter them.

It was much more enjoyable than playing against Vedik, and naturally more challenging, but with persistence and innovation, he carved his way through.

"Checkmate, Mr. Spock." Jim declared as he moved his rook for the last time.

Spock scanned the board and nodded "I concur." He calmly agreed.

"Mr. Kirk, this is such a beautiful game!" T'Sel said all of a sudden, her gloved hand touched his shoulder, and as she leaned forward, her warmth and sweet scent engulfed him and her soft breasts slightly brushed against his upper arm.

He tried to contain his surprise, because he had no recollection of her moving to seat on the couch and oh so very close to him. "You must teach me how to play! Please, don't turn me down!"

He chuckled and was about to answer her when Sobar intervened, saying something to T'Sel in Vulcan, in a cold, harsh tone.

She frowned at Sobar and answered him in Vulcan as well; her voice hardly masked her irritation, but none the less she moved away from Kirk and let him go.

Sobar said something more, and now Spock answered with a calm, collected manner.

Sobar huffed and referred to Spock now, rebuking him with snowy ire.
Nyota took this as a que, left her seat by Dayton and Carol and moved towards them, her arms across her chest, and she said something to Sobar in perfect high Vulcan, her voice calm and assured.

Sobar gaped at Nyota, his skin turned a bit greener. "My apology." He returned to speak standard. "I have briefly forgotten that you are without your translators. This will not happen again."

"Of course." Jim nodded.

Of course this had bullshit smeared all over it.

"T'Heli?" Sobar asked.

"1.5 hours." She answered.

From that point forward, the meeting dragged on like an unsuccessful first date, where the bill was taking too long to arrive and the cab was a no-show.

Well, the bright side of it all was that Vedik had agreed eventually to continue his chess match against Jim, pushing the score between them to 1:7.

1.5 hours later the comm came back to life.

"Attention deck 7, rec room 5, Commander Sabek here. Monitoring of this room has now ended, thank you for your cooperation. Sabek out."

Without ceremony all Vulcans ceased whatever they were doing and approached the exit without pleasantries, well, almost all.

Sobar turned on his hills and stared at Spock. "Son of Sarek, aren't you coming with us?" he asked at the door.

"I wish to stay here a bit longer." Spock answered from his place on a couch, Jim's guitar in his hands, placed as a shield in front of him; his elegant fingers stroked the strings without much sound.

"You are under oath." Sobar reminded him.

"I am in no breach of any regulation." Spock answered with confidence.

"As you wish." Sobar concluded and left the room, with the rest of his team following him. Only Vedik looked back and gave Jim a nod and a small smile before his departure.

Jim could only ogle Spock as the Vulcan started playing a song. Nyota smiled and went to seat next to him to join him in the singing. Spock let her lead and only provided quiet background cover with his deep, pleasant voice.

"Well, that's interesting." Sulu who joined him at the window whispered, giving him a glass of beer.

"Are you trying to kill me?" he asked his helmsman.

"It grows on you." Hikaru said and took a sip of his own glass.

Dayton joined them at the observation point. "Sir, should I call the shuttle bay now?" he asked Sulu and looked at him while he drank. "Are you sure you are fit for flight?"
"It usually takes them two hours to place a shuttle at our disposable; I'll be good as gold by then."
He assured the young Ensign.

"So another go?" Jim wondered.

"Three." Sulu answered "We'll take shifts, operating the shuttle one at the time."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Jim asked, worried.

Sulu nodded vigorously "Should have done so from the get go, if I wasn't the control freak that I
am."

"You can count on me, sir." Dayton said to Sulu with an endearing gravity.

"This is your call, Sulu, but I wonder if you should have three laps at one go. You're pushing it too
far."

"Look, Jim…" Sulu answered with a stern voice "This is all we have. We are as ready as it gets, no
more rabbits in the hat, so why not be done with it already? You'll need us free for the next round
of challenges."

"Yeah I know, but… I don't know, seems like an unnecessary risk."

"My call, Jim, we all have to make them."

Jim nodded and patted Sulu on the shoulder. "You are gonna make a hell of a Captain someday,
Hikaru, when it's your turn again, I mean, when Ben is on board with it."

"Much appreciated." Sulu nodded and after a moment of silence, he threw a glance at Spock.
"Well, aren't you going to talk to him?"

Jim looked as well, the Vulcan let go of the guitar and was holding Dayton's PADD instead.

"What should I say?" Jim mumbled, in a rare moment of awkwardness.

But as Sulu and Jim paused to think about it, they've both heard the shouts.

"Hey, Hey!" Dayton seemed to have beaten them to it. He left them and walked over to Spock
"Those are our flight charts!" he said to the Vulcan "You're not supposed to see them!"

Spock raised an eyebrow and gazed up at the young officer hovering above him. "This flight plan
is almost sufficient." He handed the PADD to the expecting hand of the young helmsman.

"What do you mean by almost?" Carol asked, snatching the PADD from Dayton's hold.

"Well, you have undercompensated for the gravity waves effects."

"Are you sure?" Carol mumbled, scanning the data with a rush. "I gave it a factor because we
cannot handle each individual wave, not with the time and resources we have here."

"Handling each wave individually is unnecessary." Spock answered. "This binary system is
extremely stable; you can represent the effects in a form of a field and treat all waves together in
this way."

"As a superposition?" She asked.
"Affirmative."

"That is actually a great idea." She whispered, her mind is already racing with calculations.

"Would it be ready in two hours?" Sulu asked.

"I believe it so." She answered "thank you, Spock. I'm off, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Lieutenant Marcus." Jim said as she sprang out the door. Then he returned his gaze to Spock, posing for a moment before asking "Why are you helping us, Spock? It's not that I'm ungrateful, but aren't you undermining your team's effort?"

"I am within the range of reason." The Vulcan answered "The flight's success relies on an accurate respond to gravity waves to a degree of 5.7%. Chances for your team to win the flight race and erase the gap T'Heli and Sobar have created, based on that improvement alone is no more than 0.27%, and my team is already leading at 8:2 respectively."

"Well, when you put it that way…” Jim mumbled.

"I only wish for them to have a safe flight." Spock ended his explanation.

"Thanks again." Jim breathed, worried.

"We should be off, Jim." Sulu said, patting his shoulder. "We have to gear up and see the shuttle ready. I also gonna keep an eye on Carol, she might need a helping hand."

Jim nodded.

"Are you coming, Yorktown?" Sulu turned to look at the young officer.

"Sir?" Dayton asked Jim.

"Go ahead, the both of you. Good luck."

They smiled at their Captain and left the room in a hurry.

"I'm leaving too." Said Sharel, making him almost jump out of his skin with the way he sneaked up on him.

"Yeah, sure, Lieutenant."

Another pat on his shoulder, and the Andorian was gone as well.

Now they were the three of them in the large rec room, and Nyota stepped into their conversation radius in silence.

"I should make my departure as well." Spock noted, but lingered still.

"Spock…" Jim started, unsure of how to progress.

"Captain?"

"Spock, are you really leaning toward 'Leave' now?"

"I am indeed." The Vulcan conformed.

"But why?" he asked bluntly, there you have it.
Spock almost smiled, and tilted his head "I cannot answer this without compromising my team." He said "And I also do not wish to elaborate on the subject."

Jin nodded; a sudden sense of fatigue fell upon him.

"Captain." Spock bowed lightly.

"Yeah, right, thanks again. good night."

Nyota stepped to his side and they both watched the Vulcan leave. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Are you alright, Jim?" she asked.

He nodded and smiled "Hey, that's my line."

"I've reached a small breaking point." Nyota admitted "But I overcame it for now. Eyes on the ball."

"Eyes on the ball." Jim agreed.

"I'm beat, I'd better go now." Nyota said "Are you coming?"

"Wait… what were they talking about?"

"Huh?"

"Our favorite elves, when they switched to Sindarin?"

"Oh… that…" Nyota tried to recall. "Well…"

"Sobar told T'Sel not to make things more complicated than they already had to be. She answered him, asking how dared he to question her commitment. Then He said that he wasn't questioning her commitment but her control over her libido.

"Spock intervened to say that Sobar was overstepping his boundaries. To which Sobar answered that he was very skeptical if Spock had any of his own."

"And what did you say to make them all shut up?"

"I only stated that it was clear from Sobar's accent that he was originated from the province of Raal on old Vulcan."

"Way to go, Nyota." you badass, you.

She only smiled wearily "I didn't like that conversation, Jim, not at all."

"Same here," Jim agreed and smiled at her "And I wonder what it means, because, remember, this was done in front of the elders and everyone. Something is wrong here, and I can smell it."

He looked an Nyota for a short while and when she did not respond, he took some pity on her, she clearly lacked the brainpower needed to process any of this at this moment, she was truly beat.

"Go, get some rest, Nyota, you've earned it."

"And what about you?" she insisted.

"Yeah… I think I'll hang here for a while." He smiled and stretched his body "Sick and tired of my
room, you know, miss the shifts on the bridge, the mess room, hanging out with Scotty at engineering….

"Drinking with Bones in his office."

"Yeah, that."

"Won't be long now." She tried consoling him and herself probably.

"Won't be long." He echoed her.

"Night, Jim."

"Night, Nyota."

She was gone soon enough and he was left alone in the huge room, all by himself, with nothing to keep him from falling apart as he was so willing to do, so much time hanging in by a thread.

"Lights off." He commanded and the AI complied. The room fell into darkness, with only the soft green light from the window to shine in. "Window, filters up to 90%" The AI complied again and now the light had withered into a soft green loom.

Now it was him, and the stillness, and the great black.

He took the guitar and lay down next to the observation window, so close to the thin glass and the force field; he could almost reach out his hand into the great black.

All alone, he could finally pay attention and notice how weak he was, how every muscle in his body was trembling with tension, how his heart was pounding so fast, as wanting to burst out of its cage, how he hardly could take a breath deep enough, and how every intake ached.

What if…?

Oh, no, don't go there…

What if I fail?

What if we lose and the Vulcans leave?

What if I don’t get the detector schematics on time?

What if there's a war with the Klingons and they win?

What if the Federation crumbles and falls apart?

My entire fault!

All of this… my fault!

Tears formed in his eyes, and when it rained, it poured.

He could not stop the tears from falling, he could not hold back his weeping, could not stop his body from shaking. No longer could he keep his self loathing at bay.

You're worthless, James T. Kirk.

You are nothing! You are no one!
You are a fake hero! A Fake Captain! A fraud!

You should have died long time ago, on the Kelvin, Trasus 4, in the reactor room.

You should have…

No!

Something within him resisted, refusing to walk down that dark path.

No!

Not here, not now!

People are counting on you! Your crew is counting on you!

Fall apart later!

Fall apart when it's all over and nobody gives a shit anymore!

Fall apart then!

With the last of his strength, he reached for his guitar, like a drowning man to a lifeboat. He picked it up and a song was waiting for him there.

"Feel it
Break your bones
Mr. Jones

Taste me
As I bleed
Taste my need

And spaceboy I've missed you
Spinning round my head
And any way you choose me
You'll break instead

Watch me
Death defy
Defile my life

I don't need
I don't care
Please

I want to go home
I want to go home…"

He sang himself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes
I claim no rights to the songs mentioned in this chapter and make no profit of them:
1. Lemon Tree- Fool's Garden (Peter Freudenthaler, Volker Hinkel)
2. stone walls- Three Tall Pines
3. Spaceboy- Smashing Pumpkins (Billy Corgan)
"Mr. Krik, are you in need of medical assistance?" The tech crewman asked as the doors of the lift opened.

"Not at all." Jim smiled his brightest smile, and let the male Vulcan in. "What happened?" He asked at the right time, to make sure the tech looked at him instead of his scanning device, which he ran on the walls of the lift and then on the touchpad. To distract him even further, Jim also tugged at his sleeve.

The tech turned on his hills to ogle him with disbelief, so he took a step backwards and chuckled with embarrassment. "Oh, yeah… they told us not to touch the Vulcans, I am sorry."

The tech muttered something in Vulcan that didn't sound very friendly, but at least he turned the scanner off. "Mr. Krik, did you touch this pad?" he pointed at the touchpad with his gloved hand to make sure the human understood.

Jim played the stupid blonde card to the fullest, licking his lips and nodding his head vigorously. "I kinda leaned on it, and everything went dark and it stopped moving. Did I do something wrong?"

"Well, you probably overloaded the system." The tech informed him "Psi-null beings are not meant to touch the telepathic interface; this is why we have installed the audio command system! Especially for you! Please use it!"

"I sure hope I didn't break anything."

"You did not." The Vulcan took his glove off and placed it on the pad, and by doing so, he had unwillingly just donated the first biometric data, directed into the recording device Jim had installed there within the 35 minutes it took for maintenance to respond to the malfunction call. "Here, I have reset the system. Good as new." He said while wearing his glove again.

The lights in the lift came back up, and so did the ventilation system and the hum of the power source.

"Thank you so much." Jim said, assuming an awestruck, wide eyed glare.

"All is well, Mr. Krik, just do not touch the pad again." The Tech noted, pleased at a job well done. "Apologies for the wait time, I had other tasks with a higher priority score to complete before coming here."

"And now what?" Jim asked.

"Where were you heading?" the tech asked, annoyed.

"Deck 8, Engineering." Jim declared out loud.

The Lift doors closed and it started its way, much to the Vulcan's open irritation. Few seconds later they opened up again and Jim let himself out, but the tech did not follow.

"Wait, what? Did I just kidnap you for a ride?" He asked the tech "Sorry about that…"
But the Tech only pressed on the touchpad and the doors closed again.

Jim now smiled to himself and made sure his hacking tools were secured and well anchored in his hidden inner pocket. Then he straightened his heavy red jacket and made his way through the deck.

***0***

He passed by the shuttle bay storage area where they parked the shuttles that were not on duty. There were two techs there, fixing a shuttle with welders.

Next were some labs, where he saw a few engineers working, and the flickering of lights drew his attention to them. "Nice holographic display." He whispered to himself, trying to understand what model they were working on. But he was spotted by one engineer that marched to the door, glared daggers at him and shut the lab doors close.

Jim took a back step, pouting, that wasn't a nice thing to do; Scotty would never close a door on his face… well, not always.

He missed Scotty, and Keenser, and the rest of them minions, sweet little, yellow specs wearing creatures, obeying Scotty's every order.

He missed them all.

He continued his path, passing by more labs and working halls, most of them locked, empty and deserted, but some occupied by busy staff members that paid him no attention, and cared none at all that he was in fact a starship Captain, of a flagship, none the less.

Well, a blow to the ego, that trip was, said his inner Yoda.

He finally reached his destination, which was a huge hanger, very wide and high, where both Carol's and T'sel's teams worked on assembling their probs.

"Hey, guys."

He greeted the Vulcan team, interrupting them in the middle of a heated argument, spoken in Vulcan. There were Sobar, T'Heli, T'Sel, Kuvac, and Vedik in a small circle around an object, looking at it and having a very energetic debate about it.

They looked up when interrupted, noticed him and fell into a frosty silence. Only Vedik smile and nodded towards him.

"How are you progressing?" He asked them.

"Not so very well, Captain." Vedik answered, scanning the disarray of equipment, PADDs, and drawing boards that surrounded their area.

Sobar left the circle and strode towards him with haste. "What are you doing here, Captain Kirk? This is Miss Marcus challenge, not yours!"

Jim smiled at him. "You know I could ask you the same … and T'Heli, hello darling." T'Heli flared her nostrils, when spoken to. "Four against two, this is a bit unfair."
"This is a complete waste of time." Sobar corrected him "My team has been working on this for the past ten days now, nothing makes any sense. Are you sure this probe has ever made it to your moon? Or was it just a fraud?"

"Hey buddy, don’t you get all conspiratorial on me, I have enough issues to deal with as it is."

"And I have helm duty, and so does T'Heli… and Kuvac. T'Sel must return to her engineering post once in a while as well."

Jim posed now, giving the Leave leader a scrutinizing gaze. "Hold on… where are you heading with this? Do you want us to drop this challenge? Do it yourself. It's not within our interest to do so, if you forfeit this challenge, we will gain 2 points and you'd lose 1. How very illogical of you."

Sobar glared at him some more and a smothered noise came out of his shut mouth, sounding much like a low roar.

"Back to work, guys, this probe won't build itself." He clapped his hands and moved on, chuckling.

Oh, boy, this was some nasty, dirty pleasure.

So very satisfying.

He crossed the painted line that divided the hall into two halves, and on the Remain part of it, he found Carol and Sharel struggling with their Delta Vega Lander.

Their side of the hall was just as messy and cluttered as the Vulcans' side, and they seemed to be as much frustrated.

"Hey, Carol, how are you doing?"

"Hey, Jim." She greeted him with a weary smile. "Not so good, Sir, not so good."

"Why is there a line painted, half way through on the floor?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and opened her mouth to answer.

"Never mind, changed my mind, don’t really care." He said before she could speak.

"Miss Marcus…" Sharel called, returning from a replicator. "Are you sure you gave me the right specs?"

"Sure, yeah, why?" She turned on her heels to frown at the Andorian.

"Because this…" he rose one part in his right hand "Does not fit this." He rose up another in his left hand. "And they both do not fit into the console."

"Do they honestly?" She walked to him, took the parts, and then walked into another area where there were more parts laid on the floor.

She bent down and tried to assemble the parts herself, and when they did not fit, she started banging them together.

"Scotty would approve." Jim noted as she straightened up again.

"Bugger, buggerly buggered!" She nearly screamed, and her voice echoed in the large hall. Then she kicked whatever equipment that was in her leg's reach.
"Oh, please, calm down now, Carol." Jim reached to her side and she turned to lean on him, snuggling into his chest.

"I'm going out of my mind here." She sobbed into his jacket. "I don’t know what to do."

He kissed her temple, and patted her soft blonde hair. "It's a waiting game." He answered "All we need to do is hang in there until they break first."

She gazed up to him, blue eyes all watery and puffed up "Vulcans never break." She sniffled.

"Oh, they do." He assured her "they do."

"Attention on the floor!" a voice sounded in the hangar, belonging to a new presence in the room. That voice was oddly familiar, but he could not put a finger on it. "Gather around, all of you! Come here at this once!" it commanded.

Carol glared her question at Jim, and he just shrugged, they let go of each other.

"Come here, I have an announcement to make." The voice roared again.

All the attendees migrated towards the halls' entrance, where they were awaited by a company of three- Spock, Uhura and Elder Sarek.

Sobar and his teammates looked as confused as Jim and his crew, so there was no point asking them what was going on.

"Hurry up, I don't have all day." Elder Sarek scolded them.

They formed a circle around his tall, angered figure, and after he scanned them with his cold, grey eyes and made sure they were all there, he spoke again. "I hereby declare this challenge's ending." He declared "Resulting in a lose for both teams. Do you understand me? Zero points for each team!"

"May I inquire why?" Sobar asked, angered.

"Be pleased that I do not use this opportunity to deduct a point from each team!" Elder Sarek scolded the young Vulcan leader "Both teams displayed an act of deception and foul play." Elder Sarek explained. "You had failed your conduct, showing ill intent bordering on sabotage!"

"Those are outrageous accusations, Elder Sarek, please elaborate." Sobar demanded.

"The Remain team have neglected to point out the differences between historical measuring system units, such as feet verses meter, kilo verses pound and such." Spock answered.

"And the Leave team failed to highlight that pre-Surak mathematics employed the 18 base system and not the decimal one." Uhura said in her turn.

Well, this was precious; Jim could not help but smile.

No one from both teams had protested against those accusations.

The atmosphere in the room was a mixture of both relief and embarrassment.

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves!" Sarek concluded. "Dismissed."
Sarek's hard, grey eyes landed upon Jim "Remember our meeting tomorrow's night, Captain Kirk."

Jim nodded with vigor, how he could even forget.

"Be there on time." Sarek added, and then left the room.

Both Vulcans, humans and Andorian were left alone to glare at each other.

"Was it your idea? Approaching the elders?" Sobar asked Spock. "This is against regulation, not to mention the blood oath!"

"Elder Sarek had approached me first." Spock answered.

"And was it your idea to point that out to him?" Sobar insisted.

"Ours." Nyota answered.

"This was a pitiful display of disloyalty." Sobar ignored Nyota and continued talking to Spock. "You have sabotaged your team's effort! I am going to notify Elder Svern!"

"Chances of gaining points in this challenge, given the current progress and the remaining timeframe were 2.9%." Spock answered "Saving time and effort by concluding the challenge this way, had increased our team's chances of winning by 14%.

"Also, all the Elders were notified and came to this agreement together." Uhura added "Elder Svern included."

Sobar did the math himself, then blinked his inner eyelids, a proof that Spock was on point. "None the less…” he said and did not continue.

"Lunch, anyone?" Jim offered.

"Captain James T. Kirk?" a Vokau crewman intercepted the trajectory of his fork half way to his mouth, so he placed it back on the plate.

The others stopped eating as well, and looked at the crewman, who stood straight at attention. From the looks of him, his pristine uniforms, severe stature and assured demeanor, he did not look like a regular crewman, but more like a soldier; a phaser was attached to his belt, mostly concealed, but there for use.

Jim's heart started beating fast, his mouth dried, and his breath shortened. Thousands of scenarios ran through his head at max warp speed, none of them good. There it is, it's all over, they were on to him, he's a goner, he failed everything and everyone, his worst fears were about to come true.

"Yes, Sir, I am Captain Kirk. How may I help you?" he asked, trying to keep his calm.

"I am Lieutenant Symer, head of this ship's security unit; I am hereby to escort you. Please join me at once." He said in a dry voice, with no further eye contact, his hand, sent to his phaser, out of a habit.
"Where to, may I ask?" Jim asked, trying to stave, but what for? He had no idea.

"What is this about?" Spock, who sat next to Jim, inquired.

"Sir, if you please; stand up and join me." The soldier ignored Spock entirely, which made the other Vulcan pissed as hell, in a Vulcan way.

So Spock again said something to the officer, in a dry, confidence voice.

Now the Lieutenant's eyes met Spock's gaze, and they had engaged in some sort of a mute stare duel, ending with the Vokau guard first to disengage.

Spock said something more.

The security officer answered.

Spock replied again.

The only one at the table that had any understanding of what was going on besides Spock was Uhura, and she kept quiet, for an understandable reason.

Carol and Sharel also waited in a tense silence to see what happens next.

The Lieutenant seemed to give up. "Very well, son of Sarek, you may come with us."

There was no way to describe Jim's sense of relief that washed all over him, and his gratitude towards Spock. He tried to convey them to the Vulcan with a glance. Spock only nodded with brief curtsey.

"Let's not keep the Lieutenant waiting." He said.

"Sure." Jim picked up a napkin to clean his mouth and then stood up.

Spock joined him in standing, and the officer led their way out of the mess room in silence.

Boy, this short trip was going to be something else entirely, if Spock had not joined them for lunch. Something Jim did not even wish to imagine what it would be as they walked the hallway without word, and entered the lift.

Thank god, thank Spock, and thank his goddamn good luck.

Lieutenant Symer ungloved his hand and touched the pad, again, without a sound, and the lift swooped away to its unknown destination.

Might have been a torture chamber, or a top secret brig cell, or any other form of 'his last known location' remark that would seal his service records file. But not with Spock by his side, he thought, and found himself drifting closer to said Vulcan, taking comfort in his sandalwood scent and body heat.

With Spock joining in, this would be a whole different story, a brighter story with an actual chance of a happy ending.

The doors of the lift opened again and the head of security officer started marching in the corridors, with not a peep to be spoken, Spock matched his fast speed and they both strode without looking at each other, or at Jim.
Jim trailed a little behind the Vulcans; and he glanced around, trying to guess where he was, and on what deck.

Just by the looks of it, this was a highly secured area, many measures of surveillance were installed everywhere, including security screens, biometric sensors, movement detectors and probably other devices he could not identify.

Place was kind of cool.

Everywhere they passed was packed with security guards, carrying phasers on their bodies at stand by, and they all peeked at the human intruder with hidden suspicion and mistrust.

Yup, definitely top secret, restricted area.

Cool.

"Captain Kirk, this way please." Symer said as if talking to a child, when he was about to lose them by taking the wrong turn.

Spock said nothing, as they awaited him to catch up.

They walked on, crossing corridors and hallways, until Symer stopped in front of a door of an office.

Spock said something, sounded like a question.

The Vulcan soldier answered then Spock turned to face him.

"Get in, Jim, you are expected, I'll wait for you outside."

"You will?" Jim could not help but ask.

"Indeed, as long as it takes." Spock promised.

Jim released the breath he did not know he was holding, and smiled towards Spock even though it wasn't very polite.

The door opened, he took a deep breath and stepped into a scarcely lit room, and heard the sound of the door closing behind him.

"A moment, please." Said someone from within, in his booming voice.

Jim needed a moment to adjust his eyes to the semi-darkness, before he could locate a male behind an overcrowded desk. He vaguely recognized the Vulcan as one of the Vokau high ranking officers that Captain Setal introduced them to when they only came onboard, but he could not recall his name or his station.

The Vulcan gestured towards a seat on the other side of the desk, so Jim took upon his offer and waited.

The office was rather a small one, and packed with equipment. There were screens on the walls, flickering in the dark, displaying any form of data- texts, graphs, mute surveillance real time feeds and more.

The Vulcan himself was a big fellow, tall and wide, dark skinned, with a buzzcut hairstyle and a short grey beard adorning his bulky face.
Despite common conception among humans, not all Vulcans looked the same. Some chose to grow their hair, like T'Sel, some grew facial hair, like this one, and some were comfortable showing their emotions like Elder Soval and Vedik. Seems like only Spock was committed to check the box of every Vulcan characterisation and even he had lapses from time to time.

Was something wrong with that officer's eyes? It was hard to see, but they looked kind of blind. Oh, no, not blind, just his inner eyelids were completely shut, and there was this device attached to his psi points, on both sides of his face, something metallic, thin and delicate and, like a cellar spider's legs.

Oh, wow! He was in the middle of a mind meld!

Did he mind melded with the ship itself?

Wow, so cool.

After a short while, the device disengaged from the officer's face and folded itself, returning to a nook in the wall. Now the Vulcan eyelids open, and he was staring right into Jim's eyes.

"Commander Sabek, the Vokau's XO." The officer introduced himself.

Jim swallowed, this was not good; earning the attention of the second in command was never good.

"Captain James kirk." Jim answered and Sabek nodded impatiently as if precious time had been wasted. "Why am I here, sir?"

"Your requests to contact Andoria prime and the starship Enterprise have both been rejected." Sabek declared with indifference then fell into silence again.

Ok, yeah, this was a trap; Jim had recognized it at once.

This was meant to break the tension, and have him blabber something out of relief, letting his guard down. Something like-

Is that all? This much drama? And there I thought you had caught me trying to hack your system and steal top secret data.

So no, not letting his guard down.

"Would that be all, sir?" he asked instead.

Now he earned another glance, a more scrutinizing one, with much more respect, the Vokau XO almost smiled.

"No, Captain Kirk; that would not be all." He conformed. "And I have reason to believe you already know why you were summoned here. Would you mind saving us the time and come forward?"

An echo, of a time long ago, his schoolboy days.

Now, our boy Jimmy was a straight A student, and much to the frustration of his teachers and classmates, it came to him with no effort at all, which resulted in boredom, which led him to become a little snooty shit, which naturally got him into lots of trouble.

"Captain James Kirk, I know everything that goes on in this ship, so please..."
What Commander Sabek did not know, however, was that said Captain James Kirk had a long, daunting mileage of visiting the principal office, from the age of five to the time he dropped out at the age of twelve.

Full blonde engaged.

"Ok, ok." Kirk nodded and changed his potion on the chair, crossing one leg over the other. "I really want to help you, sir, but I honestly have no idea what you're talking about; so if you could enlighten me, I'd be so grateful."

The Vokau's Xo only waited in silence.

"Oh, so you think I'm trying to hide something away from you?" he asked, and batted his eyes in dismay "I have nothing to hide, scout's honor, although I might have taken an extra towel from the gym without asking. Is that a serious crime around here?"

"Hey, nice device over there, what is it? A mind reader? Does it connect to the ship? May I give it a try?" he made a move to get up and reach it, but officer Sabek stood up as well to block his way.

"No, you may not." The officer flared at him.

"Of course not, what was I thinking? I am no touch telepath. But hey, wanna touch my psi points and meld? This way maybe you could search my brain and find whatever it is you think I know and hide; I promise I won’t think of sex. Wait, hey, how about I touch your psi points instead? May I?"

"Captain Kirk!" Sabek's voice rumbled, as he averted Jim's touch at last moment's notice. "Would you please be seated, I have something to show you!"

Jim nodded and slumped back into his chair, giving the Vokau's XO his most radiating smile, and he really hoped it would distract him enough not to notice his elevated heart rate and general nervousness.

Breath, calm down, Jimbo, don’t show any weakness.

You've been to worse, so much worse.

"Here." Sabek turned one of the screens on his desk so they could both share the view. "Do you happen to recognize this person?"

Jim looked at the black and white pictures, three of them, taken by security cameras, no doubt about it, on decks where none of his teammates had clearance or business to venture into.

The white hair, the blue skin (grey in the picture), the Antennas.

No room for mistakes.

"How many Andorians are on board the Vokau right now?" Jim tried.

"Do you know what he was looking for?" Sabek asked.

So he doesn't know much, Jim concluded, and smiled again. "I'm sorry, Sir, but you are the XO of this ship, if you don’t know what this person was up to, who am I to guess?"

"His name is Sharel! Lieutenant Sharel!" Sabek nearly growled now "He is one of your team! And there he is, wondering around engineering decks he has no permission to enter! Was it under your
orders? What was he looking for? What was he trying to achieve?"

Yes, as suspected, Commander Sabek was in the dark.

Jim could take the easy route and suggest that Sabek should talk to Sharel himself to get his answers, but that would be throwing the Andorian under the bus, but he could not afford leaving this room with a cloud of suspicion hovering above his own head either; there was little room to maneuver.

"Honest to god, sir, I never gave anyone any orders to breach security protocols of your ship and I am sure that this is just an unfortunate mistake. Lieutenant Sharel is an exceptional officer who dedicates all of his time and effort to the 'Plak If Fee."

"Are you sure?" Commander Sabek raised an eyebrow.

He looked straight into the Vulcan's eyes "I am sure that there's a logical explanation behind the Lieutenant's actions, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of this, Commander Sabek, Please, tell me how may I help you."

His charm did not fail him this time.

The large male Vulcan seemed to warm up to him, he leaned back into his chair, and his hostile attitude was all but gone, he was starting to see Jim as someone he could work with, and not against.

"It is a difficult position to be in." The XO spoke again. "I cannot overlook this blunt disregard of our privacy and security protocols, on the one hand, but on the other; I do not wish to disrupt the Plak If Fee ritual that we all wish to conclude smoothly. I also cannot ignore the fact that Mr. Sharel took the blood oath which gives him some protection via the council of Elders."

"Again, sir, how may I help you?" Jim asked, with all the sympathy he could master, or fake.

"Whether Sharel activities are nefarious or merely reckless, this must be stopped. Please confront him and have him abort whatever it is that he's doing. If he fails to do so, I will be forced to consider this as espionage, with every implication that might be derived from it. Is that clear, Captain?"

"Yes it is."

"Take those pictures with you as hard evidence so he'd know we are serious about this." Sabek had the pictures printed and pushed them towards Jim's side of the desk to pick up. "I will continue to track this, but I hope you'd put it to rest."

"Would that be all?" Jim asked, trying not to sound so hopeful. He took the pictures and tucked them into his not so secret pocket.

Sabek nodded and gestured for Jim to leave.

But as Jim stood in front of the door, Sabek called after him.

"Captain Kirk…" he said, and Jim froze on his feet, but did not turn back."Spying is a lonely game, you know. If I call it, no one would come charging for the rescue, no one would claim a failed spy, he'll be facing the consciences, whatever they may be, all by himself."

Panic.
A trap, after all?

Was this whole charade actually aimed at him?

You'll never know, Jimbo, you'll never know.

Show no weakness, do not falter, don’t let your voice crumble.

"I'll let him know, sir, thank you, good day."

"Good day, Captain Kirk."

The door opened again and Jim was thrust into the light.

He nearly ran into Spock's arms right then and there, in the corridor, and how he had managed to stop himself at the last second was not so clear.

Spock, who awaited him outside as promised, studied his form without a sound. There was no Lieutenant Symer in sight, and no other guard to take his place.

"I was instructed to escort you to your quarters." Spock said after a moment of silence.

All Jim could do was nodding his head.

Spock then led them back to the elevator, he moved in the deck as if he belonged there, no one had questioned his presences and seemed like he knew his way around, even if every corridor looked the same.

When they were alone in the lift, Spock looked at him again.

"What was this about?" the Vulcan asked tentatively.

"I don't know, Spock, I honestly don’t know." He admitted, wondering how much of it could he say. He yearned for the days he could speak his heart and mind to Spock without fear of consequences, those days were all but gone.

"Deck 11." Spock commanded and the lift swished on its way.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, please leave me a note :-(
Hey everyone, I think that this is the middle point of this story, so if you've made it thus far- thank you so very much for reading, and those of you who have left comments and kudos- thank you even further, because you give me joy and the motivation needed to move this project forwards.

So, at this point, I think I owe you a status report (updated to 12.05.20) :

I assume this story will have 55 chapters (give or take one or two) of which- 

• Chapters 1-28: done and out (I might revisit then to hunt down typos and do some more editing, but nothing major.)
• Chapter 29-41: mostly done and ready to go, but I am still doing some last minutes corrections and revisions on them.
• Chapters 42-51: are written but still in need of a LOT of work before they are ready to get published (I'm on it).
• Chapters 52-55: I know what I need there, but they are not written yet, I hope to get to them soon.

Yes, I know… I really stumbled upon a project here, lol. But I enjoy every moment of it, and dedicate every spare minute that I find to get it done. I will not write anything else until this gets completed.

So we have a buffer of about 13 chapters, and at the rate of updates, I hope I'll get everything done in a smooth way so you won't even notice the background work, I hope I will not need long pauses between posts in the future (But I might slow down).

I hope you also enjoy your read, and find this story worth of your precious time.

Thank you so much again, for reading, leaving kudos and commenting.

Take care!

Upon arriving Deck 11, Jim strode into the Remain team common room, his bad mood propelling his steps, making everyone in the shared living area jump in their seat.

"There you are." Carol greeted him with a smile "I wanted to celebrate the end of that miserable Delta Vega probe challenge with some flicks." She raised her bucket of popcorn and shook it. "Want to join us?"

"No thanks, Miss Marcus." He frowned at the idea; there was nothing worth celebrating at the end of that fiasco. His eyes landed on Dayton and Sulu that just got up and ventured out of their rooms moments he got in. Judging by the looks on their faces it seems like they've lost their race. "How did it go?" he asked his helmsmen.

He did not have to ask, though, their body language was spoken loud enough.
Sulu grimaced and shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, we improved, but it wasn't enough."

Great, another loss.

Was it 10:2 already?

"I am not to blame," Dayton hurried to add.

"No one said so, idiot." Sulu snarled.

"Just making sure." Yorktown hissed back at him.

"You both did your best and that's all that matters now." Jim said after taking a long breath, holding back something nasty. "Enjoy your movies; you look like you could use some fun."

"Are you already leaving, Jim?" Sulu protested as he started walking away. "Dayton and I wanted to talk with you. I know we've just lost the challenge but we have this idea…."

"We'll do this later. Is Sharel in his room?"

"Yeah, I think I saw him getting in." Carol answered.

"He's hiding there almost as much as you do in your room." Nyota added "and you would have noticed that too if you weren’t… well… in hiding."

"Thanks for the input, Uhura." Jim tried a smile but got an eye roll in return.

"He always says it's too hot in here to hang out with us." Dayton conformed.

Well, ain't that convenient.

Jim nodded and walked towards Sharel's personal room to knock on his door. "It's me, Kirk, please let me in." There was no right away answer. "Open the door, Lieutenant; I really need to talk to you."

The door opened eventually, and the cold front hit the unprepared human and chilled him to his core. Kirk braced himself then entered the room, which was a standard Vokau personal room, only freezing, and he found the Andorian sitting at his desk, awaiting him in silence.

The door closed behind Jim, depriving him of that little heat that was still warming his back, he almost immediately started shaking, what a good way to start a frosty conversation.

Well, no time like the present.

He gathered his anger and let Sharel see how pissed off he was, before he walked the rest of the distance between them to confront the Lieutenant.

"Whatever it is you're doing, you gotta stop it now, they know!" Jim slammed the security snapshots on the desk.

Sharel did not seem impressed; keeping to his silence, he glanced at the pictures not moving a muscle, and then he raised his light purple eyes to gaze at his Captain. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, sir. Would that be all?"

Yes, he recognized that tactic.
"No way, we are not done! I'm not leaving until you promise me to end this side project of yours. Damn, I'm freezing!"

"There's a coat at the door for visitors." Sharel noted, now studying the pictures more carefully. "You'd be the first to use it." he added dryly.

Jim walked back to the entrance, found that thermal coat, put it on, and then returned to the Lieutenant's side, and now he could shout at him without his teeth clattering.

Sharel picked up the pictures with his hands, and his antennas moved around in lazy circles while thinking. "Interesting…" He mumbled "And there I thought I had everything covered, seems like the Vulcans have some new surveillance technology upon the Vokau, immune to our disruptive rays. Well…" he shrugged and gave the pictures back to Jim.

"I'm waiting for that promise!" Jim reminded him.

Sharel smiled softly and shook his head. "Sorry, sir, no can do."

"Jeez, Sharel, be reasonable! You're lucky it's me confronting you about this shit; and not some Vulcan interrogator with the ability to fry your brain!"

"I am grateful, Captain." Sharel answered with a small smile, taking pity on the human buried somewhere there within his coat. "But they don't have that much, or they'd be here instead of you, and besides, I cannot stop, I'm not finished yet."

"What are you trying to achieve? Who are you working for?"

"Sir…" Sharel got up from his seat and started pacing in the room. "Please stop asking questions you know I cannot answer."

"They won't ask you questions, you know!" Jim shouted at him "They'd rip the answers right out of your stubborn mind and if you're lucky, you won't end up as a coma toast!"

He watched the Andorian walking back and forward, looking for a clue, a way to get some sense into his stubborn blue brain.

"Wake up, buddy! This is your last wakeup call!" he continued "They know! And this is their final curtsey! I am in no position to help you, not if I know nothing about it!"

"Jim!" the Andorian stopped on his hills and faced him. "With all due respect, what can you even do to help? We are both guests here! We are not even in Federation territory anymore."

"What do you mean by that?" Jim mumbled in surprise. Did Sharel also notice the green sun?

"Use logic, sir." Sharel almost chuckled now "UFP Accord annex#3, the 'Discloser and Transparency' act, article 10- 'All Federation members must inform central command of the location and nature of their scientific and military bases, operated independently of Starfleet but located in Federation space. Does Ipik looks like a registered base to you? Would the Vulcans violate the treaty? Hence- none Federation space."

Well, that was another path to the truth.

But did Sharel realize this was a different universe?

Would it do any good to open that subject? Unlikely.
"I get your point." Jim confirmed after a moment's deliberation "But I don't see the relevance."

Sharel smirked now "None-Federation space, no Federation law, no authority for Fleet officers, no protection, no UFP rights, nothing. So please, trust me when I tell you to drop it. If I answer your questions I'd put you at risk. This way, you can wash your hands clean off it."

"And what? Leave you to die? You know Vulcans; they'll find a diplomatic way of killing you and bury the subject. Think of your wife and children!"

"Believe me, I do!" Sharel answered sternly with his voice a bit elevated. "They are always on my mind, always! Whatever I do here, it's for Andoria's future and safety. I'd lay down my life for my home-planet, and my people!"

"So, you're working for Andorian prime." Jim concluded, and Sharel winced at it, angry at himself for revealing even this bit of information. "What did they order you to do?"

"Come on, Jim…"

"What is so important for Andoria, that they are willing to go behind the Federation's back; put you in this highly sensitive, top secret diplomatic mission? Put your life in danger and risk sabotaging the UFP relations with the Vulcans indefinitely?"

"It doesn't not work this way, Jim." Sharel now smiled and shook his head. "If I fail and get caught, it's on me, Andoria will never acknowledge this. Nor will the Vulcans or the rest of the Federation. You are so naïve in your view of the Federation, sir, it's almost endearing."

No, not really, Jim blinked at him, as he was in the same position but with Section 31. But at least it was the Federation itself that placed him there, and not a subsection, not the United Earth alone.

"I'm not naïve." Jim rejected the accusation "I choose to believe. Knowing that nothing is perfect, knowing that even the Federation has its dark corners, still, I choose to believe."

Sharel breathed and nodded, if not in agreement, then at least with appreciation.

"Many souls were lost, protecting the Federation." Jim continued "My father included! They died for each other! They died so our spices could live together in peace! So we will not fear one another, no matter what kind of skins we wear, the faces we have, or the color of our blood. The Federation exists so we will greet each other out there, in the great black, with open comm and not open fire. This is why I choose to believe."

"Well spoken, Captain." The Andorian smiled softly again. "I'm touched."

"What is the Federation to you anyway, Sharel!?" Jim snarled at the Andorian's open sarcasm "Just a bunch of separated groups, cynically clinging to one another out of cold interest? The universe gets darker with that attitude!"

"So yeah, I choose to believe! To live and die for this ideal! Call me naïve if you must, I don't give a damn! And I'd die for you too, Sharel! Hell, we all might just die here, if you don't put a stop to your actions! I hope you're touched enough to consider this!"

Jim turned towards the door to leave, when Sharel stopped him by calling his name.

"Jim! I'm sorry, Captain, please! You must understand that none of this is personal!" The Andorian said with real remorse, which made Jim breath out and lower his head. "I'm sorry to have let you down, sir."
Jim, now realizing his own hypocrisy, let it all sink in, and took a moment to calm his mind and contain his feelings. When he turned to answer, it was with a whole new tone.

"Not at all, Lieutenant, it is I that should apologize to you. I have no right putting the weight of it all on your shoulders. None of this is your fault, you, just like the rest of us, are only trying to do the right thing. I…

"It's true, I have no authority here, and no way of helping you, so you're right, I cannot barge into your room, all judgmental and angry, laying down demands.

"Just be careful, Sharel, that's all I ask, lives are at risk. There, I'll leave now."

He wiggled out of his coat and was about to hang it at the door, when Sharel called after him again.

"Captain, don't leave just yet, please come back."

Jim nodded and got dressed again, then stepped back into the room, where Sharel awaited him, leaning on his desk.

"I'm only telling you this because I respect you as a fellow warrior, and hold you in high regards as my Captain."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Jim answered with calm, without a blink.

"This is about red matter." Sharel explained "The Andorians have reason to believe that the Vulcans are trying to mass-produce and enhance the red matter, originated from the alternative universe that had collided with ours. My mission here is to inspect the Vokau as a prototype starship, in case those experiments were conducted here."

"Produce and enhance, you say? The UPS does not allow independent study of the red matter; heck, it does not even allow creating more than an ounce per year."

"We are in no Federation space." Sharel reminded him.

"And? Is it true?"

"I found no evidence, sir, but I do believe I should turn my attention to Ipik now."

"What the fuck? This is crazy!" Jim could not help himself "You cannot even get near there without hitting all the alarm bells!"

"My problem, sir." Sharel answered calmly. "Not yours."

"Beg to differ!"

"My problem!" Sharel repeated himself "I have a cover-up story, no one would be suspected but me, not even Andoria prime. Worst case scenario, I'll use the poison pill hidden under my molar. You are all safe, sir, you have nothing to worry about."

"And if you do find evidences of red matter, then what?"

"Captain!" Sharel now seemed to lose his patience "I've already told you more than I ever should! Any more of this, and I'll be putting you in harm's way. Please, don't push my limits!"

"But…"
"No!" Sharel lifted up his hand in the air, and almost growled at him "I am counting on your discretion in exchange for this information! Can I relay on your silence, sir?" the Andorian almost begged now, even if his aggressive posture suggested otherwise.

Jim breathed and watched the cloud that came out of his mouth, and then he nodded. "Understood, Lieutenant, I will not put you at more risk than you're already in."

Sharel relaxed into a friendlier pose, lowered his hand and even let out a smile. "I take my risks, Jim, my call."

"Be careful." Jim insisted "and if you need any help, you can always come to me, I'll do my best."

"Much appreciated, Sir."

"Take care." Jim took the coat off and handed it to the Andorian and without further conversation, he left the room.

***0***

Jim crossed the common room again, ignoring everyone, and got back to his room. His talk with Sharel had left a lingering taste of disappointment in his mouth, but he did not know where to place the blame.

They were all to blame- the Vulcans, the Andorians, the Humans and all the rest of the Federation. It was bad enough to know that there was nothing he could do at the moment, but even worse, he had no idea what could even be done about it.

So the first thing he did was to inject himself with that Vulcan drug three times. The hypo spray beeped, letting him know that it had depleted. He's gonna get some flak over this when he goes to the healing center tomorrow for a refill, this amount was supposed to last him his entire stay upon the Vokau. Oh, well, whatever; could always play his stupid blonde card, worked every single time.

The second thing he did was to enter the bathroom and pee, and he studied his piss before flushing down the toilet; no doubt about it, there was blood in his urine, turning the color of his piss into a shade of pink.

The third thing he did was taking a shower and then he set down to review the schedule for the next few days:

Tonight- a night off.

Tomorrow- at 17:00 a meeting with Vedik to conclude their chess tournament, the second challenge meeting with the 'Leave' team at 24:00, and at 32:00 an interview by Elder Sarek.

The day after tomorrow -Elder Svern's challenge.

Great.

Now was 22:00 ship time, which gave him about 32 hours to work on his private challenge. And he
needed every nano second for it, he was behind schedule, so much so, that it has began to frighten him.

The first three hours he dedicated to figure out and fix the input/output mess, and when he overcame that problem, he launched his second and third attacks on the Vulcan Resources department that revealed itself to be much more robust than he first had thought.

This was bad news, because he had the Engineering Department and the Communication department in line, waiting to be handled, and this was a major holdback.

He let those attacks run for the most of the night and in the meanwhile he began studying whatever was available on the Vulcan communication system, and its transmission protocols, in hope that the Vokau did not change it too much. When he hacks that system, he'll have to make sure, but that was tomorrow's headache.

He considered going to retrieve his recording device from the lift, it has probably collected enough data by now, because it was the only lift in the ship to lead to every deck, and everyone had to eat sometime.

Yet, being caught twice in the main elevator with the same excuse in such short period of time, might not be such a good idea, and he had no intention of revisiting Commander Sabek's office, so he should let it rest for a while, maybe he'd get a new idea of how to solve this later.

It was getting late, or rather early when he realized his attacks on the mainframe were unfruitful. It began to appear that he had locked himself inside a loop with no holes. He wanted access to the mainframe, so he had to construct a doorway, but he needed an access to the mainframe in order to create that doorway.

There was not much time, and there was no room to get too aggressive, do something foolish and get caught, but he was working against three clocks here- the ships' security, the end of the ritual and his own health.

You don't believe in no win scenarios, Jimbo, come on, there is got to be a way.

And there was, and he spent the next two hours writing the code for it.

Now all depended on Vedik, whether he took a bite into the poison apple or not.

The data stick that Jim gave him at their first 'date night' had contained not only innocent music, but also a Trojan horse that was programmed to infest his personal platform.

Now Jim didn't want to hurt Vedik by bluntly stealing his identity, he didn't even want to use him to fish out the VR department, but it seemed like he was running out of choice, with luck, no one would notice or trace this.

Yes! Vedik took that bite!

Jim smiled with a great sense of relief as he gained access to Vedik's personal interface with the mainframe. He didn't prowl too far, respecting the Scholar's privacy, but he did enter his mailbox.

Unlike the humans' statues of 'read only' onboard this ship, this Vulcan guest had also writing privileges, as Jim suspected.

Insulting, very.
'Compose a new mail.' He ordered the system.

'To: Vokau's Chief of personnel, Lieutenant commander Sorak.

Subject: complaint

Respected chief officer of personnel, I wish to file this complaint about a Vokau staff member, see details in the attached file.

Attach.

Live long and prosper,

Vedik. '

Now the mail was hidden from Vedik's email list, and the attached file was also a backdoor to the VR system, and when officer Sorak opens the link it would be unleashed upon the VR mainframe. The file itself would only produce gibberish, and when officer Sorak returns a mail with an inquiry to Vedik, Jim would get a ping so he'd be the first to respond, and return to Vedik's mail to inform the officer that he had changed his mind.

It would be awkward and puzzling, but not enough to make Sorak reach out for Vedik in person, because they were both Vulcans and Sorak will just repress it as an oddity.

Then he'd wipe everything clean and there would be no trace of him ever sticking his fingers into Vedik's cookie jar. No harm done, nothing happened.

Ok, great, and now it was time to wait for the chief of personnel to take the bait.

Back to tackling Comm protocols…

"Attention all hands…." The Vokau's main comm came to life. "This is Lieutenant T'Heli at the helm speaking. I hereby inform you that the secondary star of this binary system has entered its periapsis part of orbit.

"During that time period there will be a surge in plasma activity, and the solar winds intensity between the two stars will increase. This might result in the following:

1. Unexpected and temporary electronic malfunctions ship-wide
2. Difficulties with communications with the outside
3. Temporary and limited shields overloads

"The Vokau is experienced with those types of events, and Maintenance is standing by. Specific alerts and orders will be given to you by your direct commanders if necessary.

"Note to IPik personal still onboard, the last shuttle to leave for the base will be lunched at 08:00 tomorrow. your attendance at base side is crucial for the main experiment scheduled to correlate with peak periapsis, so please make sure to get there on time.

"Lieutenant T'Heli out."

Jim could not help but smile, could not believe his damn good luck.
"And that, my friend, concludes our tournament." Jim let go of his black queen after she had taken down Vedik's white one and with that go also chess mated his white king.

The sound of applause rose around them, as the audience cheered to celebrate his victory. Carol gave him a peck on his cheek, and Sulu gave him a pat on his back, rather a painful one, but hey… Nyota raised her glass of wine, and T'Sel glared at him with starry eyes.

To Vedik's credit, it seemed like he was taking his defeat rather lightly. Jim offered his hand for a friendly handshake and when Vedik just ogled it, so he grabbed the Vulcan's gloved one and shook it with a chuckle.

"A human tradition." He explained the Vulcan. "To end a competition in good spirit."

"Fascinating." The Vulcan nodded. "I wish we had more than eleven games to play."

"Why? Do you think it would better your chances? You gave me a good fight, with all things considered."

"Chess is a very gratifying game, illogical as it may be." Vedik mildly smiled.

"So, to conclude our match- it ends with 2:9 in my favor." Jim said.

"And the overall score is 10: 4 in our favor." Vedik reminded him.

"Yup, but we are gaining." Jim pointed out while smirking. "The trend is on our side."

"For now." T'Sel corrected him.

"Anyone wants some?" Dayton came out of the kitchen with a tray of fresh pizza, hot from the replicator.

"Is it vegetarian?" T'Sel asked, sniffing the tempting smell.

"Of course." Dayton nodded "Would be rude to serve meat while having you guys here." He explained to the Vulcans.

"How one consumes this?" Vedik inquired.

"Watch me." Jim demonstrated, taking a greasy slice with his bare hands and biting on it, creating a thin thread of cheese leading from the slice into his mouth.

Vedik sure watched as Jim ate, with open fascination. "Seems like a very sensual experience." He concluded.

T'Sel only blushed. "May I have a plate and some cutlery, please?" she asked Dayton and yet she could not take her eyes off Jim as he licked his greasy fingers, then she added "And some cleaning cloths too, with my gratitude?"

"Sure, be right back." Dayton smiled, placing the tray on the table, and then he returned for the
kitchen.

Jim wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and licked his fingers after finishing his slice.

"Somewhat erotic." Vedik mumbled to himself, and probably no one has heard him but T'Sel who blushed in agreement.

"Stop it, Jim, you're disgusting!!" Carol giggled.

Jim now realized what a show he just gave the Vulcans and chuckled bashfully. "Sorry."

Nyota just shook her head and served herself some more wine.

Vedik tried his best to eat his slice the way Jim did, but he had failed miserably and just gotten his gloves and suit dirty in the process. He thanked Dayton as the young man gave him some napkins.

"I must say that your food is as fascinating as you are." The Vulc said after cleaning up. "I wish I had more time to study your species, I am almost sorry that this ritual is about to end."

"Not so fast, we still have another round of challenges and Svern and T'Pau's challenges." Sulu said with almost a sigh, unlike Vedik, he could not wait for the thing to be over.

"Five more days, at most." T'Sel answered. "Thank you." She referred to Dayton who brought her a plate, knife and a fork.

The young man smiled and found his place next to Carol.

"Five days?" Jim echoed with alarm, he was nowhere near finishing his side project.

"Indeed." T'Sel confirmed "Elder Sven said his challenge would take half a day at most, T'Pau chose a debate for her challenge that would also last about three hours. Elder Svern also mentioned that the Elders will only allow new challenges that could be resolved in the span of two days." T'Sel explained.

"Seems like they are in a hurry." Jim said, thinking of all people about Sharel, he'd be disappointed for not having a chance to snoop at Ipik.

Where was the Andorian now, by the way? Jim would like to know. He'd better hurry; it won't be long before they were having their second challenge meeting.

"In hurry, indeed." T'Sel agreed. "The Elders have New Vulcan to rule, plus many operations are at pending position, awaiting this ritual result to know how to progress. Anything cannot be postponed for much longer."

"Nothing can be postponed for much longer." Nyota could not help herself and corrected T'Sel's standard.

"Thank you." T'Sel nodded at Uhura's deraction.

"Good to know." Jim said, while lost in his thoughts for a moment.

"However this ritual ends, I am grateful it has given me the chance to meet you all." Said Vedik. "Especially you, Jim."

"Really?" Jim could not help but chuckle "Thank you, Vedik, I guess."
"You truly possess star qualities, Captain." Vedik announced with severity.

"James Kirk, a star?" Carol giggled, almost falling over her boyfriend. She was clearly having too much wine.

"With his warmth, brilliant mind and ability to attract others, I'd say that this metaphor has merit to it." Vedik insisted.

"Keep this up and you might earn yourself a one night stand." Carol giggled again.

"Thank you, however, I'm already in possession of one." Vedik answered.

"Oh, but this one's worth it, believe me." Carol continued. "What?" she turned towards Dayton's pout. "What's a quick shag between friends, honey? It's the 23th century; besides, I haven't even met you back then."

"Wasn't it against regulations?" Dayton insisted.

"Technically- no. I was unaware of Miss. Marcus request to be assigned to the Enterprise at the time." Jim intervened, a bit blushed.

"And I didn't know that my request had been accepted." Carol added with a smile.

"Still, theoretically, Jim was about to become your Captain." Yorktown insisted.

"I took my chances," Carol shrugged.

"I'm to blame, Dayton." Jim added with an undertone of apology "It was on leave, just after we've handled Khan, I was celebrating my resurrection, was not in my right mind, didn't put much thought into it..."

"Oh, really?" Carol asked, amused and insulted at the same time.

"No, Carol, please, you know what I mean." Jim stuttered "You were fantastic; I really had a great time."

"Alright then." she brushed him off "You weren't so bad yourself."

"Oh my, love life in space..." Sulu sighed "Do you realize this, Jim? Dayton is with Carol who slept with you, who slept with Spock who slept with Nyota? I mean, I bet that if we give it a try, we can lineup everyone on board the Enterprise this way."

"What are you talking about, Sulu? Did you sleep with anyone onboard? Should Ben be worried?" Jim asked, batting his eyes innocently at Hikaru's direction.

It was Sulu's turn to blush now. "It was an away mission." he twisted in his chair "Kate and I were hit by sex-pollen, as McCoy called it, Ben already knows!"

"Excuse me, please; are you talking about coitus in public?" Vedik inquired, a little greener than usual, reminding everyone that there were some vulcans involved in that conversation.

"This only validates the known saying." T'Sel mumbled "Humans mistake sex for a handshake."

"Who said that?" Nyota chuckled.

"Spock." T'Sel answered.
Carol burst into laughter, and Sulu almost choked trying to control his.

Vedik watched his hand with awe.

And as the laughter died out, the room was left soaking with awkwardness. Seems like no one knew what to say. T'Sel focused on her Pizza, and so did Dayton, Vedik placed his hands in his lap, Nyota just huffed and drank her wine, Sulu and Jim exchanged shrugs.

"Kate from Engineering?" Carol inquired after a while.

"Kate from med-lab." Sulu corrected her.

"Small body type, heart-shaped face, red hair." Jim felt so helpful.

"Oh, not the curly haired brunette from the Warp unit." Carol remembered now. "I like her, she's nice."

"We should go, Vedik, Commander Sobar expects us for a meeting." T'Sel said before the conversation would take another illogical turn.

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Sharel was already awaiting them at the small conference room on deck 7, and so was Elder T'Pau at the head of the table, with Elder Svern at her one side and Elder Soval at her other, the 'Leave' team were there too, and watching while Jim and his crew took their seats.

"Sorry for being late." Jim mumbled and Sobar only snarled quietly at him as if a verbal response was now beneath him. Jim found his place in front of Spock, and they exchanged a glare in silence.

"Welcome to our second and last challenge meeting." T'Pau opened "By now I expect you all to know its function, a platform to exchange and negotiate challenges. We have 0.45 hours dedicated for this purpose. Now, before I give you the platform, Elder Soval will review our current status and Elder Svern has also requested to speak. Elder Soval if you please…"

Soval smiled softly at the attendees and cleared his throat. "Thank you, Elder T'Pau. We have come a long way in this 'Plak If Fee' and I find this process fascinating, I truly thank you all for your dedication, hard work and ingenuity.

"Now this is where we stand at this point in time-

"Commander Sobar won my opening debate challenge for two points.

"The leave team also scored two points for the human music challenge, and the star orbit race, and also gained four points for the translation double challenge, earning them a total of 10 points.

"The engineering challenge was a lost to both teams due to controversial strategy choices.

"The remain team won the 10th grade test challenge and earned 2 points, while the chess contest between Red1 and Green6 is still ongoing…"

"Correction, if I may…” Vedik interrupted.
"Mr. Vedik, what is it?" Soval asked fondly.

"The chess contest had been concluded as well, Captain James Kirk has won it, sir." Vedik informed them, while Sobar, T'Heli and Kuvac glared coldly at him.

"Very well, thank you, Mr. Vedik." Soval almost smiled again "If so, the Remain team has earned 4 points."

"Still, the gap is significant and there are not many points to gain at this stage." Sobar had the urge to add.

"It is true." Elder Soval confirmed. "At this meeting we have only 10 points to give away. As only Red 3, 5 and 6, and Green 3 and 5 were yet to declare their challenges. So here we are now, Elder Svern, if you may."

"Thank you, Elder Soval." said Elder Svern, straightening up in his seat "I have only one thing to add, before we can begin. The challenges selected last time, imaginative and enlightening as they were, were also time consuming. We have little of it left to spare…"

As he was speaking, the lights flickered and then died out, leaving all attendees at complete darkness.

Sobar and T'Heli got up and brought two small orbs to the table from a cabin nearby, they touched each with their naked hand and the orbs began to shine a soft golden light.

"This is just the periapsis." T'Heli explained while covering her hand again. "No need for concern, in a few moments the lights will surely get back on."

"As I was saying," Svern continued, a little angered by the disruption "The first stage of the ritual had exceeded its allocated timeframe, and I must insist that this time the challenges chosen are ones that can be completed within two days, as in 72 hours. I will veto out any challenge that does not meet this standard. As much as we all enjoy our time here, the world outside awaits us, and requires our attention."

"I am in agreement." T'Pau nodded.

"As do I." Soval tilted his head.

"0.3 hours for this meeting, who wishes to begin?" T'Pau asked.

"I do," Sulu volunteered.

"Go on, Red 3." T'Pau laid her dark eyes on the helmsman.

"I want another race." Sulu declared and before anyone could protest he pushed forwards "I know we are short on time, but we can have three rounds, which should not take us more than 42 hours, preparation time included."

"You must be jesting." Sobar had probably rolled his eyes in the dark, by the sound of his voice. "Why should anyone agree to this tedious repetition?"

"I stand with the commander." T'Heli joined in "We have already established the optimal time possible for this flight, only 1.2 hours longer than the theoretical minimum, what could you possibly hope to gain?"
"I can do better." Sulu answered without blinking.

Sobar, T'Heli and Kuvac ogled him as if he was on fire.

"I can do better than your minimum." Sulu insisted, surprising the Vulcan helmsmen, but they did their best not to let it show. "In fact I can do better than 10.5 hours per lap." He almost bragged now.

"You clearly are jesting." Sobar stated again.

"No, actually, we think we have a way." Dayton joined the conversation, braver enough under the cover of darkness.

"Is my challenge valid?" Sulu asked the elders.

"It is established." T'Pau said "However, the motivation is unclear."

"I dare you, first pilot Sobar and Second pilot T'Heli, to push the boundaries of your preconceptions and race me and Dayton, for three laps, and if we fail to score less than the known minimum, you also win."

Got to hand it to him, Jim thought, the man got pizzazz. No shinier cock than the cockpit, as the old saying goes; he just hoped Sulu had an actual plan, preferably one that wouldn't kill him.

Sobar leaned towards T'Heli and they consulted each other in whispers.

"My challenge is valid." Sulu smirked at them "Hurry up now, or lose one point,"

Sobar and T'Heli ended their debate and leaned back into their seats. "Three rounds, we win if we score the best time, or if you fail to score less than the known minimum."

"Got that right." Sulu smiled still at him.

"Challenge accepted." Sobar said, and with that the lights went back on.

"Good progress." Elder Soval said, as they all recovered from the dazzle. "Who's next?"

"That would be me, if it fine by all." Dayton mumbled, blushing; now that the lights were on again.

"Yes, son, of course it is." Soval reassured him.

"I'd like to challenge Lieutenant commander Kuvac." Dayton continued, trying to sound a bit more confident "It's a simple dare actually. I dare Kuvac to swim a pool, no time limitation, just to complete a swim from one end to the other and back again, That's all."

"We do not have such facilities onboard." Commander Sobar hurried to say.

"I am sure our engineers could create one, within the time limitations." Elder Soval answered him.

"It could be done." Elder T'Pau confirmed.

"So there you go." Dayton eyed Kuvac again with a victorious smile. "A swim challenge it is."

Kuvac backed away like he was facing an army of Klingons. "Why should I engage in such activity? Where is the logic in that?"
Dayton just shrugged "Facing your fears and conquering them, I guess…"

"It is always something to aspire to." Elder T'Pau agreed. "The challenge is valid."

"Idiotic, but valid." Svern added.

"Must I?" Kuvac's gaze ran through his teammates, looking for help or inspiration.

"Unless you have some medical reason to refrain, I see no way for us to decline this challenge." Sobar answered calmly.

"I have none." Kuvac admitted and lowered his head. "Challenge accepted."

Sulu and Dayton smirked to each other.

"You can dare him as well, in the same manner, Lt. Commander." Elder Svern suggested to Kuvac. "Dare him to do something as unpleasant as swimming."

Kuvac wore a frozen expression on his handsome face, and did not answer straight away, probably trying to come up with something equally unpleasant, but lacking the creativity to so.

"May I?" a very familiar voice said.

Jim blinked at the direction, yes, it was Spock, and that damn sexy, orgasm triggering voice.

"Go on, Commander." T'Pau nodded at him.

"Ensign Parker here has demanded the Lt. Commander to conquer his fears; I only think it is fair to request Mr. Parker to do the same."

Dayton glared at Spock, his eyes actually glittering and begging him to cease talking.

"I have no knowledge of Ensign Parker fears." Kuvac stated with a tinge of disappointment.

"I believe I may be of assistance." Spock informed his teammate.

Dayton begged some more, but his silent plea was ignored.

"If you have a way, you must." Elder Svern stated without even looking at Spock. "Otherwise, you'd be undermining your team's efforts."

"Acknowledged." Spock nodded "Ensign Parker has a fear of speaking out in public. I suggest a dare, a speech, in front of this small audience."

"On what subject?" Dayton asked and realized his mistake while speaking.

Sulu slapped him at the back of his neck "Idiot!" he hissed at the younger helmsman.

Now Kuvac almost smiled like a cat who found a treat. "I dare you, Ensign Parker Dayton, to make a speech in front of this audience and talk about something that you find as most inconvenient."

"I object." Jim spoke for the first time in this meeting. "This criterion is humiliating and unnecessarily cruel!"

Dayton sent his thanks to his Captain with a hopeful glare.

"Let me rephrase." Kuvac accepted Jim's claim "Talk about you time serving on board the
Enterprise, under Captain Kirk, this should be easy enough, am I correct?"

Oh, bot, Jim lowered his head, and Dayton's face crumpled again.

"I suppose I can do that." Dayton mumbled, but not with much conviction.

"I object again." Jim tried again, gathering new fighting spirit. "First, what you've just asked is in violation of Dayton's privacy, and second, the challenge is undefined, how can you masseur a success in such challenge?"

Dayton glared at his Captain with mute gratitude again.

"If we could commit to a human song which required hours of meditation just to contain the emotions it has arisen within us, I think it is it is only fair to ask Ensign Parker here to dedicate twenty minutes of his time to talk about his service experience." Commander Sobar said, in his cold, almost bored demeanor which was in striking contrast to what he had just confessed.

Sobar's other team members showed no sign of turmoil as well, but that did not stop Jim from feeling like this insensitive, human shit that he probably was.

"Sobar has a point." Elder Svern noted after a moment of silence.

"I agree." Elder Soval joined in.

"It is settled." Elder T'Pau concluded. "But we still need to address Captain Kirk's second point."

"I think it is safe to say, that if Dayton manages to deliver that speech fluently without being overwhelmed by his emotions, it would be measured as success." Spock answered.

"And who would be the judge of that?" Jim insisted.

"All of us here." Spock suggested.

"No way." Jim shook his head. "The majority of this crowd is Vulcan, you'll judge him by your strict standards. I suggest you, myself and Nyota."

"The majority of this suggested group is human." Spock noted.

"Fine, You, me and Lt. Sharel." Jim suggested.

Spock and Sobar exchanged a glare. "Those are reasonable terms." said Sobar.

"Deal." Jim agreed with relief.

Dayton crossed his hands on the table and buried his head between them. "I accept." His voice sounded muffled and full of misery.

"He'll do it after we win the race." Sulu promised, staring at Sobar.

"Who is next?" Elder Svern asked.

"Only the two of us left." answered Sharel, smiling at Spock. "How about another dare?"

"If you wish it so." Spock answered calmly, and they both locked eyes in an eye contest.

"You go first." Sharel stared at the Vulcan with a leer.
"As you wish." Spock answered, calculating in his brain, eyes on the Andorian as well.

Jim wondered what Spock could come up with, he hardly knew the Lieutenant, and Jim didn't
knew him that well either, Sharel was part of the security unit upon the Enterprise, and Jim only
handled their chief, Lieutenant commander Hendorff, and honestly, he only handled Cupcake
because he had to.

"Statistically, 78% of Andorians fear snakes, lizards and other cold blooded animals since there are
none on Andoria prime. I'd rely on this statistic and dare you to enter a cage full of reptiles in order
to feed them." Spock said, eyes on the Andorian.

Sharel averted his gaze, losing the contest, the shivers that ran down his spine showed that Spock's
bet was dead on, still, the Andorian tried to manage his repulsion, and cloak it with a chuckle. "A
cage full of lizards? Where can one find a cage of lizards upon a starship?"

"Deck 6." T'Sel answered "Our botanic garden holds specimens of every surviving species
indigenous to Vulcan, lizards and snakes included."

"Are they poisonous?" Sharel asked, revolted.

"Some." T'Sel confirmed.

"To Vulcans." Jim came again to the rescue "We have no way of knowing how Andorians will
react to such creatures."

"We will run some tests and choose the animals accordingly." Svern answered.

"I'd take that dare, with or without tests." Sharel flexed his bragging muscles.

"But I won't." Jim didn't like this reckless attitude, who was Sharel trying to impress? Yet, he
didn't argue further, he trusted the Vulcans to make it safe.

"Tests will be run to assure safety." Elder T'Pau promised and Jim almost smiled at her.

"Is that my turn now?" Sharel asked and a spark of cruelty flashed in his lavender eyes.

Spock confirmed with a nod.

Jim had a bad feeling about it.

Sharel side glanced Jim, all but winking, and then focused on Spock again, as a predator on its
pray, and a hint of a smile hovered over his pale lips. "Unlike Spock, I don't need to defer to
statistics in order to choose a dare. I am going to dare you, Spock, to eat a plateful of a human dish
called a steak."

"I decline." Spock answered without losing a heartbeat.

Sharel chuckled softly and shook his head. "Too easy..." he uttered.

"What is the merit behind such a challenge?" Elder Svern questioned, a bit angered. "Is there any?
Besides mocking our cherished values?"

"I wish to see if a Vulcan would dare push his bounties, dare to question old, well established,
perhaps even stale conceptions, and bravely leave them behind, if time dictates." Sharel answered
"As a military veteran, you should appreciate it, Elder Svern."
Elder Svern took the time to contemplate.

"I decline none the less." Spock insisted.

"Wait just one second!" Sobar intervened. "What is this, Spock? Why declining this simple task without even consultation?"

"Lieutenant Sharel wishes me to consume meat, which I will not do, under any circumstances." Spock explained.

"This is outrageous!!" Sobar almost raised his voice.

"This is a piece of replicated food, Spock." Jim tried softly "If an animal died for it, it happened decades ago, might even be artificial meat, grown in a lab in the first place, sure tastes like it."

"Irrelevant." Spock calmly answered them both.

"I will take this challenge." Sobar's rage was almost uncontained now. "One incidence of meat consumption is preferable to losing the 'Plak If Fee'."

Sharel sure seemed amused enough by the riot he have created "Such a noble sacrifice, Commander Sobar." He said, chuckling. "However, I was not challenging you but Spock."

"Elder T'Pau, is this challenge even valid?" Jim dared asking the elders, even thought it might be considered a violation of the blood oath.

The Elders set so very still in their seats, as if they did not hear him, they were content by watching the argument unfolds.

"Is it a fair challenge, demanding someone to do something against their belief system and ethics?" Jim pushed his luck even further; a mind wipe might prove to be a blessing in his case.

"To an extent, the challenge is valid." Elder T'Pau answered without flinching.

"Come on, Captain." Sharel shook his silvery mane with a bit of a mockery "It's not as if I asked Spock to butcher an animal with his bare hands and devour its raw, bleeding flesh."

"Elder Svern, I wish to expel Spock from my team, he is undermining our efforts, and not for the first time." Sobar spoke directly towards the elder, ignoring everyone else in the room.

"Name one other time you recognized an action of mine as sabotage, team leader." Spock demanded with calm.

"The Engineering challenge." Sobar answered quite quickly. "You should have disclosed your knowledge to me, personally, but you chose to speak to the elders instead, and dissolve our chances of winning!"

"You would have preferred a win based upon lies and deception?" Spock asked, a hint of anger slipped into his voice as well.

"I've never said that! However, this was my decision to make!" Sobar said, slamming his hand on the table.

Soon, an argument broke within the Vulcan team, Spock at one side of it, Sobar and Elder Svern on the other.
While the Vulcans were having their argument, Jim leaned towards the Andorian to speak to him as discreetly as possible. "I don’t remember this option in our challenges list, what do you think you're doing, Sharel? Drop it."

"I am going with my gut feelings, sir, and as I recalled- this was your advice. Seems to be working, right? Besides, this is my challenge and it's valid, you don’t have authority to overrule it, sir."

Damn right, he is, puppy eyes time.

"Please, Sharel, choose something or someone else, this is too much trouble."

"No, sir, this is wining 3 points." The Andorian insisted. "The Elders approves."

"Come in, there's gotta be another way."

"What way? We are losing fast! With all due respect, sir, Spock is a weakness of yours; you have a bias when it comes to him, otherwise you'd be congratulating me on my brilliance."

Fuck, the blue bastard was right.

Jim let go and moved away.

In the mean time, the Vulcans argument had extended to include almost everyone.

"May I remind you that such allegations might result in a death penalty?" Elder Soval intervened on behalf of Spock. "Please remember the blood oath and be very mindful with your accusations!" he berated Sobar.

"I am only acting according to my oath, even if it may have regrettable results! My commitment to the cause will not allow me to do any less!" Sobar answered.

"The same commitment that you have shown when you wished to step down as the team leader at my challenge?" Elder Soval reminded him.

"You misinterpret my intentions..." Sobar started to answer.

And then a hard knock on the table was heard, and all turned astounded, to look at Elder T'Pau how had made that noise.

"Enough!" Elder T'Pau raised her voice for the first time Jim had ever recalled, and all ceased their arguing and lowered their gaze.

Silence fell in the small room; the lights flickered again but did not fail, all were awaiting Elder T'Pau's words of wisdom.

"Commander Sobar, I will address your issues this once and will not tolerate their repetition." She started; her old, dark eyes glowed with intensity.

"First- Spock was chosen for your team by the elders, and you have no authority over his position.

"Second- the Elders are monitoring all your actions very thoroughly and if there was any reason to suspect Spock was undermining your team efforts, we would have addressed it by now. On the contrary, Spock has contributed much to your team's success, without his input you'd be at least 4 points short.

"Third- may I remind you that the right to refuse a challenge is for all to have, as equal honorable
warriors of the ritual. This right could not be revoked, not even by the team leader. I am sure you would have found it useful as well, under different circumstances."

She paused to let her words sink in, and her sever gaze moved from one to another at the table, making everyone quiver as she laid her eyes on them, Elder Svern included.

And she's the one who is going to help him and Spock break the link between them? That thought alone gave Jim the chills.

Such an embarrassment, to get someone as esteemed and honorable as Elder T'Pau get into their filthy, stupid, intimate mess.

Damn Spock and his Vulcan Voodoo.

"And last- I have reason to suspect you are letting your emotions get in the way, Commander Sobar. I am pleased that you have strong emotions on the subject, and respect your passionate conviction that the Vulcans should indeed leave the UFP, however, emotions will only compromise your efforts, our efforts, to lead this ritual to a satisfying conclusion."

She let Sobar squirm in his chair for a while, before turning her gaze to others in the room.

"We are all weary, we are all stretched to our limits, we all wish for this difficult trial to be over, but we must not sacrifice our logic, our principals and our Katras over this, not more that is already necessary!

"Sharel, your challenge has merit. Following anything, even the derivatives of the Surak's teaching, blindly and without occasional inspection, is by itself illogical.

"Spock, you have every right to decline this challenge at the cost of one point to your group. However, it could only be done once, since this challenge was directed at you as an individual. Consequences of this action, however, may exceed the span of this ritual, do you understand?"

"I do." Spock confirmed.

"Very well, then. As we stand now- it is 9:6 in favor of the 'Leave' team, and all personal challenge points have been exhausted." T'Pau concluded. "Would someone else wish to contribute to this meeting?"

The way she had asked this question, made no one want to open their mouth.

"Elder Soval, if you please, sum up this meeting." She turned to the Elder at her side with a softer voice, for the relief of all in the room.

"Gladly." Elder Soval replied.

"Red3 challenged green1 and 2 for 2 point. Red6 and green3 challenged each other for 4 points. Green5 challenged Red5 for 2 point, and declined his counter challenge, resulting in a reduction of 1 point for the green team and earnings 2 for the red team.

Total of 8 points are on the table, and the overall score at this point is 9:6 in favor of the 'Leave' team. Any objections?"

When no one said a thing, Soval concluded "This meeting is adjourned."
"Remember your individual interviews tonight at 32:00." Elder Svern reminded them all "And my personal challenge tomorrow." and with that said, the meeting has ended.

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The Elders left the room, and so most of the attendees, but Jim awaited a chance to have a word at Spock, and for some reason Sobar and Sharel lingered as well, and they were all staring at each other.

"Yes?" Sharel finally asked Sobar who ogled him with open disdain; the Andorian was still smug from his win. "Is there anything you want to say to me?"

"Your challenge was reasonable." Sobar muttered, compelled to refer to the Lieutenant "A logical move on your behalf, exploiting a well known weakness, well done."

"Thank you very much." The Andorian nearly beamed at him.

"However, I have reason to belief that you have harmed your team for the long run." Sobar continued and sparked Kirk's interest.

"What do you mean?" Jim asked the other team's leader.

Sobar almost snarled at this "Surly it is clear to see, for anyone even with a small capacity. The conversation we just had here will not stay within these walls. The Elders will share it with the rest, and you know what that means?"

Sobar did not wait for Jim's or Sharel's answer.

"It means that the Federation's most distinguished delegates, handpicked for this challenge by the USP, had shown no respect for Vulcan values. Do you think this will sway any Elder to vote for your cause? You should start working on your closing speech, Captain Kirk."

Oh, Hell, the Vulcan had a point.

And with that point, Sobar has left the room.

"Spock." Jim turned to the other Vulcan.

"Yes, Captain?"

Great, now that he had his attention, Jim could not figure out what to say. "I'm sorry." Was the only thing he could come up with.

"No need." The other answered coldly "Lieutenant Sharel was well within his rights, as Elder T'Pau explained. Good night to you both."

With that Spock left, and so there were no more Vulcans in the room.

"Why?" Jim asked Sharel.

"Why what?" Sharel echoed his question, shrugging. "I just won us 3 points, that's why."

"But you've heard Sobar, how many points do you think we just lost?"
"Vulcans were once a warrior race; Captain, still are, if you ask me, the Elders will respect my killer instinct, some even more than they did before. And you should thank me too, hell, personally, don’t even sure I want them to stay in the Federation."

"Vulcans now follow the teaching of Surak, the teaching of peace, logic, compassion…"

"And where did it lead them, sir? To the brink of extinction?" Sharel taunted him. "When did you become so soft? Where is your daring? The aim justifies the means."

Jim frowned at the Andorian "You have no mercy in your cold heart."

To that the Andorian shrugged. "There's an old Andorian saying that fits as an answer- Those how show their enemies mercy, will starve come winter."

"I don't get you, or your government!" Jim was angry now and could hardly restrain his rage. "On the one hand, you fear the Vulcan departure, and want to sanction it! On the other, you treat them as if they were already your enemies!"

"There's a human saying fitting as answer." Sharel smiled wearily "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

Jim listened and his mind darkened with clouds of despair.

So this was what the federation all about?

A bunch of foreign entities hugging each other so closely so they won't get stabbed?

Estranged forever? Alien by choice and design?

Maybe in the past, maybe now even, but I'll damned if I do nothing to change it.

Yes, Jim was not the one to give up, and if he must punch a hole in the sky for the sun to shine through then so be it. In his heart, at that moment, he had made that pledge.

"Come on, Jim, we live in the grey, no one is perfect or holy, not even your Federation. It is an organization build and maintained to keep chaos at bay, nothing more, nothing less."

"I hope to one day, prove you wrong, Sharel." Jim concluded, a small amount of sadness sneaked into his voice.

"You're a good man, Jim." Sharel gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Good luck surviving your interview tonight."

"Same here." Jim mumbled and they both left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your time, feedback is my lifeline, just saying...
Now what does one wear for a meeting with an Ex-boyfriend's dad? This is what Jim was trying to figure out, in his room, with a few outfits spread on his bed.

They were ordered to dress in formal wear. But Jim's formal wear was a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and a black leather jacket on top. Leather and vulcans did not mix, and neither did T-shirts or jeans.

His next option was his only formal officer suit, which was the grey one, issued by Starfleet. But it seemed far too military to take for a dinner with a Vulcan Elder.

His last option was the one that he wore for his date with Vedik, but that seemed a bit too casual.

Oh, god, why this had to be so damn difficult?

A knock on his door removed him from his agony.

He surveyed his surrounding; nothing in his room gave away his side project or was particularly disgusting, so he went to open the door.

And there was his wingman Sulu, smiling, and holding a black bag in his hands.

"Hey, come in, what is this? A bodybag? Do you thing Sarek hates me that much?"

"This is your tux for tonight." Sulu placed the bag on the bed and opened its zipper to reveal a beautiful three piece tuxedo of a deep, dark shade of grey. "You're a bit taller, but we're about the same size, and I haven't fitted it yet so... What do you say?"

"Thank you, fairy godmother?"

"Blame Ben, he is the shopaholic, come on, try it."

Jim nodded and got undress to his undershirt and boxers, he wasn't shy about his body, and definitely not around Sulu.

"You've got a white dress shirt, yes?" Sulu asked inspecting his open closet.

"Sure, somewhere there." Jim waved his hand to that general direction.

Sulu found it and hand it to Jim, and then waited patiently until Jim finished dressing; he even helped fixing his black tie.

"So, do you like it?" Sulu took a step back when they were done to appreciate the view.

"It's nice." Jim smiled, brushing his hand on the smooth fabric of his jacket "A bit short as you said, but not tight."

"Vulcans won't care." Sulu assured him. "You look great."

"Same goes to you." Jim's smile got wider; Sulu was wearing an eastern earth style black tuxedo, silver rimmed, very sleek and elegant. "I owe you one."
"You owe me three, but who's counting."

Jim took a look in the mirror, and gave himself an honest assessment. He looked good, very good actually, the dark grey worked perfectly with his blue eyes and blonde hair. Sure the Tuxedo gave him a somewhat movie star appearance, ready for his red carpet event, but would that impress Sarek? What would ever impress a Vulcan Elder? Or a Vulcan in general, if we're at it.

"I have no idea how to spend three hours with Sarek." Jim admitted "Rather have a good old 20th century root canal."

"Could have been worse, you know?" Sulu chuckled at him and Jim frowned back.

"How?"

"I ran into Kuvac at the gym after the challenge meeting, we had a treadmill talk, he mentioned that Elder Svern also wanted to interview you, but Elder Sarek used his seniority card."

Ok, could have been worse.

"You ran into Kuvac and didn't end up dead?" Jim asked while searching the shelves of his closet for his bottle of cologne, he knew it was somewhere there, buried under the mess.

"I know, right?"

Jim finished with the cologne and was now searching for his comb, which was somewhere in the room for sure. "So the Elders were fighting over me? makes me dread this interview even more."

"I hear you, man." Sulu agreed and handed him the comb he found on the floor. "But at least you already know the Elder you're going to meet."

"And that's supposed to make it better?" Jim frowned at the helmsman then turned back to the mirror to comb his hair. "Who's your date, anyway?"

"Elder Sagon of the Remain team, although he's leaning towards undecided now. I'll put him back into place. Nyota told me all about him, so I've got a few aces up my sleeve."

"Go get him, tiger."

Sulu chuckled again and shook his head as Jim tossed the comb back to the floor.

"Who's got who?" Jim asked because he really had no time to devote to finding out before, because of his side project.

Sulu reached for his elegant black side bag and pulled out his PADD, reading through the list. "Well… I don't know much about them, but Nyota got Elder Vellua from the Undecided faction, leaning towards leave at the moment, Carol got Elder Sorom from the Leave team, leaning towards undecided now, Dayton got elder T'Heni, from the 'Leave' team… "

"Sharel?"

"Sharel got elder Ketal, a remainer, leaning towards undecided."

"So who's got the pleasure of Elder Svern?" Jim got a bit curious, but just a bit.

"That would be Sobar, sir."
Jim almost laughed "Now that would be the most boring interview ever."

"Looks like it." Sulu agreed.

"Wait, what about Spock?"

"Spock?" Sulu searched the PADD "Elder T'Pau, it seems."

Jim hummed, would like to be a fly on the wall for that meeting.

"Elder Soval anyone?"

"That would be Vedik, sir."

Interesting meeting there as well, two Remainers of opposite teams.

"Well, we should get going; I really don’t want to be late this time." Jim remembered Sarek's warning, yesterday at the engineering deck.

Sulu nodded in agreement, and they went outside to the common room, where the rest of the crew awaited.

"Wow, what a pretty bunch you are." Jim smiled brightly at the view. "Ladies and gentlemen, what a lovely sight."

Nyota was wearing a tinny red dress, with a diagonal cleavage, leaving one shoulder bare. Carol wore a sophisticated black and white plaid dress with an elegant asymmetric design, which complimented her shiny blonde hair. Dayton looked sharp in his navy blue tuxedo, and Sharel wore a traditional Andorian suite, carbon black in color and decorated with silver threads.

Nyota stepped into Jim's space and pecked his cheek, engulfing him with her flowery perfume. "Looking handsome yourself, Captain." She smiled.

"Thank you."

"We should get going." Sulu reminded them all.

"All for deck 15, right?" Carol asked with a giggle "What do you know? We can share the lift."

"Lead the way." Jim smiled at her.

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They started out as a bunch but slowly dispersed along the way, as each one reached the room of the Elder who had awaited them. Soon he was the only one left looking for Elder Sarek's room, room 15123 on the deck.

The place was huge; it was probably the biggest ship Jim had ever set foot on, he remembered vaguely Captain Setal's words, that the Vokau was designed to function as a generation ship, capable of sustaining 10,000 souls onboard for an unlimited time period, so with 9 residential
decks, it meant that each deck could host the entire crew of the Enterprise with room to spare, which was kind of crazy.

Jim would give a kidney to earn a visit to the ship's bridge and probably a year of his life to captain it, even if for a few hours.

No, no, your lady is the Enterprise, be loyal.

Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

The Enterprise, of course.

But the Vokau was a close second.

Ok, he was lost.

Wondering through the huge, hot corridors, dimly lit with red light which only made it look even darker. Lonely, deserted hallways, with no one to ask for directions, he prayed he would not late. He was really not looking forward to start his interview by being late; it was enough of bad luck he was assigned to Elder Sarek to begin with.

Oh, great.

Pain washed all over him, all of a sudden, intense, crippling and completely unpredicted. He had to stop and catch his breath, luckily for him, it was in front of a huge window that showed the view outside.

He leaned on the window, and rode out the pain, trying to breathe it away and focus on the view outside.

The pain originated from his upper sides and middle torso, and because he was living for far too long with a doctor as a roommate, he knew those were his kidneys and liver. He also knew that Bones was going to kill him once he learned what Jim had done to himself.

After a few moments, Jim realized the pain was not going away, and there was just one thing he could do about it.

So he fished out the hypo spray from his side bag, aimed it at his jugular and injected a dose. He didn’t like it, and he was trying to cut back, but he really had no choice. He had to carry the damn thing with him all times now, because he never knew when the pain was going to strike.

His inner Spock said -I told you so.

And to that he answered- Oh, please, shut up, as if you'd have a better idea.

While he was waiting for the drug to work its magic, he gazed at the view outside, which would be breathtaking, if he wasn’t already out of breathe.

The Vokau had moved, and positioning itself a bit away from star base Ipik, or was it the other way around? Was the Ipik even capable of changing position?

Anyway, the Ipik was a bit further than he had remembered, and there was a changed of alignment as well.

When they first came here, the Vokau and Ipik were vertical to each other, now they were parallel, and it seemed like the Ipik has also aligned itself with one of the green plasma streams shooting out
from the star, it was riding it, or harvesting its energy, because some of that plasma was going into
that needle and not going back out again, and the eye of the needle shone with bright pink light.

T'Heli had mentioned something about an experiment. It was probably timed with the periapsis.
Those damn Vulcans, what the hell were they up to?

The pain was gone now, and so Jim had no further excuse to press his nose into the glass. He
should get going, and he was probably, no, definitely, late.

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"You are 12.3 minutes late." Was the first thing Elder Sarek had said after the door closed behind
him.

He should get used to it by now, but still he blushed with embarrassment "I had trouble finding this
room, might have taken the wrong turn, this ship is crazy colossal."

Elder Sarek did not answer; he was seated at his desk and seemed to have been working. One of his
PADDs shone bright blue, displacing a holographic model of some object, looked a lot like a
protein molecule, with a table of running data by its side; he was writing notes on another PADD
and was also ignoring Kirk's presence for a long enough time for Jim to feel utterly useless.

Jim tried not to let it get to him, so he used the time to scan Sarek's room, and it was very similar to
every other Vulcan room he had ever entered, mostly bare, with only few essential furniture, a
velvety rug for meditation, some books, PADDs and a strange artistic item, an odd metal statue was
set as a central piece in the living room.

The only extravaganza was this huge observation window, displaying the wonderful plasma show
that he saw previously outside, with Ipik at its center.

In front of that window, there was a dinner table set for two, and the food was kept there, heated by
a local red colored force field, that Jim had never seen before.

Wait.

Sarek had the view outside magnified! Something Jim could never hope to do onboard, and if his
eyes didn't fool him, the pink glow inside the eye of the needle seemed like a gateway, a thin,
glowing pink veil, where strange stars shone through.

Interesting, however, there was nothing he could do about it at this point.

He glanced back at the Elder, who continued to work as if Jim was made out of air. This could not
go on forever, could it? Was this some sort of a test? Or was this just one pissed off Vulcan Elder?
Well, not that old. Sarek was only slightly over middle age in Vulcan terms, still very much in his
prime.

"Can I seat?" Jim broke the silence first, gesturing at the chair on the other side of Sarek's desk.

"All known humanoids are capable of that function." Sarek stated, not gracing him with even a
glance.
Jim swallowed the insult and set down, watching the Elder work for a few more moments before he collected enough courage to speak again.

"I am sorry for being late, but I am here now, for your requested interview."

Sarek raised his eyes to meet Jim's blue ones for the first time, and they were cold, hard, and grey, making Kirk dread, rather than celebrate, this small victory.

"You are in error." the Elder said "I did not initiate this interview; it was Spock who implored me to arrange this opportunity and I obliged. Here..." he pushed a PADD towards Jim "You can have it; I had it loaded with all relevant, declassified data that you have requested."

"I don't remember asking anything from you." Jim mumbled and viewed the PADD, it was open on an article, writing in standard, full of equations and graphs he could not hope to understand with just one glance.

"You approached Spock, some time ago, and demanded him to disclose the origin of this star's color, placing him, and consequently, placing me, in a very difficult position, I might add. Please tell me that you remember this, and that I have not been bothered for nothing."

Jim shook his body out of his temporary stupor and nodded "Yes, I did ask him why this sun was green, I did." he tried not to squirm in his seat.

"In this PADD I have assembled relevant data about this universe we're in. I wish to add that said data was already available to you, as it was granted to the human race when the Vulcan-human relations were established, a century and a half ago, I care not for the exact date."

Jim tried to comprehend some of the math displayed on the PADD while listening to Sarek, but he was not at his peak, and so he failed at both. "Thank you." He muttered instead.

"If there is anything you wish ask me about this universe, now is the time." Sarek noted, glancing back at his work, he was probably itching to continue.

"You said that the human race have this information already, but are humans even aware of this Vulcan ability? To actually travel to this universe? Because, with all due respect, theoretical knowledge and technological capability are two different things."

"The extent of human awareness of Vulcan capabilities is no interest of mine." Elder Sarek stated. "However, I speculate that the answer to your question is negative. We do not tend to share our technologies with other species, appealing as they may be."

Sarek's answer came as no surprise, but it did come with a sting of insult.

"But why not? We have been allies for over a century now, are we not trustworthy?"

"This is an irrelevant argument. Trustworthiness has nothing to do with our policy, dependency, laziness and exploitation, however, do." Sarek continued to exhibit his disdain for humankind, ever so very subtly, not.

Jim swallowed his hurt and lowered his head, torn between his need to know more and his wish to end this torture now and walk away with his pride still intact.

When he took too long to respond, Elder Sarek raised his eyebrow again. "If you have no further questions, consider yourself free to leave, I assume we both could benefit from the time saved."
"A moment, sir." Jim hurried to mumble.

Think, Jimbo, think!

Cotton for brains, think!

So many, many questions, where to begin?

How did they get into this universe? Was it by Warp? No, stupid question, it was probably a different system altogether.

Was anyone in the Federation aware of this capability? Already asked that. Sure they are aware! As they were aware of red matter before the arrival of Spock prime into this universe. Answer is no, by the way.

Vokau is a prototype, Ipik is top secret. I bet section 31 will send people to die trying to get a glimpse at the Vokau's technologies after I give them my report.

Hey, this is probably why communication is so difficult and limited. The amount of energy it takes to send information through two different space-time continuations just blows the mind.

Space-time… Space… time… TIME!

What was the time gap between this universe and theirs? Was he already too late? Was his Enterprise already sent on its suicide mission? Was it already gone and everyone already dead? Bones? Scotty? Damn it!

"What is the time gap between this parallel universe and our own?" Jim tried to sound as casual as possible, but his whole body nearly trembled with tension.

Sarek blinked his inner eyelids as if staring at a not so very bright child.

"Please refer to document 3 on this PADD, segment 4- This universe is devoid of life, and vertical to our own, because time moves through them both at the same rate.

"We will not venture into life bearing, parallel universes, time-space paradoxes and all related moral implications are too much of a hassle, and also extremely none productive.

"I suggest you read the material and construct educated questions. I will try to make time for this, if needed, but I can guaranty nothing. You may leave now."

Wait, what?

Did Elder Sarek just throw him out of his room?

This interview was meant to last three hours, and they have probably made use of only 20 minutes of it, ok, half an hour if counting the time he spent searching for the room.

"Are we done?" He asked the elder just to be sure.

"Affirmative." Sarek answered, glancing again at his PADDs.

"Why?" Jim insisted, hoping he didn’t sound like an insolent child.

Ok, he did.
"I have fulfilled Spock's obligation, and see no further reason to prolong this encounter." Sarek stated and when Jim would not budge, he raised an eyebrow again, so much like Spock. "I thought we'd be in agreement."

Yes, they should be in agreement, he should be thrilled actually, but he was not.

Why did he deserve such poor treatment?

Every other Elder granted the team with three hours, and he was the team leader.

He felt humiliated, and it stung.

"No offense, sir, but this meeting was set for three hours." Jim said finally, felt like crying, like the illogical creature that he was.

"I am well aware." Sarek stated "I am also in the position to end this meeting at my discretion, a privilege I wish to implement at this point."

"Please, sir, could I have five more minutes of your time? I have some things I wanted to ask from you, and there would probably be no other time."

"State your requests." Sarek gazed at him again, a frosty, paralyzing stare.

"I want to contact the Enterprise and see how they are doing, and contact Andoria prime too, Lt. Sharel's family, to be exact; you see it's his kid's birthday and…" Jim sniffled. "They have already turned me down twice, and you are my last hope. Sir, please?"

Sarek only sat there in complete silence, not moving a muscle, only staring at him with unblinking, cold grey eyes.

Jim could not help it anymore, his whole body trembled, and some abrupt tears fell from his eyes, he turned his face to the side and wiped them as fast as he could, hoping Sarek didn't notice, or care.

Sarek was right; he was breaching protocol, wasting the Elder's time, and acting like a spoiled little brat. He should get out of there before he makes a complete fool of himself, if that didn’t happen already.

So Jim decided on giving up.

"Thank you for your time, your data and audience, sir. I am so sorry I was late, and out of line. I'm withdrawing my requests, please consider them subtracted. I'll show myself out now, sir, good night."

Jim forced his wobbly legs to lift him up, his shaking hands to take the PADD and place it in his bag, and his unstable body to move and blindly search for the exit.

As he turned his back to the Elders, quiet tears started pouring down his face again, damn it!

Why Elder Sarek, of all people, was able to get under his skin like that?

Stupid, weak, emotional human!

Get the hell out of here!

"James Kirk." Sarek said after him, in an unfamiliar tone.
Jim stopped and wiped the tears off his face, trying to collect himself before turning to confront the Elder again. "Yes?" he asked.

Still sounded like a miserable infant, for god's sake.

"I have changed my mind. You can have your three hours."

Jim could not believe his ears. "You really don't have to, sir, I mean, it's fine, it's all fine. I don't mind if you want me out of here."

"You may use the bathroom to your right and get yourself refresh, I'll be waiting."

Never in his life had Jim imagined ending up in Elder Sarek's bathroom, but he's still alive, and there it was. Not that it looked like anyone's bathroom, there were no visible personal items anywhere to be seen, and surly he was not planning on poking the room to find some. Just a bathroom, a shower, a toilet, and a sink, damn Vulcans and their privacy, if not for Pon Farr, they'd probably go extinct by now.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most pathetic of them all?

Congrats, Jimbo, your boyish charms worked again, such a great diplomacy style should be taught at the academy- if nothing else works, just bend over.

Shut the fuck up.

But I am right, am I?

You always find the shittiest moments to bring me down, so shut the fuck up.

You're a fake, jimmy boy, and a hacker and a thief, don’t you ever forget this.

How could I possibly? When you're always here to remind me?

If we ever to survive this Starfleet crap, you're gonna live the rest of your miserable life completely wasted somewhere, and then I'll leave you alone, promise.

And I promise to get you out of my head as soon as I can!

But you can't, you self-absorbed, narcissistic, slut of a man.

Shut the fuck up! I don’t want to hear from you until this mission is over! Understood?

He ended the argument and turned to wash his face.

When he got out, Sarek's desk was clear, the view outside was in natural scale again, and the Elder
had moved to the dinner table, awaiting him there.

Jim breathed and choked his urge to apologies again; instead, he joined Sarek at the table without speaking.

The Vulcan said nothing either, just poured them some wine like, red liquid, into tall crystal glasses, then he took his drink with his gloved hand and started sipping slowly, enjoying the view outside.

Jim picked up his fork and knife and started eating the meal he was served, Sichuan Chicken, so it seemed, his favorite.

Sarek face turned from the window towards Jim and gave him an enigmatic gaze, and then he picked up his own chopsticks like cutlery and started eating as well, what seemed to be a vegetable stew.

They ate together in silence for a few moments, and then the lights turned off.

"No need of concern, it is just the periapsis." Sarek said with calm. He then lit the candelas that were already set on the table for such occurrence.

"Why is the Vokau affected?" Jim could not help but ask "Don’t you have shields?"

"The physics of this universe is slightly different than our own; rendering the shields not as effective. We are still on the learning curve."

"So Vulcans don’t know everything, huh?" Jim concluded, which almost made Sarek smile.

"Hardly." The Elder agreed "We know practically nothing at all."

"Now you're just being modest." Jim mumbled into his plate.

"Far from it." Sarek gently disagreed "Just stating a fact."

Then he gazed at Jim as they both continued to eat, and silence took over again. Suddenly it dawned on Jim; he was having a candle lit dinner with Spock's father. It was a hard thing to swallow, and Jim almost choked on his food.

"To be perfectly honest, I have no inclination to interview you." Sarek said after a while longer. "Let's do it the other way around, you may interview me. I will, however, answer as I see fit. Is that acceptable?"

"Very. Thank you so very much!" Jim looked up and his face lit up.

Sarek only shook his head and returned to his dinner, muttering something in Vulcan.

Jim took some time to think, picking up his glass and drinking from it, he ran some ideas in his mind. He had about two hours with a Vulcan Elder, with Spock's father; he should not let this go to waste.

"Have you considered time travel to try and save Vulcan?" He asked at last.

Sarek stopped everything he was doing and gave Jim a look that any other species would wear as stunned, but the Vulcan managed to look stoic while doing so.

"I am impressed, James Tiberius Kirk. You go straight for the kill, no time spent on niceties."
"I don't have much time." Jin admitted.

Well, yeah, chances are he's gonna end up dead or coma-toast in a few days time, if caught by Commander Sabek for his side project, or killed by Sobar in a duel to the death, in case this ritual ends with a tie, which seemed likely by the way things have progress thus far. Or maybe the Vulcan drug will have the honor of getting to him first.

"I will deny answering you this, but yes, we have considered time travel, even made some efforts moving forward with it. We are, however, unable to continue that line of action at this point of time."

"Why?" Jim insisted and almost made Sarek laugh with his blunt brashness. "If you can navigate between universes you can clearly navigate through space-time."

Sarek slowly shook his head. "I am starting to regret my offering."

Jim shrugged "What could I possibly do with this information? I am under the blood oath, and the oath of secrecy which covers everything Plak If Fee related at the penalty of a mind wipe."

"Which begs the question- why would you strive to obtain this information in the first place?" Sarek suggested, with more than a hint of amusement in his voice.

Jim shrugged again "Humans, illogical, curios."

"Indeed." Sarek agreed and refilled both of their empty glasses, while trying to figure out how to handle this human before him. He then leaned back in his seat with his glass at hand. "I wonder if you are familiar with the Vulcan triangle of feasibility."

"No, I am not." Jim answered, having the notion that only Vulcans were familiar with it.

"Well, to put it as simply as possible -it is a triangle with three vertices." Sarek sipped on his drink "One of which is space-time, the other- mass-energy and the last is wisdom-knowledge. Indicating that almost anything is possible given enough time, room, energy, matter and intellectual effort."

"It is a recursive system." Jim noted.

"Very well done, James Tiberius Kirk. No wonder you scored 142 points in your logic test, I am very much impressed. You should be a scholar; instead, you waste your time, flying around the galaxy, getting into unnecessary trouble."

"A scholar's life is too boring."

"You have this in common with my son, this attitude, I'm afraid." Sarek almost sighed "To continue my answer, as it comes to time travel, Vulcans have concluded that it is impossible to do. We will always lack the wisdom part of it. We will never know if we would be doing more harm than good by going back in time and try to fix local problems."

"Local?" Jim asked, horrified "You've lost almost your entire species and your home planet, I would not call it local."

"As much as it is harsh to come to terms with, Vulcans are but a speck of dust in the grand scheme of things. Our existence is not important enough to create a rift in time and space with unknown consequences."

"Your view on the subject is noble, but you probably know that other species may have no problem
whatsoever with time travel, and might be even tampering with time-space as we speak."

"That is correct." Sarek admitted "We are fully aware, yes. Obviously, we know we cannot control the deeds of others, we are not that pompous." The Vulcan elder moved in his chair and put his glass down. "The only thing we can do is focus on the present with aim to try and better the future. That would be my last comment on that subject."

"Fair enough, next question?"

Sarek almost sighed now. "Fair enough, I'll brace myself."

"Why are you part of the 'Leave' faction?"

And now, Sarek almost hitched his breath, when he recovered he set in silence for a long moment, wondering if to bother at all. "This was a very intimate question, James Kirk."

"Had to try." Jim smiled and finished the last scrap of food on his plate, everything was so delicious. "You don’t have to answer, you know." He reminded the elder.

"You place me in a difficult position yet again." Sarek stretched in his seat, as much as he tried to conceal it, he was tempted by the idea of answering.

Jim didn't push it further, whatever Sarek chooses was fine by him.

"Very well, then, you win." The elder admitted reluctantly. "I will answer you this, but only because it is you who is asking, because I owe you my son's life."

"Saved him more than once; so you know." Jim smirked, almost bragging.

"Saved him in the most intimate way possible." Sarek sharpened his answer.

Fuck, he knew about the Pon Farr. Jim could feel himself blushing, and thanked his good fortune for the relative darkness of the room.

"I am on the 'Leave' camp because of one reason alone, because of Spock." Sarek stated and Jim wondered if he would elaborate any further, but the Elder turned to the window again, his mind lost in thought, or maybe in memory.

"What is it about Spock, sir?" Jim pushed further, feeling bold and quite intrigued, he could not help himself.

Sarek did not answer immediately, his lips twitched with a hint of a weary smile. He turned his gaze back at Jim, with something akin to pain in his eyes.

"I know I've stated that I had no questions for you, but this I must understand- why would you want to know anything about this topic? You have already terminated your relationship with my son. Why should I trample on his privacy just to satisfy your curiosity?"

"I did not cut all ties with him." Jim resented the idea "If he ever needs me again, in that intimate way; and I'm not dead, I'll do it, whatever it takes to keep him alive."

"I hope this will not be necessary." Sarek commented, a bit of that coldness returned to his voice. "After this ceremony's end, and with Elder T'Pau's aid, this accidental bond will be dissolved, and I will aid him in finding a suitable mate."

"That would be for the best." Jim agreed.
Spock had no business bonded to a wretched creature such as himself; he deserved much, much better.

Sarek hummed his gratification, gazing at an undefined point in the room.

"Is that a fruit cake?" Jim pointed at the last full tray on the table. "I prefer chocolate cakes, but I totally understand this choice, very logical."

He helped himself with a slice and spent some time just chewing and devouring it.

"This is so delicious." He moaned with his mouth half full "Everything is so delicious. Vedik was right after all, food is way tastier prepared by hand. Did your chef prepare this? But does that mean they also made chicken?

"I don't think so, not even for me. So this is just an awesome replicating technology that I wish we had onboard the Enterprise, where everything meat tastes like chicken, but not the tasty kind of chicken, if you know what I mean? I mean… "

"Spock is my greatest scientific achievement, and my greatest mistake." Sarek announced, as if only to stop Jim from blabbing. "I only had him because my beloved human mate begged me for a child. Amanda did not mind risking her own life baring it, she only wanted an offspring to cherish, care for, and identify as evidence of our love. I was in error for indulging her."

Jim stopped eating and placed down his fork slowly, hoping not to breathe too loud to make Sarek stop talking.

"Do you even realize how difficult it was to integrate human and Vulcan DNA? Years and years spent in the lab, six of them, running simulations, picking up one sequence after the other, trying to find a combination that would supply us with a viable, intelligent, healthy specimen. It was the Vulcan's pinnacle of Xeno-biological engineering at that time, still is, I suspect."

Wow, he'll never look at Spock the same again.

"I've convinced myself that the effort was worth the while, if only to expand our knowledge in that field. And then, Spock was born, and he was the most wonderful, unpredicted outcome, I should never have hoped to get. Biology is a chaotic system, as all recognize, you may know what you are striving for, but you will never know what you would achieve. "

"And what did you achieve?" Jim asked.

"A monster." Sarek stated simply.

Without thinking, Jim sent his hand to rub his throat. "The Spock I know is no monster." He mumbled.

Well, what the hell did he know? Spock was the only Vulcan he knew up until now, and the only one he knew deeply, and almost none at all.

"Did you know that Spock was tested and tested again, throughout his childhood? Physical tests, intelligence tests, blood test, tissue tests, psychological tests, telepathic tests… every known test was implemented, just so we'd understand what we have created."

Jees, poor kid, no wonder he fled for Starfleet as soon as he could.

"What have you created?" Jim asked.
Sarek winced and moved in his seat. "Understand now, Mr. Kirk, this is not common knowledge, concealed outside the circle of the high council, I only tell you this because you have earned it by saving my son's life." He noted "I will not venture into the most personal aspects of it, though."

"Fair enough."

"We found out that we have created the most physically strong Vulcan, and the most powerful telepath ever recorded."

So you have created Superman.

Where is the problem?

"But also the most volatile, violent, emotionally unstable and dangerous one." Sarek sighed now. "Spock is a creature that should not have existed, and unfortunately, he knows that as well, knew that from a very young age."

"Spock is the most Vulcan- Vulcan I've ever met." That Jim knew for sure, even more so, after the time spent upon the Vokau.

"He tries so hard, I know." Sarek acknowledged. "At first we thought he'd be sterile, but we were wrong about this as well, he has gone into Pon Farr, he is able to sire children. This only complicates things further."

"Spock is an upstanding officer and one of the finest beings I've ever met." Jim insisted "Treating him as a mistake is cruel and unfair."

Sarek turned to gaze at Jim, surprised for a second, and then he probably reminded himself that he was, after all, talking to an illogical creature. "Humans will not understand." He stated.

"And Spock, will he understand?"

"Spock is not human, Jim." Sarek said, correcting Jim's undisclosed assumption."My son has nothing human about him; you must understand that, before you get hurt any further."

"He has human DNA."

"Some human DNA, yes, 25.2% of it, yet every bit of his human DNA was deconstructed and reconstructed for so many times it no longer coded to any known human gene. It is still unclear why that human DNA affected him the way it did, but none the less, his biology, his mentality, his capacities are pure Vulcan. Expecting anything human out of him is a mistake, Jim, a mistake both you and his mother have made."

Untrue, Jim thought.

Spock had his mother's eyes.

Sarek needed a moment after that and Jim had granted him one, by finishing his disappointingly none alcoholic drink.

"Look, James, this conversation has taken an unexpected toll on me, I apologies but I do wish to conclude it. I know I've promised you three hours and 41 minutes still remain, but I hope you'd forgive me this."

"Sure, no problem." Jim dared a soft smile "But I was hoping to understand why you are on the
'Leave' faction."

Sarek gave it some thought, and spoke again after a while. "To make a long, complicated story short, I am on the 'Leave camp' because I wish no Vulcan to find themselves in my position or in Spock's, and if that means complete solitude, so be it."

"I believe you are in the wrong, sir."

"I cannot counterargument that, but still, this is my stand. And this is why we have this ritual, Mr. Kirk; no one enjoys it, or some of its unfortunate possible outcomes. Now, if you please, I forgot how demanding humans are, I wish to meditate."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir." He said and the lights suddenly turned on.

Great, now he won’t have to wait in the dark, by the lift, like a lost puppy. He got up and thanked the Elder again, and then he left the room.

This time he was not so lost, he was confidante he'd be able to locate the main lift a bit faster, navigating the red lit, hot corridors with much more ease.

But then he had to stop, horrified.

Hold on, just a second!

If Spock was only 25.2% human, does that mean he was 74.8% Sarek?

Holy hell!

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, take care.
You guys are amazing!
Thank you all for your support and feedback.
I was really worried this story will not gain traction, it is very long and demanding,
and there is not enough smut in it, but you proved me wrong! Thanks everyone!
I hope I'll be lucky enough to have you till the end (of the story, that is.).

Additional warnings: Dubcon mind meld, dubcon kiss

"Mr. Krik!" The lift's door opened and there stood that familiar elder tech.

Jim raised his hands up the air "I swear I didn’t touch anything this time!"

"All is well, Mr. Krik." The crewman mumbled and scanned the lift to find nothing wrong with it,
because there was nothing wrong with it, and that recording device was safely removed, tucked
and secured inside Jim's tuxedo pocket. "Was probably caused by the Periapsis, keeping us busy,
this event, unfortunately."

And just as he stated it, the tech's comm buzzed and a nasal female voice spew rapid commands
out of it, the maintenance guy muttered something in Vulcan and put his bare hand on the
touchpad.

"Took you 1.45 hours this time." Kirk complained.

The comm unit insisted on belching out more commands with increasing urgency.

"Five more minutes and you'd have to send in a cleaning crew as well, if you know what I'm
saying." Kirk continued.

"For me, unfortunately, am also the cleaning crew." The older tech almost sighed.

"Then we're both lucky."

"I'm sorry; sir, but we do what we can." The poor tech answered, his comm actually barked now.
"The lift is fine, Mr. Krik, Periapsis as suspected, you may use it again safely." the tech put his
glove back on, then whispered something to his comm just to calm it down.

"Deck 11." Said Kirk, out loud, and took them both for the ride.

***0***
Upon arrival, Jim rushed to his room, to use the toilet first, then the shower, and afterwards, he turned his full attention to the recording device, freshly retrieved from the lift.

Jim was so relieved to find the recording device just where he had left it, but he had no way of knowing what it meant. Did Commander Sabek was unaware of his actions? Was he aware but allowing this just to set a trap somewhere else down that road? Or was the device already compromised?

He will never know for sure, but there were some measures of security he could take.

So the first, he unplugged his PADD from the Vokau's replicator MCU, and only then he connected the recording device to it. If the device was compromised, at least it will not hurt his already established connection to the ship.

He checked the data and smiled with satisfaction; the device had done its job and was loaded with telepathic signatures, which manifested themselves as electric signals.

Vedik, oh so very helpful, explained that the Vulcan skin was a fine tuned conductor, capable of receiving and transmitting minute amounts of electricity that in turn was translated by the Vulcan brain into useful information.

It was not the only way the Vulcan skin was able to exchanged information, but it was the strongest and most reliable signal, which was the reason why it was used to create the interface with the ship.

So now he had the electricity pattern of all the Vulcans who used the lift for the past two days and only needed to sift the information from the background noise, and construct a new pattern derived from it. For this task, he had already written another code.

Next, he ran the diagnostic code on the device, it wasn't perfect, and he could not hope to detect every single risk, but he could at least identify and wipe out the obvious malware planted on it, if any excited.

He'd start processing the data after the diagnostic is complete.

In the meanwhile he used his backup, safe PADD, which he had prepared in advance; to reentered the Vokau's system and get into Vedik's mail account again, to clean up his mess. The ping signal was received, while he was preparing for the meeting with elder Sarek, the VR took the bait and the backdoor to their database was installed.

Jim poked at the VR database for a while, almost tempted to read the personal files of Spock and Sobar, but he resisted that temptation, it was a breach of privacy and also an unnecessary risk. He logged off before doing something stupid, and promised himself that the next time he enters that database would only be to plant the fake profile of the none-existing engineer.

The time was 02:30 already, a time that even most Vulcans used for sleep. With nothing left to do, Jim considered going to sleep himself, or at least try, but he was kidding no one, he would not be able to, not in his room.

The last thing he needed was to stay there, watch at the code running, and climb up the walls with anxiety and boredom, a perfect mixture to push him into making some stupid mistakes. He decided on changing to his black issued track suit and take his blankets to the couch in the common room, if he's able to sleep, good, so be it, if not, gym it is.
There was no one in the common room, as expected, all were probably tucked in and sleeping; at least he hoped so, they all deserved a goodnight rest.

Crushing on the couch, building himself a nest of blankets, he closed his eyes and tries to relax. He implemented some of Bones advice, to clear his mind from thought, to concentrate on his senses and center his mind in the now, not the past nor the future.

Just feel the warmth of your blankets, how soft the couch is under your weight, the nice soapy smell of your skin, the soft darkness behind your shut eyes, and the wailing sound of weeping.

Wait, what?

Someone was crying his or her heart out behind closed doors, but so loudly he could hear it from the common section. It was disturbing, devastating, he could not possibly hope to ignore it, he didn’t want to either.

He tossed away his blanked and jumped up, with only socks to his feet, he sneaked from door to door. First Sharel's room, which seemed empty, then Sulu's door, which was peaceful and quiet, then, yeas, as he feared- Nyota.

He bit his lips, fighting his embarrassment, but the sound of sobs and moans were too much, so he swallowed and knocked on the door.

"Hey there, it's me, Jim. You don’t have to answer; I just want to let you know that I'm up, and in the common room. If you need someone to talk to, I'd…"

He almost fell in when the door opened.

"Nyota, hey." He smiled sheepishly, entering the room.

His communication officer was seating by her desk, still in her red little dress, but her hair was undone, falling in black, wavy cascade on her narrow shoulders, her makeup was smeared around her wet eyes, and a bottle of sherry was on the table, half empty with no cup to go by.

She gazed at him, eyes wide open, trembling and trying to muffle the sound of her cries with her hand on her mouth.

"I'm sorry for barging in, I was in the common hall, could not help but notice…"

Nyota buried her face in her hands and moaned.

"I can go away now." He hurried to say at her clear display of distress. "I'm glad to see you're ok, no blood spills or sharpened objects or… Ok, I'll see you tomorrow and we'll pretend this never happened."

"Stay." She said in tear drenched voice. "Seat."

"Yes, Ma'am." Jim nodded and found a seat on her bed.

He folded his hands in his lap and waited, she'd lead, she knows what she needs, and if she only needs him to be there to look at, so she's not alone, he is okay with that, he can shut up for a period of time, at least he thinks he can.

"Want some?" she picked up the bottle.

He shook his head, someone had to keep a clear mind in this situation, and it wasn't her, because
she brought the bottle to her lips and drank straight up from it, until it was three quarters empty.

"I had this horrible, nasty, most awful encounter ever, with that Elder Vellua." She stated, placing, almost smashing the bottle on the table. "Never in my life I had some stranger so casually reaching inside for my soul, catching it with their hands and squeeze its miserable life out of it."

Well, Nyota was as verbal as always, a good sign.

"That cruel, heartless bitch!" Nyota started sobbing again.

Jim didn’t know if he should hug her, or leave her be so he kind of did a little dance on the mattress, which luckily she didn't pay attention to.

"Did she meld with you?" he dared whispering.

"Yes, kind of, I think so." Nyota smiled bitterly, tears and smeared eyeliner and all.

"She should not have done so. Mind melds are forbidden. Even for Elders, I think…?"

"I don’t know either, but she wanted to, and she told me it would not be a deep mind meld, won’t be not too intimate."

"But look at how you were affected! Elder or not, I think she crossed the line, we should file a complaint!" He didn’t know how, or to whom, but sure he will find a way.

"Jim, no!" she cried again "I agreed to it, makes me as guilty as her. Please, don’t make it worse than it already is! Please!" she begged so pretty, with sweet tears and a trembling voice.

No, he was totally going to see this through, but maybe now was not the time to put more pressure on poor Uhura. This was a headache for another day, the day after the ritual, maybe. But did it compromise the whole thing? Or maybe there were gray areas? The fuck if he knows.

"Did she ask permission first? Were you sober at that time? Did you consent verbally? Was there a point where you asked her to withdraw and she wouldn't?"

All the questions a Captain should know how to ask and pray that they never would.

Nyota nodded three times for yes and once for no, all the while tears were flowing from her eyes. Jim found some relief in her answers, but not to a point he could relax.

"Did you know that for Vulcans, mind melds are even more intimate than sex? Have you ever melded with someone before? With Spock?"

"With Spock, yes, a few times even, deep melds, at least I think so, I'm no meld expert." Nyota confirmed, hitching her breath "That's why I agreed to her at the first place, but it was nothing like what Spock and I shared, it was so… scary. With Spock it was all flickering lights and soft sounds, a sense of security. With Vellua it was like drowning in cold, dark waters."

"I only melded with Spock once." Jim confessed "and it was nothing like what you just described with Elder Vellua either. What happened?"

"She asked me to connect minds with her, so she'd get to know me better, beyond regular conversation, and I said yes, and she placed her fingers on my face, and we took a dive in and it was like…

"Have you had anyone dismantle your whole life like a bug on a glass slide? All my life's plans and
aspirations, all my perceptions, my assumptions, analyzed, dissected, and tossed away to the trashcan."

Nyota's voice crumbled again and she started crying with earnest.

Jim breathed and lowered his gaze onto the floor, not wanting to see her at that state, a part of him wished he did not knock on her door, to save them both this situation; Nyota was not the kind of person to willingly present any weakness, and she'd hate him tomorrow no matter what.

"Sounds harsh." He mumbled, mostly to himself.

"She told me I have a fetish for Vulcans; that I wanted to be around them so I'd feel better with myself, so I'd get away from my own human parts that I am secretly disgusted with. She said I didn't love Spock for all that he was, but for a reflection of him I created in my mind, that made me feel safe and secure and also allowed me to look down upon others. Told me I was selfish and childish, and…"

"Human." Jim stopped her gently; he could no longer bare the pain drenched in her voice. "You loved Spock like the human that you are, Vulcans might not understand."

"Thing is, I think I still love him. Funny, almost a year later, isn't that pathetic?" She broke into tears again.

The anger started to boil up inside Jim, damn that Vulcan Elder, she might have had Nyota consent to delve into her mind, but she had no clue of how to treat it, like a bull in a china shop.

"I'm sorry Nyota, I wish I could help."

"She said I use my career as a shield against emotions that I cannot handle. She said that at thirty five I must be honest with myself, so I won't find myself at the age of sixty, miserable and unable to correct my errors. She told me that my biggest desire is to settle down and have a family, as boring and old fashion as it sounds..."

What a pretentious, nosey Vulcan, just like the rest of them.

"Having a family is not boring, and sixty is not too late, you can have whatever you want, Nyota, you can have them both, career and a family, my parents did. They were high-school sweethearts, got married at 18, had Sam at 24… and still they both managed to graduate from the academy, and serve as officers on the Kelvin."

"Your parents were the lucky ones." Nyota sniffled, her hand sent to the bottle again, but she only caressed the cold glass.

"Lucky? I don’t think so, not after Nero, no. My mother went though some dark shit, she thought she could never love again, and preferred to focus on work to a point I only saw her few days a year, but I digress.

"I had a call from her a few months ago, she is chief engineer of the Lao Tzu now, and just married the XO, a Lieutenant commander named Diego Barthez, and she's pregnant, at the age of 59, and it's another boy."

"Congratulations." Nyota smiled through her tears.

"You see? It is never too late."
"Is that your take from this?" Nyota cried and laughed now at the same time. "I'd say you have a fucked up relationship with your mother."

"I'm just happy for her." Jim shrugged "she deserves every shred of happiness she can lay her hands on."

"I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you, about still loving Spock." She wept again.

"Should be honest with yourself first." He smiled, because he should do the same. "And it's ok, it's fine. You know we're done, him and I, so maybe you should take this chance, go talk to him, sort things out, maybe even…"

"No!" she stopped him, then moaned again "I want him out of my head, I want them all out of my head! I'm kinda rethinking my whole life now, the smartest thing I could probably do is maybe to stay away from Vulcans altogether."

"You and me both." He had to chuckle.

She left her position by the desk and came to seat next to him on her bed.

They set there in quiet for a few moments, and she came to lean her head on his shoulder, sniffling and shivering, he hesitated but placed his hand on her waist, if only to stabilize her while she was shaking.

She started crying again. "Why did I... why did I put up with it? Why did I let her? What right did she have to pass such judgment? To make such rigid claims? About my career choices, my personal world view, my relationship with Spock... my hopes and dreams? Why am I crying like a baby over some stranger's opinion?" she hit her fist against the wall, luckily it was gently enough, without hurting herself.

Jim could not help but hug her again.

"Hey, hey… don’t do her job for her… you know. I've dealt with my share of assholes throughout my life, and if there's one thing I've learned is that the only grip they have on you is the grip you give them."

"Yes, yes, you're right; you're such a darling, Jim, such a sweetheart."

"Now that's just the alcohol speaking." He chuckled again and was happy to see her joining in.

And there it was, a tilt of the head, a movement forward, a kiss.

She tasted like cherry and cinnamon, she was soft and warm, and she kissed him fiercely, putting her hand on his nape, pulling at his hair.

He kissed back, opening his mouth for her tongue to swirl around his own. She was so beautiful, and he was so sex starved, he got so hard so fast it hurt; he wiggled into another position hoping that she would not notice his erection.

She kissed him with despair, with haste, as if to mend her broken heart, to heal her wounded ego, but she was drunk and devastated from a bad meld, shaken to her core. It wasn't right, she was not herself, and she'd probably regret this tomorrow.

He tried to pull away as gently as possible; but she moaned like a wounded animal and dug her nails into his skin. He murmured something, but she swallowed his words with her hungry lips.
He wondered how to finish this as gently as possible, but then Nyota was the one to end the kiss just as suddenly as she had started it, and with a whimper, she tucked her head under his chin. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." She sobbed again.

"Shh…hush, it's alright." He breathed and patted her soft hair. "As if I was going to add you to my list of hookups."

"Am I not worthy?" she giggled now into his chest.

"On the contrary, you deserve much better."

"Better than the Captain? Better than the man Spock had chosen for his Pon Farr?"

"Captain? For six more months, if I'm lucky." He chuckled and let go of her then put some distance between them. "And Pon Farr? Not such an achievement, I just happen to be a very fuckable guy."

She laughed again, then took a deep breath, and moved away a bit, straightened up her dress and then tried to fix her unkempt hair. After a while she dared looking at him again and smiled. "Thank you, Jim; I really don't know what came over me."

"It's not you, it's me. I'm easy."

"But Jim…" she asked suddenly in a whisper, like a frightened little child."What if I could never love another again? The way I love Spock?"

He looks into her dark, wet eyes, and tried to figure out what to say.

"Remember back at Yorktown?" He recalled after a short moment of silence "You said that after so much time in one spaceship it was so easy to forget the rest of the universe? But the universe is there, and it needs you, Nyota, Out there, there are far better things heading your way.

"There are men, and women…beings, some Vulcans too, even, that would die for a chance to get to know you. Better than me, better than Spock, believe it or not, just better for you. All I know is that the universe is out there, so go get it!"

"Jim." She breathed "I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. I mean, seriously, nothing; let's forget this ever happened."

She nodded in agreement.

"You'll get over Spock eventually, humans get over broken hearts."

"We broke up just before Altamid, you know? I broke up with him." She sniffled and put her bare feet on the bed to hug her legs with her arms. "I just could not take it anymore, his… his Vulcan manner, his cold logic, his emotional constipation, the needs of the many bullshit." She huffed "Elder Vellua is wrong! I do not have a fetish for Vulcans… some of their body parts maybe… but not Vulcans as a species."

"Nyota, you naughty girl." Jim could not help but chuckle, and he got an elbow to his ribs in return.

"You've seen it too, damn work of art." She blushed and giggled, nudging him with her finger, all in good spirit but then her lovely face crumbled up again and she breathed out. "I was so envious of you, at Yorktown, you know? For being able to help him in his time of need, when I could not.

Was kind of hoping to bond with him, to be the one who saved his life, be forever his, but you took
my place, and I hated you for it, some parts of me still do. I am sorry, I know I should not, but my weaker parts still do."

"Ok then, I'll try to focus on your stronger parts."

"Thank you Jim, you're so kind."

"Just so you know, Pon Farr was extremely rough, and I know my way around rough." Jim continued, his voice falling into a whisper. "So, for what it's worth, I'm glad it wasn't you, Nyota, if only for avoiding the uglier parts of it. Have you ever considered the possibility that after sharing a Pon Farr, you might actually grow to hate him?"

"What?" Nyota stirred in her seat with discomfort, disbelief shone in her dark, humid eyes. "No, never! Never crossed my mind." but she did give it some thought now, and it was troubling her, and she fell into a long, gloomy silence.

Jim sighed then shrugged, maybe this was not such a great idea, filling her heart with theoretical doubts. "Well, whatever, the past is in the past, I just don't want you to glorify something just because you missed it."

"I only wanted to be the one."

"Well, I am not the one either." Jim eyed her with a smile. "Helps, any?"

"No."

"Sorry."

"No need, Jim, darling, this is my problem, my fuckup, my issue. I just need to find a way to get him out of my head, out of my heart. As much as I hate it, we were never a good fit, something was always squawking. I just hope it will happen soon. I cannot wait to get free."

"Such an illogical heart, I have; a masochistic, stupid heart. I hope that there is someone out there that will truly love me, like I deserved to be loved, and I have to bring myself to a point where I'm able to love them back."

"There is, and you will. Just have faith, and patience and… would you show some compassion to yourself, Nyota? Stop beating yourself up all of the time, you are only human."

"I know, Jim, I know." She sniffled. "Thank you, thank you so very much."

"I should get going now." He stretched his stiff body, and yawned, and then he looked at her again with a gentle smile "I trust you not to do anything stupid, yeah?"

"No more than I've already done, sir." she blushed, and did not meet his gaze.

"No idea what you're talking about, I have no recollection." He got up; walked to the door, there he stopped and smiled at her as she gave the command to open it. "Good night, sleep tight."

Don’t let the bad bugs bite.

***0***
Jim woke up to the notion of being squashed, someone just sat on him. He rose up, pushed the weight off, and heard the sound of a thud followed by a chuckle.

He peeked from his nest of blankets and saw the Andorian, almost rolling on the floor, laughing. "It's you, sir? I thought someone just forgot their blankets outside."

"Funny." Jim groaned; his upper and mid section hurt like a sonuvabitch. "What time is it? Were you out all night?"

"Yes, mother." Sharel snarled "Want some coffee?"

"Black, no sugar, thank you."

Sharel disappeared momentarily into the kitchen, leaving Jim to crawl out of his blankets, stretch and check his morning breath.

The Andorian came back with a cup of steamy black coffee and placed it in the hands of his captain; he himself got a hot, purple, Andorian tea.

"Thanks." Jim started drinking, ignoring the pain that followed each of his movement. "So, where were you last night?"

Sharel sipped on his tea and smiled "Let's stick to a policy of 'don’t ask, don’t tell', Sir, for your protection, if nothing else."

"Fine." Jim frowned and drank his coffee, gazing at his ever so cheery security officer. "Why are you all sunshine and rainbows this morning?"

"Because I just got a word from Captain Setal, sir, they've arranged a call to Andoria prime, tonight at 29:00! I am going to speak with my wife and kids!"

"Wonderful news." Jim smiled now as well.

"I know it was you, sir. Thank you very much!"

Sharel smile slowly withered away and then he breathed out and withdrew a little; he lowered his gaze and seemed a bit awkward. Jim wondered what went through his head, and he did not have to wait too long before Sharel spoke again.

"Thank you so much." He repeated. "It means the world to me. In my line of work, every call could be your last, you'll never know." he explained "and with everything I've put you through, the tough position I pushed you into, I never expected any help at all."

"Hey, that's my job, Lieutenant, taking care of my crew…" Jim smiled in assurance and then frowned all of a sudden, as this new thought flashed through his mind. "Hey! You're not gonna misuse this call, are you? Use your own family as a cover to transmit encoded massages to your government? Are you, Sharel? Really?"

Sharel only smiled again, but before he could come up with an answer another door opened to the common room, of which Dayton and Carol came out, still looking sleepy and a bit embarrassed.

"Morning." Carol said, a bit blushed "What? I was helping Dayton with his speech. You two are up way too early this morning."

Jim smirked at her. "Love your hairstyle, what's the name? Bedhead?"

"I'm good." Jim shrugged and returned to his cup.

"Earl Grey, darling." Carol answered and Dayton went to the kitchen. "Will you join us for breakfast at the mess room? Oh, Vedik came here looking for you, Jim, after the meeting with the Elders, but you were gone."

"Stuck in an elevator, for almost two hours." Jim hurried to say before she'd share her ideas.

"Poor thing." She cooed.

"What did he want?"

"Play some more chess, maybe?" Carol shrugged "I think he really likes you." She added, whispering quite loudly.

"Get him in line." Sharel chuckled into his cup.

"I'll join you for breakfast; Carol, just give me half an hour to get ready." Jim decided.

"Sure. Thanks, sweetie." She turned to Dayton who fetched her tea. "Will you join us too, Sharel?"

The Andorian shrugged "No, I just dropped here for a quick shower and then I have some lizards to feed." Chills ran down his spine "If I still have any appetite left, I'll grab something later."

Another door opened and Nyota stepped out to the hall, all cleaned up, neat and pristine. "Morning, Captain." She greeted him calmly "Hello, everyone."

"Lieutenant commander." Jim nodded and got up, smiling at Dayton and Carol. "I'll be back in half an hour."

He entered his room, and as the door closed, he searched for his hypo-spray with a frenzy, finding it after ten agonizing minutes, under a pile of crumpled closes he tossed out of his closet yesterday, while deliberating what to wear for his meeting with Elder Sarek.

He injected himself three times and waited, and when nothing happened, he injected himself three times more, this time, finding a relief.

But then something wet trickled down from his nose, he wiped it with the back of his hand, blood. Great, now he needed an excuse if this happens in public, could always blame it on his allergies. He went into the toilets, cleaned himself up, brushed his teeth and shaved; now he was ready for breakfast.

***0***

Sulu was there as well, as he got out of his room again, Dayton and him were sharing a PADD, discussing their new strategy for their star race.

They went together for breakfast, all but Sharel, and after they picked up their trays and moved to
take a seat, they passed by the Vulcan team, which also had breakfast together.

Sobar sat next to Spock and across from Vedik. Spock has ignored their presence entirely and when Vedik raised his head for a greeting, Sobar said something to him in Vulcan and it didn’t sound very nice, so Vedik lowered his head again without a word. The rest of them too, didn’t not throw a glance at the humans’ direction, T’Sel included.

"Back to square one." Jim whispered to Carol and she nodded.

They ate their breakfast without much talk, just went through the day's schedule. Nyota said that she'd accompany the Vulcan elders heading for the gym, after breakfast, to oversee Kuvac in his attempted pool swim.

Dayton and Sulu planed for a few hours in the simulator, to train for their flight.

"We've come up with a new maneuver." Sulu explained "We'll polarize the shields so they would react to the magnetic field of the plasma streams as an opposite magnet, and so it would gain us some extra speed, beyond maximum thrust."

"It's a manual maneuver." Dayton added "We'll have to time it very carefully so we don’t burn the shields, or lose stability. We will also cut some safety protocols, and fly lower than the recommended radius, to gain more edge and catch more plasma bursts."

"Why are you telling him this, stupid?" Sulu pushed an elbow into Dayton's side.

Jim stopped chewing and frowned. "How risky is this, Sulu?"

"It lowers our survival chances to 89%." The helmsman answered and when Jim deliberated his answer he added "It is an acceptable risk!"

"Lower from what?"

"From 99.5%. Hey, I don’t tell you how to captain, so don't tell me how to fly." Sulu warned.

"Are you good with this?" Jim asked Carol.

"I have faith in them, sir." She breathed.

Jim frowned again and turned back to his food, he didn’t like this at all.

"You have until 19:00." Nyota reminded the helmsmen "Then you must report to the gym for Svern's Challenge."

"The gym?" Jim asked.

"It is a physical challenge." Uhura explained with some hesitation. "Svern didn’t clarify his planes in the mail he had sent us; he claimed that he wished to reserve the element of surprise."

"I bet Sobar would act very much surprised." Jim grimaced, and peeked at the Vulcan team.

"A physical challenge is inherently unfair." Carol protested. "Vulcans are twice as fast and strong than humans."

"Three times." Jim corrected her "On average."

"Great, so some are even above that?" Nyota frowned "I bet Sobar and company are all above
average."

"Vulcan's finest." Jim agreed.

"There's nothing to do about it." Sulu said "Backing away is no option."

"It isn't" Jim agreed again, he didn’t like this at all.

"Bloody hell." Carol summed it up with a huff.
Svern's Challenge

Chapter Notes

I hope this post finds you in good health and spirit, enjoy :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Violence.

They were asked to report to gymnasium hall 4 on deck 7 at 19:00, and wear their Starfleet issued track suites; black with the Starfleet logo on their back, and the name Enterprise printed with white colored capital letters underneath it.

At the entrance, a Vokau security guard awaited them in his full body silvery suit; he surveyed them briefly then uttered "This way." And they could only follow.

The guard led them into the large training venue, a gymnasium where a small company had already awaited them. The gymnasium was large, but not so much, reminded Jim of his primary school's basketball hall, only without an audience seating platform, for a crowd to use. There were no windows to the hall, suggesting that this was an inner room and Jim hated inner rooms; he always preferred a view of the great black.

The security guard left them to join the strict lineup of nine more guards; luckily, none of them was Symer.

The Vulcan 'Leave' team has already awaited them in the hall, all looking as gorgeous as usual in their green full body suits, so hot, beautiful and stoic, but lest you forget also strong and deadly warriors. They also formed a line, vertical to the one marked by the Vokau guards.

Jim followed the que and took his place at the other end of the Vokau's security unit lineup, to form the next vertical line, across from the Vulcan team, facing them; the rest of his team fell in, with Carol closest to him.

Jim noted that they were not late for a change, as all seemed to be waiting for something in silence; probably the Elders that were yet to show up. In the meantime, Jim took the liberty to scan their surroundings.

There was a very prominent display of melee weapons, placed on red colored stone shelves next to the wall behind him, presenting all sorts of hand to hand weapons- swords, knifes, spears, staffs and many others too strange for him to recognize. Jim hated cold weapons, hated hot weapons too, alright; well, it's safe to say that he hated all kinds of weapons.

Carol leaned towards him. "Are you sure this is safe?" she asked in a whisper.

"I'm sure." He whispered back to her and smiled, but his eyes soon searched for Sobar's.

If there was ever going to be a deadly battle, it was going to be between them, the team leaders, a battle that would probably end his life, because optimism could only get you so far.
Sobar caught his gaze and held it for a while, as if understanding what had crossed through Jim's mind, and then he respectfully nodded and disengaged. Yeah, the same thought had gone through that Vulcan's pretty head.

Jim's eyes turned to find Spock's, and he could recognize the subtle distress behind his aloof features; seems like Spock was on the same page with Sobar and himself. He smiled at the human hybrid, trying to convey that he was well aware and in peace with this possible outcome, but Spock only clenched his jaw before breaking eye contact.

The doors to the hall opened again, causing all attendees to straighten up in attention, and so did Jim and his crew.

A new party entered the hall, the Vokau Captain, the head healer of the ship, and some of her junior aids, and so entered the Elders leaders- T'Pau, Soval, and Svern. They all moved to the center of the hall, to close the square formation, although their line was not as straight.

"Greetings, warriors, and welcome to my part of challenge." Svern had spoken first, after passing his stern glance on the attendees. After his personal greeting, the Elder lifted his gaze up to the wall in front of him. "Computer, activate main screen." He commanded.

The large screen on the wall before the Elders responded to his command by lighting up and then it started transmitting a live-stream from another part of the Vokau.

Jim turned his face to his right to look at the view.

On screen was the audience missing from the hall, they were seated in a different part of the ship, maybe even at the main gathering hall, and were ready to oversee this challenge from this remote location.

Jim had recognized the rest of the Elders in the audience by their white robes, and specifically searched for Elder Sarek for a moment, but could not locate him in the crowd. There was also a distinct group of Vulcans in crimson robes, who set at the second line, one row above the elders.

"Greetings, warriors of the Plak If Fee, high council of Elders and honored witnesses," Svern resumed his speech, this time for all to hear. "Welcome to my part of this ritual, my personal challenge.

"As you all know, I have served the Vulcan people as a warrior for many years, and I take some pride in it. As much as we recoil from violence and do our best to avoid bloodshed, we all know that sometimes, there is no other way but to rely on our fighting skills and our physical strength.

"This is why all Vulcans are trained as warriors as soon as they learn to walk; this is why we maintain a combat fleet, develop weapons and hone other military capabilities. There is no denying it; warfare is a natural part of our way of life and our culture, same as knowledge seeking and the implementation of logic.

"There is no shame in acknowledging this. Admitting that combat is a predominant part of our lives is both logical and honest, as much today as in pre-Surak age. Only the strong can offer peace, only the mighty can afforded to be generous. Logic can only flourish on the stable platform of power.

"And so, in honor of our aggressive nature, I have constructed a challenge that will test our ritual warriors in a situation as similar as possible to a real battleground. The winning team will earn my 2 points."
"Is he insane?" Carol whispered to Jim again "Does he actually want to bash us against the Vulcans? We've got no chance winning this one."

"We are leading at 9:10 now." He whispered back. "These are just two points."

Sharel has managed to feed the lizards while Kuvac failed at his attempted swim, turning the table and for the first time, and the 'Remain' team was in the lead.

"Two points?" She pouted "Two painful, humiliating points."

"The rules of this challenge are simple." Elder Svern explained "I will select a warrior from the 'Leave' team, and they will choose a weapon and name their opponent. Then, there would be a fight between the two and the winner will grant their team one point and the privilege of the next selection.

"Winning each battle would be achieved by one of two ways- disarming and disabling your opponent or have them leave the arena if they wish no further engagement. There is no time limit for each battle, although giving the biology of the participants I suspect an average span of twenty minutes will suffice."

Oh, now I see, Jim noted to himself.

How very clever.

Elder Svern was creating the possibility for them to rehearse, him and Sobar. It was probably a good idea. They would both benefit from a little rumble, get to know the way the other moves and fights; could help them form combat strategies, if ever comes the time for their duel.

Elder Svern continued "Due to the risk of a tie, although highly unlikely, I have requested to assemble a team of referees, and those are the ones wearing the red robes in the audience. They are of the 'Remain' faction; all with military background, and they will assess the teams according to skill, creativity and valor. At the end, they may give 1 point for each aspect, to a total of 3 points.

"The team who gains the most points will, of course, win the challenge.

"Captain Setal, if you may?"

"Thank you, Elder Svern." The Captain of the Vokau took a step forward, looking up at the screen. "I believe the terms of this challenge are well defined. I wish to address the gap between human and Vulcan abilities and the measures that would be taken to level the playing field.

"As you know, Humans and an Andorian were chosen to represent the 'Remain' team, and they are significantly weaker than Vulcans. So, we have implemented the following means in order to bridge that gap and allow a safe and a fair situation.

"First, as you may have already noticed- we have lowered the gravity force in the hall to 0.9 G in Earth's units.

"Second- we have lowered the temperature to 20 degrees Celsius and upped the humidity to 30%.

"Third- we chose only light weapons, easy to maneuver, and also made sure their blades were not sharpened and some are also padded.

"And last- we will administrate a drug to each Vulcan warriors, prior to each battle that will weaken and disorient them for a period of half an hour. It should lower their performance to
simulate a human ability.

"With those measures we will be cretin that whoever wins, wins because of their skills and fighting spirit.

"Head healer, please continue."

Jim breathed out; he didn’t like what he was hearing, not at all. Winning a fight because someone else was deliberately compromised did not feel like winning at all. He wondered if they were planning on doing this to Sobar, if there comes a time for the final duel, and he also wondered if he’d agree to such intervention. He hoped the time will never come.

The head healer stepped forward as the Captain backed down. "We will be monitoring the warriors at all time with our scanners, and we will stop any battle if we come to the conclusion that the risk to someone's health is too high. Our ruling will not be challenged.

"At the end of each battle, we will examine the participants and evacuate them to the healing center if necessary.

"I expect full cooperation, and the security team stationed here will obey my commands. Remember the blood shedding ritual, we wish not to spill any unnecessary blood."

The head healer ended her words with a bow and returned to her place.

Now, the Head healer's speech had Jim a bit worried, he didn’t want anyone to scan his body and find out in what condition he was in, this could lead to an awkward situation where they will not allow him the fight.

But in that case, he will insist, demanding that he since he had the Elders' permission to use that drug, he also had the right to face the consequences of that choice the way he saw fit.

"Warriors, stand ready." Svern took the floor again "Fight with bravery and resolve, show us your warrior spirit. Ensign T'Sel, I choose you for the first battle."

Upon hearing her name T'Sel stepped forwards, and turned to the Head healer to be injected with the weakening drug, then she stepped into the arena, which was a rectangular zone, marked with blue colored border line, and as she stepped in, the lines began to glow bright blue.

Sobar took the rest of his team away from the illuminated area and to one side of the guard's marked line, and so Jim followed by taking his team to the other side. The Captain, Healers and Elders also moved away, dissolving the square formation, and leaving the arena empty for the battles.

Then, T'Sel walked towards the humans and surveyed them, one by one, like a cat choosing which mouse to hunt down.

She was beautiful as ever, her long black hair was braided tightly to her head, not to give away any opening to a rival, her movements were flowing and full of grace, and as she watched the humans her gaze fell on Jim, her dark slant eyes flared with such intensity it made him gulp, he knew that look far too well, it was a gaze of lust, hate or possibly a mixture of both.

Something was different about her, she lost that sweet aura she had before, maybe Sobar had a hard, long talk with her, maybe it was the fact that the 'Remain' team was leading for the first time, and maybe it was just fatigue, because Jim was sure this ritual had affected the Vulcan team as well, even if not to the same extent as the humans.
"Lieutenant Marcus." T'Sel stated "Lirpa."

Jim could hear Carol hitching her breath; she reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"It's ok, Carol." He whispered to her "They won’t let you get hurt."

Carol breathed again, her pretty face seemed more calm and resolved, and then she let go of his hand, and stepped into the arena.

Brave girl, Jim thought, and smiled at her, as two security guards stepped in to hand each woman a Lirpa.

"On your mark." Elder Svern commanded.

T'Sel took her place on a glowing red circle on the floor and assumed position, so Carol did the same, although she had no idea how to hold a Lirpa, and had changed her grip on it every few seconds.

"At my signal. Attack!" Svern commanded again.

T'Sel was ruthless, coming at Carol with swift efficient assaults, one after the other. Carol could hardly counter the attacks, not even thinking of launching one of her own. She barely held her ground as T'Sel's Lirpa stroke again and again.

Jim glanced at Dayton, who seemed helpless and pale with worry, while his girlfriend fought so hard just to stay on her feet. He wished he could say something to him, but Dayton was too far, and was not paying attention to him anyway.

T'Sel ended one streak of attacks, and came about to start another, if the drug had ever affected her, Jim could not help but wonder, how she'd perform without its hindering effect.

Carol tried to counter the next attack, and finally dared one of her own, but she was no match for the Vulcan, T'Sel deflected with ease, found an opening and mercilessly beat the human, time and again, disarming Carol and pushing her to the floor, moaning with pain.

"A win, for team 'Leave'." Elder Svern announced.

The arena lights switched off, T'Sel threw her weapon to the floor to let it be picked up by a guard, while she walked away without blinking. A healer rushed towards Carol, knelt at her side, and scanned her.

"Three fractured ribs, internal hemorrhage at the chest area." the healer reported.

"Evacuate Dr. Marcus to the healing center." The head Healer commanded.

Two security guards helped Carol up, and walked away with her, exiting the gymnasium at her slow pace.

Seems like Yorktown was about to go after them, but then he remembered that he couldn't and bit his lips with frustration. Sulu reached out to him, as he was right there besides him, and he placed his hand on the younger man's arm. Dayton nodded to something Sulu had said, and returned to the line with a huff.

Jim wished he could escort Carol to sickbay as well, but he couldn’t, not until Sobar sends him there as well.
"Lieutenant T'Heli is next." T'Sel announced.

T'Heli walked into the area now, she was as tall as Jim, had sleek, straight black hair that she had kept very short and she also searched for her prey among the 'Remain' team.

She met Jim's gaze with subtle amusement; they both knew Sobar had dibs on him and won't let anyone else fight him so she just bowed her head and turned towards Sharel.

"I hope you don't mind." She almost purred at the Andorian.

"I'd be honored to." Sharel answered.

"Long spears." She requested, and the guards stepped in to arm both Vulcan and Andorian. A healer ran into the arena as well, carrying a hypo-spray and reached for T'Heli to jab it in her neck, she allowed it to be done, then pushed the healer away like the nuisance that she was.

The blue border lines of the fighting ground had glowed again and so did the red marks of the starting positions.

"On your mark, at my signal. Attack!" Svern commanded.

This battle was more balanced than the last. Both T'Heli and Sharel showed great combat expertise. They looked evenly matched, by strength, skill, and speed.

Their battle was so beautiful, Jim almost forget what was at stake, and was hypnotized by their dance-like maneuvers.

But time slipped away, and T'Heli seemed to overcome the drug, a bit by bit, while Sharel seemed more and more exhausted.

Jim remembered that Andorians' high metabolism left them vulnerable to fatigue, and T'Heli cleverly handled to battle leading towards that state, preserving her strength and wasting his.

A few more moments and Sharel, breathing heavily and acing, made a fatal mistake, attacking in a sloppy manner that gave T'Heli the opening she needed. The Vulcan wasted no time in disarming him, and then she pushed her blade into his throat. On his knees, Sharel chuckled and lift up his hands in surrender.

"Team 'Leave' wins again." Svern announced.

"Kuvac, your turn." T'Heli said while clearing up the arena.

At the mean while, the Healers cleared Sharel to join his team again.

He found his place near Jim.

"Well done." Jim commented. "I'm impressed."

"You're just being polite now, sir." The Andorian smirked at him, deep blue and purple bruises adorned his smiling face.

Kuvac entered the arena, after the healer injected him with the hypo spray. Like the rest of them, Jim found the Vulcan beautiful, in his manly way. He had a short curly hairdo, dark, almost black, eyes with long eyelashes to give them a dramatic frame, his cheekbones were to die for, and his body was masculine, with no ounce of fat clinging to it. He was a bit more bulky than the rest, but not enough to diminish his graceful nature. He too, found Jim's eyes and then, he smiled.
Now, a smiling Vulcan was the most frightening thing Jim had ever seen, and Kuvac probably knew it. His eyes mocked the human's unease and then he lifted his gaze and announced. "Lt. Commander Sulu, Katana."

Dayton looked at Sulu, a bit terrified, but the senior pilot showed no hesitation as he walked into the arena and awaited the guards to fetch them the swords.

Sulu was the best Katana wielder upon the Enterprise, and most likely he was better skilled with it than Kuvac, seems like Kuvac chose this weapon just to make a point. Was he trying to get back at the humans after his humiliating experience at the pool?

The fight began, and despite all of the adjustment done on behalf of the humans, Sulu was no match to the Vulcan's strength and agility. He could not get the upper hand, could not even find a way out of a defensive position.

"This is rigged, sir. Elder Svern just did a number on us." Sharel muttered towards Jim, while both watching the fight. "We're no match for them."

"I don’t know about rigging, Lieutenant, but it was logical for Elder Svern to choose this kind of challenge, considering his military background."

"Tell you, this drug; if it works like they say it works, I don’t want to ever fight a clean Vulcan."

"Those are two lost points." Jim admitted with a shrug, calculating in his mind. There were still 6 points to grab, even if this moves the score to 11:10 for the 'Leave' team.

They still had the second race, Dayton speech and T'Pau closing debate. If all the decided Elders remain in their declared positions stated at the midpoint gathering, and the undecided are split half and half, they would just need to win two of last challenges and they are probably in the clear.

This would lead them to a scenario of a win or at least a tie, and if they grab all 6 points, the win scenario is even more probable. If he was Spock, he could have provided the actual probability of each scenario in the form of percentage, but he wasn't, so he couldn’t.

Sulu gave them the best fight until now, and held his own under ever growing pressure. But again, the drug was starting to wear off, and each assault Kuvac launched had ended with more punishment. Sulu was already breathing heavily, sweating, and bleeding; while Kuvac still looked like he was ready to pose for the cover of GQ.

Come on, Sulu, end this already, damn, stubborn man! Why don't you give up? Give up before you get yourself seriously injured, which we cannot afford!

He won't though, Jim knew the guy, and he'd drop dead before raising up his hands.

It was time to do something.

"Sulu, enough!" Jim shouted, after the man earned another cut on his bicep.

"Stay out of this, Jim!" Sulu growled in return.

"Enough!" he insisted again. He cared not for the looks he got from the Vulcans, or the murmur from the crowd, even the judges that whispering to each other did not bother him.

"Stay out of it!" Sulu cried back, and moaned as Kuvac landed a brutal blow to his side, could have been worse if he didn’t evade it at the last second, but he was getting tired and weak, bleeding all
over the sleek floor.

"Eyes on the ball, Hikaru! Space race tomorrow!" Jim reminded him, hoping that some logic will penetrate the man's thick skull.

It worked.

Sulu defended himself one last time, falling on the floor, he then let go of his sword and got on his knees, hands above his head.

Kuvac watched him through half shut eyes, and then roared at his victory.

Boy, did Vulcans go feral while fighting.

"Vedik, you're up." Kuvac chuckled, as little robotic unites entered the arena to clean it from blood and sweat.

The healers scanned Sulu and decided on evacuating him to the healing center as well.

Great, just great, Jim raged on the inside, hoping that the race challenge won't be compromised over this, he tried to keep his cool, as Sulu was escorted out of the hall, but he knew he was not as good at this as Vulcans.

Vedik entered the arena with reluctance; he eyes Jim with a sad, apologetic look, and then moved his gaze back and forth between Uhura and Parker.

"If Vedik chooses Dayton that means Spock gets Nyota." Jim mumbled to Sharel.

"And so?" Sharel perked his Antennas.

Oh, yeah, not everybody onboard the Enterprise was familiar with the Alpha bridge crew romantic history.

"Never mind." Jim mumbled.

"Ensign Parker, melee staff." Vedik stated without covet.

So Nyota against Spock it is.

What would Spock do? Will he fight or leave the arena? Would probably step down. They were winning by a sweep, and could afford to be generous, even Sobar would understand.

Although Vedik was a scholar and no warrior, still he presented impressive combat skills, suited for a Vulcan practiced in warfare since the age of two.

Dayton was no warrior either; he was a pilot-navigator and as such was only required to take basic combat training, handling a phaser had nothing to do with hand to hand battles and it showed.

Vedik won, although not easily, but his skills and Vulcan biology were enough to tip the scale. Dayton was also poorly motivated, he worried for Carol, distracted, naturally, and he also knew that none of his efforts would change this challenge's results, not after the Vulcans have already scored three victories in a raw.

So as soon as he could yield without losing too much face he did, and left the scene without a scratch on his skin.
"A win for the 'Leave' team." Svern announced.

"Sorry." Dayton uttered as he came to stand near Sharel and Jim.

"You did the logical thing." Jim tried consoling him. "Must account to something."

"Do you think that they'd let me go to the healing center now?" Dayton asked.

"Don’t bother asking." Jim shook his head and Dayton huffed.

"Commander Sobar is next." Vedik announced without mirth.

Here we go; Jim straightened up and tried to stay calm.

The leader of the 'Leave' team entered the arena, as them all, he was a handsome male specimen, with his jet black hair, cut a bit shorter than Spock's, his bright blue eyes, his perfect pale skin and slander, powerful body.

He walked towards Jim, taking his time, like a predator sure of his kill. "Captain Kirk?" he spoke softly.

"Commander Sobar?" Jim answered; body up straight and at ease.

"I hope you won’t mind." Sobar said without blinking.

"Not at all." Jim answered with a small smile.

A healer came towards Sobar with a hypo spray, aiming for his neck, but the Vokau officer pushed him away suddenly, a bit too roughly, sending him sliding some feet away, before stabilizing on his feet again. "No. This would not be necessary." Sobar stated.

"What is the meaning of this?" Elder Svern stepped into their proximity, looking very much displeased.

"Administering this drug would not be necessary." Sobar repeated "For I name my opponent-Spock, son of Sarek."

Spock tilted his head to the mention of his name, which meant this had come as a surprise to him as much as for everyone else.

"The winner will grant their team one point and the privilege of the next selection." Sobar quoted Elder Svern's words said just a while ago. "Well, I select Spock, son of Sarek as my rival."

"Not so well defined after all." Captain Setal uttered as he, and the rest of the elders came closer and joined into the talk.

"Commander Sobar!" Elder Svern raised his voice calmly "You deviate from the spirit of this challenge."

Sobar did not flinch at this rebuke "Vulcans rely on instructions, not spirits."

"You may be in the right, but that means that whoever wins, the points will be granted to your team." Said Elder T'Pau.
To this Sobar slightly tilted his head, which was practically giving the finger, in human terms, Jim was astounded at this open display of contempt.

"This argument is symmetrical." Sobar argued "The 'Remain' team could have used this flaw too, had they recognized it, they can still do as such." He gestured at Jim and Nyota.

"Where is the logic, going after your own teammate?" Elder Soval inquired.

"My logic will demonstrate itself if you permit this battle." Sobar answered, raising his head to the screen, as if talking directly to the council of Elders.

Damn, Jim understood, or at least he thought he did.

Sobar was a ferocious mastermind, didn’t even hesitate putting Elder Svern between a rock and a hard place; would never want to encounter him as an enemy, all the more reason to hope Vulcan would stay in the Federation.

"Very well, then." Elder Svern admitted his defeat. "Continue."

"I choose Spock, son of Sarek, as my rival, bare hands." Sobar announced, and ungloved his hands, throwing the garments on the floor.

Spock waited a while longer, to see if anyone else objects, he gazed up the screen as well, showing somewhat signs of distress, as if Sobar has already won. When no one else came forth, he breathed deeply and took off his gloves, and then he stepped into the arena to take his mark.

"On your mark, at my signal. Attack!" Svern commanded.

Sobar and Spock started circling each other, arms up and held tight, close to the chest. They did not speak, but only moved in total silence, like two graceful felines studding their rival.

Someone had to be the first, and as Jim predicted, it was Sobar, Spock was always the counter puncher.

Spock gracefully evaded the punch Sobar delivered, but did not return one of his own; maybe his strategy was to frustrate Sobar into a miscalculation.

Sobar did not punch again, but tried a high kick instead which Spock managed to elude as well, like a well rehearsed dancer. He also deflected the next three punches, eliciting a roar of frustration from Sobar, who took a step back to reevaluate his maneuvers.

And then the fight really began.

Sobar charged now with full force, hammering one blow after the other, with a punishing rate, using his legs for kicks, as his body twisted and turned around his opponent, to maintain balance, yet Spock blocked most of the blows and started landing some of his own.

"One Vulcan G!" Captain Setal commanded "Containment field, maximum height!"

The bright blue light shot up from the ground to the hall's high ceiling, just in time for both warriors to slam into it with full force, causing it to flare up in blue and white to absorb the energy.

At that point, Sharel turned to Jim to say "I take it back, no rigging, the drug worked."

Jim could only nod, mesmerized by the display of power, both Vulcans were brutal and ruthless, as they exchanged blows.
They kicked and punched, pushed and tossed each other around, bumping into the force-field every once in a while with great impact. The speed and the agility Spock and Sobar both demonstrated seemed to impress the rest of the 'Leave' team as well, they too, found this unfolding battle mesmerizing, as if they only now realizing the full extent of their peers' abilities and skills.

Yeah, this was nothing like Jim had ever seen from Spock when they spared at the Enterprise's gym. He already had his doubts before, about how seriously Spock had ever fought with him, and now was realizing this was only a form of foreplay. Both insulting and embarrassing to realize that, but oh, what a turn on.

"Captain…" Nyota came closer to him, and her voice showed distress.

"Don’t worry, I'm not fighting you." Jim assured her "You win."

"Captain, they are bleeding." She said and her voice trembled.

They were bleeding, alright, green blood on the floor, green blood oozing from cuts on both handsome faces and bodies, but both Sobar and Spock paid no attention to it, as they went on. It did not slow them down one bit, and the fight raged on, such a powerful display, horrible and beautiful at the same time.

"Are they not going to intervene?" Nyota almost whined now, staring at the medical team.

Jim followed her glance to look at the Head healer and her aids; they were monitoring the fight, and were consulting each other with low voices, but they didn't do more than that

"They are on it." Jim ensured his comm officer "They will not let it get out of hand."

"Are you sure?" she asked, as Spock tossed Sobar, so high, he nearly hit the ceiling, and then fell on the floor to make a dent in it.

The leader of the 'Leave' team took some time to recollect himself from the ground, and he did so, chuckling, for some reason, as Spock awaited him in the center of the arena.

"Could we just stop for a moment?" Sobar asked Spock.

Spock only wiped the blood off his face.

Jim hoped this was a sign that fight was about to end, but Svern was yet to declare it. Well, it was only logical, you cannot disarm someone when the weapon of choice is bare hands, and both were still reasonably stable on their feet, so all had to wait.

"Dearly gathered, Elders of the high council, and honored witnesses…" Sobar lifted his face to the screen, and spoke through his clenched teeth; with a fleeting hint of pain in his voice. He was panting, and struggling, but his voice was clear "I must protest out loud."

"State your grievance." Svern answered, a bit weary himself.

"How could I continue this battle when it is plainly a falsehood?" Sobar continued, slowly raising his arm and pointing at Spock "Son of Sarek!" he rebuked the Vulcan in the center of the arena. "You are withholding! Show everyone here what you truly are capable of!"

Withholding? Jim wondered, surprised, what was Sobar blabbering about? Must have been hit in the head far too many times.
Most of the crowd seemed just as baffled. Kuvac, T'Sel and Vedik looked at T'Heli, who remained unmoving, and the Elders shared a glance with the head Healer, who gave them a slow nod and picked up her scanner.

"Spock, are those accusations true?" Elder T'Pau asked.

"Heartbeat, normal, oxygen lever, optimal, blood pressure below average." The head healer stated out loud, almost dumbfounded, as she reinforced Sobar's claim.

Spock fell on his knees, facing the screen with an intense gaze, searching maybe for his father's eyes. Sarek, however, made no effort to distinguish himself from the rest of the Elders.

"Please lower the shield, I wish to disengage." Spock said in a calm, stable voice, not like the panting wreck that Sobar was.

"I hold you to your blood oath!" Sobar screamed at him.

Spock did not flinch, and did not move from his kneeling position. "I am within my rights; the fight is won by the 'Leave' team either way." He claimed.

"I dare you to disobey me once again!" Sobar hissed like a furious feline.

"Declining a challenge twice will have consequence." Elder T'Pau reminded him.

"Lower the shield." Spock asked again. "I did not decline the challenge, I have fought as requested, and now I wish to disengage."

Well, what do you know, the second time in a row a member of the 'Leave' team had shown blunt disobedient towards the Elders, must be some sort of a record.

Sobar's anger spiked to a point he displayed his rage for all to see, he gathered the rest of his strength and marched straight towards Spock, as fast as his wounded body allowed him. There he leaned towards the hybrid, dripping blood on him, and whispered something into his ear.

Spock seemed horrified by those words, pale as a ghost; he got up on his feet and walked back to his mark, assuming fighting position again.

Smirking, Sobar staggered back to his place. "Reinstate." He commanded, and they both charged at each other again.

From that point forward the battle was swift and one sided.

Spock moved about like nothing Jim had ever seen, not even among the Vulcans, Elder Sarek might have been right about calling him a monster.

There was nothing Sobar could do, there was no attempt he could carry out, no maneuver to execute, every move blocked, every assault punished in spades, soon Sobar fell to the floor unmoving, and Spock was still punching and kicking him, resolved to beat him into a pulp.

"Stop the fight! Stop the fight!" The head healer cried, horrified, as she looked into her scanners.

Spock paid no attention to her pleads, Sobar was sprawled helpless before him, and he was still delivering blow after blow with a staggering rate, to the horrific sound of crushing bones.

"Safety shield off!" Captain Setal commanded "Security guards! Healers!"
Spock growled at anyone trying to approach, he pushed two guards into a wall, and one healer was sent crushing into two other guards rushing in, sending them all down in a pile. All the while he continued hammering Sobar down.

"Spock!" Jim screamed "cut it out!"

Spock looked up to search for his voice, and Elder Svern, who already bared his hands, took that opening to deliver a nerve pinch. Spock resisted the pinch, and seemed like he would overcome it and make a rag doll out of Elder Svern as well.

"Come on, Spock, snap out of it!" Jim cried again, earning Elder Svern a few more seconds, enough for Spock to finally lose consciousness.

The head healers and her aids rushed into the scene, she scanned Sobar, shouting orders as she went, and another healer came to scan Spock, and by the looks of it, was not seem alarmed by his state. On the contrary, the human hybrid seemed to recover with an exceeding rate; he already opened his eyes and tried to sit up.

Sobar, however, got a few hypo-spray shots and a gurney was brought into the hall to take him out. He was not dead, Jim notice and could not decide if that fact was disappointing or not, and as the leader of the 'Leave' team regained consciousness, he pushed away the hand of the head healer and with just the sheer power of will, he struggled to rise to his elbows on the gurney.

He looked up to the screen, and under the horrible green mask of blood he glared at the Elders "Is this what you want, by staying in the Federation? Is this the chaos you wish to invite into our midst?" he shouted with the remnant of his powers, and then he fell back into the gurney, and passed out.

The head healer escorted Sobar out of the hall, and three guards escorted Spock as well, to destination unknown, well, at least Spock seemed civilized again, and was cooperating with his keepers.

When the mayhem was over, and the crowd ceased its mumbling, Elder Svern, gray as a grave; faced Jim and Nyota to ask "Shell we finish this?"

"Oh, yeah." Jim nodded with vigor "Miss Uhura wins."

Elder Svern nodded again, could hardly hide his relief, as much as everyone else, he wanted to see this challenge's end.

***0***

Well, they won a point for creativity.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a dramatic ending, huh? Well, I hope it wasn't over the top. Reviews are most welcomed, take care!
Kirk, Parker, Sharel and Uhura went back into their quarters, oh so quietly and without speaking a word to each other, still under the gloomy spell of the challenge they just lost, and how gruesome it turned out to be.

They were worried, because they were not allowed to visit the wounded in the healing center; they were turned down by the head healer and told that they could try again first thing in the morning, after the patients have enjoyed a night's rest.

They were also concerned about Spock, even if none of them brought that up, Jim knew that they wondered what possibly could have made their calm, reasonable science officer go crazy, and what happened to him after he was taken away.

It was half past 24:00 when they returned to their dormitory, none of them were interested in talking or had any sort of appetite, they said goodnight and each disappeared into their room.

Back in his room, Kirk took some time to refresh and check the progress made in his PADDs.

Seems like the telepathic signature program was still running, processing the data from the recording device, and there was nothing he could do to speed it up. But he also got some good news, from his other PADD, connected to the ship's system. One of his hacking codes managed to break into the ENG department! At last! What a last minute's save, such a close call.

He set down at the desk, to poke at the engineering mainframe for an hour or so, only to get a bit disappointed. His hacking skills took him only to the unclassified section of that mainframe, and the detector he was after was not awaiting him there.

Brightside was that now he knew everything there was to know about his bolt gone missing, and he could still use this limited access later, to reinforce the profile of his made-up engineer and make him seem more reliable, like he was not born yesterday. Yes, it was probably a bad idea.
trying to breach the ENG department any further, it was risky, there was not much time left and he should drop it.

What he should do is start working in his closing speech. And so he tried, he gave it above two hours but had no inspiration, zero, none. How could he?

How could he be writing a persuasive speech about the benefits and the securities of remaining in the Federation, while the same Federation had ordered him to steal Vulcan technologies? While a fellow member of said Federation turned out to be another spy? Why should the Vulcans stay? Where was the logic in that? Give me one good reason.

When you cannot convince yourself, how could possibly you try to convince others?

Those were the moments he missed Spock the most. He missed talking to him, missed his brilliant mind, his wise words, his surprising insights. He remembered spending many quiet nights, just talking with him; and in those nights, time flew by so fast, it felt just like a heartbeat. They could talk about everything and anything, stupid little nonsensical things or grandiose pretentious ideas, whatever.

Whatever?

Is that so, Jimbo? You sure?

If you could talk with Spock about everything, how come you never talk to him about Uncle Frank? Or Tarsus 4? Why didn’t you ever mention your past habit of cutting? GHB? ChemSex? Still ongoing habit of alcohol binging? And what about Pon Farr? Did you ever try talking to him about that Pon Farr?

No, you didn’t, Sunshine, because you never wanted that extra baggage.

You wanted a simple, clean cut, wham bam thank you, sir, relationship, with a convenient expiration date. You didn’t want him to see the ugly parts of you; you didn't want the emotional mess. You wanted to be able to part ways unharmed, with not a scratch on that polished armor you wear, to keeps others away.

Hey there, just a second!

Spock is not spotless! Spock had a hand in this too, you know! He never talked about anything significant either! His fucking up childhood, his daddy issues, his inherent abnormality, his struggles and tribulations! He was so busy building and maintaining this perfect, immaculate image, he was practically unapproachable! Before and after Pon Farr!

But why would he, Jimbo? He's a fucking Vulcan; he doesn't know how to open up.

Vulcans are the most introvert species you have ever had the pleasure of encountering, in the whole alpha quarter. And that says a lot, given the fact that this five years' mission has got you into every remote, uncharted corner of the region.

It's on you, Jimbo! You should have shown him the way! Should have gone first, and maybe, just maybe, he would have followed.

Too late now, isn't it? Fucking too late.

Poor thing, what he must have been through at Svern's challenge. In his mind, he probably viewed this as an enormous humiliation, to be pushed into showing his anomalous abilities like that, his
monstrosity, his lack of control, before the Elders, before the ritual witnesses, in front of his father, in front of his teammates, his friends.

Fuck, Sobar was one fucked up, sadistic bastard.

Go to him.

And say what? Do what?

Go to him.

Why? What can I possibly do for him?

Just go.

"Computer, where is the location of Spock?"

The computer chirped in a faint sound, ho, yeah, the last time they squabbled he told it to shut up.

"Computer, activate speech. Where is the location of Spock?"

"Request denied."

Damn useless thing!

"Elaborate."

"Information requested is private."

"Fuck you! Just so you know- somewhere out in space, there is a starship call the Enterprise, a far better, awesome sexy ship than yours is! Where I am the Captain! And its AI would never dare treating me this way!"

"Illogical inquiry, please rephrase."

"Go fuck yourself!"

"Illogical inquiry, please rephrase."

Go.

Jim breathed out, pinching the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes, concentrating, wondering. What was this force, compelling him to go? As if there was a string between him and Spock that was stretched out too far, for far too long, and now was bouncing back again, dragging them back to each other.

Go.

Funny thing is, he knew exactly where to look for him.

Now.

Ok, I'll go and make a complete fool of myself and I promise not to care about it, just stop this nagging already!
At 29:00 no sane Vulcan was at the gym, all the rooms he peeked into were deserted- the treadmills room, the weightlifting room, and all the gymnasiums. Yup, all sane Vulcans were having their evening routines with family, friends, lovers, or working the end of the beta shift.

Jim almost thought his hunch had misled him, until he heard the bustle in one room, a sparing room? No, a hand to hand combat simulator.

The computer's voice made the final give away "Warning! You have set the parameters above recommended safety level. Please…"

"Skip intro." Spock's voice commanded. "Engage!"

Boy, did he miss that beautiful, deep voice, full of warmth, of command, and the promise of never-ending orgasms.

Jim dared peeking into the room, he could not see everything from that angle, but he could catch a glimpse of Spock, and the things he was fighting against.

Spock was wearing his Starfleet track issued suite, that looked so awfully loose and oh so modest compared to the Vulcan green, full body suit, that Jim grew accustom to see him in. That black color only fleshed out the deep green and black bruises on his handsome face.

He was holding a Lirpa in his gloved hands, wielding it without effort, spinning it around in ever-changing speed and angle without fault, creating a shield of swirling metal around his moving body, to defend and attack the five droids that battled him.

It was a mesmerizing sight to see, Spock's clash with the droids. He moved like a lithe dancer, jumping from place to place, platform to platform, attacking and blocking counter attacks. The pace of this combat was also dazzling, the droids moved with unforgiving velocity, wielding their Lirpas with efficiency and without holding back. But the Vulcan was winning, not without punishment, but clearly winning.

Jim waited for the combat to end before making himself known, because he didn’t want Spock to be distracted and get hurt, he kept hiding until the droids all shut down and silence fell in the room.

"Jim!" Spock noticed him first, he had let go of his Lirpa, which fell to the floor with a clang, and he bent over, leaning on his knees, panting, exhausted, but then he made the effort to straighten up and greet the human. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Jim uttered, to be perfectly honest; he himself was unsure of why he was there.

"You should leave." Spock almost sighed, sending a hand to wipe the blood that trickled down from a reopened cut on his forehead.

"Yes, probably, but so should you." Jim answered. "What are you even doing here? You should be resting."

Spock only stared at him for a while, his bruised nose sniffed at the air, made him recoil and huff "I'm not safe now, better leave."

"Not safe? Fucking understatement of the year! What are you doing, Spock? What are you trying
to accomplish? Some sort of a punishment?"

Jim found the courage to leave his place at the door and enter the room. Despite the fact that Spock practically growled at him, despite the droids looked like one bash away from scrap, and despite the fact that he was all alone and had no idea how to call for help if necessary.

Spock followed him with his eyes, dark, intense, smoldering eyes; an unknown cinder glowed in them. He growled again, as if in warning.

"Sobar really did a number on you, huh?"

"Problem is you never listen." Spock grunted softly.

"He's such an A grade asshole! I cannot believe he pushed you that far! And in front of everyone to see! Should be thankful he's still alive!"

"Why are you here? What do you want?" Spock raised his voice now, and added a somewhat hostile growl at the end, of which Jim willfully ignored.

"If anyone should be punished it's him! Him and stupid Elder Svern, who came up with this half-assed challenge!"

"I care not for your sympathy or for your understanding." Spock snarled at him now, moving away as Jim got close. "Go away!"

Spock huffed again, he seemed far away from his usual calm, collected self, in fact, his behavior resembled Pon Farr rather than anything Jim had ever witnessed.

And yet, the human refused to budge, it was now or never, he'll never be this brave again. "Go away? Goddamn, no! We need to talk!"

"Well, you might need to talk." Spock glared at him, unblinking. "But my needs are quite different, so if you'll excuse me…" he averted his gaze "Computer, activate…"

"No!"

"Go away!!!" Spock roared at him, and his scream echoed in the large room.

"What did he whisper in your ear?" Jim insisted "What did Sobar say to you that made you go berserk?"

"None of your business! Computer…" Spock shouted and picked up his Lirpa.

"The hell is my business!" Jim shouted now as well. "If I'm gonna be your captain for the next half a year, I'd like to know what can jeopardize you this way! Put you at beast mode in seconds!"

Spock grimaced, then smiles, actually smiled but it was more like a leer. "Fine, you win, I'll tell you, but not now, another day." He wielded his Lirpa in lazy long moves and placed himself in battle position. "Computer…"

"Fine! I accept the offer! Now, stop this fuckery! Go to bed, go meditate, go to the healing center, but end this shitstorm! Stop hurting yourself! "Jim didn’t back down, even though that leer scared the hell out of him.

"You don’t get it, do you?" Spock breathed out and within a heartbeat, he was at Jim's face, grabbed him by his throat with one gloved hand, and before he knew it, Jim was slammed against a
F*ck, that hurt!

Jim almost whimpered at the pain, as the back of his skull and his upper back were crushed into the hard bulkhead. Yet, he could not indulge in the pain for too long, not when a very scary, out of control Vulcan was weighting on him, not when he was running out of breath.

They were at a familiar kissing distance, so why did Jim feel so helpless and terrified? He could not speak now, or move, or defend himself in any way. He tried to convey his plea with his eyes; he screamed it in his mind.

//Stop, Spock! This is not you! You are not the abomination they want you to be!//

Spock just growled at him, showing teeth, pushing him up the wall with just one arm, lifting him up in the air, where his legs scrambled to find footing, and his lungs screamed for oxygen.

//Don’t hurt me!/ he pleaded in his mind again. //Don’t do anything you cannot live with!//

Seems like Spock was struggling between a kiss and a crush of the windpipe; he panted heavily, tightening his grip and relaxing it, leaning over then backing off several times, and then, after a few horrifying seconds, he let go, releasing Jim to fall down on the floor, trying desperately to catch his breath.

"I'm not safe now." Spock whispered again "Please, respect my boundaries as I do yours."

Jim nodded and fought to get up and then stagger out of the room.

"Computer, activate drones!"

"Warning! You have set the parameters above recommended safety level. Please reconsider your choice of…."

"Skip intro, Engage!"

***0***

There were million and two thousand ways to be pissed off about it; he only needs to choose one.

Jim decided, as he entered his room.

That pointy eared bastard! That green blooded hobgoblin!

Sonuvabitch!

Speaking of boundaries? Respect my boundaries?

Where were those boundaries when you fucked me like an animal?

You fucked me raw! You fucked me bloody! You fucked me day and night for four fucking days!! You never let me off your dick, not to piss, not to shit, not to take a shower!
I gave you everything! I gave you my consent! My body! I gave you my dignity! I gave you permission to do whatever! And you did whatever! Whatever the hell you wanted!

You fucked my ass, my thighs, my throat! You fucked me with your dick! With your tongue! With your goddamn fists!

I gave you life! You gave me flashbacks!

I gave you trust! You enslaved me with that fucking mind meld!

Funny thing is, you remember almost nothing of it. Funny thing is, I don’t hold it against you. I would do this all over again, just so you’d live, just so you won’t die.

I love you.

Yes, goddamn everything to hell, I love you.

Loved you from the very start.

Did I ever tell you?

Will I ever?

***0***

Jim took a deep breath, trying to collect himself again; he waited for his shivers to subside, his tears to be washed away. Under the warm cascade of water, he leaned into the shower's tiles and repeated his life's mantra in a whisper.

"I'm in control. I am always in control. All I ever do, I want to do. Everything I've ever done, I wanted to do."

I took some punches from Uncle Frank because I wanted to, because Sam needed a few days off. Every time I bent over and let those jerks fuck me, I wanted to; it was a good deal, food for the kids, so we'd survive the winter. I said yes to Spock on his Ponn Farr, I wanted to, I did whatever it took to save his life, and it was worth it, Spock was so very worth it.

I take full responsibility of my actions! Every single outcome is mine!

Now get a grip, Jimbo, get a fucking grip.

Your crew relies on you, the Vulcans relies on you, the Federation relies on you, fucking Section 31 relies on you.

You can do it, jimmy boy, just hang in there, it won’t be long.

***0***
He closed the shower manually, with its valves; stepped out of it, got himself dry with a clean towel and put on fresh boxers, t-shirt and jeans.

Then, back to his desk, he saw that the program on his standalone of his PADDs has ended its run. He had it. He had the telepathic signature he needed for his fake profile.

So he hand fed the parameters to the other PADD, not daring to pollute his ship connection with anything coming from the recording device, took him an hour to reconstruct, but it was worth it. He should later find a way to hide that devise safely until they leave, and then he will need an opportunity to acid wash it, cannot trust replicators.

He polished his profile by giving it a false log of communication with the unclassified section of the ENG department, and with his fake profile complete, he ventured into the VR database again. He delved into it, searching for a way to plant that profile in the most secure, and effective way, took a few more hours before he found one.

The vulnerability point was star base Ipik, it was so top secret that the Vokau had almost nothing about its personal, but at the same time, was compelled to deliver them any information they required.

So if his hypothetical engineer would be registered as a staff member of the Ipik, chances are they will grant him accessed to any information requested, long before they'd realize he's fake. So he made the necessary adjustments then sent his engineer into the database, kissing him good luck.

Now he realized the night was all but gone, it was almost 05:00 in the morning. Yeah, that Vulcan drug was a bitch, but it still gave him a killer focus.

He now had to wait for VR and the Engineering Department to swallow the bait, until then, he needed to start hacking the communication system. Now that was a fat ass big target, and he prayed that there would be enough time, he prayed for Sobar to recover as slowly, and painfully as possible.

He got up to fetch himself a cup of coffee from the common kitchen when the computer chimed.

The screen flickered- Incoming message from the Enterprise.

His heart leaped and pounded in his chest.

Joy and relief washed all over him.

Thank you, Elder Sarek, Thank you so much!

***0***

"Computer, patch it through."

He braced himself, sitting straight in the chair by the desk, in front of the screen, he took a few deep breaths and tried to look like someone who is not falling apart, just a bit bored, at a never-ending, tedious Vulcan conference.

The screen flickered again and an image appeared before his eyes.
"Bones, it is so good to see you!" he said, beaming to the screen. "How are you? How's everyone on board? How's my silver lady?"

But something was wrong, seems like Bones did not hear him, was not even looking at him, and was talking regardless of what was just said to him. It made Jim realize this was not a live stream, but a recorded message.

"Computer, rewind to the beginning, pauses."

The computer complied, and Jim lost his smile now, and allowed himself to slouch on the chair, then he studied the image before him with attention.

McCoy was in his medical office, in his scrubs, he looked a bit disheveled, he had some stains on the rims of his sleeves, looked like blood, he had a two day's worth of beard, his hair was tussled and there was a gaze of deep sorrow in his eyes.

Jim swallowed and breathed again. "Play." He commanded the computer, with a worried, weary voice.

"Captain." Bones started with glum, how Jim missed his voice. "Before you start yapping at the screen, know that this is a recording."

Too late for that, Jim smiled with a sigh.

"Sorry about that, but this was the only way they had let me contact you, the higher ups, because we're in a top secret situation here." Bones sure looked displeased by that fact. "Speaking of… Vulcan conference, my ass! The Pope is more approachable than you! I bet you're doing something super covert and top secret too, not that it is any of my business, I know… well I hope this message finds you well. I miss y'all, is all, and yes, all, but don’t tell the hobgoblin I said that."

I won't, Jim smiled again.

"I am blabbering here, am I?" Bones wondered, sending an apologetic smile to the recording camera, which was not in his direct view, which disabled the illusion of a direct eye contact. "Well, it is late in the Gama shift and I've been in surgery for the past two days, so excuse me for not getting pretty for you."

Jim now gasped. Surgery? Two days? What the fuck happened?

Bones shifted in his seat, and send a hand to fetch a flask from the table, which surly contained only water. He drank from it and winced. Yes, sure it was just water.

"I don’t know how to break it to you, so I'll just go for it- we lost eight crewmen in the past few days.

"Engineering- Ensign Andrews, Ensign Lee, Yeoman Grant

"Maintenance- Crewman Perez

"Security- Ensign Tathruk, Ensign Honda, Lieutenant O'Connor, Lieutenant Roberts

"I'm sorry, Jim, they are dead. We fought hard for them, and we've lost."

"Fuck." Jim whispered and did not bother fighting against his tears.

"As we speak, Commander Scotty is fighting for his life." Bones said and his voice cracked a bit "I
did everything I could, Captain; the rest is in the hands of god. We have ten more wounded, but I
expect them to make full recovery. Keenser is now acting chief engineer, and I placed Dr. Chapel
as acting CMO, so now I am the acting, acting Captain, whatever that means."

Bones reached for his flask again, and Jim waited, hoping and praying that Scotty will pull
through.

"I know that you probably wonder at this point what the hell happened." Bones continued and was
right as usual. "Well, what happened was that high command lost it, I mean, I have no other way of
looking at it, and figures this would happen on my watch.

"We just ended the mission at Kepler 213-d, very disappointing, by the way, nothing there at all,
no gallium based life forms, or any other, for that matter, just misinterpret data. So we were
wrapping up there, when we got a call from high command, alpha three priority, I shit you not, and
you don’t get to refuse an alpha priority, obviously.

"From all the places in this wonderful, vast galaxy, they've sent us to the neutral zone on the border
with the Klingon Empire. They wanted us to use our fancy new scanners to see what the Klingons
were up to. I told Admiral Archer that we were an Exploration vessel, not a spy ship, helped me
much as you can reckon.

"So we spent the last two weeks here, and lo and behold, we attracted some attention. A Klingon
battle ship crossed to our side of the neutral zone, boy, they just came out of nowhere and…. "

The sound suddenly turned off, and a black strip covered the lips of the good doctor, and the video
played on for a while like this.

"What the fuck, censorship?"Jim slammed his fist on the desk "Damn high command!"

But were they trying to hide something from him? Or from the Vulcans? Or was it the Vulcans that
censored the video? Why everything had to be so goddamn complicated?

"So to make a long story short, we got ourselves an ass whoop." The doctor concluded as the audio
came back to life, and that annoying black strip disappeared just in time for Jim to see how sad and
exhausted Bones really looked.

"I keep thinking that maybe if you were here or even if Spock was, then the outcome would be
different, and I run it in my head, over and over again, what I could have said differently, what I
could have done differently, damn it, Jim, I'm a doctor not a Starfleet Captain."

Seems like McCoy was wiping up some tears; and Jim smiled, you're getting old, my friend, too
easy on the tear shed.

"Well, I don’t have all day for you, Jimbo…” Bones pulled himself together and straightened in his
seat "Good news is that they are sending us help and two more fleet ships are on their way to back
us up. Bad news is they ain't allowing us to ditch this spot. But we are hanging in there, we do our
best, and I hope that the high command will come back to their senses soon and let us get out of
here.

"I mean; another round of this and we are sitting ducks in hostile waters and between you and I,
what can Federation ships do against damn cloaked Klingons? The ship has taken enough damage
as it is, and there is no Scotty to come by."

Jim bit his lips, and ran his hand through his hair.
High command won't let you, he remembered Commodore Laura's plan B, to send the Enterprise on a suicide mission. They will never let you go, until you bring back a Klingon cloaking device or die trying… unless I give them that Vulcan detector first.

"Cheer up, Sunshine." Bones smiled now on the flickering screen "All peaches and cream here. I hope my next message will carry some better news. Hope to see you in person really soon.

"McCoy out."

Jim put his hands on his desk and buried his face in them, unmoving for few moments.

So Mary Sue had limited influence in Section 31, was it even worth fucking her? She was hot, and a great fuck, sure, but maybe he shouldn't have bothered, it didn’t pay off.

And what can he even do now?

Ask the Vulcans for help? How? And who? The Elders? He cannot talk to the Elders while the ritual is still going on. Not even Elder Sarek can help, Spock's father has already gone above and beyond on his behalf, would not dream about putting him in such a difficult position again.

Captain Setal? Can the Vokau's Captain even do something to help? He is not Starfleet, and besides, does he even have the authority to stop everything and head back home?

And how could he possibly get the Vulcans to help without raising Section 31 related questions? And Protect Sharel while at it?

No…

Face it, Jimbo…

You are their only chance; no one else will save the Enterprise but you.

Fuck.

How is he supposed to tell this to the crew? They are already on the edge; he cannot afford to tip them over, not right now, not until the Plak If Fee is over. This will have to wait.

You're by yourself, Sunshine.

All alone and on your own.

Ok, Coffee.

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Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for reading, would love to hear from you, take care!
Another update for you, hope you'd like it.
Everyone, thank you for your wonderful feedback! Can't thank you enough, though.
Take care and stay safe!

First thing in the morning, Sulu and Carol showed up in the common room, a bit pale due to blood lose, a bit stiff with residual pain but none the less healthy and in good spirit.

Dayton sprinted out of his room; all fired up and excited, reminded Jim of a puppy who's been missing its owner for the entirety of an hour. He stumbled on his way to greet his girl, took her into his arms, swept her off her feet and then swirled with her, giving her a deep, loving kiss.

Carol giggled all the way through, and when he was done showing off, she gave him a nice scrub on his head, running her fingers through his ginger hair.

Jim eyes Sulu, and made a mute imitation of puking, Sulu just watched him and shrugged, what can you do? Young love.

Dayton never saw that silent exchange, he was all pearly teeth and glittering eyes, and after he put Carol down, he turned his attention to Sulu.

"No, no, no…" Hikaru tried some evasive maneuvers, but Dayton managed to snatch him into a crushing hug.

"Calm down, now, Yorktown." Jim frowned from his seat on the couch "It's not like they survived a Klingon attack and came back to tell their tale, some perspective, thank you!"

Dayton released poor Sulu and the slightly offended Carol stopped giggling and just smirked at Jim, "Hey, want some salt with that?" She asked and came to share his space on the couch, which he did not agree to.

Jim frowned at her too, but he said nothing, just nursed his cup of already cold, leftovers of a black coffee, his fifth or sixth after a sleepless night.

"They may not have been Klingons, but I did survive a hand to hand combat against a Vulcan." Carol stated with pride for all to hear.

"My hero!" Dayton cooed, he could not help himself, so he came to seat at Carol's other side, beamed at Jim and Carol pulled him down by his PJ's shirt collar for another hot kiss.

"Get a room!" Jim moaned, and considered puking for real now.

"Jealous much, Captain?" Dayton smirked at him.

"Jealous at everyone who isn't here to see this, yes." Jim answered and Sulu silently agreed.

They were both ignored by the love birds, and Dayton tuned his eyes to Carol again, to gaze into
her blue, blue eyes. "How did you recover so fast, my poor baby?" He murmured. "I hardly slept last night, thinking of what T'Sel had done to you."

"I, on the other hand, had the most relaxing night ever." Carol smirked at her boyfriend. "They have taken us to the healing center, and gave me this private room, and there was this tube there... I don't know, reminded me one of Khan's Cryo- chambers only filled with sand.

"They told me to get undress and lay inside, but it was so heavenly! Warm and tingling, and oddly enough, so very comfortable, and there was this relaxing music, reminded me of a posh spa, and all I needed actually, was a glass of champagne to complete the experience. Before I knew it, I fell asleep and in the morning- I was as good as new."

"They called it a telepathic healing cell." Sulu explained "It was operated by a healer from a control room, said to induce a healing trance. I wish we had some of those on the Enterprise, Jim, sure beats bio-beds by far, I'd have them, minus the telepaths, though."

"Did you happen to see Sobar over there?" Jim asked.

"No, why?" Carol tuned to look at him, puzzled. "Did you win your fight against him?" she openly mocked him.

"No, Spock did." Jim huffed and tried again his cold, horrible coffee that he was too lazy to get replaced. He watched the young couple for another moment before overdosing on the high level of sugar. "Ok, alright, alright, the fight is over, the Klingons are down, and everyone lived, can we do something else now?"

The couple stopped smooching and Yorktown eyed Jim again.

"Don't underestimate a clash with a Vulcan, sir." Dayton rebuked him with a smug smile. "Vulcans are known to be as strong as Klingons, and brighter, which makes them formidable enemies, far more than Klingons."

Jim leered at that. "First, the Vulcans are not our enemies." He started "Second- it was a fight in a controlled environment, so congrats on winning the 'I survived a round against a drugged Vulcan' award."

"Hey, easy on the kids, Captain." Sulu approached them and set on a chair across from Jim.

"Some contexts pills are bitter and uneasy to swallow." Jim disagreed "But ask any Doctor and they'll recommend them when necessary."

"Speaking of which, you don’t look too well, Captain." Carol turned her attention to Jim and gave him a scrutinizing gaze now "Your skin is a bit yellow, and your eyes look a bit yellowish too, and what's with this bruise on your throat?"

She moved on the couch to further examine him, and he retreated until there was no more room to run to.

Instead, he snarled at her. "Back off, Doctor Marcus, last time I've checked, you were a weaponry expert!"

"But I'm not wrong, sir." she insisted.

"Kiss your boyfriend, or something; leave me alone!" he now growled at her.
Dayton and Carol exchanged knowing looks "Bitch mode." Carol concluded in a whisper.

Sulu now came forth to have his two cents thrown in "Did you lose a bit of weight lately, Jim?"

"Away from me, all of you!" Jim roared now and jumped to his feet, spilling the rest of his cold coffee on himself and the carpet. "Oh, shit! Look what you've made me do!"

And then two things happened at once, the door opened first and in came T'Heli, of all people, and then the power went down, the lights turned off, replaced by small emergency dim light bulbs.

"Bloody hell." Carol mumbled "Was just gonna ask you for a snack." She glanced at Dayton with a pout.

"Greetings, Remain team" T'Heli said, forming the Ta'al, making herself known and causing the humans in the room a small heart attack while at it. "May we have a talk?"

"Lieutenant T'Heli, what a pleasure." Jim muttered, his eyes examining the coffee stains on his t-shirt, grateful for the relative darkness in the room.

As T'Heli didn’t ask permission to enter their quarters, she also did not wait for further invitation and made her seat next to Sulu. She reviewed the dim lighted room with an air of disappointment, like a homeroom teacher entering a class of misfits.

"With the approval of the Elders, I came to renegotiate the terms of a challenge." She announced "Is that agreeable?"

"Is that because of Sobar's injury?" Jim asked, wondering if he could leave them be and go back to his room for a change of clothes.

"Affirmative." T'Heli conformed "Commander Sobar will be out of service for the next two days."

"Out of service?" Sulu repeated with a soft chuckle.

"As I stated." T'Heli viewed the helmsman without understanding. "I know it is not acceptable to ask for a change of terms, however, Captain Setal and the high council wish to conclude the ritual as soon as possible, so I come to you with a suggestion that could save us approximately 108 hours. I am sure you will concur, as it will shorten your stay on the Vokau as well."

"But we're having so much fun." Jim could not help himself.

T'Heli gazed at him sternly "Fun is not a relevant factor." She stated.

"Nope…" he agreed with a whisper.

"My suggestion is that your helm team will perform the race by themselves, and if they achieve an average runtime of three rounds that is below the known minimum, we will declare you winners of this challenge."

Dayton kept quiet, and Jim tried to ignore his wet, clingy shirt, and all gazed fell on Sulu, the owner of the challenge, who was contemplating the suggestion.

"Well, what do you say, Hikaru? Sounds fair." Jim said after the helmsman failed to react in a reasonable amount of time.

The green rays of light danced in the room, as plasma bursts flared outside.
"I don’t know, Captain." Sulu breathed out. "Why won’t you take Sobar's place at the race and put Kuvac in the navigator's seat?" he asked T'Heli.

"I must take on Sobar's shifts at the helm." T'Heli explained. "And Kuvac must take on mine."

"Sulu, the whole point was to push at the minimum, no?" Jim pointed out.

Sulu winced "Yes, Captain, but the Vulcans can do the same, surly after following our lead and pick up on the plot. I want to win for the right reasons, not because someone was temporarily incapacitated."

"By his own doing." Jim reminded him.

"So you disagree." T'Heli concluded.

"Now, hold on a second." Jim glanced at the Vulcan and then back at Sulu "Hikaru, please rethink this. This request comes all the way down from the high council. Are you trying to piss them off on purposes?"

"No, sir." Sulu mumbled.

"I know your ego wants a clean cut victory, but sometimes you must make do with what you've got." Kirk continued.

Sulu breathed out now, and nodded "Fine, Jim, you're right, this is not what I had in mind, but ok, I accept the changes."

"Thank you." T'Heli rose on her feet "I will relay the news. Live long and prosper." She said and was out of the room before Jim could let her know that he wished for Sobar's quick recovery, which was for the best, because that was a lie.

"We'd better get ready." Sulu told Dayton as the Vulcan left. "If we're flying solo, I'd rather get it over with as soon as possible."

"Are you good to go, sir?" Dayton asked.

"Yes, let's go eat breakfast, prepare the shuttle and then we're out of here."

"What, so soon?" Carol asked "The power is not even back." She said and the power was restored as she finished speaking, so she leaned against the couch and pouted.

Dayton smiled and kissed her soft hair. "Sorry, love."

"Oh balls, I thought we could spend more than a couple of hours together." She continued pouting.

"We can still spend those couple of hours, while they prepare the shuttle." He smiled at her in a not so subtle, suggestive way. Then he turned to Sulu with puppy eyes "Would you mind taking care of the logistics, sir?"

"Yeah, sure." The senior helmsman nodded at the junior, not without a huff, though.

Dayton beamed at Sulu, then at Carol and then they both got up from the couch and rushed into Carol's room.

Jim eyed Sulu with amusement.
"What?" Sulu now growled at him.

"You got soft, Hikaru." Jim scolded his old friend.

"Oh, Jim, let them have it." Sulu huffed, waving his hand.

Jim shrugged "Easy for you to say, your room is on the other side."

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Strategy number one- Take your fake engineer from star base Ipik and have him write a mail to New Vulcan's Science Academy and label it 'Urgent' so commander Sabek will prioritize it. Implant in said mail an attached, hidden file containing the detector schematics, and encode into that mail an undetected subroutine that will create an untraceable carbon copy and sent it to Section 31 headquarters, delivering them the schematics.

Scratch strategy number one- You have no access to Ipik communication protocols, there is no way for you to create a reliable request, no way to get your hand on the authentic validation procedure necessary. It is risky enough to imitate communication between the Vokau and the Ipik, but to extend that to New Vulcan? No way in hell. Not unless you're gonna hack into Ipik first. Are you? In the time you have left? Never thought so.

Strategy number two- The same as strategy number one, but replace fake engineer with Vedik. Vedik's already in your pocket, you basically own his digital identity. His attempted try to contact the academy will be much more reliable, will not require poking at Ipik and therefore be less time consuming.

Scratch strategy number two. What do you think you are doing? You promised you would not hurt Vedik. You cannot destroy his life like this! Besides, nothing Vedik may write to the NVSA would ever qualify as 'Urgent', he's a guest here same as you, they will not prioritize him above others.

Stupid, stupid, what were you thinking?

Strategy number three- Same as strategy number one and two, just replace Vedik/Fake Engineer with Elder Sarek/Other Elder.

Scratch Strategy number three. Are you fucking mad? As if you can find a way to hack an Elder. What access do you have to them? Elder Sarek is beyond your reach. Same goes to every other Elder, even more so. You got nothing here, moving along.

No, the fuck Spock will help you! He'll never agree to help steal from his own kind! And put his father at risk? Come on. Breathing it at his direction would only get you in trouble. Remember Nibiru? Thank you very much.

Strategy number four- Create a video message to the Enterprise and encode the schematics into the
video feed, send a hidden CC to section 31 headquarters, they will figure it out.

Ok, this one holds water, a sip of water, but it holds it. It's by no way a guarantee; no one can promise you that this message would be delivered on time to save the Enterprise, or be delivered at all, to that matter. Put it in a placeholder. What else you have?

Strategy number five- Hack into the communication platform on the Vokau, either by code or by implanted hardware, or both. Hijack a communication from the Vokau to wherever, as long as it goes to home-universe, implement subroutine that… bla bla CC… bla bla… headquarters.

Yeah, the ugliest one yet, but this one's got the most potential to actually work in the given timetable. Not the easiest thing to do, they probably have security that surpass the HR and probably also Engineering Dep, however, there might be some weak points in the intersections. Better start working on it yesterday.

Strategy number six- Steal a shuttle, fly under the radar, land on the transmitter outside, wherever it may be on the ship's mantle, and operate it manually to send a covert unauthorized message to section 31 headquarters.

Sure yeah, just make sure to defeat Thanos while at it, uh, and don't you forget to destroy the death-star as well, gotta be time efficient, yeah?

Jim gave out a frustrated whine, rubbing his temples with his finger tips, fighting the mother of all migraines. He was already running on fumes. When was the last time he had a good night's rest? Something like a month ago, on Yorktown. When was the last time he had good, satisfying sex? Also about a month ago, on board the Enterprise. When was the last time he felt calm and secured and relaxed? Alright, this is going nowhere.

His focus has been drawn into what was happening in the next room, especially when Carol let out a particularly loud, wanton moan. Well, at least someone was having fun. Jealous much?

He should turn up the volume of the music and give them some privacy. Would they appreciate Daft Punk or some Massive Attack? Daft Punk was fun, but Massive Attack was sex. Massive Attack it is.

Focus, James Tiberius, focus! This detector will not manifest itself at Section 31 headquarters unless you make it so. You gotta come up with a plan!

His mind was pulsing into his skull, beating with tandem with his heartbeat, somewhere there a red alert screeched in his head- there's not enough time, and you won't make it! You cannot make it!

He wanted to cry, he wanted to run away, he wanted to hide, he wanted to fuck.

Jimbo, do not fall apart just yet. Look at the bright side.

Good news that your engineer was accepted into VR and engineering department and you have already requester the schematics of item 1127 from the database.

Good news is that the Enterprise was sill afloat and help was on their way.
And there's time, you still got time.

Two days, of which Sulu and Dayton will have their orbit race, followed by Dayton's challenge the next day. One day for the closing speech challenge of Elder T'Pau, and then the council will take a day or two, to cast their vote, and then you'll have all the way back, about three more days for the Vokau to fly from here back home.

A total of eight to ten days.

Plenty of time.

No time, Jimmy boy, no time at all.

You have miscalculated.

First- Sulu and Dayton are going to push at the minimum, if they succeed, they might take less than a day to get back, and they could squeeze Dayton's speech just after that, at that same day.

Second- Closing speech could only take a few hours, and the elders might cast their vote at the following hour. Who know? They are Vulcan, they sure love to talk a lot, but they could do it fast too, if they use mind melds for their deliberations, who knows? Could be over in ten minutes.

Third- There is no way you can do anything while the Vokau is on the move. You are no comm expert as it is, and including warp speed or whatever means of travel they use here into the calculation is beyond you. Sure you have the data Sarek gave you, but what are the odds you would be able to make use of it? You are only human, not a wizard.

And last- you might even not get a chance to try coping with the Vokau on the move, you know why? Because you'd be DEAD. Because Sobar is going to kill you, if this ritual ends with a tie.

No time, Jimbo.

No time at all.

Three days at best, nothing else is guaranteed.

No time at all.

And Fuck!

Who knows when will Engineering Department even respond to his fake engineer's request? Didn’t occur to you up till now, Sunshine, did it?

Fuck!!!

Spock!

Spock, I could really use some help here!

Shut the fuck up, and don't you dare start crying! You are 31 years old, not a baby, and Spock doesn't even give a shit anymore! He won’t help you steal from his people, he won't! Copy that or do you need more repetition?

And say Earth is flat and Spock is willing, would you really drag him into this clusterfuck? Ruin whatever was left of his standing? Are you that selfish?
The fuck, no!!! NO!

Breath.

No tears, just breathe!

Come on, got no time for this shit!

Got no time for panic!

Don't panic.

Don't.

Panic.
Hello everyone, here's an update for you. I hope you are all well and safe. Thank you for reading, leaving comments and kudos, it makes my day.

He woke up to the sound of bickering outside his room; it was so loud he could hear every word splattered in anger.

Growling, he reached for his pillow and covered his head with it, reminding himself to put on some loud music while masturbating again, because sound traveled both ways.

The pillow was no good.

"Goddamn, Dayton! You are the stupidest person alive!" Sulu roared.

"As if I give a fuck right now!" Dayton answered. "We made it! We pushed back the minimum and we won! That's all that counts!"

"Seven point five lousy minutes! You call that pushing back the minimum?"

"Yes I do! The Vulcans will do too! Face it, we've made it!"

"Made it?" Sulu screeched "Did the star blind you? Did the radiation fry your brain? Did we get off the same shuttle? What is happening here? Carol, you saw the state of that shuttle! Tell me I'm not losing my mind!"

"Leave me out of this!" Carol shouted. "I'm so sick of it! There's no end to it! I'm done playing referee in your stupid games!"

Jim wondered if he should venture out of his room and try to calm down the situation, and then decided that fuck it, he's nobody's babysitter, so he buried himself under the blankets as well, hiding in the dark.

"Stupid?" Sulu cried out loud "The shuttle is scrap! Total loss! Recycle only! It's a miracle we even managed to land it! Burned and cracked and leaking plasma! And the look on that Vulcan tech face when I handed him the flight logs? Miracle he didn’t butcher me on the spot!"

"But we won, Sulu, we won!" Dayton reminded him. "Admit it! The only reason you're pissed is that I had the balls to win this race! If we had it your way, we'd never have gotten below the minimum!"

"Such a pile of bullshit!" Sulu screamed again "I don’t know about you, but I have a husband and child waiting for me back home! I will not have a snotty little child, thinking he's invincible taking such stupid chances and risk my return to them!"

"We would have not taken that risk if your calculations were correct to begin with!"
"Hey, smartass, I remember you making those calculations with me! What I don’t remember is giving you permission to dive so low on your shift! Why don’t I remember that? Oh, yeah, because I was fucking sleeping!!"

"But what choice did I have? Time was running out and we had a challenge to win! Eyes on the ball, right? Keep the Vulcans in the Federation? I had no choice!"

"Fucking did!"

"Fucking did not!"

"Fuck you, Yorktown! You know nothing about taking risks, so don’t preach me about making choices and hard decisions! I'm all up for taking risks! I've taken more risks in my life than you took a piss, you arrogant baby!! That's my fucking job! I am not, whoever, into reckless, thoughtless, moronic acts, such as the ones you pulled on me, while I was out!"

"We won, we're alive! Is all I care about!" Dayton snarled.

"Shut the fuck up, idiot! You just don’t get it, do you? You have no clue!" Hikaru almost moaned his frustration.

"I have a clue, alright!" Dayton lost his last remnant of patience and was lashing out now without restraints. "I know that whatever I do is not good enough for you! If I am being careful, you tell me that I'm a gutless baby! If I take risks, you tell me that I'm an incompetent idiot! So fuck you, Sulu, I am so done listening to anything you have to say!"

Oh, make it stop, make it stop… Jim pleaded in his head, he was so sick of it, so tired of it, why can't those two find a way to get along? What was so fucking hard? He groaned into his pillow and shut his eyes again.

"How many times must I tell you? You do as I say when we ride together! You pilot like I tell you to pilot! You breathe like I tell you to breathe! Never got into that thick head of yours, huh? I had enough, Parker; I had enough of this! Enough of you!"

"Whatever, man! I also can't wait for the day I get free from your command! Wanna be a Captain one day? Dream on, crazy bastard!"

"Crazy? Damn right I am! I hope that you'd live long enough for someone like you to do what you have just done to me! Dive into a sun without thinking! Executing unprecedented, unpracticed maneuvers! While you, the senior pilot is asleep!"

"We won, Sulu! Bottom line! You always tell me to judge my actions according to the bottom line! Changed your mind all of a sudden? Remember him bitching about it all the time, Carol? Honey? What's with this face? Back me up here."

"I don't know, darling, I'm no pilot."

"Come on, Carol, I always back you up when they bring up your dad!"

"Don't go there!" Carol warned.

"Baby, you told me that Sulu will never like me because of Pavel, remember? Like they will never like you because of your dad? Remember saying you cannot wait for us to get the hell out of the Enterprise and start all over again somewhere else?"
"How dare you! This was a private conversation, Day!" Carol hitched her breath.

"Sorry, darling, but it's true! And what else is true? That we won! We won those goddamn two points! Can’t you guys be happy for me for a change? Can’t you recognize my achievement?"

"I'll tell you what you have achieved!" Sulu answered "ding, ding, ding, congratulations! You have won the complete brake of trust of your fellow pilot! Senior pilot!"

"Pulling ranks is old!" Dayton snarled "You've got six more months, enjoy it while you can. I'm outta here!"

"Damn right, you are, mister!" Sulu chuckled with anger "Because as soon as we are back home, I'm gonna write high command a nice little latter, and you? You are never piloting a Starfleet craft again!"

"What? Just because you're jealous?" Daton almost screamed. "Because I was brave enough to take risks you wouldn’t? Fuck you, Sulu! Write that letter, I dare you!"

"I will! Unamortized change of course while your direct commanding officer sleeps! Deviating from the flight plans without the consent of the Pilot in command! Using a Spacecraft in a manner that exceeds its known specifications! Damaging a Spacecraft beyond repaired! A complete brake of trust! Goddamnit! If I did not wake up in time to save us both, we'd be atoms added to that fucking star system by now!"

"You are exaggerating!"

"The stupidest man EVER!!!! Go ahead and die, Dayton! If that is what you wish for! But PLEASE, do it without me onboard!!! I am never flying with you, ever! And I am going to make sure no one else in Starfleet will!"

"You cannot do that! Carol…"

"Leave me out of this, Dayton! I'm not your mother!"

"You never back me up, ever!" Dayton seemed on the verge of tears "Fuck you both! I'm going to the Captain, he'll back me up!"

"What are you doing, dumbass? Can’t you see the 'Do not disturb' sigh?"

"What? Where? He has no company, right?"

"No, he's preparing for the closing speech, dummy."

"Fine, Carol, then I'm going to my room, and don’t bother following!"

"Don’t forget the tissue box, crybaby!" Sulu called after him.

Then a door opened and closed.

Then another.

Then the last.

Then quiet.

Thank god.
Jim woke up again to the sound of knocking on his door.

Fuck, how much time did I waste on sleeping? He wondered and rose to his elbows, blinking in the dark.

"Sir, is everything alright?" That was Sharel's voice. "We've got sixteen more minutes. Are you ready?"

"Sixteen more minutes for what?" he put his hands on his temples; his head was still killing him.

"For Dayton's speech. Sobar's team's coming and so are the elders."

Oh, hell…

"I'll be ready in twenty, just keep them occupied or something." 

"Roger that." Sharel sighed and left the door.

Jim fell off bed and rushed to his PADDs to get an update on the situation.

He saw that the PADD he used to connect to the ship was running a hacking code, as it tried to break into the Vokau's communication mainframe. He also saw that his fake engineer had gotten his requested data! Yes! The schematics of the Vulcan detector were in his possession!

He should be jumping up and down with joy. He should be out and dancing on every deck! Screaming with excitement and hugging every Vulcan in his way! But he was far too tired and way too much troubled to even give himself an imaginary pat on the shoulder. There was so much more work to do, and so little time.

He reached to his stand-alone PADD and to his surprise, it too, was running diagnostic on the same data, checking its authenticity and integrity, examine it for malware, and preparing it to be sent forward.

When the hell did that happen?

This was a day's worth of work, and he clearly has been working, so why does he have no recollection of it? So, can you now add blackouts to the Vulcan drug side effects? Or was it just a short term memory loss due to 'normal' fatigue?

Damn it.

He walked into the shower and used the toilet; his piss was now red, definitely red, and he nearly got a heart attack when he looked into the mirror. There was blood on his chest, coming from his nose and running down his chin and neck.

He had to take a shower, and then pop a painkiller, even though the head healer warned him against mixing drugs, but he had to try and get rid of that fucking headache.
"You are three minutes and forty one seconds late." Sobar informed him as he showed up in the common hall. "And your appearance is disturbing." He added, for some reason, as if he gave a shit.

Sobar did not looking so good himself, he looked weak, pale, and bruises still adorned his face with every shade of green. His right hand was held in a sling and something about the look in his eyes… something there looked kind of... well… off.

"Nice to see you too." He muttered towards the other team leader and went to search for his seat.

Everyone were already awaiting in the common hall, they have arranged it to become some sort of a gathering hall, there would be a small elevated stage, with a speech stand for the speaker, there illumination was rearrange to highlight it, and the chairs and couches were organized in three rows for the audience.

Dayton was already near the stage, walking back and forth like a lion in a cage, pale, mumbling to himself, and biting on his nails. Jim wished he had some more time to give the guy a pep talk, but there was none of it, and honestly, at that point in time, there was no pep in him to offer either.

The teams were already seated and so were the three elder leaders. Jim saw that there was a seat reserved to him, on his one side sat Sharel and on the other Spock.

"Sorry for being late." He muttered to both as took his place, and got ignored.

Someone drew Spock's attention from the other side, Elder T'Pau, and she had whispered something to him. He nodded and got up to climb the stage, and then he leaned towards the microphone.

"Greetings to all." He started, forming the Ta'al. "We are here to witness Lt. Commander Kuvac's challenge put into execution. Ensign Parker of the Remain team will now address the audience and deliver his speech. The selected topic is- The Ensign's experience of serving on board the Starship Enterprise."

Spock looked good, really good, there was almost no sign of injury on him, and he seemed like he overcame the humiliation he suffered by the hands of Sobar, or at least, he was great at hiding it.

"Captain Kirk, Lieutenant Sharel and I will judge Mr. Parker's performance, and determinate his success at overcoming his fear of speaking in public." Spock continued and glanced at the young pilot. "Mr. Parker, the stage is yours."

As soon as Spock said that, the color drained from Dayton's face and he hitched his breath.

Come on now, be brave, Yorktown, you know how to be brave.

Jim caught the young Ensign's glare and sent him a calm gaze, full of confidence, hoping that some of it will stick.

Dayton returned him a small, thin smile and lowered his gaze to the floor. He climbed up the small stage and took his place at the speaking stand, without creating eye contact with anyone, completely ignoring the fact that everyone was staring at him, waiting for whatever he had to say, even if it was stupid and pointless.
"Hello to all, my name is Dayton Parker." He started, too far away from the microphone, sounding blurry, and looking at some point in space away from the listeners. "Let's… umm… start with the facts, I guess…"

Jim breathed, the man had no PADD with him, and was clearly improvising, which was no good, he was wobbling in mid air without a safety rope.

Why didn't you prepare something in advance, Yorktown?

Improvising was never a good idea, and when Vulcans are involved? I said be brave, not stupid, Yorktown.

"So, I am Dayton Parker, hey… already said that, umm… 25 years old, an Ensign, a Pilot and navigator of the starship Enterprise for what? Kind of the past half a year, I guess? Hmmm…”

Oh, boy. Jim breathed again, trying to maintain neutral face expression.

"Everybody calls me Yorktown, though…I don’t like it but I am from Yorktown, born and raised. My parents are also Starfleet; my mother is a commander, an engineer, a part of the force-field maintenance crew, my father is a lieutenant and work shifts at Control Room as a comm officer, both interesting, but stationary jobs."

Dayton realized he was too far from the microphone, so he got closer and hogged it now, breathing into it and creating those unpleasant storm like sound effects. He held on to the small podium like his life was dependant on it, looking a bit dizzy.

"I always wanted to fly, just like Han Solo, like Star Lord from the movies... well you probably don’t know them? Maybe some do? But... whatever, ok…"

Come on! Get a grip, Dayton, eyes on the ball…

"I was in my second year at the academy when I've heard that the Enterprise saved my home from total destruction. Ever since then I kinda... I... Well, Captain James Kirk became my hero, and serving on the Enterprise was sort of a dream."

He huffed into the mic again, creating this horrible howling sound, the Vulcans did their best not to wince but the humans did, Dayton saw that and removed himself from the stand again.

"If you know, the Enterprise is the Fleet’s flagship, and our Captain is like this famous celebrity of a sort. Got any of those? Now, everyone I knew wanted to get into the Enterprise… and what were my chances? I mean, I'm just a nobody, and there are so many ships to man, so imagine my excitement when I got notified that I was picked to join in as the second pilot, none the less, I mean, oh my god! My goddamn luck!"

Dayton paused, he wiped droplets of sweat off his face, then wiped the palms of his hands on the sides of his pants, and he breathed again, pale and trembling, looked like he was about to faint or run away.

Why didn’t they think about having the head healer here for this challenge?

Jim gazed at Spock and Sharel, wondering if they have already made up their minds about Yorktown failing this task, because he almost did, Spock was unreadable as always, Sharel shook his head and shrugged at him, not a very good sign.

"My goddamn luck…" Dayton breathed again, smiling through tears now. "Because how can
someone be so unlucky, filling in for a beloved, brilliant, young officer that died a horrible death? How could I ever win the respect and sympathy of my peers when I was playing against a shadow? A ghost?"

The Ensign stopped again and his eyes searched for Jim's, there was a silent plea for forgiveness in his gaze.

"I am supposed to talk about my service on the Enterprise, and I wish I could say all those nice things that I wrote somewhere, but I can’t. I can only tell you the truth.

"Truth is… the Enterprise is an exclusive club; truth is that I never got in, and as much as I admire everyone, the Captain, the first officer, the first pilot… I cannot wait to get away.

"I don’t fit in, all I ever do is no good, everything I ever try is never… enough…"

"Excuse me…” He wiped the tears off his eyes and got down from the stage.

Sulu jumped on his feet "What are you doing, idiot, get back there! Finish it! You are making us all look bad in front of the Vulcans, stupid kid!"

Dayton viewed Sulu through a veil of new tears, and ran away from the common hall to the outside of the dormitory.

Carol got on her feet as well and ran after him.

"Idiot!" Sulu almost roared.

Sharel sighed out loud and smiled wearily at Jim, who got up just in time to stop Sulu from following Carol and Dayton.

"No!" he commanded the helmsman, blocking his way. "Let him go! Enough!"

The Vulcans in the crowd realized this was no part of the speech and that in fact, it was over, and so they rose from their seats in silence, and searched for a way to respectfully leave.

Spock, Kuvac and Sharel approached Jim and Sulu.

"It is safe to say that the challenge terms were not met." Kuvac stated calmly, so very inwardly pleased, Jim could tell.

Spock nodded in agreement and Sharel just shrugged.

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- After the show was over and everyone was gone, Jim contemplated if he should address the issue or let it slide.

On the one hand- He was dealing with adults, and they should work things out without someone holding their hand, and to be frank, he had no more patience for Sulu's and Dayton's little dance, one step forwards two steps back, all he needs to do was to ignore them for six more months.

On the other hand- they were still his crewmembers, and they needed to function together, a
malfunction is not only cute, sometimes it's a matter of life and death. Besides, if he does nothing, it might hurt Dayton for the rest of his professional life, and he was quite young, would be a shame to cripple him with neglect.

So at 32:00, after Dayton and Carol had returned and Sulu had calmed down, he dragged them both from their rooms and ordered them to join him in the kitchen. Something about all of them dressed in casual clothes, with Sulu in his black satin pajamas, Dayton in his gray sweatshirt and white slacks and him in his standard blue jeans and white shirt, had its way of mellowing the drama.

"What are you having?" He asked the men, each seated in his corner, sulking.

"I think that there's still a bottle of Uozo nobody opened just yet, somewhere in the middle cabin." Sulu suggested, mumbling.

"No, no Alcohol." Jim rejected the idea. "I think that all of us might have developed a problem, something else, coffee?"

"It disrupts my sleep, sir." Dayton now mumbled.

"Not at this hour, please." Sulu agreed.

"Herbal tea it is." Jim announced and started to make it manually, filling a pot with herbs and water and put it on the stove to boil.

Will they not even look at each other? Jim wondered as he found three tea cups on a shelf and served them to the helmsmen. The Pot whistled and then there was the matter of sugar.

"One." Dayton said and then Jim served him his tea.

"Yeah, one." Sulu nodded, so Jim tossed only one teaspoon in and gave it to the helmsman.

"None for me." Jim smiled and picked up his cup. It was a Vulcan herbal blend, bitter and sweet by its own nature, it was Spock's favorite, and so Jim had grown to like it as well, additives unneeded.

They drank in silence, not bothering to talk; Sulu and Dayton did not even bother with eye contact. Jim let them have this silence for a few moments, the fact that they both joined him and were in arm's reach from each other was an achievement of its own, besides, what he had to say was not very pleasant, so he himself needed a few minutes to gather up courage.

"Alright, I think you know why we're here, so shut up and hear me out." He started, placing his half empty cup on the table.

Both Sulu and Dayton said something under their breath, almost at the same time, and he ignored both and continued.

"We are here now because I made a bad call this morning, and it caused us two challenge points tonight."

"Hey now, don't take ownership of this idiot's fuckups!" Sulu started.

"Hey yourself, Sulu, and shut the fuck up, I'm talking here." Jim smiled Sulu back into sipping his tea. "You too Dayton, say nothing until I'm done."

Dayton nodded, finding a very interesting spotless spot on the floor to look at.

"Well, I made a bad call this morning, I've heard you arguing outside my room, Miss Marcus was
with you too, and I did not go outside to help you sort things out. So we ended up losing a challenge and looking really bad, I mean, extremely bad, in front of the Vulcans and their Elders, and I don’t know what would be the impact of this incident, but it is important that you know— it’s on me, my call, my bad."

"Sir…" Sulu tried again, this time with a whisper.

Jim shook his head for a no "Not finished yet." He stated and Sulu withdrew, forcing Jim to take a deep breath because his line of thought was cut off. "Well, both of you know me for what… Sulu, five and a half years now? Dayton, six months or so?

"By now you must already know my commanding style. Unlike other Captains, I don’t try to keep much distance, I don't hold a façade of authority and restrain, I am friendly, outgoing, approachable and I swear a lot, I mean, fucking a lot."

"Should have been a pirate, sir." Sulu dared mumbling again, eliciting smiles from both Jim and Dayton.

"Should have been." Jim smiled at his old friend "Now, if that's a bad commanding style or not, is besides the point now, it is what it is, and one of my features is that I am stubborn, like, relentlessly, stupidly, headstrong."

"Yes, you are." Sulu confirmed with a sigh.

"Sometimes it’s a good thing, but in your case, I think I really hurt you, hurt you both. You see, I wanted you to become something that you could not, wanted to recreate the chemistry that you, Sulu, had with our late Mr. Chekov.

"That is why I let you bash heads, again and again; hoping that in time, things will get better and you'll find a way. Needless to say, I made a bad call; I should have ended this dynamics a long time ago. So here we are now, and I've realized my mistake, and I am sorry."

"Sir, I…"

"No, Dayton, I'll let you know when I'm finished." Jim cut Dayton's attempted apology. "So, I am sorry, and I hope that this mistake can be rectified without everlasting damage.

"I also hope that what you have said to each other this morning was a product of the stress and fatigue we all suffer from. It's been weeks now, away from the Enterprise, operating in an alien environment, under a killer schedule, with a lot at stake. I really am proud of you both, for your admirable function.

"So, I know you're both tired and I'm not gonna keep you here much longer. Here is what is going to happen- Sulu, you are backing off, leave Dayton be, do not write that latter, and let it go."

"Sir, with all due respect, it is my responsibility to…"

"No, Sulu! It is my responsibility!" Jim almost shouted at his senior helmsman. "If you do write that latter, I will not back you up, and be sure it will be frowned upon, you'd be breaking the chain of command! Do you really want that stain on your career?"

Sulu clenched his jaws and said nothing.

"Not to mention that you cannot disclose this incidence to anyone, not even to the brass! Remember the blood oath we all took? And the terms of this ritual? Are you really aiming for a
mind wipe?"

Sulu breathed and shook his head.

"And you, Dayton, you are off Alpha. I'm placing you in Beta shifts, I am breaking this team, and if you see this as a demotion, then you are correct. Clearly, you are not ready to play with the big boys. You broke trust, Dayton, and in the great black, facing the unknown, trust is all we have."

"I pushed back the minimum!" Dayton insisted.

"And lost your personal challenge, which sums up to zero, as far as I'm concerned!" Jim almost shouted at Yorktown now "You broke trust, Dayton! Destroyed a Vulcan vessel! Embarrassed us in front of the Elders and nearly got yourself and Sulu killed! So shut up about that fucking minimum, already! You're lucky to be alive!"

"Idiot." Sulu breathed.

"Shut the fuck up, Hikaru! Back off!" Jim shouted again, this time at his best friend, and there was that pain again, his whole body burned, as if it was cooked inside the warp chamber all over again. He used every ounce of his will to stay upright and not curl into a ball before his crewmen.

"Are you alright, sir?" Sulu asked with worry, as he detected something was wrong.

"I just want to go to sleep, is all." Jim frowned at them. "Now I said my piece, and it's your turn. Do you have anything smart to say, Yorktown?"

"Not at this point, sir." Dayton mumbled.

"And you, Hikaru?"

"Go to sleep, Jim." Sulu said.

"Thank you." Jim carefully rose on his feet. "Dismissed."

"I'll handle the dishes." Dayton hurried to say.

"Can I walk you to your room, Jim?" Sulu asked.

"No, I'm good." Jim brushed him off; no one should enter his room to see his side project, he can crush on his bed in agony while he gets there. "Good night."

Chapter End Notes

On my next update, I will share another status report for those who are interested. See you soon, and best wishes to all.
The Needs Of The Many

Chapter Notes

As promised- I give you a status report. This is a continuation of the last statues report given at chapter 28:

• Chapters 1-36- are out (obviously) and will probably be only revisited for grammar and typos, as most.

• Chapters 37-47- are almost good to go, some are in better shape than others, they are still under intense editing but I don’t think I’ll run into major problems there.

• Chapters 48-52- are written but still in a bad shape and in need of a lot of work to meet my standard.

• Chapters 53-55- sadly, they are not written yet, although I have a plan for them both. I hope to get to them soon.

Next chapter is the last one of the second act.
Then, I am going to take a break, am still thinking for how long.

But I do need a break- to rest, refresh, tend to family obligations and work on the last act that I still am not very pleased with, Plus, I think you also deserve a break from me, right? Lol.

Well, yeah, I hope you'll enjoy this update, but it is a heavy and a gloomy chapter, just so you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Mature

He was back on the bridge of the Enterprise, and Sulu pulled the ship smoothly out of the docking bay, just in time for it to get destroyed as the rest of the fleet upon arriving on Vulcan.

Then he was on the bridge again, as Admiral Marcus loomed from the main screen and there was nothing he could do but turn to his crew and ask for their forgives, seconds before the Vengeance fired, and they were all up in flames.

And he was in the radioactive chamber and was kicking at the core reactor, but the damn thing would not budge, and he screamed as the radiation washed through him, and he kicked and kicked again, until there was no more strength in him, so he fell down to the floor, dying, knowing that everyone else would follow soon.

And he was on the bridge again, watching helplessly as Krall’s drones were tearing the Enterprise apart, chewing though it, like a school of hungry Piranhas, ripping the flesh of its prey, and the hall was breached and there was no more air.
No air, he had pushed the Vulcan too far, beyond the reach of logic, he had made that mistake, and no one dared to intervene, as Spock snapped his neck and ended his life.

And he was back in his room. In his messy, dark room upon the Vokau, gasping for air on the sweat soaked sheets, and time was running out.

In three days time, maybe even two, the ritual will end, and he might be dead, and the schematics would never be transferred to section 31 on time, and his beloved Enterprise would have to battle the Klingons again, in a fight it cannot hope to win.

He stumbled out of bed to see what his PADDs were doing. The stand alone PADD has ended the analysis of the files his fake engineer received. The files were legit, complete and clean of malware, which was the good news.

The bad news was that his code did not break into the comm system yet.

He studied the results of his latest attacks, made some changes in the parameters and launched a new one. The need to diversify and install hardware into the comm system was starting to look unavoidable.

He should start making preparations, and create a subroutine firm enough to operate without further intervention, an independent programming that could run itself to end goal even after he's dead.

But where to the place it? How? And when? Tonight was dedicated for the closing speech, Elder T'Pau's challenge, the last challenge of the ritual. He should get ready for that as well.

Not enough time.
Not nearly enough time.

Where did I go wrong? What did I miss? Was there an error in my prioritizing?

Not now! Not helping!

You failed! You pathetic, good for nothing hick!

No, not helping either!


He dragged himself to the shower, and tried masturbating under the flow of hot water; maybe it was a good idea to gets some release, only for a short while, just to take the edge off, to gain back some clarity.

He imagined an Earth girl, very beautiful and naked Earth girl, with long black hair, and lithe, smooth limbs, and she was under him, body pressed to body, hearts beating together. And he kissed her warm, brown skin- plump full lips, lovely narrow chin, sharp collar bones, heavy breasts, dark perky nipples, small navel, on his descent to that hidden place between her legs.

She was moaning, making those lewd, sweet sounds, trembling with anticipation, and then, as he settled into position, nestled between her soft thighs, breathing in her sweet musk smell he heard a roar in the background, a very male kind of roar, an angry, throaty one.

A jealousy boyfriend? A husband? What the fuck was someone like that doing in his fantasy?
Ruining his alone time?

But he was, and that angry, brutal, male got a hold on him, tore him away from the girl, and tossed him against the shower tiles.

The fuck happened?

Has it come to this? Was he not able to even jack himself off? Talking about pathetic.

He noticed that his erection was gone, though; might it be the Vulcan drug? Chemically suppressing his libido? Isn't that great?

So he finished the shower, got dressed and decided on a change of scenery. He remembered T'Sel mentioning a botanic garden, sounded like a good place to go and relax a little, maybe find some inspiration for his speech.

"Computer, where is the botanic garden onboard?"

"The Vokau's botanic garden is located at Deck 6, and its aim is to preserve all surviving fauna and flora originated from Vulcan, for study, backup, and support of the repopulation efforts on New Vulcan. It is open for visitors from 07:00 to 28:00 every day, advanced appointment is unnecessary, general security clearance is necessary, adhering to staff orders is mandatory."

Thanking the computer was illogical.

Deck 6 it is.

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The botanic garden was all he could hope for, beautiful, serene, and awe inspiring. He didn't know how but the Vulcan had managed to create a real sense of the outdoors, blue skies and the illusion of a horizon and no hint of mantle paving in sight, what a great engineering achievement.

He walked the paths, of this wonderful, vast garden and was surrounded with all kinds of plants—trees, bushes, weed, even some kinds of moss, all alien and beautiful; it almost felt like planet-side.

Life forms thrived here in ever shape, color and function, which but in no way they could be mistaken as Earthlings. They had colors of green so deep, almost mistaken for black, or strange purples, there were some blues and grays even.

Most of the vegetation had fleshy leaves, and bloated trunks, specialized in conserving water, some samples had the capacity to spread or retract theirs leaves, in order to protect them from sand storms, and radiation as expected at the proximity of their unstable home-star and violent, arid weather on their home planet. Same reason probably why Vulcan reproductive organs, in both males and females were protected inside a sheath, so Spock once explained.

There were all sorts of bugs there too, crawling on the ground, on the plants, flying in the air. Naturally they didn't stay in one place long enough for Jim to study them, but he caught a glimpse of their beauty, and their rich, colorful verity. They didn't know that they were onboard a starship, in a foreign vertical universe and not at their natural habitat.
The saddest part of this garden were the rocks, of all things, probably collected from the debris of Vulcan itself that was left behind, swirling in space. They were handled with such care, guarded by barriers and some were even placed behind force fields, which suggested that they were so rare; it almost brought tears into Jim's eyes.

After an hour or so of walking in that large, empty and quiet garden, Jim found a bench to seat on, in front of some trees, and a small pond, where vibrant green fish swam.

He tried to think about his opening speech, which angle to take, what to say that hadn't already been said. He wondered what Sobar was preparing; the Vulcan probably had his speech ready even before they came on board.

But Sobar has also proven to be not at all that rigid, he was capable of adjusting to changing circumstances and make use of every opening that manifested itself. His choice to fight Spock, for one thing, showed his ability to surprise others, including Elder Svern. So what did he have in store for their final verbal duel?

Duel.

To the death, against Sobar, a horrifying rival, a skillful warrior, ruthless killer and an unstoppable force. It will be painful, so very painful, but hey, at least it will be quick.

He was so caught up in thought; he didn’t even notice the child that had sneaked up on him, like a predator on its shy prey. He nearly jumped out of his skin as she presented herself to him, standing in front of the bench in a safe distance, ogling him.

She had honey colored eyes, framed by thick, black eyelashes, had a jet black hair, a bit longer than average, framing her pretty round face, and she wore a metallic green dress and matching gloves. She seemed to be anywhere between five to eight years old, Jim really sucked at estimating a child's age.

"Hello, there." He smiled at her.

Now it was her turn to hitch her breath and draw a few steps backwards, as if she never expected him to be able to speak.

"So you never saw an alien before, huh?" he noted, amused.

She said something in Vulcan, her sweet voice disclosing both fear and curiosity.

In any other given day; he'd be out of his way to engage with her, to make a funny face or an interesting sounds like a whistle, but not today, he was not in a friendly mood, his mind preoccupied, his body exhausted; so happens he had made a pretty lousy subject for the girl's first contact.

"I'm Jim, a male human, nice to meet you." He mumbled, unmoving.

The girl came forward again, encouraged by his limp body that posed no threat. She could not stop starring at him.

He breathed and forced himself to smile again. "Yup, everything green you have, I have in red."

She came even closer, pointing at his hands, it must have seen obscene to her, someone walking around without their hands covered.
"No touch telepathy." He showed her his hands "See? Not Vulcan. Red fingertips."

She studied his stretched out hand, then touched it, and then got bold and moved forward to touch his face.

"Hurt, hurt, that hurts..." He mumbled as she pulled at his bottom lip, then he moved away her hand. "Yes, red lips, red gums, red tongue, red everything."

She shook her head in disbelief then gasped.

Before he could stop her, she was tugging at his round ear with one hand, and his blonde hair with the other.

"Ouch, no, stop it please!" He almost cried out.

"T'Sala!" Someone shouted.

The girl cocked her head towards the sound and let go of his poor ear and scalp.

There was a young teen Vulcan there, his savior, with a small bunch of children that followed her around, holding PADDs in their small hands.

The girl picked up her own PADD from the floor and rejoined the group.

The teen viewed Jim and found him to be mostly unharmed, and then she nodded towards him and moved the class along, talking to them in Vulcan and gesturing towards the surrounding vegetation.

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The class moved on, leaving him alone again, which was good and bad, because right now his mind was a depressing place to share or be left alone in.

He really should go back to his room to work. He has probably lost two hours already, two hours that were so valuable, so many things to do, and so little time to do them. But he was human, an illogical creature, and his body refused cooperating with his mind.

Go to your room.

Nope, don’t wanna.

You must prepare your speech, or the hardware, or at least have a look at the data Sarek gave you, maybe something useful will jump out of it.

But such a nice view, wanna seat here and sulk.

What? You cannot afford sulking right now.

Watch me.

You stupid, illogical, blonde!
See if I care!

"James Tiberius Kirk!" Someone called "There you are, at last."

Jim woke up from his thoughts and searched for the origin of that voice. It came from behind the bench, on the gravel path; two had walked towards him, Elder Soval and a young aid that supported him walking safely towards the bench.

On any other given day, Jim would have been delighted to see elder Soval coming and seeking him out, as he desperately envied the leave team for the attention they got from the Elders of their faction, while he and his team were ignored and forgotten, but as they say, this was too little, too late.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk." Soval said as the aid helped him to seat on the bench besides him, and then the young Vulcan bowed and left them to their privacy.

"Greetings, Elder Soval." Jim answered; his voice devoid of enthusiasm.

Elder Soval studied him for a while, before speaking again. "Your shine has dimmed a little, are you under the weather?"

Under an eclipse, Jim thought to himself, and didn’t even smile. He knew this was rude, but he could not master enough interests to talk to the elder, funny, after all that time that he longed and yearned for this opportunity.

"Is your speech prepared for tonight?" Soval insisted.

Jim could only lower his gaze to the rounded tips of his boots.

"I see." Soval almost smiled now, and shortly patted Jim's thigh like a forgiving grandfather. "Very unlike you, to resort to silence, yet very understandable, I take no offence. I hope, however, that you will be willing to listen to what I have to say, maybe I'd be able to explain things that have eluded you thus far, and even be of some minor assistance."

"You're too late." Jim whispered, breathing it out, could not help himself.

"I am just on time." Soval objected politely. "For the past few weeks, I was waiting for the right moment, where my intervention would be the most beneficial, and do as little as harm as possible, the moment is now upon us, as we approach the realm of the 1.92%"

That was a nice way to phrase it, 'approaching the realm of the 1.92%', aka the time where you get to die.

Jim smiled to his boots; he had billion questions and the motivation to ask none.

"I do not need to read your mind for this one. You ask yourself- why were you chosen for this ritual? To get involved in an inner Vulcan matters. A human? An alien? An unfit match for a duel to the death against a Vulcan.

"What was the logic of placing a human on a pathway to a fight that he cannot hope to win? And therefore sabotage the efforts of my faction of winning this challenge. Doesn't seem very logical, is it? Yet the answer is complicated, Son, luckily for us, we have some time."

Time? I've got no time.
"Jim, please, I know you are at your limits, but do listen to me. You struggle to make sense of it all, and I know that whatever the outcome is, the knowledge I wish to share with you would at least, bring you some peace."

I am not afraid to die, Jim answered in his head.

By joining Starfleet he knew he was in the business of risk, it came with the territory; this constant shadow always hovered over his head; and he has already learned to live with it.

Or die; hey, been there, done that, he already got the hang of dying too.

The thing he didn’t get however was- why die a pointless death? A death that would likely serve no purpose; could have been easily foreseen and avoided.

"You remember the odds calculated for this ritual, yes?"

He nodded, numbers tended to stick to his mind.

This was in the information he insisted on removing from the preview report he gave to his crew- 63.81% for the 'Leave' team to win, 34.27% for the 'Remain' team to win, 1.92% of a tie.

"I do not think that we have shared the next set of data with you. We have run the odds for a 'Remain' team consisted only of Vulcans; I'd like you to get acquainted with those numbers as well- 76.22% for the 'Leave' team. 12.98% for the 'Remain' team and 10.8% for a tie. Interesting, isn’t it?"

The butterfly that landed on his shoe, was very beautiful and interesting too, colored yellow, green and blue, it lingered for a short while and then it flew.

"Numbers do not lie, the chances of the 'Remain' position was very low to begin with, so low that the 'Leave' team expected to win by a landslide. Elder Svern is very much disappointed at this point, believe me, he did not expect such a close match.

"But I was not surprised at all, I knew humans stood a better chance at winning for the remain position, higher than 34.27%, in my opinion, but still, all agreed that humans had better chances than Vulcans. Fascinating, don’t you think?"

Fascinating an eon ago, maybe.

"Do you know why there was such a significant gap between the calculations? Because more than 85% of young adults and teen vulcans believe in leaving the federation, our best and brightest, their young energy and strong Katras are already set on departure. We can make them defend the 'Remain' position, but we cannot force their spirits to do so."

Jim shrugged, so they had a problem finding enthusiastic and determined youth to defend the 'Remain' position, so what? Was that a good enough reason to drag humans into the Vulcans' mess?

"Problem is even worse than that, we have lost four elders since the demise of Vulcan, the official reason was old age, but I suspect broken hearts were to fault, all lost their mates and family members on that horrific, dreadful day."

Yeah, Jim remembered that day, remembered it all too well.

"Those elders were replaced by others who had a military background. The Vulcans who serves in the military have an advantage, you see, they usually serve with their bonded mates, because one
can never guaranty a safe return to Vulcan, come their time."

Pon Farr, is what you mean, but you wouldn’t say.

Pon Farr, Pon Farr, Pon Farr.

"Vulcan soldiers are leaning towards 'Leave' and so are their elders, and as time progress, this trend will only continue and get stronger. I fear the day the high council becomes an extended arm of the military, but there is nothing I can do about it. Can you see where I am trying to get?"

Jim shrugged again.

"So leave the Federation, then, it's only logical." He mumbled against his decision of self imposed silence. "What is the use of resisting the enviable? If what you say is true, then in fifteen to twenty years you're gonna have a 'Leave' majority on the council and you'd get out of the Federation anyway with or without the ritual. What we do here is just… biding time."

"Oh, Mr. Kirk, you please me so, thank you for joining the conversation" Soval almost laughed now. "And your logic is sound, whoever, biding time is all I can do at the moment, and 'Plak If Fee' results are compelling for a century and a half. My hope is that this period of time is long enough to turn the tide in our favor again. I hope that in the time you'll buy us, we will be able to convince the young to correct their path."

"I don't know. Just because they are young, are they automatically wrong? They don't get to choose their own path?"

"Leaving the Federation is an error, a grave error." Elder Soval continued. "The young are prone to error, even if they are Vulcan. That is why we have a council of Elders; where one must be at least 250 years old to be even considered for membership."

Well, Vulcans did get to live up to a 350, Jim thought, some even lucky enough to reach 400. Spock was a teenager, in Vulcan perspective, yeah, that Spock.

"Do you understand now, Mr. Kirk? Why this had to be you?"

"I understand the why, but not the… why." Jim found himself engaged in that conversation despite his best efforts, he was probably too tired to drive this point home, and this was also his way of punishing the Elder for being too late, childish but true.

"I hope that you understand my insistence to include humans in the ritual, and not just any humans, but the ones who witnessed Vulcan destruction and developed an emotional affinity to our fate as a result. Their Katra, your Katra, are strong enough to be put against the Katra of our young."

"So, because I helped saving whatever was left of Vulcan, I get to die for it too." Jim could not help his resentment; he lowered his eyes to his boots again.

"If you die, Captain Kirk, you will die for the sake of Human kind." Soval corrected him with a weary smile, and it piqued Jim's interest.

Jim looked up to study the Elder's face, Soval's features, as expected, did not give much away, but a sense of sadness and sorrow was conveyed through his eyes.

"Destroying Vulcan took only one troubled Romulan." Soval reminded him. "Equipped with a mining technique that was invented a century ago by the Vulcans and red matter, also invented by Vulcans from another universe, although here we have come close to developing it independently
as well, dare I share this information with you.

"So imagine what kind of harm the Vulcans might unleash upon the Alpha quarter, if they become illogical, resentful and unhinged. What kind of havoc could they raise if their logic takes them there? Who would be their victims, if not humans?"

"Do I have to?" Jim mumbled, and shook himself, in an effort to stay focused or to get rid of that troubling notion.

But Soval had no mercy and he pressed on.

"Now imagine the Vulcans turning to the Romulans for aid, for salvation, now what would become of that? The Romulans are ruthless and blood thirsty, they will devour what is left of Vulcan with greed and excitement. They envy our stronger telepathic capabilities, and our accumulated knowledge, knowledge that they have forsaken in favor of perusing power and control instead.

"Now what do you think will happen, James Kirk, when the Romulans gain the Vulcan telepathic abilities and their advance technologies?"

"An inner-galactic war." Jim mumbled without merit, he sent his hands to his head, to rub his temples, having that nagging headache again.

"Highly likely." Elder Soval agreed. "The Romulans and the Klingons will turn on the Federation, they will see it as a lazy, easy prey."

"But how can I help by dying?" Jim could not help but chuckle now; he turned his gaze again to look at their peaceful surrounding, standing in complete contrast to the grim and dark future predictions given by the Elder at his side.

"That has not been determinate yet, it may not come to that." Soval answered.

"I'd get to die and help the Vulcans out of the Federation while at it." Jim insisted. "Seems like a useless death to me, and a lousy reward for saving the council of Elders, if I might add."

"I am sorry, James, but it had to be you, and it had to be now. If we were to wait even five more years, we might lose more Elders and the 'Leave' faction would gain the majority for indefinitely, this was a risk I could not take."

"But Sobar is going to kill me anyway! You are going to leave anyway!" Jim almost shouted his resentment; it surprised him too, because he just got to realize how intense that resentment was.

"Numbers don't lie; son. Even if we sum the 1.92% of a tie with the 61.81% of a 'Leave' Victory to get a total of 65.73%, it is still lower than the 76.22% chance of a win if only Vulcans were involved."

"Great, death by numbers." Jim could not help but chuckle again.

Soval sighed and set in silence for a long moment, while tears of frustration fell from Jim's eyes, and he wiped then off with irritation. Seemed like Soval was searching for the words that would make a human understand, but those words were hard to come by.

Another class of small children came into view, and the teacher escorting them glanced at Elder Soval and suddenly realized with horror that they were disturbing an Elder.
This realization had him bewilder and frozen for a second, and when he recovered, and started hurrying the children the other away. Yet, there was this small boy who wouldn't budge, too fascinated by the presence of a human, his teacher almost had to drag him away by his pointy ear.

"Your star has dimmed a little, no doubt about it." Soval stated as they were alone again. "But I have faith in you, James Tiberius Kirk. I have watched you throughout this challenge and I presume I have got to know you a little.

"You are a bright, brave man, a fearless soldier, a good leader and a hopeless optimist. I know that if it comes to this, you will face Sobar with determination, your fighting spirit will be ignited again, and you will fight to win."

"Sure, if you say so…" Kirk wanted to laugh again, but only had the strength to sigh.

"Vulcans are not invulnerable; you know, we have our weak points as any other living being. For the past few years, you have served with Spock, on the Enterprise. Did he not teach you of the ways a human could face a Vulcan in battle and come with the upper hand?"

"Yes, I think he did."

"So you are not without knowledge, there is hope, Jim, there is always hope."

"I have no taste for a kill."

"Of course not, but you do have a taste for life, do you?"

Kirk only breathed out now; that was supposed to be an easy question, right?

"One more thing that had probably eluded you so far, Jim…" Soval started and then paused, unsure.

"What?" Jim straightened, stretching his body on the bench, itching to get up.

"This might be unwise." Soval almost smiled now. "You'd probably wish to avoid discussing events that might be set to motion as a result of your passing."

"No, I don't mind, if that means my death would have meaning beyond losing the Vulcans."

"In my assessment, if my logic is sound, your death, should it occur, will have a profound impact on the younger generation."

"How? The Plak If Fee is confidential; nothing of it would reach the public."

"The gathered attendees of the ritual, Jim, did you think that they were picked to witness it by lottery? They were handpicked by the council of elders; they are our next leaders, generals, scientists, poets and people of influence, they are the ones that will become elders in due time.

"They will see a noble human, an alien, fighting for what he thinks is in their best interest, fighting against all odds, with bravery and honor, dying for them. It will create a lingering impression in their mind, in their Katra, a spark that will not wither, even if we are lost and far away. There would always be a cinder left, that one day, might bring them back home."

"Home? The Federation is no home. It is a humanitarian, peaceful organization, alright, but home? Aren't you a little carried away?"

Soval now openly smiled at him, his eyes warm and wise, and sad too, yes, sad.
"Don’t you have a saying- Home is where the heart is? Very well, James, I wish not to engage you for much longer, you should go and prepare for tonight's speech, or at least get some rest."

Get some Rest? Nightmares, more likely.

"Elder Soval, I want an explanation that is more than a human chalice; I believe you awe me this much. Why did you say 'Home'?"

"As you wish; my young one." Soval confirmed with amusement "However, to answer your question, I'll have to explain why I am part of the 'Remain' Faction, and that is…"

"A very private issue, I know."

"Also a complicated one." Soval finished his say.

Jim shrugged "But we've got time, right?"

"Would you bear with me? I'll have to take you far into Vulcan history before I can reach my point."

"I love a good story every once in a while." Jim smiled now, totally immersed in the conversation, despite of himself.

Soval nodded his content and then moved his gaze to look at the beautiful scenery that surrounded them.

"Vulcans evolved from felines like creatures similar to what you have on your Earth. They enjoyed a rich, bountiful environment for hundreds of thousands of years. They were solitary creatures, hunters and nomads, they were touch telepaths, mainly to allow a couple to mate without the risk of killing each other, and maintain a child-mother bond, until it becomes an adult.

"But then, the conditions on Vulcan has changed, worsened. The unstable red dwarf star of our system had began a violent, radiation filled, flaring period, and thus the planet got hotter, arid, and prone to wild, electrical storms. That change had forced the Vulcans to get together, to form tribes, to cooperate within clans. Finding food and shelter as a group was much easier than as individuals.

"Those changes have created the first Vulcan cultures, however the basic solitary, violent nature of the Vulcan was never really gone, instead- clans clashed with clans, wars were fought over resources, mainly access to groundwater and fertile lands.

"As the centauries pasted, villages became cities, clans became nations, spears and lirpas became guns and atom bombs. If not for Surak's teaching we'd be all dead by now, killed by our own nature.

"The great teacher, Master Surak, gave us a powerful tool to help us overcome our aggressive attributes - reason and logic, instead of bloodshed and misery. This tool has helped us become one of the first races in the alpha quadrant to reach warp. But this tool is flawed, Son, and not many are able or willing to see its defects and frailties.

"We have become victims of our own success. We have banished every trail of emotion to a place so deep and so dark; we cannot even reach it and see the danger that lurks there. The pendulum is held tight to one side, the tension is rising, and the rope is ready to snap.

"I am fond of a metaphor, and often use one to describe this situation."
"Emotions are like a body of water, like an ocean, ever changing, always restless, unreliable, strong, deep and mysterious. Many would say- unpleasant, frightening, and repelling.

"The Vulcans are on the shoreline, celebrating their victory as the waters recedes, thinking that they have banished their enemy. But they do not seem to understand that water tend to retreat just before the Tsunami."

Jim stretched his legs again, itching to get up, but also sort of mesmerized, he let Soval's words sink in. He still didn’t figure out what this had to do with the 'Remain' position, and he was too weary to ask.

"Now my greatest critics say that I put the needs of the Federation before the needs of the Vulcans." Soval continued, after giving Jim a long pause.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." Jim mumbled, could not help himself.

"True." Soval smiled again. "However, this phrase is generally misused and misunderstood. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, in very strict and narrow scenarios, where you can identify with 100% certainty, who are the many, who are the few and what are the needs. It happens rarely, less often than one might think.

"I do not put the needs of the Federation above the needs of my people; I care deeply for my people and their survival. And I know, I am certain beyond doubt, that remaining in the Federation is crucial for our survival.

"You see, Human is the only race that could save us when that Tsunami hits our shores. It's a long time coming, I saw the signs before Vulcan's destruction, I saw it a long while ago. The loss of Vulcan only accelerated that process, it did not create it.

"Humans are the only ones capable of guiding us when darkness comes, they have the superior emotional balance, and they are far more experienced with living with untamed emotion, alongside logic.

"I am not so optimistic about the chances of Vulcan survival; the data is unclear and very much is debatable, no one knows for sure. I only know this one thing, Jim- If we leave the human race to their fate, withdraw from the Federation; we leave our best chance of survival behind."

Jim breathed, and he had to get up now, to get his circulation going. He started pacing before the bench, restless and troubled.

Soval viewed him with unhindered amusement.

"I could talk on and on, about the spiritual aspect of touch telepathy, Katra balance, the duality of the universe and so many other things, many tend to forget that there is so much more to us than just logic."

Jim smiled at this with unease.

"All I wish to add is that we see you. We see you through this ritual, your bravery, your struggle, your creativity, the risks you have taken, the mistakes you have made…the full range of your emotions, and the intensity of your Katra. Everything is taken into account, even challenges lost supplied insight and valuable information, when we cast our votes, we will make use of it all."

"So not all is lost?" Jim smiled again, refusing to hope, but entertaining the idea.
"Nothing is ever truly lost." Soval agreed. "I see, however, that we have reached the limit of your current attention span. I take no offence, James Kirk, those last few weeks have taken their toll on everyone. I'll make my leave now. I hope I have advanced your understanding of the situation. I hope I have been a little bit of help."

"You have." Jim assured the Elder. "I am grateful."

"Well, then, let me call my aid…"

"I can help you to him." Jim offered.

"No need, thank you." Soval said and used a pin on his robes to send a signal.

"Just one more thing." Jim remembered "Please, sir, could you be of help with this one more thing?"

The young Vulcan showed at the edge of the path, but Soval gestured for him to halt and wait a bit longer.

"What is it?" he asked.

"One of my crew members had an unpleasant encounter with Elder Vellua. The elder had used touch telepathy and created a mind meld with her which was very traumatic. Is that even allowed?"

"Was it consensual?"

"It was, but it kind of went sideways. It was very problematic."

"Problematic indeed." Soval agreed. "See, Elders have that privilege while other Vulcans are forbidden to use telepathy in this ritual, they can ask for a mind meld if they see it as a necessity to help them formulate their stand. If any other Vulcan would have done so, I'd be already on my way to get them punished, but an Elder… Elder Vellua, you say? Very unusual, I will investigate."

"That's all I can hope for. Thank you again, Elder Soval."

"I'd say peace and long life…” Soval said while getting up. "But 'Good luck' seems to me more appropriate."

"Thanks again."

"Have hope, James Kirk, not all is lost, good luck." Elder Soval smiled again and took a small bow towards the human, and Jim returned the gesture.

The aid then rushed forwards again to help the Elder, and they both left the garden, leaving Jim behind, lost in thought.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for your constant support for this story, you never cease to amaze me!
Everybody stay strong and safe, my best wishes to all.
Hey everyone, believe it or not, we are 67% done :-)  
Also- this chapter ends the second act, so it is a good place to pause.

This will be the last post for a while, I need this break to rest and work on the third act which I am still not so very happy with.

you also need a break, I think, lol.

You were so invested in this story and sent me all those lovely reviews, exceeding my wildest imagination!
I never dreamed to get so many reviews, none of my other stories even reached 60, but it is not the quantity, but the content of your reviews that blew me away.

So, I'm taking a month off-line, I will respond to comments but will not post new updates, not until the 05.07 (Force majeure excluded). Be sure that I will do everything within my power to finish this story, because an unfinished story, is not a story at all.

I thank you all, from the depths of my heart.

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Additional warnings: Mentions of deaths and executions. (Old Vulcan, Tarsus 4)

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The main gathering hall was packed full of vulcans as it was for the opening ceremony, some attendees were youngsters, pre-teens even, sitting at the aisles because they could not find a seat. It seemed like every Vulcan who was not in charge of the ship's currently not falling apart had come to witness the last challenge of the 'Plak If Fee'.

This did nothing at all to alleviate the pressure Jim was already feeling, and yet, it did not make it worse. He had no energy within him to even panic, at such a low point, low spirit, low concentration, body crippled with aches and mind tortured with worry, there was no further way down to go. He came here unprepared, could not bring himself to write a closing speech, not even in the form of bullet points, he had failed this challenge already and could not bring himself to care.

After talking to Elder Soval and before the closing ceremony, he used those last few hours to study the Vokau's available maps, trying to figure out a place to install the malware intended to hack the communication system.

Simultaneously, he wrote code like crazy, a code to encrypt and compress the detector schematics so it would be easier to send them without being found out, and a code to use on the device he
played on placing in the Vokau to break into the comm system and send the files, stable enough to make independent calls without further instructions, in case he'd be dead before it would be activated.

Time was up before he knew it, and Sulu almost broke his door, trying to get his attention, so he wouldn't be late again for the last challenge. And now he was seated in the front row of the hall, to his right side there was Sulu and to his left, Kuvac, and he did his best to look alive, even if not interested in what was going on around him.

Captain Setal climbed up the stage first, and took his place at the podium; he gazed at the attendees with a stern face, disclosing tension and weariness against his best efforts.

"Dearly gathered, Members of the high council, warriors of the 'Plak If Fee'' he opened "Welcome to the last public stage of this ritual. We now take part in the last Elder's challenges, Elder T'Pau's challenge, which will conclude this month of great effort, this remarkable endeavor, to pull our nation from its state of confusion and place it on a constructive path again.

"I cannot express my gratitude in a profound enough way to commemorate everyone that had taken part in this monumental enterprise. Your deeds will shine like a beacon to guide the Vulcan people for generations to come.

"Thank you warriors, for your devotion and determination. Thank you Elders, for your wisdom and guidance. Thank you judges, for your attention and honest evaluations. Thank you witnesses, for your attentiveness and patience.

"And last but not least- Thank you, my crew, the staff of the Vokau, who worked night and day to ensure a smooth operation for the ritual. You operated under sub-optimal conditions and the straining affect of a full blown Periapsis. You may have worked quietly in the background, but nothing could have been accomplished without you.

"And now, before I give the platform to Elder T'Pau, let's review the current state of the challenge.

"Last time we've touch on the subject the score between the teams was 6:2 in favor of the 'Leave' team. Since then, we have finished all team members' challenges and Elder Svern's challenge as well. Here are the results:

"Green6 challenge of chess game tournament has been concluded in favor of the 'Remain' team, earning them 2 points.

"Green2 challenge of the star orbit race has been concluded in favor of the 'Leave' team, earning them 2 points.

"Red1 challenge of a musical performance has been concluded in favor of the 'Leave' team, earning them 2 points.

"Red 4's challenge of the probe assemble has ended with a failure for both teams, earning no team any points.

"Elder Svern's challenge of series of duels ended in favor of the 'Leave' team, and earned them 2 more points.

"Red3 challenged for a second orbital race, had won 2 points for the 'Remain' team.

"Red6 and green3 mutual dare challenge for 4 points, ended with two losses earning the opposite team 2 points.
"Green5 challenged Red5 for 2 point, and declined his counter challenge, resulting in a loss of 1 point for the 'Leave' team and the earnings of 4 by the 'Remain' team.

"So to sum it up, the current score between the teams is 13: 12, in favor of the 'Leave' team. And now, there is just 2 more points to be won through Elder T'Pau's challenge and with that, the personal stage of the 'Plak if Fee' will come to an end.

"And now, please welcome our revered Elder T'Pau."

Elder T'Pau reached the stage with two guards escorting her to the podium, to make sure she'd arrive safely. She settled and gave the audience a long regard with her old, keen eyes, and waited for the guards to take back their place, only then she began to speak.

"I have been praying for the gods of war, all this time, not to demand more blood than they have already been offered. I pray still, but it seems like further bloodshed may not be avoided. Please, wise members of the high council, take this into consideration while you cast your vote, come time.

"Tonight we conclude the ritual, with my challenge.

"Tomorrow, the Elders will open their office doors and welcome anyone of the attendees and witnesses of this ritual, warriors excluded, who wishes to have a word with them. So if you learned something, if you have an insight, if you wish to share concerns or whatever it is that on your mind, do it tomorrow or not at all.

"The day after tomorrow, the Elders will take for themselves to meditate in their private quarters; we will fast and contemplate on what we have learned.

"The day after that- the council will assemble at the Temple of the mind, on deck 7, for a final discussion and a vote. Each and every member must vote, either 'stay' or 'leave', no one would be allowed to hold on to their undecided position, myself included.

"This would be a highly secluded event and I ask everyone to respect it and keep away from the Temple until we are done. With this, the Plak If Fee should end. However, if we reach an unfortunate tie, it will be dealt the day after the casting of the votes.

"Please join us in prayer for this ritual's success."

She stopped talking, to form the Ta'al with both her hands, raised up in the air above her head. The crowd stood up and did the same, Jim included, although reluctantly, and they said something in Vulcan in a low voice, but it was so very powerful to hear all of them whisper it together, even if he had no idea what it meant.

After that awe inspiring moment had passed, everyone set down again, in prefect order, and elder T'Pau lowered her hands as well, bowed towards the crowd and continued.

"And now for my challenge-

"I chose a challenge similar to Elder Soval's, only no debate this time. Every team leader will have his say, his final words to the gathered, and the group joining us here tonight, in green robes, chosen from the 'Leave' faction, will judge the speakers and give 2 points to the one who gave the most compelling speech.

"First, I welcome Commander Sobar, son of Elder Svern, to the stage."
Son of Svern? Jim awoken from his light doze with a jerk, this was mentioned nowhere in the reports he had gotten before, but still, it made perfect sense.

No wonder they were so cozy with each other.

Come to think of it, the fact that Spock was the son of Sarek was also not mentioned in any official document either! Damn Vulcans and their privacy!

Elder Svern was Sobar's father, of course!

Commander Sobar received the invitation with calm and rose from his seat to climb up to the stage and accept the floor from Elder T'Pau. He bowed as she left the stage and waited respectfully as she took her seat among the elders, with the aid of the guards.

Sobar still looked a bit weak, Jim noted, after all, only three days ago he was beaten within an inch of his life. He was paler than usual and thinner than Jim remembered, he walked a bit more carefully than before, but he also seemed more resolved, more determinant than ever, a cold ire hid behind the blue of his eyes.

Jim wondered what he had in store for this time; if he was going to surprise the council again, he didn't have to wait for long.

"High council of the Elders; honored Elder T'Pau, dearly gathers, warriors of the 'Remain' team and the staff of the Vokau." Sobar began calmly "We have come this far, and the journey has been long, demanding and painful. It is closing time, and I, as all, pray for its blessed conclusion."

Sobar paused, and took a deep breath.

Then, he searched the audiends and caught Kirk's eyes of all people.

Jim struggled under the gaze, but Sobar didn't let go, he glared at him, like a phaser beam, intense and deadly. Fortunately, the Vulcan was the one to break eye contact first, as he turned his head to scan the rest of the crowd.

"First, I wish to convey my gratitude to the Federation, for sending its best to go against the tide. Taking this effort, trying to keep a population of now a small city within the organization, shows how much regard the Federation holds for the Vulcan nation, and it has not eluded me this whole time, not for a second.

"Second, I'd like to express my appreciation to the 'Remain' team. At first, when I've learned that a group of none vulcans will take the defense of the 'Remain' position; I feared that we were propped up to a humiliating easy win. I am relieved to say that this turned out to be quite the opposite.

"Captain James Kirk, and the rest of his team, had managed to take their low starting point, and with creativity, wit and daring, they have given us a good fight, revealing themselves as worthy opponents. So for that, you have my gratitude as well."

Jim had to admit he was surprised to receive such respectful treatment from Sobar, he made a mental note for himself to thank the 'Leave' team as well in his, yet been written, and probably would never be written, closing speech.

"Last- A warning to you, in my speech I might refer to private and sensitive subjects, I was given permission to do so by the relevant individuals, but I must issue this warning so you could be prepared as well."
Sobar let another moment pass; looking at the crowd, waiting for a protest or objections, but everyone in the fully packed hall remained quiet.

"Last time I spoke before you, I had mentioned the past and dealt with the presence, however, we all know that what really matters is the future. The future of our race is at stake, the future of our young, our children and the silent majority of the unborn. I will do my best to represent their interest today.

"As we stand in this crossroad, there are two possible futures I can see.

"One future is staying in the Federation. In that future, we will continue to focus on the needs of the many- give away our might, our technologies, and our young, attending to the needs of the Federation.

"Take part in its needless wars; devote our best efforts and recourses for its expansion, have no significant influence over major decisions such as who to consider a friend and who to mark as foe, and continue to waste away to nothing.

"Our children will be manufactured in droves by artificial wombs, would be raised by A.I.s and droids, our youth would be matched by algorithms, and drugs will be administrated to those who could not find a mate.

"We will become soulless and hallow society, always one misstep away from calamity, be it war, UFP neglect, food shortage, genetic deformation or an unknown pandemic.

"Individuals will leave to find their fate among other races, many hybrids will be formed, alien hybrids with unexpected qualities, and unknown affinities, that will change the Vulcan people forever. The Vulcan spirit will die a slow and almost undetectable death, like a failed star, a brown dwarf, a cold, silent cinder, devoid of light and life.

"The other future I see is leaving the Federation. It would be difficult, frightening, even, it may be lonely, but we will become an unstoppable force, a tight unite, clear and coherent as a diamond.

"We will carve our own destiny by ourselves; seek out new allies, forge new alliances, open new trade paths, free from the Federation restrains. We will reach for our keen tuned enemies, over disputes which are long gone and forgotten, and we will make peace with them. If they turn us down, we may even leave this galaxy, and claim our fate in the realm of the Idic.

"All is better than to stay in a Federation that is of no use for us, which only holds us back with burdening tasks, bureaucracy and endless restrictions; serving a bloated, and indifferent system, which claims it fits all but in fact, is suitable for none.

"It takes courage to regain our sovereignty, to let go of our pride, to admit past mistakes and return to reason. But I have faith in you, I have faith in the generations to come, we must not stand in their way, we must not enslave them to past restrictions, obsolete accords and failed perceptions. We have lost almost everything, but we will not lose more time.

"I will not stand idle and watch everything we have fought for go to waste, the society that paid its way into logic and order with bloodshed and endless deaths will not descend into chaos again, not on my watch. The Vulcan nation will not be torn apart by taking in unknown elements and foreign interests.

"Have faith in me, for just like you, I have lost. I have lost my sister, her mate and my three tender nephews. I have lost my beloved bond-mate T'Marr, and without her gracious sister, T'Heli, who
also lost her bond-mate and took me as a humbled substitute, I might have lost my life as well.

"But here I am, standing tall before you, and I urge you to make a brave decision. Two possible futures ahead, choose one, choose wisely, choose boldly, and choose knowingly for you'll be judged.

"Thank you."

The emotional impact of Sovar's personal part of the speech was clear and overwhelming. Not everyone liked being exposed to his intimate ordeals, but most of the younger audience was in awe of his bravery, and the audience broke the silence into small gasping whispers conveyed in the comfort of the dark. Even when Captain Setal took over the podium again, there was still a hum in the hall.

"Thank you, Commander Sobar." The captain said with a hint of irritation at the still going on buzz. "And now I'd like to welcome Captain James T Kirk, of the Federation to present his closing speech, as the leader of the 'Remain' team. Captain Kirk, if you please?"

Oh, shit.

His turn.

All eyes on him now, and he had no clue of what to say.

Way to go, Jimbo, how did we come to this?

"Captain?" the Vokau Captain called again.

Jim had no other choice but to get up and walk to the stage. It felt like he was in a dream, or within a nightmare, actually, where everyone was looking at him and he was naked.

Well, sort of, because he had no plan at all, no idea of what to say, but then he found himself in front of the mic, and the lighting was positioned on him, the Elders were watching, and the judges from the 'Leave' team were waiting, Spock looked at him…

Well I get the point, Jimbo, you've got everyone's attention; what the hell are you going to do with it?

Say sorry? I had more important things to do than prepare a speech?

Ain't gonna cut it; just do what you always do.

Which is?

Improvise.

"Good Evening, ladies and gentleman, Elders of the high council… Commander Sobar and the 'Leave' team… less I forget the Staff of the Vokau, of course, thank you for your generous hospitality."

Ok, you sound stupid.

Shut up, I know.

"Before I begin, I wish to say something directly to Commander Sobar." He caught the 'Leave' leader's eyes and it was a frightening accomplishment.
What were you thinking? What the hell do you even want to say to him?

"Thank you for what you said earlier, it means a lot to me; and you too… I mean, you were a worthy rival- dedicated, unpredictable, and fearless. I hope that this is the last time we face each other as rivals, and maybe next time we could be… ok, friends is probably too much, but allies?"

Sobar's face never gave away any indication of his take on the offer, and he broke eye contact with a cold, sharp tilt of the jaw.

Babbling here, next point please?

Do I have a next point?

"Dearly gathered, revered Elder T'Pau, everyone… remember when I first stood before you and Commander Sobar pointed out that he could not treat me as if I was a Vulcan? Well obviously I am not, but I do not wish to stand here before you as a human either. Well, obviously I am, but I don't want to leave this podium without, at least trying to, present myself as more than a generic human being."

Narcissistic, much? Egocentric, self centered…

Shut up, I do have a point to make.

"So let us begin again- Greetings to all, my name is James Tiberius Kirk, 31 years old, male human. I was born in space, on a shuttle in the midst of a battle, kind of a dramatic start to a dramatic life, I guess.

"I was raised in Riverside, Iowa, USA of United Erath, but that you could have pulled out of my Starfleet file, I just wanted to highlight that Riverside is located near a 'Scorch'.

"This is what we used to call those horrible scars left behind by a weapon of mass destruction unleashed on Earth. You see, an alien alliance called the Xindi, were bent on the destruction of humankind, 83 years before I was born, in one more forgotten, needless war.

"The 'scorch' near Riverside was used as a quarry, because, hey why not? Was already there. I used it once too, as a place to ditch my father's vintage car, seemed like a proper burial place.

"Anyway, dumping that car there had earned me my first felony record, at the age of twelve, and it also made my mother decide that it was best if I moved to Tarsus 4 where my aunt and her family lived.

"You know the story of Tarsus 4 as well, right? Commander Sobar had mentioned it had been noted in my personal file, and other, versus historical documents can also help you understand what happened there if you want to, and yes, it was as horrible as it was reported upon, but there is something I want to highlight from that experience too…"

Watch out, sob territory ahead!

Fuck it, if Sobar can do it, why cannot I?

This is not a pity competition!

I have a point to make!

"I was there, when Kodo's men caught a group of forty of fifty people, dragged them out of the
woods where they were hiding. Poor, unlucky folks… and the soldiers killed them all, with phaser beams set on annihilate, not kill, annihilate. They say it was painless, yeah, but who knows…

"Nothing was left of them, group of forty to fifty people, not even a speck, not even a lingering smell, zero evidence that they have ever existed. When the soldiers left, I came out of my hiding, and I… I had to mark that place.

"I felt compelled to do something, anything, so those victims won’t be forgotten, so their moment of death would be documented. I used my knife on a tree trunk to mark the date and time; it was all I could do."

Reach your point, already, before I start crying in public!

Worse before some Vulcans start crying, there are kids here if you did not notice already, idiot!

"Don’t worry, no more horror stories, and I did not share this to hurt you, or make you relive your own trauma, I just have something to highlight here.

"Life is full of suffering, tremendously so, some as a result of cruel, deliberate, malevolence, some by random, arbitrary catastrophes, most due to a mixture of both. And as one survivor to another, I can tell each and every one of you that I have faith in you, you have endured. You will rise up and fight to live another day. You can do that by leaving the Federation, for sure, I have no doubt about it.

"But is it worth anything to you? That in this infinite multiverse of infinite diversity, infinite in ways that boggles the mind, is it worth to you? That we have found each other in the same tiny quadrant of space, in the same tiny galaxy at the same tiny span of time? What were the odds for that, huh?

"You can logically dismiss it as a happy or a sad coincidence, but I find it worthy, I choose to look at it as a sign that we are kin. Because it doesn't matter if it's green or red, yellow or blue, when we bleed, we bleed the same.

"The Federation was founded in order to protect the lives we find around us, precious, rare, fragile lives. Protect it from random misfortunes, protect it from malice, and protect it from the unknown that is always lurking out there, in the great black.

"It is by no mean perfect, never was, never will be, but it is what we are, what we can become, what we aim at. We aim at this kinship, we honor that bond of proximity that we share, and whatever it is that you need now; we will help you achieve it- either stay, leave or anything in between.

"I don’t want you to have this dystopian future Commander Sobar has just presented, no one in the Federation wants this for you, trust me. But it is trust that was lost here, that made you want to leave. I cannot prevent you from leaving, if that is what you must do, leave, by all means, now, if the Plak If Fee ends to that favor, or 150 years from now, when its results expire.

"But if you leave, I beg you please. Please don’t venture too far away that we could never reach you, please don't change too much so we would not recognize you, and please do not let go of all we both hold dear, so one day, we may have a chance to regain you.

"Thank you."
stay safe, stay strong, keep a high spirit, be there for friends and loved ones is all I ask. See you again on 05.07.20.
Take care!
The Needs Of The One

Chapter Notes

Surprise! I'm posting this chapter a week and a day before my self-imposed hiatus ends. This is because this story is crazy long, and I will not rest until it's done, so I'd better get a move on, I hope you don't mind.

I also feel comfortable posting this chapter because, although emotionally packed, it does not move the plot too much ahead, so it won't need rewriting. I am working hard on the third act, writing then rewriting, splitting chapters then plastering them back together, trying to keep a steady pace, it's a nightmare :-)

Also, I've come to the conclusion that I will never be happy with the third act, but there's a limit to my ability to refine it, so maybe posting this will give me extra motivation. Do not worry, I will finish this story, imperfect as it will be as long as I am able to move my fingers and work my brain.

I must give special thanks for Aschen, for giving me so much feedback the past few weeks which made me miss interacting with everyone and wanting to post earlier. You are all so very super great, and I know I promised you a bigger break, but I missed y'all too much : - )

I hope you'd like this chapter enough to leave me a review or kudos, yes, I'm an attention junky, what can I say…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Self hate, self hurt, explicit.

All time low at the 'Remain' team headquarters.

Ever since the kiss incident, seemed like Uhura had decided on hating him again, it was nothing personal, just like Dayton Parker was a constant remainder to Sulu of Chekov's death, Jim served as the personal embodiment of her failed relationship with Spock, and maybe even with the Vulcan people in general, nothing he could do about it. She kept quietly to herself, and after the gathering in the hall came to a close, she didn't bother to say a word to anyone, just disappeared into her room.

Yorktown was a ball of raging energy; pissed off at Sulu, mad at Carol, probably angered at Jim as well, but mostly furious at himself. He got into his room without a word, geared up and stormed out again, muttering that he was off to the gym.

Hikaru turned a bit mellow, after his talk with Dayton and Jim he fell into a state of self reflection, he asked if Jim wanted to share a drink with him at an observation deck, and when Jim politely refused, saying he had something to do; he just hugged him briefly and went into his room instead.

Sharel was also on his way out, only a few moments after Dayton had left, and before Jim could
ask him anything, he politely blocked his effort with antennas held high and an assertive smile
"You don’t need to know, sir." he stated, and with that, he was also gone.

Carol, well, poor Carol ran into her room, crying, so it seemed, and no, he was not going to make
the same mistake twice by knocking on her door. The last thing he needed was to put himself in
that position again, or worse, come between her and Yorktown. She'll come out when she's ready,
and then he'll see if there was anything he could say or do to make it better, highly unlikely,
though, seems like he ran out of good ideas.

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With the common hall empty, he had no choice but to return to his own dark, messy, personal
quarters, where the only source of light came from the bathroom. Without much hope he sat down
at the desk and picked up his PADD to study the results of his latest attack on the Communication
servers.

He reviewed the data and sighed, yup, this attack has resulted with a big, shiny bag of nothing.
Now he could try again, play with the parameters some more, forth time's a charm and all, but deep
inside he knew that this approach will get him nowhere; spending more time and effort on this
would be illogical. What he needed was a brand new idea, and his brain refused supplying him
with one, found the best timing ever to go on a strike.

Not wanting to think for a while; he crushed on his bed, gazing at the ceiling. "Computer, activate
Jim's mix number 4, Random shuffle, 70% volume."

That should do it, this way he could ignore Carol's weeping, give her some privacy and maybe get
some inspiration. The music started off with a Babyshambles song, that he hoped Carol would like.

And what's with this acoustic problem in their quarters, by the way? Was it an undetected
malfunction? Was it a low prioritized system failure, or was it designed, because Vulcans thought
humans enjoyed eavesdropping on one another?

Who the hell cares, anyway?

He couldn't wait to get out of here.

He couldn't wait for his captaincy to be terminated.

He couldn't wait to get rid of those Starfleet uniforms forever.

I'm so sorry Pike, you placed your bet on the wrong pony; well, I guess that you've kind of knew
that already, just before you died, which sucks in so many ways. You just demoted me to an XO,
and took over the Enterprise again. What a horrible way to die, just after realizing everything you
sowed had turned into dust.

I am such a disappointment to everyone who ever had the misfortunate to know me, Jim realized, I
have let them all down, Nyota, Sulu, Dayton, Carol, could not even stop Sharel from trying to get
himself killed.

I have let down the Federation, Starfleet, Section 31, Scotty, god, I hope you make it. Bones! Are
you hanging on there?
What are you doing, Jimbo? You've got a job to finish. Go and finish the code for the hardware already! Or prepare that encoded vidcomm message to the Enterprise, then go begging Commander Sabek to prioritize it. Just do something else except mellowing in self pity! You're a fucking grownup, not some Emo kid trying to mess up his eyeliner!

Or you know what? Go the fuck to sleep.

The best thing you can do right now is to brush your teeth, take a shower, and have some rest. Tomorrow you'll be in focus again, and you'll code better, and maybe even have some fresh ideas, and things might look a little bit brighter.

He made the effort and picked himself up, then got into the bathroom to do just that.

But whatever hunted him, followed suit.

Your strategy sucked, you know? That snarky voice mocked him. You should have known better than leaving the comm system for last! You should have hacked it while working on the VR and ENG departments!

The fuck? Hack all three mainframes at once? Sure… and they'd be on my ass in five second's time, k? Shut up.

For all you know, they are already on to you. You did not even manage to locate the replicator you were using all this time, talking about pathetic. I bet that they are seating on it right now, Commander Sabek, and Symer and the rest of them, fiddling with that fucking bolt you replicated, and laughing their asses off while recording everything. They are building a case against you for the ages, so enjoy your lifelong coma, is all I'm saying.

Vulcans don't laugh.

At you? Sure, they do. Because you are such a miserable, smalltime loser, and a failure and a fraud. Did I forget any? Yeah, go ahead and give another heartfelt speech about Tarsus 4, why won't you? I was only hacking your system because me sad childhood! boohoo fucking cares! It's getting old, you're getting old!

Fuck you, I am not gonna fall apart now!

Already did, sweetheart! Just look at you! Your team has fallen apart, your body is falling apart, and somewhere there at the border of Klingon space, your ship is falling apart!

Point taken, but you must stop already!

Stop? I'll tell you when I'll stop. I'll stop when you are a drooling zombie in a secret Starfleet facility after a Vulcan mind-wipe, when you die by the hands of Sobar, when this fucking drug kills you! I'll stop when you are dead, gone and forgotten!

Fine! But I still got time.

Oh, yeah! Plenty of time for jacking off in the shower and crying! Pathetic nobody! How is that working for you so far? Yeah, slam another fist into the wall; that will make everything better!

Please…

Cry, baby cry! Cry, whinny old bitch! Who'd fuck you now? Who'd fuck you without your golden shirt?
I cannot do this. I have to save some strength for tomorrow! I'm going to break into Deck 10, where they probably keep the main comm servers and try to install my device. I must get some rest now, get some sleep.

Sure, Ethan Hunt, James Bond, or do you prefer Jack Ryan? Mission impossible! Face it! You've got nothing! You got no plan! No time! No code! Only your goddamn bullshit!

So what? Do nothing? Give it up? Quit? I can't! Bones, Scotty, the Enterprise, I must try…

But you will fail! You'll get caught, and get tortured and disgraced! And this is the stupidest idea ever! Deck 10, through this ceiling, come on! One of the most top secret decks around here! They have security measures, guards, CCTV, all sorts of sensors…Sabek is already hot on your trail, might have even prepared a nice ambush for you, and you are so very underprepared!

But…

Now, say you get in there, somehow, miraculously undetected; you would not know where to place your little transmitter! And even if you do get lucky, it will get detected, because, guess why? Because you don't have the proper protocols! Why? Because you failed to break into the fucking comm system! Copy that, smartass?

Come on, give me a break!

A break? All your life you were handed a break after a break! Ask George Kirk! Ask Kodo's men! Ask Pike! Ask Commodore Paris! She was ready to take you in as a Vice Admiral without fucking qualifications! How many more brakes do you need? You stupid, little whore!

Shut up!

No! You are nothing but a handsome, charming nobody! Should never have taken that dare! Should have stayed in Iowa and take home whoever needed a free fuck for the night! You should have let someone more appropriate handle what you obviously cannot! Someone smart and calm and logical! Someone like Spock.

Spock, I need you!

Shut the fuck up!

Spock, please; if you hear me!

I'm not kidding! Shut the fuck up! Do you really want him here? Now? When you're such a quivering, pathetic mess?

Spock, help me please!

Help? Help with what? Betraying the Vulcan people? Stealing from them? You've already fucked him up enough as it is! Last time you saw him at the gym…remember? You did a number on him, alright… stay the fuck away from Spock! Talking about the poor fucks unfortunate enough to have known you… you've ruined him enough already!

Elder Sarek was right! Spock deserves way better! If not for Pon Farr, he would have never even glance at your direction! And why would he? Why would a Vulcan like him find this old, playboy hick attractive?

He turned to you because of one reason only- because you can handle a rough fuck! Only logical!
And he already lived to regret it, right? Would have never touched you with a stick if he knew this clingy, dirty mind of yours would trap him in this useless, unintended bond!

OK, fine! Point taken! Spock is no option! So what do I do, then? Tell me what to do!

What to do? Cry me some more, I love it when you cry.

No, I have to stop this panic attack! please, tell me what to do!

That's easy! Die!

No, fuck no, not now!

Bleed then, next best thing.

I don’t want to…

Bleed! You fucking, miserable, laughable, sorry excuse of a man! They've called you a hero; they thought you were the savior of Earth. If only they could see you now…. I know who you are! I know what you are! Bleed for me!

He let his head slam into the hard wall of the shower, first with caution, but the Vulcan octagonal, rosewood colored tiles did not break under any human's mishandling.

Harder, Faster!

And the voice in his mind roared with glee at the pain.

You wretched, vile, disgusting whore! You like it? You really like it? Is it worth it? Here boy, have some spam! And I'll throw in some sweet corn too, for another blow job! Would you do it? You'd love it, huh? The taste of your own ass, right? You little blonde cunt!

Please! End this nightmare! Please! Make it stop!

You make it stop! Make everything stop! Harder! More! Pass out already!

Please!

"Jim!"

Fuck!

****0****

Oh, Fuck.

Oh, no, no, no… shit ain't real.

This is all in your head now, in your bleeding, hallucinating head.

"What is this? What are you doing?"

No, no, there's no mistaking that voice, that deep, husky, logical voice.
Shit is real, shit is very real.

Jim dared looking up, from his hunched position on the shower's floor, under the flow of icy water, pink with blood.

"Jim..." Spock almost gasped as their eyes met.

What was he doing here? How did he get in?

Fuck, he is here, he is really here.

What am I going to do? Go away!

But Spock, in all his glory, was standing right there, in his full body, airtight, green catsuit, his jet black hair, a bit too long, and his gorgeous, lithe yet muscular body was unmoving. What a sight to behold, those hauntingly beautiful features, and those dark, searing eyes.

Fuck! The last thing he needed right now was a judgmental, logical Vulcan scrutinizing him.

He tried to curl up into a ball on the floor, covering his nakedness as much as possible, pushing into a corner, hugging himself with his shivering arms, making every effort not to cry.

"Spock..." he could hear himself whimpering, and it sounded feeble and even more pathetic there out loud than inside of his head."You're here? Why are you here? This is a very bad timing. Please, go away."

"Negative. What is wrong with you, Jim? What is this insanity?"

Yes, insanity might actually do. Damn his bad luck, for Spock to come here and find him at his all time low, limp on the floor, naked, shaking, bleeding and weeping.

So pathetic, so fucking pathetic!

"No!" Spock's gloved hands were on his shoulders, stopping his head from another inevitable crush on the wall.

Jim could barley meet his eyes again.

What was wrong with him? He had fantasized about this before, for Spock to miraculously show up in his room, take him in his arms and say that everything is gonna be alright, that they should be together, that no one else would ever do, and then they'd kiss, and the credits would roll with a love song in the background.

But Spock only glared at him with horror now, cold splatters of water have gotten his black hair wet, and Jim's teeth rattled and he had nothing clever to say.

But there it was, responding to the slightest of touch, an erection, right in time to make his humiliation complete. Just when he thought nothing could ever feel more pitiful, this had to happen, no more command for you, Jimbo, not in this lifetime!

He could not hold back the tears anymore, and he was crying shamelessly, like a lost little child.

"Jim..." Spock said again, this time softly. "I wish to assist you, please tell me how." There was a plea hidden in that logical, calm voice, a plea and a sharp sense of alarm.

Way to go Jimbo, way to go!
"I'm fine, Spock, I know it doesn't look that way, but it's a human thing, I've dealt with this before, all is under control, you should leave now." He tried to sound confident, but being naked and hard didn't help any, and neither did the sniffling and the trembling of his voice.

"We both should leave, this incident aside, your general state of health is already concerning." Spock answered; he stood up again and took a few steps back, scanning the blooded state of the room. "Allow me to escort you to the healing center."

"Healing center? Fuck no!" Jim moaned with horror. "Go away, Spock! Just get out of here! Leave me alone already!"

"You are being very irrational now." Spock returned to his side and tried to help him get up, and Jim just shoved him off with all the strength he could master.

"Leave!" Jim almost screamed at him now.

As expected, Spock was not the least affected by that shove; he kept kneeling next to him, studding him like a wild, wounded animal. "I will not leave just yet, I have a task to perform, but I do need you to end this illogical phase in order to make progress, so I will ask you again, Jim, what can I do to help you achieve this goal?"

Jim could only stare into Spock's eyes for a long, hard minute, and what he saw there was determination, anger, and a hell of a fright. Spock's dark brown eyes were always so very expressive, despite his best efforts, and right now they shone with worry and resolution.

Oh, fuck, what do I do? What do I do to get him out of here? The longer he stays, the harder it gets to keep him out of this mess, and no way in hell I'm dragging him into my personal clusterfuck!

But he will not go away, he will not budge. Yeah, you go ahead and try to push away 400 pounds of a damn stubborn hobgoblin out of your room, see where it gets you.

Distraction is my last card, distraction, disorientation, and maybe even some satisfaction, yeah, that's the best I have right now.

Ok, let go of your ego and pride, they are already gone; but maybe you can have this, if only for the next few moments. Maybe it would sedate your need and clear your mind, so you could be fucking useful again and get the goddamn job done. Let the rest burn in hell later.

"Spock, hear me out, please, if you want to help me, really help me, please hear me out." He found himself pleading and then he started crying again.

Spock nodded, pushing aside a few strands of wet hair that fell on his eyes.

Jim shivered, and more tears ran down his face, he wanted everything, but deserved nothing, so he should settle for something, whatever he'll be given.

"If you want to help me, Spock, then don't speak... don't ask questions, no mind melds, nothing. Just fuck me. Please? No strings attached; no follow up baggage, no residual emotions, would you do that for me? Would you, please?" he could not help but whimper at the end.

His beautiful alien struggled; he breathed out and tried to gather his Vulcan logic, his Vulcan calm, facing this very illogical situation with this very irrational human.

"I'll understand if you turn me down, I'll get it if you want to protect yourself from hurt, but I need it, I need a fuck, I need you. Would you take me to bed and fuck me?"
Spock only stared at him, probably looking for a way to say no and get out of here in one piece, which was all Jim wanted from the get go, and it would be great, but it would also be great to have Spock fuck him. How he missed Spock fucking him; missed his cock. Boy, what a whore he was, he wanted this so much.

Jim waited, trying to hold back the rest of his tears, hold his breath, he feared Spock would fold. It was only logical; this was after all, an unfair, selfish request to ask of anyone, let alone a Vulcan, a surprised and shocked Vulcan in circumstance he could not hope to comprehend. He would not hold it against Spock if he turns him down, the world would end, but Spock would not be to blame.

You are going to say no now, right? I know you want to say no, I can feel it. What's the hold up? Say no, I can take it, am a grown man.

But clearly Spock's body was working against this effort, Jim could not help but notice the developing bulge between his legs, where his arousal pushed against its sheath, and the tight green suit had given it away.

"If I accept your terms, you must understand this, once we've started; I might not be able to stop." Spock said and his voice hardly contained the emotions held behind it. "Not even if you change your mind." He warned.

Of all the things he could have said.

Jim breathed in relief and almost smiled now, as the tears he held at bay fell on the shower's floor. "I won't change my mind." He promised with another whimper.

"This is extremely unwise." Spock whispered to him, or maybe just to himself, but none the less, he scooped Jim up, like an exhausted child after a tantrum, and carried him effortlessly out of the blooded shower booth. "Computer, end shower." He commanded as they left the bathroom, ever so responsible when it came to ship's recourses.

Spock struggled to navigate the way in the dark room, across piles of crumpled sheets; he kicked an empty bag out of his way, and almost stepped on Jim's guitar, and then he stopped next to the bed and sniffed at the room.

"You clearly made no use of the laundry service." He noted, one hand making room on the bed by dumping the mess to the floor, while the other held on to the hopeless human.

The stand alone PADD fell down along the rest of pile, and Spock picked it up after placing Jim on the mattress. It was still running the data compression code.

"No questions asked, remember?" Jim hurried to plea as Spock glanced at him.

After a short, long while he nodded and let go of the PADD, letting it fall softly into the pile of dirty garments.

Jim released the breath he was holding, and then he lie down on the bed. "Take off your clothes." He asked the Vulcan, his hand casually landed on his erection and he started stroking himself gently, while waiting.

Spock could only stare at him mesmerized for a brief moment, but then he remembered what to do and started taking off his clothes. First the gloves, then his heavy black boots, and last, the green suit just peeled itself off his body and fell down to the floor, like shed skin.

Yes, Jim did wonder how the Vulcans put that damn thing on and off; it didn't have buttons or a
zipper and was so exquisitely tight.

"Telepathic fabric." Spock explained. "It obeys my skin."

"Really? Ever had an accident?" Jim could not help himself.

"Not since I was an infant."

"Not that kind of accident…" Jim tried again, still stroking his now leaking erection.

"I do not follow your logic." Spock confessed and turned to face him, awaiting further instructions.

Well, whatever, Spock's very adult, naked body was now in full display. Jim had to let go of himself and just stare at that gorgeous view.

That tall, lean frame, the insanely powerful muscles, flexing under flawless pale skin, the black, soft fur on the broad chest, narrowing down to a dark trail over his tight abs, trickling past his navel and into a pool of black, rough pubic hair, where his green cock was already fully extracted, standing stiff and proud, glistening with lubrication.

Jim could not tear his eyes away from this amazing sight; he licked his lips with anticipation. He knew he could have it all only for an hour or so, but he could have it before all hell breaks loose, and that was all he cared about.

"Come here, big guy." He asked again, sprawled on the bed, slowly opening his thighs. "Come here and fuck me."

Spock deliberated this invitation for a brief while and then moved to claim what was offered. The mattress dipped substantially as he added his weight to it. He crawled his way carefully towards Jim, and settled above him, hovering over, engulfing the human with his wonderful warmth and sandalwood scent.

"Oh, Spock, I need you so much." Jim admitted with a dash of shame in his voice, he should not be doing this, and this was such a bad idea, but he was a slut and he wanted this so much. "Please, give it to me…" he moaned, pushing his hips up, closing his eyes.

Immediately, the Vulcan sent his hand to Jim's head.

Jim opened his eyes with horror "No! No mind melds! You promised!" he winced and wiggled under Spock.

"Calm down, please, I only wish to investigate your wounds." Spock muttered, with a clear undertone of anger in his voice. His gentle fingers trailed the cuts on Jim's scalp; his touch was warm and careful. "Shallow, minor lacerations, a few hemorrhages." He reported in a whisper "Brain damage cannot be ruled out at this point. You should…"

"You should shut up and fuck me!" Jim protested, latching his hand onto Spock's nape, and then he pulled that stubborn head down to claim a kiss from that beautiful mouth.

Spock indulged him, kissing back slow and deep, his lips warm and dry, his tongue rough and hard, and it ventured out to lick the soft human lips, and lap at the nearby skin, tasting them, salty tears and red blood.

Carefully, and slowly, Spock started his descent, putting more of his weight on Jim, closing the distance between their bodies, until there was none, until they were perfectly aligned, face to face,
chest to chest, erection to erection, from head to toe, perfectly entwined.

Then Spock froze and breathed out, turning to look sideways, and his hair tickled Jim's face.

"What is it?" Jim smiled into his ear, before licking it from lobe to pointy top.

"Can we do something about this noise?" the Vulcan grumbled, making Jim laugh abruptly, human forehead clashed into hard, chiseled jaw.

That noise was Muse's 'Map of the Problematique'.

"Oh, come on, it's a great classic." Jim protested but complied "Computer, music to 50% volume."

"30%" Spock ordered.

"42%"

They eyed each other with amusement, and Spock claimed Jim's lips again, for another deep, wet kiss. This time, the Vulcan's tongue gently pushed his lips apart, and then licked the surface of his teeth; Jim took the hint and opened his mouth to welcome Spock in.

The Vulcan groaned into his open mouth, mingling their breaths together, brushing his tongue over every reachable surface, claiming his human mouth after a month of absence. Jim moaned into the kiss as well, and his own tongue was happy to welcome the intruder, inviting him to a swirling dance inside his mouth.

Spock purred now, in a low, contented hum, his hands placed back on Jim's head, stroking his soft, golden hair, caressing his psi points, but Jim now trusted him not to break a promise, so he didn't wince away, instead, he sent his hands threading into that warm, inky black hair he missed ruffling so much.

While they were kissing, Jim could not help noticing Spock's erection, hard and feverish, dripping lubrication all over his thighs and pelvis, creating quite a mess between them, slippery and hot.

"Spock…" he ended the kiss, and plastered their foreheads together, looking into those dark, intelligent eyes."Spock, I need you…" he breathed in open desperation. "Don’t make me wait much longer." He pleaded. "Fuck me."

Spock said nothing, but responded by sending his hand low, between them, grabbing, and then rubbing both their erections together, spreading more secretion on their cocks with his fingers.

This was electric, Jim noticed, Spock's touch was sending waves of pleasure, running from his dick, up his spine and into his brain, he gave himself into that pleasure, and let Spock have his way for a while, but when the Vulcan reached further south and started fondling his balls, and he could not help a tiny, high pitched yelp when he realized with embracement that he was way too close.

As wonderful as it felt, he didn't want to get off like that, he wanted to cum with a cock up his ass, Spock's preferably.

"Hey…" Jim whined "I know you missed my balls and all, since you don't have any, but you're taking way too long. If you don’t mind, I…" He didn’t get complete his complaint.

Spock changed their position again; he removed himself from Jim, only to spoon him from behind, and then used one hand to lift his upper thigh, and the other…
Oh, his other, now lubricated hand went to spread his ass cheeks, exposing his snug anus to the cold air of the room, yet before Jim could express his gripes, Spock compensated with a hot, slippery finger, inserted into his eager pink hole.

Now only a moan would do in response.

Spock pushed in and out of him with his wonderful, elegant finger, rubbing against the puckered opening, smearing lubrication while toying with his prostate. Oh yeah, right there, deeper, more, I missed your touch, yes, right there, deep inside of me, I need more.

"So good, Spock, more…" he pleaded, turning his head to search for Spock's eyes again, meeting their glimmer in the darkness.

"You had a few sexual partners after me." Spock hissed; a hint of annoyance in his voice. "And yet, you got a bit tighter." Spock noted with a breathy whisper into his ear, as he worked that finger in and out of that greedy opening.

"Yeah, out of practices" Jim gasped as Spock carefully added another finger to the penetration; and it did hurt a bit. "I wanted to use my dick for a change. I hope you don't mind."

Spock held his gaze, still emitting a sense of irritation, yet his fingers never ceased their ministration, fucking in and out of his quivering hole.

"I do mind." The Vulcan answered after a while, almost growling, his fingers moving inside of him with scissoring motions, widening the wet orifice and preparing it for what was about to come. "I appreciate the sentiment, though."

"What sentiment?" Jim asked and Spock caught his mouth for another kiss.

"Your intuitive understanding…" Spock said after they ended the kiss and as he was pushing a third finger in. "That your rectum is mine, for my use only." He breathed and kept thrusting those three fingers together in and out of Jim's now well stretched anus.

"Say whaa…?" Jim finally recovered enough to answer and he wanted to say something clever and dismissive, while riding Spock's fingers, trying to get more of that lovely friction, but then those fingers abruptly left their position, to be replaced by something bigger, thicker and clearly very eager. That witty, brash remark was discarded in favor of a breathy gasp.

"Last chance, James, do you consent?" Spock asked in a whisper to his ear, as the thick head of his cock was pressed against Jim's opening, he was clearly trembling with the effort to restrain himself, Jim could feel his biceps and abs tightening, and Spock's double rigid cock was pulsing against his gaping anus.

"I consent, I do, but I want to see you." He didn't want to twist his neck just to get a glimpse of the beautiful alien behind him. "Can we do missionary?"

"As you wish." Spock moaned but moved again and fast, climbing on top of his human, positioning himself between Jim's spread legs. "Would that be sufficient?" he asked with some hidden urgency.

To that, Jim smiled and nodded, hooking his heels on Spock's waists "Yes, please."

And so Spock started pushing in.

Jim tried to relax, as Spock's cock entered him, he penetrated slowly, claiming one inch at a time,
but it has been a while since Jim had accommodated him, seems like his body already forgotten how to take something as big and wide as Spock's phallus.

His anus struggled to stretch around the girth, and his walls pulsed in effort to take in all that length, and as Spock finally bottomed out, he felt so full and so totally owned and it was the best sensation ever. He almost forgot how he craved it, submitting to this powerful male alien who penetrated and engulfed him at the same time, as he lay helpless below him.

"So tight, so soft." Spock moaned as he was fully settled inside. "I missed you so..." he hummed his appreciation, looking into Jim's eyes with an intense, dark gaze.

"I missed you too." Jim found tears in his eyes again, and his voice broke a little.

Spock hurried to lower his head and claim Jim's lips for a deep, breathless kiss; his hands caressed Jim's wet cheeks to wipe those tears away.

Jim melted into the kiss, sending his own hands up, to thread his fingers into Spock's black hair, now dry again and so soft and silky.

"Are you ready?" Spock asked softly, after ending the kiss.

He laid still under the Vulcan, trying to adjust to that familiar yet foreign invasion. He wiggled a bit to get into a more comfortable position, tightened his legs grip on Spock's waist, and placed his hands on the shoulder blades, to encore himself for what was about to come.

"May I?" Spock asked again, throbbing and shuddering inside him.

"You feel so good inside me." Jim sighed and this was no lie, it felt so right, it felt like home. "Go ahead, move." He gave his permission with a moan.

And so Spock obeyed.

He set up a wonderful pace, not too fast to hurt, but not too slow to frustrate, the goldilocks zone, just fucking perfect.

Jim tightened his hold on Spock's body, as the Vulcan moved faster and faster inside, thrusting all the way in and pulling almost all the way out, to let Jim appreciate every inch of him.

Spock hastened his pace with every thrust, sliding in and out of the lubricated hole, now welcoming him with more ease. He pushed into the tight warmth, slowly picking up on speed and intensity, his leaking, green cock, hot and hard, and yet gentle and loving.

With every thrust, he made sure to rub against Jim's gland, that secret knot buried deep inside of the human, like a treasure, and Jim moaned and wept every time a well aimed thrust elicited pleasure, it washed all over him, in relentless waves, again and again, cleansing his body of anxiety and worry, soothing his frantic, weary mind.

"You moan so pretty." Spock breathed into his neck, while fucking him into the mattress.

"Oh, yeah, baby, almost there!" Jim whimpered again. "Don’t ever stop, Spock… you fuck me so good!" He was so close, so very close. Without thinking, he sent his hand between their bodies, like he always did at that point, to grab his own dick and masturbate to the rhythm of the thrusts, so he could finally get off.

"No." Spock whispered softly, and chased away Jim's hand away. "You'll cum by anal stimulation
alone."

Oh, he should cum only by hearing those words whispered into his ear.

To make sure, Spock grabbed both of the human's wrists and slid his hands up on the mattress towards the bed frame, keeping them there with one of his own.

There was nothing for Jim to do now, but give up and enjoy this total loss of control, he could not resist Spock's superior strength and frankly, there was nothing he wanted more but to surrender. He opened his legs now; letting go of Spock's waistline, stretching them out, free and loose, hanging up in the air.

"Yes, fuck me hard! Faster!" Jim almost sobbed now. "Give it to me!"

Spock smiled and gave it to him, pounding into him without mercy, he gave him a kiss as well, as he continued to fuck him deep and steady, reaching and maintaining that perfect, maddening rhythm that turned Jim into a panting mess.

He broke the kiss to allow Jim to breath, but still he slammed into his human for a long while without a fail, might as well keep at it forever, but Jim could already feel his orgasm approaching, like gathering storm clouds at the horizon, Spock took note and sped up even more, fucking into his human harder and deeper.

Jim screamed as his balls tightened and then, as it always came, a sweet surprise, he reached climax with a gasp and a wanton whine, his vision narrowed and was filled with glowing gold light, his cock shot its load in hot, thick ribbons, making a mess over himself and Spock.

Spock helped him as he rode his orgasm, slowing almost to a halt, keeping his human crammed to the rim, letting him enjoy the sensation of being stuffed full of cock, as he finished, spamming around him, tight walls convoluting, human cock dripping the last beads of semen.

Oh, Spock, you're as good as I remembered, Jim thought as he was coming down, limp on the bed, drunk with pleasure, the orgasm was tingling inside him, a sweet hum buzzed in his mind.

"Thank you, it was amazing." Jim chuckled softly, drunk on pleasure, soaked in bliss, but still trying to catch his breath.

Spock smiled at the lovely view, he released Jim's hands, and kissed the pulse of his neck, he was still rock hard, but he pulled out gently and helped the pliant human to turn onto his belly, a more comfortable position to be fucked at.

Jim knew his Vulcan needed some more time, so, while every muscle in his body sedated and his mind fuzzy with the afterglow, he still spread his legs and bore down, to let Spock dive into him again, this time to take care of his own completion. It was an easy slide this time; his relaxed anus took Spock in without any objection.

Of all the creatures of the Alpha quadrant…

Above him, Spock moved again, gaining back speed and momentum, thrusting ever so deeply, but this time he mercifully avoided Jim's over stimulated prostate. It was still very enjoyable, the feel of that massive double rigid cock opening him up, pushing in and pulling back out again.

Spock needed only a few more minutes, but as he got close, he panted heavily, lost his rhythm, and his thrusts became erratic and desperate, and not long after, he was coming, moaning Jim's name.
Even within his state of haze, Jim could feel Spock ejaculating; deep inside of him, with a few bountiful gushes, filling him up with hot Vulcan cum.

Spock took a moment to recover; as his cock emptied the last of its load, then he kissed Jim's wet blonde hair, and gently pulled his spent cock out of his body. He whispered something in Vulcan that Jim couldn't understand, but it never irritate him when Spock did that, it was kind of exotic.

"I'm back in a moment." Spock promised as he got up, and left the bed, heading to the bathroom to clean up.

Jim stayed face down into a pillow, breathing slowly, trying to hold on to the last glimmers of pleasure, but it won't be long. Spock could not keep the shadows at bay forever. Sooner or later, he is going to leave, and the shadows will return to claim what was theirs.

Better make it sooner, sunshine, before you drag him into your hellhole.

Spock returned from the shower with a humid towel, and Jim let him clean up his body, by spreading his legs and bearing down, to help push the seed out of him.

Spock ran the humid fabric on his lower back, ass, and anus, and when finished Jim turned over to let him clean his belly, inner thighs and cock.

"You should consider doing the laundry." Spock said at last, dropping the used towel to join the rest of the pile on the floor "I believe this was your last clean one."

Jim could not help himself, he laughed softly as if he was not going to die before this week ends, and then he remembered, and struggled not to cry.

"Thank you, Spock, I needed that, you have no idea how much."

"I needed that too." Spock confessed with a whisper. He sat at the edge of the bed, not sure of what to do next.

Jim breathed out and felt like a total douche, but Spock could not stay, there was so much to do, and the last thing he needed was Spock to start asking questions again.

"I'd hate to be rude, but I think you should leave now. It's for the best, trust me. And please don’t get mad, but I already told you, this means nothing, we are still over. I know you want to talk and all, but we'll have to find another time, I'm not in the mood right now, so... you'd better leave."

"No."

Chapter End Notes

That's it for today, I am not sure when I'll post my next update, I intent to slow down posting a bit, but it will not be later than 05.07 for sure.

BTW- I am extremely insecure when it comes to smut, I hope I did ok.

Take care, be strong, and stay safe.
Hey everyone, thank you so much for your wonderful and kind feedback!

So, last chapter was the start of the third act, the part of the story that I am the least sure of. I must be brave though, and publish it, imperfect as it may be, because it is either I finish this story or this story finishes me, lol.

Heads up- from now on the plot is going to get super crazy convoluted (at least imo), and I truly hope this story will land on its feet and not fall on its face, well, whatever, here we go.

"What the fuck 'No'" Jim jerked into a seating position.

"'No' is a negative, a word used to state a denial or a refusal." Spock answered as he moved from the bed and onto the chair next to the desk, ever so close to the PADD running the forth attempted hack on the comm mainframe.

"I asked you to leave, so leave already!" Jim almost shouted at him to no avail.

"No." Spock insisted "I did not come here to be used and discarded."

Oh, as if in Pon Farr, much? Jim could feel his rage growing.

"I don’t care why you came here! Or how, or the fact that we've just fucked! If I say I want you to leave, then you… How did you even get in, by the way?"

"You used the same locking sequence as onboard the Enterprise, but I would have broken in, if necessary"

"Great, isn't it? Breaking and entering! It is a felony, you know; I'm sure that the Vulcans even… oh, what the fuck? Get out of here! And that's an order!"

"No."

"No?" Jim glared at Spock with disbelief "Last time I've checked, I was still your Captain! You are in breach of regulation number… something."

"Starfleet regulation number 619, you are emotionally compromised." Spock suggested instead.

"The fuck? Get out of here!"

"Jim…"

"Bullshit! You're no doctor to make that claim! And based on our little encounter at the gym that other night? I'd say the same goes for you!"

"Jim."
"Don't Jim me!" Jim grabbed a sheet from the bed to cover himself. "Get out of here, now!"

"No! I will not leave before accomplishing my objective, a matter of life and death! There is nothing you can do to prevent me from this, so be reasonable, stop yelling and listen to me!" Spock scolded him in a harsh enough tone to make Jim wonder if he forgot about his own state of nudity.

Jim glared daggers at the Vulcan, but the damn creature would not flinch. "I'll call security, I kid you not." He threatened without blinking.

"I call your bluff, James." Spock answered calmly "You will not let security in, and have them discover what you have been up to this whole time."

Jim's face drained out of blood, his gaze fell on the floor scanning it franticly; he thought he did a fine job at covering up the wires under the tiles and behind the desk, Spock only glanced at his PADD for a mere second, there was no way he'd understand what program was running on it in that span of… not to mention that they were busy having sex this whole time so… "How the hell…?"

"Our bond!" Spock burst out, unable to maintain his annoying cool anymore. "As much as I tried to block it, shield from it, ignore it, it is too strong! First time in my life that I cannot block someone out! And your habit of broadcast your thoughts constantly, and ever so loudly, had done nothing but undermine my every effort! You called for my help 77.02 minutes ago, you called and I came!"

"And I am so very grateful, but now I ask you to leave! Please?" Fuck, he'd started crying again if Spock says no.

"I will not leave until we correlate our Katras to a position that would produce the best chance of survival!"

To that Jim could only say "Huh?"

"We need to talk." Spock remembered human again.

"No, no, no, not now! I can't, I'm sorry, so fucking tired … Please, another time, leave."

"No other time but now." Spock stated, indifferent to Jim's pleas.

Jim started crying again as he knew he would. He covered himself up to the chin with his sheet, and starter rocking back and forth, trying to calm down.

"I hate you for taking such an advantage of me! I hate you for using your strength and your logic and your fucking telepathy against me! You promised! You promised to cut this bond! Leave me alone already!"

Underneath his impassive appearance, Spock seemed to be torn between two opposite poles, and Jim suspected he only picked up on it through their bond, he moved slightly in his seat with unease, and lowered his gaze; his voice was softer when he spoke again. "Jim, as much as it is difficult for me to refuse you, you must understand that…"

"You must go!!" Jim screamed now, tears washing all over his face.

Spock raised his eyes again and they were flaring.

"Stop this at once and listen to me!!" his voice now matched Jim's volume, and on the brink of rage "I am trying to save lives here! I am done suppressing my nature! I am done apologizing for
my biology, my strength, my telepathy! Done begging for forgiveness over the bond I've created by mistake!"

"Good for you!" Jim snarled with mockery "What a progress! Daddy'd be so proud!" he spat out, and then wiped his wet face with the back of his hand.

"Everything has its time and place, Jim! And I will hold on to my promise! This bond will be terminated, as agreed upon! But now is your turn to demonstrate some self control and hear me out! Matter of life and death! I did not come here to fuck you!"

"Yes, you did! And you had your way! You always have your way! Now get the fuck out of here!"

"No! You said you wanted me to treat you as an adult! So I do! I treat you as the human adult that you are! But then you say I misuse my advantages as a Vulcan! So pick one already! Should I hold back the monster in me and coddle this helpless child? Or should I present myself completely as I am; knowing you'll handle it like an adult?"

"Oh, you presented yourself just fine when it was Pon Farr time!"

"Negative! Pon Farr was the one time I had no control over myself, and by no mean was it representing! 4 days out of 2,555! 0.15% of every seven years! I have that savagery in me, true, and I've hurt you in every possible way, true, I accept the fact that I have lost your affection and your friendship, but that doesn't change the situation at hand!"

"The situation where once this ritual is over, our bond is over too!"

"The situation where in three days time Sobar might kill you; and the Enterprise might get destroyed, and our crew might die! Does it take priority over our personal entanglement at this moment? Yes or no?"

"Fuck you!" Jim hissed "Time for me to call your bluff!" this was just like playing chess, but naked and furious. "If the situation is as dire as you describe it to be, and if you held the fucking solution in your hands all this time- then why the hell did it take you this long?

"You knew Sobar might have to kill me, even before we took off to Yorktown! And if I am as loud as you claim me to be, then you knew about the situation with Section 31 before we even left for the Vokau! Through this fucking bond! Yet, you took your sweet, sweet time!

"I call bullshit when I see it, Spock! You have no solution! There's nothing we can do about anything! You just wanted a last fuck before I'm gone, and this was the perfect opportunity! The rest is optics!"

Spock listened to him screaming his lungs out, and the pointy eared bastard nearly smirked at him, it was so damn sexy and so fucking annoying as the same time.

"Fascinating." Spock narrowed his eyes and breathed out, as Jim finished spattering out his accusations. "Even at this low point, of weak spirit and crumbling health, your mind still glows."

"Save it, Spock, you've already fucking me."

He wiped the tears that streamed down his face with the back of his hands again, and then rested his back on the bulkhead behind him, seemed like he ran out of energy, completely done, and whatever came next, he intended on accepting it with pliant defiance.
"Leave." He said again but there was no more force behind it.

Spock did not budge, did not bother stating his refusal again, since it was probably illogical at this point. "I am not leaving until me objective is reached." He reminded the human.

"Stay, leave, whatever, you're full of shit and it's boring." Jim now smiled wearily, suppressing a yawn, and then made himself comfortable, pulling a blanket on top of the sheet, and a pillow to place behind his head. He closed his eyes and ignored the Vulcan in the room; maybe he could fall asleep this way.

"James, you know…" Spock whispered softly "If I was a human, I'd be trebly offended by now, insulted to the bone by your cruel, baseless allegation. So much so, that I'd be driven out of this room in anger, as you obviously wish me to. Yet, I am a Vulcan, and my emotions are irrelevant, I am here to achieve my objective, so please, cooperate."

Jim wanted to ignore this little speech and continue his efforts to fall asleep, and he managed probably five seconds of it, but this was too rich to let go.

"First, I don't care." Jim smiled with his eyes closed, "Second- Nothing you've just said can be considered as a counterargument; face the music, Spock, you have no comeback to my allegations, none at all. Good night." He made himself comfortable in his blankets and to be on the safe side, he turned his back to Spock.

Whatever Spock did for the next few moments, was done in complete silence, so much so that Jim wanted to open his eyes again and turn to have a look, but he suppressed that urge, could not give Spock such an easy win, now, could he?

But that small moment of victory soon past, Spock clearly did not leave, and he was about to talk again.

"I would not have come here without something to offer, Jim." He started.

Yeah, your dick.

"And I will not be discouraged by your insults, accusations, this display of emotions or even your irrationality. There's no human tactic that you can throw at me to make me go away."

Wanna bet?

"You say I have no comeback? On the contrary, for every argument you have presented, I have a counterargument at ready." Spock informed him "But as my emotions, so are my counterarguments, irrelevant. Jim, please, be logical, we are wasting time!"

"You are wasting my time!" Jim jerked up, stopped pretending to be asleep and was angry once again. "If you have counterarguments, I want to hear them! If you need my cooperation, do make the effort! This illogical human really wants to know what've kept you away for so long!" Jim insisted, worn out and frustrated, almost slamming his head into the wall while leaned back into the frame.

For irony, the Arctic Monkeys just played their 'Do I want to know', well he hoped Carol enjoyed his choice of music and ignored their rather loud domestic dispute, or maybe she had passed out already, or hopefully moved to Dayton's room to have some hot make up sex.

Spock set there for a long while in silence, reminded Jim of Rodin's famous statue of 'The Thinker', green, naked and unmoving.
"Well, you're awfully quiet there..." He said after awhile, licking his freshly fallen tears. "Called your bluff, Spock, checkmate." He ended with a smile and a whisper.

"Hardly." Spock cocked his head up to look at him, almost smirking "I am just searching for the best route to reach your troubled mine, would be so much easier with a mind meld."

"No fucking mind melds!" Jim warned and pushed himself further to his corner on the bed. "No touching my brain!"

"Noted." Spock almost scoffed "But if I make the effort, will you listen to me?"

Jim breathed in and out, wiping his tears away again, calming down the crazy beat of his heart, slowing down his racing thoughts, reminding himself that Spock was not an enemy, never was, never will be.

Spock waited for Jim to gather himself with calm.

Jim nodded and looked up, finding Spock's eyes for the first time since they started the fight. "Fine… you win, I'll listen, but can we do this less naked?"

"Progress." Spock noted, he then sent a leg to the pool of green that was his outfit. The fabric slithered its way upward and took shape, covering the skin, as it did before.

So cool.

Jim moved from his position at the corner and bent over the bed to fetched one of his briefs and a T-shirt, both not that dirty, and not as cool. He got dressed as well, then he was back on his bed, leaning against the wall, trying to imagine that they were in a briefing room, preparing for a mission; it was easier to function that way.

He ran his hand in his still wet, blonde hair, and then looked up straight at Spock. "Ok, I'm good, go ahead, you've got me, I'll stop you when I have questions."

"Thank you for your attention." Spock started "Let us address your statements in order of presentation." He said while holding Jim's gaze. "The situation is indeed dire, on both aspects-

"The first- the chances of you winning a duel to the death against Sobar, at your current state of health is 14.7%.

"The second- Your chances of completion the mission Section 31 had given you are slim, I cannot provide the accurate calculation because I am not familiar with the fine details, but judging on the amount of anxiety and stress I have received from your end of the bond in the past few days, I am sure of my assessment.

"Once you fail to deliver the schematics on time, Section 31 will force the Enterprise to cross into hostile Klingon space in order to hunt down a Bird-of-prey and try to obtain its cloaking mechanism; their chance of surviving this mission is 11.6%.

"How am I doing so far?"

"14.7% you say? I'd take it over 12%, and it is way better than 13.5%." Jim chuckled and because Spock did not know how to react to that, he had chuckled some more. "Sorry, go on…"

"You claim that I have no solution; and this statement false. For the first part I have a solution with an estimated 63.6% chance of success, if we define this success as a win for the 'Remain' position
in a duel to death which stands at a 43.66% chance of occurrence at this point in time.

"For the second part- I am here to assist you as much as I can, and that should rise the chance of success significantly, so saying I have nothing to offer you is incorrect."

"Tell me about your solution of 63.6% chance of success." Jim leaned back to the wall, a bit calmer, and much more amused.

"The solution is logical- I will take your place at the duel against Sobar. I have 63.6% chance of defeating him, which is tremendously better than your 14.7%. You'd get to live, and the Vulcans will not leave the UFP. You do find this outcome considerably better than the alternative, don’t you?"

"Why only 63.6%? You totally owned him that day, wiped the floor with him in front of all to see, including your father and his."

"Sobar is a very capable fighter, very strong, skilled and lethal, and we will both be armed with ceremonial Lirpas, which will make every mistake much more lethal than bare hands. Furthermore, when we last fought, Sobar wanted to prove a point, and he also underestimated my abilities; he will not have that objective next time nor will he make the same mistake."

"So, you'd be my champion?" Jim snorted, though his mockery was aimed mostly at himself. "Problem is you're from the 'Leave' team, how could you possibly take my place?"

"I am not you champion, I am your bonded mate, and with your approval I could replace you at any given battle; nothing could stop me from claiming this right, not even the blood oath."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed."

"Then why do you need my cooperation? When the time comes, just raise your hand and say 'hold my beer'."

Spock blinked his inner eyelids before he continued.

"I've already made that point. I cannot replace you without your consent. You will be the owner of that challenge, the Warrior's Code of honor does not allow it, I cannot rob you of a challenge. You are me bonded brother in arms, not a damsel in distress.

"I need you to step down and let me take your position. No warrior will shame their bond mate by forcing them out of their own fight. I must secure this now; have your word, that if and when it comes to this, you will not stop me."

"Why would I ever want to stop you?"

"Pride, ego, human emotions, Sobar will try to anger you out of it. He'll mock you, shame you, he'll say that you are a coward, that this bond is a result of a mind-rape, that you were forced into it, and are my pet, my slave, my whore, or anything in that spirit, he'd stop at nothing to spite you into declining my offer."

"He might actually have a point, you know." Jim taunted the Vulcan just for the sake of it. "But I am not that illogical."

"Yes, you are." Spock insisted "And on top of that, you have a death wish. I know you, James Kirk;
you could be easily manipulated into throwing your life away, if that means a rebellion against tyranny, or if it gives you the illusion of control. I know you want out of this bond, but please let me make use of it, if only this once."

"Fuck you, Spock."

"My point exactly." Spock almost smirked at him "As for the second part, there is no escaping touch telepathy, the amount of data I need to familiarize myself with before I can help you, is just too much for this span of time."

"You are no hacker."

"But I am a Vulcan, a programmer, and they are my crew too, Jim, if there is anything I can do to help, I want to do it. Please reconsider mind melds; it won’t be deep, just an extraction of information, no Katra involved."

"You're missing the point, this is not about mind melds, I don’t want you involved in this shit" Jim tried to explain without getting too much angry. "If you do that, your life will be ruined forever, Spock, as in totally fucked up, for the next 300 years."

"My life is already 'fucked up' as you phrased it. My savagery and lack of control were demonstrated for all future and present leaders to see. That aside, my involvement through our bond had already crossed the line. By concealing what I have already come to know from the Elders, I have committed a severe enough crime. We face this together, James, as I have stated from the start, so please let me be of use."

"Are they on to me?" Jim found the courage to ask. "At least Commander Sabek suspects something. Do you happen to know anything?"

"If commander Sabek has any kind of evidence against you, he still keeps it to himself at this point of time or else it would have reached the Council by now. Moreover, the commander has yet to inform the council about his doubts regarding Lieutenant Sharel."

"How do you know about Sharel? I never told you... Oh... The bond. That's right. Wow, I can't keep anything away from you, huh?" Jim could not decide if this was a blessing or a curse. "It is a blessing and a curse, yes." Spock agreed "There are things transmitted from your end, that I do not wish to experience, but the bond is too strong for me to block it efficiently at this point in time. Returning to your question, it is highly unlikely you have been caught just yet, or I my offer to help you complete this mission would be rendered illogical."

Spock answered, and as much as Jim wanted this to reassure him, he still found it hard to believe. "Come on, you wanna tell me Elder Sarek shares every piece of Intel with you?"

"Elder Sarek does not share sensitive information with me; however he does imply if he deems it fit. I am, however, confident that if he had any news regarding yourself or our crew, he would at least have issued a warning, as a courtesy, Elder Sarek holds you in high regards."

Jim considered this information, it was not a sure thing, but it was as good as he was ever going to get, so there was no reason to pressure Spock any further. Switching from red to yellow alert.

"I will consider your offer." Jim decided on closing his eyes for a moment and he let out a deep breath, damn it, why Spock always had to have his way?

"As for taking too long, that claim is false as the rest of them." Spock continued without mercy,
like the relentless sexy robot that he was. "I came to you as soon as possible; I could not have approached you sooner than the stage we are at."

Jim cracked open his eyes again and stretched on the bed. "Oh, that one I find the most interesting, enlighten me, please." He taunted with a smile.

Spock nodded and took upon the challenge shining in Jim's gaze. "The best way to convey my point would be walking you through the time frame-

"My correspondence with the Ambassador Sarek and Admiral Archer regarding the situation in New Vulcan had started 3.4 months ago, when the idea of engaging the Enterprise was first brought up by Elder Soval.

"I have already given you the entire official correspondence I had in my position, but I did not inform you of the knowledge I acquired through my personal relationship with Elder Sarek. I'll try not to repeat myself."

"You see why I have lost my trust in you?" Jim interrupted with frustration "You admit to me now that you had more information than you gave out! You always keep things out! You never fully share anything substantial! Always holding back! Always so secretive and calculated!"

The Vulcan took that accusation rather soundly, damn green-blooded bastard, did not throw him off one but.

"Jim, you are the embodiment of the human tendency to project." he stated without emotion." What have you ever shared with me that was substantial? Your Tarsus 4 experience? Your criminal record? Your past substance abuse?"

Ho, yeah, Jimmy boy, you just got busted.

"The majority of said personal data has come to my possession through my role as your XO, and was derived of your Starfleet records, and only in the form of headlines."

"I could have obtained more information by using touch telepathy or our bond, but I refrained on the premise that you will share what it is comfortable for you in due time, when you're comfortable enough. Needless to say, I am still waiting.

"So please do not accuse me of being the only secretive party in our relationship. The difference between us is that I respect your boundaries, while you constantly push at mine." Spock finished his argument with calm.

Jim had nothing to say now, so he covered himself up in his sheets again and sulked.

"May I continue?"

With a sigh, Jim nodded.

"You know that the Vulcan people were divided between the group that wished to leave the UFP, and the one that wanted to stay. I want to highlight the characterization of the two groups. The 'Remain' faction is composed mostly by the elderly, and the civilians that were saved from the surface. The 'Leave' faction is composed of mostly of young people and military personal."

"I know, I was informed by section 31 and by Elder Soval."

"The 'leave' faction was not keen on the 'Plak If Fee', Elder Svern and Elder Sarek wished to avoid
it at all costs. They claimed, that time will solve this refute, and they were correct, in time the old would die and the young would take their place, which will eventually lead the Vulcans away from the Federation. Elder T'Pau was inclining to their position, at the time, even though she stated from the start that she was undecided.

"However, four months ago, one of the rare, young leaders of the 'Remain' position was stabbed to death after a rally she had organized at the Science Academy. The killer, a young student, a 'Leave' faction zealot, was put to death for his crime, and there were indications showing him elevated to a position of a martyr in certain circles, that is why elder T'Pau changed her mind and turned to favor the 'Plak If Fee' before more violence might occur."

"Why is this relevant?" Jim smothered a yawn.

"Let me reach the point, please."

"I have this major headache…" and a hard-on, for some reason.

"I'll try to be brief. Once Elder T'Pau changed her mind, she and Elder Soval tried to convince Elder Svren and Elder Sarek to perform the Plak If Fee. Elder Svern only agreed with this one condition- that I will be placed at the 'Leave' team. He would not have it way other way, and his vote was crucial for deciding on the ritual."

"So Elder Soval insisted on the Enterprise and Elder Svern agreed only if we would be on the opposite sides?"

"Indeed, Elder Svern insisted on pitching us against each other."

Jim grunted. " Fucking sadistic asshole! Why?"

"I have my theories, Jim, but you are already familiar with my disdain of sharing none established speculations, I see it as an unwelcomed divergence and a waste of time."

"Yeah, you're right, who cares? I don’t give a shit about Elder Svern's motivations at this point. Fuck him!"

"And yet, whatever those reasons may be, I am grateful for Elder Svern's stance." Spock surprised him yet again. "And I must confess to you that I've helped Elder Svern in his efforts to impose this position on the council." Spock said suddenly. "I have dedicated many hours speaking with the Elders, convincing them to secure a place for me in the 'Leave' team."

"What? Why would you do that, Spock?" Jim could not hide the hurt in his voice.

"Because it was the only way for me to take part in this ritual." The Vulcan explained calmly. "There was no other way in. This 'Plack If Fee' was designed according to Elder Soval's vision- to test Vulcan katras against none- Vulcan katras and evaluate their strengths.

"As a hybrid it was illogical to include me in any team, the council was not going to allow it, the Elders of the 'Remain' position strongly opposed it, and so most of the undecided and the ones on the 'Leave' side.

"If not for Elder Svern's ultimatum, I would not have been able to be here, offering to take your place in the duel, if and when the time comes. While you were hurt and angered, Jim, as they announced my place in the 'Leave' team, I could not have been more pleased of the outcome; it was a political victory and a personal relief."
Jim needed a few minutes to take in all this information in, and then he shook his head with a weary smile. "Would they not let you take part in the ritual as a witness?"

"In order to be selected as a witness, a unanimous vote must be cast by the Elders, I have every reason to believe this was improbable to achieve. Some of the Elders would never vote a hybrid in. Elder Sarek had discreetly conversed with all of them in the past few months and verified this.

"Regardless, there was no guarantee that as an outsider I would have been granted a permission to take your place. Remember that the 'Plak If Fee' is about sacrificing the few to save the many; a witness is, by definition, not one of the selected few. Even Elder Sarek could not have provided assurance from Elder T'Pau that this maneuver would be accepted."

"Wow, holy shit, huh? But why 'Elder Sarek', all the time?"

Spock blinked his inner eyelids "Please rephrase."

"Why Elder Sarek, Ambassador Sarek, and never 'Father' or 'Dad' or something like this?"

"This question does nothing to promote our conversation." Spock tried some evasive maneuvers, and to that Jim could only snarl.

"Come on, Spock, indulge me." He demanded.

"Well..." Spock breathed out "It is not within out customs to refer to personal affiliations in public, since personal attachment should never interfere with the implement of logic, it is rarely done."

"Are we in public right now?" Jim could not help but chuckle "I already know Sarek is your darling daddy."

"Elder Sarek is not my father." Spock corrected him.

To that Jim could only reply with "Huh?"

"As far as Vulcans are concerned a 'Father' is the person who directly sired you, and shares 50% of your genetic code, I was created in a lab and share with Elder Sarek 74.8% of his genetic code, which makes our relationship less of a 'Father-Son' and more like a 'Original-Clone'"

"I can argue with that, but it's none of my business." Boundaries.

"Affirmative." Spock agreed "I also fail to see how this relates to the situation at hand."

"Well, Spock, you don't have to convince me you had no choice but joining the 'Leave' team, I'm already past that. I just want to know why you did not come forward sooner, and saved me from this torture."

"If you refer to obtaining the data from the Vulcans then you are mistaken. I have no skills suited for this kind of task, nor the mind frame necessary. All I could do was to show you some system vulnerabilities with the hope that you would find a way to make use of them.

"So back at the elevator...?" Jim remembered with a gasp.

"Affirmative." Spock confirmed "You must understand that I was walking a fine line. I was under the constant scrutiny of Elder Svern and Commander Sobar this whole time; I could not risk a death penalty by getting too close. They would have accused me of violating the blood oath, and I suspect that my death is one of their objectives for this ritual."
"What? Why?"

"I am an abomination, an agent of chaos, a parameter that does not compute in their vision of Vulcan society."

"Jees, Spock, what a bunch of assholes! And what does your father, Elder Sarek, has to say about this?"

Spock breathed, his facial expression turned frozen and obscure "I'd rather not elaborate on this subject."

Jim nodded, licking his lips, boundaries. "So now you are scot-free?"

"Please rephrase."

"Now you can do whatever you want?" Sex "Without Elder Svern or commander Sobar peeking over your shoulder?"

"Now that the personal stage of the ritual is over, and the rest is up to the Elders, and in case of a tie, to the gods of war, I assume Elder Svern and commander Sobar interest in me has dwindled." Spock confirmed.

So all this time, Elder Svern was there to babysit Spock, poor thing, and there I thought he was only advising the 'Leave' team, Jim hummed to himself.

"Fine, so you had to keep your distance on boarded the Vokau, but what about the Enterprise? What about Yorktown?"

"I was only made aware of the whole situation a few moments before you, through my bond with Elder Sarek. Before that, I had little time, and my priority was to secure a place in the leave team, and after that, I was focused on arranging a meeting with Elder T'Pau, so my bond with you would be acknowledged by the revered Elder in time for this possible duel, without her recognition and blessing, I could not have hoped to take your place."

"Come on, now, Spock! You could not find five minutes?"

"You have to understand the Vulcan mindset, Jim." Spock answered almost apologetically. "Coming to you at any point of time upon the Enterprise was illogical. Where was the logic in informing you of a possibility that was yet to be established?"

"I could have been left out of the game, if Elder Svern had conceded his demand, in need of forming a new strategy; Elder T'Pau might have refused me audience, and also might have not approved our bond. Had I come to you on the Enterprise it would only be to raise false hope and aspire useless arguments. It was illogical."

"Five minutes at Yorktown, and Section 31, please." Jim insisted.

"While we were at Yorktown, I had to engage in a deep meld with Elder T'Pau, as she was trying to analyze the nature of our bond and construct a way to break it. It took me an extensive amount of effort, to shield from her the fact that that you were recruited by Section 31, and conceal the nature of your mission once I became aware of it. I did not dare approaching you and bring up the subject while melded with elder T'Pau, it would have put your life at great risk."

And I was a total bitch the whole time…
"Were you melded with Elder T'Pau the whole time on Yorktown? Even when we had that Vulcan Voodoo talk?"

"Affirmative."

"And still you managed to keep Section 31 involvements in secret? From Elder T'Pau? The best mind melder of Vulcan?"

"Affirmative."

While I was fucking around?

"Wow, Spock, Elder Sarek was not bullshitting me when he said you were the most powerful telepath ever recorded. Thank you for protecting me this whole time. I feel like such an ungrateful punk right now, and an asshole."

"Understandable, you are human, after all. I believe I have countered all your arguments. Can we move forward now?"

"Not all my arguments." Jim smiled at his. "You did come here for a fuck."

"I stand corrected."

Pleased with that answer, Jim smiled and finally allowed himself to lie down on the bed again, put his head on the pillow and relax. "So now what?" he asked, yawning.

"We wait for the Elder's decision. Were you informed that Elder T'Pau's challenge has ended with both you and Sobar earning one point each? A remarkable achievement, considering the fact that the judges were picked from the 'Leave' team. This concludes the personal stage of the ritual at 14:13 in favor of the 'Leave' team.

"Sobar and I ran an analysis based on the data collected on the elders. The chances at this point in time are 30.53% for a 'Remain' win, 25.81% for a 'Leave' win and 43.66% for a tie. You have pushed the chances of a 'Leave' team win from 63.81% to 25.81%. That is a remarkable achievement, a testimony to your brilliant strategic planning, your inspiring leadership and articulate expression."

"Team effort, Spock, always was; always will be."

"This also means that there is still a chance a duel would not be necessary. I do not wish to kill commander Sobar."

"I know, I also hope it would not come to this. Spock?"

"Yes?"

"Are Svern and Sobar aware of our bond? Or are they in for a big surprise?"

"The latter. No one knows about our bond save Elder T'Pau and Elder Sarek, it is a private thing. I am only willing to make it known in order to save your life, otherwise I'd never let it go published. If they had known about our bond in advance, they might have prepared countermeasures; I could not afford that risk."

"The more reason for you to stay away this whole time."

"Affirmative. Both Sobar and Elder Svern tried to investigate the nature of our relationships, they
know that we are close friends and they have suspected. Both tried to force a meld with me and failed."

"What? When?"

"Sobar, while fighting me bare handed, Elder Svern through the nerve pinch he delivered at the end of the battle."

"Fuck, Spock, that's like… an attempted rape!"

"They shares similarities, yes. They failed, I am one of the few known to lock their mind even while unconscious, it was tried and tested. Our bond is secured."

"Wait, you say that Svern's challenge was actually a set-up?"

"Unknown, it might have been preplanned or perhaps they both seized their opportunities when recognizing it, I have insufficient data to claim either way."

"But didn't you use those same chances for a counter attack? Have a telepathic read of Svern or Sobar like they did to you?"

"Negative, Jim, two wrongs do not make a right." Spock practically sounded offended by the mere idea.

"Hey…" Jim recalled. "Elder Svern wanted to interview me that other day but Elder Sarek blocked him with seniority. Do you think he would have tried a mind meld if he had his way?"

"Insufficient data, but a possibility, yes."

"Wow, I owe Elder Sarek way too much." Jim now mumbled with a naughty smile. "His Pon Farr days are over, right?"

To this Spock just ogled him and blinked his inner eyelids.

"A joke, for fuck's sake, lighten up!" Jim chuckled, way too much for far long, a testimony of his exhaustion.

"Jim, I hope I have overcome all your objections. I need to know now, have I reached my objective? Would you step down from the fight and let me take your place?"

Jim stretched on the bed. "Yeah, I guess so."

"And will you meld with me and let me help you complete your mission?"

"Sure." Jim yawned again. "But can I get some sleep first?" He felt like he was going to be sick tomorrow, but it was overdue. "I'm so beat."

"Affirmative, driving you to a point of exhaustion would be counterproductive."

Already past that, by millions of light years.

"My objective has been reached, thank you."

From behind almost shut eyes, Jim could notice that Spock was getting up from his chair. "Hey, what are you doing?"
"You just said you wanted to sleep."

"Did I say I wanted you to leave?"

"21 times."

"Fuck that, stay."

Spock seemed a bit confused, frozen and awaiting new orders.

Jim lifted up the cover in a welcoming gesture. "Get in."

Still Spock hesitated.

"I'll sleep better with you by my side, I've missed you."

"Illogical." Spock almost sighed but none the less, he joined Jim in bed and soon placed them in his favorite sleeping position, cuddling the human from behind.

"Computer, Jim's mix num 2, volume 15%."

The computer complied and started playing one of Chopin nocturnes.

"This is agreeable." Spock breathed behind him, and tightened his hug.

"Yeah, I knew you'd like it." Jim smiled "Let me have a six, then wake me up, ok?"

"Will do."

God, he missed it.

Spock's warmth, his firm body behind him, his scent, the sound of his soft breathing, the feel of his arms around his waists, even the delicate sensation of Spock's few strands of hair resting against his skin, all lulled him to the best sleep he had in a very long while.

Chapter End Notes

Next update, no later than 11.07, so I hope, stay safe.
Hey everyone, I'm back with an update.

Still got energy and patience for this super long, crazy story of mine? If so, you are amazing!

So here is another plot-heavy, crazy-long chapter for you. I hope you'll have fun, and enjoy your read.

//text//- means telepathic communication.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Attention all hands, this is Captain Setal speaking and I have some announcements to make:

"First, the system's periapsis is now reaching its peak, which will last for the next four days. You must take note that this time tomorrow and for the next upcoming three days, communication to outer space, Ipik, home-world or otherwise will not be available due to major interferences, so please make preparations accordingly.

"Also, due to high radiation, there is an increased chance of electronic malfunctions, inflow of false data due to sensors' saturation, and many more relevant risks, everything will be dealt with by taking those security measures:

"Shuttles will not be allowed to leave the Vokau, missions involving spacewalks will be suspended, all observation windows will be shut and decks 26-30 are off limit to all, unless given my direct order. When unable to verify data, please contact your direct officer, I will also make myself more available than usual in order to solve problems as soon as posible.

"Second, I wish to remind you that today the elders will receive audience in their offices on deck 15. If you wish to speak to them, and you have yet to register, please refer to Lady T'Pall, Elder T'Pau's aid.

"Doors will be opened at 10:00 and closed at 30:00, rest assured that all who seeks audience shell be received, please note, however, that mind melds may be requested in order to keep up with the schedule.

"Vokau personal will take priority at the meetings, in order to minimize potential disruption to ship's operation.

"Last, folding sequence will be initiated at 17:00 today, so we will be ready to leave this system and return to New Vulcan as soon as the 'Plak If Fee' is over.

"Peace and long life.

"Setal out."
Captain Setal announcement had woken him up, but he didn’t catch much of it, except that there were only 36 hours to find a way to send out the schematics to Section 31. He was so stupid not to include this event in his calculations, not to take it into account while prioritizing, so very, hopelessly dumb, why did Section 31 even bother with him? He tried to panic, but found out that he had no strength for it, well, he could always try later.

The fog of his deep, dreamless sleep, started to fade away and he began registering his surroundings. His room was empty, as always, Spock did not bother to stay and wait until he wakes up, his scent still lingered, though, soaked into the sheets and clinging to his body.

The room was dark, and quiet, only the soft buzz of the ventilation system disturbed the silence, and the air was fresh and cold, Spock must have set the system at maximum before leaving, and Jim could not blame him.

A heavy blanket covered his naked body, keeping him from the chill of the room, and he was so cozy and snug within, he had no incentive for leaving the bed.

He wanted to contemplate the talk he had last night with Spock, he had so much information to digest and take in, so many new revelations he needed to sort through and understand, so many ramifications to identify. He had to figure out how to relate to them, how to react to Spock's explanation and offers. He owed Spock an apology, he owed him his life.

And something was off, he had this nagging feeling that he made a mistake, was it the sex with Spock, or something else he had said or agreed to? He could not lay his finger on it; his thoughts refused to formulate in his mind, his brain refused to clear up enough to make sense of it all; he was dull and weak and could hardly master enough strength to wake up.

Oh, and he felt like shit, like really sick, like coming down with some strain of a super flu, every muscle in his body ached, he seemed feverish, and felt like he weighed a ton, but still could hover in space. He had this pounding headache, and his throat felt like he just feasted on thorns, oh, what a joy. Alright, here's an incentive for you, he needed to use the bathroom, as if now, before he messes himself up.

Staggering out of bed, he noticed that his clutter was gone, and instead there were three hampers on the floor, one contained folded, clean clothes, the other fresh underwear and the last had soft, sweet smelling towels, Spock has been a busy bee.

Somehow, Jim always ended up accumulating too many clothes, because replicating was faster and easier than laundry, Spock always preached him about conserving the ship's energy and raw materials, and Jim always told him to stuff it. They had arguments on that subject even before they got intimately involved.

Moving on, he grabbed a clean towel on his way to the wash room, which was also clean and ordered with no sign of blood anywhere. Blood, however, was in his urine, was it an eternal bleeding? Or just a kidney or a liver failure? He'll have to ask Bones.

He used the toilet for number two; he always needed to go after letting Spock ride him bareback. Was this an allergic reaction of some sort? Whatever, the bright side was, this was going to keep him lean. But then again, he did not plan on having any more sex with Spock, and it was for the best, for the both of them.
He took an icy cold shower, trying to lower his temperature. Should he go to the head healer again? She'll kill him for misusing her drug. He emptied three hypo sprays in three weeks, where he should have used one, and he really preferred to die rather than facing her again.

As he got out of the shower, someone had entered the room without asking for permission, Spock, and he carried a tray of food with him. The Vulcan glared at him with a combination of curiosity and indifference as always.

"It pleases me so to see you like this."

"What, naked?" Jim retorted, but damn, his voice sounded wonky; he finished drying his hair, and tossed the towel to the floor.

"Out and about." Spock explained, eyes following the towel to its resting place on the floor. "Are you well?"

Jim picked up a boxer from one hamper and wiggled into it. "Have been better, have been worst. What time is it?"

"10:07."

"What? I told you to give me six!" Jim protested while diving into one of his white T-shirts, damn his voice was all over the place, jumping high and low as if he was a teenager.

"I gave you six, and then some more." Spock stepped in, approached the desk and placed the tray on the table, then took his seat on the edge of the bed.

"Didn't you hear Captain Setal's announcement? We go off line tomorrow! We wasted time!"

"No time is wasted while healing." Spock quoted his mother, but Jim would not know. "We still have 35.2 hours until shutdown, a substantial amount of time, at least in my opinion. You should eat, and then we will meld."

"Fine." Jim groaned, skipping on one leg while pushing the other into soft, grey slacks. He finished dressing and set at the desk, sniffing around the tray and then opening the lid.

On the plate, the food was still warm and it looked delicious, scrambled eggs, cheese toast and a cup of hot coffee, black, no sugar, just as he loved it. The smell of food reminded Jim of how hungry he was, shame it would hurt so much going down his throat.

"Thank you, for everything." Jim said as he picked up his knife and fork "For the clean up, and the laundry, and the food."

"My job is to take care of my Captain." Spock stated the facts, but he did watch to make sure Jim eats, and his voice was soft.

"I don’t take it for granted, Spock, is all I'm saying. Did you get a chance to check up on crew?"

"Affirmative. Miss Uhura, Miss Marcus and Mr. Sulu accompanied me to the mess room for breakfast, yet, I have not located Mr. Sharel or Mr. Parker."

Jim frowned, were they out all night, those two? "I hope they are not looking for troubles." he said, finishing his eggs and picking up his toast. "I have enough things to worry about as it is."

"Would you like me to make the effort and locate them?"
Jim shook his head. "Finishing up with section 31 is more important. Then we'll figure things out."

"I will figure things out, you need your rest." Spock answered "And don't talk too much, don't strain yourself."

Jim struggled with the pain of swallowing; he didn't intend on arguing, it was a natural occurrence. He made sure to shut up and drink his cup of black coffee instead, let it burn its way down his throat.

"I have encountered Vedik in the mess room this morning." Spock said, with some unease. "He wishes to speak with you as soon as you allow it; I did not know how to answer him."

Jim tried not to chuckle, it hurt too much. "Is he still alive?"

"Why would he not be?"

"He probably just wants to say goodbye before Sobar finishes me off."

"A possibility." Spock reluctantly agreed "Mind you that I have used scent blockers while washing this morning. You should do the same if you plan on interacting with other Vulcans."

"So Sobar and Svern would not suspect?"

"So our last night encounter will remain private. If you haven’t noticed, Vulcans keep all their affairs private; romantic, family or otherwise."

And that is why I only found out two days ago that Svern and Sobar are father and son, and T'Heli is Sobar's wife, which also meant… "Hey, every time someone called you 'Son of Sarek', was it meant as an insult? For the both of you?"

Spock chose to ignore that question.

"I have retrieved a scent blocker from my room; it is within a small bottle I placed on the shelf above your sink. Focus mainly on your face, neck and genitals."

Now I understand why Vulcans are so into monogamy, Jim smiled to himself; covering up for a one night stand was too much of a hassle.

"Nah, I'll pass. If you have the helm for a while; I think I can afford to be sick for a few days."

"Good idea." Spock agreed. "You should rest, I will assist you in any way possible, but we do need to meld first. I know you resent the idea, but I truly cannot help you otherwise."

"You sure you want to sink deeper into my mess?"

"James, I wish to avoid repeating myself."

"Yeah, yeah, let's get it done." Jim nodded, he closed the tray and pushed it aside, then lowered his head as if expecting a hit; he hated the idea of sharing his mind with Spock, was such a nasty, dirty, dark mind he didn't even want to share with himself.

Spock did not leave his seating position, however, he just observed Jim for a while before saying "Please come and sit on the bed next to me, this would be safer in case you feel dizzy or disoriented."

"Happens a lot?" Jim lifted his gaze, and then moved to seat on the bed, bumping knees with
"Unclear, I only melded with two humans so far, you and Miss Uhura, both showed signs of vertigo, I hope to get better in time and learn how to minimize the effect."

"I only melded with you and your counterpart, when come to think of it, you’re my one and only." Jim smiled "I gave my meld virginity to you." He added with drama.

Spock did not like the comparison. "A mind meld is intimate, true, but not consequently sexual. You always pull towards the sexual, even when it's not implied."

"Yeah, that's me." Jim shrugged and tried not to flinch as Spock got closer and placed his hands on both sides of his face. The touch was gentle and warm, tingling even, and Jim was torn between wanting to kiss those clever fingers and push them away.

Spock breathed as his fingers settled on Jim's psi points. "Try to focuses now on your work for Section 31." He instructed the human, through half shut eyes.

"Wait; what about that thing you supposed to say- my mind to your mind and my katra to your soul or something?" Jim interrupted and got Spock to blink his inner eyelids.

"Concentrate, please." The Vulcan answered with some irritation, his fingers pressing into Jim's soft skin a bit more forcefully than before "That mantra helps me dive into deep melds, this is only a shallow one. Concentrate."

"On what?"

"Start from the beginning, the meeting you had at Yorktown, picture it in your head. Who did you meet? Where? How did they look like? What did you talk about? Et cetera."

"There were two of them, Section 31 agents, a commodore and her yeoman, or at least she presented herself as a Yeoman, I don’t really know. Oh, and Admiral Archer was there too. We had kind of a heated argument, I didn’t want to do it, Spock, didn't like the fact that they were asking me to steal from you. I gave them a hell of a fight, but they forced my hand, you see… they pushed me into a corner… oh, and I ended up sleeping with that Yeoman."

"That part you can skip. Now be quiet and concentrate."

"Ok." Jim closed his eyes and set in silence, trying to recreate in his mind all that has happened so far. This was a strange meld; he felt nothing from Spock, no signs of him poking in his head, nothing but the burning touch of the Vulcan's fingers on his skin.

"Your knowledge of Vulcan programming is impressive." Spock stated after a while, with a soft voice. "The Kobayashi Maru was your initial motivation for studding it? Interesting."

Jim sat there quietly, so close to Spock, trying hard to recreate the hacking process in his mind, all his actions as well as his strategies, all his dilemmas and decisions. He hoped he did not leave out anything important.

"Do not worry, you are my guide, but I am also able to view memories you have already pushed into the subconscious." Spock assured him.

His touch was more than tingling right now, it felt like electricity flowed between them, and Spock looked so hot, all concentrated and enthralled, and so very near.
Was there a chance for some more hot, steamy sex? Later? Just this once more?

Boy, am I addicted or what? Way to go, Jimbo.

But that cock, though, a work of art.

"Focus, Jim, please." Spock almost purred, but did not move away.

Jim nodded and breathed deeply, and yes, he was getting a bit dizzy, so he placed his hands on the mattress to stabilize himself, and tried to force his mind into the right direction.

"Fascinating." Spock said as he disengaged a few moments later. "You've done a brilliant job, so daring and creative; I sometimes envy your ability to create a possibility where others would just give up."

"Envy?" Jim asked, a bit taken by surprise "You admit to envy? That's an emotion."

"Yes, I should meditate to reflect on that later, but now there is no time. Give me a few moments to processes, please."

"Sure, just beep when you're done."

Jim found out that he cannot stay in an upright position any longer, he wasted all his strength on cleaning up and eating, and now he wanted to sleep for a month.

He was so lucky to have Spock taking over this operation, he had a horrible feeling that if this was not the case; he was in for a mission failure, and all the misery that would follow, the Enterprise destruction, the death of his crew and best friends, the loss of millions in war with the Klingons, a guilt trip to hell for the rest of his days.

He eased into a horizontal position, rested his head on a pillow and borrowed under the blankets. Then he closed his eyes while the universe danced behind them, he listened to the quiet of the room, which was somewhat peaceful now, and not as tense as before, sleep called him and he struggled to stay awake for Spock to finish his thinking processes.

"Jim, are you still conscious?" Spock asked after a while.

"Debatable, but yeah…” he answered with a moan, his voice muffled by the blankets.

"I wish to summaries what I have learned in order to weed out errors."

"Go ahead."

"You started by attacking both the Engineering department and the Vulcan staff management, but had no luck by doing so. So you constructed a subroutine and planted it in a device given to Vedik. That subroutine hijacked his access to the Vokau, and you used that access in order to bait the staff management department into taking a Trojan horse into their data base."

"So far so good…”

"In the mean while, you used the staff management protocols to create a false identity of an Engineer, and gave it a touch telepathy indicator by averaging and altering bio data obtained from the touchpad of the main turbo lift."

"Yeah, jees, my whole body aches like a motherfu... Can I have a massage, please?"
"No, please focus." Spock demanded and ignored Jim's miserable whine. "You inserted the fake identity into the staff management system under the guise of an Ipik personal, a wise choice, by the way, and had it extract the schematics of the wanted detector, which you now posses. Jim?"

"What? All is good, go on."

"Now you need to devise a way of sending the data to Section 31. You failed at breaking into the comm mainframe, which is only logical, it is one of the most secured systems we have, and you have considered breaking into it with the help of hardware."

"Hard…"

"Almost impossible." Spock confirmed.

"Very hard."

Spock turned to look at him, all snug into the blankets and on the verge of passing out. The Vulcan almost smiled, now that no one would take notice, and placed his hand on Jim's head, patting the golden hair for longer than necessary to take the human's temperature.

"You're running a fever." He informed his Captain. "May I give the code to your room to Sulu so he could bring you some medicine while I'm engaged elsewhere?"

"Not a good idea, I don't want anyone snooping around here, even if they mean well."

"Chances are they will pay their attention to you rather than looking for the wires you hid, quite well, if I may add, I almost did not notice myself. And even if they do notice they will honor your wish to keep it disclosed, don't you think?"

"Well…" Jim moaned into the pillow. "I guess I can let Sulu in. I just want it done already, can't take this anymore." he moaned again in agony, he earned it, he was sick.

"You are a fascinating creature, Jim." Spock said with unhidden fondness. "I have no illusion I could have achieved what you have done for Section 31, even if they were to approach and recruit me for this mission."

"You'd steal from the Vulcans?"

"I'd hurry their positive respond to the Admiralty's request of the detector." Spock confirmed in his own way. "I have scanned your strategies to overcome the transmission problem. May I refer you to strategy number three?"

"Fuck me if I remember strategy number three. Oh, fuck me anyway?"

Spock ignored his pleading. "Strategy number three- gaining access to the comm system by assuming the identity of an Elder."

"Already ditched that one, no way I can…"
"Yes way, Jim." Spock cut him midway "A long time ago, as a child, I found that I could mimic Elder Sarek telepathic signature, due to our shared DNA, familiar telepathic bond, and close proximity among other parameters."

"You can forge his signature?"

"Affirmative, tried and tested a few times, although in discretion."

"When did you fake your father signature? Why? And you were never caught?"

"The first and second questions I'd rather not answer, the latter, affirmative, I was successful and was never caught."

"You naughty little boy…” Jim smiled and found new strength to rise to his elbows, his mind racing. "Do you realize that you had the simplest route to get the files? Could have simply asked the engineering department for that detector! With one simple mail, sighed as your daddy!"

Spock quirked the corner of his lip up, his version of laughing out loud.

"Negative, Elder Sarek is a biology scientist, a genetic engineer; he has neither knowledge nor interest in other fields. Writing said mail in his name, an Elder's name, would only result in raised eyebrows and asking questions, getting us apprehended within… approximately two days, faster than finding out about your fake engineer, which will happen in six days' time, on the next scheduled mainframe check, taking place at the first day of every Vulcan month."

"Hope we'll be out of here in five." Jim breathed out and fell back to the mattress.

"Having Elder Sarek to ask for the schematics would result in a failure within 72 hours. Planting a hidden subroutine in one of his already constructed emails, however, is a viable course of action. Do you have that subroutine ready?"

"Needs some finishing touches, but yeah."

"Approximated time of conclusion?"

"Two, three hours, tops."

Spock paused for a moment to contemplate, his hand returned to stroke Jim's hair as if absent minded. "Get some rest now, but try to have the code ready until 26:00, is that possible?"

"I think so, yes."

"Good, I'll be going now. I'll try sending Sulu with lunch later, and please remember to drink a cup of water at least once an hour."

"I will."

Boy, it was such a relief to have someone else lifting the weight for a while, he would never be able to express his gratitude, even a fuck won't do.

"I'll see you at 26:00." Spock murmured with a whisper, his fingers lingered on Jim's hair for a while longer before he stood up and made his leave, and Jim pulled the blanket up to the neck and drifted back into sleep.
Writing code while sick was no fun at all, but it was so much easier now that Spock was in the picture, a whole world of difference.

Jim was calm, collected, stress free, all those vicious voices in his head gone, at least for now anyway, as if dumbfounded by his newly found hope. He finished the code within an hour and a half of work, combined it with the compressed files of the schematics and still had time to add some sparkles, making it easier for a non hacker such as Spock to access the program, a folder with a name and an icon and all.

He finished his work and crushed back into bed, exhausted from the effort and feeling even sicker than before, he was out as soon as his head touched the pillow, sinking into sleep like a stone.

He woke up to the sound of a chime, someone asked permission to enter.

"Computer, open door." he whispered at the AI. "Light at 40%"

It was probably his lunch, or dinner, with Sulu carrying it.

"Wow, it's all nice and clean here." Sulu almost whistled, standing at the entrance, and scanning the room. When Jim did not bother with a comeback, it made the helmsman worry; he walked in, placed the tray on the desk and approached the bed. Gazing at Jim, he frowned. "You look like shit. Do you even want to eat?"

"I'll try some, thank you, Hikaru." Jim smiled, his voiced came out so strained, it was very painful to speak.

"Don't talk, eat." Sulu commanded.

Jim nodded, he really couldn’t care less about eating, but maybe that was the flu thing, if he eats, he'll gain his strength back faster. He struggled into a sitting position and Hikaru helped him up to rise and lean his back against the bed frame.

"Spock's still around, you know? He asked me to bring in your dinner; Miso soup, the cure for all ills." He smiled "It is 19:45 by the way. Have you been sleeping all day?"

Jim nodded again.

So after the closing speech, he had slept on and off for almost 20 hours, impressive.

"Poor thing." Sulu grimaced and shook his head. "The closing speech finished you off, huh? Figures, this is so much like Ben, when he's stressed out he is all fireworks, like an unstoppable force, but when the tension drops? He drops too, like a puppet with cut strings, pity it happens every time I get a shore leave. Can you handle the soup?"

Jim thought about it, then blushed and shook his head. He was too beat up, probably was going to mess himself up with the hot liquid.

"No worries, man, I've got you." Sulu pushed the chair from the desk closer to the bed and placed the tray in his lap. "There you go." He smiled and started spoon feeding his Captain, like a
merciful nurse, Bones would be so proud.

"Hey, I bet Len would force me into sickbay shifts if he saw us like this." Sulu read his mind, smiling.

Jim smiled too, the soup was delicious and Hikaru was so careful, feeding him slowly and attentively, so nothing will burn his throat more than it should, and no hot liquid would spill over.

"Dayton was out all night." Sulu continued chatting as he fed Jim. "Came back a few hours ago, looking like a mess, went straight into Carol's room, argued with her, probably had sex and then they were both out, never bothering to update me where they were going. Damn brats, making so much noise…"

Clearly Jim was in a real bad shape if he heard none of this at all.

"Speaking of… You and Spock…" Sulu chuckled uncomfortably now "Are you back together?"

Jim blushed and shook his head.

"So was it break-up sex?"

Jim gave it some thought then shook his head again.

"So it's complicated." Sulu concluded "Oh, my, sure am glad to be a married man, life is much simpler that way. Great work, Jim, we're almost done."

Jim smiled again and sipped from the spoon Hikaru served him.

"Lieutenant Sharel is MIA. Uhura and I were thinking about getting Captain Setal involved, do you think it is a good idea?"

This idea was more likely to get Sharel killed than solve anything; Jim had to shake his head, dizzy already by using this form of communication.

"Fine, we'll give him some more time, then. Few more spoons and you can go back to sleep. Man, I'm so happy this mission is over, two more days now. I don’t know about you, but I had my fill of Vulcans for a lifetime. They are so damn difficult; I cannot understand where you get your patience for them. The meeting with Elder Sagon, case in point, was one of the most boring things ever; three hours, I thought I was going to cry."

Yeah, not many got the hang of it, Vulcans were an acquired taste.

"Spock's alright, I guess, but he's a hybrid so it's different, yeah?"

Jim nodded, yeah, it was worse.

"Look, see? We're all done, good boy," Sulu smiled, putting the tray away on the desk again. "Anything else I could do for you? No time to be shy… bathroom? Shower? Anything?"

Jim shook his head for a 'no' for all three times, then he made a gesture with his lips, but without a sound --thank you.

"Any time, sir, a pleasure."

It almost brought tears to Jim eyes, half a year, all that left was this half a year, and then his family will be gone.
"Get some more rest now." Sulu said, stood up and picked up the empty tray. "I'll come back later, see you then." He said and the door closed after him.

"Lights off." He whispered to the computer, and the room became dark again.

Jim sighed and let his body slump back into horizontal position and sleep claimed him again, he was out like a light, as Bones would say.

***0***

Next one to wake him up was Spock again, he entered the room quietly as a cat on the prowl but somehow, his mere presence was enough to alert Jim into consciousness.

Spock noted his awakening too, even in the darkness of the room. He reached to the bedside, eyes glowing green, and soon he placed his naked hand on the side of the human's head, caressing his soft blond hair.

"I do not wish to strain you." He said in a low, almost purring voice "Would you agree to touch telepathy instead of verbal communication?"

Jim nodded.

//You can speak to me just by thinking now, no need for head gestures.//

//Wow, I hear you in my head, this is so weird.//

//This is not your first time.//

//First time in a while, but it will always be weird.//

Spock petted his humid, golden hair again.

//You sure like to touch my hair a lot, a blonde fetish?// Jim taunted.

//A James Kirk's mind fetish.// Spock corrected him. //How do you feel?//

//Like I've been hit and run by a tractor, in slo-mo.// Jim could not help but groan.

//Your visual is quite entertaining.// Spock stated //I've been to the head healer, regretfully there are no drugs suitable for humans onboard, not even in the replicator programs, we opened a corrective action on that subject.//

//Oh, Spock, wherever you go, corrective actions follow.//

//True.// Spock admitted, and his thought voice was more humorous that Jim had ever expected.//I will ask the crew if they carry an anti-flu drug, or at least something to lower your temperature.//

//Uhura might have something; she is the most organized human I've ever met.//

//Which begs the question why did you not approach her when you first got ill.//

Oh, yeah, good question. Because I'm stupid? Because it hurt my ego?
I didn't want to owe her one.//

But now you will.//

Nope, we'll be even, that kiss and all…

Kiss?//

Fuck.

I must burn like a Vulcan now…//

Almost.// Spock's hand traveled to his forehead to check his temperature, and his mind conveyed worry.//Do you have the subroutine ready?//

On a data stick, near the PADD on the desk. There's a folder there, all you have to do is attach it to one of Sarek's emails. Don't worry, it won't be detected by the firewall, and it's a hidden file and very secured. Once attached it will send itself to Section 31 headquarters, so what you have to do is very simple.//

Understood. I can log into Sarek's mailbox from any data station on this ship, from your room, even, using your unauthorized one, where should I do it?//

Access points are recorded, if Sarek's mailbox is opened from any suspicious location it will raise red a flag, better do it in his room or his office if you can. Can you? Red flags will also be raised due to time of access crossed with known location, but not as fast, so it's our best chance. Can you get into Elder's Sarek room or office?//

Affirmative. His personal room is empty now, he is receiving audience at his office until 30:00.//

That's perfect.//

He has an automated routine, sending his intended mails every day at the exact same hour of 27:00, with or without his presence, been like this for as long as I can remember, this is why I insisted on having the code ready by 26:00.//

Even more perfect, you Vulcans are so anal.//

I should get going. Anything else?//

Yeah…// Jim breathed, pushing forward to overcome a mental block of a sort in his mind.//Just to be fair, I must warn you, I decided on sending a copy to Admiral Archer as well. It is already programmed in.//

Spock froze in place and went quiet for a while.

I know! It's breaking the chain of command and mishandling top secret information, but fuck if I care. I don't trust Section 31 to let the Enterprise leave the Klingon border, they've already broke their promise by sending them in! You saw the recording Bones had sent us, right? They said it was plan B, not plan A and a half!//

Sending the schematics to Admiral Archer will free him from Section 31's leverage and help him enforce the return home of our ship and crew upon the rest of the Admiralty. I understand your logic, it is quite brilliant, actually, and it violates five fundamental Starfleet regulations as far as I can understand them.//
"You can still back off if you want to." Jim said, hoping Spock will not sense the fear and panic that welled inside him, facing that prospect.

"Negative, we are in this together." Spock sounded very decisive, and there was an undertone of rage surging underneath there, somewhere, for some reason.

Jim found that he could breathe again; he relaxed as Spock patted his hair, absentmindedly. "Why did they even sent the Enterprise there?" he asked with almost overwhelming sense of sadness. "What were they hoping to achieve?!"

Admiral Marcus had sent us to Qo'noS hoping to incite a war with the Klingons. Spock reminded him. "I suspect that while the man himself is gone, the motivation had remained the same."

"Damn warmongers! Who dare they take this risk? Millions could die on both sides! Children! Civilians! And what chance do they think we have without an answer to that cloaking technique?!"

"A chance to keep the Federation united against an outside enemy, a chance at forcing the Vulcans to stay and share their technologies." Spock suggested, applying his cold logic.

"Same old, same old fucking Section 31..." Jim frowned and turned his head up so he could face his Vulcan. "Thanks for speculating, I know you hate it."

"Seeing something as pointless does not require hate; my speculation relies on my knowledge of inner Federation politics, knowledge that officers at our station should not neglect accumulating."

"I hate politics."

"I am well aware. I have to go now, we're running a bit late, anything else you wish me to do before I leave?!"

"Yes, actually, the crew has the right to know about what happened to the Enterprise, I didn't get to it, but now is the time, but I am really sick, would you? After you're done with the mail thing?"

"Of course, Captain."

"Thank you so much, and Spock..."

"Yes?!"

"I don’t know, things seems too easy ever since you got back involved, my brain is so foggy now, but my spider sense is tingling, is there something I'm missing out here?!"

"I do not know, sir."

"I feel like shit, letting you fight for me."

"It is only logical, Jim, my chances of overcoming Commander Sobar are higher than yours by 48.9%."

"Still feels like shit, I hate handouts, and something is fishy here. What am I missing, Spock?!"

"You are missing Elder Soval's cruel logic, insisting on placing a human in your position, only because the numbers looked better for the 'Remain' position when human Katras were involved. This is not a handout, but a duty, I am honored to take your place, so please, don’t look at the horse's mouth."
//Don't look at a gift horse in the mouth, you mean.//

//Something involving horses and the state of their dental health.// Spock got up, impatient //I should get going.//

//Yeah, good luck, thank you.//

Spock disengaged, removing his hand of Jim's face, and for some reason it made Jim feel sad and alone.

"Do you need help going to the bathroom before I leave?"

Jim shook his head, and so Spock nodded and left.

Jim closed his eyes and fell into sleep.

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The door bell chimed again, waking him up.

"Computer, open door." Jim whispered from his bed, his voice still hoarse and weak.

In came Uhura, and he noted that she was wearing her Starfleet issued red little dress, come to think of it, Sulu changed into his gold shirt too, and last he saw Spock, he wore his blue as well. That was nice to see them reclaiming their Starfleet identify, truly heartwarming.

"Captain, it's me." She whispered, venturing in, bringing with her a wonderful scent of food. "I've heard you were sick, I hope you'd get better soon." She placed a small pot and a tray on the desk table "Veggie gumbo with rice" She announced softly "I always take this program with me on away missions to be remind of home, and the Vulcan replicator did an ok job at producing it."

Jim made an effort to sit up, it was hurting all over, and he got really dizzy while at it, but he managed a thank you and a smile.

"There's also a pot of Jasmine tea, nice and fresh… oh, and this, before I forget." She handed him a blister package with three little white tablets still inside. "A Flu pill, Dr. McCoy said it's a must have in every emergency kit. Lucky for you, I listened."

"Thanks, Nyota, I'll not hungry yet, I'll eat it later, but how do I take this?" he waved the blister in his hand.

"One tablet, once, should relieve the symptoms within a few hours."

Jim nodded and took one immediately, swallowing it with his saliva, then he fell back to bed and gave Nyota a long, guarded glance and a smile. "Thank you, I owe you big time."

"Now, now, Captain, don't make a fuss, it was my pleasure, actually." Nyota smiled back, a weary smile, a bit on the sad side, but an honest smile none the less.

"Are we good?" he found courage to finally ask.
"What? Good?" She knelt near his bed so she could see him better, and had this expression of puzzlement in here eye. "We're good, yeah, why do you ask?"

Jim breathed out and averted his gaze "You seemed a bit angered, distant ever, you did not talk to me, not since that night where nothing happened."

Now it was Nyota's turn to let out a breath, and she added her famous eye roll to that. "I am angered, embarrassed, exhausted, but isn't it understandable? Am I not allowed?"

"Nyota…"

"I want out of here, out of this ship. I want this mission to be over, I want the five years mission to be over, I want to step out of your shadow, yours and Spock's, and stand in the sun, on my own, carve my own path, isn't it acceptable? Reasonable?"

"Of course it is." He returned his eyes to her and sent his hand to trace down a tear that ran down her lovely face and wipe it. "I want this for you too, you know. I just hope that you don't hate me."

"Hate you?" she recoiled from his touch. "I have nothing but respect and adoration for you, for the both of you! I want you to find your place in life; I want the best for you. Jim, you and for Spock! Come on! Now I am mad! Why would you think I hate you?"

He shrugged, remembering Spock's words, the embodiment of the human tendency to project. "Sorry…" he whispered."Forgive me?"

Nyota let out a huffing sound and nodded with a new smile and shiny eyes. Then they both fell into silence, where she allowed her hand to travel into his hair to caress it then later check his temperature.

"Jim…" She started again after that long pause and her voice was tender and sad. "Spock showed us the comm from the Enterprise; they had a clash with a Klingon vessel. Bad news, some crew members are dead and Scotty is badly injured, I'm sure you already know."

Jim sighed and nodded as Nyota sniffled and struggled not to shed more tears. "We can only hope and pray." He whispered.

"Why would the admiralty send them to the Klingon border? Makes no sense to me, I'm really pissed off! Wish I could kick some high command ass!"

"Same here."

Nyota hesitated now, lowering her gaze, deliberating her next move. It seemed like interacting with him was hard for her, for known reasons and she struggled to find what to say. "Well, guess there's nothing we can do about it, not from here anyway…I’d better be going, get well, sir. Good night"

She got up on her feet and rubbed one of her shins to get the blood running.

"What time is it?" he asked as she faced the door.

"32:00, good night."

"Good night, Nyota, thanks for everything."

She nodded then made her leave.
Chapter End Notes

I posted this chapter a bit in a hurry, if there are typos I'll fix it and if there are plot errors in need of editing, I'll let you know when I find them.

Next post- no later than 13.07 ( gush, I wish to end this story soon! It's sucks all my attention.)

Thank you for your time of reading!
As I get closer and closer to finishing this story (fingers crossed), I feel the urge to highlight some of my readers that went a long way with me and meant a lot to my writing and motivation, I hope you don’t mind.

This time I want to thank dear Dunyazad9: Thank you for improving my English, educate me about Literature and Fanfiction and provide me with constant, in-depth, kind and insightful feedback, live long and prosper!

Next time I will provide Story statues, for those of you who are interested.

Additional warnings: Explicit, some dubcon moments, and also- brace for impact.

He woke up again as Spock returned to the room, the Vulcan helped him to get to the bathroom, where he used the toilet, took a shower and had a shave, by the length of his stubbles, seems like he has been asleep for two days straight.

When ready, he called again and Spock helped him back to the room, he felt stronger, much stronger than before, but he was still dizzy and disoriented so he could use Spock's help.

Spock placed him on the bed and went in to the washroom to use it himself.

Jim then tossed the towel on the floor and lied down on the bed, shamelessly naked. He noticed that Spock took the trouble to change the sheets, probably did that while he was in the shower.

"What time is it? What is going on outside?" he asked, as his Vulcan returned, his voice seemed stronger and clearer than before.

"It is now 24:00 at ship's time; you've been asleep for the majority of the last three days. I've sent the mail to Section 31 and Admiral Archer the day before yesterday at 27:00 as agreed upon. Earlier today, at 10:00 Elder Sarek along with the rest of the council have gathered in the 'Temple of the Mind' to congresse and discuss the 'Plak If Fee' in order to cast their votes, we should expect results tomorrow at noon."

Spock answered, but Jim only picked up on the first topic, the Section 31 project was over! Done! Finished! And he felt as if two tons of rocks have been lifted off his chest, took him a moment to digest and recover. After a moment of shocked silence he breathed deeply.

"Wow, the closest call ever..." He breathed out, and it is over, it's really over. "Thank you so much and I am so sorry, that went against everything you stand for."
"Not everything." Spock corrected him with a soft voice and a turn of a lip upwards. "I have brought you dinner from the mess room; I believe it is called a Tuna sandwich, it's on your desk."

"Thank you." Jim nodded, he was very hungry, so he moved to the desk and took the sandwich out of its wrapper, and tried to eat like a civilized person and not devour it whole, it was delicious.

As he ate, Jim tried to give some thought to his next move, even though he was giddy with the sense of successes, drunk with the joy of completing an impossible mission against all odds, he knew he was missing something.

What is it, Jimbo? What is it, cotton for brains?

Stop grinning and get your act together! You're losing the plot!

Oh, fuck, yeah, he remembered, and his heart sank like a stone, he hated that next part, but there was no shying away from it.

"Spock…?"

"Yes?"

"Now that the deed is done…"

He began and had to stop to take a breath and gather some courage, his heart hammered too loudly he could not hear his own thoughts.

Spock must have already guessed the direction he was heading, for his body stiffened and he braced himself for Jim's words like awaiting a well aimed photon torpedo.

"Now that the deed is done, are you going to turn us in? To the Elders?"

"This question is irrelevant." Spock answered more quickly than Jim had expected, and he was trying to mask his unease with an impassive expression, but Jim saw right through it and it made him angry.

Be dammed, those Vulcan technicalities.

"I stand corrected, the Elders would probably catch on to us regardless, but are you going to help speed up that process or not?"

"This question is also irrelevant." Spock insisted.

Jim yelped in frustration and tossed the empty wrapper on the desk table, so he could glare daggers into Spock's eyes uninterrupted. "Don't bullshit me now! This is gonna be Nibiru times a million!" he pointed a finger at him.

"Still it is an irrelevant question as you will find out eventually." Spock insisted none the less, glancing at the exit door for a brief moment.

"Irrelevant or not, I want an answer!" Jim demanded with all the strength that was left in him. "I deserve an answer, don't you think?"

Spock took one moment to find the most accurate way to do as such; he turned his gaze to the door again, formulating his reply before he returned his eyes to Jim.

"I assure you this- I have no intention of turning us in, not until the Enterprise safely returned to
Federation space, and so is the Vokau, with you and the rest of the crew back under Earth's jurisdiction. Would this answer suffice?"

Fuck, he was fucked, they were both fucked, but Jim could not expect anything else from Spock, this was the inevitable price of getting this stubborn Vulcan involved, the fact that Spock was ready to wait that long, until the circumstances improves, was an achievement of its own.

"It would suffice." Jim mumbled and breathed out, god he hated it, he hated whatever that managed to come between them, and there was always something. "Just please allow me the curtsey of a warning, a heads up, before the hammer drops." He returned to bed and laid down into the mattress, then pulled the blankets to cover his body.

"As far as it would be up to me, I will grant you this curtsey." Spock assured him as much as possible, his voice soft and contemplative; he turned to look at the exit again.

"Thank you." Was all Jim could add before falling into silence, feeling a bit weak again, after spending his mental strength on this impossible Vulcan. He burrowed under the blankets like a child hiding from monsters.

"I'd be going now, and you should be getting some more sleep." The Vulcan said, his eyes studied Jim's sullen face. "Anything else I could do for you before I take my leave?"

Jim nodded with reluctant, only his eyes and mop of hair peeking out of the blankets.

"There's a cleanup file on the PADD, named… well, 'cleanup', would you please run it? Should erase any residual digital prints in the system, wipe every evident of my meddling. Yes, we have to do this, so we could get the crew back into Earth's jurisdiction." He addressed Spock's unspoken protest. "Yeah, this one, just click on it, should take about an hour. Thank you. After that, we must disconnect the PADD and tidy up the room, I'll do it, should not take too much time either."

"And what about the physical evidences?" Spock pointed out at the desk where the PADD lay.

"I'll take everything with me when we leave the Vokau, and find a way later, chuck them into a black hole, maybe?"

"There are less elaborate ways."

"Yeah, I know." Jim smiled all of a sudden, giddy again, so weightless now, like a helium balloon, might find himself scratching the ceiling. The Section 31 mission, done! Finished! Gone! "So, what's going on outside?" he repeated the question from before.

"The Elders have assembled for the vote, which will probably be taken as early as tomorrow's morning, or at most, tomorrow's noon."

"What about your team?"

"They have already scattered. Sobar and the rest have returned to their stations, Vedik was a bit of a nuisance, once he learned that you were sick, it was tiresome to keep him away."

"Hey, play nice, he's just a friendly guy."

"Too friendly for my liking." Spock mumbled.

"Lieutenant Sharel?"
"Unknown."

"He is a spy you know, for the Andorian government." Jim yawned.

This didn’t even cause Spock to raise a brow, although his intake breath was a bit deeper than usual.

"I suspected as such onboard the Enterprise." The XO said "I have been building a case against him in the past few months, but then Alpha one priority had interrupted the procedure."

"And yet you allowed me to take him as a member of the fucking remain team?" Jim frowned and tossed the blankets away from his face.

"The evidences collected up to that point were not strong enough to…"

"Did he sabotage my ship?" Jim asked through clenched teeth.

"Negative, Captain, Sharel was only reporting to the Andorian government. His last report actually praised your efforts to combat the virus that had plagued the Andorian population on board."

"All I did was to clear Dr. McCoy's way, the rest was his doing, and why the hell would Andoria Prime place a spy on my ship?"

"The Andorians are very suspicious people; it is their way of relieving inner political tensions. However, Lt. Sharel's actions onboard the Vokau might have greater ramifications than his spying upon the Enterprise."

"How did you come to that knowledge? Elder Sarek?"

"Negative, this is my own assessment."

"Goddamn, you should've dropped a word before I chose him!"

"There are currently 29 Andorians serving on the Enterprise, only 3 are under the age of 40, of which one crewman is a basic electrician and the other is an 18 year old intern at the comm unit, you had no choice but to select Lt. Sharel."

"Great, another set-up! But a fucking word, Spock, would've killed ya?"

"It was a delicate political matter, Sir, I was unsure of how to handle it and we had so little time. Refusing Admiral Aruag would have had ramifications of its own."

"Fuck, you're such a politician, I hate politics!" Jim moaned to the ceiling "And I hate you making calls for me without even letting me know! It's so patronizing, Spock, just so you know!"

"That's the XO's job to clear the way for the Captain."

"Well, we'll see about that, but we first get into Earth's jurisdictions, and then figure things out, right? Is that fine by you, daddy?"

"It is acceptable, and I am not your daddy."

"Good to know, and don’t get anyone else involved in this either, I'll deal with Sharel myself, once I'm better, I'm gonna grab him by his antennas and pull him out of his hiding place."

"I'm not sure he is even on board."
"How would you know that?"

"I've meditated this afternoon, searching for an Andorian Katra on the ship to find none."

"Hmm…" Jim was not in a hurry to dismiss that Vulcan voodoo like he once used to. "You say, Ipik?"

"The only logical conclusion."

"Fuck, like we really need this shit now." He wanted to sink deep into the mattress and disappear, he wanted to close his eyes and sleep until forever. "Is Commander Sabek searching for him?"

"I do not know."

"What can we do about it?"

"I do not know."

"Fine, I'll sleep on it tonight, tomorrow is another day."

"I will let you rest." Spock nodded and was ready to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"To my dormitory, I could use some sleep as well, or at least, meditation."

"Hey, fuck meditation, stay." Jim tried, his invitation seemed more like a commanded that a request, and to that Spock answered with a rise of an eyebrow. "Come on, please?" Jim tried again. "I'll let you sleep some, I promise."

He opened his blankets with invitation, exposing his alluring, naked body again to the Vulcan's hungry gaze. Only few were ever able to resist his beauty, and the cocky smirk on Jim's face told Spock that he knew exactly what kind of temptation he was presenting.

Spock was well aware of his defeat, because he did not even try to argue; he just took off his gloves, Starfleet issued boots, shirt and pants in silence, and was left in his undershirt and black briefs.

"Really, now?" Jim chuckled. "Everything off." He commanded.

Spock gazed at him in silence but obeyed, removing the rest of his underwear without protest. Then he got into bed and found his favorite place behind Jim, wrapping both arms around his waist, and soon, as an indication of his exhausted state, he fell asleep. In his non aroused state, it was still very weird not to feel anything poking at his rear, yet it was very intimate in its own alien way.

"Good night, Spock." Jim murmured to the gently snoring Vulcan behind him and then he rearranged the blankets around them both, until he was warm and snug and so was his Vulcan.

"Sleep lights." Jim softly ordered the computer, and the room fell into almost total darkness, only a little lamp at the desk still remained dimly lit.

He should close his eyes now and go under too, although he felt a whole lot of better, he could still use more sleep to compensate for an entire month of sleep deprivation.

But something in the back of him mind was screeching for attention, screaming to him that something was terribly wrong, and in the dark, quiet room, there were no distractions to keep him
ignoring that nagging feeling, his intuition was calling and he knew better than ignore it.

So in the safety of Spock's embrace, Jim allowed himself to investigate.

Sure, they finished the task Section 31 gave him, and now the Federation had a fighting chance against the Klingons, with or without New Vulcan in the picture.

Sure, the Enterprise will be saved, if not by Section 31 then by Admiral Archer, he was once its Captain too, he will not allow the Enterprise to sacrifice itself in vain.

Sure, the ritual was almost over, and for the first time in a while, that didn’t make his blood run cold, he could see past this mission. He could see a way not to die by the hands of Sobar, or by overdosing on the Vulcan drug, or by the hands of a Vulcan interrogator that would fry his brain.

Sure, there were troubles ahead, but there always troubles ahead and he will face them, but hey, he could picture a future where he gets to meet his new baby brother.

But this was so fucking easy! Way too easy! What am I missing out?

Think, Jimbo, think!

You're missing nothing, you just hate the fact that you placed Spock in danger, but what choice do you have? He'll make it! Say's it 63.6% of winning? I say he's far too modest, I say 100%.

Nope, you're missing something, alright, think harder!

I'm just making too much telepathic noise here; I'll wake Spock up, better try and get some sleep.

Nope, tomorrow might be a duel to the death; this is your last chance, think harder.

I did! I tried! Gave it enough thought! Let me sleep now!

Are you sure? Are you happy now? Came back that sly, creepy voice.

Oh, you again? Thought you'd be gone by now. What do you want?

Oh, I'll be gone when you are, sweetie, but are you happy now? You got everything you wanted-sending the schematics to Section 31, ditching the duel with Sobar, even got yourself a fine, hot, pity fuck. Good for you, sunshine!

We'll wake up Spock.

He won’t read you, boundaries, remember? What you lack of?

Go away.

Only after you answer my question- are you happy now? You've dragged Spock into the mud, made him betray his people, breaking the Elders' trust, have him steal and lie and cheat. There is no coming back from this, you know, you have destroyed his very promising, prosperous future. Are you happy now?

He will survive Sobar if it comes to a duel, and when we deal with the Elders about the schematics, I will take all the blame, I'll say I compelled him into it, using my authority as his Captain, tempting him with my human charms, pulling the Pon Farr card, setting him up with a trap, or whatever it takes, he'll get off with a slap on the wrist I promise you! I'll lie and lie and lie through my teeth till they bleed to make it so.
You cannot lie to telepaths.

It won't be such a stretch, you know, he's under my spell, I'll tell him to jump, and he'll ask how high, no one can resist me, it's a natural law. You'll see, I'll have the elders eat out of the palm of my hand, Spock is safe.

Unless he beats you to it, come forward to the council first and find a way to take all the blame to himself, saying stealing the schematics was his own idea. No one would be the wiser, strongest telepath ever, remember? He'll get off with a death penalty, or life in prison, would not help himself, this is in his nature, you stupid cunt! What a fine piece of ass you have, to die for!

What would you rather have me do? I had no choice! He would not leave when I told him to, 21 times!!

Really? No choice? How about not calling out for him, huh? How about not fucking him? He can't resist you; it's kind of a natural law, baby.

It was the only way to distract him; I had hoped that once he's satisfied he'd leave.

Well, that didn't work; Sunshine.

Ok, I fucked up! I fucked it all up! But I will make it work! I will find a way and make it work! I always find a way!

Spock stirred behind him.

Oh, fuck, I woke him up.

Fuck yeah! Happy now, Jimbo?

"Is everything alright?" Spock whispered into his ear, making him shiver with lust.

"Are you reading me now?" Jim asked with surging anxiety, almost choking on his words.

"You know I cannot block you out completely; I'm reading discomfort and stress. Is there anything I can do to assist?" Spock whispered into his ear.

Damn hot, smooth voice, makes your brain melt.

Jim turned within the embrace so he could face Spock; look into his eyes that were glowing green, reflecting the light in the room. "Yes, help me, fuck me." He breathed.

Spock chuckled softly "You're barely healed, you are insatiable, you know that?"

Yes, I'm a horny little slut, what can I do?

"Fuck me, please?" Begging was always a good strategy.

"You said you'd let me sleep."

"Some, and you slept some, so please? I know you wanna…"

Spock chuckled again, his body indeed began to respond, like so many others, he was unable to resist, and Jim could feel the Vulcan's cock starting to emerge out of its hiding place, poking at his thigh.
"Fine." Spock gave up with a low purring sound "But on your stomach, no more flexibility displays until you're strong enough." He said and shifted his weight from Jim so he could turn and lie on his stomach.

Jim pouted, but happily obeyed, spreading his legs, pushing his face down to the pillow and his ass upwards towards Spock's, now full erection. He felt Spock's warm lips and tongue on his nape, licking a pathway to his sensitive earlobe, as the Vulcan settled between his thighs.

"I cannot believe I'm indulging you." Spock whispered into Jim's ear again.

He hesitated, but his double ridged cock seemed to have a life of its own, and was already pressed against Jim's anus, thrusting gently, smearing lubrication between the firm round mounds.

"Come on, Spock, lighten up; let's have some fun." Jim murmured into the pillow.

"This goes against my better judgment." Spock moaned, and Jim wiggled his ass underneath him, wanting more, wanting everything Spock had to offer.

"Stop complaining and Fuck me already!" Jim meowed into the pillow again.

"Your wish is my command." Spock quoted a human platitude he always found amusing, and put his hands on Jim's waists, positioning himself before the dive.

Those were the best moments, while assuming the passive position, those moments of anticipation, the tension, bracing for upcoming penetration, and all the pain and bliss it would bring.

The Vulcan moaned as he started thrusting; shoving himself in with one smooth push, deep into the willing warmth that awaited him, soft and sweet.

Jim growled as well, as his entrance was breached at last, as Spock's length entered him, hard and gentle at the same time, hurting and soothing with the same motion. Jim's mind sang with joy for the pleasures that awaiting him, his heart fluttered in his chest, and his body welcomed Spock in. They were joined in almost every possible way, so intimately entwined, like he never had experienced with anyone before, and most likely, never will know again.

But thoughts were soon replaced by moans as Spock picked up on speed and force, slamming into his prostate with every shove, never stopping, relentless, commanding, overpowering, leading them both to completion.

Jim came first, as always, with a mind blowing orgasm, that he suspected to never share with anyone else, and Spock was not too far behind, he rocked into Jim a few more times before emptying himself into the tight, soft human flesh that devoured him.

Spock groaned with satisfaction and helped Jim move away from the wet spot, but he did not pull out just yet, he wished to stay a bit longer, and Jim allowed it without protest, clenching around the hot, semi-stiff rod lodged inside him, enjoying their lingering connection.

Spock rested his head next to Jim's and though he could not see him, he could feel him smile, as the Vulcan kissed the curve of his neck, and licked his way up to the human's nape like a cat, sending shivers in his way to make Jim dizzy with joy.

Please never leave, never ever leave…

"Are you on the 'Leave' side now?" he asked, surprising himself as well as Spock, of all the questions he had in mind, but he truly wanted to know.
"I am indeed." Spock confirmed, resting his head back on the pillow next to Jim's, but Jim could not find an angle comfortable enough to search for his eyes.

"Why? Did Sobar's logic finally overpower yours?” he almost smirked into the dark room.

"That is not the case." Spock answered, amusement sneaked into his low, purring voice, and his hand caressed one of Jim's shoulders with lazy, slow circles.

"So what is it then?" Jim asked again, clamping down on Spock's shaft to make his point.

Spock huffed at that, and kissed his unkempt, blonde hair before answering. "For simplification's sake I'd say that in the duration of this stay, I have recognized that Vulcans are now walking a dark path, best to do so away, without dragging down others with us."

"Funny, that is exactly what Elder Soval told me, but as a reason to remain."

Spock throbbed inside him and quivered a little, he was getting fully hard again. "That is a selfish position to take." He answered while bucking his hips slowly into Jim "the needs of the many…"

"Yeah, well, I know what I need. Another round, please?" Jim pleaded, moving his thighs in rhythm, to answer Spock's gentle humping.

Spock openly chuckled now, his breath tickled Jim's nape, and the sound was beautiful, and as he laughed, his member moved inside of Jim, making him moan and crave some more serious pounding.

"I find it very hard to refuse you." Spock laugh faded into a husky purr.

"Hard is good, is all I need, move please." Jim now pushed his ass towards Spock so he'd get some of that lovely friction.

"You'll be the end of me." Spock whispered and obliged, he took position and started thrusting again with honest.

After having his way, Jim now lay compliant underneath him; completely lax and loose, ready to take whatever pleasure Spock had to offer. He hummed his content, as he felt Spock hammering into him, picking up both speed and strength, he admired the stamina and energy Spock had in abundance, a Vulcan thing, obviously, how could anyone else replace him?

Fuck, he'll have to find himself a rogue Klingon, but were there Klingons able to play chess? Or the banjo? Or have that brilliant mind? Or them beautiful dark eyes?

No, no other will do.

I am so totally fucked.

So spoiled, so attached, so taken by this creature, hybrid, one of a kind.

What a turn on it would be, to see him fight against Sobar, his strength, agility, skill, what a monster indeed, shame to make a killer out of him, though.

Oh, fuck, he's going to make a killer out of him!

A killer out of this gentle, wise, logical being. The one that refused to eat a replicated stake for the sake of his team. How could he live with himself? How could Spock live with himself after killing Sobar?
And then it clicked.

Like a key turning inside a lock.

Like a safety belt sliding into position.

Spock is not going to live! Spock was going to die!

"Stop! Stop, Spock! Stop now!!" Jim found himself almost shouting, but only almost, so nobody gets the idea of breaking in to save him.

Spock growled, and refused to end his thrusting.

Jim wiggled underneath, damn that Vulcan was so heavy, he elbowed him, tried to get away, but the strong arms would not let go. "Spock, enough! Stop now, please!"

Spock snarled again, but this time he slowed down, then his groan turned into a low whine as he pulled out, slowly and miserably, but he obeyed none the less.

Jim secretly admired his discipline; he had no idea if he could do the same, control himself like this, if this was the other way around.

"Did I hurt you?" Spock asked, trembling, rising up to a kneeling position so Jim could turn and face him.

"No, I'm good, I'm good." He locked eyes with Spock's half lidded ones. Poor thing, his cock was painfully erect and dripping on the bed sheets.

"So why?" Spock asked, unable to hide his anguish.

"Because I am on to you, Spock! I am so fucking on to you!" Jim set up as well, hissing in frustration, so furies, so monumentally pissed off; he wished he could punch some sense into Spock's stubborn hobgoblin head.

"What are you talking about?" Spock disengages skin contact and put some distance between them, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Jim glared daggers at him. "I'm so very on to you! You fucking, deceitful, truth-bending, mind-manipulating, bastard!"

"Jim!"

"Don't Jim me! Answer me instead! What are my chances surviving a duel with Sobar?"

"Have already told you, I estimate it to be 14.7%, give or take with the state of your health now. Why are you doing this, Jim...?"

"14.7%." Jim echoed "And what are the chances of you surviving a duel with Sobar?"

"63.6%"

"Wrong answer!" Jim spattered "Try again!"

"63.6%!"

"Wrong answer again!"
"I do not understand…"

"How about a fucking, perfectly rounded zero?"

Spock opened his eyes wide. "How did you come by this number?"

"There it is! You won't deny it!" Jim pointed out his finger. "So fucking on to you! Coldblooded green hobgoblin! I can also use logic, you know! If you take my position and lose- you die! If you take my position and win, you die! The elders will not refuse you the fight, but they will execute you afterwards, for breaking the blood oath! – and then you die! If you even offer this to the elders and I turn you down- you are still in violation of the blood oath and get to die! Zero fucking percent!!!"

"Jim…"

"Don't Jim me! I'm so fucking stupid! So fucking self-absorbed it almost got over my head! But my head is out of my ass now, and there is no way! No fucking way I'm going to let you do that!"

"Jim, this is the only logical…"

"Not listening to you! You're outed! You're done! Nothing you can say or do to change my mind! I am fighting Sobar and if you even breath a word to anyone that you were trying to take my place, I'm gonna come back from the dead to kill you myself!"

"Jim, please, will you let me…?"

"No! Not another word! Wanna die with me? Fine! But there is no way I'm stepping down from that fight! You cannot make me!"

"A nerve pinch delivered at the right moment…"

"Fuck you! If there is any warrior honor in you, don't you fucking dare! And the Elders must need my spoken consent, right? So fucking on to you, it hurts!"

"Let me explain."

"No, none! It's a done deal, so shut the fuck up!"

"I wish to defend my position!"

"Position yourself at my asshole and give it to me! Is all I want you to do!"

"Jim!"

"Fuck me! It's is out last night together anyhow! Tell me you don't want this!"

Jim lied back on the bed, propped up on his elbows, spreading his legs, displaying his all to Spock, everything he had to offer. His lush, full lips, his smooth toned chest, perky, pink nipples, his erection, slick and pulsing, his sack, wet with cum, and his round, plump ass that was soft and tight and all around perfect.

Spock saw it all, eyes blackened with desire, but still, he fought for self control and kept himself still at his safe distance.

But not for long, not for long, Jim knew and was going for the kill. He held Spock's gaze with a cocky smirk and then pulled his knees to his chest, and used his hands to spread his ass cheeks,
letting Spock have an eyeful of his leaking, gaping, pink hole.

Beautiful, irresistible… he could almost hear Spock's mind singing this to him, as his dark eyes reviewed the sight, not blinking for a second.

Yes, no one could resist him, a natural law.

Spock sniffed at the air and almost roared, a low, purring roar, and Jim smiled.

"Like it, big boy? Come and give it to me." Jim taunted with a smirk.

Spock moved with almost unnatural speed, placed himself on top of his human and slid back right in, making Jim moan with relief.

"Good boy, now move." Jim commanded, closing his eyes, awaiting pleasure.

Spock remained still, only nested within him, but not moving whatsoever, and when Jim realized he was not planning to, he opened his eyes with irritation to fine the bastard smirking back at him.

"Hey, what's going on? Move already!"

"Now that I gave it to you, would you listen to what I have to say?" Spock stated, smirking still.

"Move!"

"There, there, Captain, I am not your pleasure toy, you will hear me out now."

"Fuck." Jim yelped, but not in that good way, and he let his head sink back into the pillow "Fine, ok! What is it?"

"First, there is a 43.66% chance for a tie, but also 56.3% for other results, so let's keep things in perspective, shall we? Second, in case of a tie, I am the one to battle Sobar; you have already given your word. Third, and most important, I have a reason to suspect you do not understand Elder Svern and Sobar's play. But I do, I have observed them as carefully as they did me, and I have learned their logic, I know the trap that they have set for you, for the both of us."

"A trap? The hell are you talking about?"

Spock smirked still, and shoved his cock a bit deeper, to give Jim a spark of pleasure, rewarding him for his cooperation. "A trap indeed. I have paid attention to them, and learned about their objectives and the way they strove to achieve them. Care to learn more?"

"One more, please." Jim panted and moaned as Spock moved again, hitting his P-spot with impeccable precision.

"You see, both Svern and Sobar are separatists, puritans, isolationists. Someone like me, a hybrid is an abomination in their eyes, a plague on the nation, and a horror outcome of unwanted involvement with other species."

"But if they wanted it so badly, to use this ritual to kill you, Spock, why are you going to let them?"

"They also fear I have created a bond with you, a human, a hybrid bond. They want this bond out in the open, for all witnesses in the ritual to see; for all the future leaders and potential Elders to know."
"There is no shame in… oh…mmm… ohh…" Jim stated and had to moan again with pleasure as Spock moved inside him again, gotta hand it to the pointy eared bastard, for finding this effective way to shut him up.

"Some may agree with you, but regretfully, some may not. Sobar has already established me as a monster, and you know how vulnerable the Vulcans are, now that reason has failed us, many will fall into elder Svern's hand like a ripe fruit."

"But Spock! Fighting for me will expose that bond anyway!"

"That victory is already theirs." Spock admitted calmly "And I do not have to guess this, Sobar told me himself, albeit through miscalculation, but none the less."

"Spock, the fuck are you talking about?" Jim hated repeating himself.

"Here is their play, should it come to a duel-

"If I step into your place- they win. If I try to step in and you refuse me- they win. If I do nothing and you fight- they'd make it so painful, I could not stand idle, and they win. We cannot protect our bond as a secret, Svern and Sobar have won."

"So what? So we have a bond? Fucking nobody's business! Nothing to be ashamed of, right? Your father and mother had one too, no?"

"They shared a bond, indeed, and kept it private as they should have; no one would have believed them for having a hybrid bond anyway. But this? This is different, Jim, at this point in time of Vulcan history; this knowledge has the potential to incite a civil war."

"This knowledge is protected under the secrecy of the 'Plak If Fee.'" Jim tried to move his hips to gain more friction, and it was so frustrating when he failed.

Spock eyed him with a smirk. "Pay attention, James." He nearly whispered "You'll have to earn this orgasm."

"I'm so gonna get back at you for this!" Jim hissed at him.

"Attention, James." Spock warned him "And no, this knowledge will not stay in the confinements of this ritual. Elder Svern is willing to die in order to get it out to the public, sacrifice his own son's life, and risk a civil war as long as the Vulcans leave the Federation now, no matter the cost. Both of them will not let this opportunity go to waste, and I suspect that they have planed this from the beginning!"

"How do you even know that this is their plan, huh?" Jim had to try. "Did you risk a mind meld with any of them? Did you?" Jim gasped, running his hand through Spock's hot, humid hair.

"I didn’t have to. You said you wanted to know what Sobar whispered to me when I almost stepped down from the fight."

"That thing that got you all berserk."

"He told me that should I refuse to fight with all I had, and he faces you in a duel, he'd tear you apart, limb by limb." Spock shuddered, above and inside him.

Jim plastered a kiss to the Vulcan's forehead, as he lowered down and leaned his heavy head on Jim's shoulder. "Would he? Would he be so cruel? Could he, even?"
"Tear you apart?" Spock sniffled and a tear came down from his eyes to tingle Jim's skin "Sever your arms and legs with his bare hands? Yes, he could. With a Lirpa? You have no idea, no idea how strong we are, or you'd be out of this door, screaming." Few more tears fell from Spock's eyes to wet Jim's face.

"Hey, running out the door, naked, in a ship full of Vulcans would be a bad, bad idea...." He smiled at Spock and gathered his face for a deep kiss, and yes, he was very aware of how strong they were, and still he was stupid enough to take a Vulcan as a lover.

"Do you think that I can let him fight you and sit it out?" Spock continued, almost hissing in rage "Do you think that I've made everything in my power just to be here, and sit it out? Do you think you can make me watch as...?" Spock's voice broke, and Jim wiped the tears off his handsome face while smiling at him.

"But Sobar had managed to get that fight out of you, showed the Elders and the witnesses what kind of a monster you were. He had already got what he wanted, so why worry...?"

"Vulcan language, Jim. More is revealed in the unsaid than the spoken. Sobar did not tell me what would happen if I comply, only what would take place if I don't."

"Oh, son of a bitch! Sadistic, cold blooded killer!" the horror started to sink into Jim's mind, cold as ice, sharp as a blade.

"Indeed." Spock whispered and nuzzled into Jim's arching neck.

"The Elders will not allow..." Jim whimpered, shivering.

"The Elders will not intervene! A duel would be beyond their reach; they will not disobey the gods of war."

"Really? Gods of war?" Jim breathed out "But logic..."

"Logic is Gone, James! Logic is gone!" Spock grabbed him by his arms and shook him as if to wake him up, and Jim gasped, fear finally took hold on him, and he stared at the Vulcan above him with eyes blown wide and his heart hammered like crazy in his chest.

"So he means it, huh? Tearing me apart?" he whispered after a long moment, trembling at the thought, trying to tame his fear, and then he inhaled deeply and a new, cold, mocking smirk rose on his lips. "Well, no one gets to live forever, Spock, Fuck me."

Jim clamped down on Spock's member just to make his point, but Spock's determination remained intact. "You are going to let me fight, James!!"

Jim now whimpered with frustration, this was nothing but torture, damn hobgoblin. "Give me one good reason." He gazed at Spock, blue eyes shining with defiance.

Spock could not hide his astonishment; he gaped and stared back for a while. "You require a reason? To stay alive?"

"Instead of you? Yes. Got any? Didn't think so, fuck me."

"Wait!" Spock recovered from his temporary shock. "I have plenty of reasons! But foremost, and don't you dare brushing this off... I see greatness in you; I know that one day you'll be a great leader."
"Oh, come on, is that all you have? really? I can say the same goes to you, next?"

"Because this bond, that will be exposed one way or another, was forced upon you and you should not pay the price of my folly."

"Nope, you were out of control during the Pon Farr, remember? Try again."

"There will be plenty of other opportunities for you to die for a noble cause, no shortage of them! Just do it for a good reason, for the sake of humankind, not for the sake of a species that has lost its way and is already gone!"

"This is for humankind; Elder Soval explained it to me very well!"

"Fine then! Do it for me! I've already seen you die once; I cannot withstand it again! I beg you please, Jim! Please let me give this gift to you! I love you so…"

"Oh, Spock I love you so much like this, inside of me, so deep, fuck me already! "

"Say the words, Jim."

"Please, fuck me?"

"The other words!"

"What do you want me to say? Yes, Spock? You win? Congrats, you get to die for me? Would that make you happy? Would that make you move your cock for fuck's sake? Fuck me, now!"

"Do I have your word?" Spock insisted, his effort to stay still was heroic at this point.

"Yes! You have it!" Jim answered with a flaring gaze, looking into Spock's dark eyes without a blink, knowing perfectly well that it will set his mind at ease.

Because Spock would not even come to think of reading him.

Because Spock respected boundaries.

Because Vulcans do not lie.

But humans do.

And so Spock started moving again, and Jim sighed with relief, hooking his legs on the Vulcan's back and awaited that mind blowing orgasm that he knew was building up inside of him.

Chapter End Notes

Next update: no later than 18.07, so I hope.

Well, until next time, I wish you well and send you all my best regards.
Dynamic Alarm

Chapter Notes

Ok, hello everyone, I am excited and nervous to share this chapter with you, because this is the point of no return in the story.

As you know the Elders have voted and now it is time to decide whether the Plak If Fee results are either- remain, leave or there's a tie, it cannot longer be left hanging in the air.

In the process of writing I toyed with all three options and chose what I think would be the most interesting path to take, the one that would yield the most dramatic impact and let the characters, especially Jim, shine through. I hope you will agree, because that this is the make or break point of this story and I wish you would not be disappointed.

So, putting on my brave suit, there we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Mature, mild violence.

Jim woke up to the day that might be the last in his life, could have knocked down anyone with the sheer gravity of it, but hey, we're talking about someone with a lot of experience in that particular field.

After the disaster had struck on Tarsus 4, he woke up to that nagging feeling every single day for nine months, not to mentions those countless times on board the Enterprise as well, where he woke up to wailing sirens and burning red lights of the red alert, or taking into account all those unexpected events and variety of unpleasant surprises that were thrown his way; be it in deep space or on planet side. Yet, there he was, alive and well, and all those incidents, buried and filed away, almost forgotten, ancient history.

This time was no different than the rest, he was not going to let Spock die for him, and he was certainly not going to die himself, not without putting a hell of a fight first.

So there must be a way, there is always a way, there are no circumstances that could not be overturned, nothing is ever perfectly sealed, in every web there was always a hole, and all he needs to do is to find it.

He could ask audience with Elder T'Pau and Elder Sarek prior to the duel, to find a way to prevent Spock from intervening; he could sneak into the healing center and steal an anesthesia drug strong enough to knock Spock out and find a way to slip it into his drink or food before the duel start, he still has time to figure this out, plenty of time to find the way out of this trap.
If this was indeed a trap, it had been planned by a mastermind, Elder Svern, most likely. Got to give it to him, he was extremely good, got under Jim's extremely sensitive radar. He registered in Jim's mind as this not very smart, headstrong, military type, boorish and arrogant as much as a Vulcan could be. He never struck Jim as one that could patiently and quietly weave together a thread of events that might result with him or Spock, or both dead. Why? What was he hoping to achieve by that? What was his end game?

So many questions, so little time.

Spock was still asleep, Jim noticed with a smile, he was laying above the blankets, in the nude, on his stomach, hugging a pillow and drooling on it. He looked so vulnerable at this state, so endearing, with his unkempt hair, and his soft snores and those long, dark eyelashes, fluttering over flawless, pale skin as he dreamed.

Well, they say Vulcans do not dream, and Spock is a hybrid, so maybe that is why he could dream, but Jim says bullshit, of course they all do, they just probably call it mind defragmentation, or something of that sort.

Carefully, Jim removed himself from bed then got into the shower, where did what he needed to do and got back all nice and clean. He felt a whole lot of better, stronger, clearer, and focused, and was ready to start the day.

Searching for something to wear, he found his Captain's uniform at the bottom of a laundry hamper, a good choice, that golden shirt and those black undershirt and pants, if he dies today, he'll die in this outfit, as the Captain of the Enterprise, as a delegate of Starfleet and the UFP.

As he got dressed he suddenly noticed something strange, something had changed in the room's lights, ever so slightly, it was still set on the night program, but something was added to it, a new, small, flickering green light, so small it hardly made a change in the room, and it looked like something you'd expect from a smoke detector, or a gas detector, but there was no sound attached to it, so... he'll ask Spock when he gets up.

Turns out he didn't have to wait that long, because a wave of pain came washing all over him, burning him from the inside out, and making him want to scream. He had to sit down on the bed and breath through it, so bad, getting worst every time it happened, and he was all out of the damn Vulcan drug, with a slim chance to get some more and ease his craving.

Spock woke up, probably feeling his pain through the bond; he set up abruptly and rubbed the sleep off of his eyes. "Jim?" he crawled closer and sent a hand to caress the human's face, worried, his fingers settled on Jim's psi points. "Are you alright?"

"I'm ok, I'm fine." He answered with a hiss; the pain was already receding, so soon enough he won't be even lying. "Go get ready; I have no idea how much time we've slept."

"10.2 standard hours, it is now 08:21 in the alpha shift."

"Great, breakfast." Jim smiled, the pain was now over, and so was his flu, and he was super mega hungry.

"I'm not certain about that." Spock said, letting go of Jim's face, then he got up, and entered the bathroom. "But allow me to go and refresh first."

"Sure, go ahead."

Spock returned 15 standard minutes later, drying up his hair with a towel, and then he picked up
his folded cloths from the desk. He too, had chosen to wear his Starfleet uniforms, and Jim smiled as he put on his black undershirt, science blue shirt and black pants, it has been too long.

"Did you notice something odd?" Spock asked Jim while getting dressed. "The shower did not respond to my vocal command, I had to operate it manually."

"Yeah, me too, I think it might be broken, the computer said I was an unidentified user. Oh, and what is it with that light over there?"

Spock followed Jim's pointed finger to the small lamp on the ceiling. "That is the dynamic alarm." He answered calmly but could not mask his puzzlement completely.

"Green alarm?" Jim almost cried out "As in- our red alert?"

"Affirmative." Spock conformed.

"When did you notice it?"

"21 minutes ago, while waking up."

"And you said nothing?"

"What is there to say? We are guests on this ship, protocol dictates guests should stay in their quarters while there is a dynamic alarm, and await the Captain's instructions, and since none were given, there is not much we could do but wait."

"Fuck, I'm hungry, and I hate waiting, what do you think happened?"

To this Spock almost frowned. "You are well aware that I operate on the basis of facts and well establish scenarios, speculations are useless."

"I understand." Jim nodded "but what's your guess?"

Spock slightly shook his head but obliged. "If you force me to make an assumption, my primary one would be that this is Periapsis related, we are, after all, at its peak. Could also be a malfunction due to said event, this would be my secondary assumption."

"I see, I hope that the Captain is coping. Computer, lights on."

"Command rejected, unidentified user." The male AI voice insulted him politely.

"Lights on, I tell you!" Jim insisted.

"Command rejected, unidentified user." The AI insisted too.

"The fuck? You know me! We argue all the time! Lights on! Now!"

"Command rejected, unidentified user."

"Fuck you, you stupid, nasty piece of shit!" Jim shouted before realizing there was a Vulcan in the room, who eyed him with amusement.

"Command rejected, unidentified user." The AI was also not impressed.

"Damn, good for nothing bastard!" Jim muttered, crossing his hands on his chest.
Spock raised an eye brow at Jim's outburst. "Computer, open door." He gave it a try as well.

"Command rejected, unidentified user."

"You too? Fuck! Are we locked in?" Jim was almost ready to panic, being hungry and caged up was a particular horrible combination.

On the other side, Spock merely seemed intrigued.

Remembering suddenly, Kirk turned to his PADD on the desk, and he breathed out in relief as he saw that the cleanup program had already finished its run.

"What are you doing?" Spock asked as the human started moving about the room.

"Finishing the clean up." Kirk fetched the ventilation's system MCU from under the loose tile on floor and disconnected the wires and the PADD that were attached to it. "Getting rid of the physical evidence, green alert or not, this might be our last chance to do that."

"I see." Spock nodded his approval and set again on edge of the bed.

Jim started to clean the MCU from the unauthorized wires he had soldered into it, carefully removing the soldering filler with his screwdriver. It was hard to work in almost complete dark, and the situation was so very irritating, but keeping busy was the best strategy against the sense of dread that threatened to take hold of him.

"So now what? We are supposed to stay locked in this room? For how long?" he asked while cleaning.

"I do not know times three." Spock answered with a hum.

"Well, think of something." Jim muttered at him, as he cleaned the MCU from his finger prints and placed the microcontroller back in its place under the floor, and then he screwed back the tile and cleaned it from his fingerprints as well.

"May I have the screwdriver?" Spock asked.

"Sure, what for?"

"Under this tile, there should be a touchpad." Spock answered, pointing to the side of the door. "Let's see if this malfunction includes touch telepathy as well."

"Good idea. I have a soldering iron too, smuggled it onboard, don't ask me how."

Inside an altered butt plug, along with his other physical hacking tools, counting on the Vulcans not to get too handsy and proven right about it.

"Negative, that soldering iron is miniature, would take too long to implement; the screwdriver would be much more affective."

Jim handed the screwdriver to Spock.

Spock took the small tool and walked towards the door, he placed his fingers on the lintel, his sensitive fingertips trailing down the minute edges where the tiles were bordering each other.

"Yeah, there's a touchpad there." Jim conformed, when Spock placed his hand on the right spot, after all, he did disassemble the whole room at one point, but the touchpad had no hardware
beneath it, only thin wires, so it was useless to him at that time.

Spock carefully maneuvered the screwdriver until he loosened the tile and it drop with a clang to
the floor, exposing the touchpad beneath it. Then, he placed his naked hand on the pad, and
nothing happened.

"Did you try opening the door?" Jim asked.

"Affirmative." Spock answered in that voice he used when his mind was occupied elsewhere. "I am
completely locked out of the system." He concluded with a hint of wonder.

"Did you try your dad's signature too?"

"I did, with the same results." Spock confirmed.

"Fuck! What is going on here? Does green alert means locking everyone in? It's not very logical, if
you ask me. Does it still look like a malfunction to you? If that's the case, it's a major one. Hey, can
you try contacting your father? Find out what he knows? Do that family bond telepathy thing."

"I do not wish to disturb Elder Sarek in the midst of a voting process."

"Well, yeah, a bit awkward, you're right, do it anyway."

"Jim." Spock tried, but got that look from his human, so he breathed and closed his eyes in
concentration, when he opened them after a long moment, he seemed torn between astonishment
and concern.

"Well, what is it?" Jim asked nervously.

"Elder Sarek just informed me that the council has reached its decision." Spock answered; voice
calm but eyes wide open.

"Which is?" Jim asked, loud enough to overcome the pounding of his heart.

"Remain!" Spock whispered in awe "12 against 9, which means the Plak If Fee concludes with
25:23 in favor of remaining! You did it, Jim, you won!" Spock looked at Jim as if he had laid eyes
on him for the first time ever and found him fascinating.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" Jim murmured, almost blushing under Spock's intense gaze "It
was a possibility, right?"

"You do not seem to understand." Spock breathed out "The Vulcan people have chosen to put their
trust in humanity, to entrust their fate with the Federation, all because of you, James! Because of
your efforts! They saw you! Your bravery, your honesty, your strengths and weaknesses, your
bright, dazzling katra! And they have chosen to place their future in your hands!"

"Well, sure I'm glad they didn't see my hacking project while at it...." Jim blushed deeper and was
ready to say something even more dismissive when Spock cupped his face with both bare hands
and leaned down to kiss him.

Now all he could do was to moan and melt into that hot kiss, let the Vulcan ravish his mouth with
this deep, passion filled embrace, taking his breath away. After a brief moment, Spock let him go,
but still, he looked at him with eyes blown wide open in dismay.

"So, no duel to the death, Huh? I feel so stupid now, we worried for nothing." Jim chuckled in
relief. "Such wonderful news! How did Elder Sarek vote? Don’t tell me, he voted to leave."

"Elder Sarek still holds a 'Leave' position, indeed." Spock conformed "There are complications, however."

"Complications?" Worry crept its way back into Jim's voice again. "What complications?"

"Elder Svern had objected to perform the final voting, he wished to postpone the official declaration and have the vote repeated, in light of evidences he intends on bringing forth to the council. His wish was granted, and they are still in deliberation as we speak."

"What evidences? What does it mean? Could you please ask Elder Sarek what kind of…"

"Elder Sarek has blocked me after delivering this massage." Spock interrupted him mid question. "As predicted; Sarek doesn't wish to pollute the debating process by simultaneously conversing with us."

Biting on his bottom lip, Jim nodded, this was totally understandable, but what was going on here? What kind of evidence was Svern intending on bringing? Was it about the bond? The hacking project? Sharel? What did he know, and how was he going to prove it?

"Jim, I do not think it is wise to push Elder Sarek any further." Spock concluded.

"Yeah, yeah, perfectly understandable." He mumbled.

Jim frowned; he didn’t like it, didn’t like it at all.

Now that he had acquired a much deeper respect for Elder Svern's sharp, cunning mind, he had to wonder what Svern was up to next, a Vulcan like him was not going to give up so easily, just because one trap failed.

If Elder Svern had spent so much time preparing his moves in advance, surly he planned for this scenario, where the Plak If fee would be conclude in favor of remaining. But what could possibly be his play for this turn of events was still beyond Jim's comprehension, and it pissed him off.

"Damn it, of course he has a plan B, probably a plan C and D as well, he's got everything covered! And we've only focused on this one scenario!" Jim almost shouted, berating himself mostly, but also Spock.

"Indeed." The Vulcan agreed.

They both have failed to see beyond the prospect of a duel. Well, to be fair, that particular scenario where they both faced the risk of a gruesome death had its striking appeal, subjectively speaking.

"And the Dynamic alarm? Did you ask him about the dynamic alarm?" Jim asked after coming back to his senses.

"Came as a surprise to Elder Sarek when I mentioned it, the Elders were not informed of an alarm, which reinforces the option of a local malfunction."

"My intuition says there's something else in motion." Jim shook his head "Too many strange things happening all at once, we need to get a grip, and we cannot do it in this room, must be a way out."

"Regulations dictate…" Spock tried to argue.

"Fuck regulations! Get us out of this room!" Jim commanded, almost with a shout.
Spock nodded and found his gloves on the desk, neatly folded; he wore one on his dominant left hand, and used the other as an additional protective layer, warping it around his knuckles. "This might hurt." He stated while clenching his hand into a fist.

Then the Vulcan turned to the door, crouched on one knee, found its middle point and placed his arm in position.

"What are you doing?" Jim asked, finding a place behind Spock.

"Stand back." Spock said and drove his fist into the door with all his strength, creating a dent in the metal.

"Holly shit!" Jim jumped, holding his left hand, because suddenly, it hurt like hell.

"I cannot shield properly from you at the moment." Spock explained and slammed his fist into the door again with full force, expanding the dent and to a point where a small crack appeared in the middle.

"Fuck." Jim hissed, this time it hurt a bit less, because he was ready for it.

Spock rammed his hand into the door for the third time and now, he managed to punch through, creating a hole all the way to the other side, then he changed his position, using that hole as an encoring point, he leaning his body to one side, pushing the door open. It screeched and shrieked but the mechanism keeping it locked had already been damaged enough for Spock to force it open.

"Are you alright?" Spock asked while getting up to assess his achievement.

"I'm ok."Jim threw a glance at the open door, it was bent sideways and even folded at the center point, and there was green blood smeared on it. "And you?"

"Minor inconvenient." Spock answered and Jim knew better than starting a fight.

"Let's see if the others are locked in as well." he suggested instead, and walked out through the wrecked door, that was all crumpled up and shooting sparks.

They did not have to wait for too long, to hear Dayton banging on his door, Carol and Nyota screamed for help and Sulu slamming whatever object on his side of the door with not much of a success.

"You're not punching through every door here." Jim glared at Spock, his hand was still bleeding, he could see the droplets leave his glove and fall to the floor.

"Illogical." Spock agreed, placing his other glove on his right hand. "I'll find the main electric feed and cut off the power; that should suffice. May I have the screwdriver again?"

"Hold that thought." Jim said and ran back to his room to fetch it.

He came out again and gave it back to Spock and while the Vulcan turned his attention to locating the main feed, he returned to the common hall and crouched next to Sulu's door.

"Cut it out, Hikaru!" He shouted above the ruckus the man created. "We're on it. Do you hear me, Sulu?" he shouted to overcome the noise of the helmsman's battle against his door.

"Jim?" The slamming noise in the room had halted and Sulu asked panting.

"Yeah, it's me, we're getting you out, don’t worry, just a few more moments."
"What is going on?"

"I don't know, see you in a few."

Jim left the door and turned to Nyota's.

"Someone, help!" she shouted from behind the door, panicked and on the verge of tears.

"Help's on the way." He informed her.

"Captain?" she gasped "I'm locked out of the system! What is going on here?"

"Seems like we're all locked out, gonna get you out in a few, stand by."

"Yes, sir, thank you." She said, a bit calmer.

Jim got up again and turned to Sharel's room, but it was still and quiet, seems like no one was there, and it has been four days already, was the Lieutenant even alive? No time to explore that thought, Carol and Dayton were next. He could hear Carol shouting for help, and Dayton was talking to her through his own room, so they've spent the night separately.

He walked to the other side of the common hall to Carol's door.

"Marcus, it's me, Jim, we are working on… ouch!" She fell on him as all the doors suddenly opened, and at the same time darkness had filled the room.

Dayton felt his way out of his room and helped them both up. "Would someone please explain what's going on?" He asked them.

"There's a dynamic alert, or a massive malfunction, or both." Jim updated him, while Sulu and Nyota moved slowly into the hall, led by the sound of his voice.

"Dynamic alert?" Carol asked.

"As in our red alert, only Vulcan." Jim explained "Spock?" he shouted.

"Here, Captain." Spock said, returning to the group, eyes glowing green in the dark, giving everyone a focal point "I've cut the main supply to the quarters, however, it seems like the electrical feed was inseparable from other primary feeds."

"You mean we have lost life support?" Jim asked his XO in alarm.

"Affirmative, sir."

"Oh, my" Hikaru could not help but say.

"It is getting colder in here." Nyota noted, and Sulu came closer to warp his arms around her.

"Assuming worst case scenario, we have about half an hour to evacuate." Jim came to the next conclusion.

"26.5 minutes before life threatening conditions are developed." Spock confirmed.

"Alright, everyone, make yourself known." Jim spoke to the near complete darkness in the room; only one, tiny, green alert light was still flickering in the hall, probably a part of the fail-safe system.
"Nyota's here."

"Carol, hey."

"Dayton."

"Sulu, at your command."

"Spock."

"Jim."

He waited a few seconds, and as expected, the Andorian was a no show.

"So here's what we are going to do- everyone, you have 15 minutes, go back to your room, carefully, get your emergency gear, flashlights, first aid kit, whatever, put on something warm, grab whatever it is that you cannot live without, as long as it doesn't hinder your movement and come back here. In case the whole ship is a mess, we'll take some water and food with us, and then we are out of here. Go."

"Yes, Sir." Everyone answered almost as one.

Spock followed him back into his room, and Jim found a flashlight, turned it on and placed it on the desk to illuminate the room. Then he picked up a side bag and stuffed it full with his hacking PADDs and after some consideration also the PADD he got from Elder Sarek.

After that, he rolled in all the wires he attached to the microcontroller, packed his hacking kit, the recording device and then he turned to his closet, where he kept his food stash, grabbed his emergency energy bars, dry fruits and cookies, he always had food with him, ever since Tarsus 4.

Spock, at the same time, found three more flashlights and turned them on, letting the shadows dance in the room, and then he picked up another side bag, and filled it with Jim's first aid kit, emergency charger, a change of Jim's clothes and a small towel.

"Where should we go?" Jim asked as they packed.

"Protocol dictates that in case of a dormitory malfunction, all affected must report to their direct officer. Since we are guests here, our direct officer is the Chief of personnel, Lieutenant commander Sorak."

That name seemed vaguely familiar to Jim. "Where would the Lieutenant commander might be?"

"At this hour, he should be in his office, on Deck 20, but if he is not there, we could report to his subordinates as well."

"Complication, Mr. Spock, how will we reach deck 20, or any other deck, with no access to the lift? We're all locked out of the system, remember?"

"Indeed, we should alert maintenance as well, they have the authority to grant us temporary access in the case of a malfunction."

"And where is their headquarters?"

"That would be on deck 9, sir, I see the problem." Spock halted to think. "There are alternatives to the use of the turbo lifts; the main emergency staircase is one of them."
"So first step, we get out of here, and find a safe place for the crew on the nearest deck, after that the two of us will go sort things out with maintenance, and later head to deck 20 for the Personal officer, no need to drag everyone along with us."

"Sounds logical, Sir." Spock nodded.

"Do you think the Vokau itself is in danger now that we lost life-support here?" Jim asked with concern as the idea occurred to him.

"Highly unlikely." Spock answered "The ship was designed to withstand far greater damage than this, ours is a local problem."

"Well, locally the temperature is dropping fast." Jim noted, watching the small clouds of his breath coming out of his mouth. "Oxygen level must be dropping too." He noticed he was getting kind of dizzy. "Come on."

Outside, their crew awaited, carrying their belongings, some held flashlights too, all have changed into their black track uniforms, except Spock and Jim that found no time for it.

Jim handed two of his flashlights to Carol and Dayton that had none. "Time, Spock?"

"12.3 minutes."

"Fine, Sulu, come to the kitchen with me, the rest, wait outside."

Sulu followed him into the kitchen without word. They opened the cupboards and fished out what they thought would be useful, four bottles of mineral water, snacks and some more energy bars.

"I'll take everything, sir, you have no room." Sulu suggested.

"Thanks." Jim nodded; he only carried a side bag, while Sulu had a whole duffle on his back.

On their way out, Sulu glanced at the floor, and over the pile of empty alcohol bottles they created in their search for water. "We sure did develop a problem."

Jim could only hum in return.

They left the kitchen and walked out of the quarters, expecting to find themselves in the hall, but the hall was shut, blocked from both sides with a bulkhead, made out of thick, hard metal. No way of punching a way through and no access to emergency staircases either.

Captain Setal referred to that while saying that deck 11 was unpopulated and mostly sealed, and they've all seen it before and accepted it, funny thing is that no one noticed the risk this had presented, only now, when it became a problem.

"Spock, any way out?"

"There is a shaft next to this main elevator, parallel to it and reaching all decks, for maintenance use only, yet it should be opened when the dynamic alarm is on." The Vulcan stated calmly, he walked towards it and tried the handle "It is locked, sir."

"So many corrective actions." Jim mumbled and wondered what to do next, but he had no chance to gather his thoughts, because the elevator doors just opened and out came three security officers.

"Captain James T. Kirk?" asked one Vulcan, so very familiar. "You are wanted for questioning."
It took for Kirk another second to recognize him. "The name is Symer, right?" Jim asked the stern looking security officer. Yeah, he totally remembered him now, how can you not recall your friendly neighborhood prick?

"Lieutenant Symer." The security officer corrected him and then turned to look at Spock "You too, son of Sarek, you are both to accompany me this once, Captain's orders."

So this was an upgrade, from the XO's to the Captain's orders, not so good, probably happened now because the 'Plak If Fee' was over and they did not have the Elders’ protection anymore, the upside was that they could now use the lift.

Spock and Jim exchanged glances.

//Do you think they are on to us?// Jim asked in his mind, just for the heck of it.

//Unclear.// Came Spock's answered out of nowhere, straight into his brain.

It almost caused Jim to jump out of his skin, but hey, this was so cool!

And so very useful, the conversation seemed to run almost in the speed of light, because he noticed that while talking, everything around them seemed frozen in place, like in The Matrix, like Quicksilver, so fucking cool!

//This is our bond thing?// Jim asked again in his mind.

The answer came into is mind with Spock's voice again. //Yes, our ability to communicate like this is a result of our bond.//

So very cool!!

//Is it safe? Can anyone else listen in? Why everything is in slow-mo?//

//Yes, only we can share this conversation, and the reason everything is in 'slow-mo' as you call it is because thoughts travels significantly faster than words. And yes, this is 'very cool'.//

He could not help himself but go on. //So this is about Section 31 or Sharel going MIA?//

//Each one is a possibility, as do both at the same time, either way, we must obey the Captain and turn ourselves in.//

Fuck!

Once the Captain has them, there was no way Spock could keep their Section 31 project under wraps, Vulcans do not lie.

Double fuck!!

All the hard evidence was on him! No way out of this clusterfuck!

Triple fuck!!!

None-Federation space, none-Federation rights, None-Federation protection!

But then again, they had to get out of here before they run out of oxygen.

Think, Jimbo, think fast!
In the mean while, Symer almost lost his impassive expression. "What would it be, Captain?" he asked again. "Would you come with me or should I assume you are resisting arrest?" his hand was sent to the phaser attached to his belt, giving it a small anticipating stroke.

//Say we go with him, what about the crew?//

//I am sure Lieutenant Symer will take them to safety, Jim, we must obey a Captain's direct order, there is no other choice.//

//Are you sure he won't put them in the brig with us? Or throw them out of an airlock? No one would be the wiser, Spock, something's off here, I don't trust this guy.//

//Illogical.//

//Intuition.//

// Insubordination.//

//Improvisation, watch me.//

"Officer Symer." Jim started, his cocky smile already annoying the Vulcan.

"Lieutenant Symer, head of the Vokau security unit." Symer corrected him again.

"I don't know if you noticed, but we are in a situation here. Our life supporting system is malfunctioning, and the ship's AI will not respond to us. I'd be happy to accompany you to the Captain, but everyone must come with us to safety first."

Lieutenant Symer seemed like he was not used to someone arguing with him, because all he could do for a very long moment was just to stand and stare.

"I can testify for the validity of this report." Spock added, as Vulcans do not lie. "This happened 24.7 minutes ago, by my doing, albeit a mistake."

"So should I add sabotage to the list of topics I must question you about?" Symer asked, did not seem alarmed or impressed.

"Whatever it is you want to ask us about if fine by me." Jim said. "Just get everyone out of here before they suffer brain damage."

"I have my orders, sir; I was told to deliver both of you to the captain, ASAP, later, I can have one of my men to inform maintenance of this malfunction. Come with me."

"We don't have time for later! We have minutes!" Jim almost screamed at the stubborn Security officer, only to watch him unimpressed.

"Regulation dictates that you should have been in your rooms right now, not tampering with the life supporting system. Regulation also dictates that when life supporting system fails, the affected section must be evacuated within 50 minutes." Symer notify him, as if he cared. "I guaranty that help will get in here under 25.1 minutes. Now, please join me, Captain, Commander."

"Hell, no! In case you have not notice, we are humans, not Vulcans! In 25.1 minutes we'll be coma toast!" Jim argued, screaming with frustration, but one cannot simply come between a Vulcan and his regulations.

"In case you haven't notice, Captain, we are in the midst of a dynamic alert!" Symer spattered with
growing irritation "I am needed elsewhere, so please do not keep me waiting, I will use force if necessary!"

"And I will not leave my crew behind!"

Symer gave a slight tilt of the head and all three officers drew out their phasers, pointing them at Jim and Spock. "Captain Kirk, I will not repeat myself again."

"Me neither, sir! You may not realize the gravity of the situation, but I am not leaving my people where their lives are in immediate danger!" Jim refused again, this time screaming at the top of his lungs, with every bit of oxygen left in them.

"Commander Spock?" the security officer turned to the other Vulcan after giving up on the illogical human.

"All will come or none at all." Spock confirmed "It is the only logical way, death it the only other outcome of your misprioritizing."

"Do not lecture me about priorities; you have no knowledge of the stakes at play. The needs of the many requires your obedience." said Symer, unbothered by the possible risk; he tightened his grip on his phaser, aiming at Jim. "Come with us now, or I will be forced to stun you."

"Now, that's already falls into the category of an unlawful order by Vulcan military standards." Jim stated out loud "Don't you think, Spock?"

"Indeed." Spock agreed with a surprised undertone "Lieutenant Symer has given us an order, and we have provided him with an explanation as to why this order will resolute in an unnecessary loss of life, while supplied a suitable alternative, yet the Lieutenant refused to withdraw, which makes his order unlawful."

"One thing you did not take into consideration." Symer said with irritation "I do not follow that old code anymore!" he shot his phaser, and Spock leaped in front of Jim, taking the hit instead of his Captain.

However, his hybrid nature made him more resilient to the beam, and to Symer amazement, he got up and tackled him, discarding his gloves.

Sulu was not far behind, taking the advantage of surprise to tackle another officer, and throw him off balance, while Dayton and Jim took on the third and disarmed him.

Spock overcame Symer with a nerve pinch, then picked up his phaser and fired quickly at the other two officers before they recovered enough to subdue the humans, all three fell on the floor, unconscious. One, luckily, fell halfway inside the lift, preventing the doors from closing.

"Time, Spock!" Jim demanded.

"81 seconds."

"Quickly, put them back in the elevator, they have a chance inside. Can we use the phasers?"

"Only I can." Spock said "They are designed for touch telepathy."

"Sure glad you are here, Spock. Take another for backup." Jim ordered, panting while dragging a heavy officer into the elevator with the help of Dayton.
Spock placed Symer in, and then helped Sulu with the last one. "20 seconds." He announced as the doors of the lift closed. Then he turned toward the shaft and aimed at the lock. "Fire in the hall." He announced and everyone fell on the floor to take cover.

He shot three times, before the lock gave up and the door opened.

"Move, move!" Jim ordered, leaping into his feet, helping Nyota on the way. "Spock, Dayton, you go first, Carol, Nyota, next, Sulu and me last. Move. Destination- deck 9."

It was a less restricted deck, and the home of Maintenance headquarters, chances were they'll run into maintenances techs before security would catch up to them. This way at least, he could get the crew to safety and even ditch the evidence before turning himself in to the Captain.

Jim waited for them all to get in before he did so himself, and as he closed the door, he could not help but taking a deep breath of that oxygen enriched air inside of it, such sweet, sweet air.

The maintenance shaft was a tube in the width of an average man with both arms stretched to the sides, there were two ladders welded into the tunnel on each side, and some signs welded in the middle with instructions, but all in Vulcan, which Jim only had limited knowledge of, mostly programming related.

//Could you believe that guy?// Jim tried reaching Spock with his mind again, since he could not locate him further up the dimly lit shaft. //What the fuck was his problem? Why wouldn't he take everyone at one go? And following the old code? What the fuck was that all about?//

//Indeed, very strange.// Spock agreed. //This blunt disregard for life, I do not know what to make of it.//

//Let me know when we reach deck 9.// Jim concluded.

//Of course.// Spock reassured him.

And so they climbed upwards, for what seemed to be twenty meters high, if not thirty, everyone pulled though with no complaint, although they were surprised and worried, they never thought this mission will turn out to be something like this.

//Deck 9// Spock updated him //I'll go first, secure the perimeter.//

//Make sense, you're the only one armed.// Jim agreed. //Be careful,//

A whisper ran down the line, delivered to him by Sulu. "Hold position, sir, until Spock gives us a clear."

"Acknowledged." Jim concurred and waited, while bored, he thought it would be a good idea to peek down; instantly regretted it. Although not afraid of heights, he aimed his flashlight down, but the light could not chase the darkness away, the deep, black chasm that stared back at him was enough to freeze his blood. He removed his eyes from the sight before it made him dizzy and focused back on the white ladder bars he was holding, boring, but way better.

After a few moments, Spock sent him his thoughts again. //The area seems secured enough, we may proceed with cautious.//

//Thanks.// Jim sent back, and another whisper came down the line, passed to him by Sulu.

"We have a clear." The helmsman said.
"Go, go, go." Jim answered, impatient, could not leave this narrow, deep catacomb fast enough.

He climbed the last few meters and someone gave him a hand to help him out of the hatch, blinded by the light, he needed time to register it was Dayton. "Thank you, Yorktown."

"You welcome, Sir."

Spock returned from a corner, phaser drawn and pointed at the ceiling. "It's clear between here to the maintenance center." He informed the team. "There are, however, bodies on the way."

"Bodies? Why?" Carol asked.

"Unknown."

Nyota gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

"How many? Cause of death?" Jim asked.

"Two, phaser shots, most likely." Spock answered.

"Come on, people, it's nasty but we gotta go." Jim said, looking mainly at Nyota. "Spock, lead the way, I'll take the rear." He commanded. "Need any help, Uhura?"

"No, I'm fine, I'm fine." She nodded, trying to collect herself.

"After you, Ma'am." He smiled at her; she returned him a faint smile and started walking.

Jim watched her go and wished he had a weapon, but without one, all he could hope for was to block the first shot with his body and pray this would buy enough time for the others to react.

He bumped into Sulu while trying to establish position. "Sorry." He muttered and tried to bypass him towards the rear, but the helmsman only blocked his way.

"Right behind you, sir." he said, daring Jim to argue with his death glare.

"Let's go." Jim nodded instead.

Chapter End Notes

And now, dear readers, for those of you who are interested, here is again, a status report, a continuation of the last statues report given at chapter 36:

1. Chapters 1-42: are out and published, I do not foresee a need to revisit them for major changes, but if I do, I’d let you know that I have edited them as soon as I do it. I might come back to them to fix grammar errors and typos.

2. Chapters 43-50: are in a good shape and ready to go under minor editing.

3. Chapter 51-53: are written but in a bad shape, they still need a lot of TLC to reach posting position. I might need a break to get them in order.

4. Chapters 54-55: are not written yet, sorry about it. I might need another break in order to find time and write them. I also might need a chapter or two more, so we
might be looking at a 57 chapters long story (omg…)

So to conclude, I might need to take a break after chapter 46 is posted, and then I'll know better how to wrap things up. If I take that break- I'll let you know.

Ok, what did you think of my choice? Are you still with me? Thoughts and comments are always welcomed.

Next update- no later than 25.07

My best wishes to all.
They all fall in with silence, walking the hall which was lit in soft gold lights accompanied by flares of green, it seemed like this large section was deserted, quiet and still, but there were doors leading to other parts of the deck, and any second now, someone could jump them, and there was almost nothing they could do about it because only Spock was armed.

And after a short walk, ten minutes or less, there they were, the bodies, of two Vokau crew members, probably from the maintenance department, laying dead on the floor, blood splattered on the floor where they were hit, and some parts of the bulkheads were glowing in red, and still smoking, so this battle must have took place in the last half an hour, at best, whoever it was that shot those men was still around and might strike again.

Carol stopped at one of the open tears in the bulkhead, to study its glowing red rims, its diameter, shape and state, she observed the debris and bodies that were lying down on the floor, and lastly she peeked into the hole to see what kind of damage was inflicted on the next segment.

"What do you make of it, Lieutenant?" Jim stopped next to her and awaited her conclusions.

"Standard issued phasers, two, or three of them, probably set on kill, maximum amplitude and a wide range, this was no hand to hand battle, those crewmen were taken from afar, by surprise, you see? No damage in this area has the opposite trajectory." She reported.

"Set on kill? For sure?" he argued, could hardly believe that Vulcans would do it this other Vulcans, or any other creature, as a matter of fact.

"Most likely, only setting a phaser on kill would have melted the bulkhead we stand next too. Look at it, part of the metal actually melted, not only went through heat deformation." Carol pointed her fingers at areas of interest, but did not actually touch them, or she'd burn her finger.

"This is reckless, and cruel." Kirk answered, worried, but they could not continue the conversation as Spock approached them.
"Captain, we should get going." Spock said after a short while, and he was right, it was not safe here.

"Let's go." Jim nodded and so they carried on.

The large hall they were walking ended with an opening into a wide, big open space which was the maintenance center. It had three big screens on the walls showing running data, and there was a hologram of the Vokau located at an elevated platform, in its center, surrounded by consoles.

There was no one there.

The holographic display of the Vokau was all lit up like a Christmas tree, with many small, flickering green dots, every dot probably signified an alert or a malfunction, either way, this was no good.

With no one there to explain the situation or help them get back into the system, they could only try figuring out things for themselves. Jim scanned his sounding, seems like this huge place was deserted or evacuated in a hurry. PADDs, bags and tools were left everywhere, discarded and forgotten on the floor, as if the crew just dropped everything down and made a run for it.

Spock took a seat at the main console, watching the screens intensely, trying to make sense of the data that was rained down on them. Jim joined him, and tried to maintain silence, so the Vulcans could concentrate.

"Well?" nope, he was unable to stay quiet. "Something interesting here?"

"There are multiple programs running simultaneously." Spock reported "Analysis programs, prioritizing programs, diagnostic, scheduled testing, nothing out of the ordinary, so it seems."

"No emergency protocols? No calls for help?" Jim leaned over Spock's shoulder to try and see things from his point of view; he hoped that the Vulcan did not mind he was breathing down his neck.

"The only emergency protocol that I can detect is a routine maintained alert, related to peak Periapsis, but that would be expected."

"I see…" Jim breathed out his disappointment, and then moved away.

"There is nothing we could do here, we are locked out of the system and no one is here to aid us." Spock summed it up as they all knew it and turned to look at Jim.

And so did the rest of his team, who were scattered about the room, but were listening in their conversation, they all looked at him now, eagerly awaiting his next move.

Thank god for that bond thing, which could provided a way to talk discreetly in front of an attentive crowd.

//Is there anywhere here we could destroy the Section 31 project's evidence? A plasma cell or something of that sort? I still carry them on me, and it's a risk to everyone, not just us, and you promised you'd turn us in only after we reach Earth.//

//I'm sorry, Jim, but there's no such a suitable place at the Maintenance HQ, we can try to locate a safe place as we get near the Engineering HQ.//

//Which is where?//
Deck 21, but there might be an access to plasma conduits on our way there; as far as I know, plasma is only conducted through decks 21-30. If I recognize a chance, I'll let you know.//

//Good, but if you find none, we'll head to deck 21 before we contact the Chief of personal.//

//Acknowledged.//

//Great.// Jim stretched and viewed the disarray around him. "Can the ship operate with no one in here?" he asked, even though this was none of Spock's expertise, he always liked to think out loud.

"The bridge may take over some functions, Engineering could probably cover some others, but to what extent and for how long can this ship operate with an inactive maintenance center, this I cannot tell." Spock did his best to answer.

"I only asked so we'd know if to expect company or not." Jim clarified his point.

"We must always expect company, sir." Spock answered.

"We must do something about this, Captain." Sulu could not help himself but join into the conversation. "Battles are probably going on everywhere, on every deck; unknown hostiles are on the move. We cannot stay unarmed, or we might not even get to the chief of personal on Deck 20."

Sulu hated being so vulnerable, they all did.

"I know, Hikaru, it's a priority." Jim assured him, and then returned to Spock "Is there something here you find useful? Because I'd like us to relocate into a more defendable position, plus try and find someone that could actually tell us what the hell is going on."

"There is nothing I could utilize here." Spock stated and got up.

"I can utilize this." Dayton picked up something akin to a large spanner from the floor.

Spock reviewed it and raised an eyebrow "Any Vulcan will disarm you before you could even attempt to make use of this tool, assuming said Vulcan would not fire his phaser first. Carrying this would only burden you."

Yorktown only shrugged "Finders keepers." He answered, affirming his hold on the handle.

"Illogical." Spock concluded and turned to face Jim again.

"I think our next stop should be that storage room, where they stashed our phasers and communicators and all our other stuff, when we first landed here."

Jim suggested "It should be on deck 8 where we landed, right? And I know it's a stretch but maybe we could locate the boxes where…"

"Items number 1157683 and 4." Spock ended Jim's sentence. "The barcode printed on the boxes Captain Setal had brought forth as we disembarked, if my memory serves me well."

"You can read barcode?" asked Yorktown with dismay.

"And where would those boxes be?" Jim asked almost at the same time.

"Guests' temporary storage room, sir, room number 09012 on this deck, deck 9."

Jim could hardly pick up his jaw from the floor. "And I thought it was on deck 8." He mumbled. "Hey, did you study this ship by hard, Spock? And if so, when did that happen?"
"I have studied it, on our first day in, when Captain Setal had read us all the relevant protocols to get us acquainted with the ship. Plus, there is an orientation map near the main turbo lift on every deck, sir."

"Lead the way, Mr. Spock." Was all Jim could say after that.

They fell in place again, with Spock at the front and Sulu at the back, and let the XO lead them through the maze of the deck. It was so huge, reminding Jim how stupidly big the Vokau was, and how painfully empty, which panged Jim's heart.

This was a generation ship, one of a kind, it should have been a vibrant ship, with Vulcans teeming all over it, passing by, talking, arguing, doing their jobs, even kids might have been allowed to run around, but as Captain Setal said, the ship was operating on a skeleton crew, and now Jim could make the full sense of it. Room after room, of empty vacancy, hall after hall, silent, devoided of attention, spacious, soulless grounds.

The Maintenance center was room number 09083, and walking towards room 09012, with sturdy strides should not have taken too long. They managed half an hour at an almost ideal pace, without unplanned events or delays, and it was already room 09014. Wait, room 09014 was actually interesting.

Jim stopped at the entrance to the room. //Spock, come back!/ he called in his mind, getting used to that bond thing. Sulu almost bumped into him as he abruptly halted and then he took a peek into that room as well.

There was no mistaking it, the technology in the room, the stations, the elevated platform, the circular markings, and the structure behind it.

"Sir, this is a transporter room." Sulu commented.

"Yeah." Jim answered, well it made sense, all ships had them, and the Vokau probably had more than one or two. "Can we make use of it?" He asked Spock when he walked back to him, alone.

"Negative, sir." he said out loud for Sulu's sake, but continued in his mind. //Even if we were not locked out, transporting living beings in this universe is far too risky, practically impossible with our current knowledge of its physics, have you not read the data I sent you via Elder Sarek?//

//No, didn't get to it, had no time.// Jim admitted, and then shrugged "Room 12, then."

Spock nodded and they all walked into that storage room. It was a large one, but not large enough to get disoriented inside. There was a chart at the entrance, and Nyota, with Carol by her side, was already reading it carefully, it had crossed item indexes with physical storage location.

"Our boxes should be on stand number 11, in the middle of that stand, both in width and height." She said to Dayton who was randomly scanning the rows of storage shelves.

"I cannot read Vulcan numbers." He reminded her, so she joined him for help.

In the meanwhile Jim walked in, noticing that Spock blew up the lock to the room with his phaser earlier to allow them all in, which was sort of a developing pattern.

"Wait!" Carol suddenly shouted a warning, before Nyota and Dayton could reach for the boxes that they have located. "There's an invisible force field protecting the shelves." She pointed upwards to the ceiling. "See those devices there? Force filed conductors. You'll get zapped!"
Jim looked up to see some sort of small objects, looked very much similar to CCTVs, placed in rows on the ceiling and in line with the shelves, Carol was probably right, he could not think of any other function they could have preformed, no one needs so many security cameras per square meter, or detectors or even fire sprinklers.

"Can you identify and cut the feed?" he asked Spock, pointing upwards.

"I do not think so, I do not wish to make the same mistake and cut the life support system as well." Spock answered, looking up himself.

"But this deck is not sealed like ours was; we can grab our stuff and get out of here in less than 30 minutes."

"Captain, when a malfunction in life support system is detected, the affected compartments are automatically sealed within 30 seconds." The Vulcan corrected him. "Have you read Vokau's Emergency protocol number 5?"

"Oh, no, I didn't have the time…" Jim breathed, disappointed, on the Enterprise, sealing process was conducted only manually to prevent people from getting stuck in failing compartments. Guess that the Vulcans deemed it as an illogical waste of time. "Sorry, Sulu, seems like we can't get your Katana back, let's go."

"May I try something?" Carol suggested.

"Shoot." Jim glanced at her, offering a small smile.

"A force field is a superposition of wave patterns." Carol continued, looking at Spock, because he was the only one knowing what she was talking about. "We could try to disrupt it by generating another pattern creating an interference with the original one.

"This should punch a hole in the fabric of the field, enough for someone to reach out and fetch the boxes safely. We can use Spock's phaser to create that wave, aiming it at the nearest conductor; this should do the trick."

The two science officers gazed at each other, and then Spock nodded. "It is a good idea, Lieutenant Marcus." He approved.

"Is it safe?" Jim threw a glance at Spock, but before he could answer, Carol did.

"With all due respect, Sir, I would not have suggested it otherwise." Carol answered with irritation. "I know me force fields and my phasers, you can trust me." She seemed politely angry.

"Miss Marcus is our weapons specialist." Spock reminded him.

"We have no room for a miscalculation." Jim explained himself "If we do it the wrong way, someone's might get fried."

"I volunteer." Dayton said, looking at Carol with warmth "I trust her with my life."

"Oh, darling." The science officer beamed at him. "Are we go, Captain?"

Jim had to gather his courage, one man's life in return to weapons and communicators and a better chance for the rest of them to survive.

"Go ahead." He told the Lieutenant. "And no stupid stuff, Yorktown, it you feel the slightest
discomfort, you disengage." One electrocuted helmsman was enough for Jim already, thank you very much.

"Yes, sir." Dayton nodded and got into position.

"What do I do, Lieutenant?" Spock asked Carol.

"Set the amplitude on minimum, and then start wiggling with the frequency, until..." She walked towards Dayton and took out the spanner he had stuffed into his belt, placed it on the floor and pushed it with her boot, until it touched the edge of the wanted shelve, and immediately flared up in a blue haze, with electricity dancing on it.

"Until this section stops shooting sparks, copy?"

"Affirmative." He nodded and turned to Dayton. "On my mark, Ensign, even when the flares stop, I might need a few more moments to stabilize the system; touch telepathy is a delicate thing."

"Roger, on your mark, commander." Dayton approved.

Spock moved to position and aimed his phaser at the relevant conductors.

"Steady." he breathed out and seemed like delving into deep concentration.

For a few seconds, it seemed like nothing has happened, but Spock appeared to be falling into a meditative state, and no one dared breathing into his direction, seemed like he was making a substantial mental effort, even if his face remained perfectly impassive. "Steady..." he whispered again.

Jim tried very hard not to think of anything, and the flares engulfing the spanner had vanished and returned a few times.

//Stop doing that, please.// Spock asked him.

//Do what?/

//Counting Mississippis, it's illogical.//

//Sorry.//

"Steady..." Spock tried again; the flares withered again and then were gone. After a short while, where the situation had not change, Spock glanced at the Ensign "Go ahead, Mr. Parker, hurry."

Dayton leaped forward and pulled at the boxes, they were constrained to the shelf with thin plastic belts, and he struggled until he loosened each one enough to set them free, take down and push them away from the shelf on the floor.

"Away!" Spock hissed and disengaged as soon as Dayton backed off, he tumbled down to his knees, panting, letting go of the phaser.

"Are you ok?" Carol ran towards Dayton, he nodded and they both smiled to each other.

"Spock?" Jim asked.

"This was a bit more taxing than I anticipated, but I am well." The Vulcan reassured all, who were watching him with worry.
"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Jim placed a hand on Spock's shoulder. //well done.//

Spock nodded and gathered himself up.

In the meanwhile, Nyota and Sulu opened the boxes and handed the equipment to their owners. Sulu's face lit up like a thousand light bulbs when he was reunited with his Katana, a family heirloom, he activated it, checked it for integrity, and then folded it again and hung it on his belt.

"I believe this one is yours." Uhura walked toward Jim and handed him his phaser.

"Thank you, Lieutenant commander." Boy, it felt so good to be reunited with his weapon, under such circumstances, of course. "Grab your translators and communicators as well." He reminded the crew. "I hope we will need them even more than our weapons."

Sulu walked towards him and gave him his translator. "Thank you." He smiled at him and attached the microchip's patch behind his left ear, then pushed the small headphone into the ear and activated it.

"May I try something, Captain?" Nyota asked.

"Sure, what is it?" Jim finished installing the device and raised his gaze to look at her.

Nyota nodded and almost blushed "If you could buy me half an hour, I want to try something with our communicators, would be illegal though…"

"Illegal? I'm all ears." He beamed at her.

"I want to bypass the security protocol and allow the communicators to open up for none Starfleet frequencies, this might help us pick up transmissions from the Vokau and even respond to them."

"Go for it, Nyota, it's a great idea." Jim smiled at his comm officer.

"Thank you, sir." Uhura took a little bow and set up to work. She collected everyone's communicators and aliened them on a desk.

Then, she set down and took out her PADD from her bag and a hairpin out of her bun, letting her hair fall into a ponytail. She used that hairpin as a small screwdriver to get the first communicator open.

For some reason, she seemed much practiced in this illegal activity, so Jim noticed with fascination, while observing her hacking and reconfiguration the first unit.

Nyota worked in quiet for a short while, and then lifted up her gaze. "Are you going to buy me that half an hour, sir?" she asked, almost rolling her eyes, and Jim woke up from his transfixion.

"Yes Ma'am. Sulu, Spock, main entrance. Dayton, with me to the second exit. Carol, with Nyota. Phasers on stun. Go."

The redhead Ensign joined him and they walked towards the second entrance as was showed on the map of the room, it was a good thing that the Vulcans had maps attached to the entrance of almost every room, so very helpful.

"Sir, may I ask you something?" Dayton asked shyly as they reached their position and established it.

"Always." Jim answered while maintaining his high alert.
"What do you think is going on?"

Such a simple question, such a complicated answer "I don’t know, Mr. Parker, but we will find out soon enough."

"I think that there's a mutiny taking place." Dayton continued "The only thing that makes any sense."

"It is pointless to speculate." Jim found himself quoting someone.

"You sound a lot like Spock, sir." Dayton breathed in frustration. "Are you two still going to turn yourselves in to the Captain?"

"I don’t know, but I am sure going to talk to him after we get the rest of you to safety, maybe this is all just one big misunderstanding."

"You've done nothing wrong, sir." Dayton hurried to say "If you go to the Captain, I think we all go with you."

Jim smiled at him now "So, you don’t hate me, Yorktown?"

"You've done nothing wrong, sir." Dayton said again.

"I demoted you, threw you into the beta shift. Should have done better, acted sooner, should have seen things through your eyes."

Dayton just shrugged at that, and Jim breathed out and continued.

"Now, don’t tell Sulu, but I've already delivered you to my successor with recommendations, he sent me a mail about a week before this ritual was set to motion, asked me about you and Carol, and I responded. I won't lie to you, I wrote him about your shortcomings as well, but you'd find the positive outweighing the negative."

"But I broke trust, sir…” Dayton ogled him briefly with disbelieve before returning his eyes to his watch.

"I know, but you also demonstrated initiative and valor and I believe in second chances, just make sure not to break trust again, and as I said, this one is on me, I hope your next Captain will do a better job."

"My next Captain will have a shoe size problem." Dayton stated.

But before Jim could even form a reaction, there were sounds of a fighting coming from Spock and Sulu's position.

***0***

"Stay here, Yorktown, I'll go." Jim stopped Dayton from leaping forward to respond.

"But, sir…” the young Ensign resisted.
"Secure this exit; we might need it for a retreat, leave only if relieved or outnumbered, understood?"

"Yes, sir." He answered, he didn’t like it, but he resumed position, while Jim hurried to join the battle.

He crossed again to the main storage room, where Nyota was still working on their comm units, but Carol left her side, probably to join the defense. Nyota worked calmly, as if in the middle of a library, and not a battlefield, as expected from a communication officer.

Jim had no time to talk to her, he continued his run for the entrance and found Spock, Sulu and Carol in defense positions, fire came from both ends of the T section corridor.

He stopped next Carol, which placed herself right at the entrance, while Spock and Sulu were further on one end of the corridor, Spock, almost beyond visual. Carol nodded towards him as he knelted besides her and aimed his weapon along with her line of fire, to the other side of the corridor.

"Three hostiles, phasers set on kill." Carol reported, trying hard to hide her dismay.

"And there I thought were wanted for an investigation." Jim muttered and moved forward, to take position a bit further away, to supply her cover, firing at an attacker and forcing him into hiding.

"A change of orders?" Carol suggested, and fired as well, stunning one attacker and forcing the other to stop firing and evacuate the body of his unconscious friend.

"Stand by." He told Carol. //Spock, report.//

Spock gave him a visual first, the T section they were at was leading to the same hall on the parallel side, next to a turbo lift, where their attackers took position and dug in. They would have to charge from both ends if they want to surround and neutralize that force.

//Seven hostiles, three positioned at your end, four at mine, led by Lt. Commander Kuvac. They have anti stun armor which gives them a recuperation time laps of 50 seconds. They also requested backup.//

//Fuck, they really want us killed?//

//Your call//

//Set phasers on kill, inform Sulu//

//Roger that.//

"Carol, set phaser to kill." He said without mirth, while setting his own fast enough so he could free himself again to give her cover.

"Sir?"

Jim grimaced while lifting his weapon again, this gave him no joy. "It's us or them, they gave us no choice."

"Understood." Carol nodded and fixed her own phaser, biting on her lip.

"I'm goanna try a breach." Jim muttered when she was ready, glancing at the edge of their corridor. "On my mark, give me cover."
"Yes, sir." She mumbled and set her weapon.

//Spock, on three, Sulu supplies cover and you charge, give me a go.//

After a few seconds, Spock responded //Go//

Jim moved into a leaping position, and whispered to Carol, knowing that Spock will pick it up as well from his mind. "One, two, three!"

He launched himself forwarded, phaser aimed at whoever would show up. This was the part where his supreme denial mechanism and damn good luck came together to give him a blanket of confidence.

He zigzagged the hall as the shots started flaring up all around him and let out a roar, and could hear Carol yelping as well, he aimed his phaser and shot right back at the attackers while running towards them.

Two blew up cover and showed themselves, firing at him; he took one down, the other did Carol. He could see a third disappearing into the lift and decide not to pursue. From the other side it got quiet as well, the fire seemed to have stopped, it's either they won, or he was the only survivor.

//Spock?// he asked and prayed.

//Four down, Kuvac not among them// Spock informed him calmly, and his heart fluttered up with relief. //Sulu's hurt.// the Vulcan added, and now Jim's heart sank down with dread.

//On my way//

He ran, almost falling on the smooth floor, and circled around to the other side of the T section, to see Carol already treating Sulu's bleeding shin. She used her first aid kit and wrapped an arterial tourniquet above his knee. "Time?" she asked.

"12:03." Spock answered.

"Cheers." Carol mumbled, using a sticker and a marker from her kit to write down the time and stick it on Sulu's pants. "You have three hours before things get complicated." She glared up at him and said with a frown.

"I know, Thank you." Sulu smiled at her through his pain.

"Hikaru, talk to me." Jim approached him and ran a sympathetic hand on the man's bicep.

"It's just a ricochet, sir." the helmsman said, through clenched teeth; he seemed very much in pain. He was pale, covered in sweat and was shivering, leaning on the wall, his hands blooded from putting pressure in his wound.

"I know, idiot." Jim answered "You'd be missing a leg if this was a direct hit."

"Lucky me." Sulu chuckled through his pain.

Kirk searched on the floor, to assess how much blood the Helmsman had lost, not finding droplets but also not finding pools, which was a good sigh.

"No, no pain killers." Sulu rejected Carol's hypo-spray "It always makes me nauseated and dizzy, cannot fight like that."
"Cannot have you crippled with pain either." Carol insisted, waving the hypo-spray at Sulu's direction so much like some other doctor Jim knew.

"May I?" Spock intervened.

"What?" Sulu asked as Spock reached for his psi pointes, on his sweaty, pained face.

"I can use touch telepathy to temporarily block the pain pathways in your brain, this should provide relief for at least a day." Spock suggested, not yet touching Sulu's face.

"I don't know…?" Sulu moaned and eyed Jim.

"You can trust him." Jim smiled at his best friend. "He's our Vulcan."

Sulu panted, closing his eyes, biting on his lips not to scream, and then he nodded.

Spock stepped closer and placed his hand on the man's face, and after a few seconds of silence, he stepped away.

Sulu no longer panted, his face relaxed, and his whole body seemed to loosen up as well. "Amazing." He breathed "Thank you."

"Keep a visual with the wound; it will be the only indicator now for its state." Spock said and Sulu nodded with eyes closed.

//Hey, why did you not suggest this to me earlier? You knew how my kidneys and liver were killing me! It even woke you up.//

//Are you in any pain now?// Spock looked at him with a head tilt.

//Now that you've mentioned it…// Jim realized his body was so much cooperating that it should in his state. //Did you…? When?//

Spock raised an eyebrow. //When I woke up to that pain.//

//Wow, thank you so much, should have asked permission first, but yeah, thank you//

"We should go see if Miss Uhura is finished, I suggest a change of location." Spock said. "A backup might be on its way."

"Yeah, right, this place is compromised." Jim agreed. "Go get Dayton." he commanded Carol.

They all got in to see how Nyota was doing, she was just finished dismantling the last unit. "Five more minutes." She said without looking up.

Carol fetched Dayton and they looked like they've just finished kissing, blushed and slightly panting.

Nyota kept fiddling with the instrument while asking "Captain, what shell we do with Sharel's comm?" it was the last untouched unit on the table.

"You don’t have to work it, but keep it, I'll keep it." he had some stupid notion that somehow he will see it delivered back to its owner.

Nyota handed him the Andorian's equipment without looking, still focused on her job, and he took it and stuffed it in his pocket.
"Get ready to leave as soon as she's done." Spock informed all. "Phasers on kill."

"Phasers on stun." Jim corrected him. "Let's give them another chance."

"Phasers on stun." Spock corrected himself with appreciation.

Dayton nodded, and everyone adjusted their phaser accordingly, then Yorktown picked up Sulu's duffel. "I'll take the rear now." He informed his senior officers.

"There." Nyota finished and looked up with a smile "32 minutes, about five minutes a unit, a new personal record."

Jim picked up his comm from her hand and attached it to his belt. "Thank you, Lt. Commander. Spock, now that we are done here, do you think we should go to the Temple on deck 7 and make sure that the elders are alright? I still have no idea what's going on here, but they might be in danger. Should we drop by to check on them? It's only two decks away."

"Negative, sir." Spock answered "As long as there is no official announcement, the 'Plak If Fee' is still in process, disturbing it would be a violation of the blood oath, and everything that is implied from that. We should first focus on getting ourselves to safety, Sulu must be taken to the healing center, and we must contact Captain Setal."

//But ditch the evidence in a plasma cell before we contact anyone official.// Jim reminded him.

//Off course.// Spock reassured him.

"Captain, may I have a question?" Carol asked.

"Go ahead, Lt. Marcus." Jim allowed it, but it'd better be quick.

"Sir, I think we just killed some Vokau's officers." Carol reminded them with discomfort. "What are we going to do about it? What are we going to say to the Captain?"

"Who just sent Lt. Commander Kuvac to kill us!?" Sulu retorted with anger.

"This assumption is not yet established, Lt. Commander." Spock corrected him.

"I'd say to him that there's a coup attempt going on." answered Dayton. "That the guys who tried to kill us, Kuvac and the rest of them, might be part of this illegal, criminal act, might have also killed those Techs we saw earlier. We did nothing wrong, Carol."

"This assumption is not yet established either, Ensign Parker." Spock said to the young helmsman.

Now all turned to look at Kirk.

Jim grimaced, this might take a while, and there was a backup on the way, but all eyes were on him and he could not just brush it off, could not command them to shut up about it either.

"The situation is ugly, I won't lie to you." Jim started with a weary sigh "But what just happened here was clear-cut self defense. Whatever Captain Setal wants with us, Spock and I, even if he thinks we are criminals and want us arrested, you don’t do that with phasers set on kill, and you do not leave behind people in a room with a failing life-support, even if they are humans.

"Something is clearly wrong here, and we will do everything in our power to solve this, according to Starfleet standards and the Vulcan military code, but in no way will we apologize for standing up and defending our lives. Leave it up to me, Carol, Hikaru, you are all under my command and I
will take full responsibility of whatever outcome that will present itself. We are all in this together, and now we have to get a move on. Five by five?"

"Yes, sir." Carol nodded, still worried but also a bit relived.

"Loud and clear." Sulu answered; more self assured than Carol.

"Yes, Captain." Nyota and Dayton almost said at once.

"At your command, sir." Spock said with calm.

"Good, let's get going." Jim gave away a stressed out smile //Would you try your father again? See what he has to say?//

//Elder Sarek had temporarily blocked me for many reasons; one of which is to protect us from violating our blood oaths.//

//I see…// Jim breathed out, he didn’t like this answer, he wanted to make sure the elders were safe, but he also wanted to avoid risking his crew lives any further.

//The Elders are heavily guarded and protected.// Spock added in their minds to assure him //I am also positive that should they require help, Elder Sarek will inform me through our familiar bond.//.

"Deck 20, then." Jim decided "To find our direct officer and see what the hell is going on here. How should we get there?"

"There are many paths available, even for those who are locked out of the system." Spock stated.

"The main emergency staircase?" Jim suggested not even knowing if the ship even had one.

To this, Spock raised an eyebrow "This is a very predictable pathway and an indefensible terrain in case we’ll run into more hostiles, it would be an illogical choice, Captain."

"Which is why it would be the last place they’d search for us." Jim smirked back at him, and only made him blink his inner eyelids.

"Proceed." The Vulcan said.

"Deck 20." Jim announced "Go, go, go."

Chapter End Notes

There you go ;-) 

Next update, still no later than 25.07, so I hope.

See you then, my best regards to all.
Greeting to all of you, dear readers of far and near!

I hope I find you well and happy, here is another update for you.

This time, I want to dedicate the chapter to the lovely Finnegancat, a reader who, up until now, had never fail to review each and every chapter of this story, and help me stay motivated.

Thank you, dear Finnegancat for finding the humor in every chapter and entertain me with your funny comments- Peace and long life!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Additional warnings:** Reference to violence.

//This is madness, there must be someone that we could talk to.// Jim could not help himself and used the bond for venting. Spock did not respond to his ranting, and Jim would not blame him, he was, after all, raving in the Vulcan's head for the last half an hour, and Spock had nothing logical to say to counter his complaints.

They were walking down the stairs as much as possible in silence, if not for the echo of their hastened steps, as they landed on steel mesh flooring making it vibrate and sometimes even clang, but Jim hoped their noise was well masked by the distant sound of alarm.

Their journey was led in almost complete darkness too. Their only sources of light were the bouncing beams of their emergency flashlights and the faint, flickers green rays of the dynamic alarm, which randomly managed to enter into the staircase room. It was not enough, not for the fast pace they were trying to maintain, and Jim hoped no one will get injured by a misstep on a stair, a sprain ankle or a broken palm were nothing they needed at the moment.

They were all alone in this huge ship, with no one but each other to count on, and no way of knowing if what they were doing would get them anywhere safe anytime soon. That chief of personal they were hoping to find, might be already dead, or might wait them with a phaser set on kill when they finally get to meet him, there was no way of telling anything at all. Well, at least Jim was right about this one thing, no one had chased them down that main staircase, not in the last 45 minutes they were using it, anyway.

Spock was at the lead, his phaser pointed forward, followed by Nyota and Carol. Jim was after
them, supporting Sulu's weight as they climbed down the stairs, so he won't have to put too much weight on his wounded leg, or fall and make things even worse. Dayton was last, a few steps behind them, on the lookout for an attack from above.

What the hell happened?

Million and two hounded things could go wrong in space, and who would know better than Jim. This could be an emotional parasite, an invisible entity that thrives on chaos and incited all this mayhem just to feed. This could be an alien virus making everyone gone Pon Farr at the same time, could be a new kind of radiation, messing up with the Vulcan brain, could be a mutiny too, who knows.

//Spock, did you try your father again?// Jim asked again, the second time within half an hour.

//Elder Sarek's attention is now resides elsewhere.// Spock answered as he did, half an hour ago.

//So he's still blocking you, huh? Where are we?//

//Deck 14.//

//Deck 14? Only deck 14? // Jim paused then turned to speaking "Guys, stop, we need a break, and I want to make a personal detour." he said out too loudly and his voice echoed in the expanse of wide, dark stairwell. "Ok?"

"A detour?" Sulu asked "Where?"

"Room 14703."

"Why?" Nyota asked, looking up through the mesh flooring to search for his face.

Spock looked up as well and their eyes met through the mesh flooring. //That would be Vedik's room, may I inquire why do you wish to go there?//

//Wanna see that the guy's ok.// Jim answered, and for the rest of his team he repeated out loud. "Gonna see if Vedik is alright, maybe he knows what's going on."

"Poor guy wanted to talk to you for ages." Carol reminded him, raising her head to peek at him, too.

"Dayton, are you coming?" he asked, looking up to gaze at the guy's boots.

"On my way." Dayton answered without looking down.

"How long will you be gone?" Nyota asked, as she climbed up to join him.

"I don't know, fifteen minutes, half an hour tops…take a break and have something to eat and drink, and that's an order, by the way." Jim answered her.

Dayton, Spock and Carol joined him as well, the young pilot placed Sulu's duffle down and opened it, searching for their supply of food and water.

"I'll join you, sir." Spock said. "No deck is safe."

"Sure." Jim said and helped Sulu slide down the wall, to seat against it. "You ok, buddy?"

"I'm gold." Sulu smiled, but could not hide his sweaty, pale face or his exhaustion.
"Let me check your temperature." Carol suggested, fishing out her emergency kit from her bag.

"Everyone, drink half a bottle of water and have at least one energy bar, no exceptions." Jim commanded, his eyes set on Spock. "You too, sport." Jim insisted and handed his bottle to the Vulcan after drinking his share, "Captain's order."

"Yes, sir." Spock murmured and took a few symbolic sips with resentment, Jim knew he hated drinking Earth's grade water, let along cold, and would rather have a cup of steamy Vulcan tea.

"Oh, my!" Sulu screamed as Carol hit him with a hypo spray, out of nowhere. "Told you no pain killers, Carol! You mean, sneaky snake!"

"That wasn't a painkiller." Carol answered calmly. "But a dose of emergency antibiotic, you were burning up, Sulu."

"But it hurt!"

"Don't be such a baby about it." she rolled her eyes at him, and Nyota came to seat next to them, handing each an energy bar and a cookie.

Sulu took his portion with a sulk, but his face lit up when he found out Nyota fixed him with a strawberry chocolate energy bar, his favorite.

While everyone drank and ate, Jim was ready to go and find Vedik. "Are you coming, Spock?" he said while getting up and stretching.

"Of course."

"We'll be back in a few, you're in charge." He told Nyota and she nodded while chewing on her snack.

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Spock led the way into the deck, since after all, it was his deck for the past month, his pace quick, his face impassive, but Jim knew he was angry.

//Are we good, Spock?// he asked the Vulcan.

//I see no logical reason for this detour, a waste of time and effort.//

// I want to see that he's doing alright. Maybe he'll join us, maybe he knows something we don't, and we could sure use some more hands on phasers. Is that logical enough for you? //

//You are too easy to trust.//

//Nah, Spock, I'm just too easy.//

Fortunately, Vedik's room was not too far away from the staircase, Spock found it within ten minutes of walk. They paused at the door and reviewed their surroundings. The deck seemed as empty as the rest of them, hot and dark and still, apparently, if there was any action somewhere,
they were missing out on it.

"Do you think he's in?" Jim asked and Spock did not respond. "Do you think he's also locked out of the system?"

"I see no logic in your questions." Spock answered in a low voice.

Jim just shrugged and tried to command the bell to ring, but it didn’t work, obviously, because he was after all, an unidentified user. He knocked on the door instead, relying on the Vulcan keen sense of hearing.

"Mr. Vedik, are you in there? It's Jim, open up, please!" he shouted and banged on the door for good measure.

The door opened automatically after a moment, so Vedik was not locked out of the system, which was super great, but he was also not expecting company, since he was clad in his maroon colored, meditation robes.

"Jim! What a delight!" Vedik's face lit up as he saw the human, but then he was taken aback a bit. "Greetings, Commander Spock."

Spock formed the Ta'al with reluctant.

"I'm glad to see you too." Jim smiled at the scholar and wandered into the room, uninvited. "Is that...?" he pointed at the source of the loud music that filled up the room. "Are those the Benevolent Bystanders?"

"Indeed, I found them very suitable for meditation." Vedik confirmed "This music tends to overpower all distractions, and there are a few of them, at the moment."

"This music is the definition of distraction." Spock stated.

"Minus minus is a plus." Vedik objected that statement.

"In math, maybe, but this is physics." Spock insisted.

"The mind is a spiritual place as well as a physical one." Vedik noted. "Where all rules might apply depending on its state"

Spock did not answer, just gazed at Vedik, while Vedik did the same.

"Vedik, are you aware that there's a dynamic alarm?" Jim interrupted their staring contest.

"Yes, and it has been for the last 13.7 hours." Vedik did not sound alarmed at all. "I am acting according to protocol, staying in my room, awaiting the Captain's instructions."

"Computer, end music." Spock commanded.

"Command rejected, unidentified user." The AI said and Spock almost sulked at the answer.

"Interesting." Vedik noted. "Computer, end music." He tried as well and the music ended, leaving them in a complete new silence.

"Why him and not us?" Jim asked.

"A random malfunction or an administrator's choice." Spock answered "We have achieved our
objective, Vedik is well and in no immediate danger, we can leave now, sir."

"Vedik still has access to the system, Spock! We can use that, don’t you think?"

"We have no right to put him at the path of peril."

"I don't see how peril would spare him for much longer." Jim answered with passion.

"Your argument is rather weak." Spock calmly objected.

"Excuse me, what is going on here?" Vedik tried to tug at the conversation that was taking place above his head.

Jim and Spock exchanged a look.

//I disapprove // Spock protested.

"Ever since this alarm started, things got weird, Vedik." Jim ignored Spock and turned to the other Vulcan. "We were asked by officer Symer to accompany him to the Captain for an investigation, but he refused to take the rest for my team with him, even though the life supporting system in our quarters had failed.

"Since then, we were fired upon with phasers set to kill, by Lt. Commander Kuvac, I might add, we stole back our weapons and gear from storage, and now we're on the move, looking for the Chief for staff for help, his name is Solak or Sulak or whatever. Did I mention we were locked out of the system?"

Vedik gazed at him for a few seconds without blinking, so much so, Jim started to worry he might have broken the Vulcan.

"Fascinating." Vedik finally said after that stressful pause.

"I was also wondering if... if you could come with us and help us find a way out of this mess, because you are still in the system... well, forget it, I don’t want to cause you any trouble, or make you break regulations, or get yourself killed, sorry for asking. I'm glad you're ok, stay safe, we'll be..."

"If I could be of any help, I will come with you, gladly." Vedik interrupted Jim's flow of speech, not bothering to smother his excitement, which made Spock blink his inner eyelids and turn his back on them.

Jim tried very hard not to get into puppy eyes mode. "Are you sure?"

"Well, I am not in immediate danger of breaking the blood oath, you are a Captain, after all, and I was waiting for instructions." Vedik smiled and they both noted Spock was shaking his head with his back still turned to them, pretending to remove some dirt off his hair. "Just let me get dressed first."

"Sure, we will be waiting outside." Jim smiled back. //What? He's a grown Vulcan, and I told him the risks, he wants to come.// he said to Spock as they walked out the door.

//He wants to fall into your grace, you take an unfair advantage.//

//Well, maybe I am.// Jim admitted.

With nothing more to add, they waited in silence until Vedik left his room and met them at the
corridor. Now he was wearing the cloths Jim first saw him in, a dark brown tunic and black pants, boots and gloves, minus the apron, though.

"Thank you for taking me with you." Vedik said when he joined them. "I resent isolation, and I was getting rather bored."

"Here," Jim offered him Spock's spare phaser, pulling it out of his belt without asking. "You know how to use this, right?"

"Exciting." Vedik nodded, nearly smiling, and he took off a glove to try and hold the weapon. "Do you expect a usage?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Spock said. "Shall we?"

"Affirmative." Vedik nodded.

Spock led the way again, dictating a fast pace, but both Jim and Vedik were unwilling to match his rate and let a gap open up between them, so they could have a little chat.

"I know you were looking for me while I was sick, and you were probably worried, thank you for your concern." Jim spoke first.

"My concern reaches further than that." Vedik confessed "The prospect of you fighting to the death with Commander Sobar chills me to the bone."

Jim smiled brightly at that "Thanks, Vedik, but no worries, we won."

Vedik halted, hardly containing his emotions "We won?"

"Yes, the Elders voted to remain, the Plak If Fee ended in favor of remaining, this is not official yet, but yeah, we won."

"This pleases me to no end, but how do you know?"

Ope.

"I've heard a guy who've heard a guy who've talked to a guard…?"

"If this is true, it is splendid news."

"Nothing is yet concluded." Spock joined the conversation; since he decided on slowing down to close the gap between them. "Rejoicing would be premature."

//Spoilsport.//

"So you have adopted the leave position." Vedik noted, referring to Spock.

"My position is irrelevant, as do yours, at least until the situation that had resulted in this dynamic alarm is resolved." Spock answered.

"Your logic is sound." Vedik agreed.

"Right as ever." Jim shrugged with a smile.

And with that they have reached the staircase, and met Carol that ran to meet them.
"Captain! Nyota just intercepted a mayday call from the Vokau senior staff! Come!"

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"I repeat! This is Commander T'Eelel, requesting immediate backup! Anyone who stand with the Captain and can hear me, please report to deck 22! We are blockaded and the Captain is down! I repeat- Captain Setal is down!"

Jim slid into a seating position between Sulu and Uhura and asked for her comm. she gave it to him. "Commander T'Eelel, this is Captain James Kirk speaking, we wish to help you, but would you please tell us what is going on?"

For a second there was no answer and then, the Vokau officer could hardly hide her astonishment "James Kirk? The… the human leader of the Remain team?"

"Yes, that's me. What is the situation, Commander T'Eelel?"

"Is this channel secure?" she asked next, and Jim eyed Nyota.

"This is a Starfleet channel." Nyota leaned into the comm and answered them both. "It runs on Starfleet codes, and so far I haven't notice anyone trying to break into it, so we have at least a few secured minutes, Ma'am."

"I understand." The Vulcan officer sounded a bit confused and did not know how to continue, so her side fell into static for a moment.

"Is the channel secure from your side?" Jim returned the favor.

"Yes, it is, I am using a standalone broadcasting station with codes known only to Captain Setal. We can converse safely." T'Eelel said and fell into silence again instead of speaking.

"Good to know, Commander." Jim took the reins of the conversation again after allowing her some time to recover, to no avail. "We woke up this morning into a Dynamic alert, locked in our rooms, and out of the system. When we tried to escape our confinement the life supporting system failed so we had to leave the deck.

"But then, we ran into Lieutenant Symer who insisted on taking me and Spock alone, for questioning, saying it was the Captain's orders, expecting us to leave the rest of my crew behind, deserted, in mortal danger, and without aid.

"Ever since then, and in the past few hours, we have been searching the ship for someone to talk to and find out what is going on, only to find bodies on our way, an abandoned Maintenance HQ and a shootout led by Lt. Commander Kuvac, with phasers set on kill, forcing us to defend ourselves and neutralize four Vokau crew members, who are now dead or wounded.

"So please, we wish to help you or even turn ourselves in if needed, but what the hell is going on?"

Again, static on the other side.

Jim searched for Spock's eyes, which gave him nothing and then he glanced at Nyota. "Did we lose the connection?" He asked her with a whisper.
Nyota studied the screen of the comm unit and shook her head, but before she opened her mouth to answer, the Vulcan officer spoke again.

"The Captain is down." Commander T'Eel said, repeating herself with disbelieve, and Jim started to suspect that she was presenting early symptoms of post traumatic distress.

"Captain Setal is down?" he tried to confirm.

"Captain Setal has been down for the past few hours; he's badly injured and probably is dying." The Commander mumbled, and moaned, trying to hold back tears. Yes, she was definitely post traumatic if she couldn't pinpoint the exact time the Captain was hurt into the minutes and seconds.

"Who is in charge? What is going on?" Jim could not take pity on her now, he had to insist.

"I don't know who is in charge, I am? Maybe? Commander Supak?" The Commander stuttered and then she breathed and got a better grip on herself. "Commander Sobar, along with the rest of the junior commanding staff, assumed illegal control of the ship at the gamma shift, and used emergency protocols to lock us out of the system.

"We are also physically locked at Deck 22, at the main reactor room, which is the most fortified section in the ship, and we have managed to switch it to manual, still, I fear we don't have much time left. Commander Sebak is dead, the Captain is severely injured. How many of you?"

"Wait a moment, Commander; please, you say Commander Sobar assumed illegal commanded of the Vokau? How?"

"Indeed, Sobar has taken over, using emergency protocols; he is now the acting Captain of the Vokau."

"Why did he do that? Is Elder Svern involved or is he acting on his own volition? What is he trying to achieve? What is going on with the ritual and the Elders right now? And where are the guests and the kids? How many are you?"

So many questions in need of an immediate answer, he had to try, but Jim knew he probably overwhelmed the poor officer, she didn’t strike him as the military type, she probably earned her ranks through seniority at the science department, and she took some time to gather her mind and start answering him.

"I… I do not know why Sobar decided to overthrow Captain Setal." Th Commander confected. "And we had… we had so very little time to try and understand his logic. I assume Elder Svern is at least in the know of what is happening, through his familiar bond with Commander Sobar, but…. But if he approves of his son's action, I cannot tell. Also, I have no knowledge of what is taking place regarding the ritual at the moment, Deck 7 is not responding to our hails. Nor do I have much information about the guests… I am so sorry. How many are you?"

"Seven, one still have access to the system." Jim answered.

"Not nearly enough power to remove the blockade, I suspect." T'Eel sounded desperate again. "Captain Kirk, you are human and this is a Vulcan matter, please find a safe hideout until this crisis is over." She begged him.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, I disagree." Jim answered. "We are way past staying out of this. I have already reported to you that Lieutenant Symer was sent to arrest us, and later, Lt. Commander Kuvac attacked and tried to kill us. This means we are also targeted by Commander Sobar, am I correct? This was not done under Captain Setal's orders, was it?"
"Most certainly not." The senior officer confirmed. "Captain Setal had nothing to do with it."

"So there's a mutiny going on, led by Commander Sobar, right? Against Captain Setal and, I assume, and against the council of Elders."

"I confirm." T'Elel answered, almost sobbing now.

"Commander T'Elel, how may we help you?" Jim tried again, softly.

"I honestly do not know." She admitted with a moan, she sounded exhausted, at the end her wit's end. "I must consult with my peers."

No can do, Jim bit on his lip and shook his head, he knew Vulcans; this could take hours, hours they may not have.

"Let's do this together, Ma'am, please, is that ok?" he decided on taking the lead of the situation." Let me tell you what I've got and we'll analyze your needs, run through options together and prioritize them, it that fine by you?"

"I am listening." She sounded relived, more than happy to allow another to handle the Conn.

"So…" Jim started, casting his gaze at the team surrounding him. "I have Commander Spock, here, son of Sarek, he can get in touch with the Elders through his bond with his father and get us updates on what is going on at their side."

Spock glared at him with irritation, he was less than happy to promise a contact with Elder Sarek while Sarek still blocked him, but Jim shrugged at this and hoped for the best, there was no place for Vulcan sensitivities at this point.

"The other Vulcan with me here is Mr. Vedik, and it seems like he's not locked out of the system yet."

Vedik nodded with vigor. "It would be an honor to serve captain Setal in any way possible." He hovered over Jim and said that loudly enough to be heard by T'Elel.

Jim waved his hand as a hint for the scholar to back off, but he did not get it, and it was Spock who tugged him by the arm and pulled him away to allow Jim some more breathing space.

"I also got two human pilots here, my men, but they are skilled in operating the Ta'hal shuttles, and they have experience flying in this system under extreme conditions, they even got the Captain's permission to orbit the main star under Periapsis conditions."

"And we broke the minimum." Dayton reminded him.

"And they did so at record speed." Jim rolled his eyes but added that fact to his report.

"But we're locked out of the system." Now was Sulu's turn to remind Jim something.

"But they have no access to the mainframe at the moment, so I am not sure if this data is useful at this point." He added that to his report. "I also have a comm officer, a weapon specialist and myself for all it's worth."

"I see, thank you for your intent to help, it is very much appreciated."

"So you need the blockade removed, what else do you need? How many people dose Sobar have? Did he contact you already? Does he have any demands? Got any hostages?"
Commander T'Elel went silent again; maybe he pushed too far too fast again, she was probably overwhelmed by his onslaught.

"Stand by, Captain Setal was informed of your involvement and now requests my attendees ASAP." T'Elel said and disconnected.

Jim sighed and nodded. "Standing by." As if he had a choice, he just hoped that they will not take too long.

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The silence returned to their location, only the sound of distant claxons and the flickering green light indicated that there was an emergency situation, otherwise, they were all alone at the middle of this huge staircase, stretching for a daunting height in both directions, up and down.

Jim waited for a while in quiet, but then he could not take it anymore. He gave the Vulcans a side glance and a weary smile. "Hey, Spock, what are the Starfleet regulations for our situation?" he asked, half joking.

"I believe there are none." Spock confirmed his fears.

"Shit got real." It was Sulu who made that remark and he was absolutely right, he smiled at Jim and leaned against him, almost falling on him, Jim allowed his friend to rest his head on his shoulder.

"Shit got real long time ago." Jim corrected him, adjusting his sitting position to better support Sulu's weight. "Seems like we might have crossed into a pre-Surak style ritual after all." he chuckled.

"This assumption is premature." Spock argued, but without much enthusiasm, he glared at Hikaru, but said nothing.

"How's your leg?" Jim turned to asked Sulu, jerking his shoulder to get a respond.

"It's there." Sulu raised his head slowly like it weighted a ton, and smiled at Jim. "I can walk it, I can't feel it, it's not bleeding, is all that matters."

"Eat and drink some more." Jim smiled back, patting the man's healthy thigh absentmindedly.

"Good idea." Hikaru agreed and straightened up, removing himself from his Captain, Dayton hurried to hand him an energy bar and a half full bottle.

They set in silence some more.

"They're taking their time." Carol mumbled after a while, nervously pacing the small space she was allowed into. "Do you want us to set up a patrol, Captain?"

"Negative, Miss Marcus." Spock answered before Kirk did "You'd only make yourself known by the ruckus of stamping boots on the steel flooring. If anyone approaches, I'll hear them first and issue a warning."

"Do you want me to retrace the call and get Commander T'Elel back online, sir?" Nyota offered.

"No, give her some more time." Jim sighed and tried to wiggle a bit under Hikaru's pressure, get his blood flowing.
And he knew he had no choice, everyone was on their edge, and the fear of the unknown made them jumpy, and he needed them focused and also, he needed to know. So he took a deep breath and made eye contact with every member of his team, holding their gaze for a while giving them an appreciative smile.

"Attention, please." He said after the last exchanged glance with Spock "I know we didn’t sign up for this, but it is clear to see now, this is a mission gone wrong, and I cannot guarantee your safety, as you probably noticed already.

"Up until now we only acted in self defense and whatever we did, we had no choice but doing. Now, however, I am going to ask you to deliberately risk life and limb for Captain Setal, his ship and the council of Elders. If there are any objections, I'd like to hear them now. Are you with me?" Kirk halted and awaited response.

"With you Captain, hell or high water." Carol informed him first, lifting up her gaze from the floor and offering him a bright, weary smile.

Dayton pulled her into a hug and kissed her hair. "At your service, Sir." he said after letting her go.

"Thick and thin." Sulu confirmed with a whisper.

"100%." Nyota shook her head decisively, and her ponytail danced on her shoulder.

"Honored to be of aid to both of my Captains." Vedik almost smiled.

"Positive." Spock stated.

"Thank you, everyone. This is not…” Jim started, but the comm chimed before he could finish. "Yes, Commander T'Eelel?"

"I have instructions from Captain Setal." She said. "Follow them at your discretion; we have no authority over you."

"We'll do whatever we can to help." Jim reassured the Vokau's senior officer.

"First, the captain wishes to convey his deep gratitude. He also request that you'd go to deck 16 where we have gathered most of the children in a safe room, room number 16433. They are guarded by their four teachers, who are armed, but also young and inexperienced, so they could use some help."

"Are the children in any danger?" Jim could not believe Commander Sobar would go that far.

"Affirmative." T'Eelel confessed with sadness "The children here are descendants of crew members loyal to the Captain and Elders of the 'Remain' Faction, we are concerned that Commander Sobar might deem them all as traitors and, should he get to them first, use them as leverage or worse, bring pre-Surak justice upon them."

"Kill those kids? Really?" Jim could not help the sound of horror in his voice.

Fuck, that heartless, sadistic motherfucker!

But then again, Sobar was already willing to tear Jim apart limb by limb in a duel, so this should come as the smallest surprise.

"We speculate the worst, and Sobar has already obtained ten of them, the younger ones, and he
holds them at a none-disclosed position. Please, take the 22 remaining children to deck 15, there's a large shelter there, room 15677, designated for emergencies such as this. There is a food and water storage there, and it could be defended by a small force."

"I will take them to safety, alright." Jim promised.

He'd never let children fall into the hands of sadistic abusers, not as long as he breaths.

"Do you want us to find out what is going on with the Elders, Ma'am? Is there anything we can do for them? Make sure that they are Ok?" He decided on bringing up the subject, after some deliberation. "They are, after all, the essence of Vulcan. And how about all those ritual guests? They are the future of Vulcan. We should be checking up on them too, right?"

"You are correct." Commander T'Elel confirmed with a bit of sadness in her voice. "However, there are only seven of you. There are 50 Vulcans at the Temple, the Elders alongside their aids. There are 308 guests onboard, some of them have joined Commander Sobar in his mutiny, and there are also 32 children and 4 teachers onboard. You cannot help them all. You must make a choice, make it wisely."

With some horror, it dawned on Jim that the Commander was right, so he took a few seconds to make up his mind, but only a few seconds, because his heart would not let him have it any other way. "I will send a team to protect the kids. Anything else?"

"Yes, Captain Setal urgently requests Spock, son of Sarek to join him in the reactor room for further instructions; it is a top priority, and could not be delayed. The Captain has hours to live, at best, and he referred to Spock as his last best hope. You mentioned that one of you can still access the system."

"Yes, Ma'am, that would be Vedik."

"Please have Spock and Vedik go to deck 19, room 19877, it looks standard and has no owner, but under the bed, there's a secret staircase leading to the reactor chamber, we will open it from our side and await Spock there."

"Roger that, is there a password to the room?"

"There's no password."

"Understood, anything else?"

"Live long and prospered, captain Kirk, peace and long life, for all of you." T'Elel said, her voice choked with emotion.

"Thank you, same here, and hold on, help is coming." Jim promised again and the communication was disconnected.

Jim returned the comm to Nyota and then surveyed his awaiting crew with a stern gaze. "Alright, people, this is what we are going to do."
Reviews, comments and any kind of civil feedback is welcomed.

Stay healthy and safe!
"Sulu, this is your call." Jim turned to look at his helmsmen and best friend "If you're not up to it, don't be shy about it, we'll find another way, I don't want a mission failure due to a wounded ego, you hear me?"

"Loud and clear." Sulu confirmed.

"I want you, Nyota and Carol to join the kids and their teachers at deck 16 and defend them. This mission is not about battling hostiles, Hikaru, or I would not have sent you there, it's about stealth and avoiding conflict, just join forces with the kids and teachers, get everyone to safety, and hold position until further notice. Understood?"

"Roger that, we'll take them to the shelter at deck 15, right?" Sulu nodded again.

"Wrong." Jim said.

"Wrong?" Sulu sounded confused.

"I know Vulcans, Sulu, and if T'Elel suggested deck 15 then it's probably written somewhere in some emergency protocol. Sobar has access to those protocols; if those kids are a priority to him; his people are already there, at deck 15 awaiting them."

"Then what do we do, sir?" Carol asked.

"Sir, our comms are being scanned." Nyota alerted everyone with a low voice. "I recommend setting them on safe-mode and minimize usage."

"What she said." Jim confirmed and turned back to Sulu and Carol "I want you to take the kids to deck 6, to the botanic garden. It's a rather open terrain, but it has lots of hiding places and strategic points that can be defended, plus it has food and water supply, so it will give you a breathing space."

"We'll have to cross deck 7." Sulu noted. "Where the Elders are at the Temple, and they are primary target for sure, Sobar probably concentrated his forces there."

"I know, the Elders are probably his major focal point, but that is also an advantage, the Elders are
heavily guarded by the Elders' Guard, and he'll have to put a lot of effort in obtaining and maintaining control over there, I put money on him not paying attention to a bunch of kids sneaking across his periphery, especially if he expects them elsewhere."

"If you say so, sir, but I know nothing about sneaking around this place." Sulu sighed and Jim had to smile at this.

"Leave the sneaking to the experts." Jim almost chuckled "The kids will show you where to go."

Now Hikaru had to smile too and he nodded to the affirmative.

"So, are you go?" Jim asked, locking his eyes with Sulu's. "Can you take this mission? Are you up of it? No time to be shy."

Sulu returned the gaze with his fierce dark eyes. "I am good to go, sir."

"As long as I don't need to run, I'm game."

"We're on it." Carol confirmed, adjusting her comm to safe mode. "We'll cover you, Sulu, you can trust us."

"We got your six, Hikaru." Nyota nodded.

"Goes without saying, phasers on kill if you feel threatened; I leave it at your discretion, Sulu." Jim grimaced again; he hated the need to make this point.

Sulu took a deep breath, and then nodded "Understood."

"Hey, Nyota, can you take my comm with you and reroute the signal so I could use Sharel's instead?" Jim called as this fresh idea popped into his mind.

"Yes, of course, but what for?" she asked.

He smiled and shrugged "Just a hunch, to give Sobar some hard time locating us. It will make things a bit more difficult for him, right? It might provide us further distraction. You need Sharel's comm for that?"

"It will surely make things more confusing for however that is scanning us, sir, yes, and I only need Sharel's frequency number and your comm, sir, may I have them?" Uhura nodded and reached out her hand to receive his comm, already taking off her hairpin with the other. "Five minutes."

"Sharel's frequency number is 44537/98, copy that?" he said after fetching it from his pocket, flicking it open and study its setting.

"Aye aye, sir." the comm officer nodded and used her pin to open Jim's unit. "Five minutes."

He let her do her job and turned his attention to his helmsmen, Dayton and Sulu. "Before you go, Hikaru, I need to understand something. Can you fly a Ta'hal Shuttle under peak periapsis conditions? And with your injury?"

"I think so, sir, I have my piloting PADD here with me." Sulu answered. "Most of the sensors will not work; I'll only have gravity sensors, but Carol and Spock helped us create a navigational tool by using the knowledge we have on the gravity wave-filed of this system.

"Dayton and I also found out that by polarizing the shields we gain extra knowledge of our position according to the shuttle's real time reaction compared to the anticipated theoretical reaction to the
baseline electromagnetic field of the system."

"That's good to know, excellent news."

"But, sir…" Hikaru looked at him puzzled. "Where do you want us to fly to? Nothing here but the Vokau and Ipik"

"A moment, Hikaru. Is your navigating ability accurate enough to land a shuttle at the Ipik docking bay, or fly it through the eye of the needle?" Jim answered with a question of his own.

Sulu gave it some thought and then nodded. "Yes it is, but Ipik's Docking bay? The eye of the needle? Why?"

"I'll answer all your questions, but let's just finish this first." Jim assured him with a smile "The Ta'hal shuttle, how many passengers can it carry?"

"Ten, sir." Dayton answered this time and Jim lost his smile, this was not good enough.

"I believe we can use any shuttle here, sir." Sulu hurried to cheer him up. "They all have the same consoles and helming systems."

"What's the biggest one you can safely navigate?"

Dayton and Sulu exchanged looks, as if communicating telepathically, with small minute facial expressions.

"The Mozh model?" Dayton suggested.

"500 passengers, Yorktown, it is too big and tough to navigate safely even under normal conditions, not through the eye of the needle anyway." Sulu shook his head. "We can handle the Ritsuri, 300 passengers, tops."

"I can live with 300." Jim hummed; two shuttles of this kind and they can evacuate the entirety of the Vokau. Problem is- does he have two pilots? "Yorktown, shut up. Hikaru, can Dayton fly the Ritsuri solo under those conditions?"

Sulu stared right into Jim's eyes for a brief moment, and Dayton squirmed in his place, trying to keep his mouth shut, then Sulu broke eye contact with Jim to gaze at Dayton instead.

"Sir, may I just…" the Ensign tried.

"Shut up, Yorktown!" both Sulu and Jim retorted quickly.

Sulu returned his eyes to Jim and sighed. "Oh, my…"

"Can he, or can he not?" Jim insisted.

"Do you have your piloting PADD with you, Parker?" Sulu asked.

"Of course!" Dayton sounded insulted, but neither Jim nor Hikaru had cared.

Another moment had passed before Sulu could make up his mind.

"Yes, Dayton can fly solo, eye of the needle and all." Sulu finally admitted reluctantly, making Carol almost squall and Dayton's face lit up with the power of a thousand suns.
Jim smiled now too. "Thank you, Lt. Commander, I needed to know that. Are you done, Nyota?"

"Yes, I am." She said, attaching the Captain's comm to her belt. "I'll beep twice when we get the kids to safety, don't answer."

"Copy that." Jim nodded and confirmed.

"Sir, my questions…" Sulu gently reminded him and Jim nodded with vigor.

Yes, no way out of this one.

"Alright, everyone, attention please." He said while his mind was racing, trying to figure out the shortest way for this debriefing. "What I am about to tell you is something that I wished to keep to myself, because I didn't want it to distract you during the ritual, or worse, get you asking the wrong people the wrong questions and get into trouble."

The crew gathered around him, and all but Spock were memorized to his words, drinking them like a wanderer in the Vulcan desert.

"There is a reason you did not find those Vulcan constellations you were looking for, Dayton, there is a reason that the magnetic fields of this system are wonky, Carol, there is a reason why this sun is green, if you have noticed, and the reason is- we are not in our own universe anymore."

"What?!" Nyota could not help herself. "Where are we?"

"A vertical universe." Spock took to answering her and the rest. "A Universe different than our own in many ways, some known and some still undiscovered, but it shares the same flow of time with our own."

"Is this why the shields and other systems failed here under Periapsis?" Carol asked "I was wondering about that. Those kinds of systems failures seemed rather bizarre to me, I mean, how come the Vulcans have so many shields' and sensors' problems in a situation that is so very common and already well covered, seemed very odd to me."

"And rightfully so, Miss Marcus." Spock agreed. "Our insufficient understanding of this universe is the cause of all those malfunctions. We have no time to delve into the details or the reasons why we are here, but the Captain is correct, this is not our home universe.

"Vulcans have had the technological ability to reach this vertical universe for the past 300 years, and make use of it to access unique resources, conducted dangerous experiments and do it all discretely and without interruptions. The Captain was right to keep this knowledge to himself, and may I remind you that this information is also protected under the sanctity of this ritual, at the penalty of a mind wipe."

"Bloody hell…" Carol whispered. "Better keep my mouth shut about it, but I don't know if I can."

"You must!" Jim implored her.

"As if someone would believe us anyhow." Nyota grimaced and Dayton just shrugged.

"You have to." Spock scolded them all "Do not try the Vulcans on this matter, I cannot stress this enough, it is too dangerous to toy with."

"Talking about dangerous…" Kirk picked up from where Spock had stopped "This is not yet confirmed, but remember Star base Ipik? Which some of you have visited? I have a reason to
believe it is conducting 'Red Matter' experiments and can open portals to other universes, while
containing them at the eye of the needle."

"So flying through the eye may take us to another universe, sir?" Sulu asked with dismay.

"Or back to our home universe." Jim confirmed and added. "This is why I asked if you two could
fly through the eye, again, this is again, unconfirmed, I only asked so I'd know we have this
theoretical option."

"Is it safe?" asked Dayton.

To that Jim could only shrug and shake his head. "As safe as this whole situation is, Dayton. Now,
I am sorry for keeping this information from you, but I was only doing this to protect you, I really
hoped you would not be forced to relate to it."

"Ignorance is bliss?" Nyota asked, sighing.

"Something of that sort, yeah." Jim admitted. "I am sorry I broke trust."

"You did not break trust, Captain." Dayton hurried to say. "That's part of your job, right? Gathering
and distributing information at your discretion, right?"

"Right." Carol affirmed softly "No harm done, sir, I understand completely."

"Alright!" Jim interrupted the mushy-gushy moment before it would make him nauseated. "Now
that I know that it is doable, that you both can fly a shuttle to a different universe, I will take it into
consideration, Copy that, Sulu, Parker? Consider this your last warning,"

"Understood, Sir, standing by." Dayton confirmed.

"Will do, if necessary." Hikaru nodded.

"Great, now can we get a move on?" Nyota reminded them all "We have children to save, butts off
floor, please."

"Yes, Ma'am." Jim chuckled "At your convenience, you may leave now, Carol, Nyota, Hikaru…"
He held each one's gaze for a brief while in their turn. "Good luck."

"You've heard the Captain, come now, ladies, let's go." Sulu said. Dayton helped Sulu to his feet,
and Hikaru glanced at the ones staying behind. "Good luck to you too, Captain, everyone."

Carol reached down and pecked Jim's cheek "Stay safe, sir." She smiled. Then she turned to
Dayton and they shared a long, tender kiss and a few soft spoken words.

Sulu patted Yorktown's shoulder, and then let him go. "See you all later." He said, and Dayton
handed him back his now half empty duffle.

Nyota got up as well and gathered her stuff. "Try not to get killed." She told them, and then she
raised her hand with a Ta'al to Spock who returned the gesture.

The three of them assembled and then, led by Sulu, began climbing down the stairs again, and the
others watched in silence until they disappeared from view.

"Yorktown." Jim turned his attention to the Ensign signaling with his hand for the young officer to
approach.
Dayton knelt at his side, watching him with a stern gaze "Yes, sir?"

"You and I, we escort Vedik and Spock to deck 19, to their secret pathway and their meeting with the Captain, you cover Vedik, I cover Spock. We die for them, understood?" he said in a whisper, somehow hoping Spock would not hear.

Dayton watched him with alarm, then he gulped and nodded "Yes, sir."

//Sir, I object your prioritizing.// Spock stated, as if he would not notice or comment on Jim's order. //The Xo must protect their Captain, not the other way around.//.

//Objection noted.// Jim answered. //But I am no Captain here, Captain Setal is, he is dying and specifically asked for you, calling you his 'last best hope', this is bigger than us, Spock, this is logic.//

//I object, none the less.// the Vulcan insisted.

"Are we go?" Dayton asked.

"Not yet, let's give Sulu some breathing space, fifteen minutes."

Vedik recognized the opportunity and came to seat next to Jim. "I have a suspicion that I should feel offended, Mr. Kirk." said the Vulcan scholar.

Jim turned to look at him and smiled. "And why is that Mr. Vedik?"

"Why was I not locked out of the system? Am I such a feeble threat in Commander Sobar's eyes?"

"Oh, come on!" Jim leered at the Vulcan "Why bother with Sobar? His mistake is our good fortune."

"Agreed." Spock joined in "Just do not use the system before we reach room 19877, so the Commander would not see the error of his ways before it is too late."

"Logical." Vedik concurred.

"What he said." Jim smiled again at both Vulcans. "Mind if I take a nap, Spock? Give me exactly ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Jim did not want to tell Spock, but he was starting to feel a familiar pain creeping its way back into his body, still faint and distant, but there, none the less, seems like the damage he caused his body was too much for a temporary telepathic blockage to handle, the pain was carving new pathways to his mind, around the blockade Spock had placed there.

He leaned against the bulkhead and closed his eyes.

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They met resistance on Deck 19, forcing them to set their phasers to kill, seven security guards were circulating the area Commander T'Elel told them to go to, which meant one of two things- T'Elel had led them into a trap, or more likely, Acting Captain Sobar had suspected that there was a secret passage to the reactor's room somewhere there, and placed his men in position, in case the senior staff make a run for it.

Still, surprise was on their side, this time, as they entered the deck, and between the three of them, Spock, Dayton and him, they managed to kill two, wound three and make a run for it.

Vedik was pretty much shell-shocked throughout that encounter, probably this was the first real battle he had ever took part in, or even witnessed, poor thing, to see death for the first time, to watch Vulcans kill Vulcans, it was too much to handle. Dayton had to drag him forward by his arm, running the corridors, before the surviving guards would call for a backup.

They ran like crazy, and Jim almost fell on his face while taking a sharp turn but then he noticed their target. "Found it! Found the room! Here! Hurry!" he called for the rest of them.

They almost made it, but then fire opened from across the hall, and now Spock had to dragged Vedik by his tunic to take cover, and Dayton dropped to his knees next to Jim and both returned fire towards the source, creating enough distraction for Spock and Vedik to leave cover and make the rest of the way towards the door.

Vedik placed his hand on the touch Pad and tried opening the door.

"It asks for a password." He told Spock after a few seconds, puzzled, and Jim picked up the conversation through the bond.

"But there is none." Spock answered the scholar with discomfort.

//Try – 'there's no password.' Come on, just try it!/// Jim shouted in his head, while returning fire, and almost hitting the attacker who managed to return to his hiding place behind the bulkhead at the last second. //Hurry!///

There were sounds of new boots on the ground, running towards them, getting closer, closing in on them from both sides of the hall.

Spock whispered this to Vedik, and the other Vulcan placed his hand on the touchpad again, this time the door opened.

"Fascinating." Vedik breathed out and turned toward Spock. "How did you…?" he started but Spock shoved him in.

Jim knelt on the floor and set his weapon to max amplitude, their attackers were just around the corner, and there was probably a second force going about, closing in on them from the other side of the hall, they didn't have much time.

He glanced at the young Ensign at his side, who glanced back at him; they knew that they were not going to make it, unless… he set his weapon again to wide range, having this idea how to supply enough cover all by himself.

"Dayton, make a run for it." Jim ordered, lowering his body to a crawling position, minimizing his exposure to the intensifying fire. He aimed at the new arrivals, planning his next attack; he could buy Dayton a few more seconds, but not much more. "Go!"

"Sir?" Dayton hesitated.
"Make a run for it!!" Jim screamed at the man, and as expected, there were now attackers from both sides of the hall.

Dayton growled in frustration, but left his position and leaped towards the safety of the room.

Jim fired a few shots, with his weapon set on max range and amplitude; it gave out enough energy to melt the bulkhead and ceiling on this one side of the hall, heating it enough to drive the attackers away from that spot, because even Vulcans had their heat tolerance limit.

The metal slid down from both sides to block the way, formed puddles on the floor, and rained down from the upper bulkhead, sizzling and smoking, giving away a nasty burnt smell.

After melting one side into a no-go zone, he moved his body to face the other side of the hall, but he knew he had no time to treat it in the same way.

The attackers were already there, taking positions, closing in on him, he had one or two shots left, so he glanced back to see if at least Dayton made it to safety. He expected to see the room's door shut, but instead it was opened, and Spock's face peeked from it, and made him furious. "Close the goddamn door already!!" he screamed at his XO.

But the next thing he knew, someone was pulling him by his belt, almost ripping it off, and then sending him flying across the floor to be stopped only after hitting a wall, bumping his head and right shoulder into it, and it hurt like a bitch.

It was Spock, under Dayton's cover; moving at an insane speed, he made a run for it, grabbed Jim and tossed him around in like a rag doll, and got back into the room milliseconds before it closed again.

"Are you alright, sir?" Dayton hovered above him, offering his hand.

"My ego…" Jim grunted in pain and reached out, letting Dayton help him back up.

Spock used his phaser to weld the door locked, while Vedik searched frantically around the room looking for the secret passage, before remembering and stopping at the bed, he inspected it for a moment and then decided on moving it away altogether and there it was; the hidden staircase, which led down to three decks below.

"Go, go, go!" Jim said, while a sound of phaser shots came from the other side of the door.

Vedik got down first, then Jim, Dayton, and Spock, the last, moved the bed back to position above them before he joined the descent.

The staircase was shaped like a helix and had a very sharp slope, and so many, so many stairs, should have made it into a slide to begin with. Above them, they could hear the door to the room break open and then the sound of steps on the floor above them, needless to say that they all went completely quiet.

A few moments later, they ended their journey by facing a wall. Jim and Vedik were the firsts so they smash right into it, while Dayton and Spock halted at the end of the staircase and waited, not knowing what to do.

Jim placed a hand on the wall, trying to make sense of its structure; it was hot and slightly vibrating, but nothing out of the ordinary. They could hear the sounds of the hostiles as they started their way down the staircase as well.
If T'Elel doesn't open the door from her side ASAP, we are Tango Foxtrot// Jim sent his fearful thought to Spock.

"Totally Fucked' is an adequate description, sir.// Spock agreed.

But they didn’t have to wait much longer, the wall started shining with a red glow, followed by the sound of screeching, and then it started moving, like it slid into a track, and glided sideways, and as a gap opened, an old female Vulcan peeked through the crack, created at one corner.

"Spock, son of Sarek?" she hopefully whispered.

"At present, Commander." Spock answered.

"We've got a tail, hurry up now!" Jim informed her with a hiss and she nodded and disappeared behind the wall again.

The screeching sound returned, a bit louder, and the wall rolled on, until it supplied enough leeway for them to push themselves through.

"Come on in!" She whispered with urgency, and awaited them all to enter the reactor room.

With everyone inside, she rolled the pneumatic control wheel quickly as possible, and it pushed the door back on its tracks until the entrance was blocked again.

This was a massive steel door, a few feet in width, more suitable for sealing a vault than just be used as bulkhead, and after T'Elel locked the door, a red colored force field came down on it, like a veil, to add another measure to the fortification.

"Yup, that should do it." Jim nodded with satisfaction as the blockade, as he tried to catch his breath.

"I also activated the mid way barrier of the staircase, so it was sealed once you all crossed it." T'Elel said with a breathy sound.

"Good to know." Jim smiled, panting.

He tried not to, but eventually had to bend forward, and place his hands on his knees for support, feeling suddenly very dizzy, not the best way to make a first impression.

"Captain James T. Kirk, by the way." He smiled at the old officer from that position, fighting a surge of pain that ran through his body, not the worst he had ever had, but a bad omen of what might come.

Yup, he got totally ignored.

"This place was designed to contain an inner meltdown of the main reactor." The old Commander explained Spock "It would take them days to breach it." she reassured him.

"Commander T'Elel." Spock started "We have come as requested, this is Mr. Vedik, and the man besides him is Ensign Parker."

"I know you all." The old Commander briefly nodded towards them. "We all followed the 'Plak If Fee' very closely."
"Are the children safe?" she asked Spock, trying and failing to mask her anxiety.

"The children are being taken to safety by our best officers as we speak, Ma'am." Spock assured her. "I will notify you when they reach their destination."

"Thank you so very much! Captain Setal will be profoundly relieved when he hears about this!" T'Elel gazed again into Spock eyes, and as she spoke about her Captain, her eyes welled with unshed tears "Spock, son of Sarek?" she repeating his name, making sure that he was actually there.

"At your disposal, Ma'am." Spock nodded slightly, and nothing suggested that at the following seconds his arms will be filled with a shivering, weeping old officer. He froze still as she shattered on his chest, crying and sobbing. "Commander?" he asked softly, and searched for Jim's eyes, not knowing what to do.

Jim straightened up and smirked at him.

"You have no idea how glad I am to see you!" the old Vulcan wept in earnest, her tears soaked the fabric of his blue shirt. "Seems to me that I know you so well; and yet you are so young! Captain Setal and the rest of us, the senior staff, have worked very closely with your counterpart from the other universe, building the Vokau together. If you are half as like him, you are our savior!" she almost wailed.

"Commander…" Spock tried again, blushing green under the red light; he searched for Jim's eyes again for help.

Jim only leered at him again and offered none.

"I suggest a meld." Spock tried with hope to soothe the trembling commander. "I wish to learn what happened here and this would be the most efficient method."

T'Elel took a deep breath and removed herself from Spock's chest; she too seemed very uncomfortable with her emotional outburst. She took a few steps back, wiped her face and fixed her wrinkled robes, and then assumed the Vulcan none-expression and nodded.

"A meld is highly logical, Spock, and time efficient indeed, I accept." She said. "The Captain expects you, we all certainly welcome your help; it is extremely needed." She said to him then remembered Vedik, Dayton and Jim and gave them a brief glance as well.

"Lead the way, Ma'am." Spock said, and they both walked together to find a more suitable place for a meld, where they could seat down in quiet.

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While the Commanders were melding, Jim scanned his surroundings, unsure of what to feel about this place, safe as it was; this also was a prison. When he found enough strength in him to walk about and glanced around, and since Spock was occupied and he was bored, he set his attention to
familiarizing himself with this place.

The reactor chamber was a huge room, about 500 ft in height, and 2,500 feet in both length and width. It was very dry and very hot, as in 105 Fahrenheit at the least, illuminated by red lights, which probably looked brighter for the Vulcans who were able to see in the infrared spectrum of light, but it was very dark for humans.

He recognized two main doors, on opposite sides of the room, and they seemed barricaded the same way the small emergency door was or even further. There were a few working stations, scattered in the room, the main one in front of what seemed to be a pool. He could see a small transporter platform next to that station, and there was also a replicator stand at one corner, looked like an old, engineering grad unit, might even be programmed manually without a need for a mainframe access, should be able to produce at least drinkable water, if nothing else.

There were giant tubes laid out all over the place, some as big as 40 ft in diameter, mostly colored in red, but some were blue and yellow, some were submerged in the flooring, others running across the walls and on the ceiling, even breaching them to reach other parts of the ship. He turned his attention back to the middle, where there was a pool, or something of that kind, about 1000 square feet in area, and who knows how deep.

Jim could not resist himself; he walked towards the pool and peeked down, leaning over the yellow colored safety bar, probably against all safety protocols, to see a structure submerged under what seemed to be glittering, whitish, silvery sort of water.

It was unlike anything he had seen before, and worst, learned about, and there was something submerged under those strange waters, something smooth and metallic, even though he did not recognize the exact metal alloy, ellipsoid in its shape, reminded him of a submarine, and it was glowing in a golden light, and made some peculiar, almost subsonic noises.

"Welcome to the main reactor, Mr. Krik." Someone said, almost made him lose his balance and topple into the pool. "Be careful were you fall, very much! Down from there, please!"

"Hey, Elevator guy!" Jim beamed at him after this sudden recognition, happy to know the old Tech was still alive. "Remember me?"

"The question is- how could one forget." The tech answered.

Now Jim chuckled, recalling their previous encounters. "Well, yeah, sorry for the troubles I gave you, I hope you don’t hate me much."

"Hate you? Not at all, reverse it is, I like you, Mr. Krik, very illogical, still a fact. Please step away from this bar, thank you, is there for a reason. Why are you in location?"

"Well… that's a long story; Mr. Never got your name."

"Mr. Never asked for name, it is." The Vulcan corrected him. "Soren I am" He lifted his gloved hand in the familiar Ta'al.

Jim smiled still and tried the hand gesture himself, but he sucked at it and as always it didn't work.

"Is this the warp reactor?" Jim asked, throwing a glance at Spock, which seemed to be still melded with Commander T'Eelel, as they both had their fingers at each other meld points.

"It is capable of warp, also, sir." The Vulcan, Soren, sort of confirmed. "Prototype, Vokau's only, at top secret, can fold without aid of designated folding stations, also top of secret, cannot tell you
anything more, apologize."

"Scotty would have killed to be here." Jim mumbled, praying that the man survives his injuries.

"I bet he would." said Dayton, who just joined them at the pool, delivering a strong pat on Jim's shoulder as he spoke, giving Jim a hell of a scare. "Nice pool, man, do you think they'd let me to take a dip?"

The helmsman's joke horrified the elder Vulcan tech.

"Not swim, young human sir, much forbidden!" He said to the young Ensign "This is no water, white matter, exotic sub-atom particles, so very top secret, and heavy, it will squash you like a fly on a window moving light fast. And you'd be dead, sir, very dead."

Dayton looked puzzled at Jim who smiled kindly at Soren "You can speak Vulcan, Sir, we got our translators back." He pointed at his ear "No need to struggle with standard."

"Is that so? What a relief Mr. Krik." Soren almost blushed. "My standard is horrible, so I was told, you should have informed me sooner."

To this, Jim only shrugged.

"Sir…" Dayton turned to the older tech. "Are you Crewman Soren? I was asked to call you; Commander Supak wishes to talk to you."

"I am indeed, let's go." Soren nodded and both he and Ensign Parker left Jim alone without a word.

So he looked sideways again, and it seemed like Spock and T'Elel ended the meld, and it looked like she was leading him to a dark corner of the room, it was hard to see, but Jim assumed this was where they had laid down the wounded Captain. They both disappeared from his view so he returned his attention to the pool.

But then Vedik walked towards him, he looked worried and stern, very unlike what Jim had seen from him, until now.

"Sup, Vedik? How are you?"

"Seems like I've lost my access to the mainframe, Mr. Kirk." Vedik said in a sad tone, while joining them. "Mr. Supak here, the Chief Engineer, requested that I try it on the touch pad at one of the working station, but I could not operate the instrument he wished me to. I have been told I am an unidentified user, I am locked out."

"But it was expected." Jim tried cheering the Vulcan up. "No need to feel so sad, this is a compliment actually; you're a threat now, congrats!" Jim allowed himself to pet the scholar on his shoulder.

"But I have returned to my useless statues." Vedik insisted and his desperation touched Jim's heart at the core. "I am of no use for you anymore."

"Of no use?" Jim protested "Come on! Who ever told you that you're useless, Vedik? Because they are dead wrong!"

"Well, some of them are indeed dead." Vedik stated, feeling suddenly chatty "My parents, for example, perished on the surface of Vulcan, my bond-mate as well. Some are much alive, though, like commander Sobar and Elder Svern. Mr. Spock as well, dare I say."
"Oh, Vedik, I'm so sorry that you were treated this way." Jim wiggled under the weight of the embarrassment.

Bring up the dead, why don’t you?

Way to go, Jimbo.

"Well, when an overwhelming majority makes the same claim, it is very likely to be true."

"Fuck'em all! They are all wrong, and you should be the first to know that!"

"You are so kind, Mr. Kirk." Vedik seemed so moved, almost to tears, and it made Jim want to hug him, but he had to control himself, after all, he was talking to a Vulcan.

"Rest assured that we will find more use for you, we will need everyone to get us out of this mess. If we get out of this alive, I promise to teach you 3D chess myself."

"I… I… thank you." Vedik stuttered, eyes wide open and glittering.

But then Dayton and Soren returned and joined them; making Vedik retreat into silence, in fact none of them had anything clever to say, and Jim was becoming so bored again, enough to consider finding and then throwing something into the pool, just to see what happens.

"I don't like it here." Dayton was the first to disturb the silence, stretching his body. "I hate confined places, especially ones where there aren't windows, so you cannot even see the stars."

"I know, I feel the same." Jim sighed in agreement "We need to get some water; before we get dehydrated." he remembered his thirst and turned to Soren "We can get some drinkable water around here, yeah?"

"We have only one replicator that can be operated outside of the system, but it is programmed for Vulcan grade water, I'm afraid." Soren said. "They are a bit more oily and salty than you'd probably prefer." The maintenance tech explained.

Jim shrugged "Water is water."

"Of course." Soren nodded "Come with me."

"Dayton, Vedik, please join him, I'll be with you in a moment." Jim answered.

"Very well." Vedik said, Soren bowed, and Dayton only nodded.

While the three of them went to the replicator, Jim took the opportunity, he glanced around to make sure that no one noticed, and then he fished out from his bag his illegal PADDS, the wires, and the recording device, and all the rest of his hacking equipment, letting them all plummet into the reactor pool.

They were up in flames half way through and disintegrated into atoms as soon as they touched the surface of flowing white matter that engulfed the reactor. The blast didn't even make a decent sound, only a pathetic fizzle. What a dismal end to the ten ton of rocks that were hanging off his chest up till now, he suddenly felt as light as a feather.

Jim glanced around again to find out that his act did not draw any kind of attention, with a relief he left his position and went to search for Dayton and Soren.

Soren operated the Replicator manually to give them each a bottle. The water was warm, oily and
bitter, but Jim was too thirsty to care.

"Thank you, Soren." Jim smiled after emptying his whole bottle.

"Sir, do you have any toilets here?" Dayton asked with some awkwardness.

"Indeed, sir, come, I'll take you." Soren offered, and Dayton sought out Jim's approval and got a smile and a nod.

"Don't mind if I join as well." Vedik smiled and Jim was left alone again.

So he returned to the reactor pool that he found mesmerizing for some reason, and let himself drape over the safety bar again, safety and health supervisors be dammed, he looked at the waves of the white matter across the pool and it felt like meditation, but then Sharel's comm beeped twice and Vedik returned from the loo to find him..

"Hey, where are Dayton and Soren?" Jim asked as the Vulcan took his place next to Jim at the pool.

"Mr. Parker and crewman Soren have returned to the replicator, they want to try and reprogram the replicator to improve the water quality and provide an Earth's grade product." Vedik informed him. "It would take them a while."

"Oh, ok." Jim shrugged.

Vedik kept his eyes on Jim, and it seemed like he wanted to say something more and had no idea how to do it. Jim glanced back at him a few times, wondering if he should make the effort, but only after Vedik looked like he was ready to pass out, he took pity on the scholar.

"What is it? Spit it out." He demanded with a smile.

To that Vedik nearly smiled with relief. "Please forgive me, Jim, I am a bit shaken, I must admit, never in my wildest imagination had I thought I would be engaged in a battle against an attempted mutiny, or see Vulcans turn on each other."

"Yeah…" Jim sighed "Sorry about that." he hummed in understanding.

"Captain Kirk…" Vedik tried again, hesitating, but now brave enough to try.

"That's me."

"In case my life will be unnaturally terminated in this unfolding event, there is something I wish to share with you, at your discretion, if you would not mind, it is rather personal. Please allow this to me." The Vulcan almost begged.

Finally! Jim breathed out and nodded, he had an idea, but he will not refuse this kind and gentle Vulcan, he owed him that much. "I am listening, what is it?"

Grateful and relieved Vedik now turned to look him in the eye, and they were glittering, as if he was about to cry. "I wish to express my deep gratitude, Jim. I want to thank you for becoming my friend and by that change the trajectory of my life."

Jim had to chuckle, blushing, this was a bit too dramatic for his taste.

"You see, I had a bond mate, back on old Vulcan, a very well renowned and esteemed professor at the Vulcan academy, significantly older than me, and we had a rather weak bond, arranged by my
parents who were his past students and thus adored him. He never found me satisfactory in any aspect, and often scoffed at my doings, I did not mourn him properly after he perished along with our world."

"I am so sorry to hear that." Jim mumbled, in awe of Vedik's bravery, sharing this very private information with him.

"After I lost him, I made a decision not to seek out a new mate, and settle for medicated aid when relevant, but then I met you."

Fuck.

"I met you and something was rekindled within me."

No, Vedik, please don't go there…

"You have set my Katra on fire again, Jim."

Oh, hell…

"Thank you, James Kirk for inspiring me to find a new mate, should we survive this predicament, a Human even, dare I say, even without forming a telepathic bond, it is still a very enticing idea, something that had never occurred to me before as an option, not until I met you."

Oh, for fuck's sake! I'm a slut, alright, but there are so many Pon Farrs I can handle!

Jim had no idea how to reply to Vedik's heartfelt confession without breaking his heart, but he should say something, anything, Vedik deserved a respond, and still, he hadn't got the slightest clue of where to begin, but then someone came to his rescue, and it was Spock.

Spock stopped at his side and glared at Vedik so harshly, it made the other Vulcan swallow, bow his head and take his leave.

"That wasn't very nice, Spock." //I owe you.//

"Captain Setal wishes to converse with you." Spock informed Jim when they were left alone. "He is too weak to talk; I'll have meld us, with your permission."

"Sure, anything." Jim breathed out and pushed himself off the safety bar.

"We don't have much time." Spock murmured; so much sadness in his voice, all Jim wanted to do was to pull Spock into a hug, but that would be illogical.

"Very well, then, let's go." He said instead.

Chapter End Notes

Stay safe and take care, next update (so I hope) no later than 08.08, until then, my best wishes!
Hey again, another update for you to enjoy (so I hope).

You know, I was writing this story for myself, for my own indulgence, the fact that I have readers amazes me every single time.

Thank you so much for reading and reviewing, stay safe!

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Additional warnings: Mild gore.

//A fair warning.// Spock informed Jim as they walked towards the place where the dying Captain had been placed //This would not be a pretty sight.//

//What happened?//

//The Captain took a direct hit to the chest, by a phaser set on kill; his armor gave him a few more hours, but no more. He placed himself in a healing trans, and struggled to stay alive while awaiting our arrival, but he has little time left.//

Jim swallowed and lowered his head, when a Captain dies, the heart of the ship dies with them, no wonder Spock sounded so troubled and heartbroken in his mind. Jim felt that sorrow seeping into him as well, and he welcomed it, besides the fact that a premature, violent death was always horrible; a ship without its captain had no future to look forward to.

But sadness aside, Jim remembered to be practical.

//Spock, I need to know before you meld us…// Yeah, it seemed selfish and out of place, but he could not help it, yet he did not even have to form his thought into mind words before the answer came through the bond.

//I have not disclosed our Section 31 endeavor to Captain Setal.// Spock stated. //I have already given you my word about it, moreover, I did not wish to burden Captain Setal with this knowledge, he'll find no use of it, and it would only serve to enhance his distress.//

//So, you lied to the Captain, huh?// Jim taunted, but maybe for the first time, he found Spock's awe-inspiring ability to bend the truth useful.

//I did not lie.// Spock corrected him, of course. //I avoided sharing irrelevant and problematic information with a dying man.//

//And how do I avoid it?//
Jim nodded and they both arrived into that dark corner where the dead and wounded were kept in a grim line. He had to give himself some time, adjusting his eyes to the almost absolute dark, and then he noticed. There was someone awaiting them, seated at a lotus position as if meditating, the Captain's head rested in his lap, and he was stroking the elder's Vulcan gray hair.

As they approached, that young, sullen Vulcan noticed them, wiped the tears from his eyes with shaking hands, and forced himself to a state of alert, so he could greet them with dignity. He looked very young, a teen even, seemed like a male that was yet to go through his first Pon Farr.

"Are you James Kirk?" the boy asked, his voice calm and low, but his eyes glittered with tears.

"Yes, I am."

The boy suddenly gave him a dazzling smile, an evidence of his unstable state "I am so pleased to see you, sir, so relieved. I am the seventh in line, but I cannot assume command, I am unsuitable and unqualified, under current circumstances."

"Seventh? You mean in the chain of command?"

"Yes, Sir." The boy sniffed "Captain Setal first, followed by Commander Sebak, Commander Sobar, Lieutenant commander Kuvac, Lieutenant T'Heli, and Lieutenant Symer. I am Ensign Xon, a junior officer of the security unit."

"Understood, nice to meet you, Xon." Jim nodded respectfully and then turned to Spock to see what he would do next.

"I will meld us now, with your permission." Spock answered Jim's gaze.

Jim nodded again and then he turned to examine the Captain's state; and indeed this was not a pretty sight.

Captain Setal had been laid on the dirty, hot floor, and was white as paper, frail and unmoving, and he seemed almost lifeless if not for the slightest movement of his chest. He was covered with a sheet that clanged to his body, soaked with blood, glued to a gruesome hole in his mid section; Jim could even see the outline of broken bones underneath the wet fabric. The smell was as awful as the sight, the smell of roasted flesh, and the pungent odor of burnt plastic.

Spock set down next to the Captain, mindful of his movements, not to disturb the wounded body and cause unnecessary pain; he assumed lotus position himself and then glanced at Jim, and reached out with his hand, inviting him without words to join them.

Jim set down slowly and carefully as well, as close as he dared to the dying Captain, between Spock and Xon, and he watched Spock as he slowly and gently reached for the Captain's melding points with one hand, and for Jim's face with the other.

"My mind to your mind, my thoughts to your thoughts…" Spock mumbled softly.

Jim felt the sudden dive, seemed like falling fast into an infinite abyss.
They were immediately off ship and thrown into another landscape, and it was a beautiful one, of a narrow valley, with steep, sharp rocks surrounding it, a fast moving river was flowing in its center.

Jim recognized old Vulcan, the shades of red, purple and orange gave it away, as New Vulcan was rather dominated with browns, pinks and yellows, and there was no mistaking the distinct color of the sky, blue as on Earth, but a very different kind of blue, one shade away from violet.

Captain Setal phased into view, and took a few moments to appreciate his surrounding as well. He looked as Jim had remembered him, strong, healthy and unharmed, clad in his Vokau commanding outfit, it made Jim wonder if this was also Spock's doing. Smiling, the Captain looked at Spock. "Is this your mindscape?" he asked.

"Affirmative." Spock confirmed, taking his shape in the land, dressed in formal black Vulcan robes. "This is near the house I grew up in; I used to travel down that valley to the river bank for walks or meditation, my mother never approved of this habit, she always told me this was too steep a climb."

"Thank you, for allowing me to lay my eyes upon Vulcan for the last time." Captain Setal said; and for a moment he seemed overcome by emotion "In my state, I do not dare to wonder what my mindscape would even look like. Xon had tried to send me into his, but failed; he is not as powerful as you."

"It is not perfect, sir." Spock noted.

And he was referring to the glowing, red line of light, far away in the distance, the energy beam shooting down from the Narada's drill, paving its way into the core of the planet. Ever since Nero, Spock was unable to picture Vulcan without the Narada somewhere in the background, but this was it, a background, there was no additional attachment to that view, no sound, no smell, no emotion.

Captain Setal studied this reminder of Vulcan's destruction, and emitted a wave of sorrow, but not desolation, then he returned his gaze to Spock and smiled. "Imperfect as it is, I am still grateful."

"If you wish me to, I'll stay here with you until time comes." Spock offered.

"So very kind of you, I only have my gratitude to offer in return." Captain Setal smiled and tears ran down his eyes "And you!" the old Captain turned his attention to Jim now and regarded him with a strange mixture of surprise and awe. "Spock was right about you! You are such a radiant being! Your Katra shines so bright!"

Of all the things he could have said.

"Ummm… thank you, sir?"

Jim tried his voice and found it the same as in real life; Spock gave him his command gold for this meld, but he didn't feel particularly radiant, this was probably just a manifestation of the Captain's unsettled state of mind. Was his telepathic representation capable of blushing?

"I wanted to tell you this after the official conclusion of the ceremony." Setal continued "But I found no time to do so, might as well say it now- thank you for representing the 'Remain' position with such vigor and determination, we could not have hoped to win without you."

"We?"

"Commander Spock has informed me, indeed, Elder Sarek reported this to him- the Elders have
voted to remain!"

"You mean that you were part of the 'Remain' faction?" Jim wondered.

"I had to retain a neutral position, as the Captain of the ship, but yes, I hold a 'Remain' position, if this was not so, I assume, I would have not be facing my impending death now.

"Thank you for your win, I can rest easy knowing that the 'Plak If Fee' had ended with the most preferable result; knowing that the future of the Vulcan people is secured for the next 150 years… although I fear… I fear this might be too late…" Setal impassive expression started crumbling before their eyes, succumbing to sorrow.

Jim eyed Spock, not knowing what to do, but then he felt as if he was snatched from position and pressed into another presence, it was Captain Setal.

The Captain did the unthinkable and pulled Jim into a hug, a mental hug, but a hug just the same, and the Vulcan not only did that, but also started weeping, actually resting his head on Jim's shoulder, and weeping.

Alarmed, Jim looked at Spock again, but Spock only sent affection and warmth to help him regain his calm.

Jim then tried to move the telepathic representation of his hands, and succeeded, so he used them to return the hug and even pet the Vokau's Captain upper back. "Please, sir, don't…" he pleaded, but his voice was smothered under Setal's crushing hug.

"I have failed." The Captain wept so miserably now. "I have failed! I lost the youth! Sobar, T'Heli, Kuvac, even T'Sel… my beloved youth! My pride and joy! They have turned against me! They have betrayed us! And far worst, James Kirk, they have betrayed themselves! Turning into something cold and heartless! Turning into something which is hateful and cruel! I do not recognize them any longer as Vulcans, James! I do not know what they are! All I know is that I have failed!"

They were thrown suddenly into another scene, one that took place at the corridor outside of the reactor chamber, there was a battle, where Vulcans were firing upon Vulcans, or falling dead and dying, where Sobar stood tall, his face frozen and hard, his phaser set on kill, aiming at Xon, and Captain Setal jumped in front of his son, even though he was the Captain, even though it should have been the other way around, even though it was against all logic.

A wave of mental pain was hurling its way like a tsunami, threatening to crush Jim underneath it, but then Spock took charge again and placed them back at his chosen scenery, the mayhem, the smells, lights and noises, all disappeared, all but the sound of weeping.

The Captain wept still and moaned like a lost child, and it sent chills down Jim's spine, he prayed to never hear this sound ever again, the sound of hope shattered and gone.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Jim patted the Captain's grey hair, stretching his body to do so, as the Captain was taller than him. "What can I do for you?" he asked the dying Vulcan "How can I help? Please, I'll do whatever you ask me to."

"Would you?" Setal broke the hug and took a few steps backwards, an apologetic expression on his old, worn out face. "Spock has already turned me down." He helplessly gestured at the stubborn hybrid.

"I merely said I had a better candidate, Sir." Spock corrected Setal politely.
"Better than the son of Sarek? Better than Spock of the other universe who had helped us build this ship? The one that recommended me above all others to become its Captain? "Setal wondered out loud.

"Indeed." Spock confirmed "Captain Kirk is the most natural leader, creative mind, original thinker and the best strategic planner that I have ever come across. You don’t have to take my word for it, Sir, you can investigate yourself."

Captain Setal turned to look at Jim again, and smiled "We have no time for an investigation; I'm afraid, I will take your word for it, son of Sarek. And you, James Tiberius Kirk, will you assume command of the Vokau?"

"Wait, what? What are you talking about?" Jim gasped. "You must be confused, sir, Sobar has already taken the ship, he is its Captain now."

"Acting Captain, Sobar assumed command of the Vokau by using his statues as third in command after killing the XO and mortally wounding me." Captain Setal explained. "He activated the emergency protocols, and then he used his authority as temporary Captain to lock all of us out of the system. With that done, he thinks he had eradicated any chance of us taking back the ship, but he is wrong, Captain Kirk, he is very much mistaken."

"What are you talking about?"

"When we first met, I have told you that the Vokau had unprecedented abilities. She had to have them, as a generation ship, she had to have unique fail-safe mechanisms, far more robust than the regular warships Sobar and Elder Svern are familiar with.

"Spock of the other side, had exclusively designed many of them and passed that knowledge only to me, not even the Elders are aware of all the Vokau's secrets, its hidden pathways, its melding stations, its in-depth programming.

"Only I, as her Captain, am aware of them all."

"The Elders are unaware? Really? Why?"

"By design, another safety measure suggested by elder Spock, to protect the ship from enemies who might try to use the Elders to take hold of it." The Captain explained "The Elders are public figures and therefore are obvious targets for enemies. Captured and tortured, the Elders might have been forced to give up control of the Vokau to an enemy, we could not have that, as I have already told you, this is an extraordinary ship, and having it fall into the wrong hands is an unacceptable scenario."

"But we're dealing with enemies from within." Jim grimaced "Elder Svern has orchestrated this, right? I don’t see how Commander Sobar could come up with this uprising without his father's help, gaudiness and blessing."

"I do not know how much Elder Svern is involved in this coup." Captain Setal admitted with sadness "I wish I could provide you with a clear answer, but I cannot. I have failed! My young officers have betrayed me and I knew nothing of it until it was too late! I will not dare offering speculations after such a colossal failure, and if I were you, I would not take any advice from me."

"But that is an advice…" Jim smiled at the contradiction.

"You are a very bright Human." Captain Setal was very pleased to hear that remark.
"Fine, we'll give Elder Svern the benefit of the doubt, for now." Jim muttered, he wanted to know, he needed to know how much Svern was involved, but so far, that Elder had succeed in his efforts to remain within the margin of error, so very annoying of him.

"Elder Spock's ingenious and profound insight had manifested itself again to protect us from a mutiny scenario; whether he is involved or not, I am very pleased that Elder Svern is unaware of what we are about to do next."

"Which is?"

"Implementing one of those safety measures, which will allow me to regain my commanded and then reinstate you as my successor."

"Me?" Jim gulped "Is that what you two want me to do?" He glanced between Setal and Spock. "I am an outsider, not even a Vulcan! Why would anyone trust me with the Vokau's command?"

"They will." Spock answered. "Vulcan or not, all will recognize a natural leader."

"You are the natural leader, Spock! The son of an Elder, a descendant of the pre-reformed royal family! The most Vulcan-Vulcan I have ever met!"

"A hybrid monster is what I am." Spock stopped Jim before he could praise him even further "And regardless, you are the creative one, the intuitive one, the master of improvisation. This is what we need at present, a none-believer in this 'no win scenario'."

"But how can I even help? Sobar has taken the bridge, we are all locked out of the system, physically locked inside this reactor chamber, barricaded, outnumbered…"

"I envy you, James." Spock interrupted him again, gently "for creating a possibility where others would just give up."

Jim stopped fighting and just breathed out, considering, wondering. Who exactly was the one to lose his mind? Him or the Vulcans?

"I am Psi null." He tried his last line of objection.

"It doesn't matter. The ship has the capability to study and recognize your karta, it would be able to calibrate the melding station and read your thoughts, and do not forget that we have also installed a vocal commanding system in the ship, for the none-vulcans to use, just before the ritual." Captain Setal explained.

"Oh, shit." Jim mumbled, he had nothing more to add.

"Will you take command of the Vokau?" Captain Setal pleaded now "The Vulcan Elders are here, the future leaders and our best successors are here, our children are here. This is the beating heart of Vulcan; would you please take it and lead it home?"

"There's not much time." Spock added with a whisper.

Jim looked between them, back and forth, trying his best not to succumb to panic, he felt dizzy and his heart raced, but he could also feel the adrenalin racing in his veins, the alluring call of the challenge.

"I will, sir." He breathed out again, staring at Captain Setal. "I will."
"Thank you so much, Captain." Setal beamed at him "Vulcan owes you a great deal once more. Now, Spock, help me wake up and let's do this properly."

"Yes, sir." Spock nodded.

"Do what?" Jim inquired.

"Activate the Captain's code." Setal explained "Designed to be used in case of mutiny, no one knows it even exists. There's a secret melding station hiding inside the reactor chamber, leading directly to the ship's AI core, known to me alone, we will go there and I will install you as the new Captain of the Vokau."

"I will block your pain, Sir." Spock said to Setal "But I could only do it for a few minutes."

"Minutes are all I need." Captain Setal assured Spock. "Let's go."

"Wait, just a second." Jim hurried to say. "Does Xon know about the mutiny code? He knows you are about to hand the captaincy over, but does he know how?"

"No, my son is still young and vulnerable; I am so relieved that I do not have to burden him with this responsibility. He knows I wish for you to assume command but assumes it would only be a symbolic act, he does not know I can reinstall you into the system."

"Good to know, sir, because with all due respect, this could be a major weak point. We must ask him to leave before we continue, agreed?"

"I see now why Spock insisted it had to be you." Captain Setal answered with awe "I am in agreement."

And within a sharp, cruel second, Jim was thrown out of the lovely, serene mindscape and back into the red illuminated, hot as hell, awful smelling reactor room.

He heard someone screaming, he turned to look, and it was Spock.

Spock took all the pain away from Captain Setal, all the while shielding Jim from it, but he was unable to protect himself for a moment, and then he adjusted his shielded again and calmed down. "Xon, son of Setal, I am sorry but you have to leave now." He said, gritting his teeth.

"But father…"

"Xon, we have no time. I promise you'll get to say goodbye." Jim said more harshly than he wanted to. "Those are Captain Setal's orders."

Xon nodded and wiped the tears off his eyes; he stood up, took one last glance of his father, bowed and took his leave.

They waited until Xon was out of view, and Jim wished that boy would walk a bit faster, or even run, but he took his sweet time along with some precious moments that they did not have.

"We are in the clear now, sir." Jim whispered to the Captain, as they were left alone.
"Take me to the left." Setal said his voice only a whiff above a whisper. "Three feet further, yes, here, stop here."

Spock carried the dying Captain effortlessly, as an adult would carry a sleeping infant back to its crib, and still, pain was written all over Captain Setal's face, which made Jim wonder, how much of it Spock has managed to take on himself.

//Behind this red pipe, there's this maintenance panel.// Setal instructed within his mind, too weak to talk.//Be careful, there's no ladder.//

Jim could not help noticing that the Captain had switched to telepathic communications, and with that he realized that they were still melded, and were probably having a top secret conversation, because Spock's powerful telepathy would block anyone else from listing in, including Elder Sarek.

Spock carried the wounded Captain up and over the pipe, Jim followed, and they all found themselves in a very dark nook, hidden from view. The huge metal pipe took a very illogical W turn there to create this hidden niche between itself and a bulkhead, and there was no logical reason for anyone to find themselves there, unless they knew exactly what they were looking for.

//Is that the panel?// Spock asked, a bit of suspicion crept into his voice.

It looked like a small, insignificant panel, for monitoring plasma pressure and temperature in that pipe, looked like one of thousand, and was giving a faint orange light, the only source of light in that dark tight space.

//This is the one.// The Captain confirmed //Remove the lid.//

Spock and Jim both hoped that the Captain was not hallucinating this, making it all up in his desperate dying brain.

Spock opened the plastic covering; bending it a little, unable to be delicate, not with the amount of pain he was dealing with, or the load of the meld he was maintaining.

Underneath the fake panel, there was indeed a touch pad, and Jim helped Captain Setal place his hand on it. As Captain Setal touched it, a hidden door in the bulkhead above his head opened and a spider like metal instrument showed itself out and reached its delicate legs to settle on the Captain's Psi points. It reminded Jim of the same tool he saw at Commander Sebak's office.

//There are only four stations of this kind onboard.// Explained Spock. //They connect the user with the core of the ship's AI.//

//And this station is only known to the Captain.// Setal added.

//A mind meld, with the Vokau.// Jim could not hide his awe, so cool.

//This superficial description would suffice for now.// Spock was willing to compromise.

Captain Setal went quiet for a while, even in his head, as the ship's mind verified his identity and studied his recent memories. Then it gave out a sort of a hum in their joint meld, recognizing the state of emergency with all its gravity, and granting Captain Setal permission to proceed.

Jim could feel it too, the mind of the ship, through his connection with Spock, the artificial mind had a very distinct feel to it, cold, calm somewhat Vulcan, but also alien, he wished he had more time to give it more though, as the Vodka's Captain spoke again.
A familiar, yet very faint, male voice welcomed the order. //Greetings, Captain Setal, mutiny code activated, awaiting orders //

Jim heard that voice in his mind two times over, probably picking it both from Spock and Captain Setal.

//Computer, install Captain James T. Kirk, Psi null, human, as the new Captain of the Vokau, Katra recognition will be provided.// The Captain said with the last of his strength.

//Your turn now.// Spock said, fighting through pain. //Speak up, make yourself known.//

Jim breathed deeply, and gathered his courage, took him a few seconds to collect himself and make a sound. "Hey, I am James T. Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise, nice to meet you, again." he said out loud, as clear as possible.

The metallic hand let go of Captain Setal and reached out for him. Jim hardly could contain his fright, as the device settled on the top of his head, sending its cold metal fingers to his psi points. And when the instrument was fully attached and operational, Jim felt like millions of light bolts ignited inside his brain.

He did not understand it all, but he felt the ship as if it was a living being, could see all its data pathways, flowing like golden rivers and lakes inside his mind, every microcontroller, every memory storage unit, every bit flying in and out of every station. He could feel the pulse of information running through him, too much to handle, but exciting none the less. He could also feel, that as the ship was introducing itself to him, it was also studding him with the same vigor, learning his every neuron pathway and mapping his entire brain structure.

It all lasted for the eternity of a few seconds, and then the ship hummed its approval again.  
//Welcome, James T. Kirk.// The AI purred in his mind //Captain of the Vokau.//

Jim could not hide his cocky smile of conquest.

Who was an unidentified user now?

//The Vokau is awaiting your orders.// the AI's male voice continued.

Jim's smile had widen even further, so much so his mouth began to hurt, and he knew exactly what his first order would be, for his and Spock's sake.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me a kind comment as you leave, would not hurt you much, I think.

thank you so very much, have a nice day!
Hello to you dear readers.

Sometime ago I told you I was unsure of the last act, and I still am, this will not change, I'm afraid. I also got this vibe that some of you lost interest in this story and it is totally understandable, it is a very convoluted one and the plot rarely revolves around Spock's and Jim's romantic relationship.

Even though I tagged it at the beginning (long story, diplomatic mission, plot based …), I still feel like I owe you an apology, or at least an explanation, if you feel like you have been misled.

You see, I wrote this story to fill my need to see AOS Spock and Kirk work together as a team, both intellectually and physically, and that dynamic fascinated me as much as the romantic dynamic.

I found very few stories that focused on that aspect of their relationship and it was almost always a sub-plot and not developed enough for my liking. (If you have recommendations I'll be happy to receive them, btw) So I had to write one to fulfill my need.

So I am sorry if the romantic elements will continue to stay on the back burner for the next few chapters, but I do promise to get back to them with full force at the end of this story (the last three chapters, for sure.) and I hope you'd still be with me when we get there.

I also feel like I'm shoving this story down your throat too fast, but I really, really, really want to be done with it, get free from it, it has been five years already that this story hunts my days and nights.

There it is, my venting is done, lol,

If you feel like cuddling this insecure author, I'd be more than happy to get your comments and reviews. If you want to scold me for misleading you and criticize my crazy/boring/disappointing choices it's also fine (just please be gentle), if you want to ignore me, stop reading, whatever, everything you want to do is fine.

I just want to finish this story!
My best regards to all, stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Character death (not our babies), convoluted plot, all business, no pleasure (sorry…?)
The initial adrenalin rush and the exhilarating sense of conquest lasted only for a few moments, leaving him high and dry without a warning, to fall back down to the harsh, dirty floor of reality.

James T. Kirk, Captain of the Vokau...

Few simple words and the weight of them almost crushed Jim into the ground. He leaned against the pipe, struggling to breath, to slow down his racing thoughts. The Elders, the children, the future leaders of the Vulcan people, their one of a kind generation ship, all depended on him now, to get them safely back home. So much stuff to learn, numerous decisions to make, endless things to do, and seemed like the odds against them were staggering, he could hardly think of anything that would help them get out of this prison and take back the ship.

The metallic spider that had already freed him of its hold, retraced into its storage box inside the bulkhead and the door closed again disappearing into the background, as if nothing ever happened.

//Are you alright, James?// Spock asked, as captain Setal fell into his arms, and he rearrange his position to fully carry him again, like a sleepy child. //You are bleeding, your nose.//

Jim sent his hand up to investigate, and yes, blood was running down his nose. //It's nothing, too many mind melds.//

//Or it's that untested drug.// Spock sounded angry, because it was stupid to lie about it. //I took you off the meld; a dying mind is not a pleasant place to be in. Clean up and insert new captain's codes, I will take Captain Setal back to his son in the meanwhile.//

//Yeah, great Idea. And Spock…//

//Yes?//

//No one gets to know I have access to the mainframe, not even Elder Sarek. This melding station must remain a secret. Can you do that for me?//

//Of course.// Spock answered and lifted up Captain Setal, climbed over the huge tube with the dying Vulcan in his arms and he was gone. Spock left behind his side bag, and Jim took out the small towel he packed there and used it to stop the bleeding and clean up his face and shirt.

When he was done inserting new passwords, he climbed out of that nook himself, and his eyes scanned the reddish darkness for a few moments, before finding his direction and walking back to find Spock and Xon kneeling on the floor. The Captain's broken body was propped up against Xon's chest. Spock was kneeling besides them, his fingers touched both Xon and Captain Setal meld points, and the young man could not stop shivering and sobbing.

It didn't take an extensive knowledge of the Vulcan culture to realize this was an extremely private and difficult moment that Jim was reluctantly witnessing. It took then a while, so Jim gave the Vulcans the breathing space that they needed, he stayed respectfully away, averting his gaze, and waited in silence for a hint from Spock, signing that he was allowed to join them.

After a while longer, he could feel through the bond as Spock shed some tears and softly whispered. "Travel with the light, Captain Setal." He ended the meld, and then turned to the sobbing youth at his side ""I grieve with thee." He whispered and then rose to his feet, leaving Xon to join his Captain.

They stood there for a moment, just next to each other, and then Spock broke the silence first. //My third.// he sent a gasp through their bond. //Three Captains I have escorted to the edge.//
Spock sent his eyes to glare at the human with a sense of puzzlement, and whispered with a sound of surprise. "You."

"Oh, yeah, right..." Jim averted his gaze and chuckled softly "Forgot about it already. I mean, not about you staying besides me, will never forget that, but dying, already forgotten about dying."

Yup, that famous Kirk denial mechanism had struck again.

"I should go to him.// Spock glanced at Xon, still holding on to his father's body. //We are wasting time."

Xon cried still, and Jim let Spock go and approach the boy. "Let me assist." Spock said respectfully and took the body of the captain in his arms again.

Both Spock and Xon looked at Jim, awaiting his word, a reminder that he was now the Vokau's captain.

"Let's go back to the main hall, gather the crew, and tell them that as the highest ranking officer, I request permission to say a few words."

"Let me do that, Jim.// Spock suggested //I'll gather them and call you when they are ready, take this moment to clear your mind and prepare your speech."

"Yeah, good idea.// Jim nodded, and let Xon and Spock leave, taking the deceased Captain with them.

A few minutes later Spock summoned him through the bond.

The remaining Vokau crew members awaited him in a square formation, surrounding the dead body of Captain Setal, which was covered in the same simple, blood soaked sheet from before. He counted twenty three people, not including himself, Vedik, Dayton and Spock.

Only fifteen crew members seemed fit and trained enough to fight, the rest seemed too old or too wounded. Two young officers looked out of place; they were wearing another set of uniforms, colored purple and brown instead of the Vokau's silver and gold, he'll have to investigate this, one of the million and seventy things he'll have to do.

But this first.

"Members of the Vokau, all attendees, attention!" he said as he stepped in line, in front of the crew and before the dead body. "Eyes on Captain Setal!"

All the gathered stood in attention; and Jim raised his hand and saluted, for a long moment, he did not let his eyes off the bodily remains of his predecessor.

All Vulcans presented more or less an aloof façade, but desperation hovered like a dark cloud above their heads, only Xon allowed himself to actually cry, but even he was calmer now and more in control of his emotions.
"Thank you." Jim said after the moment was gone. "At ease, eyes on me." He commanded and lifted up his gaze to meet the eyes of this collection of strangers. "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the starship Enterprise, you probably know me as the leader of the 'Remain' team. As you can see, I am a human, and I have served Starfleet as the Captain of the Enterprise for the past five and a half years.

"I stand before you in this horrible day, the day your captain had died, and with it, the heart of the Vokau had been broken. I know that you are at lost; stranded here in this reactor room turned a prison, after one of your highly esteemed officers, one that Captain Setal considers as a son, did the unthinkable and betrayed you, killed the Captain and placed everyone on board including the Elders in great peril.

"I know that you suffer from shock, from confusion, dismay and disbelieve, I know that you struggle with emotions of grief and despair, you may feel helpless and lost, but most of all, I know that you are very determinant to take the Vokau and its precious cargo safely back home.

"I too, am committed to that objective, and will give my life to see the Vokau, the Elders, the children, the future leaders of the Vulcan people and each and every one of you, brought back home to safety, to New Vulcan, where we could get the help of New Vulcan's patrol fleet, and even the UFP aid to gain back control of the situation and resolve it with calm, reason and with no more bloodshed.

"So I stand here before you, offering my expertise, my experience, my life and Katra for that cause, and I ask you to trust and assist me. I wish to temporarily take Captain's Setal's position and lead you home. However, if there is anyone here who has reason to believe that they have a better chance at achieving this objective, let them come forward now. I will step down if convinced that there is a better alternative, it is only logical. Is there anyone among you who wished to take this place?"

Kirk took a deep breath and waited in silence, he honestly didn't mind if someone else steps in, this was not a matter of ego, but a matter of getting the job done, he was the alien here, an outsider, and he'd only help in any way they'll allow him to help.

The crowd was also still for a moment, some glances were thrown into Spock's direction, but Spock only stood upright, calm and assured of his choice.

"Live long and prosper, James Kirk, Captain of the Vokau" Commander T'Elel suddenly said, breaking this silence, forming the Ta'al, and the rest of them followed suit.

"Live long and prosper, Captain Kirk." Some more attendees said after the commander, among them, Vedik was the loudest.

Jim fought the emotions that threatened to overcome him; he pushed back stupid tears and nodded. "Thank you for your vote of confidence, Peace and long life." He answered, trying to control his trembling voice.

"Now for my orders-

"First, I wish to keep this exchange of command as a secret for as long as possible. So I ask you, if you talk to Commander Sobar or his collaborators, do not let them know that the Captain is dead, do not let them know that I have replaced him. Do not let anyone outside this room know about this, by any mean, telepathic or otherwise. As far as they're concerned, I only took refuge here as the rest of you, and the Captain still lives."
"Second, this is Spock, son of Sarek, most of you already know him."

He turned to look at the tallest Vulcan in the room, who stood next to Xon, nearby the body of the late Captain. All eyes were now turned to him.

"Spock served with me upon the Enterprise as my XO, and will continue to do so here. So please mind that and help him in any way needed.

"And last, I will take the time now for updates and probably would use the next few hours to summon you, one by one or in groups to talk. I wish to get to know you, your skills and abilities, to get familiarized with the situation, and start forming a plan to reach our objective. I am human, and there are so many mind melds I can stand a day, so please, try and help me by answering my questions as clearly and simply as possible. Thank you.

"When I have a plan to get us out of this situation, you will know. Spock come with me please, the others are dismissed."

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//Is there anywhere we could talk or should we just find a comfy place on the floor?// he asked Spock as they walked away from the crowd.

//There's a staff room this way.// Spock answered and led them to the other side of the pool, where there was an inner room with bulkhead as walls and one door for entry and exit.

The room was dimly lit, with orange ceiling lamps, and there was also a small flickering green light next to the exit. There was a data station inside, touch pads, a vidcom screen, and a table with six seats.

//Would it suit your needs?// Spock asked as he closed the manually operated door behind them.

//If we could have Rand bring in a pot of coffee it would be perfect.// Jim fondly recalled his sweet Yeoman and hoped that she was doing ok. "Let's switch to talk, my head is killing me."

"As you wish." Spock agreed and took a seat on one of the chairs.

Jim slumped on another, allowing himself to show weakness, something he'd only do in front of Spock. "What a mess." He breathed out. "A total fucking mess."

"I concur." Spock agreed again, watching Jim intensely, assessing his mental and physical health probably, but his face remained severe and unmoving.

"I feel like such a fake." Jim confessed "Here I am, a liar and a thief that was busy all this time stealing Vulcan technology and now I am handed the captaincy of their flagship? Just like that?"

"Seems like captaincy falls into your lap wherever you go." Spock let his lip turn upwards in a minuscule, minute way.

"Your fault actually! On both times! And it should have been you! A Vulcan! "Jim frowned at him.

"For what it is worth, I do believe we made the right choice, entrusting you with the Vokau's fate. Do not think yourself as a fraud, Jim, no one here is better qualified, and as a human, you have
certain advantages no Vulcan here possess. As for the theft, I was involve as well, so I am in no better position, and you were given no other choice by Section 31. For the time being, I suggest we let go of all that we cannot change and focus on the things that we can."

"Right as always, Spock, thank you."

"So, what do we do?" Spock asked, gently getting back to topic.

"There is something fundamentally strange here, Spock, we have to define it and decide what to do about it."

"You are referring to the situation with Elder Svern."

"I do." Jim confirmed. "What a mastermind that Vulcan is, really! I adore him and loath him at the same time. How come we haven't figured him out just yet? We have to figure him out, because he might be playing us big time, leading us into a trap and we haven't even notice yet!"

"It is one of two things." Spock agreed. "Svern either works with his son Sobar and had helped him throughout this takeover, or he is aware of his son's actions and disapproves, he cannot do both at the same time."

"If Svern is helping Sobar, he cannot rely on the council's support any longer. He cannot order his son to run around killing the Vokau's Captain and crew members and still have the Elders' cooperation in his efforts to present new evidence, and change their votes." Kirk continued their shared line of thought.

"If Sobar acted against Elder Svern's will, it was an illogical thing to do. He only made it more difficult for Elder Svern to convince the council to change their minds, not to mention that in his action he had placed Svern in grave danger as part of the council, that might be hostages right now, or at best, under a blockade."

"You don’t wake up one day and start a mutiny." Jim breathed out "You have to find the right people, cultivate them, motivate them, make plans… I'm sorry but Sobar doesn't strike me as the person that has enough cunning or sophistication to do that alone."

"I agree, and yet, just because Elder Svern might have laid the groundwork, does not mean he intended on activating that option in this specific place and time, or ever."

"You say Sobar might have jumped the gun."

"Is that so important to understand this now, Jim? We have insufficient data, and there are pressing matters at hand."

Jim stretched in his chair, arms up to the ceiling, legs sliding on the floor, and then he slumped back down and plastered his head to the table. "I fucked it up, Spock; they flew right under my radar, Sobar and Svern. I should have paid more attention; I should have studied them more carefully, and maybe, just maybe, this whole clusterfuck could have been avoided."

"You were preoccupied, and without authority." Spock reminded him.

"Bullshit, there's always something one can do."

"Kaiidth." Spock answered simply.

"Did I ever mention that I hate this word?" Jim raised his head from the table. "You melded with
Commander T'Elel and Captain Setal, tell me what you've learned."

"The mutiny came to Captain Setal as a surprise; there were little to no indications for this uprising in the days that preceded this event; however there was an odd occurrence between the Captain and Elder Svern four days ago.

"Elder Svern was one of the Elders that pushed to end the ritual as fast as possible, probably because he was assured of his Victory and saw the 'Plack If Fee' as only a formality. However, after the closing speech; he had approached Captain Setal and ordered him not to activate the reactor and cease all preparations towards folding.

"Captain Setal consulted the head of the council, Elder T'Pau, and she commanded Setal to proceed preparing the Vokau for departure. Captain Setal obeyed Elder T'Pau's instructions, and two days later, as he was preparing for his nightly meditation, he got a report from the Gama shift crewmen that Sobar has taken over the bridge unexpectedly, and not long after, he and the rest of the senior staff were locked out of the system."

Jim took a few moments to reflect before he spoke again, he had troubles wrapping his mind around all this information, and this was only the start of it.

"I don’t understand." He admitted after a while. "I don't get Elder Svern's game, what is he up to? Even if he is not part of this coup, what does he think he can achieve by stalling the vote? By remaining here? And why would he go directly to Captain Setal and not go though the council to delay the departure? Is he playing it both ways? Is he hiding his involvement in the Coup from the elders, pretending to be a good old council member?"

"I do not think so." Spock said. "As I stated, Elder Svern cannot have it both ways, Vulcans do not lie, and furthermore, Elder T'Pau is no fool, she is the best mind-melder in our nation, Elder Svern's manipulation would be exposed as soon as she commands it."

Well, it was worth a try.

What a mess.

And what a headache, only a phaser set on kill can take care of it, at this point .

"I don’t like it. I don't like the fact that we don’t know what is going on with the council of elders. For all we know, Elder Svern have already won them over in the past few hours we've spent running around here, and now a 'Leave' decision was voted in, making us the illegal mutineers.

"Caption Setal might have read the situation the wrong way, Sobar might have been unable to explain himself properly, no one actually threaten the children, and this whole catastrophe is just one gigantic misunderstanding…

"Fuck, I don’t want us to make that stupid mistake, like taking the wrong side of this conflict, I think we're on the right side, but I am not a Vulcan, Spock, I have no knowledge of Vulcan politics, I'm flying blind here, you gotta help me."

"You're not taking sides in this conflict; we will not resolve it anytime soon, not here, anyway. Our only aim is to get the Vokau back to New Vulcan, where there will be other players that will help dissolve the situation, like the New Vulcan Patrol Fleet, the Planetary committee, and if forced to, even the UFP embassy, do not concern yourself with picking up sides now, the task ahead of us is improbable enough."

"Spock, you must make contact with Elder Sarek, as soon as possible, we must understand what is
going on with the council."

"I am trying all the time, Jim, Elder Sarek still blocks me."

"What? Why? You're the stronger telepath, try harder!"

"If I am to 'Try harder' as you call it, this will become a breach of privacy, a breach of trust, an aggressor's act, and it is not done, sir, not with a blood bond, not with an Elder."

"I have to talk with them, Svern and Sobar." Jim murmured at the end of this explanation, after some time of consideration, and then he straightens up in his seat. "I need to know what they are trying to accomplish here. What is their play? Their endgame? What is their logic? Are they a lost cause? Is there room for negotiation?"

"Their logic is simple, don’t you think? They want the Vulcans out of the Federation. They are willing to take any measure necessary to achieve that objective, working together or apart, it does not matter."

"Yeah, Spock…. But no." Jim shook his head and sighed "I feel that there's more to it, that we're not getting the whole story yet….and I will have to talk to them, to get their vibe, before I can decide on what to do next."

"When I melded with her, Commander T'Elel reported to me that Sobar stated his intent to hail the reactor room at 17:00, and now he is 43.7 minutes late. She assumed he'd be searching for the children to obtain more leverage before making contact again."

"Using children as leverage? If she's right, this is so cold, Spock, this is not Vulcan."

"It is Vulcan, sir, pre-reformed Vulcan." Spock corrected him.

Jim got the chills all over, not knowing if it was because of Spock's words, his calm voice while saying that or the state of his own health. "Ok, enough background, let's do time table and statues, now, she gave them to you, right?"

"Would you not prefer first hand information, sir?"

"You melded with the Commander and with the Captain, and you speak human better than the rest of them, so please save me the time, and trouble, Spock. Time table and statues, please."

Spock nodded and began. "Time table report-

"10:00 yesterday – the Elders assemble at the temple of the mind to vote.

"28:00 yesterday- the Elders approach the decision to remain, at 29:00, Elder Svern holds back the final vote and requests further discussion, his request is granted.

"29:30 officers from the Ipik dock at shuttle bay and run towards the Captain's quarters to inform him that Ipik was taken over by mutiny. Captain Setal informs senior staff and gather his men."

"Wait, wait…" Jim interrupted the report, almost wailing with frustration. "What? There's a mutiny upon the Ipik as well?"

"Indeed, led by Elder Svern older son, Somak, the XO of the Ipik base."

"Wow, such sons Elder Svern has… well at least the brothers are working together for sure. Go on…"
Spock nodded and resumed his report.

"30:00 Sobar apprehends the bridge from the gamma staff, alongside Kuvac Symer and T'Heli.

"30:30 Captain Setal and the senior staff find out that they are locked out of the system and make a run for the reactor chamber, Commander Sobar conducts a pursuit, there are wounded and dead, but the senior staff manages to secure the reactor room and switch it to an off line state, under a blockade.

"36:00 The dynamic alarm is activated by Sobar and his crew.

36:30 fights break out ship wide, between forces loyal to Captain Setal and those who stood with Commander Sobar, some indications show that those battles involved guests and witnesses of the 'Plak If Fee', to unknown extent.

"08:00 Key positions all across the ship are taken by Sobar and his men, including the Temple of the mind where the Elders are assembled, and Lieutenant Symer was sent to fetch us.

"End of time table report.

"Status report- all information is vulnerable to inaccuracy:

"Sobar has those positions taken-
"Deck 1-2, full control.
"Deck 3-6 – control via bridge, no physical presence
"Deck 7- control of every access to the 'Temple of the mind', the situation inside the temple, however is still unclear.
"Deck 8- control over docking bay
"Deck 9- presence only.
"Deck 10- control via bridge, no physical presence
"Deck 11-19- presence only
"Deck 20- control via bridge, no physical presence
"Dock 21- no control
"Dock 22- a blockade on main reactor room.
"Dock 23- no information.
"Deck 24-30 - control via bridge, no physical presence.

"End of statues report."

Jim let a few moments pass digesting all that information, and none of this was good, things looked grim and dire, he wondered if there was even anything he could possibly do.

"They are spread thin." He commented a moment later, trying to find the bright side. "Do we know who many stand with Sobar?"
"I can only provide Captain Setal's assessment, a number between 45 to 70 people out of 150 staff members upon the Vokau."

"I counted 23 alive in here, two of which are Ipik officers, right?"

"Correct, and ten bodies are also in here including Captain Setal and Commander Sabek."

"12 dead, including the maintenance crewmen we saw on deck 9." Jim added. "Which leaves us at worst case scenario with 47 crewmen unaccounted for, not to mention the 308 guests of the ritual, 21 Elders and 29 of their aids."

"9 aids, the rest are part of the Elders' guard." Spock corrected him.

"And 32 children and their 4 teachers, of whom 10 children are presumed captives." Jim finished his survey. "Am I forgetting something?"

"I believe your calculation is valid, sir, within the realm of the known."

What a fucking grandiose mess.

"Thank you, Spock; next goal is to identify our clocks. Please bring in- T'Elel, Supak, and the Ipik officers, but give me 20 before you get in, I want to reinstate key players back into the system, and I don't want anyone to see me doing it."

"Captain." Spock protested "With all due respect, before we call in the staff, I think we should take Elder Svern, Commander Sobar and the rest of his known collaborators off the grid, just like they did us, as a safety measure. This will cripple them, slow them down and supply us with a great advantage as we prepare to take back the ship, it is the logical thing to do."

"No, it is not." Jim answered softly.

"Sir?"

"We are at risk of jumping the gun. What you suggested might only make things worse. First, we don't know who's with whom and we might harm our own or miss some of them. It will only alarm Sobar, and maybe also Svern, and turn them more dangerous and desperate, they might even start executing hostages if they have them, some Elders or the children, and it might be a bloody massacre.

"If we kick anyone off the system, it would only be after we get the big picture. Our first goal is to understand what the fuck is going on, our second goal is get the hell out of here, and we will have to do it without the help of the melding station, so it would remain a secret, our third goal is assuming control of key positions on the ship, such as the bridge with minimum use of the system, hoping it would get unnoticed, getting the mutineers out of the system is out fourth goal, if not the fifth."

Spock set in silence and contemplated Jim's explanation for a while and then he slowly nodded "You claimed I was a better option to take command here, and you were wrong. I will fetch the officers you've summoned."

"Yes, just make it slow; give me half an hour to reinstate some of our crew, and a I need a heads up, so no one will see me do it."

"Understood." Spock nodded again and got up.
"No hard feeling, huh?" Jim called after him and smiled.

"That would be illogical." Spock answered at the door.

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Jim was half way through, after reinstating Spock, Elder Sarek, Sulu, Dayton, Vedik, and T'Elel when Sharel's comm chimed. He finished reinstating Soren and then snatched his comm from his belt to look at it, placing it on the table. He let the comm chime a bit longer before he had the courage to pick it up and answer it. "Kirk here."

"Fuck you, I thought you were dead!" Sulu barked at him.

"Sorry, Hikaru." He had to smile at that. "But that's a good sign, if you're raising your voice."

"A good sign?" Sulu mocked the assumption. "how?"

"First, you're not dead." Jim answered "Second- you have enough strength despite your injuries, third- you're not under immediate threat at the moment, or you'd be whispering."

"Oh, my, Jim…" Sulu sighed "I hate it when you're smart."

"So, sup?"

"Bad news first? Or the good ones?"

Jim took a deep breath. "Hit me."

"Carol's dead."

Oh, fuck, it hurt like a motherfucker, Jim had to slam his fist into the table and bite his lips so he would not scream. He then took another breath. "What happened?"

"Commander T'Elel was right." Sulu explained "They were waiting for the kids. We met resistance at Deck 16, Carol volunteered to create a distraction. She said that she was the best fit for the job and would not even wait to finish arguing with me.

"She lunched herself forwards, drawing the fire to herself, and giving us enough time to escape. We lost contact with her for a while, and we prayed she had got to safety, but this was not the case.

"She was a hero, and she gave them hell, bought us enough time to get the children out. I'll let you talk to Nyota in a moment; she was the last one in contact with Carol. Anyway, we shook them off and took position in our designated area."

"So, no one followed?"

"None that I know of, sir, not for the moment, we are safe. Listen, Jim, this is the last time we're gonna use the comm. Nyota says it is a matter of hours before they turn them into surveillance devices. I only called you so you'd know and make sure you ditch the comm as well. I didn't want you to get worried when we stop answering."

"Thank you, Sulu, much appreciated." Jim sniffled "Hey, did you get to tell Dayton?"
"No, I think it's your job."

"Yeah, yeah, you’re absolutely right. Can I talk to Nyota now, please?"

"Sure, a second." There was some static noise, and while there was silence, Jim leaned into a bulkhead and wept in silence.

"Uhura here." Came the lovely voice, and it was calm but sad.

"Hey, you." Jim sniffled and smiled at the empty room.

"Did Sulu update you about... everything?"

"He did. What happened?" He could hear Nyota sigh, breathing into her comm, she needed time to organize her thoughts or take control of her emotions.

"We got a bit lost on deck 16, and were under attack. We needed someone to create a distraction and let the others get away. Sulu wanted to do that, and so two of the teachers, but Carol said that Sulu was too valuable because he's a pilot, and that she had better aim than the rest of us, which was probably true, and that the kids could not take the blow of a dead teacher. She didn't give us time to argue, just fired her phaser and started running, never looking back. She was a hero, Sir, a true hero."

He wiped the tears away while listening to her, there would be a time, he hoped, when he could really mourn the loss of that beautiful, brilliant, brave woman, but now was not it.

"Did you confirm death? Did you see her fall?" Jim knew he was grasping at straws, but could not help himself.

"We didn’t see her fall, sir, but it was confirmed audibly, I heard her going down." There was sadness in Uhura's calm voice, but she had perfect control over herself, could have made a fine Vulcan.

"Must have been horrible." Jim answered with sympathy. "I'm so sorry you had to go thought such a thing."

"But I'm glad I got to be with her to the end. She sent her love, to us, to Dayton, I sent her our love as well, and there was nothing else to do."

"I'll tell you the truth, Uhura, I am not going to lose hope just yet, Carol is MIA, not dead as far as I am concerned, without a visual confirmation, I refuse to give it up."

"But there's nothing we can do to get that confirmation, sir, not without risking..." Nyota sounded hurt, and it was not a good idea to prolong her suffering.

"I understand." Jim cut her out, and ran a hand through his hair. "Carol is MIA, Nyota, and that's my final decision. I will deal with this later, see what can be done about it; it's on me, don’t worry, I am not going to ask any of you to return to the scene. Now, you recommend getting rid of the comms?"

Nyota breathed, taking a moment to recover and then she continued. "Yes, sir, they are scanning for us like mad; there's nothing I can do. We are going to throw the comms into the shaft near the main lift; I suggest you all do the same."

"I don't want you to go under just yet, too risky, may I suggest an alternative?"
"If you got any, I'd love to hear it, sir." Nyota almost helplessly chuckled now.

"How about keeping my comm? It is Captain's Grade and far more secured than the rest, could be of use for a while longer, no?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Now, how about keeping the comms active and attach them to a moving target, let it loose on the ship? Maybe in the mess room, where it got food? Would send the Vulcans on a wild goose chase, buy you some more time."

"You're crazy, sir." Uhura giggled "But yes, it might work, but what kind of animal?"

"A sehlat?"

"My goodness, Jim, I'll have to ask the Vulcan teachers if this can be done."

"Try that, Lt. Commander, I'd hate us to lose touch."

"I'll update you, one beep for Go, two for No-go."

"Agreed, but this will work, trust me. Keep the children and yourselves safe."

"We'll do." She breathed. "How about you guys? Holding on?"

"Sure, no worries, I'll get us out of this mess in no time."

"I sure hope so, sir, Uhura out."

Chapter End Notes

Toss a coin to your witcher?
Ticking Clocks

Chapter Notes

First-

I want to thank each and every one of you who had commented on the chapter before, and did their best to cheer me up. I am sorry for my meltdown, and I really needed your kind and heartfelt words.

Thank you so much! you have no idea how much you have helped me regain my confidence and my faith in this story! You were absolutely wonderful!

Second-

the chapter at hand is very boring, but it is also very much needed in order to move the plot forward, it is the kind of chapters even I as a writer would prefer to skip, but I have no such luxury, lol.

I hope you'd at least find Jim's thinking process interesting, and find the way the Vulcans reacted to it as amusing at times.

So here it is, enjoy your read, I promise that there are more engaging chapters ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Too much information.

As Uhura disconnected, Spock sent a warning through their bond and a minute later, he knocked on the door, giving him the promised head's up, just enough time to turn the data station off.

"Sir, the officers you have requested are here." Spock announced. "Can we get in?"

//Sorry to break it to you this way, but Sulu just commed me, Carol is MIA, don’t tell Dayton.// Jim had no idea how to ease Spock into this horrible reality, so he just spewed it out in hope that Spock's Vulcan nature would cope.

//Acknowledged.// was all Spock returned into his mind; and his calm demeanor helped Jim set aside his own turmoil and focus on the task ahead.

So he turned off the data station embedded in the table and lifted up his gaze. "Sure, get in, everyone, let's do this." He tried a smile, hoping that his charms will hide the fact that he was still disoriented and in overload.

"Commander T'Eelel, head of the folding department." Spock properly introduced the elder officer as she took a seat opposing to Jim. She was tall, skinny, with silvery long hair braided into a single
"Commander Supak, the infrastructure officer." The old officer introduced himself, seating next to the other commander. He was probably Scotty's equal in function, a small, dark skinned Vulcan, his hair was white and kept at the same bowl-cut style Spock had, although shorter, yet unlike Spock he had a rather impressive white mustache as well.

"Lieutenant Nelath." A young and pretty Vulcan female introduced herself, she was an Ipik officer according to her uniform "Ipik engineering unit, sixth in the chain of command. Honored to meet you, sir." She bowed her head; her hair was jet black and kept at shoulder's length. She turned to introduce the young male officer that came to seat beside her. "This is Setek, Ensign, security officer, my appointed bodyguard for this mission."

The young, strongly built and dark skinned Vulcan gave Jim a severe, unreadable gaze and said nothing.

"We also had a pilot." Nelath continued "but he was killed on our way to this chamber, he died taking a hit aimed at me."

Jim nodded and breathed, so many lives lost, and for what? For what aim? Was there any logic behind this eruption of violence?

"Commander Spock." was Spock's turn to introduce himself "The Captain's XO on both the Enterprise and the Vokau." he said briefly while walking towards his seat.

Way too many commanders for one small table, Jim noticed without saying.

Spock took his place next to Jim, and assumed his immaculate position of mute, polite engagement, seating straight in his chair, hands folded on the table, eyes boring into however was speaking, and now was Kirk's turn.

"I am Captain James Kirk of the starship Enterprise." Kirk repeated his introduction from before. "Captain Setal has requested me to take temporary charge of the Vokau and guide it home. This is my sole objective, and my only mandate, however I can only achieve it by putting a stop to this mutiny. This is our goal here, to retake the ship and fly it to New Vulcan.

"I have assembled you so you could update me on the situation; we need to work out a plan to achieve our goal. I've already had Spock's report about how things have developed in the past few hours, and what is the current statue of each deck. What I need now is to learn what clocks we are running against, here and on the Ipik.

"After this, I would probably initiate contact with Sobar and Elder Svern to assess their state of mind, and their intentions, in hope that after that, I could devise a plan to dissolve this situation, negotiation, combat or anything in between is on the table, as long as we get back home with minimum casualties. So please, let's keep it short and simple. I am going to ask you questions, and I hope you have some answers for me."

Jeez, this was just like taking over someone else's chess board at mid game, and try to play it while blindfolded.

"Clocks?" T'Elel asked, she struggled to keep silent but finally gave in to her curiosity.

"Time frames, processes that work in the background to change current circumstances, say an ultimatums, or a ticking bombs and such." Jim tried to explain himself. "Now before we even begin, I need to verify this, are we safe? Are we contained? Or Can Sobar see and hear us using
surveillance equipment placed in this room."

"We are safe." Commander Supak assured him "The reactor is off-line, which also means every sensor installed here is now unconnected to the mainframe. Sobar cannot spy on us."

"Great! We can start now! So let's start with an easy question, what do we control here that Sobar wants?"

"We control the main reactor." T'Elel answered "The reactors are strategic assets on this ship, two of the few systems that are able to operate as a standalone unit, disconnected from the mainframe. This is one of the reasons the Captain, our late Captain, chose this room as our last standing post. The other reason is that this room is extremely fortified, designed to contain a reactor meltdown. It also has independent access to life support systems, which makes it ideal for a prolonged standoff."

"Why is it a standalone unit?" Jim asked.

"May I?" Commander Supak asked and was granted permission by both T'Elel and Jim. "It was designed as a standalone so it could be operated manually in cases of system failures such as the ship's computer going off line. The reactor must be operative under extreme circumstances such as a malfunctioning AI system, or a malicious attack through a compromised one."

"We have managed to disconnect the reactor from Sobar's control by switching it to manual." T'Elel continued. "Now, Commander Sobar cannot harness the energy produced by the reactor in order to operate the ship."

"But he has power." Jim argued.

"Yes, he uses the reserved power, stored within batteries or generated by local minor reactors that work on other forms of fuel."

"Speaking of which, when will we run out of fuel?"

"It is a very complicated question." Supak stated "I'd rather meld…"

"The Captain prefers no melds." Spock hurried to reject the idea "He is a psi-null being and melds put a lot of strain on a psi-null mind."

"If so, the answer is never, Sir." Supak struggled to keep his answer short. "The Vokau is a generation ship, capable of creating its own fuel by harvesting outside resources, and thus staying indefinitely in space."

"Can we harvest resources while controlling the reactor room alone?" Jim insisted.

Supak opened and closed his mouth.

"No." T'Elel answered before he did "Here we have reserves for two weeks only."

"Two weeks, that's our first clock." Jim concluded and wrote it down at the back of his mind. "You see? A simple answer is not that hard." Jim beamed at the chief engineer."Now, if Sobar doesn't gain back control of this reactor, what can he do to get more energy?"

"He could try and operate the secondary reactor, on deck 23, right below us." Said Supak "but it is highly unlikely he'll do so. It is very risky to operate both reactors at the same time without any mean of coordination; this might result with a double meltdown which has the potential to rip the ship apart."
"Well, I assume none of us wishes to blow up this place up just yet. Am I correct?"

"Affirmative." Commander T'Elel answered "Losing this ship in not an option, under any circumstances, including having it taken by Commander Sobar."

Jim agreed with a nod "So, on auxiliary power alone, how much time does he have until lights out?"

"If he manages his consumption wisely, I'd say a week, maybe ten days." Supak guessed.

"That's our second clock of ten days." Jim explained "As this clock ticks, Sobar would get desperate trying to gain control over this asset."

"I am sure he'd want that power before those ten days are over, without it, the ship has not enough energy to fold a path into our original universe." T'Elel stated. "I assume you are aware we are at a different universe, sir, Spock has informed me that you are."

"You are correct." Jim assured her. "So Sobar is at the wheel, and he's punching it, but the ship's in neutral and won't move."

"An almost accurate description." Spock stated, the rest of them did not understand the vintage car analog.

"I assume he will try to breach into here." Jim continued "I recognized three main doors, a secret pathway from deck 19 and a force field."

"Five days clock." T'Elel got the hang of it "He will have to drill in very carefully, or risk damage to crucial infrastructures that would either disable the ship, or cause its destruction. Breaching one of the plasma main pipes, for example, had the potential to tear the ship apart."

"And the Force field?"

"After establishing a secured pathway, Sobar will need a few more hours to divert and rerouting power feeds in order to get this Force field to shut down." Supak answered, keeping it short for once.

"Alright, five days to reach to us from the sides, but what about from above or below? Through the floor of deck 21 or the ceiling of deck 23?"

"Besides the fortification and the force filed, Deck 21 is a maze of reactors, pipes, storage tanks and other engineering equipment." Supak said "If you're not a senior Engineer or a well trained maintenance technician, chances are you will die or get severely wounded while trying to navigate the deck in order to reach us."

"And he has no senior engineers or technicians?"

"He has none." Supak confirmed "They were all loyal to Captain Setal and are either here, in hiding or dead."

"Fine, I'll risk that assumption, in hope Sobar is not busy torturing a crew member that holds that knowledge right now and…"

"Even if he gains that information this way, a theoretical knowledge is no substitute for walking that ground with your own two feet, sir." Supak stated with unhidden pride, and Jim could only hope his confidence was justified.
"So deck 21 is a no-go for them, could we reach it, by the way?"

"Yes, sir, if needed, we can lower the force field and get in through known hatches; we have skilled staff that know their way around there, myself included."

"Great to know, now how about deck 23?"

"The area of deck 23 right below us holds the secondary reactor room and is as fortified as this one." T'Elel explained. "Five days would still be needed to breach it and deal with the force filed."

"Ok, say Sobar gains control of the reactor and we are all dead, can he fold back into our universe without your help?"

"Affirmative, the path home is an established one; the AI could do it without our guide. We are not irreplaceable." T'Elel almost smiled.

"And the ship is good to go?"

"The reactor will be in full capacity in 4 hours." Supak informed him.

"Should we slow down the reactor? Maybe shut it down completely?" Jim asked, knowing he suggested a bad idea as soon as the words left his mouth.

"Negative, sir." Commander Supak said "Handling the reactor with such aggression would only result in an increased risk of a meltdown."

"To shut it down completely and safely, how much time is needed?"

"Ten to fifteen days for a complete and safe shutdown." Supak answered and shut the door on one of Jim's ideas, making him pout for a little while.

"We should not give up our ability to fold, sir." T'Elel added. "The Vokau needs to be able to fly to New Vulcan at a moment notice, in case the situation on Ipik deteriorates any further, Lieutenant Nelath will explain this to you when it is her turn to speak." The elder officer referred to the young Ipik officer, and the young Vulcan female nodded her head, but said nothing.

"Fine, no shutting down the core." Jim concluded, sulking. "Ok, Clocks…" He shook his head and returned to the meeting's objective "Time to think outside the box. Commander T'Elel…"

"Which box are you referring to…?" T'Elel mumbled.

"Excuse me." Someone knocked on their door, Soren, he was carrying a trey and on it a pitcher of fresh water, some glasses and few pieces of what looked like a dried fruitcakes. "I got some refreshments for you, and you must drink water often or get dehydrated, dear human Captain. I tried to reprogram the replicator to produce Earth's grade water, and the human Dayton said it was an improvement. I will get out now, sorry to have disturbed you." He placed the trey on the table, bowed and left.

"I hope you don't mind." Jim poured himself a glass and drank, Soren was right; the water tasted sweeter than before, and he sure needed to drink more often. He picked up a piece of the fruitcake and started eating as well.

"You were talking of boxes." T'Elel reminded him gently.

"Yes." He said after finished chewing "What else could Sobar use against us that would work faster
than five days? Could he… say… cut our life support?"

"Highly unlikely." Supak answered. "Life supporting system- mainly heat, atmospheric pressure, electricity, water and sewage are all placed in deck 21, right above us, as I said before, that deck is problematic to handle without skilled personal and to make things even more problematic for him, the feed to this deck is direct. The way things are built, if he wants to cut us off, he will have to stop the feed for the entire ship."

"He could try to cut it indirectly." T'Elel continued "but it is a risky maneuver, do it wrong and lose all decks below 21."

"Still it is a possibility." Jim concluded. "Time?"

"Two days." Supak answered, unworried.

"Ok, we are getting closer. Let's take a different direction. Can Sobar, say... take a shuttle out and fire at this room from space-side?"

All ogled him as if he had lost his mind, Spock included, and that actually made him smile, he saw this as a compliment.

"Why would Sobar do something this illogical?" Supak gasped, as them all.

"Our weapons do not work here as they do at our home universe." Spock answered. "Here they will react with local particles in unpredictable ways, making it almost impossible to predict the outcome of activating any kind of weapon at space-side."

Now Jim wished again he had the time to study the data Elder Sarek has provided him, but at least he was grateful Spock took the time to do so.

"Ok, so no firing... and no transporting, any other ways in and out of this room that I did not detect? How about them transporters again? I want to make sure we have covered all options here. I know it is impossible to transport out of the ship, but inside? Can we use the transport on the inside?"

Commander Spock took to answering this question as well.

"Nothing living can be transported in this universe, Jim, as we are yet to fully understand its physics. Transporting a living creature requires an in-depth understanding of all partials involved and their interactions with the living body at least at the cell's level, or else it will only kill the creature we attempt to transport."

Ok, let's keep it simple, none living things are simple. "So how about a bomb, huh? Can Sobar transport a bomb into here?"

"Only if he wishes to initiate a meltdown inside the reactor." T'Elel marveled at the human's stupidity, and even glanced at Spock to capture his reaction to this, but she did not understand that asking stupid questions was part of thinking outside of the box.

"Can we send a bomb out, by the way?" Jim asked, relishing on the expressions of dismay and puzzlement the Vulcans around him tried so hard to suppress. Well, all but Spock, Spock was already used to his type of crazy.

"We will not replicate a bomb here, sir." Supak said in horror. "Not under peak periapsis, not in the reactor room."
"A phaser then, set on overload, could he sent one of those in?" Jim said making everyone gasp or gape.

Boy, the look on their faces, he was having too much fun.

"Sir, the only things that are safe to transport or replicate here without risking a meltdown are low energy, none animated objects." Supak said with his commanding voice, aiming to put an end to this illogical dissection. "And even then, only inside the ship, with a limited range, with no guaranty they will be fully operational, arriving to the other side."

"I see..." Jim nodded, and then he smirked again. "How about drones, can we do drones? Practice drones?" he pushed them closer to the edge. "Grab them from the gym and get them in here?"

"For what aim?" Supak inquired and tried not to frown as Jim just shrugged "Yes, we can do drones, as you put it." He answered, giving up on understanding the human's logic. "But if they'd be in working condition after this, no one can tell. Sir, I believe that we have exhausted this subject" The chief engineer raised his voice a little, which only served to widen Jim's smile.

Nope, we have only exhausted you, Mr. Supak.

Hey, play nice, Jimbo.

"Fine, let's review all regular in and outs again, please, so I'd know I missed nothing..." He allowed the conversation to move on.

T'Elel spoke this time, letting Supak have his rest.

"Two main doors to the rest of the deck, one emergency hatch to the deck below us and one hatch to the deck above us, one secret passage to deck 19, one maintenance tunnel connects the main reactor to the secondary reactor at deck 23, one emergency door to a docking bay for two shuttles, between the decks, one transport platform with a capacity to carry two members per time. But as we've already pointed out that the transporters are unavailable in this universe."

"All ins and outs are probably guarded by Sobar's men from his side, and blocked by our locks and the force field on our side." Spock completed the picture.

Yeah, but how many and in what formation? And can we move them around by creating distractions?

Jim took a few moments to visualize the options in his mind, also noticing that soon he'd need to take a leak, the later he chose to ignore at the moment, and the rest of it he analyzed in his mind.

"Tell me more about the shuttle bay and the maintenance tunnel." He asked after a while.

"There are two shuttles ready at an emergency docking bay between deck 22 and 23. They may be accessed from both decks, through the door left of the reactor pool." Supak said.

They are stationed there, ready to take off at a moment's notice, to evacuate the staff working at the reactors in case of one or both reactors melt down." T'Elel explained. "The access to that docking bay is easier from the deck below us."

"Can we reach it? Could Sobar reach it?" Jim asked, so many questions, if this was the Enterprise this whole frustrating stage would be avoided, because he knew his silver lady by hard.

"Yes to both." Supak continued "Although we have no knowledge of Sobar securing the deck
below us."

"Let's assume that he does. Will he have shuttles waiting, say, at the entrances to the bay, in order to stop a shuttle of ours from taking off?"

"At space-side?" T'Elel asked. "Highly unlikely, weapons cannot be utilized in this space, and a physical contact may result in an explosion as well, so it would be illogical to employ a shuttle for an ambush."

"But we can assume forces on the ground." Supak added.

"Then we will have to break out of here by force." T'Elel agreed.

"So we open the door from our side, and we fight our way to the shuttles?" Jim had to understand.

"Indeed." T'Elel agreed "But, sir, I must ask, even if we gain accesses to the shuttles; who would be flying them? And Where to?"

"That's my department; I have already told you I have pilots." Jim smiled at her "I just need to know everything, so I could formulate the best plan. I have two pilots, one of them is with us here, and the other is guarding the kids. They even trained at flying Vulcan shuttles under peak conditions."

"The maintenance tunnel." Spock gently reminded them all.

"Yes." Supak straightened up in his seat. "There's a tunnel connecting the main and the secondary reactors, pool to pool but under regular circumstance, white matter floods it, so it is safe and Sobar would not be able to use it as a point of entry."

"Wait, just remembered something." Jim stopped swaying in his chair "If we use an exit, any exit, it means that we have to shut down the force field for that while, yes? Leaving us temporarily vulnerable from all directions?"

"Affirmative." Commander T'Elel nodded. "Unless it is the maintenance tunnel, there is no field coverage of the pool, the anticipated interactions between the field and the white matters are too dangerous to let them mingle."

"But the white matter itself is a sort of a force field." Supak reassured them. "The maintenance tunnel is used only when the core is shut down, and the white matter is removed, safety protocol number 37 section 3 specifically demands that... " Supak explained.

"But hey!" Jim stopped him before he starts reciting the whole damn thing. "Can we… theoretically, clear it for use while the reactor is operational? Yes or no?"

Again, Supak and T'Elel ogled each other with dismay and the rest of the vulcans looked helpless just as well, dealing with this crazy human.

"What do you mean? Clear away the white matter?? Leave a working reactor without its protection??" the old engineer seemed like he was ready to pass out.

"Well, maybe not the entirety of it, just a small hole, a hole to allow us the usage of the tunnel."

"This goes against every safety regulation I have ever known or wrote!" Supak hitched his breath, suddenly dizzy, he grabbed hold of the table to stabilize himself.
"Oh, come on! A teeny-weeny passage!" Jim added the power of his blue eyes into the mix, shiny and begging and hopeful.

Both Supak and T'Elel turned to look at Spock, who shook his head with remorse.

"Come on? Could it be done? Yes, no? What are the risks?" Jim insisted with a charming smile.

"Yes!" Supak broke under the pressure. "I can... I can manipulate the white matter and create an opening to allow us a usage of that tunnel, I will need an hour." Supak answered, hardly believing those words actually left his mouth. "If every person using it is properly protected and pass through it under fifteen minutes, the risks should be minimal."

"So protective gear, and no need to remove the force-field, am I correct?"

"Indeed, you are." T'Elel said with a gasp.

"Great." Kirk smile got brighter and he resumed his sways on the chair "Commander Supak, I want you to make those preparations as soon as we finish this meeting. Understood?"

"Yes sir, I will prepare the tunnel and replicate protective gear for everyone."

"Great." Jim nodded and turned to look at the rest of the officers. "So as far as we know, Sobar has two days to take over this perimeter."

"So it seems." Spock confirmed.

"Wonderful!" Jim was too cheery for the liking of his audience.

Although he was not that sure they were done with the clocks hunting; his own personal clock was ticking, he had no idea when his body will give up, but he had a hunch that this will happen in the next few hours, and a part of him could not wait for the wait to be over.

"Are we done? Spock asked, he seemed worried.

"Not yet." Jim smiled at him.

Spock tried to suppress his disappointment and so did the rest of the officers. Jim knew he was running them down mercilessly, pushing them even further to the end of their rope, but there was no other choice.

"Now, let's expend our thinking again." He breathed out. "Still with me? If my calculation is correct, Sobar has at most 70 people at his side, am I correct?"

"Yes, you are, anything between 50-70 crew members loyal to Sobar is a logical assumption." T'Elel confirmed. "We have 23 members here that we can count on."

"Could he get more?"

"Reinforcement?" Spock asked, suprised. "How?"

"Ipik." Jim turned to look at the Ipik young officers. "Or more ships that would fold into here using their own folding technology."

"But that would indicate some sort of coordinated communication." T'Elel noted.

"Sir, communications with the Ipik can only be maintained through telepathic means at this point
of time." Lieutenant Nelath said. "But as far as I understand the situation there, I do not think that they have enough crew members to relocate to here, not without risking the loss of control over the base."

"I'm talking about using the gate or independent travel." Jim sharpened his point. "The gate to New Vulcan or folding stations."

Yeah, they were all seemed astounded again, maybe because he showed his extended knowledge of Vulcan technology and abilities that were supposed to be top secret, or many because of his ability to throw into the air one ridicules idea after another.

Nelath looked at him with total dismay and then turned to exchange some meaningful glares with Setek, getting paler at the moment as their silent conversation continued.

"Yes, it is a possibility; Sobar might have summoned reinforcement prior to peak periapsis, a reinforcement that might use the gate in Ipik, if it remains open.

"The gate is open now to New Vulcan for the sake of an experiment; Sobar's forces on New Vulcan, if there are such, can detect that opening and send ships through if they deem it necessary."

"Ships will not arrive independently of the gate, though." T'Elel joined in "No one can fold into here while the level of radiation is this high, not in the next upcoming 30 hours."

"I am not entirely convinced this is even a probable scenario." Spock intervened, although with some hesitation. "I do not see how ships arrive here via the gate or through folding any time soon, Captain."

"Why do you think it so, Mr. Spock?" Jim turned to study his Xo's beautiful face and could not help an appreciative smile.

"Telepathic communication between our two universes is impossible; even I cannot reach that far. Sobar cannot ask for help from New Vulcan by telepathic means, and even if he had secured those measures prior to the Periapsis, he still lacks the motivation, as long as he thinks he's on top of things over here, I do think he would prefer keeping things discreet."

//Good point, Sport.//

"But it is a possibility, right?" Jim insisted.

"Yes, it is." Supak answered. "A viable one, and when peak periapsis is over? Even more so."

"Time, Mr. Supak?"

"Approximately 28 hours, sir, as communication with home universe resumes ." the Chief Engineer answered.

"Here's another clock for you." Jim hit the table with his fist and smiled with a sense of victory, startling the Vulcans a bit with the unexpected noise. "The fastest one yet, am I correct?"

"Yes, you are." Commander T'Elel confirmed with open renown.

"So if we are to take control of the Vokau, we must take it within the next 28 hours." Jim concluded. "Unless there are even faster clocks ticking out there… Now, let's see what is going on at Ipik. Lieutenant Nelath, I believe this is your turn."
The young Lieutenant bowed slightly, but fell into silence. Jim recognized this silence from his years with dealing with Spock, seems like the young officer was trying to walk the thin ice of truth, choosing her path very carefully.

He gave her time, but time was not on their side, and when his comm beeped once, for a sehlat on the loose, he shifted on his seat. "Lieutenant, come on, we need to know everything if we are to take back control, and I think I already know a lot."

"But Ipik is top secret, sir." She squirmed on her seat. "I have no authority talking about it with a UFP delegates, or even with the Vokau crew, of all that matters." She moved her eyes from Jim to Spock and vice versa with unease.

"Even the Captain and the XO of the Vokau?" Jim tried.

"Even they don't have the proper clearance." She confirmed what he had already suspected. "However, the situation at hand forces me to ignore regulations, even at the cost of facing a court martial, because if we do not stop the experiment conducted now on Ipik, we may never get to go home."

Fuck my life.

Jim frowned and took in a deep breath. "Please, elaborate."

Chapter End Notes

Feedback will be welcomed with gratitude and even with awe, because this chapter was really taxing.

Be safe and strong and healthy!
Hey, Y'all!

This was actually one of my favorite chapters to write in this story, because Jim was so much 'In the zone', bombarding me with his crazy ideas in such a high rate, I could hardly keep up with him, made me gape every single time.

Of course I'm not telling you anything of importance here, in case you haven’t notice, lol. Still, I hope you'll enjoy your read.

Btw, I think it is time to note that 'Ipik' in Vulcan means 'Hidden'.

Ipik was a research facility constructed and activated almost four years ago, with the help of Spock from the other universe, who supplied his knowledge regarding red matter, and was conducted under the direct supervision of Elder Svern.

As part of a non-aggression pact signed between New Vulcan and Romulus after the Narada incident, the Romulans were also involved at Ipik, although to a minor degree. They took interest in the technology, which might one day be needed, to save their home world in this universe, should a similar super nova occur.

The Vulcans were inclined to help their keen, although the relationship between the nations were strained in any other aspect, they still informed the Romulans of the progress made, and even allowed their delegates to visit Ipik every once in a while.

The sole purpose of this facility was to study red matter and the technology to control it, so it would be operational and ready for use in case a super-nova of the Romulan sun would threaten this galaxy as it did in Spock's prime universe.

The facility had the shape of a sawing needle and had three major parts- the low two thirds of the needle had constructed a semi-hollow tube, designed to attract, collect and process plasma from the main star of the binary system, the upper third part was were the red matter was created, using the energy harvested and particles collected. The eye of the needle was a force field generator, and was used to contain the space-time anomaly created by activated red matter, in order to study it and learn to control and manipulate it.

60 Vulcans served on the base, all of them handpicked by Elder Svern, all with military background, 15 were scientists, 25 engineers and maintenance crewmen, the rest were security personal.

"For the past few months" Lieutenant Nelath said "Ever more so, after it had been decided on the Plak If Fee, Elder Svern had been putting more and more pressure on the Ipik staff, demanding them to perform more and more dangerous experiments in order to achieve his objective."

"What objective?" Jim asked.
"To advance Sadvun 5 million Km in orbit, and five years into the future."

//A planetoid in New Vulcan's solar system, similar to the size of Sedna of the Earth star system//

Spock explained.

Jim struggled not to gape, Section 31 were correct; the Vulcans were far ahead in the game, further advanced than anyone else in the alpha quarter. "How this could be done?" he asked. "Please explain it in layman's terms."

The Lieutenant blinked her inner eyelids in irritation as expected. "You'd use the red matter to create an anomaly linking the Ipik and New Vulcan; you then aim at Sadvun, and capture it within the force field, manipulate time-space around it, using the red matter and when done, disconnect the link."

"Is that the experiment conducted right now?"

"Affirmative, it is now ongoing, and will continue for, at least, the next three days. I wish I had a better assessment, but there is no way for me to gain it now."

"So Ipik now has an active, open gate to New Vulcan?" Jim had to verify.

"Correct." Nelath nodded.

"And why is this experiment so dangerous that it might risk our return home?"

"Because up until now, we have had difficulty creating a stable enough anomaly. Elder Svern suspects that Spock from the other side had never given him the complete formula of the red matter, in order to do so, for one reason or another."

"At its peak, this experiment will charge the red matter with the highest level of energy, never been tried before, for the longest duration ever been practiced."

"There's a high risk that the Ipik force field, at the eye of the needle, will not sustain the load, and the red matter will erupt in an uncontrolled manner. Resulting in anything between an experiment failure, destruction of the Ipik, destruction of the Vokau, this binary system and even, as some extreme models suggests, the collapse of this universe. It is unclear, sir."

Well, no one can rely on the mercy of standard deviation.

Jim wanted to lay his head on the table, or at least slam a fist into it with frustration, but none of that would be taken lightly by the Vulcans surrounding him. So he just breathed in deeply and sent a hand to mess up his hair.

"Do you have any idea why would Elder Svern push forward to perform such an extreme experiment?"

"Elder Svern have claimed that we were too conservative with our risk assessments and that we lack the courage and innovation to push the frontier, he claimed that our Katras have been weakened since the loss of Vulcan."

The Lieutenant sighed and continued.

"Some of us started resenting the Elder leadership awhile ago, so when Svern gave the order last night, there was a dispute among the Ipik staff. The base Commander wanted to ignore it, and so did the head scientist but the Chief Engineer and the base XO apprehend the ones who objected
them, and took control by force.

"Before everything happened, I was ordered by the Ipik Commander to leave for the Vokau and seek Elder Svern for negotiation, but as soon as I arrived, I have learned from the Captain that the situation upon the Vokau was dire as well. We were caught up in a fight and ran to seek shelter at the reactor room, the Vokau's Captain was severely wounded… and I believe you know the rest of the story, sir."

"There is no communication between the Ipik and the Vokau now, due to peak Periapsis, how do you even know the XO managed to take charge there, if you left before everything had happened?"

"Vulcan telepathy." Nelath explained "I have a twin sister serving also as an engineer on board, and this is why I was chosen to fly to the Vokau, but now she is captured and placed in a brig, so she cannot provide me with valuable information anymore."

"Do you have any evidence that Elder Svern was involved in the Ipik take over? I know his son, Somak, serves there as the XO."

"I have no such evidence." Nelath admitted, confirmed his suspension.

Well, it was worth a try.

Too much information, and Jim's concentration was beginning to evaporate, soon he will need a break, and his aching body did not help either, but he had to push forward.

"Time, Lieutenant Nelath, how much time do we have until this experiment gets out of hand?"

"Unknown, sir, we have never done something of this magnitude before."

"Estimation, please?"

"Sir, I'd rather not speculate…"

"Estimation, please!"

"In 30 more hours, we will reach the upper limit of known force field capacity." Nelath squirming in her seat.

"Ok, I see; another clock here." Jim hurried to take over again, before she adds her reservations. "How many are in control of the Ipik now?"

"I assume 20 crewmen, led by Somak."

"Who many are captured?"

"Ten, as my sister informed me, the rest are dead or unaccounted for."

"If I give you one of my pilot, a few scientists and nine more of my best fighters would you be able to take back control of the Ipik?"

She seemed to do some calculation in her mind. "Yes, sir, the element of surprise will be on our side, however there's a complication."

"Complication?" Jim almost moaned, he really wanted that break.
"Indeed. My sister had informed me that we were all taken off the system, as did happen here. When we left, the docking bay doors automatically closed behind us, and I cannot order them to reopen by using my codes, we cannot land safely without someone from the inside opening those doors again. With my sister and the rest of them in the brig, no one would be able to help us."

"Can you open the dock by firing a weapon?"

"That would be unwise." Spock reminded him.

"The Ipik is now loaded with plasma and red matter, firing a weapon would be extremely unwise." The Ipik officer agreed with Spock.

Well ramming into it will do no good either, just get everyone dead.

"Spacewalk?" Jim tried.

"Negative, sir. The amount of radiation surrounding the Ipik at the moment would render any spacewalker incapacitated within a few minutes, long before he could manually open the doors."

"Incapacitated as if dead?" Jim sharpened the point, just for the fun of it.

"Indeed, sir." Nelath confirmed.

Great, just great, asking someone to sacrifice his life is hard enough, but to ask it for this slim chance of success is another thing all together.

"Tractor beam?" Jim knew he was grasping at straws "Bent the doors open?"

"Our shuttles don’t have tractor beams." Supak said "And we have no access to the Vokau's tractor beams as they are operated from the bridge, and it would be as dangerous as firing a photon torpedo."

"Attach the shuttle and drill in?" he asked, hoping.

"Not much time to prepare a shuttle for such an operation." Supak hurried to nip his idea in the bud.

"Fine! Forget about the docking bay door problem for a moment. Would you be able to take control of the base and stop the experiment with the force I can provide you? Under five hours? While maintaining the gate leading to New Vulcan open?"

Neleth took a few moments to deliberate, she turned to other Ipik officer at her side, and they placed their fingers at each other's psi points, sharing a quick meld. When they disengage she turned back to look at Jim.

"Yes, I believe I could." She answered.

//Spock, would you go with them?//

//I will go wherever you wish me to go, Captain.//

//I'm thinking about it.// "Timeframe?" he returned his attention to Lieutenant Nelath.

"Assuming the docking bay will be ready for landing- half an hour to fly back, an hour and a half to regain control, an hour to stop the experiment while maintaining the gate."
"Three hours then, from a mark." Jim mumbled "Fine, this is on you Lieutenant, gather the nine best soldiers here and start planning your assault, Commander Spock will assist you; and Spock, find Dayton and have him join in as well, assume the doors to the docking bay are open, this one is on me, I'll think about something when we have our break."

"Yes, Captain." Spock answered. //am I to go with them?//

//Stand by, thinking about it.//

"The rest are dismissed, I'll take a break now, 40 minutes, if you don't mind, I think it is reasonable, given our fastest clock is running on 28 hours." Yeah, time to shut up a bit and find the toilets.

They all got up, gave a little nod or a bow and left. Spock got up as well, but he lingered, his eyes stayed on Jim, showing much concern.

"Spock, you wait just a moment, please." Jim said after making sure that the rest were gone. Yeah, he's gonna hold it a bit longer, he can totally wait a bit longer without pissing himself.

Spock slowly sank back into his chair. "Are you well, Jim? Should I find you something to eat? Would you like to lay down a bit and rest?"

Jim ignored all questions. "Did you pick up on what happened to Carol?"

"Through our link, yes." Spock answered and although his face was as impassive as ever, Jim already was able to read the sadness on them and the sorrow in his calm voice.

"I called it as MIA, any objections?"

"None."

"Don't tell Dayton." Jim ordered bluntly, but also with guilt, this was for practical reasons, he could not foresee how Dayton will react to the news and could not risk the young pilot falling apart. "If he's lucky enough she'll be here, alive and well when we reach New Vulcan, if not, the situation will not change until we leave here, either way, there's nothing constructive he could do about it."

"A logical analysis." Spock agreed.

"It is a fucked up analysis, but it's all we have." Jim breathed out. "Spock?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have a bad feeling about this; we will end this day with more casualties, might even be me."

"Sir…"

"We cannot hide here forever, we must take the initiative soon, we only have this one shot, this Hail Mary, should make it count, and make it soon, but any way I look at it, I end this day at Svern's feet."

"Jim…"

"I know, I do not believe in no-win scenarios." Jim gave Spock a dazzling smile to ease his concern. "This is why I need you to give me an edge. Before you're leaving this room, you're gonna give me an edge."
"What do you mean by an edge?"

"Vulcans, Spock… so goddamn perfect. Smart, strong, agile, skillful, fast… need I go on? But there must be something… something us humans do better than you. I don’t care if it's a silly little nothing, I'll take it, whatever it is. I need an edge, give it to me."

"Well, we have our difficulties with water." Spock said the obvious, looking a bit appalled himself.

"Go on."

"Cold temperatures are unsettling."

"Yeah, naturally."

"Too much noise or even particular strong scents such as the smell of bleach may have an unpleasant effect."

"Something more, please."

"Let me think…” Spock sank deep into thought "Maybe this…” He mumbled, contemplating "Utilizing the different chemistry of our blood systems, hemoglobin verses hemocyanin..."

"Interesting, go on."

***0***

He was just taking a piss when he heard his comm come to life, and it was a male singing voice and also in Andorian, scared the hell out of him, and made him mess up the rim of his shirt.

"Jesus Christ!" he jumped at the sound, and tried to tuck himself in without getting his cock caught in the zipper. He hurried to snatch the comm from his belt and answered it. "Sharel? Is that you?"

"Pink-skin bastard! Captain, is that you?" Sharel answered, seemed just as spooked as Jim was. "How did you lay your hand on my comm? Who's with you?"

"Long story short, I'm alone at the moment, we kinda stole back our stuff from the Vulcans, and we are sort of on the run at the moment…" 

"My goodness, things have been interesting on board the Vokau…"

This snarky remark made Jim furies.

"You'd know all about it if you had stayed with us, Lieutenant!" Jim pressed the comm between his ear and shoulder and searched for the sink to wash his hands and clean his shirt. "Where the fuck are you? Gone MIA for four fucking days!! I should totally court martial you! Better than that, turn you in! How about a Vulcan brig for the rest of your life, huh? 120 degrees and zero humidity for as long as you live? With lizards and snakes as cellmates?"

To his surprise, Sharel only chuckled at the other side. "What a sadistic side you have in you, Captain… But no worries, sir, I'm already in one of a sort, sir, minus the lizards." He chuckled then
sighed. "Stuck on Ipik, hiding in an airlock, 120 degrees sounds just about right."

"Fuck, Sharel!" Jim's anger turned into concern as he finished washing his hands and dry them. "How did you get there? What business do you have on Ipik? How the fuck are we even talking? Peak Periapsis and all."

"Wow, sir, too many questions, but as for the last one, I can ask you the same- what are you doing with my comm unit?"

Jim exited the toilet room and peeked to see if anyone was approaching. "Yeah, long story." He breathed, lowering his voice. "The Vokau is a mess, there was a mutiny, the Captain is dead, and so are many others, dynamic alert, the extremists are in control, Elder Svern's son, Sobar, took over the bridge…"

"Amazing." Sharel whispered too "Same happened here on Ipik."

"Still waiting on your answers, Lieutenant!" Jim hissed, peeking again to see two Vulcans walking towards the loo, so he started moving away from it, taking shelter behind a nearby container.

"Yes, captain. As for how I got here- that's easy. The shuttle Sulu and Dayton destroyed was put out of commission, and I snooped around it. Turns out that the vulcans planed on dispatching it into the sun, because it was leaking plasma and there was no way to fix it in time for peak periapsis, and too dangerous to keep on board.

"I found out about the time they were planning the launch, I suited up and hid inside before it, and when it was discarded, I waited for it to pass next to Ipik, then I ditched it, and maneuvered my suit to land on the outside mantle, where I found a maintenance hatch I could open and got in."

"You're lucky you got inside before the radiation levels went insane! impressive Bond skills, by the way." Jim muttered, unhappy.

"Bond what?" Sharel chuckled again "It's nothing you haven't done before, sir. Found plenty of proof for red matter usage, by the way, Ipik was practically built for red matter. And did you know that the Romulans are involved here as well? Against every known Federation policy?"

"Yeah, I know." Jim had to admit with a frown, ducking down as someone passed by, and was saved by the Vulcans' indifference. "And the comm?"

"Not a standard comm, sir, as you must have already guessed, Andorian top tech, can broadcast and receive transmissions under extreme conditions, Peak Periapsis apparently is one of them, telepathic in nature, curtesy of our own telepathic subspecies, please don’t ask for any more details, I know you are a tech buff, but this is top secret."

"This explains my end, but not yours." Jim insisted.

Sharel chuckled again "My smart Captain, I love you, you know that, right?"

"Everybody loves me." Jim stated "It is a cross to bear."

"Well, my antennas are not exactly mine, they are enhanced, state of the art, bio-engineered, can do very clever, top secret things. Can disrupt sensors for one, can also receive and transmits data from my mind and pass it to my comm unit. Was just attempting to record a lullaby and a bed-time story for my children, when you interrupted me, something for them to remember me by."

"Lullabies or encoded information?" Jim insisted.
"Can do both, I'm talented that way. Please, sir, I don't want to spend the remnant of my hours arguing with you, I'd rather sing to my children."

Could not help but feel a pang in his heart; but Jim did his best to ignore it. "Are you in any kind of trouble, Lieutenant?"

"Something like that, yeah." Sharel breathed and for the first time, Jim could detect pain in his voice. "I am less than optimal, injured, dehydrated, probably suffering from a heat stroke, got not much time. Did you know that taking a poisonous pill is so very hard to do? Psychologically speaking? Learned that today. May I get back to my singing, sir?"

"Hold that though." Jim commanded. "You are a spy, have always been, an Andorian spy on my Enterprise!!"

"Oh, sir." Sharel chuckled "You know the drill, I cannot confirm nor deny".

"And I was manipulated by Admiral Aruag into taking you to the Vokau!"

What a clusterfuck, what an epic-sized clusterfuck!

"I cannot confirm nor deny." Sharel insisted. "For your own protection, sir, for the rest of our crew's safety, please forgive me."

"Look, this is something I will have to move up to the brass, I'm sorry, Sharel."

"Not taking it personally, sir."

"But as for right now? I assume this channel is secured, by the way…"

"As secured as it can get."

"As for right now, I really need your help. And, oh yeah… is there anything that you've recovered on this comm that will get me in trouble if the Vulcans get their hands on it?"

"No, sir, I don't think so, as far as I was informed, the Vulcans don't have the technology to crack it, not yet, anyway."

"Just had to make sure."

"Sir, I don't think I'm going to make it, time for my sleeping pill soon. Please give this comm to my wife and children; I have recorded some very personal messages on it for the past two days. It would mean the world to me."

"Will do, and you will make it! No pills just yet! I am sending a crew to take back Ipik, and if you handle yourself carefully enough, you might even make it back to the Andorian jurisdiction before I blow the lid off of this.""

"What? Really?" Sharel gasped "Are you serious?"

"Fuck, yeah!" Jim almost smiled now and he had to start walking to the other side of the container as a new group of Vulcans made their way to the toilets. "Oh, fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" He remembered. "Can you get into the Ipik docking bay and open the doors manually for a shuttle?"

"I suppose I can, I was trained for those types of tasks. But sir…?"

"Great news! Get there ASAP and stand by for a mark. Place yourself in three minutes range for
opening the docking bay doors and await my mark! Can you do this for me?"

"Yes sir, anything, but…?"

"But what?"

"But how come you're involved in this mess?"

Jim's smile shined in the dark "That's long story. How do I get back to you?"

"Trace back this frequency; it leads to the comm devise in my antennas. Sir…?"

"Gotcha! I see the number on the screen now."

"But, sir! What's up with this shuttle coming? Who's on board? How many are they? How are they planning to take over the Ipik? Why…?"

"Wow, Sharel, too many questions, and also, you don’t need to know. Stand by for more instructions. Kirk out." Jim hanged up on the Andorian with delight.

***0***

There was a hum in his brain, like the hum of bees homing in on a sweet flowery field, ready to land and have their feast of nectar. His mind was buzzing and busy, formulating his plan without effort.

He wondered through the chamber, and saw Commander T'Elel guiding Vedik about her filed of work, he saw Lieutenant Nelath, working together with Spock, Dayton and Setek on their plan to take over Ipik.

He saw Commander Supak working on manipulating the white matter field with his crew, while some of them were producing protective gear for everyone to wear at that old, standalone replicator.

He saw an elder crew member giving comfort to Xon, meditating with him at a nook by the pool. He saw elevator guy working a remote console at the far end of the room. He had a bottle of water next to him, and as he looked up to see Jim, he smiled and offered it to him.

Jim picked the bottle up for a try.

"Work in progress." Soren warned him as Jim uncorked it.

Jim drank if was trying a fine wine. "Not bad, Soren, getting very close."

"Thank you, Mr. Krik, Kirk, Mr. Kirk."

"Busy?"

"No, sir, actually done here, about to return to Supak for new instructions."
Jim finished drinking; glancing at the anticipating face of the elder Vulcan tech, and then it dawned on him, this idea.

"Mr. Soren, I was actually looking for you." He said, when decided "I need you to do something for me."

"Anything, Captain, anything."

"How well can you keep a secret? Zero to ten, come on."

"Zero?"

"Come on, really?" Jim frowned at him.

"Zero leaks, sir." Soren corrected his statement, and now Jim beamed at him.

"Walk with me."

###0***

"Sulu here."

"Not eaten by the Sehlat yet?"

"No, sir, not yet."

"How are you?"

"My leg is getting a bit swollen and blue, but other than that, I'm good."

"I've asked around, you know, for the head healer and her aids, turns out that she is on Sobar's side, along with all her medical team, no healer is on our side, sad isn't it?"

"I miss Bones." Sulu admitted.

"I miss him too." Jim sighed, or almost "I didn’t comm you for small talk, by the way. I have new orders. Can you fly?"

"Born to fly, sir."

"Get all the kids and the teachers at designated area to a one minute walk zone from main elevator, do it now. How much time do you need to prep a shuttle for takeoff? Two hours?"

"If I go through Vulcan protocols, Sir."

"And if you go through your own protocol?"

"20 minutes, half an hour, tops."

"Great. So on my mark; get the kids to main shuttle bay, have a shuttle ready and take off ASAP."

"Take off? Where to, Sir?" Sulu sounded alarmed "Green sun, remember? We are not in Kansas anymore, nothing here but the Vokau and the Ipik."
"You're gonna click those red shoes and fly right through that gate we've talked about, created within the eye of the needle at Ipik, it is open and linked to New Vulcan, will be waiting for you. Roger that?"

"Yes, sir." Sulu could hardly hide his dismay "The portal is open to New Vulcan? Are you sure? Who told you? Is it safe? How long will it stay open? Will they not shoot at us as we come near? Comm off line and all…"

"Sulu, got no time for this! At my mark, grab the kids to a shuttle, take off and fly through the eye of the needle to New Vulcan, copy that?"

"But the main elevator? The Shuttle? Sir, for one, we are locked out of the system, remember?"

"Trust issues much?" Jim smiled into the comm "It will work, everything will work. You've been reinstalled, and the Ipik will be waiting for you, expect some resistance onboard the Vokau, but we will try to minimize it. Now, say it back at me."

"Settle near the main elevator, and at your mark, use it to get to deck 8?! Grab a shuttle and fly it through the eye of the Ipik?!"

"Roger that, Sulu, you should work on your commanding voice, just saying."

"Oh, my…"

"Ending transmission now, Sulu, await my mark."

"Standing by, Captain, Sulu out."

***0***

"Captain! Captain!" Someone came running towards him, sounded very much alarmed, it was Vedik.

"Hello, my friend, why are you running?"

"Commander T'Elel…." Vedik stopped in front of him, pale and panting, he paused to collect himself. "Commander T'Elel requests your aid, sir. Commander Sobar just hailed us."

"Is that so?" Jim smiled in an effort to ease Vedik's anxiety and not disclose his own. "Let's go help her, then." and so they went to confront the Vulcan who promised to tear him apart limb by limb.

While taking that short walk, Jim clenched his jaw and promised in return, not to give that Vulcan the pleasure of watching him cower, and Vedik, oblivious to Jim's inner turmoil, led them to T'Elel working station, chatting his panic away, all the way there.

The poor old Vulcan officer looked petrified and at lost, gazing at her screen with terror, and Jim could relate, Sobar indeed had that chilling effect, turns out it worked on Vulcans too.
He came near to peek at the screen, and there Sobar was, in his silver and gold Vokau uniform, he seemed cold, arrogant, and, oh well, a damn handsome young Vulcan, dominating the scene.

"You must know that I am growing tiered of your excuses and feeble attempts at stalling." Sobar informed Commander T'Elel with assumed boredom "My basic assumption is that Vulcans do not lie, but I begin to question it. If Captain Setal is indeed alive, I wish to speak to him. I will accept no more evading maneuvers or time-wasting tactics."

"I am sorry, but the Captain is unavailable at the moment." T'Elel said, but despite her best efforts, her voice trembled, and she was so stressed out, she did not even look up from the screen to notice Jim was already standing quietly by her side.

Jim came near, alright, but made sure to stay out of the camera for a moment, enough to inspect Sobar's surrounding, as much as the frame and angle allowed it, got his first glimpse into the Vokau's bridge along the way. It was organized similarly to the UFP grad spaceships, including the Enterprise, which was only logical, because Earth adopted much of the Vulcan way of building crafts, ever since their first contact.

Sabar was standing next to the empty Captain's chair, and in front of him were T'Heli at the pilot position, and another male he did not recognize at the navigator station. He could spot a security officer standing next to Sobar, behind the chair, as some sort of a bodyguard, T'Sel and Kuvac were unaccounted for.

"If the Captain is incapacitated, or dead, as I suspect, who in your group of renegades is authorized for negotiations?" Sobar continued "Both my patience and generosity are running thin."

"Why should they negotiate with you, Commander? Where is the logic in that?" Jim found this as the perfect timing to intervene, pushing his face into the camera.

T'Elel suppressed her surprise, but she was more than happy to let the human take the lead, she step aside to give him more room.

"What do you have to offer them? You have shot your Captain and fatally wounded him! Took over the Vokau with an illegal mutiny! Took everyone you saw as a threat off the system and drove the senior staff into this prison cell of a reactor room! So I ask again- what do you have to offer?"

Sobar suppressed his own astonishment by staying very still and very quiet for a long while, he only narrowed his eyes and breathed, as he glared at the human before him, running options in his head, looking for the best way to react.

"Captain James T. Kirk." Sobar said after that long pause, resuming his detached attitude. "You have the tendency to show up at the most unexpected places and meddle in affairs you are most unwelcomed to." He stated "By right, you should be at the brig now, answering Lieutenant Symer's questions."

"Dead cannot answer questions!" Jim reminded him. "Where is Lt. Commander Kuvac, by the way? Still searching the ship trying to kill me?" Jim had to ask, in cold rage. "And what is the deal, huh? Are you aiming to kill us or capture us for an investigation? Cannot do both, as far as I know. And where is Carol? Is she alive or dead?"

"Why should I answer any of your questions when it is you who should…"

"And what's with your followers trying to capture all the children?" Jim interrupted Sobar mid sentence. "Do you have in your possession the ten youngest on board? What are you going to do
with them? Are we going pre-Surak again?

"Because, hey, been there, done that, did not bode well, remember? And there I have thought useless repetition was the root of all insanity. What does your father say about that? Are you working under his command or did you lose all faith in his politics and took the reins into your hands?"

"I must admit that I find this situation pleasing." Sobar said at the end of Jim's onslaught. "Here I am, in command of the Vokau, and there you are, hiding in this suffocating reactor cell, at lost, trapped in the dark." Sobar mocked him coldly. "Give me one good reason I should supply you with enlightenment."

"No! You give us one good reason not to hang up on your pretty face!"

"I have neither the inclination nor the necessity to converse with you, Captain Kirk." Commander Sobar answered, he seemed very calm, but who knew what was going on behind his icy exterior. "I owe you no explanations."

"But you awe Captain Setal! You fired your phaser at the rightful Captain of the Vokau! Fatedly injured him, taken his place illegally! You awe it to the parents whose kids you now hold hostage, just because they are your political rivals! Talking about generosity? The fact that Commander T'Eelel is even talking to you now, you criminal scumbag, is generosity!"

Sobar waited a while in silence, made Jim wonder if he was just stumped or was having a hidden a conversation at the moment, with his father, Elder Svern, his brother upon the Ipik or his bond-mate, T'Heli, whose beautiful face gave no indication of it at all.

"I have my reasoning, Captain Kirk, yet I lack the interest to share it with you. Stay away from Vulcan affairs, Human; you have no means of understanding our logic."

"Understanding you logic? Bullshit! Logic is to recognize all life as precious, logic is to aspire for peace and long life! What kind of logic is to murder your own?"

"The past must make way to the future, Captain Kirk; some parts of Master Surak's teaching are no longer applicable. Seeking longevity and avoiding conflicts at all cost had rendered the Vulcans weak, dull and docile, open to the calamity that fell upon them. Insanity is to preserve such a behavior that had failed us, logic is to adapt and adjust."

"Nice slogans, Sobar! Really! You have used all the right words! Gave me a nice buzz, I admit, but zero answers!" Jim snarled at him, giving him a challenging look. "I guess your logic is not as sound as you'd like it to be, if you cannot even supply this puny human with an explanation."

Sobar contemplated the challenge, staring back at Jim's taunting eyes.

"Captain Kirk, you are a killer, a liar and a thief." he started calmly. "Usually I do not bother to explain my logic to criminals, but I will honor you just this once, as a fellow 'Plak If Fee' warrior.

"You are correct- I have attacked the senior staff, Captain Setal included, and made an attempt at collecting all the children on board, succeeding in capture ten of them. However, I only did this because I was forced to, because the alternative is far worse.

"Captain Setal and the rest of the senior staff have become a threat to the Vulcan people, they have chosen to willfully ignore the needs of the many, disobey the command of their superior, and put New Vulcan at risk with their reckless, illogical choices."
"I was forced to take over the Vokau, forced to fight Captain Setal, and forced to use the children as leverage, there was no joy in it, but also there was no other way. So I ask you to step aside, Captain Kirk, this is an inner Vulcan matter, of which you have no knowledge of, nor the authority to intervene."

"Nice way of justifying betrayal and murder! Taking helpless kids as hostages and organizing a mutiny! I don’t know what you are; Sobar, but you're no longer a Vulcan for sure! You're a backstabber, a killer and a coward! The only…"

"We warned them!" Sobar interrupted him sharply and first signs of anger sneaked into his voice "We informed them in advance that they will be judged! And still, they would not listen! They have failed us!

"The Elders have chosen you, Human! They have chosen humans over our kin! Succumbing to pure sentiment! Discarding all logic! They are the backstabbers! They are the cowards! They are the traitors!

"Do you think I feel nothing, James Kirk? Do you see me as heatless and cruel? I have shed tears of blood, knowing I had to kill my Captain! My pain runs deep! And yet, I did what I had to do, for Vulcan! For future generations! Think of me what you will, your opinion changes nothing at all."

"Sure, and that is why you just invested five minutes in explaining that to me, Sobar, very logical."

Jim retorted, could not help a cocky smirk "Be careful or I'll make a remainer of you after all."

Commander Sobar glared at Kirk again, and if looks could kill, Jim's body would have already hit the floor with a thud, but before the Vulcan had opened his mouth to speak again, Jim continued. "No one has forced you into anything!" he almost shouted. "You are not the victim! There is always a choice! You chose to incite mutiny! You chose to raise your phaser and use it on the Captain! You are in control of your actions and you will have to answer for them!"

"Talking to an illogical human had been proved again as a waste of time." Sobar turned to Commander T'Elel again. "Give me back control of the main reactor and surrender peacefully, I guaranty that you'll be treated well, the children will suffer no harm, and when we reach New Vulcan you'll get a fair trial, fail to do so, and suffer the consequences."

"A fair trial? Of what crime, may I ask?" Jim asked.

"Treason." Sobar answered, not letting go of T'Elel's gaze and after some thought he turned his eyes back to Jim and added "My last warning to you, Captain, stay away from Vulcan affairs, I will kill you within the blink of the eye, if I find you in my way."

"Did you disobey Elder Svern by sending Kuvac after me?"

"I am in no way obligated to answer any of your questions." Sobar said, with calm.

Jim ignored that comment and continued his verbal onslaught "Where are the guests of the ritual? What is the situation with the Elders? Are they held hostage too?"

"I am not the one wanted for interrogation, Captain." Sobar insisted calmly and turned his attention to Commander T'Elel again. "You have 4.5 hours to enjoy your safe haven, Commander, when we meet again, I will not be this accommodating. Sobar out."

The acting Captain of the Vokau finished delivering his message and the screen turned black.
Upcoming chapter will contain a new status report; I hope to post it no later than 23.08. Until then, be safe and well, I send you my best wishes.
Greeting to all, dear readers!

Thank you so much, you are so awesome! So supportive and so very kind! I send you my best wishes, and hope to find you well, healthy and safe, which is not as trivial in our chaotic world.

so first- as promised an update.

And here is also a status report for those of you who are interested, a continuation of the last statues report given at chapter 42:

A. Chapters 1- 50: are out and published, I do not foresee a need to revisit them for major changes, but if I do, I’d let you know that I have edited them as soon as I do it. I might come back to them to fix grammar errors and typos.

B. Chapters 51-52: are in a good shape and ready to go under minor editing.

C. Chapters 53-54: are written but in a bad shape, as I came to edit them, I realized that after all editing done to other chapters, they have become totally irrelevant and in need of rewriting. They are such tricky chapters to write, a real pain in the A**, I hope to overcome them soon.

D. Chapter 55: is in a good shape and ready to go under minor editing

E. Chapter 56-58: Yes, I will need about three more chapters to wrap things up, I hope you don’t mind, but that was the only way to avoid 10K+ words chapters.

So… sorry? And they are still in my head and not on paper yet, I'll probably take a break from posting to get them done, sorry again.

So to conclude- I might take a break after chapter 54 is out, wow, such a huge story I found here, never thought it would turn out this monster : -) But it will definitely take 60 chapters at most, this the upper limit I swear! This story is about to end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warning: Character's death, Violence

The screen went dark and quiet, and T'Elel covered her mouth with her hand to suppress a moan,
she gazed at Jim with tears welling in her eyes. "Sobar is going to hurt the children, I am sure of it!" she started breathing fast and Vedik drew near her.

"Calm down, please." Vedik tried, placing his hand on her shoulder to brace her, and the elder Commander nodded and did her best to do just that, she could not suppress a smile of gratitude and Vedik smiled back and took a respectful step back again, placing his hands behind his back.

"No one will hurt the kids." Jim reassured her as well. "This is our turn now; we are going to strike and strike hard. When they are recovered enough to know what has happened, they will be forced to give us the children if they want to regain any ground, Commander, trust me."

"Thank you, sir." the commander mumbled and wiped her wet, weary face with her gloved hand.

"Please note that Sobar did not connect his statements together." Vedik shared his observation. "He said – 'You have 4.5 hours to enjoy your safe haven', and later added 'When we meet again', he never said I'll meet you in 4.5 hours, maybe he's misleading us, maybe he only tries to push us into surrendering faster."

Jim had to marvel again at the masterful way of the Vulcans to use language; he had a renewed appreciation to Nyota for learning so many alien languages which was never only about speaking and listening to words, and maybe, just maybe he should have given Spock some more slack as well.

"Thank you Vedik, but we cannot afford to spend time analyzing and assessing Sobar's words. I'll take them at face value, we don't have much time." Jim continued "I'll assume Sobar has a plan to take the reactor's room within 4.5 hours. So no more time for meetings and plotting, but the good news is that I already have a plan, and we can start executing it in less than an hour, they won't see us coming."

T'Elel nodded again, and Jim noticed Spock, Dayton and Lieutenant Nelath walking towards them, so he gave them a big bright smile and a wave of hand.

"We are ready." Spock announced at arrival "The plan to take back Ipik is set, and all involved have been briefed. Have you made up your mind, about my positioning, Sir? Am I to stay or go with them?"

"You stay." Jim answered, deciding on the spot. "We only have this one shot, and I'm already sending our best fighters to Ipik, you'd be more useful here."

//But then, communication between the Vokau and Ipik would be problematic.// Spock insisted.

//Got that figured out already, stand by.//

"Hey, before I forget, I've solved our docking doors opening problem. More luck than brains, but you won't hear me complaining about it." Jim said for all to hear. "Turns out that there's an Enterprise officer on board the Ipik that could open them manually from within given a three minutes mark."

"How did a Federation officer found his way to Ipik?" Asked Nelath with a gasp.

"Long story." Jim brushed her off "His name is Lieutenant Sharel, an Andorian. He is a very skilled officer and will be of great help, here Lieutenant Nelath, let's introduce you to each other, and if you have more instructions for him, now would be the time."

He said that so fast to get the Lieutenant enough overwhelmed, not to question why there was a
Starfleet officer onboard the Ipik and how he was able to communicate with them.

He then fished out his comm and hailed Sharel.

"Kirk to Sharel."

"Sharel here."

"Are you in position?"

"Yes sir, in position and awaiting orders."

"Great, that's what I wanted to hear. There is someone I want you to talk to, the Ipik officer that will pick you up, well, after you open the docking bay doors to let her in, that is. Her name is Lieutenant Nelath."

"Sir?"

"There you go." Jim smiled at the young Vulcan who expected anything but to be talking to an Andorian officer right now, but then he handed her the comm "Take five, and please return me the comm when done."

Nelath looked at him with dismay, but indeed, she did not even ask how this communication was even possible at this time of peak Periapsis. She just took the comm with her gloved hand and started the conversation with Sharel, taking a few steps away from the group.

As the Ipik officer took a step back, Soren and Supak came near.

"Mr. Vedik just reported to me that you had a talk with Commander Sobar." The elderly engineer said, unable to hide his concern "What was agreed upon?"

"We agreed to disagree." Jim huffed with impatience "You're just the Chief Engineer I wanted to see, Supak, Is the tunnel ready? Is the safety equipment at stand by?"

"Affirmative, sir." Supak confirmed.

"Great news!" Jim smiled. "Oh, and Soren too, I've got one more task for you two."

"What is it, Captain?" Supak asked, completely attentive, ready to hear some more of the humans' wild ideas.

"Let's walk and talk." Jim offered, placing a hand on the elder officer's shoulder as they moved away from the rest for a few minutes.

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Jim returned alone, after giving Supak and Soren more instructions, and by this time, Nelath ended her talk with Sharel and handed him back Sharel's comm.

"Did you two coordinate your efforts??" he asked her.

"Affirmative, we are very fortunate to already have a presence onboard the Ipik."
"Yeah, I'm lucky that way." Jim shrugged.

"How are we going to keep in touch with Ipik once the shuttle is gone? Do we rely solely on Sharel's communicator?" Spock asked this time out loud.

"No, Spock, only Sharel can use his comm, it's not enough. I want you to meld with Lieutenant Nelath and establish a direct contact with her, so we'll have a mean of communicating directly with the commander of the task force."

"How?" The Ipik officer asked, her gaze traveled between Spock and Jim.

"Spock will meld with you and establish the communication this way." Jim explained.

Lieutenant Nelath glanced at Spock with disbelief. "Few are the telepaths that can maintain a meld without physical contact, let along throughout such a great distance. We have no bond between us; Commander Spock, we are neither blood nor mates."

"But we are in luck again, because Spock is a very powerful telepath and he could pull this off." Jim assured her. "You can, Spock, right?"

"I estimate my chances at 98.3% for a period of time between three to eight hours." Spock said after a while spent calculating.

"Good enough for me." Jim smiled "Dayton, ready to fly?"

"Yes, sir." The young pilot said "Gonna be a rough ride, flying blind and into hostile territory, but I can make it, sir."

"As long as you don't push the minimum, you'll do just fine." Jim affirmed him with a pat on his arm, and Dayton smiled, blushing.

"Nelath, please gather your team, T'Eel, Vedik, you are both going to join the Ipik science team, and help with maintaining the gate open and handle the red material to the best of your abilities. Dayton, you too, join the fighters after you done piloting, but be careful, you'll be the only pilot on the Ipik as far as I understand."

"You understand correctly." Lieutenant Nelath confirmed "The rest of the pilots aliened with Commander Somak. We will protect Dayton and would not allow him to take unnecessary risks."

"Good." Jim smiled "Lt. Nelath, please gather the Ipik takeover crew and bring them here, Vedik, find Supak and get the rest of our crew here, I'll say a few words. Spock, a moment of your time, pleases, guys, give us five minutes and some room, alright?"

"Yes, sir." They said, each in his turn and then scattered, all but Spock.

"What is it, Captain?" his favorite Vulcan asked when alone.

"Talked to Sobar a few moments ago, as you already know, got a vibe from him, and wished to share this with you, get your insight as well."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"The man is on the brink, Spock, I mean the Vulcan, he is a ticking time bomb, of the worst kind, he is absolutely sure he's in the right, and is trying to act all logical and all, but clearly he is almost lost. I am not sure that there's a plan B, well, maybe only in outlines, but definitely not a fully
fledged plan."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that as far as I understand it, once the 'Plak If Fee' was concluded with a 'Remain' win, Sobar just lost it. He is running against a clock that I cannot identify at the moment, but it is ticking fast, and he's desperately improvising."

"You got all this from just a few minutes of conversation?" Spock had to make sure.

"Well, yeah?" Jim shrugged.

"Interesting, but I would not be in a hurry to jump to conclusions. Remember that in their eyes, Sobar and Svern, the ritual may have not come to an end just yet."

"I know, Commander Sobar is one thing, I'll have to talk with Elder Svern as well, to learn more but we have no time for it now, and yeah, Spock, this could be nasty, a Vulcan without a plan is extremely dangerous."

"I concur; however, we need more information."

Spock was careful, way too careful for Jim's liking, and it made him lose his patient and get snarky. "Would have helped if Elder Sarek was not blocking you."

Spock did everything he could to stop himself from an eye roll. "Elder Sarek believes it's within our best interest not to converse at the moment."

"I don't like it. The situation with the guests and the Elders is our blind spot. What is happening there? Is this a hostage situation? Are some cooperating with Svern? How many? To what aim? How many of the Elder's guards are on his side? Where are they positioned? Where are the rest of the kids? Carol… So many questions and Elder Sarek holds at least some of the answers. Could you breach his shields?"

"I can, but as I have already told you, this is something an interrogator would do, not a blood related confidant. Furthermore, Elder Sarek may have no answers for you, have you taken this into consideration? Weighted it against the damage that could be done?"

Jim considered it for a while, this was a possibility, right, but in honest, he did not see why Elder Sarek would be this stubborn, oh, wait, yes, he did. But he should accept Sarek's choice for the time being, because there was nothing they could achieve from inside the reactor room, and if they fail to take back control, forcing Elder Sarek into communicating would not matter anyway.

"I guess I can wait a while longer." Jim breather out "But I hope Sarek will change his mind soon, whatever information he has, would be of tremendous help, keep on trying, ok?"

"Yes, Sir."

In the background, Kirk could see the Vulcans gather for his debriefing, there was not much time left.

"Now, meld with me, let's discuss the plan before everyone is gathered here."

"Yes, sir." Spock nodded again and reached out to Jim's Psi-points.
There was not enough time, if they linger, Sobar would get to the reactor first, and then everything will be lost; there was no other time to strike.

As requested T'Elel and Vedik gathered the remaining Vokau and Ipik crew in the reactor room for the final prep up. They assembled next to the reactor pool and formed a square with him at the center, and Spock as always, was by his side.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Kirk began, raising his voice. "In the past two hours I have conversed with the remaining senior staff and others, and now I am pleased to let you know that we have formulated a plan to take back both the Ipik and the Vokau." he informed the crowd to the sounds of relief and dismay.

"That is the good news." He continued. "The bad news is that this plan is risky, there is no guaranty of success, and we are now at 30 minutes to 'no launch', so let's make this quick." He started, greeting each with an eye contact and a nod.

"We will split into three teams, each with its own tasks to perform, we will have surprise at our side and also- Peak Periapsis will help masking our activities, as everywhere on board the Vokau, sensors are operating in less than optimal conditions which make them susceptive to false reading or no reading at all. If we play this right, it will give us a substantial leeway. Spock, if you please?"

"Sir." Spock nodded and stepped forward to make the next announcement.

"Team one:

"Team leader is Lieutenant Nelath, second in commanded Ensign Setek, pilot- Dayton parker.

"Team crew- 7 Vokau fighters, one more will join you on the Ipik, an Andorian, named Lieutenant Sharel. Commander T'Elel and Mr. Vedik that will join as well, to support the science team with the last two objectives once the first is achieved.

"Objectives- Obtain control of Ipik, Terminate dangerous experiment, and maintain the gate to new Vulcan until further notice.

"Time- 3 hours, launching after this conversation is over.

"Mark 1- touchdown, Mark 2- taking the Ipik bridge, Mark 3- ending the experiment, mark 4- control of the gate to New Vulcan.

"Team two:

"Team leader- Captain Kirk, Second in command, myself, Commander Spock.

"Team crew - 4 Vokau fighters.

"Team objectives- Secure a path for team one to shuttle bay though deck 23, and give them backup until liftoff, secure deck 3 and 2 of the Vokau, take over the Vokau bridge, aka Deck 1, regain control of the Vokau and return it to New Vulcan.

"Green 1- team 1's liftoff, Green 2- deck 2 secured, Green 3- bridge taken.
"Time- 3 hours, launching after this conversation is over.

"Team 3:

"Team leader- Commander Supak, second in command- Crewman Soren.

"Team crew: Everyone not on team 1 or 2.

"Objectives- maintain hold of the reactor chamber; give support to the other teams, prepare and keep the ship at ready for folding at a moment's notice.

"No timeline, no marks, further orders will be supplied if necessary."

Spock ended his part and step back to let Kirk take over again.

"I hope everyone knows where they are assigned, however if you have any doubts, please report to Commander Spock after this debriefing.

"Now as for general guidelines:

"Keep quiet, minimum communication, to maintain the element of surprise.

"Speaking of which, I have a surprise for you as well. The late Captain Setal and myself have managed to reinstate many of you into the system, the ones that need to know already know. This means you have back the ability to use the ship's AI, to open doors, use facilities and everything that goes along with it.

"Use the mainframe wisely, only when absolutely necessary, to maintain the element of surprise. We have peak Periapsis at our side, but that could only take us so far, I'd like to keep our renewed connection to the ship as a secret for as long as possible. Also- do not give in my position as Captain for as long as you can.

"Phasers to stun, unless your direct commander says otherwise, we are trying to defuse this situation, not escalate it, I hope to get everyone home alive no matter the side they took. Stun your opponents when you can and restrain them as much as possible.

"Any questions?"

There was silence in the room, and Jim didn't like it. He ran his eyes from one Vulcan to the other. "Come on; better ask now than guess later, there's no such thing as an illogical question." He tried encouraging the Vulcan out of their shells.

A young fighter which belonged to his team raised her hand shyly.

"Yes, Ensign." He smiled at her.

"Sir, why is deck 7 not an objective?" she asked, blushing.

"Excellent question." Jim answered with a sigh "I can give you every excuse in the book, but the fact is that we are outnumbers and must prioritize. My assumption is that once we gain the bridge, things will turn about and we'll have a chance to take over that deck, although no guarantees, our main objective is to get back to New Vulcan and there will be added elements to help us dissolve the situation. Other questions?"

"Sir, what about the guests on board?" Ask an elderly crewman, one of Supak's team.
"Again, great question, we have no information regarding their situation, we hope to learn more once we obtain the bridge. Anyone else?"

"19 minutes to 'no launch' mark." Spock reminded them all.

"Alright, thank you for your time, gather in your designated groups and await my 'Go'." Jim concluded.

Lieutenant Nelath stepped forward and approached Spock for the meld necessary to establish communication between the Ipik and the Vokau.

Jim watched as Spock placed his fingers on the young officer's temples, mumbling his mantra softly. "My mind to your mind, my thought to your thoughts." He said in his mind melting, libido inflaming voice.

Those words, sounded so intimate, and were spoken to a stranger. Jim was jealous, truly jealous, especially when they disengage and Nelath looked at Spock like he was the best thing ever, and she giggled, actually giggled, and blushed, yeah, there was defiantly an inner conversation going on, one that he was excluded from.

Great Jimbo, remember that this was your idea, when the wedding invitation arrives.

"Amazing, a meld without a bond or a touch." Nelath could not help but gasp, and give Spock an admiring look with glittering eyes.

Spock turned to face him "We are ready." He stated.

"Great." Jim almost snarled at him, and then he shouted to the open air "Team one and two into positions! Everyone, we have a Go!"

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Team 1 and 2 gathered around Jim, next to the pool and awaited Commander Supak, how returned to them with the protective suits he replicated for them for the tunnel crossing,

"I have cleared the way from white matter, the tunnel is open." He reported as everyone got dressed. "However, it was not given enough time to cool down; it will be hot in there."

"How hot?" Jim asked as he suited up, the grey suit reminded Kirk of the archaic diver suits before they invented oxygen tanks, heavy, stiff and clumsy, no way of fighting inside this suit, but it was the only way down to deck 23 without disconnecting the protective force field.

"Unpleasantly hot, even for a Vulcan. This was never done before. No one ever had used the maintenance tunnel while one or more reactors were operational."

"First time for everything."

"You should cross in groups of three, to safeguard each other but also minimize risk, and please cross as fast as you can, less than seven minutes, if you can, radiation exposure is a crucial factor." The Engineer was clearly unhappy about this plan.
Jim raised his head to make sure everyone was on the same page.

"You've heard the commander, get into groups of three, Spock, Xon and I will be first, Dayton, Nelath and Setek, you are the last trio, everyone, keep calm and move with cautious. The element of surprise will be on our side, so I don't expect too much resistance, good luck to all." He finished and returned to look at Supak. "Thank you commander, you have your own missions, see you again within an hour." He smiled and put his heavy helmet on.

They crossed the tunnel in groups of three, first Spock, then he, and Xon completed the first trio. Supak was right, this crossing was very unpleasant, felt like he was walking through a furnace, hot, narrow and suffocating furnace. Luckily for him, Spock was very resilient, and he helped both him and Xon down faster than they could without his help.

He reemerge from the other side of the tunnel to find himself in deck 23, as the secondary reactor room, but this was a much smaller room, a much colder one and it was empty and dark.

He claimed out of the pool tunnel, the ladder continued on until it reached the flooring, and then Jim realized with some puzzlement that this room was upside down in some regards to the other. The two white matter pools were constructed back to back, and so did the cores, and the pool on this room was on its roof, instead of the floor. There was probably some fancy gravity manipulations involved, that the rest of the federation could only envy.

Jim never knew this could be done in such a way, in Yorktown it was done, alright, but Yorktown was huge, and here this was done between two sequential decks, boy, Vulcan technology was amazing.

Spock helped him out of the fuming suit, and then turned his attention to help the new arrivals, so Jim and Xon took out their phasers to secure the area while the rest were crossing in. There was not much to secure, though, this reactor room looked very much deserted.

With the last three to arrive, Dayton with the two Ipik officers, Jim and Xon turned to locate the Emergency door, leading to the shuttles' docking bay. This would now be their first test, to see if they can fully access the system, and if there will be any resistance; it will be behind that door.

The door was easy to recognize, it had "Emergency Evacuation" painted all over it in bright yellow colored letters, and there were some green flashing lights at each side, Jim didn't need to know how to read Vulcan in order to understand its function.

"Here!" He called out for at quietly as he could and waved to the rest of the team to join. "Phasers on stun." Jim commanded the task-force, he didn't like it, but he knew that there was no other choice, failing was not an option.

"Ready at your command." Spock confirmed after surveying the group and watching them fall into formation at the two sides of the door.

"Computer, open shuttle-bay door." Jim commanded, unable to hide his unnerve while waiting on the Ship's AI to obey.

"Deck 23, Emergency docking bay door is opening." The familiar male voice of the AI confirmed, as the large door quickly rose up with a whoosh, and disappeared into the Deck's ceiling, to reveal the next room.

There was no one awaiting them at the other side, bless the element of surprise.

"Go!" Jim commanded and was the first to charge.
Two of Sobar's men were on the other side, but further into the bay hall itself, and they definitely
were not expecting the door to open, they were actually with their back to it, and unconscious
before they could reach the comm and ask for reinforcement.

"Tie them down." He ordered one of his fighters, as they stepped over the passed out guards and
moved forwards to take front positions.

That door opened into a wide hall, and team 2, led by Jim, raced it towards the two shuttles
stationed there, taking down two more security soldiers who guarded those shuttles.

Jim signaled for his men to take position in the hall, secure corners and strategic points of view. He
approached one of the shuttles and took a walk around it, to eliminate more threats if there were
any; Dayton was not far behind him.

"It is unlocked." Dayton reported, as he ducked under the floor of the shuttle and pressed a button
there to open its doors.

"Only logical." Jim commented "Must be ready for an emergence evacuation at all times." He
continued, phaser at ready, eyes always scanning for threats.

"It's for ten passengers and two pilots will be a bit crowded." Dayton continued "I need about 20 to
get it flying." Dayton informed him.

"Get it done." Jim nodded. He glanced at the young Ensign for a short while, feeling guilty about
not informing him of Carol's situation, but he wasn't sure how Dayton would react, and he could
not afforded a pilot falling apart.

"Docking bay is clear." Someone shouted from afar, Spock, after returning from a brief tour of the
premises.

Somewhat relieved, but none the less, holding his phaser at ready Jim side-glance at the Ensign
"Dayton, I am going ahead to secure the perimeter from the outside, the docking bay is clear. Good
luck to you."

"Roger that, thank you." Dayton answered, already inside the shuttle and making preparations.

Jim left Yorktown and the docking bay, to venture into the corridors surrounding it. It was a maze,
big enough to lose sight of his other team mates, but the risk was worth it, because he had bumped
into another surprised patrol guard, stunned him out and locked him up to a nearby room with his
high clearance.

He continued to navigate alone, entering rooms and wondering through passageways, maybe this
was a bad idea, but he could not help himself, amazed at how big the Vokau really was and how
many rooms and functions it had that he knew nothing of. Every room seemed to reveal a new
mystery, strange equipment, unseen before, advanced technologies he could not even fathom what
they were used for, there was nothing Jim wanted more but to study the Vokau inside and out, and
there was no way to allow the Romulans to lay their hands on it.

Everywhere he went, he met no further resistance, Sobar's forces were spread thin, indeed, yet
retaining the element of surprise was still the crucial key to their success, Jim hoped no one had
time to report to bridge about the attack before they were neutralized, as so he went on, seeking
engagement, just to make sure.

//Jim, where are you?// Spock asked in his mind.
Wow, he lost track of time, was half an hour already gone? //On my way.//

Team 1 was now heading to Ipik, and team 2 assembled back at the hall of the emergency shuttle bay to gear up and climb up (or down) the tunnel back to deck 22. They had no casualties and no wounded, but they were also down by 11, that went onboard the shuttle.

Now they had to climb up/down that hellish tunnel again, enough to develop claustrophobia, something Jim never had a problem with before.

"Ok, we head back to deck 22, and stand by for mark 1." He said and positioned himself at the pool, next to the ladder, counting the six Vulcans as they made their way back, so no one would be lost. As the last one pulled back, he left his guarding position and got back in himself.

Back at the hot, red lit Deck, Spock helped him again out of his heavy suit, he smiled his thanks to him and picked up his comm as he entered and hailed Sharel. "Your pickup is on the way, ETA 20 minutes." He informed the Andorian. "Retain position, standby"

"Roger that." Sharel answered "I'll keep you posted."

"Minimum comm usage." Jim reminded him.

"Understood, Sharel out."

He found the rest of the Vulcans gathered at the reactor room, some having a quiet conversation, others meditated.

Supak came near to report to him "I have now flooded the tunnel with white matter again; the connection to deck 23 is now sealed."

"Great, is Soren back?"

"Yes, sir, he awaits you at the staffroom." The old officer confirmed.

"We await mark 1, and then we continue." Jim reminded them all "ETA 30 minutes, Spock, you're on it?"

"Yes, sir." Spock nodded.

"Great, now excuse me, Soren is waiting."

He departure from the rest and went searching for Soren, found him in the staff room, holding a dusty PADD.

"Is it done?" he asked the crewman as he entered the room, closing the door behind them.

"My part is done, yes, you're up next." The elder tech confirmed with a smile.
"Great, walk me through it."

"Walk you through it? Never knew you can walk through walls, sir." Soren said with much amusement.

"Please explain to me what I need to do." Jim rephrased, grabbing a seat and taking the PADD in his hands.

He gave the display a brief view, locating the main elements and the way they related to each other, and then he looked up at Soren and awaited his report. The elder Tech pulled his chair closer and peeked over Jim's shoulder at the same document.

"It is an older version, not up to date." The crewman said "However, the relevant data remains the same. You will have to know it by hard, Sir, taking this with you might give this illogical plan away."

"Yeah, I know." Jim hummed and returned his eyes to the PADD to study the schematics before him. "But I have a good visual memory, what am I looking at?"

"This big tank over here? It is the relevant reactor on Deck 21. As you ordered, I went there, while you escorted the shuttle out, and played with the parameters to shift the reaction to produce maximum N2O."

"Is the switch detectable?"

"It is, sir, but only if you know what you're looking for, this is such a minor reactor, and in a very low priority, chances are it will be overlooked, 89.4% chance, if that number interests you, plus, even if it will be detected, chances are they will not consider the ramifications, not until it is too late, 93.7% chance for a miss, if that number hold your interest. Also, chances for them fixing the problem before running out of time are 0.33%, should this be relevant to you."

"Why not, those are reassuring numbers, right?" Jim smiled.

"Very illogical of you, Mr. Kirk, a number is only a number." Soren scolded him gently and then continued. "The outlet of this reactor, I connected it to this tube, number #3365, please remember the number, this is an important one. That is the tube of oxygen from life support system, going all the way into Deck 7.

"Problem is there is a spilt at the main maintenance center, to serve all deck from 7 to 1, and your part is to go there and divert all the flow strictly to deck 7, or else the material will be dispensed too slowly for us to achieve our goal in a logical amount of time."

"We need to shut down the flow of tube #3365 for anywhere else but deck 7."

"Correct you are, Mr. Krik, I mean, Kirk."

"But does that mean no oxygen for decks 6-1? No way nobody notices this. And there must be backup tubes to deck 7 as well, right?"

"Indeed, Captain, very logical. This is why, once you are in the maintenance center, you will also divert backup tubes from feeding deck 1-7, #3447 and #3464, then you also reconnect the decks to a back-up feed, tubes #6211A to D, remember all those numbers as well. No one should mind the switch or run out of breath, only N2O enriched flow will go directly to deck 7, would you be interested the statistics?."
"No thanks, Soren….Ok, got the idea." Jim huffed "But how to actually do that?"

"Not only gas flow valves are involved, Captain, you must also disconnect automatic sensor alarms, cut the standalone sensor feed into the mainframe and disable some air filters. You must operate in a very strict order, one misstep will ruin everything."

"Wow, complicated."

"Indeed. Improbable, even." Soren agreed and sighed "But I was willing to give it a try, although I don’t know why. You are positive not to give this task to a Vulcan? Spock, perhaps?"

"Hey, I can do it!" Jim pouted at the insult. "Besides, I need Spock’s muscle power to secure the maintenance center; he gives us an edge the other side doesn't have. Having him on this would be a waste of that edge."

Soren said nothing to that, instead he pressed on the PADD to reveal the next document. "This is why I have created a list too, you see? The order of operations. Has all vulvae and buttons numbers in it, their starting position vs required position, all listed at the order of operations. Read this very carefully, study by hard."

Jim nodded, taking everything into memory. "Thank you, very helpful." He continued to study the text with Soren waiting patiently by his side. "Question, Mr. Soren."

"Yes, sir?"

"Once I set the system correctly, how much time do we need?"

"Approximately 8 hours for the accumulated dosage to be achieved"

"Approximately?"

"Biology is not an accurate science." Soren answered, and Jim frowned, he didn’t like this answer so much.

"Eight hours from when?"

"From when you finish adjusting the system at the Maintenance center, at Deck 9."

"Can’t we cut it shorter? Eight hours is not something I can guaranty."

"I'm sorry sir, but we are talking about flooding a big section. We have to do it slowly and evenly. A higher rate, and there would be a local accumulation, when one drops before others, we'll be detected, you know. Above the safe rate we are also risking setting off the fail-safe alarm. We need it to simulate a malfunction, a none priority malfunction."

"And if I give the system a false negative? You know we control the mainframe now."

"Not a complete solution." Soren explained "I've already told you, some of the sensors are independent of the mainframe, for fail-safe reasons. And don’t forget that from a certain concentration Vulcans can actually smell N2O, so we don’t want to achieve a local overdose, but I do agree, this is a complicated process, easier to execute once you take over the bridge. Why don’t you take over the bridge first?"

It was Jim's turn to disagree, and he shook his head slowly. "No, taking the bridge is a gamble, this is out backup plan, I need this to work in the background regardless of our success or failure. You
might have to pick things up if we fail and die."

"Let's hope that you don't die, I like you, Captain." Soren said, although hope and like were both illogical.

Jim breathed. "And I hope we can find a way to burn 8 hours." He mumbled and turned his attention to the PADD again. "Thank you, Mr. Soren, for everything, I am sure you are super busy, but I need a few more minutes to study this." Jim smiled at the tech "So, you may leave now."

The Tech got up to his feet as soon as he was dismissed and walked to the door, but then he stopped and looked back at the human "Do not forget to…"

"Yeah, yeah, I will erase everything before leaving, no worries." Jim smiled, never taking his eyes off the screen. There was a lot to study, in a very short period of time.

Sometime later, Spock announced in his head //Mark 1, minus 5 minutes./.

//Thanks, Spock, five more minutes, roger.//

//Granted.//

Jim took out his comm. "Kirk to Sharel."

"Sharel here."

"Proceed to open the docking bay doors."

"On my way, Sharel out." The Andorian said and disconnected.

Jim placed the comm back on his belt and returned his attention to the table before him.

//Mark 1.// Spock reported after a few moments. //We need to go.//

//On my way.// Jim stretched in his seat, he hoped he got everything correctly. He deleted the data on the PADD and left the staff room.

***0***

He found Spock outside by the white matter pool, next to T'Elel working station.

"Did Sobar or Svern tried to hail us again?" he asked his XO. "Did they pick up on Ipik?"

"According to Nelath, negative to both." Spock answered. "Peak Periapsis provided a perfect cover, 95% of all types of outside sensors are temporarily out of commission, so the shuttle liftoff and touchdown went undetected. Mr. Parker and Mr. Sharel preformed their part adequately."

"Our boy, Yorktown." Jim cooed "I'm so proud, we raised him well, didn't we?" he gave Spock a bright smile and a pat on his back.

Spock did not know how to react to that, he just returned Jim a puzzled gazed without blinking, and to that Jim only shook his head, luckily, the shuttle landed batter than his joke. So he returned to business, lifted up his gaze and located his team in the room.
"Alright, team 2, we have touchdown!" He shouted at them. "I repeat, our shuttle had landed safely on Ipik. You know what that means, we are good to go! Fall into form at Exit door number 1, please! Team 3, give us cover, phasers on stun." Jim continued and his voice echoed in the now almost empty reactor room.

"Yes, sir." The Vulcans answered and gathered next to the main door they were about to open.

Jim aimed his phaser and held his breath, there was no way they will be this lucky again, and that door was probably more guarded then the one leading to the shuttle bay, but again, their attack at deck 23 might have sent Sobar's men to reinforce it, thinking that the breach will occur there, so there was no way of knowing, actually.

"Opening main door, number one." Supak announced form his position.

Sobar's men were ready this time and as the door opened they opened fire, but there were only five of them and fifteen with Jim, they were taken down after a short fire exchange. From the corner of his eyes, Jim could see two Vulcans of the third team going down, and it was unclear if they were stun, dead or wounded.

He wanted to investigate, but someone blocked him and shoved him forward, Commander Supak.

"Go! There's no time to linger!" the older officer shouted at him "We will handle this!"

And he was right, the rest of his team was already out the door, and any minute now, a backup team might get there to replace the ones that went down.

Jim nodded "Good luck." He said to the old engineer, and left the reactor chamber. Behind him, Commander Supak was already starting to close the door, running it on its tracks again.

The six of them gathered at the edge of the hall, and Jim turned to look at Xon. "Your turn, Ensign, take us to deck 9 undetected, without using the ship'd AI."

Xon nodded, he knew many pathways in this ship, as the Captain's son, and as a kid growing up in this ship from the moment of its construction, and even Sobar was not familiar with all the paths Xon knew.

They started the climb from deck 22 to deck 9, a long way to go, through maintenance tunnels and small hidden staircases, climbing up ladders, crawling in pipe lines, avoiding highly supervised areas and taking random detours just to keep their route on the verge of illogic.

That last tactics was Jim's idea, and the Vulcans gasped, as he suggested those random, illogical turns, but showed remarkable understanding.

Jim found out, quite at the start of this climb that he was wounded. He had a large burn on his left shoulder, probably from the heat wave that surrounded each phaser shot. It hurt like fuck, but he was lucky to be alive so he shut up about it. He considered asking Spock to block the pain path but decided against it, because Spock had enough on his mind, pun intended, and he didn’t want to fry his own brain any further.
They reached deck 5 about an hour later, and took a break at a communication pipe, finding their seats among cables and wires, and used the time to breathe, eat and drink.

Spock sat next to Jim; he wanted to examine his wound.

"Hey, no touching!" Jim hissed as Spock tugged at his shirt. "If you pull at the fabric, it might start bleeding again, and that would spell a whole world of trouble."

"It will get infected later." Spock argued.

"If there's a later, we'll worry about it then. Any News from Lieutenant Nelath?"

"Have you missed my mark 2 announcement?"

"When?"

"13.4 minutes ago."

"Probably was too busy feeling sorry for myself."

"Lieutenant Nelath encountered less resistance that anticipated, Somak had more dead and wounded on the Ipik than previously estimated. Nelath took the bridge, capturing Elder Svern's Son, and now they are trying to stop the experiment and stabilize the conditions on the star-base."

"Great news." Jim smiled at Spock, but something was off, the smell of upcoming bad news.

"Team 1 had suffered some losses."

Jim breathed deeply; losing his smile "Hit me." He leaned his head against the bulkhead.

"Four dead, two wounded. We have lost Lieutenant Sharel, sir, Commander T'Eelel is wounded, her state is unclear."

"Are you sure Sharel is KIA? Do we have confirmation?"

"Indeed, Lt. Nelath reported that she was present at that moment, he saved her life."

"Fuck." Jim hissed and bumped a fist into the wall in frustration. "Dayton? Vedik?"

"They are well."

"Contact Nelath and tell her to prepare for evacuation, tell Dayton to prepare a shuttle again, a one that can carry all the wounded and the dead from both sides to New Vulcan, everyone on Ipik must be evacuated as soon as I give them a go."

"Yes, sir." Spock said and returned into a state of meditation, which Jim assumed, was his way of delivering that order.

"Tell her to expect a shuttle from the Vokau that will use the gate to cross to New Vulcan as soon as she gives me a clear."

Spock hummed without opening his eyes, probably conversing with his bride to be, Jim watched him and waited.

After a few moments, Spock returned his attention to his surroundings, searching for Jim's eyes.
"The Lieutenant received your orders and will make preparations to evacuate the Ipik as soon as the situation there is stabilized. She also conveyed that the shuttle from the Vokau may pass at their convenience, the gate is stable and open." He reported.

"Thanks Spock, so we also got the mark 4." Jim picked himself up and fetched his comm to hail. "Kirk to Sulu."

"Sulu here."

"Hey, how are you all doing?"

"The kids are remarkably disciplined; my leg is numb, other than that, there is nothing new to report."

"You have a go. Prepare the shuttle and once done, load the kids up and fly to Ipik, the gate to Vulcan is open and the path is clear, you have a go to use the gate and cross into New Vulcan."

"Is Ipik safe?"

"Ipik is under control, but you'll have to move fast, we don't know how longer it will stay that way, so you must fly now. And Sulu…"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Once you reach New Vulcan, tell them to switch to planetary alert."

"What? Why?"

"A safety measure, do that and ask them to alert nearby Starfleet vessels."

"Really? Why?"

"A hunch, they might have unexpected company soon."

Yes, Romulan, even.

"Sir, what kind of company?" Sulu read his mind, which sparked a brand new idea in Jim's mind along with a brand new fright.

"Also tell them to change their codes for the planetary protection array while at it, and keep it on the hush, make it ASAP."

"What?! Why?! How?!"

"Sulu, we're running out of time, I must go."

"But sir, I'm not supposed to say anything about the 'Plak If fee', remember? Mind wipe and all? How am I going to convince them to do all you ask? Some major, dramatic changes, no one there knows me, I'm just a random human guy, coming out of nowhere with a bunch of kids! I need a way to… "

"Damn it, make something up!! Must I think about everything all by myself? I must go! Got my own objectives to reach! You have a brain, Hikaru, use it!! And you also have Uhura, don't we forget! She can talk anyone to anything!"

"You're right, Sir, we'll think of something." The helmsman breathed out and Jim already felt sorry.
"Inform me before liftoff, to say goodbye." He said with a lower voice.

"Goodbye?"

"Indulge me, no drama."

"Yes, sir."

"Kirk out."

Jim let a wave of pain wash all over him, trying his best not to move or cry out loud, and when it was over, he breathed out and looked at Spock with a smile, then ran his gaze on his crew.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, break is over."

Chapter End Notes

Was it good news or bad news to know I need more chapters? I wonder.... lol... And the last ones are going to be so emotional, the most difficult kind for me to write... oh, well, I'll worry about it later.

Thanks again for your time reading! I hope to get more of your wonderful feedback, and as always, take care!
Hey again, how are you? Still here enjoying this crazy long story? Great, thank you very much and please leave me a review or a comment, it will give me great joy!

Just so you know, I had to edit last chapter (chapter 50), made a very minor change, replaced the time frame for Soren and Jim's plan, it has no affect on that chapter but it will be important for the next few ones.

This chapter is dedicated to few of the readers that have accompanied me in this story from almost the very beginning-

Dear Sophie, Jaylen0827, Lisaly75, SandyWormbook, Gabrielle and of course, the wonderful Nimrodel.

Thank you all for your constant support, your kind words, your encouragement and help. You have no idea how much strength you gave me to push forwards, in time of low spirit you lifted me up!

Additional warnings: Super long, all work and no play, violence, some mature language, Sorry, not sorry.

Deck 9 was still in total disarray as the first time they found it, the bodies still laid on the floor, which made Jim frown because it meant that no one had the time or the decency to evacuate them poor sods, and there was nothing he could do about it either.

They reached the maintenance HQ again, which was still glowing with all sorts of warning lights like a crowded dance floor in peak hour.

"Secure the exits." Spock commanded the rest of their team, while Jim tried to locate the relevant console to perform his task.

He found it in a large side room, which one of its walls was covered in an array of tubes, coming out from the floor and going into the ceiling, twisting and turning around each other like a super highway.

There were so many valves, so many buttons, so many pipes and it made Jim's head spin. If he screws this up, there is no coming back from, now that was a though to make a sound person go hyperventilate, no need for attention disorder of any kind for that.

Focus, James Tiberius, focus.

Remember Soren's schematics and setup list, one step at a time.

He took in a deep breath and began working.
Time stood still for a while, or ran as usual, just outside his bubble, but he managed to create the wanted configuration manually, without using the mainframe, as planned, redirecting the airflow to deck 7 as planned, to flood it with N2O, as Soren instructed him, or at least he though he did.

//Jim?//  Spock poked into his head.
//Problems?//
//No, but we need to move, we are getting behind schedule.//
//Five more minutes, please. What time is it anyway?//
//23:08.//

So they where 15 hours into this mess, flew by like a second.
//Mark it and start an 8 hours countdown to Endgame at 31:08.//
//Understood.//

Jim gave his work a last once-over, whatever it is, it is, or Kaidth, as they say; if he touches any more buttons he feared he'd do more damage than good. There was nothing to do now but hail the reactor's room with Sharel's comm.

"Kirk to Supak."

"Supak here." Came the husky voice of the elder Chief Engineer.

"Is our distraction at ready?"

"Almost, Captain, we are still in the midst of reprogramming."

"Time?"

"Fifteen minutes, at most."

"Good. Did Sobar or Svern hailed you after we left?"

"Negative, sir."

"Also good. May I speak to Mr. Soren?"

"A moment, sir."

There was statics for a while and then Soren went up.

"Mr. Kirk, I am so pleased to hear from you." Soren voice filled the air.

"Same, elevator guy." Jim smiled at the walls. "I think I'm finished here."

"Are you sure?"

"As I could possibly ever be, yeah, can you monitor the situation from your end? Give me a head's up if there's a problem?"

"Of course, Captain."
"Also, I need you to clear the way, as we planned."

"Already at the bridge, sir?"

"In twenty minutes, if Spock is correct." But Spock was always correct, so no worries.

"Understood, Mr. Krik, will do."

"Great, Krik out."

//Jim, we must go.// Spock's voice came back into his mind.

No rest for the wicked, Jim sighed and nodded. //On my way.//

***0***

Deck three and two were mostly clear, they swept through them without much resistant, stunning six guards on the way and leaving them behind, as Spock restrained them. Sobar's forces were really spread thin; and their main objective was to secure deck 7. Jim wondered how many of them concentrated at the bridge; well, he did not have much time to wonder about it, as they steadily made their way there.

The bridge was the entire first deck, which made it the smallest deck of them all, but it was also the third most fortified place on the ship.

There were four ways into that deck from ship side, the first was the main elevator, that they should not use, not to alert the bridge crew, the second was the maintenance shaft, parallel to said elevator, the third was the main stair case, all three ending at an entrance hall, in front of large, fortified, sealed door that led into the actual bridge itself.

The last rout was an escape route, a ceiling door at deck 2, or in case of the bridge, a floor hatch; that opened up at the very center of the bridge itself, right behind the Captain's chair. It was locked by the acting Captain code, but he used emergency protocols to assume command, so the true Captain's code was able to override it.

They gathered next to that hatch and awaited a go from Supak, when Spock suddenly reported. "Mark 3 was just received from Ipik."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock."

Good news, the dangerous experiment Svern insisted on conducting was now stopped, and Jim wondered if Sobar or Svern could pick it up from the sensors that still operated and were under their control.

But there was nothing they could do about it, unless they were ready to send a shuttle of their own reinforcement to try and assume back command of the Ipik, which soon will no longer be an option, if Jim's plan continues to go smoothly.

"Great news, Spock, did you send them Green 2?"
"Yes, I did."

"Supak to Kirk." Jim's comm chirped.

"Kirk here."

"Distraction is at ready."

"Count to three and send it in." Jim smiled.

Oh, how he wished he could see and hear what was about to go on the bridge, but sadly, it was soundproof.

"On my three, now." Spock said and climbed the short ladder leading to the ceiling hatch. He grabbed at the handle, with his free hand and awaited as Jim followed, the rest needed to wait for more room.

"One, two… three!"

Spock launched himself forwards, and Jim tailed after him into the bridge. As he entered, he could see Spock already engaged in a hand to hand fight with Kuvac and at least three more security guards, but Jim could not linger and watch him fight, because he had troubles of his own.

Inside the bridge, there was already mayhem, as the practice drones from the Gym were sent in and were creating havoc, waving around their padded Lirpas. Only two of the five of them were still operational after the transport, but they were set on maximum level and demanded the attention of the guards on board.

This distraction was enough to let Spock and the rest of the team enter the Bridge without being immediately shot at, which was great because they had to emerge one by one from the hatch, under great disadvantage.

But while all eyes on Spock or the raging drones, Jim was able to stun two officers, before Sobar jumped on him and slammed him to the ground.

That Vulcan was so damn heavy, and so strong, even more so, while fueled by rage. His blue eyes that gazed straight into Jim's were burning with ice ire, and Jim feared that this was it, Sobar was going to tear him apart now, limb by limb, like he had promised, and there was nothing he could do about it.

By sheer luck, Jim managed to avoid a punch that would have shuttered his jawbone, and he wiggled on the floor, trying to free himself from Sobar's lethal hold, the Vulcan used his weight to trap him underneath, and as much as Jim wiggled to get free, he just could not.

Funny, how intimate this position was, Sobar's mass pressed on him, body aliened perfectly against his own, Jim could smell the Vulcan's scent, feel the heat of his skin, hear the purring roar that rumbled deep in his chest.

And he hitched his breath as Sobar's bare hands reached for his throat, was going to snap it? Or worst? Tear his head off his neck? Would only take one more second to know for sure, it's been a long time since Jim had been this afraid, he screamed and closed his eyes, awaiting the pain, but somehow the snap never came, and Sobar's hot body fell on him, limp and unmoving.

It was Spock, who managed to stun the acting Captain with a nerve pinch, at the last possible second, Jim peeked passed Sobar's shoulder to look at the hybrid, unable to form his gratitude into
words or even into a coherent though.

Spock peeled Sobar's unconscious body off Jim and tossed him with excess force into a corner of the hall, where he crushed into a bulkhead with a bang, and collapsed into an awkward position on the floor.

//Are you harmed?// Spock asked with alarm, reaching out his own naked hand to hoist him up to his feet.

//He had his bare hands on me, I don’t know what he was able to snatch out of my mind.// Jim confessed, still trying to regulate his breathing.

//I have reason to believe his only focus was on killing you, at least this was what I managed to read from him.//

//I sure hope so.// Jim reached for the offered hand and hurried up on his feet, just in time to aim his phaser and fire at T'Heli, who was sneaked on Xon from behind, and she too, dropped on the floor without grace.

In the mean while, Spock snatched a Lirpa from the hands of one the Drones that was still running amok and used it to behead it, and its robotic body crushed on the floor, shooting sparks.

Silence fell on the bridge as well, swift and sudden.

Jim looked around to see that between the six of them, the element of surprise, and the overconfidence that prevented Sobar's crew from wearing anti stun armor on the bride, they have managed to overcome all the officers in the room, 14 in number.

"Status?" Jim commanded after catching his breath, his throat hurt like a sonuvabitch, and was probably busy sprouting a black marking on it in the shape of a collar.

"We have the bridge, sir." Xon announced.

"Yet, we do not have much time." Spock muttered as he turned to help the others in handcuffing Sobar's bridge crew. "They will recover in minutes."

"Computer, take off all brig force-fields." Jim ordered.

"Brig force-fields are now off line." The commuter answered.

"Computer, cancel bridge override of brig."

"Brig is in now returned to local control."

"Computer, reduce security level of all personal included in the 'Renegade' list to 'level one' guests.'"

"Members of 'Renegade' list now have 'level one' guest's authorization." The ship's AI confirmed.

Now everyone they could identify or suspect as part of the coup was able to flush the toilets, use the inner comm system, replicate food and perform other, minimal operations necessary for staying alive, but nothing more.

Which was far more generous treatment that what Sobar has gave them earlier, taking them off the system completely, rendering them helpless and isolated.
Soren has categorized that group, including every known and suspected mutiny collaborator in that list, it was not perfect, and some must have gotten away, but it was the best they could come up with, and they will deal with the complications as they manifest themselves.

"Computer, seal every entrance and exit to deck 7 to respond to senior staff level of clearance only."

"Deck 7 in now completely sealed and could only be unsealed by level 50 clearance and above."

Jim turned to Spock with a weary yet bright smile "Did I ever tell you how much I love the Vokau's AI?"

"Not yet, sir." Spock answered, he was next to the comm station and a signal caught his attention. "Sir, we are being hailed, the hail bares Elder Svern signature."

Jim smiled bitterly. "Well, this answers some questions, don't you think?"

"We should answer the call." Spock suggested.

"Computer, transfer the call to the main screen." Jim commanded.

"Acknowledged." The AI confirmed, and now the hailing request flicked on the main screen. "Impending call from 'The Temple of the Mind'."

"Computer, end call." Jim ordered much to Spock's dismay and the computer obeyed and now the bridge was quiet again, so he turned to the Vulcan with a smile "Take Sobar's crew to the brig, I'll handle Elder Svern."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, yeah, I will surly ignore all his hails."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

Jim only shrugged. "How much time to endgame?"

"7.3 hours." Spock answered.

"I'll ignore him till then." Jim offered Spock another bright smile which was still not returned.

"You are taking a significant risk with this tactic, Captain." Spock warned.

"I know, I want Elder Svern frustrated, I want him to make a mistake, blow his cover for once and for all."

"May I remind you that Elder Svern may hold hostages, and use them in his frustration?"

Jim just shrugged again, his left shoulder protested against it, reminding him of the burn. "He won't, not that fast, he'll make other mistakes first. Please take the prisoners to the brig, Mr. Spock." Jim repeated his commanded, and Svern made a second attempt at hailing.

"It is unwise." Spock concluded, but went on to do Jim's bidding anyway.
Jim was left alone on the bridge, while the Vulcans were taking their unconscious prisoners to the brig. And now, came the moment he had fanaticized about ever since he came on board, never thought this would ever become a reality, he moved towards the Vokau’s chair.

The bridge was organized almost as the Enterprise Bridge, and the chair was right in the middle of it. A nice, comfy chair, colored with a dark shade of vermilion, and with a touchpad at each hand rest. Jim patted the smooth outline of the chair, and it was nice and soft and velvety, it smelled nice too, reminded him of Spock’s incense, he drew a deep breath and set on it. It didn't fit his as perfectly as the Enterprise chair, but was close enough.

It was nice sitting on the Vokau's chair, smiling to himself, with no one to watch him in the room, he swung around like a child, until he felt dizzy, and then the computer spoke again. "There is a hail from the Temple of the mind on deck 7 for the bridge."

"Ignore." Jim almost chuckled now; it was such a perfect moment, shame to spoil it by talking with that Vulcan. "Computer, hail Reactor room."

The computer complied and on the main screen, there appeared Supak, the infrastructure officer.

"Hello, commander!" Jim smiled at him.

"I see that the bridge is in our control." The elder officer stated.

"Yes it is." Jim confirmed, smiling still, giddy with the drop of tension. "Could we go back home now, Commander Supak?"

"Home? New Vulcan, I presume?"

"Yes, New Vulcan." Out of this weird universe where the suns are green and physics is bizarre.

"We could fold within ten hours, sir."

"Ten? But you told me the reactor would be ready in three and a half hours, we are well passed that mark."

"The reactor is ready." Supak conformed "However, it is not the only mechanism needed for the fold; other parts of the system are still affected by the radiation of peak Periapsis, which will be over in ten more hours."

"But Ipik can open a gate."

"Ipik uses red matter, a more powerful folding technique, the Vokau relays on natural gateways between universes, which are now affected by high radiation. As soon as the secondary star moves away to 7 times of minimum radius, the peak will be over and we could fold back home."

"Ok, I'm gonna ask a stupid question, because if this was an option you’d probably have suggested it by now, but why can't we use impulse drive to move away from the Periapsis and fold from there?"

Supak looked at him for a long while before realizing he was new to the ship. "The Vokau has no thrust engines of any sort, Sir; it is too big for such delicate maneuvers.

When it was built we knew that placing impulse engines array would be inefficient and even dangerous to the ship's integrity, in case of a force filed failure, so it uses warp or it folds, but otherwise is stationary."
"Now, that was something I should have known before creating this plan." Jim frowned, always something would be missed, no matter how hard you try, must be an iteration of Murphy's Law.

"You never asked me about Impulse drive or about the whole folding process before, if my memory serves me right." Supak stated and was absolutely right, and Jim tried his best to contain his frustration.

"I know; my bad." Jim breathed out. "May I speak to Soren, Commander?"

"Affirmative, he is next to me."

"Captain Kirk, I see you have taken the bridge, congratulations." Soren pushed himself into the frame with a smile on his face. Now that was a warm greeting that the tech gave him.

"Thank you, Mr. Soren." Kirk beamed back at him and spun the chair again, a smooth, fast spin. "I like this one, very stable, soft and ergonomic, you should try it too."

"Another time, maybe. I am following the progress if you have wanted to ask, 7.2 hours to count down, no sensor has responded yet."

"I see, still a long way to go." Jim breathed "Remember, if anything goes wrong, I'm the first to know."

"I remember." Soren nodded and disconnected.

Sulu hailed next, and so did Svern, and a few Vulcans entered the bridge, led by Ensign Xon, all at the same time.

"Kirk here." He chose to answer Sulu, ignore Svern and nod to the newcomers with a smile, gesturing them to get in and wait.

"We are ready to go, Sir." His helmsmen said. "Took me a bit longer than expected, I am not at the top my game."

"Only natural, don’t beat yourself up. Did you meet any resistance?"

"No, the shuttle bay was not guarded; I think that they have pulled out all their forces from there for one reason or another."

"Wonderful news, I hope New Vulcan will cooperate and do what needs to be done."

"Me too, sir."

"And when you land, let Uhura take over the mission, gotta take care of that leg."

"Will do."

Now Jim almost sighed, almost choking on unshed tears, this might be their final goodbye, he was pretty sure of it, but no drama, he promised, no drama.

"Have a safe flight; Hikaru, I hope to see you on the other side."

"I hope so too, Captain, Sulu out."

As soon as he hung up, Ensign Xon approached him. "Sir, those are bridge officers of last night Gamma shift, they were loyal to Captain Setal and so were placed in the Brig by commander
"Nice to meet you all, live long and prosper." Jim said and reviewed them, wondering if he will be able to remember their names in his state. "I am Captain James Kirk, you must know me by now from the 'Plak If Fee.', I was granted a mandate from Captain Setal to take charge here so we could all go back home. I wish to get to know you."

"Tuvon, Lieutenant, a junior comm officer." Said one of the males, a dark skinned one and the tallest Vulcan Jim had ever seen so far, half a head taller than Spock.

"T'Dara, Ensign, a pilot in training." Said a drop dead gorgeous female, but he had no time to drool at the sight.

"Yes, I see." Jim nodded "And you are?" he turned to the next officers.

"Soret, Ensign, the forth navigator, also in training." Said the young male.

"Kellet, Lieutenant, a sensor array controller." Said an elder female.

"Welcome to the bridge, I'll be your commanding officer for a while, please take your respected stations. Our objective is to get this ship and everyone on board safely home; I assume you can rally behind that."

"Yes, sir." Some said.

"Yes, Captain." Said the others.

"May I have a word?" asked the comm officer with a certain degree of unease, but it seemed like he really needed to say something and had everyone's back up for it.

"Yes, Lieutenant Tuvon, shoot."

"I believe that I speak for all of us here, when I say this- we all hold 'Leave' position, and gave Commander Sobar our full support during the 'Plak If Fee', this is why we are still alive, I suspect. We did not, however gave our support for a coup against our esteemed Captain Setal and the council of Elders, there for, we will be honored to aid you in any way possible, so order and reason could be resorted once more."

Jim nodded and sighed, this little speech had managed to touch him, and he could also see Xon battling his own emotions at the corner of his eyes.

"Captain Setal is dead." Jim answered since it suddenly occurred to him that they might not know. "And so are Commander Sebak and many others, and I don't know how many more will die if we don't resolve the situation within the upcoming hours."

"We suspected as such." The beautiful T'Dara nodded and then bowed her head.

"May they travel with the light." added Lieutenant Kellet.

"Alright, people, we have work to do." Jim reminded them. "Mr. Tuvon, please scan the communications between the bridge and the rest of the Vokau in the time period it was taken by Sobar, focus mainly on the communication between the bridge and Deck 7 and the Temple, try to learn everything you can and give me a report within the next hour."

"Yes, Captain." Tuvon bowed slightly and assumed his working console.
"Ensign T'Dara, Ensign Soret, please contact Chief Engineer Supak, reconnect the reactor room to the bridge, and help him in any way needed so we could fold out of here as soon as possible."

"Right away, sir." T'Dara answered for them both, and they also took their stations.

"Lieutenant Ketell, please monitor the situation on Ipik to the best of your ability, give me a heads up as your consideration, also, please use the inner sensors to help Mr. Tuvon in his task, I want to know what is going on at Deck 7, I want to know what happened to the each and every individual child, guest and Elder on the ship, and I want to know that within an hour."

"Yes, sir." Kellet nodded and moved towards her working station.

"Mr. Xon..." He searched for the young Ensign eyes.

//Please, report to the brig as soon as possible, Jim.// Said Spock through the bond.

//On my way.// he answered, then viewed Xon again. "Ensign, I am needed elsewhere, you have the Conn."

"Yes, sir." Xon answered, pale as snow.

And then Elder Svern hailed again to make matter worse.

"Ignore those calls." Jim commanded and looked at Xon again. "I'll try to get back in a few minutes."

He tried reassuring the boy and the rest of the crew, the officers only nodded, too busy to answer, and Xon staggered towards the chair, Jim hoped that the boy won’t pass out before he reaches it.

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Jim thought that placing the brig in deck 2, so close to the bridge was the implementation of the principle 'Keep your enemies closer.' And it was a large brig too, some cells were personal, but some were clearly meant for large groups. In which cell did they placed Sulu and Dayton that night? Intriguing, beside the point, though.

A force field kept the restrained inside, and it was transparent but had a bluish hue, probably was soundproof as well, because one of the bridge officers was clearly screaming his discontent from behind it, but from Jim's side of the cell it looked like he was placed on mute.

Outside, at the guarding post, Spock awaited him with four other vulcans, he was talking to them but as soon as Jim approached he straightened up into attention, and the rest followed.

"Captain." Spock greeted him. "Allow me to introduce those prisoners we have just freed, all loyal to the late Captain Setal. I've explained the situation to them and already sent the bridge officers to you."

"I know, I've met them." Jim nodded at the recently added Vulcans to his manpower strength, or Vulcanpower, whatever.
"Sulak, Lieutenant, Shuttle pilot." Said one, an older officer, and Jim knew he hit a jackpot.

"Sedar, Ensign, I am also a shuttle pilot." Said a younger male besides the elder; and Jim vaguely remembered him as one of the pilots that flew them from Yorktown to the Vokau, and if he had any say about Dayton and Sulu making fools out of themselves back then, he kept it to himself.

"Della, Lieutenant, security officer." Said a tall, fierce female, she seemed like she was taken down with a fight, judging by her bruised face.

"Telek, crewman, security." Said another male.

"Great, nice to meet you all." Jim nodded at them "live long and prosper."

"As Commanded Spock had already reported to you, we were all loyal to Captain Setal." Explained the younger pilot. "I myself was on the undecided camp during this ritual, and I deem this descent to violence as appalling, and very un-Vulcan."

"The rest of us supported the 'Leave' faction." Added the security officer, Della "And yet, when I was commanded to draw my phaser at my fellow crewmates, I did the only logical thing left to do, and placed it down on the ground."

Jim grimaced at the thought of it, Vulcans killing other Vulcans, and there were so few of them left. He gave the group an appreciative scan.

"I am Captain Kirk." He introduced himself. "And I wish to get you all back home; politics can wait until we are back on New Vulcan soil."

"Indeed." Agreed the older shuttle pilot.

"We are at your command." The security Lieutenant summed it up.

"Did you give them phasers and comm unites?" Kirk turned to ask Spock.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you install them back into the system?"

"Indeed."

"Good." Jim breathed and turned back to the new additions to his crew "I want you all four to get to the docking bay at deck 8, should be easy, as you are installed back into the system, deck 7 is now sealed and you have the bridge's backup,

"Please prepare two shuttles that can carry 500 people between them, and can fly through the gate opened by Ipik, ASAP. Then secure the bay area and await further instructions. We might need you to evacuate the entirety of the Vokau at a moment's notice, so make every preparation needed to meet this objective."

"Yes, Captain." Said the elder shuttle pilot and the four of them left.

Jim eyed Spock as they were left alone. "Back to the bridge?" he asked.

"Commander Sobar wishes to speak with you." Spock answered and Jim breathed.

"Does he? Well, tough, because I don’t want to speak to him." He admitted to Spock raised eyebrow.
"This is unwise." Spock insisted.

"Unwise? To avoid the one that wanted to tear me apart at a duel? That almost beheaded me half an hour ago? Give me one good reason to talk to him, Spock, He is a prisoner, he is out of the system, and we are playing the clock, why should I bother?"

"You should talk to him or there will be more blood on your hands." Spock answered and hurried to add "His words, not mine."

"Fuck…" Jim breathed out; he feared he knew exactly what Sobar was talking about.

"We have no choice." Spock agreed "But we can benefit from this too, if we get him into cooperation. In my younger days…" Spock forced himself to continue "I was introduced to some interrogations technique that I have learned to implement. If you wish me to, I could interrogate Commander Sobar about his forces layout, the situation on Deck 7 and his counterattack planes."

Tempting, this was so very tempting.

Jim looked into Spock's chocolate eyes and saw the length this beautiful, fierce, and loyal man would go in order to protect him, a meager human, a good for nothing hick, it made him somewhat melancholic, the cliché was true, love was blind, blind and so very destructive, Jim almost sighed.

"No Spock, thank you but no thanks. If we are to do this, what is the difference between us and them? What gives us the higher ground? I will not force Sobar into collaboration through telepathic torture, I will not let him go through that kind of interrogation, and furthermore, I will not let you go through one."

Spock seemed unpleased, holding his gaze throughout that little speech and awaited his turn. "This is no time for sentiment, Jim, lives are at stake, the fate of the Vulcan people is at stake, and yours is a naïve approach, sir."

Jim shrugged at the accusation "That's the only approach I got, Spock, and you've said it before, two wrongs do not make a right, remember? Sobar will talk to us out of his free will, or not at all. Now, let's go and hear what he has to say."

"Yes, Captain."

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While picturing this joyful reunion with that coldblooded bastard that only tried to kill him half an hour ago, Jim walked the sort distance to where Sobar's cell was located.

"He is thoroughly restrained and poses no threat at the moment." Spock picked up on his fear and assured him, while they were walking.

Sobar was placed in a small, personal cell, away from any others of his bridge crew, he had no visual of them, but he could possibly speak to T'Heli through their bond, and even might talk to Kuvac, through T'Heli. He sat there, kneeling on the floor, in what seemed to be a meditative state; his face unreadable, and his hands were tied behind his back and to his feet with a Vulcan grade restraining bar.
Jim remembered their first meeting, not too long ago, at a respected diner on an observation deck, and even then he got the chills from him, and with everything that has gone since that, the fight with Spock, his attempted mind meld, his planes for their possible duel, have done nothing but enhance that sense of dread. But even now, it gave Jim no pleasure to see the young Vulcan in this state, a proud and strong warrior, now a prisoner in his own ship.

As they entered, the force field flickered to let them pass, and Sobar raised his gaze from the ground to meet them with cold blue ire.

"I have a message from Elder Svern." Sobar said, cutting straight to the chase. "Ignore his hails once more, and he will execute one of his captures for every stalling attempt."

Yeah, Jim feared that news, this is why he didn't want to enter Sobar's chamber at the first place, but it was a logical assumption to make with or without Sobar's confirmation, and he kind of knew already that he could not use time wasting tactics for much longer without getting blood on his hands, as in, more blood on his hands.

Well, it was fun while it lasted.

And yet, this was the mistake Jim has been looking for, Elder's Svern mistake, no more hiding in the shade of ambiguity, Elder Sven worked with both his sons in creating and managing this uprising.

"So you do admit to this." he told the Vokau's first pilot. "Elder Svern had planned this coup with you, before this ritual even began, in case it would result with a win of the 'Remain' position.

"Together, you took illegal control of the Vokau by violence, not caring how much blood you'll spill during this takeover and still, you are willing to kill your own, just to get your way, even children."

"I confirm the facts but reject your interpretation." Sobar answered without flinching "We never wanted this ritual, it was forced upon us, in a futile attempt to divert the natural course of history."

"You renounce this ritual? You admit to have planned on sabotaging it from the start, should it not end in your favor?" Jim had to wonder "And yet you took the blood oath?"

"I took the blood oath, with an honest intention to accept every possible outcome that the gods may lead us to." Sobar turned to look at Spock with contempt "although forced upon me, I honor this ritual profoundly, and ready to utilize it to the fullest, unlike others, who have betrayed their vows. Kill me now and you will be within your rights, Captain Kirk, I am ready to die, others will take my place."

"I do not wish to kill you, Sobar." Jim's voice suddenly softens against his own will.

Sobar snarled at this display of compassion "If so, you will be a traitor to your own cause as well."

Now that pissed Jim off "Tell me; what noble cause demands the death of children? This ritual is about the few protecting the many!"

"The few are indeed protecting the many, Captain." Sobar insisted "The few upon this ship, children included, are sacrificed for the many, for the generations to come, for their prosperous future, for their needs. I do not care about your sentiment, about your senseless, delicate, human inhibitions."

"No one but us twelve took the oath, Sobar!" Jim reminded him with anger. "I don't recall any
Children on the stage, letting out their blood! And besides, how could you possibly foresee the needs of generations to come, huh?" Jim argued. "I cannot even foresee my dinner."

"Everyone with eyes to see and ears to hear can reach the same conclusions as I have, everyone who followed the ritual with a half opened mind, the logic is simple enough." Sobar answered with contempt.

None the less, Jim decided to kneel next to Sobar, to look him in the eye, to get a better assessment of the Vulcan, who seemed to be something else entirely, alien to everything Jim knew a Vulcan to be. Something cold and harsh, savage even, Captain Setal was rightfully heartbroken over what have become of his junior officers.

"I am sorry my logic has failed you, Commander." He said in a whisper, looking into those pale blue eyes. "After losing so much as a nation, after losing so much as an individual, losing your sister, your nephews, your wife, how could you possibly want to inflict more death upon your own? Enlighten me."

Sobar looked him right in the eyes as well, and for the first time, Jim could recognize the hurt behind them. "I do not enjoy nor wish to inflict death upon my people." He answered with hunting honesty "But when one must choose between alternatives, they chooses the most logical one, the one that will serve the many and cause the least amount of harm.

"Once one had chosen their path, they accept all the risks and ramifications derived from those actions, and welcome every consequence that comes to pass as they pursue their objectives. It is the only logical way."

Well, justify a genocide, why won't you?

"What is it? Your objective?" Kirk asked, honestly, he truly wanted to know. "Leaving the federation? You can still do that, 150 years from now, when the results of this 'Plak If Fee' are no longer valid. Why the rush? Why the bloodshed? Why tearing apart everything you believe in? 150 years is nothing for Vulcans, not even a generation."

"You are mistaken." Sobar answered, flexing his muscles, trying his strength against the restrainers and failing. "This is a one chance opportunity, a window that will close far more quickly than you'd think. In 150 years, the Vulcans might be gone, as a nation if not as individuals, in spirit, if not in body.

"Only one thing stands between us and extinction- join our kin, the Romulans, as a house united, as a force to be reckoned with, as respected members of the Empire. Miss this opportunity and die as an aimless, misguided, fractured society, falling into various temptations, falling into decay!"

"Really?" Jim glanced at Spock with disbelieve and then returned to look at Sobar. "Join the Romulans? The ones that enslaves and kills others without as much as a heartbeat? The ones that care not for the wellbeing of the species living under their boot? The ones that seek only power and control? Those Romulans?"

"They are our kin, in need of our help and guidance. If what Spock of the other universe says is true, they are about to lose their home world as we did, they are about to share our grim fate, and if we refuse helping them, this galaxy itself might come to an end, and another Nero would be created, an endless cycle of suffering and pain. Can you not see it? Can you deny my logic? Deny the needs of the many?"

"I will never deny the needs of the many when I recognize them." Jim assured him "But what are
"You will never understand..." Sobar averted his gaze.

"But will you? Time travel is tricky, Sobar! It's about playing with infinity! You can never tell if you land in your own universe or at someone else's! Infinite variants! Where everything could be exactly the same, except the Beatles! And here is another one for you, what if your tampering with time would be the actual cause of Romulus demise, and thus Vulcan? Have you ever given it some thought?"

"No one said time travel will solve all our problems right away, Captain, but discarding it completely would only be a disservice to the needs of the many, a lazy and an uninspiring choice."

Sobar answered gazing into undisclosed point in space, and then he continued.

"Besides, the Romulans will eventually take over Vulcan in one way or another, by force, if we do not welcome them as keen, we will be by their side or under their boot, either way this is our choice, and this is our only chance at making the right impression."

"Why are you sure that this is unavoidable? The UFP will stand with you against any Romulan act of aggression."

"My logic is sound, captain Kirk, New Vulcan will be taken by the Romulans, and it is only a matter of when and how," Sobar answered, turning his eyes back at Jim. "And just so you know, whatever you accuse the Romulans of, I would blame the Federation of the same.

"Whether it by sheer brutal force or by the weight of bureaucracy and careless neglect, it does not matter, the result is the same, misery and death. Why can't you see that, Jim? A Tarsus 4 survivor?"

Great, the Tarsus 4 card again, but this time it will not devastate him, this time he was prepared.

"The Federation eventually came to our rescue, you know, took them about a year, but they came and saved us, or I would not be here standing before you." Jim said, pushing all the memories, the pain and the hurt deep into a dark corner of his mind so he could continue. "The Federation will come for you too. The 'Plak If Fee' had ended with a 'Remain' Victory, Sobar, like it or not, the Vulcan leaders voted to trust the Federation."

"Our leaders have lost their way! Lost their logic, and our trust! I weep for them! They only chose to remain because they did not want to see your precious human blood spilled on the floor! Before the gods of war! They are weaklings and infidels, all of them! Their vote was invalid and will be corrected!"

No, he will not mention that Spock was about to take his place, this would be an unwise choice, would only expose the bond between them, make everything worse, go straight into Elder Svern's mind, to incite a civil war, and maybe this was all Sobar ever wanted out of this conversation.

"You show much disrespect for the elders, but they have done nothing wrong. They are the followers of Surak, they cherish logic, peace and every form of life id dear to them, IDIC, remember?"

"IDIC..." Sobar almost splattered at the notion, "Humans will never let IDIC be! Will always try to pollute it with their curiosity and influence! Where would IDIC be if we all merge into this one homogenous race of hybrids and mongrels? There is no diversity when all colors are mixed together into a coherent lump of grey muck!"
"You speak no logic." Spock interfered "Hybrids are rare and in between, I am the only Vulcan-Human one so far to be made, the Vulcan race will not be threatened by their creation."

"And this is where your logic collides with mine, son of Sarek." Sobar nearly smiled, raising his gaze to meet Spock's "The only problem is that I cannot afford this experiment to run its course, in order to decide who is right and who is wrong. There are too few of us left to allow it."

"Spock is strong and a powerful telepath, don’t you want this for the next generation?" Jim had to ask.

"Volatile, violent unstable Human hybrids?" Sobar snarled at the idea "I'll take my chances with the Romulans, Captain Kirk." Son of Svern now smiled for real, a bitter, mocking smile. "This conversation is over." Sobar announced soon after regaining control of his emotions. "I have nothing more to say." He concluded and his eyes fell on the floor.

"So how about helping us end this senseless bloodshed, Sobar, huh? Would you help us do that?" Jim asked without a shred of cynicism.

"Follow Elder Svern's instructions and reach that goal, you have no further use for me." Sobar calmly answered, his eyes still focused on the floor.

Jim chose to ignore this particular advice "What does Elder Svern want? What kind of investigation does he want to conduct? What information does he hope to get from us?"

"I'm done talking to you, human." Sobar informed him without looking up.

"We are trying to find a way to dissolve this situation." Spock tried "If we know what Elder Svern is after, what kind of evidence he wishes to present the council, we might be of aid, there should not be more fighting, and with your cooperation, we might be able to avoid any more violence. You must see the logic in that, Commander."

"Logic is a tool, not a creed." Sobar turned to look at Spock with icy disdain in his pale eyes. "Vulcans have become too attached to their logic. And what is left of that logic? Twisted and deformed beyond recognition, convoluted and rotten, so much so, a psychotic Romulan was able to destroy our entire planet! What kind of logic led to this annihilation? What sort of logic has created you? Son of Sarek?"

Spock recoiled, ever so subtly.

"You are an abomination, Spock! A waste of time and effort, a creation of an illogical scientist. And the nerve you have, talking logic to me, while smelling of him! This human! Smells of sex, of sickness and of you!"

Damn Vulcans and their sharp senses.

"This is how Vulcan will fall! Faster than 150 years! Into decay, into degeneracy, into fornication with aliens! Into creating hybrids! Inviting chaos into our blood! Mayhem into our spirits! Until there is nothing left of us that is Vulcan! I'd rather let every single Vulcan die, young and old; only not see this perverted future manifested!"

"Spock, let's go, the Commander is of no use to us, and we don't have to stay and listen to that." Jim mumbled at Spock, while glancing at the flickering force field.

"Listen to truth?" Sobar snarled at Spock, ignoring Jim altogether. "Truth is that I detest you, Spock! But my curiosity compels me to ask you, what is the appeal? Would you please explain this
to me? How does it feel like, fucking a human?"

"Excuse me?" Jim asked but was ignored; Sobar's searing gaze only hunted Spock's eyes.

"Humans are so weak! You must be so very careful all of the time, takes half of the fun away. They always smell like their piss and shit! They are as cold as a freshly deceased corpse! They don't even posses enough strength in their feeble muscles to give your lok a decent squeeze!"

"No!" Jim was quick enough to get up and turn to block Spock with his body; he had that nasty feeling, that if he had failed at doing so, Sobar would have been laying on the floor right now, with his head facing one side and his body the other.

"Jim!" Spock had burning fury in his eyes and rumbling rage in his voice. "Out of my way!"

"What for? Help him prove his point?!" Jim needed all the courage he could master not to obey that demand and keep protecting Sobar with his body. "This is exactly what he wants! Can't you see that? He gets the easy way out and you get to be the monster! Step aside, Spock!" Jim commanded, hoping this will not earn him a bone shuttering punch. "Back off! Now!"

Spock growled, a deep an low roar, his eyes were completely black, his fists were clenched tight, his whole body shivered with the effort, but Jim held his gaze and did not let go, so Spock lowered his eyes and took a step back.

Jim felt like falling down with relief but instead he turned back to face Sobar that was now chuckling like an unstable maniac.

"I see you have tamed the beast, human, very well done." He complimented Jim while still chuckling.

"Oh, shut it, Sobar! Really! If all you got for me are boring platitudes!"

"I would, but they serve me so well…" Sobar insisted, could not stop himself from this frantic laugh.

Jim grimed and crouched again to look at the young 'Leave' leader, while activating his very sensitive bullshit detector.

Jim saw past the cold, mocking exterior, the tough act and the arrogant attitude, and when he spoke again, he tried to extend his reach towards this young, lost and desperate man that hid beneath that external shell.

"I'm Sorry, Sobar." He said softly, with complete honesty "I am sorry that I did not have the time or the motivation to talk to you during the time we had in the ritual. It was a valuable time lost. You brought up so many good points for discussion here, so many concerns that should have been addressed, and I hope that one day they will be. But not today, Sobar, not by us, for us it is too late."

Jim realized, as he continued to talk, that he truly felt the weight of that lost, the hours he could have spend with Sobar, trying to figure him out, trying to see things from his point of view, trying to close the gap between them, maybe this was an achievable thing, maybe he could have made a remainder out of him.

Who knows, if not for Section 31's meddling, he might have actually had the time to give it a try, and then, this whole bloody mess, might have been avoided.
Speculations, Spock would say, if he had a coherent mind at the moment, mere speculations.

"Anyway…" Jim shook his head and breathed out "If there is one thing I have learned as a Tarsus 4 survivor it is this- if you think that you have to kill children in order to save your world, you're doing it wrong." He finished and straightened up, then walked towards Spock. "Come on, let's go."

"One moment, sir." Spock watched Sobar with intensity. "I wish to answer The Commander's question."

Jim nodded, he only allowed it because Spock looked so much calmer now; still he had no idea what Spock was going to do.

The Hybrid walked the short distance between them, then bent over the kneeling Vulcan and whispered something into his ear, Jim could only catch it through their bond.

"Fucking humans is sublime." Spock stated dryly and delivered Sobar a nerve pinch to knock him out.

Sobar fell on the floor, unconscious.

Jim and Spock looked at each other for a moment without speaking, not even through the bond.

"Let's get back to the bridge before Xon has a heart attack." Jim murmured after that long, quiet pause.

"I concur." Spock agreed.
Hey everyone, survivors of 51 chapter of a crazy long convoluted story ;-)

As we reach the end, I post here the newest chapters of the story. As such, they are the least edited and the rawest ones, so you may expect some clumsy writing and dodgy style, I wish I had more time to write them, but I am losing my patient and cannot wait to finish this story, I also see RL challenges in the near future that will probably disrupt my writing schedule, and I don’t want to leave this story unfinished for far too long, so, it is what it is.

I hope you'll have a fun read anyway, please let me know what's on your mind, reviews are life!

Thank you and my best wishes!

Xon evacuated the Captain's chair as soon as Jim took his first step back into the bridge, could not have done it faster if there was a space rocket attached to his posterior. Jim tried his very best to suppress a chuckle while witnessing this, but he did not take the vacant seat, he turned to Lt. Tuvon's station instead.

Bending over the console due to the lack of moveable chairs, Jim gazed at the comm officer's screens to get a feel of what he was doing. "Any progress, Mr. Tuvon?"

The young, dark skinned Lieutenant shook his head slowly. "I am sorry sir, but I am struggling with the task you have given me, seems like the Vokau's communication logs are severely damaged. Very large chunks of data are missing; many other files seem to be randomly scrambled or just unreachable."

"Could this be blamed on peak Periapsis?" Jim tried.

"I am not that sure." The comm officer answered carefully. "This is not the first time the Vokau has been here under peak Periapsis, if our database was this vulnerable, we would have avoided the system under those conditions a long time ago, of course that is only my assessment."

Jim could only agree. "Sabotage, maybe?" he suggested.

The young Vulcan nodded. "A possibility, yes."

"Understood." Jim frowned, disappointed, but there was nothing he could do about it, but give the comm officer a light smack on his shoulder for a job well done and ask for some more. "Please try
to recover as much data as possible, Mr. Tuvon, or at least enough to figure out what had just happened here, it is crucial for our advancement. If you find any evidence of an intentional sabotage, please document it as well."

"Yes, sir." The Vulcan officer needed some time to recover from the unexpected pat on his back, but he eventually did, and returned to his work.

Next, Jim lifted himself up and turned his attention to the elder sensor array operator, Lt. Kellet, Spock was already at her side, bent over her station, supplying Jim with a nice view of his attractive behind.

Jim came near, almost unnoticed and leaned against the bulkhead next to them, letting them finish their conversation before interrupting. "Well, what is new, Lt. Kellet?"

"I am working on my report." she answered "You gave me an hour; Captain, I still have 23 minutes left."

"I know, I'm sorry, but any second now Elder Svern might hail us, I need to know all I can before he does."

"Well…" The elder officer wrinkled her brow with the effort to rush things through her mind. "The situation in Ipik is highly unstable, I can only follow the gravity sensors, but they show tremendous fluctuations, indicating high instability, I estimate that the Ipik is on its way to implode, however, I cannot provide the chances for this event to occur nor can I assess the implications it will have on the Vokau."

"Fair enough." //Spock?//

//Lt. Nelath had provided me with a status report. Ipik's core is unstable, and they will have to shut it down in attempt to prevent an implosion. The Lieutenant's efforts are now focused on neutralizing the red matter stored at the base, so in case the shut down fails, the core's meltdown will have minimum effect. The neutralization process would take about two hour and then they will initiate an automatic shutdown and leave.//

//Will the gate to New Vulcan hold on for two more hours?//

//Affirmative, until the core is completely shutdown, the gate will remain open.//

//Is the shuttle Dayton prepared ready? Did Sulu used the gate and flew to New Vulcan?//

//Aye, aye to both, Captain.//

//Tell Nelath to report if anything goes wrong, but other than that, she may take off to New Vulcan as soon as they are done, on my go.//

//I will have her know.// Spock confirmed.

"What is the situation on deck 7, Mrs. Kellet?"

"Unclear, we lost all visual and audio sensors on the deck, and other sensors are also malfunctioning, some of it was deliberately done, and some is related to peak periapsis."

The same peak periapsis that worked so well for them at the takeover, now turned against them once they gained control; but this was only expected, annoying, but expected.
"And by scanning the rest of the ship, what can you deduce about the power balance between us and Svern's forces?"

"Well, I have scanned the ship for the dead and wounded to the best of my ability, and crossed that data with known knowledge on the members of this attempted coup. They outnumber us significantly, sir." Kellet admitted reluctantly. "Anywhere between 1:4 to 1:10 would be a valid guess, I wish I could provide a more accurate assessment, however …"

"Sir, Elder Svern is hailing us." The comm officer announced, cutting the Lieutenant's apology short.

"Thank you for the report, Mrs. Kellet." Jim left his post at the bulkhead and his gaze hardened, he walked to the center of the bridge, next to the chair, but did not take a seat, just stood there, breathing in and out slowly. "On screen, please, Mr. Tuvon." He instructed the comm officer a short moment later.

Elder Svern impressive figure appeared on the full screen, the camera gave a view of his upper chest and face, against a bland background of a grey bulkhead, a wise choice, intended to reveal as little visual information as possible.

Jim had nothing to focus on except those chiseled handsome features, those cold blue eyes and the icy expression on the man's face. Even if this was just an act, the Elder looked like someone in control, someone who is 100% sure of his standing, it took a lot of effort from Jim to try and appear the same, and he wasn't sure he was as successful.

"Thank you for accepting my call." The Elder started.

"Commander Sobar gave me an appealing incentive to do so." Jim answered coldly. "What can I do for you, Elder Svern?"

"First, I believe congratulation is in order. I have underestimated you, Captain James T. Kirk, you gave me quite a fight. I never thought you would resist arrest and defy Lieutenant Symer's orders, as there was no indication that they did not come from Captain Setal.

"You also managed to escape Lt. Commander Kuvac and his men, although here I must apologies on Acting Captain Sobar's behalf, we had a slight disagreement whether we should arrest or kill you, you see, I wanted you comprehended, but Sobar ignored my wishes, and ordered Kuvac otherwise, something he now learned was an error, but I digress…

"When I thought I had you trapped inside the reactor room, you have proven yet again to be very illusive and extremely dangerous. If not for your meddling, my operation would have gone much smoother, and be over by now. Kaiidth."

"Thank you." Jim muttered "I am honored."

"So, here we are now, after you assumed command of the bridge. A human, in commanded of the Vokau, the Vulcans' generation ship, the irony does not elude me, Captain, very well done."

"I can say the same, Svern, I have underestimated you as well, I especially did not imagine the
length you were willing to go in order to get New Vulcan out of the Federation and into the arms of Romulus.

"Ignoring a valid result the 'Plak If Fee', starting a coup here and on the Ipik, killing the legitimate Captain of this ship, taking the Elders as hostages, threatening children... a long way to go, alright. Was this a part of a plan you had in mind? Or just some desperate improvisation? Either way, things are not looking up. So again, I ask you, how may I be of service, Elder Svern?"

"You are a highly intelligent Human, Captain Kirk, you must already know the answer to this question, I am sure you are aware of my objectives."

They studied each other, staring into each other eyes, and Jim tried to look past Svern's cold exterior, but unlike with Sobar, this time his bullshit detector could not penetrate the Elder's shields, well not yet.

"We both have our objectives, and we might help each other achieving them." Kirk continued. "So, stating our demands would be a good place to start, don't you think?"

"That's in assuming I need your help." Elder Svern corrected him. "But let us be clear about the situation at hand first, shall we? I am operating according to the rule of law, the law of the 'Plak If Fee', although pre-Surak, it had never been widely revised since.

"And under that law- the 'Plak If Fee' is not over yet, on the contrary, I have extended it to include all beings onboard this ship. I find it a much a more reliable sampling, about 1% of the Vulcan population, out best and brightest, nobly sacrificing themselves for the benefit of the many."

"You alone have the authority to extend the ritual?" Jim asked, surprised, trying not to sound too alarm.

"Yes, I do, Captain Kirk. I am the owner of the 'Plak If Fee.' ritual, according to the Vulcan law. This is my territory, the Ipik is under my direct command, the Vokau is a part of the Vulcan fleet which is also under my direct command, and thus, this part of space is mine, I am the Elder who hosts this challenge and as such, I am its owner, and I get to make the rules."

"And what are those rules?"

"You will find them more generous that what the Pre-reformed law allows me to set. I have extended the ritual to include everyone on this ship, but I am not hungry for blood, Captain, if anyone wishes to surrender themselves and pledge their loyalty to me, I will allow them to live, if I find them redeemable, of course. You- for example, I may spare, if I find you cooperative at your questioning."

Jim could only frown at the fact that Spock was not mentioned. "How can you change the rules after the Elders already voted to remain? After the 'Plak If Fee' had already been finished? 25:23 in favor of remaining."

"I am impressed." Elder Svern answered, some amusement seeped into his voice, which was never a good sign. "An interesting piece of information you had managed to gather there, Captain, one that could only be acquired though a high level leak."

Oh, shit.

"Come on, Svern! You just telepathically communicated with Commander Sobar to deliver us a message! We both know you've been helping both Somak on star-base Ipik and Sobar on the Vokau! This coup was a coordinated effort! Don't blame Elder Sarek for a fault you both share!"
Jim could not help but raising his voice in anger, if there was one thing he detested the most, it was duplicity.

"Your logic is sound, Human." The Elder confirmed "I was just wondering how did you came across this information, do you happen to share a telepathic bond with an Elder of that council, directly or indirectly?"

Svern turned to look at Spock, who held his gaze without losing his blank expression.

"What are you talking about?" Jim asked in return, thank you, Nyota. "I share a deep friendship with Commander Spock, and he reported this to me after I asked him to. Are you going to answer my question or not? Why would you extend the ritual after it was already finished?"

"If you already know this much, you probably also know that the final, official vote had not been commenced yet. Elder Svern mocked him. "I am within my rights, to change the conditions of the ritual as it is still running. The ancient Vulcan law permits me so, my fellow, ignorance council members might have discarded pre-reformed rules, but I have not."

Jim started pacing back and forth as he listened to the Elder, and he didn't like what he was hearing, this was worst case scenario, as far as negotiations were concerned, to be the weaker part and to face an adversary who is absolutely convinced at his own righteousness, there was so little room to maneuver.

"For a very long while, I have allowed this insult of a ritual to conduct according to the wishes of the other Elders." Svern continued. "They wanted Humans included, and I obliged. They specifically requested the Enterprise crew members, and I agreed. They turned a blind eye to misconducts and blunt violations of the blood oath, and I accepted their interpretations of those events.

"But one can only be generous and enabling for so long. I have my limit and I have reached it when that failed, careless council voted to remain in the Federation! By using illogical, unacceptable, sentimental arguments to justify their vote! What a despicable, useless, mockery of an Elder council!"

"Good luck convincing the Elders to change their votes with this attitude." Jim murmured, smiling bitterly, while walking the bridge.

"That council had failed the Vulcan people." Elder Svern stated with open distain now. "They showed their degeneracy and incompetence with that vote. They left me without a choice but to expand the ritual to include everyone on board in it, children as adults. The blood that has been and will be shed is on their hands!"

Oh, come on now! Really?

"Is there no other way to solve this?" Jim honestly tried.

"I hope you understand, Captain Kirk, this is our last stand, our last chance of saving the Vulcan society! I will not let it slip through my fingers to accommodate your human sensibility! If I could have it any other way, I would! But I was pushed into a position that allows no other solution."

Jim paused his pacing, at the corner of his eye; he could see Spock joining in to stand at his side, alert and attentive.

"Now, I want my ship back." Elder Svern returned to his demands. "I want my access to the system restored, and deck 7 unsealed. I want Acting Captain Sobar and his crew released and placed back
into their position, and the same goes to the situation upon Ipik and Acting Captain Somak.

"They were both illegally removed by your forces. Sobar had to take over the Vokau due to Captain Setal's refusal to obey his direct Elder supervisor, and Somak, had to take over the Ipik due to the insubordination of the base Commander. I want them both reinstated."

"Well, it is a way of looking at things." Jim mumbled, mostly to Spock, but got ignored by both Vulcans.

"I want you and Spock to surrender yourselves for questioning, and all your collaborators must turn themselves in as well. There are severe allegations against you, such as harboring an Andorian spy and sabotaging the ship, the council will very much appreciate you coming forward without delay. Do that and I will show you mercy, I am not without kindness, Captain Kirk, and your cooperation will be rewarded."

Jim could not help but marvel at Elder Svern ability to improvise, as his carefully planned operation fell apart, using the Elders votes against them as evidence of their own failure was a brilliant move, so very clever.

But what was the situation with the Elders? Are they even aware that the ritual was extended? Do they know that they are now a part of it? A fair gain in the ongoing bloodbath? Or are they kept away as helpless witnesses? Still somewhat protected by their status? He had to know.

"I need to understand something, Elder, if you please." Jim resumed his pacing and as the elder finished he had to ask. "You claim that the Council of Elders is an incompetent body and a failed one, and yet, you asked them to halt the voting process this morning, claiming you had evidence to present to it, hoping for better results in the final round of voting.

"Why bother presenting evidences to a council you no longer find as legitimate? Why making the effort of convincing them to change their minds, while extending the scale of the ritual to include them as participants at the same time, it doesn't make sense to me."

"And why should I bother to make sense to you? I can only say that you will find the council changed, and far more attentive to my arguments at this point of time. I am indeed in the process of gathering evidence, which I will present to them, after finishing questioning the both of you, oh, and just so you know, every interaction between us is recorded and watched by the Council as we speak, as addition to the evidences I collect."

Ignoring the rest of Svern's words, Jim honed in on the one clue that really mattered and found it dreading. "The council is changed, you say? In what way? May I speak to Elder T'Pau for confirmation? Is she safe? Is everyone safe?" Jim gave it a try, but he knew this was a long shot, and he was losing Svern's attention anyway.

And he was right, Elder Svern turned even colder than before, and his blue eyes almost froze Jim and he stood under their glare.

"You are an insolence Human after all, Captain Kirk, and this conversation is over. I have my demands, and I will allow you one hour to fulfill them before I start executing members of your ritual clan in front of your eyes. I might even start with your fellow human warrior, Miss Marcus, one for every ten minutes of delay."

Jim could not help but interrupt, his heart hammering in his chest. "You have Carol? Alive? How is she?"
Svern ignored him completely, if not for the sadistic satisfaction flaring for a second in his eyes.

"If you turn the screen off, I will transport their blooded corpses to your bridge, yes, some of my clan members are still in the system, good luck on pinpointing them within the hour you have left.

"And if you still refuse to meet my demands by the time they are all dead, I will come for you, you are outnumbered and weak in body and mind! Face it, Captain Kirk, there is no other way out of this! Meet my demands and I might be kind to you! Fail to do so and suffer the consequences.

Svern out…"

"Lay a hand on any of the children and I will send you Sobar's head on a plate!" Jim shouted at him just before the Elder managed to disconnect.

"Would you do that, Captain? Fascinating." Svern asked without losing his calm, he seemed, at best, intrigued.

"What other choice do you leave me with? I have demands too, you know, and the leverage to achieve them!"

"I have no interest in your demands." Svern stated dryly. "We outnumber you. We are about to take back the bridge, and the reactor room. Do the logical thing, Kirk! An hour."

"I call your bluff, sir!" Jim stood still and almost growled at the Elder.

"Bluff?" Elder Svern raised his eyebrow with mockery.

"Yes! Your fraud! Attempted deceit! You are in a hurry to finish this! You know you outnumber us, so logically; you should be waiting until we are worn down and easy to subdue. I am human, I have only a few hours until I collapse, but you would not wait.

"You are in a hurry! This is why you put this much pressure on me, knowing that I cannot stomach more casualties! You wanted to return to New Vulcan in a hurry before the closing speech challenge, but why? Why put so much pressure on us? Killing one hostage every ten minutes? Which clock is running out of time?"

Elder Svern seemed a bit overwhelmed at Jim's words, he could not help but blink his inner eyelids, and clench his jaw, but he did not speak before making sure his voice was calm. "An hour, Kirk."

"Forty five minutes!" Jim retorted with rage. "Get back online in forty five minutes and be ready to negotiate or you'll find Sobar's head on your doorstep! I dare you to try me!"

"Very well, Kirk, an hour." The Elder did not budge "Svern out."

The screen went black, and a sudden realization hit Jim unexpectedly, out of nowhere, like a sucker punch straight to his guts, left him breathless and panicked. Horror threatened to paralyze him so before it did, he kicked at the first thing that was next to his feet, the column of working console, gave him the pain he needed to return to focus.

"Can we pick up the signals of Svern and his cronies and transport them into the void?" he asked in rage, and when the bridge crew did not answer and only looked at him with deep concern he added "I'm not saying we will! I'm just asking if we can!"

"No, sir." the older sensor operator answered "Deck 7 is almost black to us, and our operating
sensors give unreliable data at the moment, we cannot pinpoint individuals, and we might hurt innocent hostages on the way. Moreover, the Temple of the mind within the deck, is a designated shelter, and as such it was built with special materials that disrupt transporter beams."

Fuck.

Well, it was worth a try.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He breathed out, fighting to steady himself

//Jim?// Spock tried reaching out, could not prevent his own distress from bleeding through the bond. //Are you truly willing to kill Sobar? Transport Svern and his collaborators into the vacuum of space?//

Jim bluntly ignored his questions. //How much longer to endgame?//

//5.6 hours.//

//Fuck, Spock! I have it! I finally have it all!//

//What do you have?//

//I have the whole picture! Svern's plan! He's a grandmaster alright! And we all marched straight into his trap!//

//Jim...//

//And it is your entire fault! Your fucking fault!// Jim continued, breaking on the inside and fuming on outside. "Spock, accompany me to the ready room, please." Kirk's voice was calm, but his eyes burned.

"Yes, Sir." Spock had no other choice but comply.

"Lt. Tuvon, is there a ready room here? Where is it?"

"At the entrance, to your left, the toilets are to your right." The Comm officer explained.

"Lt. Tuvon, hail us in half an hour, if we delay. Xon, the bridge is yours."

"Yes, sir." they both answered.

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The ready room seemed familiar, almost the same as the one on the Enterprise, although a bit bigger. Similar to the Enterprise, there was a table for six, but with bright orange colored padded chairs around it instead of Tan, and they looked very comfortable, unlike the Enterprise.

There was also a big screen on one of the walls, and hey! There was a replicator in the room! Why was there not a replicator at the Enterprise's ready room? Would have saved Rand a lot of trips to the bridge carrying pots of coffee! Unsafe trips, prone to accidents and spills! A corrective action
Jim immediately approached the replicator, in a desperate hope to calm down. "One black coffee, no sugar, one Vulcan herbal tea." Jim ordered and was relieved to find out that coffee was still installed into the system.

He returned with the two cups to the table were Spock was already seated and handed the Vulcan his tea.

"Thank you." Spock cupped the glass with both his hands and breathed the sweet scent in.

Jim only glared daggers at him, but said nothing, he wanted this moment to enjoy his coffe, that was his first for ages, and might also be his last; Spock indulged in his cup of tea too, probably for similar reasons.

They shared the tense silence for a minute or two, but Jim could not hide his foul mood, and his rage only grew, expanding into the physical space as well as the mental, like boiling red matter about to explode.

Jim was reluctant to be the first to ignite it, he wanted to give Spock a chance to confess, and the Vulcan indeed gave the first indication of unease, and raised his face to study Jim's, and then he gently tried probing at the bond.

//Are you well?//

"Not, I'm not!" Jim erupted like a boiling magma chamber. "My body is burning and my mind feels like it's going to leak out of my ears! My shoulder burns, and my entire body is pounding! I don't know who much longer I can keep up with this killer pace! Not sure even if I am gonna last until endgame, assuming it's even going to work!"

Not showing even a sliver of sympathy, and not even looking at him, Spock moved on to his next question."Are you seriously considering killing Sobar? Sending his head…"

"Why the fuck not?" Jim cut his speech with a growl "He seemed ready enough to remove my arms and legs in a duel! Almost had my head plucked off my neck when we fought on the bridge! Might as well return the favor!"

"Inconsistent." Spock softly noted, keeping his eyes on his cup. "I was ready to end him at the brig and yet, it was you who have stopped me."

"Inconsistent, yes, deal!" Kirk snarled at him again and turned his attention back to finish his coffee in a hopeless effort to calm down.

Now Spock finally looked up to study Kirk with curiosity. "I also do not understand your wish to maroon elder Svern and his associates at space side, this is unbecoming."

"Oh yeah? So unbecoming? Because I remember someone doing to me just the same!" Kirk slammed the empty cup on the table instead of smashing it against a wall.

And then he waited, but when Spock said nothing for a long while, it was starting to feel like an insult, so he frowned and shook his head.

"Of course I not gonna kill Sobar or space Svern! I am bluffing! Did you really think I'm able to do such a thing? I want the Bridge crew and Svern to think that this kind of crazy is on the table, but you? You know me! Did I really manage to throw you off? Did you actually think that… forget it!"
"Vulcans do not lie, not to their subordinates, and certainly not to their Elders." Spock tried to defend his mistake.

"Not a Vulcan!" Jim reminded him. "And you do lie!"

"We do not." Spock insisted.

Oh, really? Jim smiled bitterly; we'll get to that in a moment, but first. "Told you, I saw it; I saw the big picture, Svern's master plan! Even in shambles, there is still no way out of it! No fucking way! and it's your entire fault!"

Spock seemed unfazed by that last statement, which only meant one of two things, he either did not comprehend the accusation just yet, or he knew everything already and was only waiting this whole time for Jim to catch up.

Both options only added fuel to Jim's fury.

"You fucked it up, Spock! You totally, monumentally fucked it up! I hope for your sake, that you haven't realized it just yet, because if you already know what I'm talking about then you truly are a lost cause!"

"Or… I know exactly where you are heading with this, and disagree completely." Spock answered harshly. "I advise you against opening this subject at this point in time." He warned "It would do nothing to solve the situation at hand, it would only cause harm."

"Up yours, Spock! You don't get to tell me what to bring up or not!" Jim now actually screamed. "You don't get to tell me to shut up! We're opening this now! So you knew all this time and said nothing! You already know you are the one that gave Svern the ammunition against us! Handed it to him like a fucking gift!"

"Those are profound allegations, Jim, how did you come to this conclusion?" Spock asked after another while spent in silence.

"I have a mind underneath this blonde hair, if you haven't notice!"

"Of course I have noticed, one of the most dynamic minds I have ever encountered, but still, I would like to know how you came to such harsh conviction."

"Come on, Spock, you and I both know I'm right!"

"Fine, I'll entertain your line of thought, if you'll share it with me!" Spock could not help but slip in a slightly mocking tone to his voice.

"If the Vulcans are to leave the Federation, led by Elder Svern, Humans are going to have a problem! A big problem! I don’t want Vulcans as enemies, and especially I don’t want the likes of Svern as their leaders! He had everything covered, Spock, everything! Everything we thought we had against him, he had ahead of us, to use against us!"

"Our bond?" Spock helped Jim focus.

"Our bond, yeah!" Jim spat out in anger. "If he wins the 'Plak if fee'- he wins, if there's a tie and a duel, well, we've already covered that, and if he loses, he also wins! What a brilliant mastermind!"
"I am not following you…" Spock stated with some unease.

"Come on! Don’t play stupid! You know exactly what I mean! I put money that this is what set you off that night at the gym! When you realized that your gamble was almost lost! And what's with this need to choke me all the time? You and Sobar! A fucking Vulcankink?"

"I resent your implications." Spock raised his voice now, just a little bit. "If you want to say something, say it bluntly!"

"Bluntly?" Jim chuckled now "As in that famous Vulcan, clean-cut way?"

"In your harsh, brutal human way! Say it already!" Spock glared at him with a burning gaze now. "Tell me how I've helped Svern set his trap for Elder T'Pau!"

"Yes you did, alright!! Like the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin! Leading the rats to the river! Svern is the piper, our bond is the pipe, which leaves the Elders as the…. oh, whatever!" Jim halted for a second to inhale.

"I am unfamiliar with this Human culture reference."

The Vulcan took that chance to let Kirk know, but Jim ignored him and continued.

"And you, Spock, you handed him that pipe! You singlehandedly, gave him the weapon to obliterate the council of elders! Did you do it on purpose? Did you do it knowingly? Or was this a result of an unconscious desire to punish the Elders for the way you were treated as a hybrid? To take your revenge at them? Which is it Spock? Answer me!" Jim demanded while shouting and slamming his fist on the table.

"Although I find your amateurish psychological analysis fascinating, it is irrelevant to Vulcans." Spock's tone was still mocking. "You attach motivations I do not recognize and emotions I do not have to an action I most likely did not perform!

"I cannot answer your accusations without knowing what you are talking about!" Spock now shouted as well. "Instead of human fables, please refer to facts and logic, Jim!"

Fucking stubborn Vulcan!

Why postpone the inevitable? Why not come clean?

Why not say- sorry, Jim, I fucked up badly and I know it?

Jim pinched his nose and swayed on his chair with anger, well, ok… if this is how Spock wants to play, so be it, we will have it his way.

He stopped moving and gazed right into those dark eyes. "Fine! Let's play this stupid game!" he hissed. "Answer my questions and let me make my point, ok?"

"Logic, at last!" Spock nearly growled back. "Go ahead."

"Your Pon Farr, was about ten months ago, right?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven, and when did you realize you have created a bond between us?"

"I suspected, I am not an expert on this subject." Spock corrected him. "A few weeks after that,
about eight months ago, give or take, I cannot pinpoint the exact moment of realization."

"That was two months before you were introduced to the impending 'Plak If fee'."

"A month and a half, give or take." Spock corrected him. "Once I identified the possibility I began my efforts to free you from the potential bond's influence by rising up my shields and minimizing our melds."

"Whatever! Anyone else knew you were going through Pon Farr while on Yorktown? Aside from Nyota, I mean? Before you came to me for help?"

"Affirmative."

"Was it your counterpart?"

"Negative, my counterpart had passed away about two week before that, I assume his passing had contributed to my suddenly evolving condition back then."

"Fine, so who was that?"

"A renowned Healer, who have made a name for herself by helping young, unbounded males survive Pon Farr, through developing groundbreaking medication. I knew I needed her help, my hybrid nature had created a rather vicious blood fever, and my attachment to Uhura was not strong enough to create a bond. I feared for Nyota's life, so I sought that healer's help in an effort to stop or at least, mellow down the fever."

"Did that healer help you?"

"She made an attempt, provided me with an experimental drug, but while she did so, she also warned me that since I was a hybrid, she was unsure if it would have the desired result. She was correct to assume so, the drug only made my fever worse."

"Was that Healer in any way contacted to the elders? Did she report back to the council that their famous human hybrid was capable of going through Pon Farr?"

"I assume that she had kept that information to herself, Jim, as any healer is expected to do, they vow to keep their patients privacy, and Pon Farr is an extremely private thing."

"'Assume' is a key word here!" Jim could only taunt him. "Who was that healer? Was she connected to the Elders?"

"I'd rather not say, those questions surpass the boundaries of privacy."

"Goddamnit, Spock! Fuck privacy! You had your cock up my ass that entire time! I deserve your answers! Was that healer connected to the council of Elders?"

"She is the Healer on board the Vokau." Spock admitted, reluctantly. "Lady Setris, Elder Svern's wife."

Jim felt his jaw falling down to the table, and there it was, another sucker punch, and it hurt, it hurt like nothing other.

"Fuck me, Spock! This is the same doctor that gave me my drug!"

"Indeed." Spock confirmed.
"Damn everything to hell, Spock!! You should have told me, way, way sooner!!! This is such a disappointment, such an insult, such a betrayal of trust!"

"Vulcans do not share this kind of private information, as you already know; Captain! I did not find that coincidence relevant at the time!"

"No, no, no! No more 'Vulcans do not' bullshit, Spock! You knew! You knew! You knew her name! Knew her connection to Elder Svern! Experienced her 'help' through your Pon Farr! Why do you get to know it and I don't?"

"I knew by accident, I never gave much consideration to that knowledge!"

"But its implications, Spock! Did you give consideration to the implications? Elder Svern's wife? Sobar's mother? Did she try to poison me? Did she try to kill you when you went through Pon Farr? Us? You said it yourself that killing you was one of Svern's objectives for this ritual! You see why I cannot trust you? You should have come to me upfront! As soon as you recognized her on board! You should have warned me!"

"Attaching nefarious intentions to an individual based on their personal attachment or political views is illogical! Vulcans have worked very hard throughout the years to place that trust between them! It saved us from self-destruction! It is all we have! Logic and trust, or oblivion! I respected that trust! If you claim that this healer betrayed her vow, you must come up with hard evidence, not speculations!"

"You should have told me! We had trust too, no? It would have made me reconsider taking that drug!"

"I tried! I tried to warn you against taking an untested drug! Remember our conversation at the elevator? I did just that! I begged for your trust and was rejected! You refused listening to me! I implored you not to take that drug!"

"Would have helped your case if I knew who she was!"

"Is that so? Knowing me all those years! Saving each other's lives so many times! Having me as an XO and a lover! All that would not do to make you change your mind! But mentioning a piece of triviality would? That the healer was Elder Svern's wife? Was that enough to stop you from gambling with your health?"

"If I had known that this small, irrelevant piece of information would stop you from taking drug, I would have disclosed it to you, even if I was to violate Elder Svern's and his wife's privacy by doing so!

"We both were unaware of the extant of Elder Svern's plotting at the time! Both did not realize how dangerous he was at that moment! And may I remind you that the entire council of Elders was involved in approving your reckless request to use that drug?"

"Do you understand how illogical this claim is? That it would make any difference? You claimed I have lost your trust long before you were considering that drug! Makes me wonder, if it was so easy for me to lose your trust, did I ever truly gained it at the first place?"

"It was relevant information! It might have made a difference!" Jim insisted. "You should have come clean!! You should have come clean at… When… Fuck! Any time sooner than now, would have actually been fine by me! As long as it was initiated by you!"

"Lady Setris is a Healer, Jim, not a killer! If you think had she meant us harm while supplying us
with those drugs, you’d better back it up with some hard evidence! She could be blamed for neglect, at most! For failing to check up on you, after administrating an unknown medication.

"And it was your responsibility too! To stop using and report back to her when first signs of damage presented themselves! We both asked her for medications she could not provide, she had nothing to offer humans and human hybrids!"

"Are you defending Svern's wife, Spock? Or your own fuckups?" Jim asked after listening to those feeble excuses without interruption.

"I am merely stating that that your arguments are weak! Vulcans do not speculate, Jim! We follow facts and reason!"

"Yeah right, you are all so very perfect! That is why we're in this mess right now! You don’t take ownership of your shit!"

Jim stated harshly, but then he shook his head and breathed out, forcing himself to calm again before he continued.

"That put aside, would you at least, consider the possibility that Lady Setris informed her husband about your Pon Farr? By accident if not intentionally?"

"Highly unlikely." Spock stated stubbornly.

Jim almost moaned in frustration, this was almost as enjoyable as bashing his head against a wall, he knew he had to let go.

"Water under the bridge, moving on." Jim decided on changing the topic. ",After you found out about our bond, who did you talk to about it?"

"No one."

"No one?"

"No one, not even you, not until I found it absolutely necessary to involve Elder T'Pau, so I could take your place in case of a duel. She had examined our connection and confirmed it as a bond, only after this affirmation I had grounds to inform you and later, Elder Sarek about its existence."

"Did you inform Elder T'Pau about this possibility of a bond before or after you were accepted into the 'Leave' team?"

There it was, the tricky question, and Jim smiled now, because he already guessed the answer, and he was getting very close to proving his point.

"The latter, involving Elder T'Pau before my place in the team was secured was an unnecessary complication." Spock admitted, after a suspicious amount of time spent in silence.

"A-ah!!! There we go!!!" They were so close, so very close. "Why only after you made it into the 'Leave' team, huh? Why not ahead of that? What was the complication?"

"You read too much into this, Jim, this is how Vulcans operates, moving from one well established scenario to the other!"

"Bullshit, try again!"

"I did not want to involve T'Pau in a very private affair unless absolutely necessary!"
"Again, try again!"

"What do you want me to say? If you know the answer you are seeking for, why won’t you tell it yourself?" Spock lost his patience again and raised the tone of his voice.

"You only involved Elder T’Pau after your place on the 'Leave' team was secured, because you had to make sure she would not veto you out of the team! You knew, Spock! You knew Elder T’Pau would not allow two bonded mates to end up on opposite sides of the 'Plak If Fee' if she could help it! How could two bonded mates be pitted against each other? Fighting for opposite causes? Honor their blood oaths?

"Can you trust bonded mates not to exchange sensitive information? Not to help each other? Bend the rules? Cheating on challenges? How can a duel to the death be performed under such conditions? And what does it say about a council of Elders which allows such a conflict of interest? This is nothing but sabotage!"

"We have done nothing to taint the ritual! I have made sure of that! I never sent you one intended thought during that whole time! Tempting as it was, I never made an effort to ease your distress or answer your pleas for help until it was allowed!"

"Really? Come on now! We both kept the Section 31 project on the hush that whole time! You tipped me about the system vulnerability at the elevator! You have created an opening to take my place at a duel in advance! Tell me that this is not cheating, Spock, do tell!"

"I cannot, and will not apologize for my need to protect you! As my love, my bonded mate, as my Captain!"

"Problem is I never asked for this protection!! Problem is I never asked for this bond!!" Jim screamed, hoping that the room was as soundproof as it should be.

"And now what? Now Elder T’Pau is trapped! You came to her at the worst timing possible! She could not renounce the bond once she had learned about it, because Vulcans do not lie! And she could not take you out of the 'Leave' team without exposing it to the council and thus risk initiating a civil war herself!"

"Elder T’Pau took this 1.92% on herself as well." Spock agreed, stiff and upright in his seat, as if in defiant, proud and unashamed of what he had done.

"No! Your meddling had placed Elder T’Pau at an impossible position! 1.92% chance you say? Not when Elder Svern is involved! No way will he pass this chance to use it against her! Regardless of the ritual results!"

"He'll use this opportunity to blame her for setting the ritual for a fail! Betraying her people in their most desperate time of need! Spock, this could break the trust of the people in council of Elders, not just in its current composition, but all together as a concept! This is Elder Svern's endgame, Spock! To overthrow T’Pau and maybe even have the council disbanded!"

"And he still can do that! We only prolonged the inevitable, by refusing to obey Lt. Symer's command! Once Svern has us for his investigation, this is going to blow up big time! Blow up and burn the council of Elders with it!"

"This is very farfetched." Spock claimed calmly after a moment of silence, taking in that information and processing it. "You give Elder Svern much more credit than he earned by his actions so far."
"This is all you have to say? Really? Tell me I'm wrong! Tell me you didn't deliberately put Elder T'Pau in this position! Tell me you've made a mistake; tell me you did not know Elder Svern can use this opportunity to eliminate the trust of the people in the council!"

"I have nothing to add to your analysis, as I reject it completely!" Spock answered with open wrath, and this was all the telling Jim needed from him.

"Fuck it, Spock!" He could not stay seated anymore, so he stood up and walked in the tiny room like a lion in a cage. "Completely? Nothing I’ve said made any sense?"

"Some did, some did not, and there are many hidden assumptions in your theory."

"Such as?"

"We do not have the time, James."

"Such as?"

"Would Elder Svern base his whole strategy on a wild guess? Of us creating a hybrid bond? Do you have an idea how improbable our bond is?"

"He did not have to guess! Lady Setris might have reported this to him! Can a human even survive Pon Farr without the creation of a bond?"

"Unclear. Why did Svern not turn his attention to Nyota? She was far more likely to form a bond with me. Lady Setris had no indications that I turned to you eventually."

"They did turn their attention to Nyota! Elder Vellua nearly fried her brain with a meld! Remember? That night of the interview challenge? She might have been searching Nyota’s mind for a bond!"

"I was not informed that this meld took place, not by Nyota and not by you until now." Spock scolded Jim. "Regardless, Elder Vellua was on the undecided faction."

"Leaning towards leave! Elder Svern might have persuaded her to do this investigation for him!"

"This is not the only fault in your theory, and delving into them now is both ineffective and a waste of time." Spock followed Jim as he walked in the room, like a mad man looking for something to punch. "Leave it be, Jim! You are tired, sick and exhausted, you are very close to your limit, and we have other pressing matters to discuss!"

"Patronizing prick!"

"Jim! I warn you! I have limits too!"

"Fuck you! How could we stay a Captain and his XO like this, huh? Even for six more months? How could I ever trust you again? How could I even stay bonded to you? When you are such a manipulative bastard? You and Sobar are practically the same! My way or the highway! Take it up the ass and say thank you while at it!"

"Oh! And if Elder T'Pau ends up dead, it's on you, you hear me? On you!! Did you listen to what Elder Svern had to say about the council? The words he chose? That I will find the council changed? Damn it, Spock! They all might be already dead! Right now, as we speak!"

"Elder Sarek is not dead, I would have felt it though our bond."
"Sure, like you have felt it when your counterpart had passed away! Two council aids had to come to fucking Yorktown to inform you of his passing! You felt nothing!"

"My counterpart was the strongest telepath the Vulcans have even encountered! Elder T'Pau's words, not mine. He locked his mind from everyone! Locked his mind even after his passing as well! No one could get hold of his Katra, so you know! Not even Elder Sarek!"

"I once tried my strength against his shields and failed! He had blocked me from our familiar bond since the moment he had landed in our home universe, claiming he did not want to interfere with my future choices!"

"Good choices, by the way." Jim could not help a snarl. "If Elder T'Pau is dead, if the Elders are dead, what are we doing here? What are we fighting for? Fuck, who will sever this fucking bond?"

To that Spock got up and walked towards Jim, pushing him against the wall, with eyes burning hot, and one arm placed across his chest, not allowing any kind of movement. Jim could hear the Vulcan growled, and he smiled at him, taking some pleasure at the fact that he have managed to piss Spock off to this point.

//Yeah, why don’t you get physical on my? Huh? Always solves the problem!/\n
But Spock did not attack him; he just backed Jim into the bulkhead with his dark eyes fixated on his lips. Jim knew what was about to follow. He wondered until the very last second if he would allow this kiss, but yes, he let Spock's lips lock onto his, and they were burning hot, and so very soft, compared to the rest of his hard body.

Jim moaned and allowed Spock's tongue dive into his mouth, licking the soft flesh and sliding against his own human one. Spock's lips hungrily sucked at his tender, lush ones, as if wishing to steal his breath away or swallow him whole.

Spock's hands cupped his face gently from both sides, and Jim sent his hands to close on the Vulcan's nape, pressing against hot skin and soft black hair.

Spock kissed him like he wanted to sear this act into memory, far inside the depths of his Katra, as if this was the last chance to experience that tender touch, and he was probably right in thinking this.

Jim could not help the tears that ran down his face, thinking about all the things that should not have happen and all the things that would probably never come to be, while Spock's elegant thumbs wiped those tears away.

Seems like forever before they were willing to disengage, remove themselves from each other. Spock shifted his weight from Jim's body and allow some space between them, but still he remained very close.

"What are we fighting for?" Spock asked in a whisper, his hot breath fell on the human's wet skin. Jim licked his abused lips and did not remove his eyes from those dark, beautiful ones but he said nothing. His silence had earned him a low roar and another shove into the bulkhead; it was not painful per say, but his weak body ached regardless.

"What are we fighting for?" Spock asked again, through clenched teeth.

"We are fighting for Vulcan's future, for the Federation's future, for humankind." Jim answered with a broken voice.
"What kind of a future would that be, where a warrior cannot protect his T'hy'la?" Spock almost growled.

Jim translator did not pick up on that word; it was probably a very old, obscure and rarely used one. "Thyl'a?" he asked, and Spock let him go.

He almost fell on the Vulcan, but his pride made him seek the support of the table instead.

"Your theory, as appealing as it might be, has many flaws in it, and we have no time and no way of investigating them." Spock continued as Jim found blood dripping from his nose, falling on the orange surface of the table. "It would suffice to say that at the very least, you show great disrespect towards Elder T'Pau and the rest of the council.

"Elder T'Pau is not without agency or insight! Our revered leader was not chosen as the head of the council by a whim! Nor she is a poppet to be manipulated! And by the likes of me? Young, frightened and desperate?"

"Elder T'Pau could have turned me down! Could have refused a meeting, or acknowledging our bond! But she extended her hand, and allowed me that grace! Knowing every single implication that would have resulted from that decision! The ones that we have already recognized and the ones that are yet hidden from our eyes!

"I must say I am disappointed, James, with you placing full responsibility on me! Blaming me for every possible outcome of this clash with Elder Svern!

"I never wanted, nor acted to place the council of Elders and our great leader T'Pau in harm's way! And if you think this of me, if you have such little faith in me, if I have not proven my worth to you up until now, then I too, cannot wait for this bond to be severed!"

Oh, fuck! Really?

Was this really happening? Did Spock just give up on him?

Congratulation, sunshine! Another one bites the dust!

But you don’t need him! You don’t need anyone!

No one controls you!

"Whatever, Spock, you have earned my mistrust for a reason."

Jim answered in a low voice, wiping the blood off his face and turned to meet his eyes again, but before he could say anything, the comm chimed and Lt. Tuvon's voice entered the room.

"Sir, you wanted a reminder when half an hour had passed."

"Thank you, Mr. Tuvon." Jim answered, and slowly straightened up. "I'm going to clean up now, Spock, and I want you to make contact with Elder Sarek and see if there is anything left fighting for."

"Elder Sarek blocks me still."

"Break his barriers! Tear down his walls, shatter his shields! I don't care! I want to know if Elder T'Pau is still alive!"

"I need to meditate in order to do this, sir."
"Whatever! Call me when you have reached Elder Sarek, I'd like to speak to him as well. In the mean while, I must prepare for the pleasure of talking to Elder Svern."

"Understood." Spock answered.

Jim could see him finding a place at the corner of the tiny room and assuming the meditation position, as he exited.

Chapter End Notes

Too much? Overloaded? Bored to tears? Need a break?
Whatever it is, good or bad, I'd like to know (^_^)

See you in a week, I hope.

My best regards to all!
Final Transactions

Chapter Notes

At this point of the story, every post feels like a victory against the odds.

So many things are working against me now- RL issues, the complexity of the story and the rising difficulty of every chapter, the fear to let you down, and I can go on and on.

Again, I am sorry that this chapter is not as polished as I wished it to be, and the perfectionist in me would like to rewrite it to eternity, but as I said before- a story without an end is no story at all.

So I hope you'll enjoy your read, and if you do- show me your support, it would help me a lot to finish this marathon.

Thank you all, and take care!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings:  Minor character death, mention of violence, very long, heavy on the plot, and too much drama (maybe :-)

Jim finished refreshing in the toilet, thank god for high tech, stain resistant fabrics used by Starfleet for their uniforms, or his shirt would be too dirty and blooded to wear by now, the smell however was probably something that any Vulcan could still pick up on, and there was nothing he could do about that.

While in the toilet, Jim also dared looking at himself in the mirror and he didn't like what he saw. He was too pale, and there was a distinct yellow tinge to his skin, his eyes were yellowish as well, and had dark patches around them, like a poorly applied eye shadow, his neck was colorful, for the lack of other word, and his shoulder looked like a raw mess or red blood and blackened flesh.

He was a wreck and not the authoritative figure he wanted to be, nothing but sheer will was keeping him on his feet, on the edge, the slightest breeze would take him down, and everyone looking at him would think the same, Elder Svern included. Thing is, there was nothing he could do about it now, and soon, all will be over.

With Spock at the ready-room, trying to establish contact with his stubborn father, Jim returned to the bridge, foul mood in fool bloom. "Did Elder Svern hailed us yet?" he asked as he returned to claim his chair.

"Not yet, he has 19.5 minutes left in his hour's ultimatum." Tuvon answered.

"Correction, he has 4.5 minutes to respond to my ultimatum."

Unless Svern wants to find Sobar's head at his deck, Jim played with that scene in his head, finding
Strange it strangely appealing. Now, he didn't know if he was going to kill Sobar and act like a crazy barbarian if Elder Sven actually sends him children's bodies, he could not figure it out, which was good, because if he could not anticipate his own next move, how would Svern?

Waiting on that call tested Jim's nerves to their limits, trying to stay calm; he glanced at the clock on the main screen counting down the last 3.5 minutes. Still, he welcomed Tuvon's distraction as the comm officer turned to him and asked for his attention.

"Sir, would you please come and see this?" the Vulcan asked, inviting Jim to his console.

"Sure." Jim almost leaped out of the chair and joined the Lieutenant.

"Look at this telepathic signature." Tuvon shared his screen with Kirk and there was this display of a telepathic signature as an electric signal spread out on the nanoseconds timeline it usually took to produce it.

"What am I looking at?"

"Elder's Svern's Aid telepathic signature, Mr. Surin's signature." Tuvon explained. "I'll have some other samples of his signature in a layout." The comm officer quickly worked the console and placed more lines on the same graph, all very similar to the original line he presented, stack up together.

"Lieutenant, you must help me here, I am no expert at analyzing Vulcan telepathic signatures." Jim almost lost his non-existing patience.

"It's not a Vulcan signature, sir, but a Romulan one."

"How can you tell?"

"You see those areas of the signature? Repeating in his every sample presented here?" Tovun pointed out his long, gloved finger to circle some areas of the graphs. "Vulcan brains and Romulan brains are very similar, and so are their telepathic signatures, but those areas I just highlighted, indicate that this is a Romulan brain producing it, not a Vulcan one."

"But they look a bit different, Romulans and Vulcans right? Physically. And they have different DNA markers too, am I correct?"

"Yes, you are, but both appearance and DNA markers can be changed by gene therapy, a known Romulan spying technique."

"Alright..." Jim mumbled, his mind racing, trying to figure out what all of this meant. "So we have a Romulan spy on board?"

"I believe it is so." Tuvon agreed.

"How come no one picked up on it yet? Commander Sabek? Security? The ship's AI?"

"The Elders and their aides are protected by diplomatic immunity." The comm officer explained with unease "I searched Commander Sabek's files, and Elder Svern had provided him with all the necessary documents to clear Surin for boarding the ship and get his clearance."

"Fake documents, for sure." Jim mumbled.

"Elder Svern is hailing us, sir." Tuvon cut their conversation with this announcement.
So Svern exploited the blind trust Vulcans had in their Elders to get a Romulan spy on board, but how does he play this? And to what extent? Was something Jim could not yet figure out.

"Find all relevant data and documents and prepare a dossier to send to New Vulcan as soon as communication is back online, sabotaged comm logs, the Romulan spy activities, everything. On screen,.."

"Yes, sir."

Jim straightened up just in time to see Elder Svern's face appear on the big screen of the bridge, and his blood froze as the Elder was not alone, he was holding a little girl in his arms, a very familiar little girl he once met at the botanic garden.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk." The Elder said, while struggling to keep the girl in her place, she didn't look frightened or alarmed, but she did seem uncomfortable.

"Elder Svern, I am happy that you got in touch as agreed upon 45 minutes ago, mind explaining why do we have company?"

"Oh, it is but a small nuisance, T'Sala just wanted to say hello to her grandmother, isn't it, sweet child?" Svern cooed at the girl, but the warmth in his voice did not reach his eyes. "Is Commander T'Eelel available?"

The little girl seemed alerted as she heard her grandmother's name, and her eyes ogled Jim with hope that he had to crush.

"Not at the moment." He answered, clenching his jaw. "Let the girl go, now that you are ready for negotiation, there is no need involving others in our business, don't you agree?"

"Indeed."

Elder Svern briefly moved away from view, as he probably handed the girl to someone else while off camera. When he was back again, he seemed to be alone, and there was a glimmer of amusement in his bright eyes, that sadistic scumbag.

"It is unbecoming of an Elder to use children as a negotiation tool." Jim mentioned without losing his calm, it was a major achievement.

"My demands remain the same." Svern returned to topic in a heartbeat.

Jim could not refuse a frustrated chuckle at hearing that. "Is the concept of negotiation lost on you? It is all about trade, you want some, you must give some."

"Very well, let us hear what you want, captain Kirk." Svern graciously agreed at last.

"I am ready to hand you over Sobar and his crew, and turn Spock and myself in for whatever investigation you wish to perform, I promise our cooperation. I cannot give you back command of the Ipik, however, because the situation there is unstable, the core must be shut down to avoid a meltdown, and still there's a chance the base will implode."

"Whose estimation is that?" Elder Svern asked with hidden mockery, which Jim chose to ignore, as he continued his speech.

"I ordered my crew to evacuate everyone, and that includes your son, Somak and the ones loyal to him, dead and alive, to New Vulcan, and this would be a sign of good will from my part."
"In return, I want every child on this ship to be transferred ASAP to New Vulcan via the gate that is now open at Ipik, along with the Elders their aids, Miss Marcus, my Lieutenant and every one of the guests and witnesses that don’t want to stay here."

"Give me back my crew first, and then we will talk about it." Svern insisted, but Jim shook his head at that.

"No." Kirk stuck to his refusal "And I will not hand you the Vokau any time soon. It will remain at the hands of this bride crew until we reach New Vulcan and solve this conflict with the help of other players that are awaiting us there."

"What players?" Svern almost snarled "All the important players are right here."

"Are you sure?" Jim smiled bitterly at the Elder's statement. "Because it would be relief to know that no hostile forces are awaiting us upon arrival."

Svern gave nothing away at this hinted accusation, did not move a muscle, was frozen as a statue, but then again, this might be an indication of its own kind.

"Only after everyone is evacuated." Jim continued. "We will release your Son and the junior officers, then Spock and I will turn ourselves in. This is my final offer, Elder Svern, what do you say?"

Jim took in a deep breath and stood still, awaiting Svern's words, the tension at the bridge was a living entity; everyone stopped whatever it was that they were doing and awaited the Elder to react.

"Unacceptable." Svern finally broke the silence with his decisive verdict, making Jim want to cry on the inside, but quickly he diverted that energy into anger instead.

"Unacceptable?"

"Indeed, you must return me the control of the Vokau. I will not have it returned to New Vulcan before the 'Plak If Fee' is concluded, and I will not let any of the warriors leave here before the ritual is done."


"We must remain in my territory until the ritual is completed." Svern insisted. "I want a clear, swift, 'Leave' victory, with all opposition obliterated, one way or the other. I want the council reformed and have diminished authority; I claim the authority parallel to a Praetor. I am in the right and there is no reason for me to back down!"

"We can do this until the Ipik blows up." Jim reminded him. "Is that what you want? Staying here and getting everyone killed?"

"There is no evidence to support your claim that the Ipik is about to implode. Give it back to Commander Somak and he will have it stabilized. Give the Vokau back to Commander Sobar and come to me. I promise you we will take back the bridge by force, before the Ipik will present any kind of risk."

"No, Svern, you gotta give me something!" Jim decided not to bring up the suspected Romulan spy just yet, to keep some ammunition for later, but he'll bring Sobar up very soon, and he might mean
"Do as I say now or suffer the consequences." Svern concluded calmly. "I'll give you ten minutes per hostage we will execute, this should buy you approximately eight hours, and then we will come for the bridge. Linger enough and it will eventually cost you the children's lives."

Fuck.

"If you don’t mind parting with your son, his wife and the others, I don’t mind this waiting game." Kirk lied.

Now Svern studied him carefully, and Jim hoped his poker faced would hold under that frosty scrutiny "Are you truly willing to murder children for this? Lt. T'Heli is with child." Svern tried.

Damn hypocrite.

Well, some children are probably more precious than others.

"Elder Svern, you are the one threatening children, not me." Jim tried to sound as cold as he could, but inside his mind raced, trying to figure out how to rescue all the children under an hour.

They glared at each other for a long moment.

Kirk wondered if Elder Svern was really able to give up his son. After all, if Spock was to face him in a duel, Sobar was pretty much done for it, right? Or maybe not? Maybe Sobar was never at risk?

Elder Svern could have saved his son, with Spock trying to step in instead of him, the bond would be immediately exposed, Spock would be a traitor to his a blood oath, be executed, Elder T'Pau would be exposed as the enabler of the ritual's sabotage, and the ritual itself? It would probably be deemed as invalid.

And if the ritual was invalid or even suspected as such, there was no point to continue the duel, and Sobar's life would be saved. What a mastermind! What a gamble! But does it mean that Elder Svern was not planning on putting Sobar in harm's way? Was not willing to sacrifice his son to achieve his goal?

Maybe there was still hope to get to Svern; maybe there was still warmth in his blood after all.

Elder Svern was the first to lower his eyes.

"Give me half an hour to reconsider and I will get back to you."

"As you wish." Jim answered with a nod, trying very hard not to view this as an achievement.

As Svern's image disappeared from the bridge's main screen, and it fade into black again, there was someone tugging at his mind.

//Please join me in the ready room, I have established contact with Elder Sarek.//

"Xon, I'm gonna take a break, the Conn is yours."

"Yes, sir." the youth seemed less disturbed by the prospect, and he moved from the tactic station into the Captain's chair with more ease.
Jim entered the ready room and Spock eyed him from his place on the floor with subtle distress.

"You have contact Sarek, you say."

"Indeed. I have done so while crossing some lines I should have not, this will never be forgiven. Elder Sarek is waiting for us, none the less. Please join us."

Spock gestured towards the vacancy next to him on the floor, and as Jim set down, although not in a meditation position, he let Spock reach out to his melding points, but Spock did not touch the skin yet, he lingered.

Jim gave him a questioning gaze.

"Be very still and try not to over burden us with emotions." Spock said softly "Elder Sarek's shields are practically none existing at this point, and if he gives away any indication that he is communicating with us, our bond will be at risk, and so would be life. If I detect any indication for loss of control, from you or from him, I am going to end the contact. Understood?"

"Loud and clear, I'll do my best."

Yeah, he knew that this was not very reassuring.

"Kaiidth." Spock murmured and his fingers finally found Jim's melding points and they were thrown into a different setting, much like as happened with the late Captain Setal.

They were placed in the temple of the mind, at deck 7, and it was a huge and beautiful structure, framed by pillars of rosewood base phasing into golden top, it looked like they were build out of actual stones, brought into the ship from New Vulcan or from the debris gathered from old Vulcan. Yet the pillars did not close the hall, it was large and spacious.

The ceiling was decorated with etched woodwork, a rare and luxuries raw material both on old and new Vulcan, with rich and elaborated carving of geometric forms, full of symmetry and grace, and golden lamps were hanged down from it, casting a soft golden light on the hall.

The floors were covered with polished black garnet, creating a smooth, reflective surface that mirrored the golden glow of the lights hanging from the tall ceiling, like a starry night sky. And next to external walls, there were rows of colossal statues, carved from red and pink garnet in the image of old Vulcan heroes, their stern faces loomed over the drama below them.

There was a pleasant scent of burning herbs and boiling oils in the air, but it could not mask the smell of tension and fear that was emitted from the captives, as they set on the floor together, at the center of the temple, near the elevate altar, guards pointing their weapons at them, positioned both around the captives and above them, at stairways and balconies on the second floor of the huge hall.

Jim realized that he was witnessing the happenings throw Elder Sarek eyes. He could only use his
eyes for point of view, but he could also use his other senses, to smell the distress in the air, to feel
the aches of his old body against the cold, hard floor, to feel the sorrow and rage that dwelled in his
heart, buried deep inside, tucked away and only echoing as a distant bell.

Sarek was seated next to Elder Soval and Elder T'Pau, and Jim noted that while Elder T'Pau was
unmoving like a statue in the room, Elder Soval was fuming like a volcano on the verge of
eruption.

Four appeared from a side room and took the stairs to the elevated stage next to the altar, Elder
Svern, Ensign T'Sel, Lieutenant Symer and another young male, which was probably his Romulan
aid, that Jim had never noticed before. Elder Svern allowed himself to appear angry and restless,
while the others were calm, and the unidentified male almost looked amused.

"Time is up! You have run out of time to rectify your errors!" Elder Svern started, almost roaring at
the get go, so much different from the way he presented himself in front of Jim. "All I needed form
you was honesty and bravery! All I demanded was for you to acknowledge your failure and resign!
But pride blind your eyes still!

"Don’t you understand the consequences of your refusal? Would you not be satisfied only by
betraying the nation's trust? Would you drive us into a civil war as well? With this illogical refusal
to step down? Future generations will look back at you with shame! And I am here to serve as
their mouth, and as such, I must inform you that time is up! You are Elders no more!"

"Great claims require great evidence!" Elder Soval got up on his feet and waved his fingers at
Elder Svern "You keep us here as hostages! You forced us to stay locked up here for 63.5 hours!
Cut off from the rest of the ship, without knowing what happened to the rest on board! Accusing us
of treason, of destroying the future of Vulcan and all sorts of horrible allegations! And yet you
have presented no evidence to back it up! Our time is up? Maybe your time is up!"

Elder Sarek could not hold back his appreciation of Soval's courage, and Spock and Jim though the
same, all of them wondered where Soval did draw his strength from maybe even Elder Sven who
looked at him with unhidden dismay.

"You ask for evidence, Elder Soval? Need I remind you all, how you have come to decide on your
votes?" He answered Soval with ire "You vote to remain was based on your affinity towards the
leader of the 'Remain' team! You wanted to prevent more bloodshed! Human blood! You said that
it was cruel to pit a human against a Vulcan in a duel, and yet, Elder Soval, you were the one who
wished to include humans in this ritual! You cannot play it both ways! Where is the logic in that?
Pure emotion! Pure sentiment! Intentional sabotage!"

Soval listened and stayed stern on his feet, pure willpower fueling his resistance.

"I wished to include humans because I saw the need to measure their Katras against the Vulcan
ones, so we would know the true strength of the Federation. We all agreed to do so. You added
your vote to mine! Need I remind you why we invoked the 'Plak If Fee' in the first place? Why
involve only reason in our decisions? Emotions should have a room in them as well, even more so,
since logic had failed us."

"Failed you, perhaps, but not me. I never lost my way like the rest of you, never lost logic, never
had any doubts. I never had to rely on deception and sabotage to win my case! I am the owner of
the Plak If Fee! And I declare you as part of it, no more protected by the status of Elders! Your
time has run out!"

"Then what are you waiting for?" Elder Soval asked with a mocking smile on his face. "If we are
all traitors and unworthy of your logic, why won’t you kill us and be done with it? Why bother with collecting evidence and signing papers?"

"My efforts are not aimed at you, arrogant fool." Elder Svern answered with contempt "My efforts are aimed at the witnesses that had gathered to oversee the 'Plak If Fee'. The future of Vulcan!

"They are still gathered, at the main hall on this deck, watching and listening to everything that goes on in this temple. They watch you now! They watch us, and I will show them what a failed council you were! I will convince them to follow me with logic and evidences!"

"What evidence?" A new voice had risen from where Elder Sarek could not see. "All I see is evidence of your treachery."

Sarek's eyes were sent back to the stage, and focused on Surin, who just gazed at his boots with a smile on his face.

"I am loyal to the nation of Vulcan, to our future leaders." Svern insisted. "All I do, I do for them! For their peace of mind! For their reassurance! So they will come forth without a shadow of uncertainty and trust my leadership as their Praetor! So we could walk together into the Romulan Empire as a house united! Own our future as one!"

"Then you are the traitor, Elder Svern! A traitor to Master Surak!" Soval kept going, and Jim could not help but both appreciate again his stubbornness and worry for his frail health.

"What kind of future do we have with Romulus?" asked another Elder from a back seat that Jim could not see. "A future of enslavement?"

"Only if we refuse their terms, Elder Sidok, as I have already said, time and time again." Svern replied "But I see no more logic in this repetition, time is up."

"What terms do they present? What guaranties do we have for them not to take back their word? " Elder Sidok insisted with a sense of despair. "We have no assurance but your word for it! And we all know the Romulan way. They care not for peace and logic, only for power and control. They have turned their backs on Surak's teaching eons ago, they are everything that we swore not to become! They are not to be trusted!"

Elder sidok's words came out as a lament, echoing in the hall like a mournful howl.

"Stubborn imbecile!" Svern almost roared. "What good has come to us, following Surak's teaching? What have become of us but ash and dust? We have followed Surak's path to become weak, degenerate, lazy and soft! The Romulans turned their back on Surak and what have become of them? An empire! A force to be reckoned with! A force feared by the Klingons and the Federation! If that is not telling enough, I don’t know what would be!"

"We do not wish the Vulcan people any harm."

That was Elder Svern's aid, Surin has spoken, and his voice was surprisingly melodic and soft, elder Svern did not stop him, but turned and listen instead, and Surin continued.

"We want you as equals, as brothers." Elder Sarek noted his heavy Romulan accent; something Jim would not have picked up on his own. "You are wise and strong, more powerful telepaths than we can ever hope to be. Your blood will mix with ours to make us both stronger. We will be more than happy to welcome you, be our bonded mates, fathers and mothers to our children. Let us rejoin our races as once before, you are our lost, beloved kin."
"Beloved kin?" Elder Soval insisted. "Remember one named Nero? Singlehandedly destroyed Vulcans! Our home! Is this the way to treat your own?"

The Ronulan glared at him with sadness and breathed.

"I expected logic from an Elder, Soval, but received nothing but prejudice and generalization. This was a different timeline, a different universe; please focus on the here and now. If you refuse us, we will conquer your planet and save all the children, so you will not ruin their Katras with your weakness and decadence."

"This is a window of opportunity that soon will be closed." Elder Svern continued "The Romulan people are not known for their patience, and if we fail to convince them now that we are a united, strong house, they will take us apart and enslave us as individuals."

"Traitor!" Someone shouted again, this time from the front, and Sarek recognized her as Elder T'Mur. "The council has placed its trust in you! You were sent to negotiate peace with the Romulans and when you came back, you reported that they have turned you down!" the Elder waved her hand in the air "but behind our backs you have made a deal with them! You have promised them New Vulcans in return to a praetor position! You are an enemy of Vulcan, shame on you!" she finished, pointing her boney finger, and some others mumbled their agreement.

"Not everything goes through the council, Elder T'Mur." Svern huffed at her "I was authorized by the V'Shar to bring in a Romulan liaison officer, so we could keep in touch and maintain communication. That is for your first accusation, and as for the Romulans? Are you delusional? Do you think we stand ground against them at our current state?

"Romulans are cruel and brutal but not without logic! Their time of attack is now! When the Vulcans are weak and few! When the Federation is on the verge of war with the Klingons and cannot interfere! When New Vulcans is placed at the edge of Romulan space! Do you think I had any conviction over the Empire? Do you think I could have stopped them from nurturing this ambition? Am I the only one to appreciate Romulan reason?"

"You are a traitor! Who took the opportunity to join our enemies as they considered against us!" Elder T'Mur insisted, and then she fainted and fell into the arms of her neighbors, a clear sign of her fatigue and state of excitement.

"A traitor?" Svern turned to the rest of them with a sad sigh. "A traitor for accepting the unavoidable? For wanting a true viable future for the Vulcan kind? A traitor because I refuse to shut up? Because I wish to continue studding the red matter that one day might save this galaxy? You are the traitor! All of you!"

"We wish the Vulcans well." The Romulan spy added. "But unfortunately, as I observe your reactions here, I see stubbornness and unjustified pride. If you do not see the error of your way by reason, you'll see it by force."

"This generation is all but lost." Elder Svern admitted to him. "We can only place our hope in the ones to come."

"There will be no future generations of Vulcans if you do this!" Elder Soval insisted, still on his feet. "It would be the end of Vulcan in spirit and mind! If we follow you, our children will be Romulan!"

"But they will be!" Elder Svern shouted. "Or would you prefer human hybrids? such as Elder Sarek's son? You all saw him at my challenge, the monster that he is! All raw power and no
restrain. Do you wish this for future generations? Do you wish for them to cower before such hybrids? Creating an elite class of engineered monsters? Ruling with cruelly over the rest? We'll become worse than Romulans, I assure you! The galaxy will burn to ashes under their rule! A future of agony and pain, is that what you want?"

"Not all will follow Elder Sarek's way." Another elder said "His experiment had failed, and we have no affinity to psi-null creatures; Elder Sarek has succumb to his bizarre carnal needs, an oddity that is not commonly shared."

It puzzled Jim that an elder would talk about another this way, but if Sarek had an emotional reaction to those disrespectful words, Jim could detect none, a testimony for his strong Vulcan control, he remained calm and unmoving in his seat.

"That's where you are wrong, Elder Vetuc!" Elder Svern glare flared at the speaker. "Hybrid Vulcans can form hybrid bonds! I will prove this to all! Wait until we have Spock and the human James Kirk with us! The fact that the human is psi-null did not prevent it from happening! Imagine a world where Vulcan hybrids will have bonds with none Vulcans, their loyalty will be divided! They will prefer alien interests over our own; trust will be gone, Vulcan society will be no more!"

"Is that true?" someone gasped, turning to look at elder Sarek.

"I will not violate my son's privacy, ask him yourself when and if he's here." Elder Sarek answered, but his heart started beating fast in his side, pulsing violently, almost painfully erratic.

It was so weird to hear his voice through the meld, and there it was, a hint of emotion, anger and resentment towards Spock that has shuttered Elder Sarek's shields and forced himself in.

And was that a hint of fear in Sarek's mind as well? Did Elder Sarek fear his own son? That was horrible, and his fault! He pushed Spock into this! How could he even hope to repair this?

//Jim, control yourself, or I will end this meld.// Spock warned him, a voice hovering in his head, demanding and threatening. //Calm down.//

Jim was not the only one to turn his attention to Elder Sarek, elder Svern did that as well. He glared at Sarek, and Sarek returned the favor, unflinching, it was strange staring at Elder Svern through someone else's eyes, almost terrifying.

"Elder Sarek, please answer me this." Svern said "You have voted the same as I did, to leave the Federation. So why are you down there, with my captives? Why are you not up here by my side? The way Elder Sponn and Elder Vellua are? Why do you refuse your own logic?"

"I voted to leave, indeed." Elder Sarek answered "But before casting my vote, I also respect the terms of the 'Plak If Fee', which you have agreed upon as well. The 'Remain' team had won the ritual, fair and square; refusing to accept that result would not only upset reason but also provoke the gods. Logic might be on your side, but it will be so 150 years from now, trust in our governing system, however, might not last that long, if you unlawfully refuse to play by the rules."

"This 'Plak If Fee' was invalid from the start! And do not pretend you did not know it before this ritual even began! I will prove this to all! Your vote was also invalid!" Elder Svern continued "Elder T'Pau knowingly let two bonded mates take opposite sides, opening this ritual to trickery and deceit!"

"Prove it for Surak's Katra!" someone shouted from the crowd. "Elder T'Pau, do you have a word to say on the matter?"
All turned to look at Elder T'Pau who sat next to elder Sarek, and she looked very old and profoundly sad, yet her eyes shone with the wisdom of the ages, and she seemed very resolved and strong.

"I weep for our nation, for this is our darkest hour." She said, without emotion. "The rift is wide and deeper than my wildest imagination. My worst fears are rising up before my eyes to hunt me. My heart is broken, but my mind is clear. You say I am a traitor, Elder Svern, but if I am one, I am looking at another."

She said while staring straight into his eyes.

"Because when you ask me why did I allegedly let two bonded mates enter the ritual on different sides, I can only ask the same. Why did you insist on having Spock on your team? Why did you threaten a veto if this demand was not met? Were you trying to sabotage the ritual from its starting point as well, Elder Svern?"

For a second there, Elder Svern gasped "I did not know this in advance! I merely suspected while you knew! You knew and allowed it regardless! I will prove it for all to see!"

"You claim with such certainty that I had this all planned out in advance, very well then." Elder T'Pau continued "Prove your claim and we'll have this conversation finished afterwards." She nodded with calm.

"I will! But not to you! You will sign your resignation, Elder T'Pau! Just like Elder Sponn and Elder Vellua who atoned their errors and therefore their lives will be spared. We have no time to spare!"

"The future will never forgive us if we bent the knee to the likes of you, Svern! How dare you blame Elder T'Pau in such a way! No Elder has ever done so much for our people in this generation, as our revered leader!" Some other elder said, making Svern snarl.

"Sentiment!" he spat out "Pure sentiment! And where will it lead us? Is that our future? A human is now commanding the Vokau! Seated in Captain Setal's chair and handling the Conn of our generation ship! I would not come up with a better symbolic image of our poor, pathetic state if I had tried!

"I am done with waiting, the time is up! You have forced me to declare you all as unfit to serve! I will dissolve this council now! Strip you of your Elder jurisdiction, and form a new council! One that is brave enough; resolved enough and humble enough to let go of the past, and carve a new future!

"One by one now, you will climb up the altar and sign this certification, admitting to your folly and giving up your authority! Refuse me and you will be executed on the spot! Elder Soval, you go first."

A guard came to fetch the elder, Jim saw him through Sarek eyes, he showed no sign of fear, rising up on his own volition, but he did need help walking towards the stage.

The guard was young and somewhat rude, almost dragging the Elder with him in his haste. He let go of Elder Soval when they finished the short climb up the stairs, where elder Svern awaited him with an offered PADD.

Elder Soval stabilized himself with the help of the altar, and took a moment to balance himself and look straight into the eyes of Elder Svern.
"Sign this, please, Elder Soval." Elder Svaren said calmly.

"I will not surrender the remnant of Vulcan to the tyranny rule of Romulus."

"Then will you abandon them in the hands of the reckless and indifferent humans instead?" Svern asked, lowering the PADD and raising his phaser instead.

"Unlike you, I have faith in Humanity, Elder Svern, live long and prosper." Soval smiled and formed the Ta'al with his old frail hand.

Elder Svern almost frowned as he fired his weapon.

"You have an hour to reflect on this useless death before call the next one up to the alter!" he said as the body of Elder Soval hit the floor.

Spock ended the contact, and left them both alone in the ready room again, disoriented and overwhelmed. Jim leaned against the wall, blinking at Spock in complete shock.

Elder Soval was dead; all his wisdom gathered throughout the years, all his knowledge and insights, his vision for the future, his love, and his spirit, gone. Elder Svern just killed him, without blinking, without a shadow of remorse on his cold face. How did it come to this? What have become of the Vulcan people?

Jim spoke first. "Holly hell! A motherfucker piece of shit! He killed Elder Soval! He just fucking killed him! Who gave him the right? Such an unhinged fanatic! Out of his fucking mind!"

"Calm down now, Jim."

"Fuck no!"

"There is nothing we can do about it."

"It's my fault, he was already improvising and I pushed him over the edge. I backed him into a corner, I'm so stupid!"

"It's nobody's fault, Jim." Spock himself, seemed grief stricken, but also very lucid, and he stared into Jim's eyes with his dark, deep gaze. "Elder Svern never had the intention of leaving this space-time without all swearing allegiance to him or dead at his feet, with or without a plan."

"He's gonna kill them all! He's gonna kill Elder T'Pau! He's gonna kill your father!"

"4.4 hours to endgame." Spock reminded him.

"If it's going to work!" Jim retorted. "Sick fuck! He's gonna kill us!"

"It is a possibility; we can only do our best."

"You understand that we need to turn ourselves in, right Spock? The only way to save the elders, to turn Svern's attention and aggression our way, instead of the elders, at least for the next 4.4 hours."

"You are correct." Spock answered. "If we wish to save lives, we'll have to turn ourselves in."
"We played the clock for as long as we could." Jim hummed and closed his eyes, exposing his weakness and pain to Spock, tears ran down his face again, in silent anguish. "I tried my best, I'm sorry."

"Elder Svern is hailing us, sir." Xon's voice filled the room with his announcement before Spock could say anything, forcing Jim to open his eyes again.

Was it half an hour already?

Kirk ran a hand on his wet face and through his hair.

"On our way." he said back to Xon, struggling up to his feet, and Spock helped him up and followed.

***0***

Elder Svern already awaited them on full screen, as they walked into the bridge, he seemed unfazed by the fact he had just killed an Elder, the cold blooded murderer. He seemed exceptionally frosty and Jim knew this was their last chance, what he doesn't achieve now; he will never get to achieve.

"Elder Svern, what a pleasure." Jim muttered, trying his very best not to give away the fact that he saw what he saw and knew what he knew.

"Let's finish this." Svern stated dryly.

Jim nodded, the feeling was mutual.

"My demands are the same." Jim started. "I want the Elders, my officer, the children and every guest that wish to leave this ship to be able to do so. I have shuttles standing by, and I will send them through Ipik to New Vulcan.

"In return I offer the evacuation of your crew upon Ipik and returning the Vokau's junior staff to your hands. You can remain in control of Deck 7, but the bridge will stay ours. Once everyone is evacuated, Spock and I will turn ourselves in for whatever questioning you have in mind."

"I want the Vokau to stay here, I need the bridge, and I will not let the Elders leave, they are not yours to free but mine to judge."

Fuck, this was like talking to a brick wall.

"The bridge stays in our control and the Vokau will fold towards New Vulcan as soon as possible. I am willing to give up the Elders, though, if you give up your crew in return."

Yes, I'll give them up if I must but only for the next 4 hours or so, and I hope to occupy your attention until endgame, so no other Elder would die.

"The Vokau must stay here, until the ritual is over." Svern insisted.

"I know what you want, but this is how it is going to happen." Jim insisted, trying his best to stay
calm. "First, to establish trust from your side, as we did on our, you will release the children and the delegates.

"Once we confirm that they all took off by a shuttle, we will come to you, Spock and I, but we will be guarded, and we will turn ourselves to you, in exchanging for the aids, the other hostages and Lieutenant Marcus.

"Control over the ship and your bridge crew will be returned to you once we reach New Vulcan, under the assumptions that Spock and I are alive, and all the Vokau crewmen had left the ship first."

"This is not acceptable!" Svern elevated his tone. "I will have control over the ship and my crew as soon as the last shuttle leaves! Before we fold back to New Vulcan!"

"No, you will not!" Jim also allowed his voice to be a bit louder."What other guaranty will we have for our safety? Come on! We both take a gamble here! You place your bet on the Romulan fleet to get involved and take over New Vulcan and I place my bet on Starfleet to come and stop them!"

"How did you come to this conclusion?" Elder Svern tried, but there was no way he'd disclose his communication with Elder Sarek again.

"Come on! I'm on the bridge now! Did you think I would not notice your son's attempt to erase communications logs? Did you think I would not notice the Romulan signature of your aid, Surin? Captain Setal trusted you! Commander Sabek was blinded by you Elder Status! Both paid with their lives! I'd be foolish to do the same! So trust me to know what I'm talking about! I know about your dealing with the Romulans, and I know that they are at stand by to join us either on New Vulcan or here, once peak periapsis is over!"

"You have no idea what you are talking about, human." Svern almost growled, and that alone showed Jim that he was on the right track.

"I know that we are on even grounds now." Jim smiled at him. "So this is only a logical demand that we stay that way, and keep our leverage until we reach New Vulcan. If you have nothing to lose, you'd kill us without blinking, and I want to live, if you don’t mind me saying."

Now try me, Elder Soval, you sonuvabitch!

Svern took some time to consider, and Jim held his breath in the meanwhile.

"Romulus will win, with or without my aid, it is enviable. Starfleet will never come and if does, it will lose against the Romulan superior force and cloaking technology."

Unless they have new Vulcan's help or the detector I gave them or both, Jim smiled again to himself.

"I have no desire to rule over New Vulcan." Svern confessed with a soft voice, out of the blue and with open sadness. "I only volunteered to ensure my people's safety, otherwise, a Romulan praetor would be appointed, and I am not sure their treatment of the Vulcan people would be as delicate.

"I am not the villain you paint me to be, James Kirk. Romulans are sharks in the water, and as of now, the Vulcans bleed. I am their only chance of survival as a nation, can't you see that?"

Oh, yeah? Cold blooded killer!

"I am not interested in your reasoning, Elder Svern. Save your cognitive dissonance to yourself. Do
you agree to my terms or not?" Jim asked and stared right into Svern's eyes with fire in his gaze.

Svern blinked his inner eyelids, and Jim saw this as a huge achievement, this was the first time he managed to throw Svern off balance.

"I agree to your terms, but we will do it this way- I will send the first group of delegates and captive Vokau crew to the shuttle bay, unharmed and unguarded, as soon as possible.

"When this is done, you must let the Ipik personal leave. With this stage done, I expect to meet you both on deck 7, next to the temple and then I will send out the next group of children, aids and Miss Marcus in return to your surrender. Is that acceptable?"

"It is." Jim nodded with unhidden relief.

"Expect the first team within half an hour. Svern out."

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Jim almost fell down as the screen turned black, so he dragged himself to the Captain's chair and set down. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, battling the orchestra of pain playing in his body, led by the frantic beating of his heart.

No one said anything, for a long while.

Spock took the spot next to his chair, and Jim breathed in his heat and sandalwood scent.

"Ensign T'Dara." Spock turned to the young female pilot. "Is the main reactor room connected to bridge control?"

"It is." The pilot confirmed "Commander Supak estimates that we could fold back to New Vulcan within 5.8 hours."

"Thank you." Spock nodded and turned to Lieutenant Tuvon. "Please comm deck 8 and confirm that the shuttles are at stand by."

Tuvon nodded and worked his console; Spock glanced at Jim with worry, but said nothing.

"Shuttles are at stand by." Tovun reported after a moment.

"Positive." Spock nodded again. "Please stay in touch with them to confirm the arrival of the first group."

"Yes, sir."

Jim opened his eyes, and the bridge danced before them, he held on to the sides of his chair. "Hail all decks, Lieutenant." He commanded.

Spock raised an eyebrow, but Tuvon complied.

"Greeting, to all who can hear me." Jim opened, trying his best to sound as strong as he did not feel. "I am Captain James T. Kirk, currently in control of the Vokau's bridge. The past hours were a nightmare to us all, it is almost a day now, which Vulcans have fought and killed their own,
Captain Setal is dead, and so are many others. It was a dreadful day, and I hope it will end soon.

"I want you to know that we are doing the best we can to end this conflict and restore peace and order. We are also in the process of folding back to New Vulcan and hope to start our journey back there in 5.8 hours. I hope to find New Vulcan safe and welcoming as we reach there, in three days’ time.

"However, I know that some of you do not have that long. For those of you who are wounded and weak, I offer another path to New Vulcan. Shuttles will leave within the next hour and get there through the gate, which is now open on Ipik.

"So I ask of you, if you are hurt, wounded or lost, please report to deck 8. No questions will be asked, it will not matter which side you took in this conflict or how much blame rest upon your shoulders, because now is not that time. If you need to get to New Vulcan now, and able, the doors to the docking bay will be open for you.

"I do not know how this will end, or what will wait for you on the other side, but I do ask you to use this option if needed and able, the rest will have to wait for another day, helpfully, a better one than this. Kirk out."

Jim breathed through the pain again, and turned in his chair to face Spock.

//What is the situation on Ipik? Let them know that two shuttles will be passing through the gate soon, so it must stay open for at least another hour and a half.//

Spock did not respond for a while.

"Lt. Kellet." Jim turned it the sensor array operator "Please clear the path from all decks to deck 8."

"I should do so for all decks but deck 7." She corrected him.

He nodded in exhaustion, closing his eyes again. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, is what I meant."

"Acknowledged." Kellet nodded and turned to work on it.

//Lieutenant Nelath reports that the naturalization process of the red matter has been completed successfully, ahead of schedule, and the procedure of shutting down the core had been initiated, it will take the core about 9 days to shut down, assuming it will not blow up during the attempt. They are ready to leave at your mark.//

//Can they leave before it shuts down?//

//Yes, shutdown is an automated apparatus.//

//Someone must stay there, right?// Jim reluctantly inquired //To close the gate to New Vulcan after the shuttles are gone, so Romulans could not get in, and also make sure the core is stabilized.//

//Affirmative.// Spock confirmed //Commander T’Elel and another Ipik scientist have already volunteered to stay behind and oversee the operation.//

Jim pictured it in his mind, the both of them left alone in an unstable space base, so far away from home. They will stay there as the cold settles in, as the lights turned off, when silence takes over, and food run out. Help may never come.

He swallowed and nodded. //Give Commander T’Elel and the other scientist my gratitude, for all
it's worth. Oh, and let T'Elel know that her granddaughter, T'Sala, sends her love.//

//Aye, aye.//

//The rest can leave for New Vulcan now.//

//Roger that.// Spock nodded. //I will inform Lt. Nelath.//

Tuvon turned on his chair and searched for Jim's eyes. "Docking bay reports that the 10 crew men and 58 delegates have reported for the first shuttle, also 9 Vulcans have made contact and are making their way from across the ship to join the first shuttle."

77 souls saved, not a bad bargain for his and Spock's lives, the needs of the many prevails.

"Good, have them take off with one of the pilots as soon as they can." Kirk commanded.

In case Svern changes his mind.

"Computer, hail the reactor room, on screen."

Thank god for small graces, Soren was the one to answer and not Supak.

"Captian!" he beamed at Kirk as he saw him.

Jim wished he could return the smile. "My part is done, Mr. Soren, I think you'd better come up here."

Now Soren lost his smile as well, and a severe expression took over his old face "On my way." He said and disconnected.

//Dayton took off with the rest of the Ipik crew; no one is left at the base but Commander T'Elel and another scientist, they will give us two hours before shutting down the gate. I have lost contact with Ipik, the meld with Lt. Nelath has ended as they left through the gate.//

//Understood.//

Jim scanned the room with weary eyes, and found the one he was searching for- Xon, seems like the boy was growing up in front of his very own eyes, he no longer looked lost, but seemed alert and determinant, a quiet bravery shone in his dark eyes, yet, he was innocent enough to the task at hand.

"Mr. Xon, please approach." Kirk asked, not yet ready to try and stand on his feet again.

"Sir?" the youth, son of Setal came to his chair, honored to serve and eager to please.

Jim gave the youth a studding gaze.

Yes, he will do, Jim smiled and he let himself feel sorry for the boy, for the shit storm heading his way once everyone finds out what he had done. And then he fished out Sharel's comm and presents it to the young Vulcan.

"I promised an officer of mine that his comm will be handed to his wife and children as a souvenir after his death." Jim said with gravity in his voice "I don't think I'll be able to honor my word, so I ask you to do this for me, will you, Xon?"

"I will, sir." the young male nodded with vigor and accepted the comm to his gloved hand with an
open awe, and that was how Jim knew he had chosen wisely, no one will suspect until it was too late. "I will not let you down, Captain!" Xon placed the comm on his belt with great care, as if handling a holy relic. 

"Thank you, it means a lot to me." Jim gave him a smile. "Contact Admiral Aruag from Starfleet and ask him how to deliver this to Sharel's family, make it as privately as possible."

"Yes, sir." Xon nodded again.

"The first shuttle from docking bay had taken off." Tuvon reported from his seat, and before he could say anything else, Elder Svern hailed them.

"I have done my part." Elder Svern announced with a dry voice "The first group was released, and the second group of 8 aids, 10 children and your officer are ready to leave as soon as you turn yourselves in. I will send one of my healers with your officer to New Vulcan since she is severely wounded and in need of great care. I am expecting you."

"Thank you, Elder Svern." Jim could hardly believe his own ears. "We will meet you at the main entrance to deck 7, but join you only after the last shuttle takes off."

"Agreed, it will take me 15 minutes to arrange the next group for departure." Elder Svern nodded "Svern out."

Jim turned in his seat to look at Spock. //Told you, in every scenario I was running in my head, I ended up at Svern's feet.//

//3.7 hours to Endgame.//

//Kill the bond, Spock.// Jim had to command it, as foolish tears welled in his eyes, fuck, he was turning into a crybaby. //Close it as much as possible, we have to protect Elder T'Pau. Whether I am right or wrong, we must try and keep it a secret for as long as possible.//

//Understood, sir.//

//Good.// bye.

And silence filled his head all of a sudden; Spock's warm and reassuring presence in his mind was suddenly gone, leaving a cold void behind.

What? Why sad?

I never wanted this bond, right?

I should be happy to be independent again, in control again.

Jim added, hopefully to himself, hopefully to make himself feel better, but it didn’t work just yet, he ran his hand on his face, wiping away those tears that never fell.

The door to the bridge opened a few moments later, and in came Soren.

"Elevator guy!" Jim tried a smile.

"Mr. Krik."

Jim took a deep breath and rose slowly to his feet, fighting to stand up straight through his pain. "Team 2, you will accompany us to deck 7, the rest of you- thank you for your service and good
luck. Mr. Soren, you have the Conn.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope to post the next chapter in a week, but it is the hardest one yet to write, so I don't know if I'll hit that mark.

Anyways, thank you for your time, I hope it was worth it.

Stay healthy and safe!
Endgame (Part One)

Chapter Notes

Here we go, one of the most difficult chapters I had to write for this story, and it was so long I had to break it down into two parts, so this means we might have another chapter to conclude this story (cries and run to the corner of the room.). Dear me, I really had no idea what I've started here until it was too late, lol.

Anyway, I have come to terms with the fact that I will never be pleased with the third act of this story, I will always fear I could have written it better, problem is I can rewrite it forever, and this story deserves to be completed and you deserve it to have an end as well.

So this is a very raw chapter, I did not give it as much time as I wanted to reflect on or edit it. This raw energy might be suited for this chapter, might be not, as always, all mistakes are mine, no beta was involved.

I hope you'll enjoy this, please let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Additional warnings: Wow, where to begin? Every warning I used to tag this story at the first place applies here. General content alert, very unsafe, very dark, very long, enter at your own risk.

The six of them left for the small hallway and the door to the bridge was locked behind them, leaving them in solitude. They stood there, Spock at his side and the rest in a respectful distance from them, and called in the main elevator that would take them to deck 7, to their final transaction with Elder Svern.

"They will separate us; I won’t be able to protect you." Spock whispered to him while waiting for the lift to arrive.

Jim just shook his head and said nothing, yet Spock pressed on.

"You should expect torture, any form of it, be it physical, psychological, telepathic." he continued with both gravity and calm. "Elder Svern is a very capable investigator of the V'Shar, so did Elder Sarek confirm. We can also assume that the Romulan spy, Surin, belongs to the Tal Shiar, and would also be skilled at information extraction."

This had Jim give out a weary smile, ‘information extraction’. It reminded him of his academy days, or more precisely, the 'Semester of Hell' all command track cadets dreaded but had to go through,
their SERE training, learning to survive hostile terrains, escape sticky situations, and of course, that wonderful captivity week. He almost passed that semester with flying colors, if not for the Kobayashi Maru, oh, and yeah, Vulcan's destruction.

"Fun times assured." Jim hummed at the memories, and the lift arrived to the deck.

"With 3.6 hours to endgame, and your current state of health, our chances of surviving this are low." Spock concluded, and his facial expression gave no emotion away, then the door opened and they all stepped into the turbo lift.

Jim smiled bitterly again before answering. "Protect Elder T'Pau, the Vokau, Sections 31 and yourself, don't worry about me, daddy."

Spock glanced at him while listening to those last taunting word, his face remained impassive and Jim also noted that no thread of thought or glimpse of emotion had leaked through their bond; the bond was sealed and secured, and Spock was again an unreachable stranger to him, just a perfect marble statue.

Good.

This was good, right?

But why does it feel so bad?

"Computer, Deck 7." Jim remembered to order and the doors shut before him, the lift started its descent.

The few short seconds of travel were quite and tense, all kept to themselves, preparing for what was to come, and it was the last thing Jim wanted to do, imagine what was to come, so instead he used the moment to go through his life mantra in his head -

I'm in control. I am always in control. All I ever do, I want to do. Everything I've ever done, I wanted to do.

Upon arrival, the lift opened into a T-junction where all pathways were sealed shut with thick bulkheads blocking them, which gave Jim a claustrophobic feeling and very little room to walk into.

Spock fetched his comm, since Jim had given his to Xon, and hailed. "Spock to bridge."

"Soren here."

"We are in position; you may open the main entrance now."

"Yes, sir, I must remind you that deck 7 is black to the bridge, if anything goes wrong, you'll have to report it in."

"Understood, Spock out."

As they finished talking, the bulkhead in front of them rolled up slowly, and disappeared into the ceiling, revealing the rest of the hall. It was lit up with the familiar soft red illumination, constantly disturbed with flickering green flashes of the dynamic alarm.

On the other side, there was an entourage walking towards them, at first, they seemed like one amorphous silhouette gliding forwards, but as they drew near, it broke into different figures, and
Jim could recognize among them the guards, armed with phasers, the frightened hostages, Elder Svern and his trusted companions and what seemed to be a big, cylindrical tank that rolled on a cart of a sort, that Jim was nervous about, it looked like this could be some sort of a bomb.

They stopped before the junction, where the bulkhead had been lifted just a moment ago, creating a gap of about fifty meters between the two groups, and Jim could now attach faces to the figures—Elder Svern, his wife, the head healer; one of her aids was placing her bare hand on a touchpad at the side of that tank. He also recognized Surin, the Romulan spy, as well as T'Sel and Symer, among the guards.

Svern gestured to his guards to stand down and they pushed their hostages forward. "We brought here the 8 aids as promised and 6 more delegates we found in hiding."

"And the children?" Jim asked with worry.

"Of course." Svern nodded and gestured with his hand, nine children came forth, between the ages of eight to three. The last child seemed no more than a toddler, and was held by one of the aids that were about to get free.

Jim had to count them, laying his eyes on each and every small figure, making sure no one was left behind. He counted them all three times before feeling satisfied, and then he let a wave of relief wash all over him, he cherished that feeling; it was time to cherish every bit of positive emotion, because there were probably so few left.

"Go head and give hand them over." He nodded at Elder Svern then elevated his voice in warning. "Spock and I will walk towards you as soon as we get a lift off confirmation from shuttle bay." Jim reminded the elder "Should take no longer than twenty minutes, try to get to us before this happens, and our guards here will shoot us dead on the spot, understood?"

He threw an apologetic glance at Xon's, that sank into a stare at his phaser gun, feeling sorry for putting the young man in that position, but they were extremely outnumbered, and had no other choice.

Svern watched at the phasers Jim's team had pointed at their Captain and XO, and whatever went through his mind did not reach his face. "Understood." He agreed at last, and then turned to his own guards. "You may release our prisoners now." he announced, like a gracious lord addressing his peasants, that smug piece of shit.

The guards let go of the hostages, some were rude enough to shove them forth with unnecessary force. The hostages first hesitated, but then some kids started running the hall towards Jim, and the rest followed, under the securitizing gaze of guards as well as the aim of their phasers.

The tension mounted as one boy tripped on the slippery floor and two others, older children, helped him up and rushed him along the corridor towards the turbo lift, behind the protection of Jim's guards.

Jim tried focusing on his breathing, as the moment seemed to stretch into forever, the silence was suffocation and the air was too thick to inhale, he had to lean against the wall and let his eyes shut for a moment, displaying his fatigue out there in the open.

Say goodbye.

Goodbye to your body, goodbye to your pride, goodbye to your ego.

Say hello.
Hello to pain, hello to harm, hello to mind over matter.

Protect.

Protect Elder T'Pau, protect Spock, protect the melding station, protect section 31.

Something surprised him by attaching itself to his thigh suddenly, tossing him out of his self induced trance. The child, T'Sala, she recognized him for some reason, and while the others have already cleared the hall, she chose to cling on to him and won't let go.

Spock knelt beside her, to mumble something privately into her ear, which Jim could not pick up on, so he waited instead and patted her silky hair; worried that Elder Svern might lose his patience and hurt her.

He dared not look at Spock or the girl, in fear that emotions will overcome him and he will reveal his deep worry for them both, as if Svern needed more ammunition that he had already got.

Spock finished talking to the girl and rose up after a short while. T'Sala finally let go of his leg and joined the rest. Jim could only glance at her as she ran into the elevator; still he could not look at Spock or even mumble a 'Thank you' at his direction.

The healer was next to cross his path, moving the healing cell past him. There was little room to maneuver and the young healer nodded as they almost brush shoulders, Jim took that brief chance to peek into the cell, through the transparent window and see Carol inside. She looked like the sleeping beauty, seemed so peaceful, and young, and he was pretty sure he saw her inhaling at least once, to show she was alive.

Good, he made the right call not to inform Dayton about her situation, she could tell him everything herself once she wakes up.

He just hoped Svern was not planning something nasty with this healing cell, and he knew that the crew at the docking bay will check it before letting her in, he was almost sure they'd find nothing like a bomb, and Carol too, could be taken to New Vulcan without delay, but that was already Soren's headache.

With all at the elevator, the doors closed at it was now headed to the docking bay, the shuttle was already at stand by, so ten more, fifteen more minutes and he'll have to turn himself in, alongside Spock. In the meantime, they were at gun points from both sides, and it was kind of funny, well a bit.

Spock stood by his side, unmoving, he said nothing and nothing flowed through the bond, it was shut and blocked, sending Jim into a small panic attack, but he braced himself, now was not the time to show any indication of their relationship, whatever was left of it.

How did this happen? How did he let himself get so attached? Talking about pathetic.

No one controls you, Jimbo, no one.

A few moments later, Spock's comm chimed and he spoke a few words with Soren. "We have a lift off." He informed both Jim and Svern.

"Great." Jim sighed with a smile and used every ounce of self discipline to pull himself up from the bulkhead and stand upright, and then he threw a glance at their welcoming committee.

"We are waiting." Svern impatiently reminded them as they locked gazes on each other.
"Need any assistance, sir?" Spock asked.

"Nope, I'm fine." Jim dodged the hand that reached out to support his wobbly body. "Let's finish this." He hissed through the pain.

He walked the rest of the way to his awaiting captors on his own two feet, while his muscles screamed at every movement, and he ignored them to the best of his ability.

Behind them, the sealing bulkhead was going down again, putting a barrier between them and the team that accompanied them to the deck, and Jim knew that Xon was leading them back to the bridge, where they will hopefully be safe until the Vokau is back in New Vulcan's space. Again, this was Soren's headache from now on.

Soon, there was no more distance to walk; Jim and Spock were now at the mercy of Svern and his men.

"I am all yours." Jim smiled as the guards came to get him. "Hello, doctor." He said as he recognizes Svern's wife, but she ignored him completely, caring her hypo-spray and marching towards Spock.

"Do not resist this." She warned the human hybrid.

Spock eyes searched Jim's for a brief second, and returned to watch her intensely, and then he nodded. She placed the hypo-spray at his neck, and seconds later, as expected, he fell on the floor, unconsciousness.

Jim winced and bit on his lower lip at an attempt not to shout out, he was supposed to downplay his relationship with Spock, and protesting with rage was not a good way to start.

Four guards came forward to carry Spock with them, and Svern's aid came to great Jim, even gave him a once over, finding him horribly human and thus scowled.

"Captain James T. Kirk, you will be investigated now, I expect your full cooperation." The Romulan said as another guard forced his hands behind his back and handcuffed him.

"Lower your expectations, darling." He answered Surin, after giving him a mocking once over of his own.

The Romulan almost growled and someone laid a hand on his neck, a wave of electricity washed all over his body, frying his every nerve end, locking up his muscles and paralyzing him, then everything went black.

***0***

He woke up in a small, hot room; the only source of light was a lamp placed on a table, casting a soft golden halo on the walls. As far as he could tell, the room was mostly bare, nothing but a standard control penal on the wall, no other equipment, no decoration, no furniture but a table, and a few standard offices chairs. This could be anywhere on deck 7, far or near the Temple of the minds, Jim could not tell, deck 7 was huge.

The first thing he noted after the room's state of anonymity was his own situation. On the bright
side, he was intact and unharmed; the rest of it was not as peachy.

He had lost both of his shirts and his upper body was nude, the burn on his left shoulder seemed to have been taken care of, clean and dressed. There was also an IV stuck into his left arm, pumping whatever into his blood, which he could not remove because both of his hands were tied to the chairs armrests.

His shins and feet were tied to the chair legs in a similar manner, and he tried his strength against the straps and failed as predicted. While wiggling about, he noted a collar around his neck, attaching a small metallic device to his throat, he tried it by shouting, and no sound came out of his mouth, so yeah, this was some sort of a high tech gagging device, must have interference with the sound waves created by his vocal cords, never encountered something like that before.

Was kinda cool, though.

In a weird kind of way, he felt no pain, every ache in his body was gone, which was an impressive achievement considering the variety of them. Yet, with the pain gone, he could feel his muscles trembling without control under his skin, the tension they held, fighting against the pain just to make his body function, was now taking its toll. He had a feeling that even if he could somehow break free from his constrains, and tare that IV out of him, he would not be able to make more than a few steps forwards without collapsing.

While trying to figure out what to do next, he heard the sound of boots approaching his way, so he hurried to close his eyes, relax his body and pretended to be sleeping still.

He could hear three individuals walking into the room, and they were talking as they came in, probably in Vulcan, but he could understand them, which means they did not take his translator away just yet.

"Thank you, Lt. Symer, but you should go now." Said one of them, a female, her voice familiar but not familiar enough. "You should have this bite rechecked."

"I am well." insisted the Lieutenant. "It is just a Sehlat's bite, I will not leave you two alone with this one, my ladies, you don't know him like I do, he's a tricky one."

"A Sehlat's bite should not induce dizziness or vomiting, your wound might be infected, I order you to report to one of my aids, we can handle this human."

"Yes, Head healer." Symer said "I'll try to send Sitra in my place, if I find him. Last time I saw him he was dozing off in a hidden corner, that slacking fool."

"Do that." Lady Setris said, now Jim was sure of that, Svern's wife.

From the sound of it, it seemed like Symer indeed left the room and Jim now was alone with Elder Svern's wife and her other female companion, not that it mattered in any way, Vulcan females were still stronger than human males and he was still tied to his chair, barely alive.

After Symer left, there was a strange pause, a long period of silence, which made Jim wonder if they called his bluff. Keen Vulcan senses should be able to detect the rise of heartbeat and the shallowness of breath, but maybe they were not that acquainted with human sleeping patterns, or their minds were occupied elsewhere, because they spoke again and ignored his presence altogether.

"Fascinating." The other woman in the room said at last, and again, her voice seemed strangely familiar. "It has been an hour and he sleeps still. What can we learn from this?"
"Not very much, Elder." Lady Setris answered. "Either human painkillers are incredibly efficient, or we have not yet reached a breaking point with Spock. Another option to consider is that they are not bonded."

"Or perhaps you were wrong from the start, and the hybrid did not undergo an actual Pon Farr." The Elder added "Maybe he went through a similar, yet unknown, process, one which did not lead to a creation of a bond. Another possibility is that the drug you supplied him back then had worked and stopped his blood fever."

"All valid possibilities." The Head healer agreed. "I wish we could have narrowed them down further, by ruling out that human girl."

"I have already told you, Heat healer, the possibility of Uhura creating a bond with Spock stands at 4.21%, in my evaluation."

"Still, 4.21% is not zero." Setris insisted "We needed a clearer answer before letting that human escape."

"I will say this for the last time, Setris, I could not have gone deeper into her mind without causing permanent harm. It would be quite counterproductive, don’t you think? Risk the continuation of the ritual? The one that commander Sobar had failed to win?"

As the Elder said that, she also walked towards him, Jim could feel her approaching him, and had to fight really hard to stay relaxed, as he felt her body’s warmth engulfing him, along with her spicy herbal fragrances. He could hardly stop himself from flinching as she attached her fingers to his melding points; he knew exactly what she was trying to do.

He felt Elder's Vellua gentle probe into his mind, and he knew he could not clear his head of thoughts, he was no Vulcan and had no such discipline, but instead he tried to picture himself having a game of chess against an octopus, or a dolphin, or a seal, could not quite decide on that, his rival kept morphing in his mind, refusing to take a definitive shape.

"Well?" Lady Setris asked after a while, the tension was clear in her voice.

"He's probably dreaming." Elder Vellua reported. "What a human thing to do, their minds are such a chaotic mess, so fragile and unorganized, and this one is particularly troubled and disoriented. I suspect that if pry any further, I may cause him too much damage before we could extract the information we need from him. Maybe Elder Svern will have better results."

"Negative." Setris answered with frustration "You are the best mind melder here, second to Elder T'Pau alone. Elder Svern is a trained V'Shar investigator, specializes in Vulcan and Romulan minds, if he melds with this one, he will likely kill him before we get anything out of this brain. If the information we seek is truly inside this mind, elder Spock had chosen wisely, what a conundrum, the human mind protects itself by its own weakness."

Elder Vellua agreed by taking her fingers off Jim's temple, and he fought his instinct to sigh in relief as she did so. She left his side and probably returned to Setris, and silence filed the air again, but not for long, Jim had no time to celebrate his small victory, because a new person entered the room, or maybe even two.

"Report please." A male voice stated as he closed the door behind him, that voice he knew for sure, Elder Svern.

"Melding would not be beneficial to our cause." Setris answered "This mind is too delicate, sick
and weak; it will break under any amount of pressure."

"Are you sure? Elder Vellua, your input?" Svern asked.

"I concur." The Elder said. "I dare not attempt a deep meld, and a shallow one will not do."

"You were able to meld with the female called Uhura before, why not this one?"

"That human was strong and cooperative at that time, her mind calm and open, still I could not dig deep enough to completely rule out a bond, not without risking permanent damage. This one however is resisting me, fighting the meld even in his sleep."

"I see." Svern answered calmly. "Thank you, wake him up, Surin, we don’t have time to spare."

Again, Jim listened as the Romulan came closer, and as he suspected, his touch was not as gentle as Elder Vellua's, he gave him a slap with the back of his hand, that made his bones rattle, the ring Surin wore opened Jim's upper lip, making it bleed. He yelped in pain, but no sound came out of his mouth, so he blinked his eyes open to gaze at the smirking Romulan instead. The man was skinny and angular, his hair a bit oily, and his smell was very musky, they all could probably use a shower, Jim included.

"Wake up, human." Surin greeted him with a smile after that slap "Time to cooperate."

"Welcome back, Captain Kirk." Svern joined in. "I am going to disable the gagging device now, and in return, you will use your mouth only to answer our questions and obey our orders. Is that understood? Or would you like to try me?"

Jim smiled and nodded.

Svern took out a small remote control out of his pocked and pressed on the button.

"Computer, lock…." Was all Jim could say before a painful punch came hitting his face, this time he could hear the distinctive sound of bones crushing, probably his nose. He screamed again, but this time, he could not make a sound.

"We are going to try this once more, Captain." Elder Svern said, holding the control in his hand and pacing slowly in the room, casting a looming shadow on the walls. "In this iteration, you'd be punished severely for every attempt to utilize the AI system against our will. Do not test my skills and determination. Are we clear, Captain?" he asked, stopping his pacing before Jim and blocking the light.

Jim considered this, was there any order he could give the computer that would be worth the hassle? He was going to lock them all up in the room, but if Svern still has people in the system, this would only buy him a few minutes, so was it worth the pain? No, not just yet.

Any other great ideas, Jimbo? Something worthwhile? No?

Jim nodded in agreement, if not in defeat.

"Good." Elder Svern stated with no emotion and pressed on the button again, then resumed his pacing.

Svern, Setris and Elder Vellua watched him in silence with almost the same blank expression on their faces, but the Romulan bastard smiled, seemed like he was having too much fun, and yet, he
kept quiet, like everyone else in the room.

Jim found his breathing too loud, so he tried to take in a deep breath and calm down, brace himself for what was to come.

Surin smiled still, and moved behind his line of sight, the bastard, but then he felt his heavy hand land on the curve of his naked, almost at his healthy shoulder, a reminder of the threat that was hanging above his head, or a mean to read him of he lets panic take over, or both.

Elder Svern studied him carefully for that while, daring him to try something funny again, Jim smiled back at him and licked the blood off his lips, then he leaned against the chair and tried to relax for a while.

"Thank you for being reasonable." Svern started again after a moment. "Now for the first subject at hand, Captain Kirk. I want you to order the computer to transfer the Vokau's command to me. Should be an easy task, the voice recognition system operates here as well as on any other part of the ship. Just repeat after me- Computer, install Elder Svern as the new Captain of the Vokau."

Jim said nothing, just continued to smile at him. Surin quizzed his shoulder, and it hurt more than he wanted to admit, reminding him the price of disobedient.

"Come on now, James, you promised you'd be cooperative, I'm a bit disappointed." Svern said after a few moments spent in silence.

"I was expecting a civil treatment." Kirk shrugged. "So I'm also kind of disappointed."

"Oh, this is a civil treatment, trust me." Svern assured him with a raised eyebrow. "Mind you that we could break your body, and still get our answers through your skin. Why make things difficult, Captain? Repeat after me- Computer, install Elder Svern as the new Captain of the Vokau."

"Come on." Surin bowed down to whisper in his ear, his hot breath sent chills down Jim's body, he always hated when someone panted into his ears. "Do it and we will treat you to another dose of human painkillers Lieutenant Marcus left behind. This one is already wearing out, so it sounds like a good deal, right?"

Jim swallowed his blood, and tried a side glancing at the Romulan, and then he nodded, there was no use of stalling any further.

"Computer, install Elder Svern as the new Captain of the Vokau." He said as clearly as he could, staring into the dark room.

"Request denied." The computer answered from somewhere there. "User is not authorized to make this request."

Svern cocked his head up with surprise. "Explain, Computer!" He demanded.

"Only the Captain of the Vokau can make this request, sir." the AI answered.

"Who is the captain of the ship, Computer?" Svern asked again with urgency.

"This information is classified, sir." The AI answered.

"Since when is this information classified? Computer?"

"This information is also classified, sir." The AI insisted.
Jim made an effort to contain his chuckles to himself, but he only succeeded in choking at the process, earning another hit on the head from the Romulan aid, which rang inside his skull like a bell, and might have tore his ear, because he could feel blood trickling down his neck.

"Who is the Captain, Jim?" Svern almost raised his voice now, and he walked towards him until he was looming over his seated figure again.

"Not me, sir." Jim smirked at the Vulcan above him.

Svern grabbed him by the neck with an ungloved hand, and tilted him down along with the chair by using the other, almost all the way to the floor, muttering under his breath. "I can sever your spine in a way that you'd survive, and then let you watch as I chop down your every limb." he whispered.

Jim could not help but smile and think, like father like son, but if Svern indeed read him at that moment, he did not seem to dwell on how he obtained that information.

"Who is the Captain of this ship? Commander Supak? Commander T'Elel? That child, Xon?" Svern weakened his grab on Jim's throat to allow him to answer.

"We've already ruled out Spock." Surin said from somewhere in the room, Jim was too upside down and dizzy to try and locate him.

"Why should I know?" Jim answered, trying to fight his nausea and Svern's carful chokehold, then Svern let go of his tilted chair and let Jim fall and bump his head on the floor.

Fuck, it hurt.

"Who is the current Captain of the Vokau?" Svern asked, stepping over the chair to place his boot on Jim's neck, applying a little pressure as an incentive.

"Could be anyone, could be no one, might be some maintenance tech, might be someone else. Did you really think I'd get down here and hand you the Captain of the Vokau? Would I be this stupid?" Jim answered into Elder Svern's boot that pressed his face to the side against the hot floor.

Svern stepped down from him after another moment, and Surin hurried to get the chair back up.

Jim could feel the bile in his empty stomach climb up to his throat and did his best to swallow it back down, he hated vomiting, even more so in public.

"Head healer." The Elder said at last, removing himself from the human's proximity, in an effort to remain calm. "Can we have an up to date status report?"

"Of course, Elder." Setris said, as her husband came to stand next to her, regaining his control.

Now it was her turn to come closer, and Jim studied her as she drew near, this was the first time he realized how similar to Sobar she looked, a female version of him, only older and with silvery hair, and she smelled like lavender.

She took out of her pocket a device that looked like a blue crystal, as she did that day he came to her for help. The crystal glowed in her hand and she ran it over his body, and when done, she spoke up, her eyes still fixated on him, as if her words were only meant for him.
"Your liver has already failed and soon your kidneys will follow. Your blood system is unbalanced and full of toxins and this will affect your heart, likely causing a heart failure, to be followed by lungs collapse, then brain damage, coma and eventually death. This will happen in a matter of hours, a day, at best."

Jim could hardly say this information surprised him, 36 hours were kind of a generous offer actually, he would settle for a human day, but then again, he could not hope to function as well as he did for more than a few hours, less, if Svern was involved. He gazed into the healer eyes with mockery and could not help himself, even if this comes with a high price.

"Did you do this to me on purpose, doctor? Did you give me that drug knowingly it will bring me down? And what's dripping into my veins now, by the way?"

"Saline, to keep you hydrated." The Healer answered and she seemed appalled by his suggestion. "And to answer your question- I did not poison you intentionally, Captain, on the contrary, I gave you a drug to up your performance as requested, as approved by the council. We wanted to win against your best, not to defeat your worst."

Seemed quite familiar, that statement.

"You should have come to me once you started noticing its negative effects, as any responsible adult would have done, so do not blame me for your recklessness. We honored the ritual from the start and will continue to do so until it is finished."

Jim glanced at Elder Vellua as Lady Setris talked, trying to study her reaction, but she was frozen like a statue, so he could not help himself again. "Honor the ritual, you say? So why are you here, Elder Vellua? Were you a 'Leaver' pretending to be undecided from the get go?"

"Do not be illogical, human." Elder Vellua brushed it off with a huff. "If I held a 'Leave' position from the start, the 'Leave' party would have Council majority, making this ceremony redundant. I only consolidated a 'Leave' position after witnessing firsthand, the makeup of the human mind, how illogical it was, how selfish and morally ambivalent it was, how dangerous and cruel it could be."

No, Romulans, was all Jim could think of in return, and his smile widened, Spock was right when he said that logic was gone.

"I believe you have asked enough questions, Captain Kirk." Elder Svern interfered now, somewhat amused. "Elder Vellua, are you sure a meld is not an efficient method in this investigation?"

"I am positive, the human will not survive a deep meld, and none of us is skilled enough to extract data from a dead human brain."

Oh, this was nice to know.

"If so, you may leave now, all of you." Svern commanded.

"Good, I would like to lay down a while, I am a bit unwell."

Svern and Setris exchanged a mute gaze, Jim thought it to be a worried one, but hey, it could be just his hopeful imagination.

"I will check up on you, Elder." Setris said, and they both left the room without looking back.

Surin, on the other hand, crossed his hands on his chest and did not look very pleased. "I will
not leave." He stated. "As the Romulan representative, I have the right to oversee this investigation. What we are looking for is a Romulan interest as well." The spy insisted, and Svern gave him an icy cold look.

"You have is the right to live, for the time being, Mr. Surin." Svern answered with calm ire "This is still my ship, my territory and my people. You should get back to observe Spock's investigation for a while, would be a better use of your time."

"Yes, Praetor." Surin said reluctantly, and then let himself out of the room as well.

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And so there they were, Svern and Jim, alone in that dark, empty room.

Jim had no idea what would happen next, and a sense of horror threatened to take over. Recollection of every report, article and personal experience of torture had rushed through his mind, Klingon methods, Romulan methods, arrogant and drunk with power aliens' methods, and Svern was nothing but a monster in Vulcan skin. If he had any hope for Sobar, his father was indubitably a lost cause, murderous, sadistic and without limit, if anything, he reminded him of Kodos.

Oh, yeah, Jimbo, way to go!

Let's bring up some Tarsus 4 nostalgia, because now is the perfect time!

Or, maybe you can shut the fuck up!

Control your mind, Jim, remember your training.

Breath, empty your brain, focused on the here and now.

There is nothing else left in your life anymore, this is your entire universe, this room and this chair and this moment, whatever happens next is no concern of yours.

Breath, be alert, be attentive, an opportunity might present itself, don't miss it by freaking out.

He tried pushing away all his fears and observe Svern only, without supplying useless commentary in the back of his head.

At the meanwhile, the Elder grabbed a chair and dragged it intentionally with force all the way to the table. The screeching sound of its legs against the metal floor made Jim shudder, but then the room got quiet again and Elder Svern sat down and searched for something in his robes' pockets.

The Vulcan Elder wore a satin like, copper colored robes, and on top of them a heavy black cape, with golden symbols embroidered on it, and the heat of the room did not seem to bother him at all, while Kirk on the other hand, was topless and sweating like a pig, breathing heavily, life was so unfair.

Svern found what he was looking for in his pocket, a sort of a Vulcan cigar, and a lighter. "An ancient custom, disapproved by the head healer, but it helps me concentrate." He explained as he lit up the cigar, and the smell of burning herbs filled up the room, a rather pleasant scent.
"I won’t tell." Jim whispered as Svern started smoking, part of him considered begging for a toke.

"You pose a unique challenge, Mr. Kirk." Svern opened after a while spent on savoring his smoke. "Are all humans as fascinating as you? On the one hand, I cannot use my mind techniques, because human minds are alien to me and so very delicate, in your current state of health, I might kill you before I get my answers. On the other hand? I cannot use my physical techniques either, for very similar reasons. As I said; a very unique challenge."

Svern blew some smoke out of his mouth and watched as it dispersed in the room; the golden light glittered through it.

"May I offer my input while you're thinking?" Kirk asked, half smirking, just because he had nothing else to do.

"Go ahead." Svern agreed with subtle delight.

"I'm your clock, right? There is something in my head that you need, and when I'm gone, which will happen sooner or later, it will be lost forever and then you lose."

"You are not entirely wrong." Svern confirmed, amusement still glittered in his eyes as he inhaled again. "Another clock is ticking against New Vulcan; a Romulan fleet is on its way there, if I do not greet them as a praetor, they will turn the colony to ashes and my people to slaves."

Jim made a face and shook his head, droplets of sweat rained on his face.

"Oh, come on, now, Svern, cut the bullish. It is one thing to fear a Romulan fleet knocking at your door, it is a completely different thing to invite them over and hand them the keys!"

Fuck, it did not work.

Elder Svern remained seated, calm and unmoving, he only smiled, and it was scary, terrifying even.

"I see what you try to do." Svern hummed with a soft chuckle. "You want me to lose balance and strike you dead, but we cannot have that, Jim, not yet, not until I get my answers from you."

"Well, I'm just warming up." Kirk muttered with disappointment "You can always put me on mute, though." He lifted his chin up to show off his collar.

"On the contrary, I find that talking to you is fascinating." Svern answered with his cold, scary smile "I wish that Elder Sarek would have allowed me my interview, it would have been engrossing, delving into each other's mind, don't you think?"

Yeah, for you maybe.

Jim tried his best not to show how much that idea appalled him, he hoped Elder Sarek was still alive, he hoped Spock was still alive, fuck, what were they doing to Spock as if, now? Why nothing leaked through the bond just yet? What would happen when something does?

"What are you thinking of, Captain?" Svern asked with a taunt "A Penny for your thoughts?"

"I'm thinking of how screwed you are," Jim leered at him. "Whatever you need from me, I'm not gonna give it to you, I'd die first. Whatever you want from Spock, you're not gonna get either, he'd die first."

"Dramatic, are we?" Svern almost smiled.
"And I call your bluff. You are stuck in this green star twilight zone. No one wants you as a praetor, or you'd already have your new council by now. You cannot stay here for too long, because the Vokau cannot operate without its skeleton crew, and many of them are already dead or gone back to New Vulcan, not to mention Ipik might blow up any second now. But you cannot leave either, not without leaving your territory behind and thus your claim as the ritual owner."

In his mind, Jim wondered when would Svern use his little remote control, but the Elder only sat there, frozen like a statue, seem to be fascinated and attentive, so he gathered the strength to continue his speech.

"You're fucked, Svern, face it, you failed! You have spent all this time plotting and making plans upon plans against the council, carefully preparing the grounds for a coup on the Ipik and the Vokau, but I stopped you, a mere human, a pathetic, psi null weakling, improvising his ass off."

"Colorful." Svern noted.

"Just so you know, I've sent Sulu and Nyota out with an order to change the codes of every security system on New Vulcan and told them to alert Starfleet while at it. When you get back home, you will be welcomed by guards with handcuffs not by Romulans rolling out a red carpet! You'd be…. Haaa!!! Motherfucker! What the…"

Jim's vocal cords were neutralized again and Elder Svern was above him, putting out his cigar by sticking it into Jim's already wounded left shoulder, burning through the bandage.

That motherfucker moved so fast, Jim never saw him coming until he was upon him, turning him into a human ashtray.

"Easy now… breathe through the pain…" Svern whispered to him, a smile on his thin lips and chill in his blue eyes. "Almost over… breath… yes, beautify done."

The Elder tossed the black butt on the floor and slowly returned to his seat. "It is amazing what could be deduced by watching someone going through pain, very educational."

Jim tried his voice but found he was still mute, tears of pain rolled down his cheeks to join the other mock accumulated on his chest, dry blood and salty sweat.

Breath, focus, there is nothing but the here and now.

"You are accustomed to pain; you have a very high tolerance." Svern shared his observation, pacing slowly in the room. "It does not bother you if it is your own. I also made some threats earlier, gruesome threats, enough to drive ordinary men into panic, to make them beg and soil their pants, but not you, Captain Kirk, you were not bothered. Bravery? Sure. Denial? Maybe. Stupidity? I think not. Why do you hate yourself so much?"

Fuck, what a punch to the gut.

Svern stopped and gazed at Jim as he gaped back at him, his eyes as piercing and burning as the cigar he just put out on him. He searched in his cape's pocket and probably found the remote control there.

"You got a week?" Jim asked after he found out that he could speak again. "But fuck this shit! I thought this would be a civil investigation. I came to you willing! I am a Federation officer and I demand my rights! I have a right to know why I am here! What are the accusations against me?"

"You got a week?" Svern threw his own words back at him with much delight, but then he returned
to his seat and crossed his hands on his chest. "You'll have to narrow this question down for me, Captain. Do you ask this as a Federation representative? As a human delegate or as the individual James T. Kirk? Because for every identity you represent, I have a different set of allegations."

"Then you choose, but make it the less boring one." Jim sighed, and moved on his chair as much as he could, he was getting very uncomfortable, the painkiller effect was indeed wearing off and so was his concentration.

"Very well." Svern indulged him. "James T. Kirk, you are accused of sabotaging your room, by removing the Ventilator MCU for a few days, sabotaging the main elevator on two occasions, destroying the life supporting system in your dormitory, indirectly responsible of the damaged done to a shuttle beyond repair by your helm's team…"

"Oh, really? Tell me I'm also responsible for Vulcan's destruction, why won't you?" Jim had to interrupt because this was beyond ridicules "But I got two words for you- Ipik and the Vokau, ok, make that four… but you get my point, so…"

Fuck, Svern pressed on the button and cut his speech, the bastard.

"You were aiding an Andorian spy both on the Vokau and the Ipik."

'Romulan Spy' Jim answered with a dramatic move of his lips. 'Surin'

"You were responsible for the unlawful capture and imprisonment of the rightful Captains of the Vokau and the Ipik and their crew."

'Killing Captain Setal', Jim said by moving his lips again, then he added a smirk, hoping for a good, hard punch that did not come yet.

"What you don't seem to understand is that history is depicted by the victor." Svern explained, the sadistic smirk never leaving his lips. "By the time we are done here, I can even convict you of the death of master Surak."

What a scumbag, a scumbag with a good point.

"But you are correct; though, this is a waste of time. I should prioritize what I can get out of you before you die. I am afraid I might not get everything I'm after, but I cannot let you go without having some answers. Be a good boy now and I'll grant you more painkillers, yes? Willing to give it a try?"

Jim shrugged, whatever, the clock was running just the same.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'." Svern shifted in his seat and pressed on the remote control again. "Yorktown, before the ritual; remember? I have sources who reported that prior to the start of it; Elder T'Pau and Admiral Archer were both present at Yorktown. Do you have any idea why?"

"No."

"Dear me, the command in chief of Starfleet and our revered leader of the council were both at Yorktown at the same time, two days before the 'Plak If fee' had started and you know nothing of it? Not even a hypothesis to share?"

"Maybe the old geezers had a secret affair?" Kirk suggested and got a slap on his face, hard, but not hard enough to lose consciousness, unfortunately.
"Do not speak of Elder T'Pau in this manner! Be respectful of the Elders!"

"Funny, I wonder what Elder Soval might have said about…"

Oh, fuck, shit.

Shut up, Sunshine.

"Elder Soval?" Svern pressed on. "Why him?"

"Yeah." Jim flashed a smile and tried to relax in his seat. "The leader of the 'Remain' team, met him once, seemed like a smart dude, I was wondering what he'd say about everything, that's all."

"Imbecile…" Svern said under his breath.

And maybe it was time to engage the full blonde mode; maybe Svern will give up on him faster this way.

"Me or Elder Soval?" Jim gave it a go.

"Oh, I see what you're up to." Svern's eyes almost rolled. "Don't play dumb little human with me, Captain, I know how smart you are, it's a bit too late for that."

Jim pouted and leaned back into his chair again, under the scrutinizing gaze of the elder.

Svern returned to his seat as well, but instead of sitting, he dragged it on the floor again, moving it as close as he could towards Jim, and there he set, they were even bumping knees as he did so.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" Svern raised an eyebrow in mockery as Jim shuttered. "Good. What else gets you uncomfortable, Captain? Please, do share. Let's talk about sex now, is it uncomfortable enough? I have witnesses reporting they have smelled Spock on you. He came to you as soon as the personal stage of the ritual was over, at the first chance he had, right? And then you had sex. Or is there another explanation why both Symer and Sobar smell Spock's semen on you?"

"Sobar and Symer managed to smell semen on me and identified its owner? That's weird."

"So you had sex with the hybrid." Svern continued "You two have been having sex for almost a year now, on the Enterprise as well, correct? Lt. Marcus shared that bit of information with us before we treated her wounds."

Jim clenched his jaw at that, poor Carol, they have interrogated her as well, while she was severely wounded, probably refused her treatment until she cooperated, but if she knew the possible implications, she would have died before sharing this piece of gossip with Svern.

"What's with this sudden interest in my sex life? What does it have to do with anything? Did Carol tell you we also had sex?"

Jim smirked at the Elder, the last thing he ever imagined happening upon the Vokau was for him and Svern have a chat about his sex partners.

"Us humans," Jim continued, smiling "We mistake sex for a hand shake, nothing to write home about. I am particularly easy, so you know, they called me 'Cadet Bent' back at the academy, as in my cock was bent from overuse, it's a joke, kinnda…"

"A joke?" Svern mused, leaning his hand on his knee and his square chin on his hand. "The first
part I found amusing, the part with the handshake." He added after musing some more. "Reminds me of that first contact incident between the humans and Vulcans. Do they teach it to you in your schools? The story about your great Engineer, Zefram Cochrane, who built a warp capable ship out of garbage, and flew it to your moon by fluke?"

"Yes, they do." Jim confirmed.

"Unfortunately, there was a Vulcan survey ship in that area at that time, and what did its idiotic Captain do? He decides, on a whim, without consulting the Elders, that the humans have met the criteria for first contact, that they were this warp-capable magnificent civilization, and not the riffraff leftovers of an inner planetary war having a one good day.

"And he landed on that insignificant rock to meet those wretched savages and their drunken leader, Cochrane, and what does he do when they first meet? He shakes hands with him! Bare hands! Do you know what it means for Vulcans?"

"Second base?" Jim guessed "Third, maybe?"

Svern shook his head and then send his hand to his temple as if nursing a killer headache. "The greatest mistake Vulcan has ever made." He concluded "We should have left you alone back then, and we should leave you alone right now."

"To go with the Romulans instead?"

Svern shook his head again and looked up at Jim. "Make no mistake, Captain, humans and Romulans are similar, both cruel, cold and manipulative. Maybe it is what it takes to become a galactic powerhouse. Humans are not below exploiting underling civilizations and their own, less fortunate, kind. Deep down inside of you, Kirk, you know that."

Jim swallowed and lowered his gaze, Kodos' face floated before his eyes, yes, he knew it, and he knew it just fine.

"Prime directive, comes to mind as a good example. What a sophisticated way to discriminate against younger and less developed civilizations, just because they did not yet develop this state of the art warp engine, they would not get into your club? They'd get to die by random misfortune for that? So you could take over their planet and loot their resources afterwards?"

"I always tried to go around the prime directive." Jim admitted, and he hated the apologetic tone of his speech. How did it come to that? Why was he trying to ask forgiveness from his captor and tormentor? Svern was a mastermind indeed.

"Vulcans are monsters just the same." Svern hurried to add. "And do not try to tell me I'm wrong."

Jim could not help but quirk a smile, no arguing there, sir, no arguing at all.

"I just want us to be in the right company of monsters, our kin." The Elder concluded. "Well, as much as it was a pleasure talking to you, I still have my objectives to achieve."

He stretched on the chair, and Jim gazed at him with envy, he wished to do the same.

"I concluded that given your current state of health, headstrong personality, high level of intelligence and the time we have left, I should lower my expectations. I can get from you only one or two things so I'd better choose carefully.

"I am going to aim at my top objectives alone- prove that Spock had formed a bond with you and
extract from your brain the information Spock of the other universe had hid there from me, I just need to figure a way to do so."

Svern stretched once more on his chair, knowing this will inflict more agony on the restrained human, he did it so slowly, with emphasized motions, making humming noises of content hum and a smirk on his face, yeah, he was doing this intentionally, the bastard.

Then he got up and walked to the door, he opened it up to a crack and even the small amount of light that came in was enough to make Jim blink and turn his face away.

"I must leave now; I wish to see what progress is being made with Spock. Anything you wish to ask of me before I leave?"

Jim said nothing, even though he had three millions and four questions, mainly about Spock young and elder. What did Spock hide in his brain? When? Why did he do that? Why Svern suspected it even happened? Why Svern needed that information so badly? And what were they doing to Spock right now? And how is he?

But whatever he'll say would only be a rope for Svern to pull more information out of his mouth, even thinking about it was probably a bad idea. Maybe there was a device here recording his brain patterns? Who knew? Better focus your thoughts elsewhere.

"I want to use the bathroom; can someone take me there, please?" He asked instead, the IV filled his blabber to the rim, he was about to explode any time now.

Oh, fuck, wrong move.

You're such a stupid, whiney bitch, Jim!

Now Svern closed the door and got back in, to relish at his suffering a while longer.

"I remembered something." He said while returning slowly to his chair, and Jim closed his eyes, trying very hard not to curse himself out loud.

Yeah, now he's going to stay and dare you to piss yourself in his presence.

Way to go, Sunshine.

He tried to breathe deeply and ignore his blabber, yet he could not bring himself to look at Svern, in case he fails to control the urge.

"I have one more subject to cover- your motivation." Svern said and Jim could feel the mockery in his voice. "It is an enigma to me, the reason why you are here, going through all of this. Well, you had to obey Starfleet orders and take part in this ritual; for sure, and you can thank your dear Elder Soval of that one, but in no way you had to interfere with this miniature civil war that has followed.

"You had many exit points to use. For one, you could have hid somewhere in the ship after you managed to avoid Symer and wait it all out. You could have taken shelter at the reactor room and lay low. You could have taken the shuttle along with Sulu and Nyota and get back to New Vulcan and from there, to the safety of Earth's jurisdiction, and yet, you did none of that. Why? And do not give me that 'We bleed the same' nonsensical argument. Why are you here?"

Jim smiled to the floor, new tears in his closed eyes.

Gotta hand it to the bastard, he knew exactly what buttons to push.
"Because I'm an idiot?" Jim offered; he opened his eyes and raised them to meet Svern's inquisitive gaze. His answer was a fine balance between honesty and self protection, but he knew Svern would not fall for it.

"You can do better than this, Captain, do try again and hurry please, I am starting to miss my midnight cup of tea." Svern answered.

God, I gotta pee.

Bastard.

Jim tried to close his legs, but it was difficult when each one of his shins was tied to a different leg of the chair.

"I'm a Starfleet officer; a Captain, I am expected to offer aid to allies under attack."

"But this is an inner conflict." Svern insisted on digging deeper. "No Federation regulation that I know of would demand you to…"

"Why the hell do you care about my fucking motives?" Jim cut Svern rudely with a shout.

I cannot take it anymore!

I want out of this chair! Out of this room! Out of Svern's fucking face!

Calm down now.

No!

I wanna fucking stand! Stretch my body! Scratch my nose! Take that fucking leak!

"So you have no deep reasoning." Svern concluded with a satisfaction. "You're just a good obedient soldier, acting like an automaton, like a drone in the service of the Fleet, for the good of Federation. They have trained you well."

"Shut up!" Jim screamed now, and tried to wiggle in the chair, but the damn thing was so heavy, or was it him? Was he that weak? He wanted to fall down, fall down hard and badly, with some luck; he'll manage to break his own neck.

"But why, Captain Kirk? Why? Why this sacrifice? What the Federation have ever done to deserve it?" he pushed on without mercy. "What have Vulcan ever done for you?"

"Shut up!"

"Do you know what Pon Farr is? The blood fever adult male vulcans go through every seven years in their reproduction years? It drives them into mating or fighting, and if they don’t get their release, it could be fatal. I have been reported that Spock went through his Pon Farr almost a year ago; I believe it was when you were awaiting your new ship, constructed upon Yorktown."

"Have no idea what you're talking about." Jim hissed, moving his body like mad, trying his strength against the strong straps that kept him bound to his seat.

"Did Spock use you, going through his Pon Farr? Did he rape you?"

"Shut the fuck up!!" Jim screamed now as he tried to move the chair again, without successes.
Svern studied him with intensity, like a hunter gazing at his prey trying to chew off its leg in a futile attempt to get out of his trap.

"Who else raped you, Jim? Did it happen on Tarsus 4?"

Fucking Vulcans and their fucking logic.

"Shut up!!" Jim screamed out and cried at the same time.

"Your reaction is very telling." Svern commented with calm.

"Not gonna tell you nothing!" Jim screamed, tears flowing down his face without control "Not gonna tell you a goddamn thing! Want some answers? Better rip them out of my dead brain, you worthless piece of shit!

"Child killer! Monster! Does your lok poke out of its sheath when you think about murdering children? Do you cum while fantasizing about it? Grabbing a child by its neck and squ…"

He found himself mute again, but could not celebrate that small victory because the next thing he knew, Svern was on top of him, dragging the chair on the floor with tremendous speed and incredible strength to crush his skull into the wall.

Then darkness took him, at last.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long to post this chapter, It was very difficult to write. I hope to post the next part no later than 11.10.

Take care, everyone, stay strong and healthy!

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