Unraveling

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Unraveling

by AnnaKnitsSpock

Summary

When the Enterprise receives a December assignment to accompany a Federation investigation on Tarsus IV, Jim is forced to confront not only the trauma he experienced there, but also his conflicted feelings about Christmas, his childhood, and his first officer.

Notes

This is my contribution to my favorite holiday tradition: the K/S Advent calendar. Thanks as always to Ashley and Amanda for putting on such a fabulous event!

So, I swear I was going write a fic for this year's advent in which Jim was not an emotional mess, but then this amazing prompt about Tarsus IV and Jim knitting appeared. Whoever you are, lovely prompt writer, were you in my brain? There is nothing I love more than Tarsus IV, damaged Jim, and any combination thereof. And I'm an incredibly serious knitter in real life. So I felt like I had no choice but to take this prompt and, for the second year in a row, write an incredibly angsty Christmas story about sad, broken Jim. Kaiidith, I guess?
Merry Christmas!

This is largely a story about trauma and the resulting mental illness, so please proceed with caution if you are triggered by themes of PTSD and/or anything else that might come up in a Tarsus IV story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Unraveling

Snow is falling and there is a fire in the old-fashioned fireplace. Mom is home, and Grandpa Tiberius is on his way. Sam is actually smiling. Frank is upstairs and probably won’t come down—he hates Grandpa. For a moment, everything is right and Jimmy hasn’t learned yet to distrust the moments that feel good. He’s at the window watching snowflakes dissolve against the glass, looking and looking and looking for the lights of Grandpa’s car. When they appear, Jimmy runs out into the snow, still in his slippers, no coat, yelling, “He’s here, he’s here!” and Mom is telling him to come inside before he freezes but she’s laughing, and Sam is right behind him, picking up excited handfuls of snow and throwing them at nothing.

Grandpa’s car drifts to the ground and shuts off. Grandpa comes out with his arms already outstretched and Jimmy and Sam go running. Jimmy holds on as tight as he can, burying his face in Grandpa’s sweater, breathing in that Grandpa smell that makes him feel sleepy. He won’t let go, so Grandpa picks him up and carries him inside, tossing him like a sack of potatoes onto the couch in front of the fire, and everyone is laughing.

“Jimmy boy!” he booms, “Sammy! You’ve grown again! Didn’t I tell you to stop that?”

The boys squeal and start chasing each other around the house. Winona laughs and shakes her head. “They’re excited to see you, Tiberius—they’ve been like this all day. You make them go crazy.”

Tiberius hugs her. They both know that Winona will last no more than four days before the presence of George’s father is too much, and she’ll run off to space again. But they don’t talk about that now.

Later, after everyone else is asleep, Jimmy and Grandpa are curled up on the couch, the light of the fire shivering against the wall. Jimmy has a cup of hot chocolate, and he is slowly falling asleep in Grandpa’s lap. He’s only six years old, and Grandpa seems like a wonderful giant.

“Grandpa Tiberius,” he asks, “Am I old enough yet to go fishing with you and Sam?”

Grandpa chuckles. “I think so. But we’ll have to wait until you come visit me in the summer.”

“But that’s so far away.”

“Oh, not so far. I’m sure the time will fly by.”

“No it won’t.”

Grandpa doesn’t answer. They both know Jimmy’s right.

“When will you take us hunting? We can go hunting in the winter. Can we do that tomorrow?”

Grandpa takes Jimmy’s cup, which has been slipping out of his hands as he drifts closer to sleep. “No, Jimmy, you’re both way too young for hunting. Maybe in a couple years I’ll start teaching you and Sammy to shoot, but that’s still a long time away.”

Jimmy sighs. He wants to be brave and strong and useful like Grandpa Tiberius. People like it when you’re useful. They need you because you know how to do things.
“Do you want an early Christmas present?” Grandpa asks.

Jimmy wakes up, sleep chased away. “Yes! Yes yes yes!”

Grandpa laughs and shushes him. He gets a present from under the tree and hands it to Jim, who tears it open even before Grandpa sits back down.

Jimmy knows he should hide his disappointment, but he can’t—it’s yarn and a big pair of knitting needles. He was hoping for something to make him useful, like a compass or one of the vests Grandpa wears when he goes fishing.

Grandpa smiles, like he expected Jimmy to react this way.

“I know you like doing things for yourself, Jimmy. This way, you can make yourself hats and scarves and things to wear when you’re old enough to come hunting with me.”

“But Grandpa, knitting is for girls.”

Grandpa scoffs. “It most certainly is not! Being able to make things with your own hands is a good skill for anybody. It’s a very useful skill.”

Jimmy does want to be useful, but he’s still not sure.

Grandpa gathers him back onto his lap. “Tomorrow, when it’s light out, I’ll teach you how to make a scarf, ok? You can practice knitting while you wait for the time to pass, and before you know it, it’ll be time to come visit me.”

Jimmy leans his head against Grandpa’s chest. “Do you know how to knit, Grandpa?”

“I sure do. If you can make your own clothes and cook your own food, Jimmy, then you can always take care of yourself. You never know when you won’t have a replicator to use. The only thing you can ever really rely on is yourself.”

Jimmy thinks about it. He thinks about Grandpa’s nice-smelling sweaters, his hats lined with soft felt, the mittens he sends Jim and Sam every year that keep their hands warm, even when Frank wakes them up to haul firewood when it’s still dark out. Did Grandpa make all of those things himself?

Jimmy is still holding the yarn. Even after he’s asleep, when Grandpa puts him in bed, he’s still holding it.

The next day Grandpa teaches him the knit stitch and how to use it to make a scarf. When Sam makes fun of him, Grandpa takes a beautiful blue sweater out of his suitcase, and starts knitting the unfinished sleeve. Sam shuts up and sits watching the two of them knit for an hour, eating a plateful of Christmas cookies and telling Grandpa jokes.

Frank comes down and complains that Grandpa is going to make the boys faggots. Grandpa ignores him, but Jimmy realizes this is why he’s never seen Grandpa knitting before. He tries harder to make his stitches even and neat, like Grandpa’s.

On the day after Christmas, Mom is back in space and Grandpa is packing up his things, but Jimmy has finished his scarf and is making another one. Grandpa taught him the purl stitch too, so now Jimmy can make clumsy copies of the little v-shaped stitches that Grandpa makes so effortlessly.

As Grandpa drives away, Sam and Frank get into a screaming fight. Jimmy slips up to his room and
wraps himself in a blanket. He can still hear them, but he picks up his needles and works on the new scarf. Knit four stitches at both ends of the row so the work doesn’t curl, knit one row, purl one row, knit one row, purl one row, knit, purl, knit, purl. After a while, Jimmy can’t hear anything except the clicking of his needles.

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“Spock, if you don’t stop talking I am honestly going to throw my communicator at you.”

Spock looked up from his PADD, not even bothering to hide his exasperation.

“Captain, the admiralty has requested that our standard operating procedure consist of—”

“A detailed discussion of all major reports by both commanding officers before they are signed and submitted. Yes, I know that, Mr. Spock, they usually tell these things to the captain too, not just the first officer.”

“Then I fail to understand why you so frequently attempt to evade this duty.”

Jim put his head on the cold surface of his desk. It was 1:00 in the morning. “I write reports, you write reports. I’m a genius, you’re a bigger genius. We don’t need to read them to each other and have a heart-to-heart about every single one. We don’t need to follow every single rule, Spock. I trust you—don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

Spock said it so quietly and seriously that Jim raised his head. Spock’s face was blank, but Jim knew him well enough by now to read an emotion there, even if he couldn’t name it. A long, silent moment went by and they just looked at each other, something faintly electric thrumming between them.

Lately there had been a lot of moments like this. It was almost two years since Jim had died in the warp core, and they were nearing the end of their first year on the mission. Things between Jim and Spock had been… different. Jim didn’t really want to think about it beyond that. Working with Spock, arguing with Spock, hanging out with Spock—it all felt good, it felt right, and that meant it couldn’t be trusted. Something was sure to go wrong, Jim was sure to read meaning into something that meant nothing to Spock, he was sure to fuck things up somehow.

So Jim just broke the eye contact and said, “Cool, then we don’t need to stay up into the wee hours reading reports to each other.”

Spock blinked. Jim was pretty sure he was actually confused, not just pretending to be, which meant Spock was really, really tired. It was a rare occasion, but it did happen.

“Hours cannot be small or large, Captain—an hour is a measurement of time.”

Jim rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Yeah, I know Spock, I just mean it’s late. We’re getting those new orders tomorrow and if I don’t go to bed, I’m going to fall asleep in the middle of receiving them.”

Spock stood and gathered up his PADD and communicator. “Of course, Captain. My apologies. You must remind me earlier when your body is in need of sleep. I sometimes forget that humans require much more rest than Vulcans.”

Rolling his eyes, Jim shut off his computer and dragged himself into his bedroom, flopping face-first
onto the comforter. He turned his head just enough so that Spock could hear him and called out, “Sure, Spock. You’re totally not tired at all—you could probably go for a ten-mile run right now!”

Spock came to stand in the bedroom doorway. “You have found me out, Captain. I am indeed fatigued. I could likely run only six miles in my current state.”

Jim picked up a pillow and threw it at him. Spock dodged it expertly.

“Captain,” Spock said, suddenly business-like again, “There is one matter on which I do require your sign-off.” His PADD flared to life again and lit up the dark room as he started walking toward Jim’s bed, staring at the screen.

“Spaaaaaack, I’m so tired! Leave me alone!”

Spock sat on the edge of Jim’s bed, ignoring him, and continued tapping at his PADD to pull up a form. The easy, thoughtless way he came into Jim’s private space made Jim’s head feel sort of light and floaty. He put the other pillow over his face.

Spock began rattling off a speech about how he wanted to promote one of his science officers who was performing at a much higher level than her previous experience had suggested she would, and she would need a higher-quality microscope and also some other things, blah blah blah blah blah. Jim stopped listening almost immediately. Spock could ask Jim to fork over his own personal salary to the science department and Jim would do it.

“That’s fine, Spock,” he finally interrupted, “You have my approval.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Captain. If you will just—oh. I see the type of oscilloscope I had planned to request for her is not available. I will have to find another and redo my calculations of expense.” And with that he settled in next to Jim, sitting at the head of the bed with his back against the bulkhead.

For a few moments, Jim couldn’t move, but Spock was barely aware of him, still tapping away. Finally not even Jim’s uncomfortable, unresolved emotions could outweigh his exhaustion, and he drifted to sleep to the sound of Spock’s fingers against the screen.

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That summer Grandpa teaches the boys to fish. In the evenings he shows them how to prepare and cook their catch, and it tastes like butter and no one is yelling. Jimmy has brought all of his scarves to show Grandpa, and Grandpa makes a fuss over them. Jimmy thinks they look pretty bad, but he’s still proud of them.

Grandpa teaches him more. How to decrease stitches, how to increase. They knit a hat, and Grandpa sews the seam. Sam tries to learn too but he gets bored. He doesn’t tease Jimmy, though, so Jimmy starts knitting another hat, this one for his brother. But he doesn’t finish it before they go home, and when he tries to sew the seam himself, it looks terrible. Sam is mad all the time at home, and Jimmy thinks the messed-up hat will just make him madder, so he doesn’t give it to him.

When Jimmy is nine, Grandpa teaches them how to shoot. He shows them how to use both a phaser and a gun, even though Sam thinks the gun is a piece of crap. They shoot at targets and miss most of them.

Grandpa teaches Jimmy how to knit with a circular needle, so he can make things without seams. Over the past four years, Jimmy thinks he’s gotten pretty good. He can make washcloths and hats and he even made a blanket for Mom. The circular needles make it easier, and his hats start looking really good. That Christmas he knits Grandpa a deerstalker and Grandpa says it’s one hell of a
present.

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When Jim woke up the next morning, he was momentarily confused about being up before his alarm, which usually went off for five straight minutes before Jim was conscious enough to turn it off. But then he noticed the all-too familiar dip in his bed that meant someone else was sleeping in it. Turning over, he found Spock lying beside him at an awkward angle, shivering without any blankets over him. He had fallen asleep before he could finish his budget and make Jim sign off on it. His PADD was lying beside him, the screen dark.

For a few moments, Jim stared at his sleeping first officer, his tousled hair and slightly parted lips. Jesus, this Vulcan sure didn’t make it easy. He reached over and shook his shoulder gently. Spock came instantly awake, sitting up and looking around in confusion.

“It’s ok, you’re in my quarters,” said Jim. “I think you fell asleep last night when you were doing those calculations.”

Spock leapt out of the bed like the sheets were acidic. “Captain, please accept my sincere apology. I did not realize the true extent of my fatigue. In the future I will attempt—”

Jim held up his hand. “Spock, it’s ok! Don’t worry about it. Obviously we both need to get more sleep. All the more reason not to read each other’s reports.”

Spock was flushed an unfairly appealing shade of green. “Indeed, Captain,” he said haltingly, and without another word he turned and left Jim’s quarters through their shared bathroom.

Jim flopped back onto the bed and dug his fingernails into his scalp. He felt like he hadn’t gotten any sleep at all.

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Grandpa decides they can start learning about hunting when Jim is ten, although he won’t actually let them try it. He takes the boys on a camping trip and starts teaching them the basics. Jim loves camping, and he can make his own campfires now. He likes to sit by the fire and read or knit, and he likes being able to fend for himself—cook his own food, brew coffee for Grandpa, navigate the winding trails with nothing but his own brain to keep him from getting lost.

Grandpa leads them deep into the woods and teaches them to sit still and just watch. He says this is one of the most important things about hunting. Sam hates it and storms off on the second day, scaring trees full of birds into the air.

But Jimmy is good at sitting still. Knitting is sitting still and being patient. Walking back to camp, Grandpa shoves him fondly and says, “See, Jimmy boy? I told you knitting would come in handy.”

The next day Grandpa takes them out boating. Sam likes this a lot better than sitting still waiting for animals to creep across their path, but Jimmy thinks it’s kind of boring and sits in the bottom of the boat knitting the cuff of a mitten.

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Spock didn’t bring up falling asleep in Jim’s bed, but he was awkward for the rest of the day. Jim decided to be mad at him and tried to ignore him, but he failed on both counts.

As soon as Jim arrived on the bridge, Chekov and Sulu descended on him to discuss their plans for
holiday celebrations on the *Enterprise*. It was mid-December, but they had started pestering Jim about Christmas early last month. Finally he had given up and made them the ship’s official Christmas committee.

“Ve are considering four parties, Kepten,” Chekov said. “Ve vill need your approwal, obviously, but—”

“*Four* parties?” Jim interrupted him.

“It’s good for the crew, Captain,” said Sulu.

Jim rubbed his forehead. “Okay, listen. Commander Spock is officially your commanding officer for this Christmas stuff. You can get all your answers and approvals from him. And please make sure that there are as few things I have to participate in as possible.”

“But Kepten,” said Chekov, looking confused, “you love parties.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t love Christmas parties, ok? I’m not a big fan of Christmas.”

Sulu and Chekov exchanged a look and tactfully let the subject drop. When Spock passed by his chair a few minutes later, Jim flagged him over.

“I just made you the senior officer in charge of corralling Sulu and Chekov with this whole Christmas on the *Enterprise* thing. Sorry. I probably should have asked you first but—to be honest, I hate Christmas. Do you mind?”

Spock regarded him for a moment. Jim felt like he was trying to figure him out, but maybe he was just reading that into Spock’s raised eyebrow. “I do not mind, Captain.”

“Thanks, Spock. I appreciate it.”

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*Grandpa finally takes them hunting for real when Jim is twelve. Grandpa has come for another Christmas visit, and they go into the woods behind the farmhouse. Jim wears a scarf he made two years ago. He hasn’t knitted anything since the car and the cliff and what Frank did to him after. Grandpa hasn’t said anything, but Jim notices he’s wearing the deerstalker.*

*In the past two years, Sam has already run away from home and been dragged back three times. In the woods, he shoots hard and fast into the trees like if he tries hard enough he’ll turn into the bullet. He doesn’t hit anything. Jim waits, and he kills three squirrels his first try. Sam shoves him and Jim’s gun goes off, shooting harmlessly into the treeline. It’s the first time Jim has ever seen Grandpa Tiberius get mad. He grabs Sam by the arm and pulls him back toward the farmhouse. Sam is shouting that he never wanted to use an old-fashioned gun anyway, and Grandpa shouts back that if they had been using phasers, one of them would probably be dead.*

*Jim collects his squirrels and slowly strings them up like Grandpa taught him. Grandpa and Sam are on the couch when Jim gets back to the house. Sam is hanging his head and Grandpa’s hand is on Sam’s back.*

*The next day, Grandpa asks if Jim wants to do some knitting with him. Jim does want to. He misses it—the clicking needles, the quiet rhythm of stitch after stitch. Grandpa shows Jim how to knit socks, but Jim gets so frustrated when he tries to turn the heel that he throws the unfinished sock across the room and storms out of the house.*
When he gets back, Frank says he’s glad Jim decided not to start again with the goddamn crafting. He doesn’t want a faggot for a stepson. Grandpa Tiberius usually ignores Frank, but this time he tells him he’s as backward as a redneck raised by wolves. Frank smashes a plate and goes out drinking.

Jim doesn’t tell anyone that Lucas Jones kissed him behind a broken-down hover truck on the last day of school before winter break. Or that Jim kissed him back, with tongue.

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At noon, their assignment came in from Starfleet. Jim asked Uhura to read the orders aloud as usual. He only read them in private if they were marked high-security-clearance; he thought everyone on the ship had a right to know what they were doing and why.

“Captain James Kirk,” Uhura read, “the Enterprise is ordered to proceed to Federation Starbase 18 and take aboard Colonel Masters and her convoy of Federation personnel. You are further ordered to transport them to Tarsus IV in the Tarsus system. An away team must escort Colonel Masters and her convoy on any and all away missions they conduct on the planet’s surface. Colonel Masters and her team are investigating the Tarsus IV famine and massacre, and there is a perceived threat to their safety based on political disagreements. A complete mission assignment has been sent. Admiral Komack, Starfleet Headquarters.”

Sulu was entering the coordinates. “Proceed to Starbase 18, Captain?”

The Captain didn’t answer. Sulu spun around to get a confirmation, but Jim was sitting frozen in his seat, staring straight ahead, the color gone from his face. At Jim’s silence, Spock also turned from his station and was momentarily taken aback by the sight of him. He could see the clenched muscles of Jim’s hands on the arms of the captain’s chair, the tightness of his jaw, the quickening of his breath. Spock rose and crossed the bridge, laying a gentle hand on Jim’s shoulder. He jumped and looked up at Spock in surprise. His eyes were glassy and hollow.

“Are you well, Captain?”

Jim stood too quickly, knocking Spock’s hand away and nearly falling over.

“No. No, I’m not, Mr. Spock. You have the con.”

Jim walked stiffly to the turbolift and disappeared from the bridge, the flash of his electric blue eyes momentarily visible, staring at nothing, before the doors whispered shut.

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Jim visits Grandpa Tiberius a week before he’s supposed to leave for Tarsus IV. Sam has left home for good, so it’s just the two of them. Jim is fourteen. They go hunting and fishing and Grandpa never brings up the bruise Jim has on his eye from fighting, or the month he spent in the Iowa Juvenile Correction Center.

Grandpa talks about Tarsus like it’s something thrilling that Jim earned, not like the punishment it really is. Jim starts to get almost excited about living on the colony. He and Grandpa make up wild stories about what Jim can do on the little faraway planet, what books he can read, what the girls will look like.

It’s only November, but Grandpa and Jim decorate the whole house like it’s Christmas, since Jim will be away for the holidays. They cut down a tree together and sing stupid carols while they
decorate it. They have a feast, complete with a turkey Jim shot himself. Grandpa even lets Jim have a cup of eggnog, which makes him sleepy and sad. After he drinks it, he tells Grandpa that he’s sorry about the knitting. His plan had been to never tell anyone how guilty he feels that he stopped knitting, how it makes him feel like he let Grandpa down.

He even tells Grandpa that he likes boys just as much as girls. He starts to cry and feels like the biggest idiot in the world, but he’s been fucking up ever since Sam started running away, and he just got out of juvie, and now he’s being exiled to some random colony on a speck of a distant world. And it turns out that he is a faggot after all.

Grandpa puts his arm around Jim and says there’s no shame in crying, and there’s no shame in liking boys, either.

“Nobody thinks like that anymore, Jim. You just had the misfortune of growing up with one of the few dinosaurs who does.”

Jim puts his head on Grandpa’s shoulder like he did when he was a little kid. Grandpa still smells the same.

“And as for the knitting,” Grandpa says, “It wouldn’t hurt my feelings if you never picked it up again. But just because you’ve stopped for a while doesn’t mean you can’t start again. Good, honest skills—things you can make with your own two hands—those are always there for you, waiting until you need them.”

They have a pretend Christmas morning. One of the presents Grandpa wraps in green paper is a bagful of yarn, a beautiful set of silver needles, and a sweater pattern. He winks at Jim and says, “If you don’t need it, don’t you worry none. But if you get bored on Tarsus, if the boys are ugly or something, you can dig this out. I never did teach you sweaters.”

Jim hugs him. He’s on a ship to Tarsus IV the next day.

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Jim distantly heard the doors to his quarters open, and he wasn’t surprised, but it did occur to him that Spock had probably buzzed several times before overriding Jim’s code. He hadn’t heard that at all.

Jim was sitting frozen in his desk chair. He hadn’t moved his head since he sat down, and he thought maybe his neck was starting to hurt, but everything hurt and his head felt detached, like a balloon on a string, so he wasn’t sure.

Spock stepped into Jim’s line of vision and took a seat across from him.

“Captain? I would like you to explain your behavior so that I may understand. Are you currently capable of doing that?”

Jim was quiet for a long moment. By the time he realized he had said, “I was on Tarsus IV during the famine,” ten seconds had gone by and Spock had already looked confused and then checked himself, erasing the emotion from his face.

“Jim, that statement is not correct. I have read your file in its entirety. It makes no mention of the Tarsus disaster.”

Jim laughed and then covered his mouth. He had forgotten that laughing was a thing people did.
He started to talk into his hand and for a moment couldn’t figure out why the words sounded wrong. He dropped his hand and tried again.

“I hacked into my file and made all the Tarsus stuff inaccessible. The day I started at the Academy. I couldn’t delete it; it just couldn’t be done without the highest level of clearance. But I made it so that no one can see it. No one can see it. No one can ever see those pictures of me.”

Jim’s eyes were too wide and had drifted away again. He wasn’t blinking. Spock was beginning to think he wasn’t going to say anything else when the words began pouring out, jumbling over each other.

“My stepfather convinced my mom to send me there when I was fourteen, after I got arrested the first time. Everybody thought I needed a kick in the ass, and there was a Starfleet school program on Tarsus they wanted me to do. There was nowhere to run—if I was stuck on the colony the teachers could make me go to school, keep me out of trouble.

I was there for a month before the grain started dying and the food started running low. At first nobody was worried, because Kodos said we had plenty of food in storage and the best replicators. But then the food just started disappearing for good. When we realized that Kodos had lied, people started panicking, started fighting, started… killing each other. Even before the massacre, things were out of control. People were hiding food and letting their own families starve, kids my age were trading sex for food, bodies were just lying in the street.

A bunch of little kids, their parents died. I took them outside of the colony and we lived in the woods for a while, and I hunted these little rodents for food, but then the animals started dying, too. By the time we heard about the massacre, we had almost nothing. We had all been chosen for the slaughter—we should have been dead. So going back into town was a huge risk, but we were going to starve, and the only food left was in the colony. So I took the two oldest kids and we snuck in, trying to find something to eat. We were in this little empty house, looking in the cupboards, when—when he came in. Kodos and some of his people. I—I saw his face, Spock. I saw it clear as day. We went running, but—but the two kids got killed. I don’t know if Kodos himself did it, but somebody killed them. But I got away. I got back to the camp where the little kids were and I gave them the very last of the food we had. Starfleet came the next day.”

After a minute, maybe two, maybe a thousand, Jim realized he had just told Spock everything. He raised his eyes warily. Spock’s face was completely blank, a caricature of indifference, a sure sign that the emotions he was feeling were the hardest to control.

“You cannot be expected to take on this mission,” he said quietly.

Jim laughed, a brittle, humorless bark, and said, “Well, that’s what I get for hacking into my own record, isn’t it? Hacking always does seem to bite me in the ass. You wanna do an I-told-you-so dance? I can totally remember your smug face at the Kobyashi Maru hearing—you should break that out right now, it’s perfect.”

Spock took Jim’s hand. He had never done that, not once. “Jim, I am grateful that you cheated on the Kobyashi Maru. That act set in motion the events that allowed us to serve together.”

The string connecting Jim’s head to his body broke, and he felt like he was drifting away. “I need to lay down,” he said, and dropped Spock’s hand, wandering into the bedroom like a ghost. Spock rose and followed him, hovering in the doorway. “Would you like me to stay?”

Jim was sprawled on his back, his arm thrown over his eyes. “No, that’s ok, Spock. I just need to rest for a while.”
Spock hesitated, but finally he offered a quiet, “Yes, Captain,” and slipped out of Jim’s quarters.

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When the Starfleet shuttle drops Jim off at Fleet headquarters to be debriefed, his mom is there, and so is Grandpa Tiberius. Mom starts to cry as soon as she sees him, his bones sticking out, his t-shirt hanging off him. But Grandpa just wraps an arm around him and says, “I’m so glad you’re home, son,” and he doesn’t let go even while Starfleet personnel herd Jim into the main building. Mom can’t take it after a while and leaves, but Grandpa stays while they are dragged from office to office so the Starfleet people can get Jim’s testimony. They take holos of his naked, emaciated body, and his eyes burn holes in the pictures they put in his file.

Grandpa never looks away. Jim sees the way the officers keep glancing nervously at old Tiberius, like they know that he’s going to look and look and look, he’s going to see everything—he’s going to know every detail of what happened to Jim on Tarsus IV. Starfleet knows who Grandpa is, who his son was.

Grandpa doesn’t say anything at first, he just listens and stares. They try to make Jim eat some food and he can’t bring himself to do it—he wants to take it home. Food is for saving, not for eating. Someone else, someone younger, weaker, will need it later. Grandpa leans forward in his chair and puts his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “Eat what you can, Jim. There’s plenty more where that came from.” It’s the first time he’s spoken since they entered the building. Jim eats an apple but nothing else.

After four hours, they start asking Jim more questions about the two kids that died. Jim breaks down and all of a sudden he can’t get control of himself, he’s crying so hard that he starts choking, so hard that he has to run to the bathroom to throw up the apple.

Grandpa comes to get him and when the Starfleet people try to take him back to the conference room, Grandpa says, “That’s enough for today,” and walks Jim right out of Headquarters.

Mom is waiting outside drinking coffee. She’s shaking and won’t look at Jim at all now. She says, “Why does space keep taking my boys?” and Jim is pretty sure she spiked her coffee because she never says stuff like that sober.

Grandpa just says, “Let’s get back to the hotel.”

Once Mom is asleep, Jim gets out the sweater. He had started knitting it his first day on Tarsus, and it all came back, just like Grandpa said it would. After everything went to hell, he kept it the whole time. Even if he died, he wanted them to find it on his body so Grandpa Tiberius would know he finished it.

Jim holds it up. It’s a little dirty now, but he thinks Grandpa can probably get the stains out.

“Here,” he says, “I sized up the pattern so it would fit you.”

Grandpa takes it and is quiet, just for a moment.

“Thank you, Jimmy. That’s one hell of a present.”

Jim shrugs and says, “No problem. Thanks for the yarn and the needles.” It’s like it’s normal, this exchange of presents, like it didn’t happen on either side of a horror show.

-★-
Spock immediately hacked into Jim’s record himself and accessed the hidden files, saving them to his computer with heavy encryption.

He forced himself to control the anxiety—and, if he was honest, the guilt—he felt about reading this information. It was relevant, and it was necessary for Spock to have it so that he could make informed decisions about their current assignment. He opened the file.

A teenage Jim stared out at Spock from the computer screen. They had taken photographs of his naked body to document the full extent of his malnourishment, and his bones were sharp, the skin stretched over them almost translucent. His lips were cracked, his skin dry, his hair thin and dull. The blue of his eyes was dark and angry, his dilated pupils two howling black holes.

Spock deleted the pictures. He did not want to look at them again.

The file fleshed out Jim’s Tarsus account only a little, filling in some logistical details. This was followed by information about how Starfleet handled Jim’s situation once he was back on Earth. The file mentioned Tiberius Kirk, Jim’s paternal grandfather, several times. Spock knew the identities of Jim’s relatives, of course, but he could not recall Jim ever mentioning this grandfather in any specific context. The report, however, indicated that Tiberius had been present for the entirety of Jim’s debriefing and had not only advocated for him in several instances, but also made medical decisions for him, and dictated his schedule and treatment throughout Starfleet’s inquiry into Tarsus.

It appeared that Starfleet had followed Jim’s progress for nine months. His medical records indicated an extreme decline in Jim’s overall health following his stay on the colony, particularly a decline in mental wellness. Trauma-related diagnoses were considered, but the files repeatedly referenced Jim’s refusal to cooperate with Starfleet-mandated therapy, and his increasingly volatile and illegal behavior. After Jim was arrested again, Starfleet concluded that he was too difficult to monitor and closed his Tarsus file.

Spock shut his computer off and steepled his fingers, processing what he had just read. He logically considered his options for 37.64 minutes. Finally he transferred the files to a PADD and proceeded to the medical bay.

-★-

“You don’t have any right! Goddamn you—you don’t have any RIGHT!”

Bones crossed his arms and watched Jim pace back and forth across his quarters.

“I’m not allowed to have a few minutes of freaking out after being blindsided by a Tarsus mission? Are all starship captains supposed to be Vulcans now? Sure, I’m not thrilled that I got assigned to go to Tarsus with no warning, on the bridge, in front of everyone, but I’m fine! I freaked out and now I’m fine!” Jim ground to a halt. “Where the fuck is Spock? Get him in here, this is his fault too!”

Bones stared him down, immovable as a mountain range. “You have to unshield your Tarsus files. You can lie about how they got hidden and Spock and I’ll vouch for you. But Starfleet needs to know. I’m not medically clearing you for this mission because you can’t handle it and you’re putting the entire crew at risk. You’ve been avoiding this since you were fourteen. You need to face it and deal with it, but not like this.”

Jim was shivering with anger, his hands in tight fists. Bones wondered if he was going to punch him. It wouldn’t be the first time Jim had punched him for talking about Tarsus IV.

“I’m not clearing you for this mission, Jim. Either I can tell the admiralty or you can.”
Jim swung violently sideways and punched the hull. He punched it over and over until Bones grabbed him and pinned his arms down. He held Jim there until the live-wire tension bled out of him.

Spock came in several minutes later to find Jim sitting on the couch, Dr. McCoy using a bone regenerator on his hand. There was blood all over Jim’s shirt.

Jim looked up at him, his eyes empty. “Remember that time you stabbed me in the back before? I kinda thought you might have learned a lesson there.”

“For fuck’s sake, Jim, leave him alone. He’s trying to help you. He’s right and I’m right. This isn’t safe for anybody.”

Jim stood up and walked over to his computer, his movements as stiff as wood. “I’m comming Starfleet,” he said.

Spock took a step forward. “Captain, I believe it would be prudent to change your uniform shirt.”

Jim glanced down at his blood-soaked tunic. He tore it off and, in just his black undershirt, hailed Starfleet. As they waited for the connection he asked, “Gonna back me up on this, Spock?”

Spock had already come to stand beside him. “Of course, Captain.” Bones took his place at Jim’s other side and they waited.

When Starfleet answered, Jim gave an impressively convincing performance of being righteously angry—he had just discovered that all mentions of Tarsus IV had been removed from his file. He was furious that he had been serving Starfleet for three years without any awareness of what he had already given them on Tarsus IV when he was fourteen.

The officers looked like someone had just accused them of misplacing an entire starship, and began scrambling around, looking in Jim’s file and calling admirals. Jim could tell the moment when they realized he was right, that the files were encrypted, and watched as they methodically unshielded the missing part of his record. The knowledge that a roomful of Starfleet officials was rifling through his most fiercely held secrets made Jim want to start punching the bulkhead again, but he clenched his fist and kept silent. Eventually Spock said, “We would like to be removed from this assignment.”

The officials on the screen all froze as one. For a few beats they stared silently at the Enterprise command team, before exchanging several anxious glances.

Finally Commander Ortez, the most senior officer present, reluctantly spoke up. “That— that isn’t possible, I’m afraid.”

Spock felt Jim’s body go rigid beside him.

“Well, you’re gonna have to make it possible,” said Dr. McCoy. “I’m not medically clearing Captain Kirk for this mission.”

More nervous glances. “Captain Kirk and the Enterprise were specifically requested by the Federation investigative team,” said Commander Ortez. “This mission is… delicate, politically. The Federation is… concerned… with how Starfleet originally handled the Tarsus IV disaster. They consider your ship to be the most objective, based on Captain Kirk’s reputation for… for questioning authority.”

Jim huffed an incredulous, humorless laugh.

McCoy was clearly putting an excessive amount of effort into keeping his voice above a growl.
“Well, tell the Federation they’ll have to choose somebody else. They’ll probably change their minds in light of this new information anyway.”

A young ensign in the back of the conference room raised her hand shyly, as if she were still a cadet attending a lecture. “Um, sorry, Commander Ortez? I’ve already contacted the Federation to inform them of the change in Captain Kirk’s files? They just answered and, um, it seems that they are actually… even more insistent on the Enterprise’s involvement?”

McCoy took a step forward. “Look here,” he said, “I’m the chief medical officer on this vessel, and I have the authority to forbid Captain Kirk from taking on this mission, and I’m exerting it.”

“Bones—” Jim started, but McCoy held up his hand.

Commander Ortez took a deep breath. “There’s nothing I can do, Doctor. I have orders here directly from Admiral Komack that supercede your authority. I contacted him in a text communication two minutes ago about the missing files. He told me the orders were to remain the same.”

McCoy opened his mouth to speak again, but Spock cut him off. “Understood, Commander. Please forward all updated orders and communications to the Captain and myself.” He reached out and cut the connection.

“Goddamn it, Spock! Do you care about Jim at all? This is—”

Spock rounded on him, “Of course I care, Doctor. Which is why I will not dispute the admiralty when it is obvious that they will not be persuaded. Rather I will spend my time determining the best way to accommodate the Captain during—”

Jim slammed his hand on the desk, interrupting Spock with a bang that echoed against the hull. “Get out, both of you,” he said, and disappeared into the bedroom.

-★-

Grandpa Tiberius dies less than a year later, on December 22. Mom says that a neighbor found him dead from a stroke in his backyard, and that he was wearing the sweater Jim knitted him. Mom holds out the sweater and asks if Jim wants to keep it. Grandpa had obviously cleaned it up and it looks crisp and new. Jim takes it and it has that Grandpa sweater smell.

He wears it to the funeral. It’s not black—it was a fair isle pattern with red on a white background—so people give him weird looks and Mom yells at him. But he leaves it on and he won’t take it off for days and days. On Christmas he sits on the couch by the cold fireplace, huddled down in the sweater, and drinks cup after cup of eggnog. Mom doesn’t even notice.

Ten years later, when Jim gets on a shuttle to Starfleet—this time by choice—he has the sweater stuffed in a pocket, hidden under his leather jacket. He doesn’t bring needles or yarn though. He doesn’t knit anymore.

-★-

Spock was drawn out of meditation at 7.325 minutes past midnight by a clumsy sort of banging coming from his living quarters. He rose and left his bedroom, not surprised to find Jim standing awkwardly by Spock’s display of Vulcan weapons, swaying slightly. Even from across the room, Spock could smell the whiskey Jim had undoubtedly consumed in an irresponsible quantity.

Jim didn’t look up when Spock came in, but he said, “I’m sorry I got mad at you. I know you’ve been trying to help— to help me. I don’t like talking about this.”
Spock crossed to Jim and took his elbow, leading him to the sofa and sitting down with him. “There is no need to apologize.”

Jim shivered and curled into himself, drawing his knees against his chest. “I know you thought you could get us reassigned. I know you didn’t expect them to dig– to dig in their heels like that. It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have been such an asshole.”

“I understand your reaction. I grieve with thee for what you experienced on Tarsus IV.”

Jim smiled sadly. “You’re so hot when you talk all Vulcan. How come you don’t think I’m hot?”

“I do, Jim. I have always found you to be exceptionally aesthetically pleasing.”

Jim looked up, and Spock held his gaze. Neither of them was surprised when Jim leaned in and kissed Spock, his mouth sharp with the taste of whiskey. Jim wrapped a hand around Spock’s head and Spock could already feel desperation at every point where their skin touched, as tangible to his telepathy as beads of water.

Gently he pulled away and pried Jim’s hand from behind his head.

“Jim, you are extremely intoxicated. You cannot consent to any kind of sexual activity. I think it best if you sleep for now.”

Jim stared at him like he didn’t quite understand. “Spock, I’ve wanted you since the fucking beginning. You can take the last three fucking years as my consent.”

Spock took both of Jim’s hands and stroked them slowly with his long fingers. “There is time for us, Jim. You are currently traumatized and impulsive.”

Jim jerked his hands away. “Don’t tell me what I am, Spock. Fuck you. Don’t do that.”

Spock turned his palms up, placating. “I apologize. If you would like, we can share a bed tonight. Perhaps proximity could bring you a small amount of comfort.”

Jim stood up unsteadily, backing away. “I’ll tell you what would bring me comfort. You pounding my ass until I can’t think anymore and all these thoughts go the fuck away.”

Spock flushed green, but Jim barely noticed. Black dots were popping in the corners of his vision and the room was slowly being reduced to a pinprick at the center of a tunnel.

“I will not take advantage of you in this state. We can revisit this discussion at a later time.”

Jim fumbled toward the door of the adjoining bathroom. “I’m not a fucking idiot, Spock. You can just say you don’t want me, it’s not that fucking hard. Do you think I can’t take it? You’re not the first pretty asshole and you won’t be the last. Don’t fucking worry about me.”

“Jim, you misunderstand me,” Spock said, striding toward the bathroom in a vain attempt to keep Jim out of his own quarters. But Jim was already gone and had locked his doors. Spock stood impotently in the bathroom trying to decide if he should override Jim’s codes, but calculated that Jim could only remain conscious for a maximum of twenty-two minutes and that letting him sleep was the kindest course of action.

-★-

When Jim woke up the next day, he was immediately hit with fragmentary memories of his
disastrous encounter with Spock. He groaned and tried to sit up, but instantly regretted it. He rested his head on the cool side of his pillow for a few minutes, trying hard not to think. When he managed to sit up, he found a detox hypo and a Christmas present sitting on the end of his bed.

Confused—but relieved—he gave himself the hypo and felt his hangover beginning to dissipate as he picked up the present. It was haphazardly wrapped in Christmas paper, tied with a ribbon and a gift tag. Written on the tag in Bones’s familiar scrawl was a note that read, “Congratulations, I put you on two days of medical leave.”

Jim growled in exasperation. In two days they would be at Starbase 18 to pick up the investigative crew. Jim wasn’t sure why Bones thought it would be better for him to knock around his quarters just thinking and thinking instead of distracting himself with work. He considered throwing the present across the room, but instead he pulled off the ribbon and tore the paper.

It was yarn. And a set of needles. Jim sat and stared at it for a full minute. Then he threw it across the room after all.

-★-

Jim lay in bed reading for as long as possible, which was about half an hour. He couldn’t focus—all he could think about was Spock, and the knitting supplies burning a hole in the corner of his quarters.

He let his book fall onto the blankets and scrubbed his hands over his head and face. What was the right thing to do when you kissed your first officer and then got mad at him? Should he go apologize? Should he give Spock time and let him come to Jim?

Finally Jim went and picked up the yarn. At this point, anything was better than thinking about Spock. How the hell did Bones even know about the knitting? It wasn’t like Jim ever talked about it. Hell, he barely talked about Grandpa Tiberius at all. Emotions that ran deep like that—those weren’t topics of conversation for Jim Kirk.

Jim wandered out into his living quarters, rubbing a strand of the yarn between his fingers. There were four skeins, three light grey and one dark, all with a faint silver thread woven in among the wool.

Jim sat down and searched for patterns on his PADD, just to see—he wasn’t committing to anything yet. But he hesitated at a pattern for a loose cardigan with no buttons. It called for a darker-colored front panel, open and intentionally rolled at the neck and chest, crossing itself at the bottom of the sweater to serve as a closure. It was an old man sweater, but it was kind of an old country doctor sweater too.

“Fine, Bones,” he said out loud. “I’ll make you a sweater, asshole.”

Casting on took only five minutes, and then he started in on the stockinette stitch at the beginning of the pattern. Just like the last time he tried to knit—Grandpa’s sweater all those years ago—it came back to him with no effort. His hands remembered, and for a little while, Jim didn’t think about Spock, or about unshielding his Tarsus files, or about Tarsus at all.

By the time Jim realized he was hungry, an hour-and-a-half had gone by. Jim hadn’t even noticed. He let the knitting fall onto the couch and he blinked for a few seconds, drifting up from his laser-sharp knitting focus. He stood and stretched, making his way to his replicator, and ordered a coffee and a bowl of oatmeal. Just as he sat down at his desk to eat, someone buzzed at the door. Jim’s stomach fell; since he was off-duty, it was probably Bones come to yell at him, or worse, Spock.
He took a deep breath and muttered, “Come,” just loud enough for the computer to hear. As feared, the doors parted to reveal his first officer, who took a few steps inside and stood at parade rest. His face was unreadable, and Jim took a long sip of coffee to hide his anxiety.

“Good morning, Captain. I wish to ascertain your physical status.”

“I’m fine, Spock. Bones gave me a detox hypo. Thanks for checking, though.”

He ran a hand through his hair and pushed his oatmeal aside. His appetite was suddenly gone.

“So, listen. I obviously owe you an apology, like, the biggest apology of all time. I’m really sorry, Spock. I can’t say I remember everything that went down, but I know that I made a pass at you, that I… kissed you, and that I got really unfairly angry at you. You have every right to file a report against me, and if you want to, I promise I won’t be mad. I just want you to know that I’m really, really sorry.”

After an uncomfortable silence, Spock gave a small not-sigh and came to sit down across from Jim. “The idea of filing a report against you is absurd.”

Jim glanced up. Spock was still pretty stone-faced, but Jim thought maybe he could detect a little bit of fond exasperation around his eyebrows.

“I am not angry, or violated, and you do not need to apologize. I am your first officer and your friend. It is expected that I will see you at your worst. What you experienced yesterday and the effect it had upon you was far from your worst. Your reaction was logical.”

Jim laughed. “Logical? Are you serious?”

Spock shrugged one of his shoulders, just a little. “For a human.”

Jim smiled reluctantly and shook his head. “Uh, ok. Thanks? And I’m sorry again, even if you think I shouldn’t be. Any chance you can just forget the whole… kissing thing?”

“I cannot, no.” Spock’s blunt reply cut through Jim and he almost winced, but held himself back.

“Well, fuck. This is gonna be awkward for a while. Listen, I can promise that I won’t bring it up again, and now that I know it’s not, like, a mutual thing, maybe I can—“

Spock interrupted him by offering his hand to Jim, resting it on the desk with his palm up. Automatically Jim put his hand in Spock’s, the touch like a reflex, like his hands remembering how to knit.

“I cannot forget because I do not want to. Your interpretation of my actions last night was inaccurate. I did not wish to take advantage of you in a vulnerable state. But I was not averse to your advances.”

Jim opened his mouth and then closed it. For a few moments they stared at each other in that charged and insistent way. Slowly Jim stood up, a hesitating, questioning look in his eyes. Spock reached out both hands this time and Jim took them, allowing himself to be pulled close. Spock’s cool fingers came up to cradle the base of Jim’s skull, drawing their mouths together, and that electric shiver flared to a fire between them, sparking and hot.

Jim pulled away to strip off his shirt. Spock’s eyes trailed down his chest, a faint green flush beginning on his cheeks, and as Jim started undoing his pants, Spock’s eyes followed. Jim drew in a sharp breath as he took off his black briefs and Spock’s eyes locked like a pistol on his already-hard cock.
“I’ve wanted you for so long,” Jim hissed.

Spock slipped slowly off the desk chair and knelt at Jim’s feet.

“Oh, Jesus,” Jim said, his knees going suddenly weak.

Spock rubbed his cheek against Jim’s cock in a gesture so simultaneously depraved and tender that Jim swayed dizzily as the blood rushed from his head. Spock looked up again and met Jim’s eyes. “I too have long desired this,” he said softly, and took Jim’s cock into the heat of his mouth.

“Fuck, oh fuck,” Jim said, grabbing the back of Spock’s head. “Oh god, Spock, oh my god.”

Just when he thought his knees couldn’t hold out, Spock pulled away and stood, his mouth swollen almost lime with desire. “Proceed to the bedroom, please.”

Jim was quick to comply. Once there, he dropped onto the bed and watched Spock strip with neat, calculated movements, a dark well of hunger blooming in his belly as Spock’s slick alien cock came free. Spock crawled over Jim’s body, a ferocious heat in his eyes, and took Jim’s cock in his hand, rubbing it slowly as he ran his tongue over the flat, tight muscles of Jim’s stomach, then up to his neck and face. His kiss against Jim’s mouth was a brand, so hot Jim felt like he had almost been burned clean.

“Faster,” Jim commanded almost immediately, and Spock increased his speed. Jim was clinging to Spock’s shoulders, the press of his fingers strong enough to bruise another human, although not Spock. His kisses were anxious, needy.

“Faster!” he gasped again.

Truthfully, the emotions pouring off Jim’s skin were hardly different from his drunken desperation of the previous night, and Spock sat back on his haunches, looking down at Jim sprawled naked on the bed. He was every bit as beautiful in this state as Spock had imagined he would be.

“What’s wrong?” Jim panted.

“Your emotional distress is still quite palpable. I do not—”

Jim scrambled out from under him and bent over on all fours, swallowing Spock’s entire cock without preamble.

“Jim!”

Jim broke away momentarily, pumping Spock with his fist and glaring up at him. “You’re not stopping me this time. You’re not responsible for my emotions. If you want to stop for you, say so. But if you’re trying to protect my delicate sensibilities, shut up and fuck me.” He took Spock in his mouth again, reaching back to press two fingers inside himself, stretching the tight ring of muscle.

Spock gasped at the sight of him, so flagrantly depraved, his throat tight around Spock’s not-insignificant girth. He did not altogether believe that Jim’s emotions were stable enough for this activity—he still seemed so utterly raw and vulnerable. But Jim had given him lucid and enthusiastic consent, and Spock was rapidly losing the ability to put up any kind of logical resistance.

Jim pushed Spock deep into his throat once more before pulling away. He turned around, hand still shoved up between his legs, fingers scissoring and thrusting. Spock reached out and ran his hands over Jim’s full gluteus muscles, the brush of golden hair there much softer than Spock had expected.
Jim slipped out of himself, leaving the puckered, winking tightness visibly relaxed, wanting.

“Fuck me, ok?” Jim whispered from the edge of the bed. Rising shakily onto his knees, Spock rubbed himself against Jim for a moment, coating him in the musky oil produced by the Vulcan penis during arousal, before slipping easily inside him.

Jim let out a strangled cry. Spock curled over him, one arm holding himself up and preventing his full weight from landing on the fragile human, the other wrapped securely around Jim’s waist, keeping him still in what Spock hoped was a reassuring gesture.

Spock started slow and gentle, which in his experience was preferable for the recipient of anal intercourse, and was indeed what his previous male partners had requested when taking the submissive role. But Jim slammed back toward him, rotating his hips desperately.

“More, Spock, please,” he begged. Spock increased his speed slightly but Jim whined in frustration. “Harder, harder, please, Spock! Please, I want it really hard.”

Spock hesitated, but Jim’s moaning was quickly becoming hysterical, and the desperation wailing at the juncture of their skin was now indistinguishable from desire. So Spock sped up to a punishing pace, slamming the sensitive head of his cock into Jim’s prostate again and again.

Jim screamed, a wild howl, and his hands flew out in an aborted attempt to find something to hold onto. He settled for resting on his elbows and clinging to the sheets.

At this frenzied pace they were both climbing quickly and steadily to their inevitable orgasms, and Jim’s hips began to buck uncontrollably as he twisted and jerked, trying to find the deepest angle of penetration.

“I would like to see you touch yourself,” Spock said into his ear, and Jim moaned, rising off his elbows, wrapping a hand around his cock and rubbing it with little coordination.

Jim came 1.34 minutes later, his chest falling forward onto the bed. Spock thrust insistently through the protracted period of Jim’s orgasm, and Jim’s primordial cries were so needy, so perfect, that Spock quickly fell hard into the waves of his own climax, gripping Jim’s hips without regard for his preternatural strength. The weak human body in his hands went limp and heavy, and Spock was forced to hold Jim up until he was entirely finished himself.

Breathing heavily, a fuzzy sort of contentment in his head, Spock extracted himself and lowered Jim gently onto the mattress. Foggy as he was, it took a moment to notice Jim trembling, and several more to hear his almost-silent crying.

“Jim?” he whispered, dizzied by the sudden swing from post-coital satisfaction to anxiety, “Are you well?”

He leaned over Jim’s body, muscular but now, naked and no longer flushed with desire, surprisingly small. He put two gentle hands on the Captain’s back, but Jim jerked away and sat up, scurrying back against the bulkhead. His knees came up to his chest and he wrapped his arms around himself, eyes darting helplessly around the floor, trying to land as far from Spock as possible.

“Jim? Did I hurt you?” Spock tried to reach for Jim again, but Jim held up his hands as if he was protecting his face from a blow.

“No! No, you didn’t hurt me. Don’t touch me!”

Spock felt utterly confused and slightly panicked. “Jim—”
“Don’t look at me! Stop looking at me!”

For 5.781 minutes, they sat in silence on the bed, Jim’s head buried in his arms.

Finally he mumbled, almost too quietly to be heard, “Sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Spock reached out a tentative hand and put it on Jim’s arm, and this time Jim allowed it.

“You do not need to apologize, but if you could explain this to me, so that I may understand—”

Jim looked up—though still not at Spock—and ran a hand through his hair. “I just get emotional after sex sometimes, ok?” he said defensively. “Sorry.” His eyes were that watery sort of sad that Spock had often observed in humans.

“Again, there is no need to—”

Jim shot up from the bed and into the living quarters. “You can have the first shower, ok?” he called over his shoulder, and Spock took the hint.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Jim returns to Tarsus IV.

When Spock emerged from the fresher, Jim was sitting on the couch in a faded academy t-shirt and sweatpants, apparently foregoing a shower himself. He was fiddling with what appeared to be a set of knitting needles and a ball of gray yarn.

Spock sat next to him, an awkward, uncertain silence stretching between them. Spock considered apologizing, but was uncertain what to apologize for, so decided against it. He noticed again the objects in Jim’s lap, watching Jim’s hands dart quickly, nervously, to and fro.

“Are you knitting?” Spock asked by way of breaking the silence.

“Uh, yeah,” said Jim with a self-conscious laugh.

“I did not know that was a skill you possessed.”

“Well, I haven’t done it for a long time, not since I was a kid. My grandpa taught me.”

“Your paternal grandfather, Tiberius Kirk?”

Spock noted the speed with which Jim’s face went from slightly embarrassed to guarded, like a door blowing shut with a bang.

“Yeah. How did you—oh. You read my Tarsus files.”

“I did. I apologize if it was an invasion of your privacy.”

Jim waved his hand. “No, it’s ok. I figured you would. Just don’t, like, feel all bad for me and start treating me differently.”

Spock watched Jim carefully, observing the minimal effort it required him to quickly conceal his powerful emotions. His level of ability was almost Vulcan in its efficacy. Spock said, “Truthfully I cannot deny that I feel a tremendous amount of sadness for what was done to you. But I will not treat you differently. I am impressed by your fortitude.”

“Oh yeah, breaking down after sex like a sissy shows real fortitude.”

“Jim, you are a successful starship captain and a good man. As you yourself said yesterday, the erasure of emotions is not required of you.”

Jim shrugged and didn’t answer. It was becoming apparent to Spock that changing the Captain’s opinion of himself was going to be a long-term project, so he let the matter drop.

“What are you making?” he asked instead.

“A sweater for Bones. Don’t tell him though.”
“I will not.” After a moment, Spock asked, “Were you close to your Grandfather? Your file would indicate so, but you have never spoken about him.”

A sad look came over Jim’s face, somewhere between a grimace and a smile. “Yeah, we were really close. He was the best guy I knew. Nobody else was really there for me when I was a kid. He died less than a year after I was on Tarsus, so I didn’t handle losing him very well. It just makes me sad talking about him.”

Spock reached out and touched Jim’s knee. “I apologize. I did not mean to cause you sadness.”

Jim looked up from his knitting and gave Spock a forced smile. Spock noticed his hands kept moving even when he wasn’t looking at the work. “No, it’s ok. Don’t worry about it.”

“Causing you pain is never my intention, Jim,” Spock said quietly. Jim shook his head.

“I know, Spock. You didn’t. I know that how emotional I got after we fucked probably... made you really uncomfortable. I’m sorry. Sometimes sex kind of—drains me, you know? Does that make any sense?”

“It does. You did not make me uncomfortable—I want only to help you in any capacity that you find useful.”

Jim laughed ruefully. Spock recognized it as Jim’s self-deprecating laugh that belied an undercurrent of shame. “Even in the rough, emotional sex capacity?”

“In any sexual capacity especially, Captain.”

Jim laughed again, a true laugh this time. Spock’s PADD chimed and he reached for it, reading a message from Starbase 13 aloud to Jim, even though he was not technically allowed to work. For 32.7 minutes they discussed ship’s business while Jim knitted, and then Spock returned to the bridge. The awkwardness between them had dissipated, at least for the time being.

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Spock would not have admitted it, but he was distracted for the rest of the day by thoughts of Jim. Indeed, as he walked from the bridge to the science lab to determine the status of an experiment, he did not notice ensign Chekov approaching him until they were face-to-face, too late for Spock to turn down another corridor as if he had meant to all along.

He had agreed to be the “Christmas Contact,” as Chekov had begun calling him, because he had not wanted to say no to Jim, especially as he detected something more serious about Jim’s hatred of Christmas that he had not revealed. But in truth, Spock had no interest in facilitating such frivolous celebrations, and furthermore he knew about Christmas only what his mother had told him and what he had observed living among humans.

“Mr. Spock!” said Chekov, “I need some Christmas approwals from you. Are you wery busy?”

“I am indeed busy, Mr. Chekov, but if you can be expedient, I can spare a few minutes.”

“Certainly, sir!” Chekov handed him a PADD. “I haf made a list of things vich require your permission.”

Spock scanned the document, rapidly counting 27 requested permissions. They included five parties to be held on ship, a supplies list for their next starbase stop—live evergreen trees, decorative wrapping paper, alcoholic eggnog, and an illogical amount of cinnamon, among other items—a
permission request for the possession of toxic mistletoe (which required an admiral’s approval), and even a petition to bring live reindeer aboard ship.

Spock suppressed a sigh. “I will need to review this list, Ensign. Please forward it to me and I will return any approvals that meet with regulations as soon as possible.”

Chekov was visibly disappointed as he took back his PADD, but Spock pretended he still had very little ability to read human facial expressions. As he continued down the deck, he considered Jim’s aversion to Christmas. It made little sense—Jim enjoyed any excuse to engage in raucous celebration, especially if the consumption of alcohol was encouraged. He had also shown a great deal of amusement and excitement during other shipwide holiday celebrations. His Halloween costume representing a 20th century Earth gangster had become something of a ship’s legend, and Spock heard it referred to on a regular basis.

Spock considered the new information he had recently learned about Jim’s life, and a few dates suddenly fell into place, forming a rough timeline. It had been late December when the colonists on Tarsus IV first became aware of the food shortage, the crisis erupting in earnest in late January. Jim had returned to Earth in March, and a mere nine months later, on December 22, Tiberius Kirk had died from a stroke.

It was entirely logical that Jim was uncomfortable with Christmas. It was a holiday that had bookended the most nightmarish year of his life. And now, mere weeks before outrageous celebrations were due to begin on his ship, Jim was returning to Tarsus IV.

Spock closed his eyes and took a breath. He had known since the Narada that there was more to James Kirk than his brash, irreverent exterior would suggest, but he was obviously more complicated even than Spock had imagined. Spock filed that fact away as a possible explanation for how quickly his romantic feelings for Jim were becoming alarmingly serious.

--

When Spock entered Jim’s quarters at the end of his shift, Jim looked blearily up at him from the couch, knitting in hand, several completed sweater pieces on the coffee table in front of him.

Jim blinked. "Is Alpha over already?"

Spock hovered by the door. “Yes. Are you occupied? I can return at a later time, or we can meet tomorrow morning for breakfast before—”

Jim cut him off, “No, no, it’s fine. I was hoping you would come by after your shift.” He dropped his knitting on the floor and rubbed his eyes. “Guess I lost track of time.”

Spock lifted up a few of the finished pieces—two front panels and a back, one sleeve. A nearly finished second sleeve was on the needles Jim had tossed on the floor.

“Captain, you have almost completed this garment.”

“Yeah, I guess I have. Still have to finish this sleeve and then the seaming will take me a while, but… yeah. I guess I got a lot done today.”

Spock rubbed the soft gray fabric between his fingers. “You possess an impressive level of skill.” Spock carefully arranged the pieces on the table, not wanting to damage them in any way. He was unfamiliar with the particulars of hand-knitting, and he did not want to compromise something into which Jim had put so much effort.
He looked up to find Jim smiling slightly at him, a flicker of badly concealed pride crossing his face.

“T’would seem you think so,” he said, but then his expression fell flat. “So, do we need to, like, talk? Or whatever?”

Spock raised his eyebrow. “I assume you are referring to a discussion regarding this morning’s coitus?”

Jim laughed awkwardly. “Well, I wouldn’t put it like that, but yeah.”

“Is there something you wish to say in addition to our previous discussion?”

Jim picked up the sleeve he was working on, obviously eager for an excuse not to look at Spock. “Not really, I just— I feel kind of bad, like… Well, kind of like I used you? I mean, I wasn’t expecting to get that upset, but I wasn’t… surprised that I did either. I know it weirded you out and made you worry.”

Spock tilted his head. “Curious. You are the one who experienced distress due to our sexual congress, and yet you believe you victimized me in some way.”

“I wasn’t upset by the sex, Spock. Sometimes sex is kind of… a way I can let emotions like that out. And it’s not fair to make you deal with me when I’m acting crazy just so I can feel better.”

Spock sat down and curled his fingers around the back of Jim’s neck. Jim finally looked up from his knitting, his eyes full of uncertainty, as unstable and destructive as two hot blue flames.

“You were not ‘acting crazy’ and you were not using me. Do you consider seeking emotional comfort and release from me a violation?”

“Well, I mean—yeah. Because what do you get out of it? You have to fuck me and then you have to watch me fall apart.”

Spock trailed his fingers up Jim’s skull, causing his eyes to flutter shut. “I am not forced to engage in intercourse with you, and it is hardly a chore. Our interaction this morning was quite physically pleasurable for me. Was it for you?”

Jim squirmed, embarrassed. “Yeah. I wouldn’t have reacted so… intensely if it hadn’t been good.”

Spock nodded. “I am gratified. Jim, if I were to come to you, unable to meditate, unable to access my emotional controls, desperate for help, would you give it to me? Would you give your time, your energy, perhaps your body, to help me achieve calm?”

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“Of course I would, but that’s not the same—”

“It is exactly the same. You are my friend, my Captain, and you need me. I would give all of myself to help you, as you have already proven you are willing to do for me. Were you not willing to sacrifice your life to save this ship, your career to save my own life?”

Jim was gritting his teeth. After a minute he grumbled, “Your logic is a stupid jerk.”

“My logic is not sentient.”

Jim smiled, just a little, which Spock counted as a victory. “In all the fantasies I’ve ever had about fucking you, I’ve consistently reduced you to a stammering, pre-reform-Vulcan animal by the sheer power of my sexual skills. Not crying in your arms. Basically the opposite of crying in your arms.”
“I do not intend to have only one kind of sexual interaction with you. I would like to explore many varieties. Is that amenable to you?”

Jim’s smile widened. “Uh, yeah. Obviously.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Captain. And may I ask how often—approximately, of course—did these fantasies occur?”

Jim quirked an eyebrow, some of the usual swagger sliding back into his face. “Oh you know, pretty much every day. Usually at least once on the bridge.”

A spike of heat went down Spock’s spine and Jim chuckled before turning back to his knitting. He shifted a little closer to Spock until their arms were touching. Spock picked up a PADD and for a few hours they worked together in silence.

--

Jim wandered into Bones’s office the next day. Bones was sitting at his desk reading test results on a PADD, which he was holding close enough to his face for his nose to practically touch the screen.

“No, Jim,” he said without looking up. “I’m not taking you off medical leave until Alpha shift tomorrow.”

“I know. I wasn’t going to ask you to.”

Bones glanced up. Jim was standing looking slightly uncomfortable, holding a bulky package.

“Giving it back, huh?” said Bones with a wry smile. “Gotta say, I was kind of expecting you to come down here yesterday and chuck it at my head.”

Jim gave him a half-hearted scowl. “Well, I did want to. But no, I’m not giving back. Here.”

He handed the parcel to Bones, who took it with a suspicious look. He opened the paper and found a pale gray sweater, trimmed in darker yarn with a silver thread woven in, glinting slightly in the light. He stared at it for a moment before looking up at Jim in surprise.

“Wait, did you make this— yesterday? The whole thing?”

Jim was shifting awkwardly. Bones could tell that this interaction was pushing him very close to exceeding his Jim-Kirk-has-emotions-about-the past limit. “Uh huh. What else did you expect me to do all day? You wouldn’t let me work.”

Bones stood and held the sweater up, looking the finished piece over. “Jim, this is— I don’t know what to say, kid. It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, well, it’s your Christmas present, so don’t complain to me on Christmas morning when I don’t get you anything.”

Bones ignored him. “Thank you, Jim. This is one hell of a present.”

Jim stiffened slightly at that, but quickly forced a smile. “No problem. How did you even know about the whole knitting thing anyway? I never told you about it.”

“Jim, come on. Do you know how many times you’ve babbled drunkenly at me about one thing or another? Have you been sober one Christmas that I’ve known you?”
Jim’s cheeks got hot. He could only imagine what he’d said to Bones, drunk and despondent during their Academy holidays.

“Oh. Right. Well, you’re an asshole, but thanks. I didn’t hate knitting again. I might pick up another couple skeins of yarn at the starbase tomorrow.”

“You’re welcome, Jim.”

An awkward silence descended, which Jim tolerated for about three seconds before saying, “Ok, that’s all. Talk to you later.”

And he slipped away. Bones knew better than to go after him.

The following morning, Spock arrived in the transporter room 2.637 minutes before Colonel Masters and her team were due to beam up.

Jim was already there, leaning on the transporter console and chatting with Mr. Scott. Spock observed his relaxed, casual posture and his lighthearted tone. He mused that if he and Jim were bonded, he would have a better awareness of when Jim was concealing his true emotions. That would be a tremendous asset to command.

Spock mentally shook himself. Why was he thinking about bonding with Jim? That was a hasty and inappropriate idea. Spock dismissed it from his mind.

Jim noticed him and smiled. “Good morning, Mr. Spock. Ready to receive our guests?”

Spock nodded. “Certainly, Captain.

“They’re ready to beam, sir,” said Mr. Scott, “A bit early.”

“Thank you, Scotty. Energize.”

Five officers materialized, including a stern-looking young woman with curly black hair that was perhaps attempting to be unruly, but which had been securely tied back. She stepped off the transporter pad and held her hand out to shake Jim’s.

“Captain Kirk. I’m Colonel Masters of the Federation of Planets. Thank you for assisting us in this mission.”

“My pleasure, Colonel,” Jim said with an easy smile. His statement could not have been farther from the truth, but Colonel Masters was obviously convinced and gave a satisfied nod. Her team assembled behind her and she rattled off their names, Jim flashing his warm grin and sympathetic eyes on each of them in turn.

Jim introduced Spock and led the way out of the transporter room. “Mr. Spock and I will show you to your quarters, and then we have to return to the bridge to oversee the supplies transfer from the Starbase. We should be leaving in a few hours.”

As they walked, Colonel Masters outlined their projected schedule of beam-downs to the surface of Tarsus IV. Spock watched Jim carefully, but his face revealed nothing of the anxiety he was almost certainly feeling.

When they reached the guest cabins, Spock and Jim helped the investigative team get settled, and
were about to leave for the bridge when Colonel Masters said, “Captain Kirk, I understand that you
yourself were present for the Tarsus famine.”

Jim froze like a trapped animal. Spock had to resist the urge to touch him, to reassure him somehow.

“Yes, Colonel. That’s correct.”

“That’s fortuitous,” said the colonel emotionlessly. Jim twitched slightly. “We are conducting
interviews with survivors, especially those who were affiliated with Starfleet at the time of the
famine. Would you be able to reserve a few hours for us before we arrive on the planet?”

Jim stared at her but seemed unable to answer, and she raised her eyebrows as the silence became
increasingly awkward. Spock gave up trying to resist and put a hand on Jim’s shoulder. “Captain
Kirk will not be available in that capacity before we arrive at Tarsus IV. We will reevaluate his
schedule once we reach our destination. We must currently return to the bridge. If you need
anything, Colonel, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Without waiting for an answer, he steered Jim out of the guest quarters and into the hall. Jim was
silent until they were inside a turbolift, where he shook off Spock’s hand and snapped their
destination at the computer.

“Thanks,” he muttered, not looking at Spock.

“Of course, Captain.”

“Great captaining—freezing up in front of a fucking Federation detective. Captain fuck-up, reporting
for duty.”

“Is there any possibility I could dissuade you from using such self-deprecating terminology?”

“It’s not self-deprecating if it’s true.” Suddenly Jim reached out and stopped the lift, his eyes sharp on
Spock’s face.

“Let’s take a detour.”

“Captain, we are due on the bridge.”

Jim grinned, although his eyes were still dark and angry. “Fine. We’ll do it here.”

“Do what, Capt—Jim!”

Jim had fallen to his knees and was quickly undoing Spock’s uniform pants.

“Jim!” Spock hissed. “We absolutely cannot—”

But Jim had already put his hot mouth around Spock’s sheath, and was running his tongue just inside
it, against the sensitive glans. Spock whimpered in spite of himself and had to lean against the wall of
the turbolift. Blood rushed to fill his cock and Jim chuckled around him, causing Spock to gasp and
grab a fistful of Jim’s hair in each hand.

Spock was beginning to realize that Jim was an incredibly volatile sexual partner. He comforted
himself with impulsive sex, he used sex to forget the things he should be confronting, he was a
sudden wildfire that was out of control before anyone had even noticed it. Spock was aware that it
was highly illogical to be attracted to such behavior, but as he looked down at Jim—command gold
glittering under the ship’s bright lights—sucking his cock in such an audacious, submissive pose,
Spock was certain he had never been so ignited by anyone.

He ran his hands through Jim’s soft hair, and Jim looked up at him, his flashing blue eyes fixed firmly on Spock’s. Jim’s sexuality was so brazen, his desire shooting straight into Spock through the touch of his lips.

With one finger, Spock stroked Jim’s cheek, his ear, his mouth as it pumped up and down. Jim reached up and tangled his hand in Spock’s, and the feeling of their fingers rubbing together pushed Spock over the edge. He clutched Jim’s head and tried to be as quiet as possible, but even hearing his own strangled gasps, the knowledge that he was coming in Jim’s mouth in a turbolift—while on duty—fed the fire burning in his whole body.

Jim hummed around him until Spock slumped back, entirely spent. Jim gently extracted Spock and grinned up at him, smugly wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Jim fastened Spock’s pants for him and then stood up. “Bridge!” he said cheerfully, and the turbolift resumed.

“Jim– I– are we really just going to—”

Jim smiled at him. “Of course, Mr. Spock. We’re due on the bridge. You might want to neaten up a little—you look kind of rumpled.”

Spock straightened and weakly tugged his shirt into place, trying to give Jim a look of perfect expressionless disdain, but Jim only grinned harder. As the turbolift opened, he leaned over and said in Spock’s ear, “Now that’s the kind of fantasy I usually have on the bridge,” and swept toward his Captain’s chair, leaving Spock to call on every Vulcan reserve in order to force all emotion from his face.

Three hours later, the supplies from the starbase were almost entirely loaded, Jim had made a quick (and secret) run to the surface for yarn, and the departure for Tarsus was imminent. Jim was anxious and fidgety, all satisfied distraction from the turbolift blowjob long gone.

“Mr. Spock, report,” he said, for the fifth time in the past hour.

“There’s the same report you gave fifteen minutes ago, sir.” Jim watched Sulu and Chekov exchange another confused glance at Spock’s continued patience.

“Spock nodded and as Jim wandered back to his seat, spoke to the crew overseeing the loading operations. Over his shoulder he said, “Apparently the animal handler is struggling to get the reindeer aboard, Captain.”

Jim swiveled his chair sharply in Spock’s direction. “What reindeer?”

“Lieutenant Sulu and Ensign Chekov requested that live animals be brought aboard for the Christmas season.”
Jim turned to the two officers in shock. They both were suddenly occupied by the buttons on their stations. Jim turned back to Spock, his eyes as wide as saucers.

“And you allowed that?”

Spock met his stare with no hint of apology. “It was not against regulations, Captain. Interactions with live animals are considered healthy for persons serving on deep-space missions; thus there are specific regulations regarding their presence on starships.”

Jim let his head fall back in exasperation. “Jesus Christ. So there are two actual, living reindeers on my ship?”

“Well, not technically, sir. The reindeers are currently refusing to board. There are actual, living sheep, goats, and llamas on your ship.” Jim’s head snapped back down.

“What? Are you seri—”

But Chekov interrupted him with an excitement he could obviously not control. “Ze complete Santa’s Menagerie was approved, Mr. Spock?”

“Yes, Ensign.”

Chekov and Sulu high-fived. Jim put his suddenly aching head in his hands and was thinking about coming Bones for a painkiller when Spock announced, “All animals have been loaded, Captain, as have all other supplies. We are ready for departure.”

Jim felt like a stone had been dropped into the pit of his stomach. But he took a deep breath, lifted his head from his hands and said, “Mr. Sulu, ahead warp factor six. Proceed to Tarsus IV.”

“Aye, sir.”

The normal beeps and buzzes and hums of the ship preparing to warp became unusually loud in Jim’s ears, too loud. It made his ears hurt, made his headache spike into a nauseating pounding.

But he stared straight out the viewscreen as the stars were whipped into blazing white lines. He was vaguely aware that Spock had come to stand at his shoulder, but he wasn’t sure if that made him feel better or worse.

“Warp six achieved, Captain,” said Sulu brightly, oblivious.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr. Spock, you have the con.” Jim stood and wouldn’t make eye contact with Spock as he entered the turbolift, although he could feel Spock staring at him. Everything still felt too bright, too loud, the floor too firm under his feet, like it was trying to push back at him. He couldn’t handle Spock right now, Spock who was already so intense, who electrified Jim’s skin like lightning on the water.

- -

After his shift ended, Spock approached Jim’s quarters tentatively through their shared bathroom. Jim’s door was unlocked and he slipped inside without buzzing for entry.

He found Jim in bed, sleeping in his uniform, his knitting lying on his stomach as if he had fallen asleep without meaning to. Spock noticed that the gray sweater was gone, replaced by something with many strands of yarn that appeared to be forming a red and green plaid.
Spock gently picked up the knitting and rested it on Jim’s dresser. He neatened the blankets that were bunched at the end of the bed and tucked them around Jim’s shoulders. After he had completed his nightly meditation and grooming, he crawled into bed with Jim to complete his paperwork.

At some point late in the night, Spock was distracted from his PADD when Jim seemed to wake, but his eyes were glassy and Spock suspected he was still dreaming. He reached out and pushed Jim’s hair back from his forehead.

“Sleep, Jim,” he murmured. “I am here.” And Jim’s eyes drifted shut again.

- -

They arrived at Tarsus IV the next day. Starfleet had ordered Jim to beam down with Colonel Masters and her team in addition to the Enterprise security party, at least for the first trip to the surface. Naturally, both Spock and McCoy insisted on going down as well.

As they assembled in the transporter room, Spock hovered at Jim’s shoulder, searching his face and body for signs of impending emotional collapse. McCoy was taking an even less subtle approach, scanning Jim with his tricorder whenever Jim turned away.

Jim was expressionless, his eyes distant. When required, he spoke to Colonel Masters and to the officer manning the transporter, but he was otherwise silent.

Spock noticed that the belt which held Jim’s phaser and communicator was improperly buckled and falling off. “Captain, your belt.”

“Mnhm.” Jim nodded, not looking at him. It was clear that he wasn’t actually listening.

“Captain?”

When he received no response, Spock gave up and reached out to fix Jim’s belt himself. Jim started to lean toward him, as if drawn by his body heat or some other sign of his presence, but quickly caught himself. He finally noticed what Spock was doing.

“Oh. Thank you, Mr. Spock.”

“Of course, Captain.” Spock inclined his head close to Jim’s, and spoke so that only he could hear. “You do not have to do this, Jim. If it is too much, we can invent an excuse for you now and deal with the particulars later.”

Jim shook his head. “I’m not backing out of my duty. If this was any other protective mission I wouldn’t dream of letting anyone down to the planet without me until I knew it was safe. I’m not going to compromise my standards for this. And I need to go down. We might have to come back here any number of times. I need to get this over with.”

“Very well,” said Spock softly. “Please allow me to assist in any way possible.”

Jim looked down and started to say something, thought better of it, then seemed to muster his resolve. “Just– just stay with me, ok?”

“Always, Jim.”

That made Jim look at him. A faint smile began to lift his mouth, but then the lieutenant at the controls announced, “Ready for beam-down, Captain,” and Jim’s face shuttered up. He climbed the transporter pad as if it was a gallows, and stared resolutely at nothing until everyone was in place.
“Energize,” he said, and the floor beneath their feet fell away.

The smell hit Jim before his atoms were entirely united, and it nearly drove him to his knees. It was exactly the same as it had been that first day long ago, stepping off the shuttle into the chilly sunshine and the smell of grain. Others smells followed later, rotting, stinking, dying smells, but not that first day.

They finished materializing and Jim stumbled, Spock’s hand shooting out to catch him. Memories Jim didn’t know he had were flooding back—the quality of the air, the tint of the light, the unusual sound of an insect that thrived in the Tarsus winter. It had died off with the plants and the last weeks on the colony were silent.

Jim shook himself free of Spock’s hand, aware that Colonel Masters was watching him skeptically. He focused on the spot between her eyebrows and didn’t let his eyes so much as shiver in any direction.

“Colonel, please proceed. My security team has their orders to shadow you, and we all have a copy of your itinerary. I will join you shortly—I am accessible by communicator.”

Colonel Masters nodded slowly, still scrutinizing him. “Thank you, Captain.” She and her team walked past him, the security detail following. That meant it was behind him, then.

Assured that the colony was at his back, Jim allowed himself to look out at the expanse of uninhabited hills and fields before him. He had looked out at this vista innumerable times, and for several moments he forgot that he was grown up, that he wasn’t still fourteen and brash—scared—all of the horror still to happen.

But then Spock stepped up beside him and took his hand. He curled his fingers securely in Jim’s, and this uncharacteristic action, this overt and human display of affection, broke Jim from his revery. He looked into Spock’s confident face. He had taken control.

“The colony site is in the other direction, Captain. Would you like to turn around, or would you prefer to wait?”

“N-No. I want to look.”

He dropped Spock’s hand and turned around, zeroing in on the retreating investigative and security teams before allowing his eyes to wander. The buildings were where he remembered, the town hall, the recreation center, the handful of shops in the town square. There was the fountain shaped like an ugly bird—the one he had laughed at with some of the younger kids—now dry and empty. Just over a ridge he could see a corner of the school building where he had attended his Starfleet-sponsored classes, and he knew that beside it, out of view, was the dormitory where he had lived. Stretching into the distance were the rest of the colony’s houses and outbuildings, the rows and rows of grain silos.

It was all starting to crumble now. And it was so still, no hum of people, but as Jim looked closer, recognized more and more, his memories filled the empty streets with ghosts. There was the grocery where the first riot had started. There was the clinic where they had lined up for bread on Christmas Day, before anyone realized how bad things were. There was the general store Jim had broken into to steal supplies the night he escaped to the forest with the kids. And there was the warehouse where Kodos had given his speech and murdered 4,000 people.
“Jim?” The whirring of Bones’s tricorder brought him back to the present. “We can go back to the ship if you want. Spock can stay down here and make sure it’s safe.”

Jim waved him away. “I’m not going back to the ship. And stop scanning me, will you? Spock, have you taken any readings?”

“Affirmative, Captain. All lifesigns detected belong to the investigative team or to our crew. I detect no environmental dangers, but will need to scan in the colony site for more accurate readings.”

Jim nodded. “Alright, then. Let’s go.”

They moved down into the abandoned site. Jim was lightheaded and waves of panic kept breaking over him, but he refused to be taken down by his ridiculous weakness. Spock took a step closer to him as they walked, close enough that Jim could feel the heat of his inhuman skin. He was painfully embarrassed that his emotions were on such stark display, and he wanted to tell Spock to get lost, but he was pretty sure that he wouldn’t still be holding it together without him. Jim had become disturbingly dependant on his first officer… friend… fuckbuddy… definitely-more-than-a-fuckbuddy… or whatever the hell he was.

They met up with Colonel Masters, who had made a beeline for the warehouse and was taking holos of the interior. Although it was the heart of the Tarsus disaster, this wasn’t the most disturbing place for Jim. He and the kids were already in the woods by the time Kodos had handed down his sentence. They hadn’t been anywhere near the colony’s town center, let alone the warehouse itself. He knew the 4,000 bodies had been kept there after they were murdered, but he hadn’t seen them. The Starfleet officers had tried to shield them from the worst of the carnage while they were being evacuated, as if they hadn’t already seen a lot of it, seen too much for a lifetime.

Colonel Masters heard them come in and looked up. “Ah, Captain. What have you determined about the safety of the site?”

As Jim relayed Spock’s report, he glanced over at him and found those intense Vulcan eyes already boring into him. He jumped slightly. Fuck, this thing with Spock was weird. “Mr. Spock, did you want to proceed through the colony and take further readings?”

“Yes, Captain. Are you… available to accompany me?”

He and Jim stared at each other for a few moments, wordlessly untangling the conversation they were actually having underneath their formal officers’ exchange. Did Jim want to stay here, protected from most of the colony but alone, or did he want to have to face his memories in order to stay with Spock?

“Yes, Mr. Spock. I’ll accompany you.”

Bones was looking back and forth between the two of them, his eyes narrowed. Well, that didn’t take very long, Jim thought as they headed for the door. Bones tugged on Jim’s arm to make him fall a few steps behind.

“What’s going on with you and Spock?”

“Nothing,” Jim said, trying to catch up, but Bones held him back.

“Damnit, Jim, I’m a doctor, not an idiot.”

Jim gave him a look. “Really? That was a lame one even for you, Bones.”
“Oh, get fucked!”

“Well, as it happens—that’s your answer.” He finally broke free, scurrying to fall into step with Spock. He looked over his shoulder to watch Bones glaring at him in confusion until the meaning of Jim’s words hit him, his face turning apoplectic. Whether he was mad that Jim was fucking his first officer or just that he hadn’t let Bones in on the secret, Jim wasn’t sure, but he almost started laughing.

He didn’t though, because they stepped back into the weak Tarsus sunlight, and he suddenly remembered where he was, that he was standing on that familiar rotted ground listening to the insects of Hell. The momentary reprieve from his trauma made it all the worse when it came crashing back, knocking his breath out of him like a physical blow.

Spock put a hand on his arm. “Captain, are you alright?”

“Get your paws off him, you pointy-eared Casanova.”

“Doctor, I fail absolutely to understand—”

“Shut up!” Jim shoved Spock’s hand away. “Both of you! Shut up!”

He marched ahead of them, drawing his phaser with the intention of sweeping the buildings and alleyways adjacent to the main square. But he only got about five feet before the sight of the colony stopped him dead. The square was suddenly full of people again, all yelling, a woman clinging to one of Kodos’s guards screaming loudest of all. Everyone was so, so skinny, and Jim was probably hungry, that was probably what this pain was, but he couldn’t remember how it felt to be full. The eyes of at least two guards were sliding over him like searchlights. The guards had food, everyone knew it. Lots of people were willing to pay, but Jim was holding out as long as possible. If he gave his body over, if he traded sex for food, some of the kids—the older ones at least—might do it too. So Jim turned away as the guards looked him over, this pretty blonde kid with such startling blue eyes, so bright in his pale, dirty face.

Jim ducked his head and tried to fade into the crowd—he had two stolen rolls in his pockets, and if he drew too much attention he might not be able to get them to the kids. He needed to get out of the colony and back to the woods as soon as possible, but as he left the square he saw a flash of brass in the corner of his eye—fuck, one of the guards was following him. He would probably have to hide—around that corner? No, that was a dead end. In that door? That door up ahead? No, it was too far, too far, Jim could hear the rattle of the guard’s phaser against the buttons of his coat, Jim wasn’t going to make it, the kids needed the bread, maybe just this once he would do it, if he could be tempting enough, distracting enough, maybe the guard wouldn’t notice the bread, Jim could make himself useful—

“JIM!”

The crowd of people, the narrow street with the too-far-away door, the chaotic shouting—it all fell away like water turning suddenly into steam. Jim looked around, confused. Bones was holding his upper arms. Spock was at the doctor’s shoulder, doing a terrible job of hiding the worry on his face.

Bones shook him gently. “You back with us, kid?”

Jim swallowed. He was almost hyperventilating, and his body was shivering. His stomach ached with hunger. He nodded shakily.

“Yeah. You guys win. I’m going back to the ship. Spock, you’re responsible for confirming the
safety of the rest of the colony and commanding the security officers.”

“Yes, Captain. As soon as I am satisfied with the conditions here, I will return to the ship to ascer
tain your status.”


Bones tightened his grip. “No way. I’m going up with you and I want you in sickbay—”

But Jim tore himself away, shielding his face with his arms. “No! I don’t want to go there, no no
NO!”

Bones threw up his hands. “Ok! Jim, ok! You don’t have to come to sickbay! It’s ok, Jim!”

Jim slowly lowered his arms. He couldn’t look at either of them. Everything felt too close, too much.
He needed to get away. Before he could collect himself enough to request beam-up, he heard Spock
flip open his communicator and say, “Enterprise, please beam up Captain Kirk.”

Jim heard someone say “Aye, sir,” as if from a great distance, and he started to break apart,
evaporating like the rest of the starving and the damned.

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It was a few hours before Jim heard his door open. Vaguely he registered that Spock had completely
stopped asking for permission to enter.

Jim was on the couch in his sweats, almost done with the body of Scotty’s tartan sweater. He had
four balls of yarn in different shades of red and green going at once. Jim realized he had been saying
the stitches to himself as he made them for quite some time. His mind stuttered as it tried to shift
focus to Spock as he took a seat beside him.

Jim let the needles fall onto the couch and rubbed his hands over his face, his head. “Everything ok
down there?”

“Yes, Captain. The mission is proceeding as planned, and Colonel Masters is pleased with her team’s
progress.”

“Good. Thanks for taking over. Sorry I—”

“If you are going to apologize for your behavior on the surface, please cease immediately. It is
becoming most unpleasant for me to hear you spoken of in a defamatory manner, and I find that I
enjoy it the least from you.”

Jim raised his eyebrows and shrank into himself a little. “Um, ok.”

Spock reached out and lifted Jim’s knitting, placing it on the coffee table. Jim watched him warily,
but all Spock did was use the free space to shift closer and trail his fingers up Jim’s scalp until Jim
felt tingly and sleepy.

After a few silent minutes, Jim found himself curled up with his head on Spock’s shoulder, Spock’s
hand in his hair, the fingers of his free hand interlocked with Jim’s, a gesture he realized was
startlingly intimate for a Vulcan.

This wasn’t sex. This was way more than sex.

He was sort of settling into the idea of being with Spock, really with him—partners, boyfriends,
whatever. He’d never made that kind of commitment before, but Spock had seen the darkest parts of him—was watching them spill out right now, in fact—and he kept coming back to Jim anyway. What would that feel like, being with someone he wasn’t running from, who wasn’t running from him?

“Jim,” Spock asked softly, and Jim was feeling fuzzy and way better than he had expected to tonight, “Have you eaten today?”

All the sweet, lazy, maybe-this-is-the-real-thing anticipation blasted out of him, like Spock’s words were an old-fashioned bullet going in and then out again, taking all the good stuff with it.

Jim scurried away to the corner of the couch. In some dim, judgemental part of his mind, he could see that he was acting like an animal, a freak—but that was how it had been on Tarsus in the end, and today he was having trouble keeping the past separate from the present.

Spock watched him evenly. “If you have not, Jim, I will sit with you while you consume a small amount of food.”

Jim started shaking his head. He didn’t want to think about food. He just didn’t want to think about it. “N-no,” he said, “I’m good. I’m fine. I don’t want anything right now, I really don’t, and it’s better to save our resources anyway—”

Spock reached out and put a hand on Jim’s knee. “There is an indefinite amount of food on the ship, and even were our replicators to fail, we are currently within a day’s travel of four planets which could provide aid. If you do not consume a minimum amount of calories, you will be unable to grapple with your current emotional state. Furthermore, experiencing hunger would most likely be a powerful traumatic trigger.”

Jim felt his chest rise and fall against his thighs where he was crushing them against his body. "I'm already triggered," he whispered.

Pity flashed briefly across Spock’s face. “I know, Jim.” He rubbed his thumb against Jim’s knee. “I am going to obtain a small amount of porridge, which you are going to eat.”

He rose from the couch and disappeared from Jim’s view as he went to the replicator. The clenching pain in Jim’s stomach was intense, but pain was good. Pain was life, and it was all Jim knew for so long after Tarsus. He didn’t want to give it up, he couldn’t. He needed his pain.

When Spock came back with a small bowl, Jim tried to get up as soon as he caught sight of the bland white cereal, but Spock’s hand shot out and gripped Jim’s arm, pulling him back with Vulcan strength.

Spock held out the bowl. “No, I can’t,” said Jim, digging his nails into his scalp and scratching hard until he felt the skin start to tear. “Please, Spock, don’t make me.”

Spock put the bowl down and pulled Jim’s hands away, bringing them to his mouth. Against Jim’s fingers he said, “Hush. I am here, and you are safe. I am going to make your decisions now.” He picked up the bowl and put it in Jim’s lap. “Take one bite.”

Jim raised the spoon with a shaking hand and ate a tiny bit. The porridge was disgusting on his tongue, and the feeling of it moving in his throat was enough to make him want to throw up, but he forced it down.

“Good,” Spock said. “Another, please.”
They continued in this manner until Jim had eaten the whole bowl. When it was empty, he sat with it in his hands for a moment before flinging it across the room to clang off the bulkhead. Spock didn’t even blink.

They sat in the thick atmosphere of Jim’s rage for what felt like forever. He wanted Spock to leave, to be uncomfortable, to see this fucked-up situation for what it was and realize that he wanted nothing to do with Jim. But he just sat there with his hands neatly folded, his face placid, and waited.

“What are you doing here?” Jim finally growled, his whole body coiled too tight.

“I am sitting with you through whatever emotional state you may experience. I will continue doing this until I am required by duty to leave, in an attempt to demonstrate that I do not share your negative opinion of yourself, nor will I be driven away by any of your behaviors.”

Jim hated Spock. He hated his genius, and his empathy, and his patience. He hated him. And if there was one thing Jim was really good at, one thing he could give himself credit for, it was hate-fucking. Hate-fucking people until they hated him too. Here was a challenge he could accept, a battle he could win.

Jim stood and started taking off his pants, holding Spock’s eyes the whole time—let Spock see how much of a slut he was, see that he had fucked too many people to be even remotely demure.

Spock stared back, unmoved.

“I will not engage in sexual activity with you at this time.”

Jim let his pants and briefs fall to the floor. “Oh yeah?” he said. His cock was already hard, bobbing eagerly with no awareness of Jim’s intention to use it to drive Spock away. He started jerking himself with one hand, opening his lips and lowering his eyelids. He knew he looked good enough to make Spock forget how frail and scared he had been a mere minute ago.

Spock didn’t fall for it. He kept looking impassively at Jim’s face. “You desire copulation because it is your preferred method for deflecting difficult emotions and avoiding deep personal connection with others. I will no longer participate in this behavior.”

And there it was. Jim hadn’t even needed the hate fuck—Spock was done with him already. Apparently having to force feed his superior officer wasn’t on Spock’s list of turn-ons. Jim could hardly blame him.

He nodded, yanked his clothes back on. “I think we’re done here, Mr. Spock.”

He snatched up his knitting and his communicator and made to disappear into the bedroom, but at the last second changed his mind and wheeled out the door. He needed to move, he needed to breathe. Let Spock leave whenever he wanted. Jim didn’t want to be there to see it.

Jim found himself in one of the botanical gardens, the lights dim for ship’s night. He wanted to knit some more—saying the stitches to himself as he went kept his mind distracted. He just wanted to stop thinking.

As he wandered around looking for a good bench, he became aware of the smell of hay and remembered the ridiculous Santa’s Menagerie. This must have been where Spock had arranged to have the animals housed.
He followed the unmistakable sounds of sighing and huffing animals until he came around a corner and found the menagerie, a large, clean pen where various animals were sleeping or wandering lazily around. The whole thing was decorated to look like one of Santa’s workshops, a miniature gingerbread house painted red and white, with an open area in front to give the animals space to move. It was enclosed with a picket fence, and strands of colored lights traced the frame of the house and the pen.

Given their almost disturbing enthusiasm, Jim would have expected Chekov and Sulu’s decorations to be tacky and over-the-top, but he had to admit that the menagerie was beautiful. In the low light, it gave off an especially warm glow, and there was something comforting about the slow, lumbering noises of the animals in the otherwise silent garden. The hay lining the floor of their enclosure was fresh and almost white, certainly not an Earth variety, and it looked undeniably like snow.

Jim stood staring at the little house for a long time, holding his knitting against his chest. This felt like something out of his childhood, something Grandpa would have taken him to see. Grandpa was more on his mind now than he had been in a long time, and it hurt. Everything he felt about Tarsus, and Grandpa Tiberius, and the intersection of the two was so sharp and unforgiving. He was just so sad. God, he hated being sad. Angry was easy, but when he was sad it felt like his skin fit wrong.

Jim put his knitting on the wide lip of a nearby flowerpot. He stood at the fence for a while and watched the animals, holding out his hand in the hopes of enticing one over so he could pet it. None of them was interested.

Finally Jim muttered, “Fuck this. I’m the Captain.” He found the door that the animal handlers used to go in and out, put in his override code, and entered the little house at the back of the Menagerie. He found himself in a small shed full of supplies, and another door led him into the animal pen. A few sheep huddled together in a corner raised their heads to look at him, but none of the animals seemed disturbed by his presence. He picked up a handful of livestock feed from one of the troughs and slowly approached a reindeer, holding out his hand. It was a big, impressive animal with a full set of velvety antlers. He snuffled curiously at Jim’s hand and nibbled at the offered feed. His fuzzy lips and snout tickled, and Jim found himself smiling despite himself.

Even after he had finished the pellets in Jim’s hand, the reindeer hung around and let Jim scratch his ears and pet his head and muzzle. He reared his head and puffed air through his nostrils in a gesture Jim recognized as playful, and Jim patted his flanks roughly in answer, which seemed to amuse the reindeer enough to make him toss his head again. Eventually, without really thinking about it, Jim put his arms around the animal’s neck and buried his face in the soft fur there. He smelled so familiar to Jim, although his farmboy hunting days were long behind him. The reindeer let him stay there for a long time, almost like he understood that Jim needed it, before gently shaking him off and going for a drink of water.

Jim petted a few more of the animals and quietly left the enclosure. He picked up Scotty’s sweater and settled against the picket fence. For an unmeasured amount of time he knitted by the light of the menagerie, chanting the stitches to himself until his mind was calm and still.

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Scotty was always the first to arrive in Engineering—if he had managed to leave at all the night before. So he was more than a little surprised when he wandered in before the lights had come up for ship’s day to find a large parcel waiting on his desk. Someone must have slipped in during the four hours of sleep he had stolen in his cabin. It made Scotty uncomfortable and suspicious—he kept this ship afloat and he knew all too well how easy it would be for someone to sabotage an engine or cause some other problem even he couldn’t fix.
But this was obviously a Christmas present, and it being December it seemed reasonable enough that
the parcel was what it appeared to be. Maybe it was from Nyota. There was no card, but the paper
was green and covered with thistles, a red bow tied clumsily around the middle.

When Scotty opened the paper, he found a beautifully tailored plaid jumper, knit in the Scott family
tartan. The accuracy of the pattern was spot-on, and three brass buttons gleamed at the collar. There
was no company tag, and Scotty could only assume it was handmade.

He looked around, half expecting someone to jump out of the shadows and reveal themself as the
secret Santa. But Engineering was entirely still—and cold, as it always was. Scotty pulled the jumper
over his head and ran his hands over the soft tweed fabric. It was such a lovely, thoughtful gift. Why
would someone give it to him in secret?

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For the next two days, Spock beamed down to the surface of Tarsus IV and Jim stayed on the ship.
Jim wasn’t talking to him, and Spock had decided to give him the space he appeared to need. He
knew that it was difficult for Jim to be open with his emotions, and he was obviously uniquely suited
to understand the embarrassment of laying oneself bare to another. He hoped that he had adequately
conveyed his commitment to helping Jim through this mission, even if that meant stepping back
when, Spock had to admit, his desire was to stay as close to Jim as possible. Even on duty, he ached
to touch Jim’s arm, or drag his fingers over Jim’s scalp in the manner he seemed to find so pleasing.
It was most distracting.

But for now, Spock held back. He performed his own duties and as many of Jim’s as possible, and
made certain that as long as Jim needed to stay away from the surface, Spock was available to go in
his stead.

Colonel Masters had attempted to schedule time to interview the Captain four times, but Spock
consistently deflected her. It was clear that she was becoming frustrated, but she had not pushed the
issue further. Spock theorized that, despite her stern exterior, she was well aware of the trauma
suffered by the victims of Tarsus IV. She had likely surmised the reason for the Captain’s erratic
behavior, although perhaps not for Spock’s immovable protectiveness.

On the fourth day of the mission, the senior officers gathered in a briefing room with Colonel
Masters for a progress report. Spock took a seat next to Jim as he always did, but this time he felt Jim
stiffen.

“Good morning,” said Colonel Masters. “As you know, the purpose of this mission has been to
gather data on the surface of Tarsus IV to be included in the Federation investigation of Starfleet’s
response to the famine and massacre of 2247.

My team has made good progress, and has encountered less deterioration of colony sites than we had
originally predicted. The evidence we are gathering includes holo-images of the colony and
surrounding areas; samples of soil, flora, fauna, debris, and building materials; updated schematics of
the colony layout to compare with those gathered by Starfleet in 2247; biological remains; healthy
grain samples to compare with those infected by the fungus and now held in storage; and any
remaining possessions abandoned by the colonists.

We have not discovered any native threats such as wildlife, nor have we encountered any situation
that would suggest illegal, nefarious, or political activity by an outside party. I estimate that we will
need a further three days to complete this part of our investigation. Are there any questions?”

There were several, none of them from the Captain. Spock took detailed notes and asked five
clarification questions of his own, assuming he would again be beaming down for Jim. When all questions had been asked, however, Colonel Masters turned to Jim and said, “Captain Kirk, I am formally requesting your presence on the planet today. You may be aware of areas in the colony that we have not found, and time is running out for us to thoroughly investigate them. I would very much appreciate your cooperation.”

Jim stared at her in silence. Spock noticed that Dr. McCoy was now watching the Captain intently, clearly ready to spring into action if necessary. Under the table, Spock reached out and took Jim’s hand, but Jim jumped and looked at Spock in surprise, gently pulling his hand away.

He turned back to Masters, his face blank. “Of course, Colonel. I’ll be there.”

“Excellent. All that remains—”

Jim stood up and started for the door, interrupting her. “My apologies, Colonel Masters. I’ll meet you on the surface.”

He left without giving her time to respond. Colonel Masters did not seem confused or disturbed, supporting Spock’s theory regarding her awareness of the Captain’s current state of mind.

Spock exchanged a look with Dr. McCoy before tuning back in to the end of Colonel Masters's report. It was imperative that he be aware of all requirements of the away mission, as it would be difficult enough for Jim to perform the tasks expected of him, let alone any others.

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Jim sat with his back against his doors, clicking away at the sweater he had started for Uhura two days ago. He was trying to say the stitches to himself, but his mind kept drifting.

Jim had been avoiding Spock since he had managed to convince him of how damaged he really was. Spock undoubtedly didn’t want to be around Jim anyway, but the fact was that Jim didn’t trust himself. All he wanted was to curl up in Spock’s arms and have Spock rub his head that way that he liked so much.

On the other hand, he was infinitely relieved that Spock was no longer seeing this emotional freakout he was having over the Tarsus mission, especially now that Masters wanted him down on the surface. The knowledge that Spock would not be Jim’s emotional support today was both comforting and terrifying. Jim wasn’t sure he could do it. He wasn’t sure he could conduct a tour of that place, the landscape of his nightmares, as if he was casually showing someone around the Enterprise or the Academy.

But he would have to, and somehow he would have to keep his anxiety hidden from Spock.

Why had Spock taken his hand under the table, though?

Jim realized he had stopped chanting the stitches again and drew his mind back.

Knit two, purl two, knit two, purl two…

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Jim had prepared himself for the sensory overload of materializing on Tarsus, and this time he managed to stay still and keep his face expressionless as the landing party appeared around him.

He had reviewed the sites already investigated by Colonel Masters and her team, but he hadn’t been
able to think about anything beyond that. Coming up with an organized, professional list of places he had frequented on Tarsus, particularly the ones where the worst stuff had taken place, was so ridiculous he couldn’t even focus on it.

Colonel Masters and her team headed into the colony without preamble, followed by Spock and the *Enterprise* security party. Jim took a few deep breaths, trying to prepare himself, but Masters turned to look for him and he hurried to catch up.

“Where would you suggest we start, Captain?” she asked. Jim stared at the ground as they proceeded and hoped he didn’t walk into anything. He wasn’t ready to look around yet—he wanted to avoid a flashback for as long as humanly possible.

“Um, I… hadn’t really decided yet… but, um, there were hiding places… a few of them… where people were hoarding food or just trying to stay out of sight. I… lived in the woods with a group of kids for a few weeks.”

From behind him, Jim felt Spock take a step closer. What was his deal? Was he disgusted by Jim or not? Jim supposed that he still cared about him in a professional capacity, or in a friend capacity or… something? Jim started feeling dizzy—this stuff with Spock was too much on top of everything else.

“Excellent,” Colonel Masters was saying. “Let’s start there.”

Jim finally had to look up and confront the colony site. They were walking through the main square, past the ugly fountain. Colonel Masters hesitated, obviously waiting for him to take the lead. Jim took a deep breath and cut off to the right, toward the borders of the colony.

“It’s a bit of walk,” he said, not looking at anyone in particular, his eyes slipping from one familiar building to the next, each recognition hypnotic and inescapable, like a dream he couldn’t wake up from.

They pressed forward, no one talking much, through the square and the outer neighborhood, past the school and the decaying dormitory that Jim couldn’t bring himself to look at. As they were crossing through a field overgrown with what was now wild grain—wasted, Jim thought—Spock fell into step beside him.

“May I inquire as to your mental status, Jim?”

Jim looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Uh, yeah, sure. I mean—if you want to. If you think it’s important for the running of the ship.”

If Jim didn’t know better, he’d say Spock looked almost confused. “It is, of course. But I am also asking out of personal concern.”

“Why? I thought we were done with that.”

Spock narrowed his eyes. “Done with… my concern for you?”

Jim rubbed his face. “Look, I can’t have this conversation right now, ok? I’m fine. Barely, but I’m fine.”

They had passed the treeline and were now making their way through the threadbare forest. Spock resisted reaching out to take Jim’s hand only by virtue of the large contingent of their crew behind them. “My apologies, Jim. I did not intend to increase your anxiety.”

“It’s fine.” Jim didn’t look at him. “Don’t worry about it. I just need to get through this right now,
“Of course, Jim,” Spock said quietly. Jim had no fucking idea why he was still calling him Jim but he didn’t have space in his brain to think about it. He paused, gathering his bearings. His head was starting to swim a little, remembering how these trees had blurred the many times he had crashed through them, escaping from the colony with food for the kids. He remembered changing direction if someone was still chasing him so that they wouldn’t find the camp, always looking over his shoulder, always so alert that his skin began to hurt from the effort of listening with his whole self.

Jim closed his eyes. He tried to picture Uhura’s sweater—what row was he on? What part of the pattern did he have to do next? Knit two together, purl two together, knit two together, purl two together, knit two–

“Captain Kirk?”

Jim opened his eyes. Colonel Masters was staring at him, but without judgement. Like she understood, but they still needed to get moving. They needed to work. Jim took a breath, his mind slowed down for the time being.

“This way,” he said, and picked up the lead again. It only took him a few more minutes to find the campsite.

Most of the rough stone firepit Jim had made was still there. Thirteen years had passed, and there was a layer of plant growth creeping over the rocks, but they were right where he had left them. So much of the colony was eerily preserved, abandoned so quickly, no time to dismantle it.

Jim stopped in front of the ring of stones. “Here,” he said. “This was where I made fires. Small ones, so they couldn’t see the smoke. Just got the coals hot enough to roast these little animals that we ate.”

Colonel Masters’s team had already started to disperse, various instruments whirring, tapping away at their PADDS, the security team shadowing them. Masters and Jim were alone except, of course, for Spock, who was still doing his weirdly protective thing, his familiar standing-closer-to-the-Captain-than-a-first-officer-should thing, which to Jim seemed pretty inappropriate now.

“Little animals?” Masters asked, opening a document on local Tarsus fauna.

“Yeah,” said Jim. “They were kind of like squirrels, a little bit. Around that size, red fur. They had this kind of… scream that they made when you killed them, and it wasn’t very loud but I was always scared anyway. You know, that someone would hear it. I don’t know what species they were.”

Colonel Masters was busily taking notes. Jim glanced at Spock, who was watching him with those sad, black-brown eyes. Jim looked away awkwardly, running a hand through his hair.

“Is this them?” Masters asked, holding her PADD out to show Jim a picture of the slim little animals. Jim had a sudden, paralyzing memory of coming back through the woods one day to find the ground littered with their small red bodies, their rat-like eyes bulging and their mouths hanging open, gums black from the infected grain they had apparently started eating.

Jim looked up from the PADD and found all the children sitting around the fire, their dirty faces looking hopefully up at him. He had to tell them that the animals were dead. Their main food source was dead—again. The youngest girl had a big smile on her face because Jim usually meant food, but not today, not now.

A hand slipped into his and shook his arm slightly. Jim looked around, expecting to find one of the kids, but instead there was Spock, and suddenly warm waves of affection and security were flowing
into Jim at the juncture of their hands.

“Captain? Does that picture identify the animal you remember?”

Jim turned back to the firepit and the kids were gone. With a small gasp he pulled his hand away and roughly wiped a couple of traitorous tears off his face. Colonel Masters was still holding out her PADD, no expression on her face.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “That’s them.”

Colonel Masters started typing again. “A zortorian treehopper. They’re fast little things—how did you catch them?”

Jim was still staring at the now-empty firepit. “I made a slingshot and I hunted them. I was good at hunting. My grandfather taught me.”

“Jim,” Spock said quietly, forcing him to look away before he had another flashback. “Were there any other parts of this site that were significant?”

Jim looked around, although he didn’t need to. This place—all of these places—were burned in his memory like scars. “Not really. I mean, we just slept on the ground.” He pointed to one tree in particular. “We kept most of our stuff in a bag up in that tree, wrapped in a tarp. One kid was always guarding it, making sure animals didn’t get in. Not that we had a lot, just some clothes we had brought with us, some tools and stuff I had pinched. I can show you the perimeters of where we stayed, but that’s about it.”

He and Colonel Masters went off to mark the boundaries of Jim’s roughshod camp, Spock following at a short distance, keeping an eye out for the ghosts that kept slipping out from Jim’s past.

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It was 2.376 hours later that Spock realized Jim had disappeared. Spock had been conferring with one of the investigators on the best method by which to preserve biological samples collected from the campsite. He had last observed the Captain 15.73 minutes ago, walking with Masters, who was now deep in conversation with several of her staff, Jim nowhere to be seen.

Spock left the woman to whom he had been speaking in the middle of her sentence, striding to Colonel Masters, trying not to panic. “Where is Captain Kirk?” he asked, possibly interrupting her conversation, although he could not be bothered to care.

Colonel Masters glanced briefly around the site. “I don’t know, Commander. I haven’t seen him for a while.”

Spock took off running. He didn’t care if it seemed strange to the crew, or to the contingent from the Federation, or to anyone. He didn’t care if they put the pieces together, if they realized that he had fallen in love with his Captain, and no—he had not admitted that to himself before now.

Spock triangulated Jim’s location on his communicator as he ran, confirming his suspicion that Jim was back in the colony. He crashed through the field of wild grain, the outbuildings, the empty neighborhoods. Jim was in the colony center, at 9.87 degrees Northeast. Spock was very close, but fear pounded in the back of his brain—why had Jim wandered off? Did he have a deliberate goal of self-injury or some other destructive behavior? Or had he lost himself in a flashback again, unaware of his surroundings, alone, unprotected—

Spock skidded to a halt. Jim was sitting against the wall of a building, whole and sound. He looked
up as Spock approached, and though his face was shuttered and detached, he was obviously cogent, as well as uninjured.

Spock marched over to him, still breathing heavily from running. “You will not separate from the group again without informing me,” Spock said, looming over Jim, struggling not to clench his fists in anger. Jim looked up at him, unimpressed.

“Last time I checked I was your superior, Spock. I don’t take orders from you.”

Spock knelt in front of him with more aggression than was strictly necessary. “I am not speaking to you as a fellow officer. I am speaking to you out of the deep regard I hold for you, and my personal need to keep you safe.”

Jim stared back at him. If he was intimidated by the force of Spock’s words or his threateningly close proximity, he was not showing it.

“Spock, you saw me for what I am and you checked out. I can’t blame you for that. But I don’t want you going around telling me what to do. If this is about duty, I give the commands. If it’s not, you have no business in my life.”

Spock sat down hard on the chilly Tarsus ground, staring at Jim like a mathematical proof Spock realized he had gotten completely wrong.

“I have made an error,” he said. “I do not entirely understand this situation, but it seems you have fallen under the misconception that I no longer wish to continue our romantic and sexual relationship. That is not accurate. I feel strongly for you; I wish to be your… I believe you would say ‘boyfriend’?”

Jim’s eyes were guarded, but his face had opened up slightly and Spock easily read the fear and desolation there. “But– but you said you didn’t want to have sex with me anymore. After you had to… force me to eat. I figured… what else could you have meant? Who would want to be with someone as fucked up as me anyway? When I tried to fuck you and you said you didn’t want it—I knew you had seen how disgusting I am. Sexually and mentally and…”

“I do not find you disgusting in any capacity. I no longer wish to engage in the kind of unhealthy sexual behavior you seem to rely on, and which I am sure other partners have been selfishly happy to indulge in. I wish to have sexual relations with you because you find them pleasurable, because you desire me. But do not mistake me, Jim. Whatever we have been building between us, I wish to continue building it.”

Jim was silent for a long time, but the walls of his face were falling down, and two small tears had washed tracks through the sweat and dust on his skin. Spock was 78.3% certain that Jim had not realized this fact, and had no intention of telling him. He reached out his hands, and Jim took them without hesitation, reflexively.

“But, why would you want this? Why would you want a boyfriend who’s in the middle of a breakdown?”

“Jim, we are hardly strangers. I have known you for three years. I have been developing feelings for you through all of your emotional stages, based on my observations of your behavior and my assessment of your overall character. That my regard for you has been revealed in the middle of a traumatic time in your life is of no consequence to me. It remains unchanged.”

Jim was digging his nails into Spock’s palms. Spock suspected this was another action of which he
was unaware. Jim’s voice when he spoke was barely above a whisper. “So why have you been avoiding me?”

“I have not. I was giving you the space I believed that you desired; I see now that I was much mistaken. For that, I am sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize,” Jim said, and Spock noticed he had started to rock back and forth. This conversation needed to end. Spock came to sit against the wall with Jim and put his arms around him, running his fingers up and down Jim’s scalp. Jim slowly relaxed against him.

“Jim, we can discuss the nature of our relationship at a later time, when this mission is over. For now, please know that my stated intentions remain the same: I am going through this with you. Nothing you do or say can drive me away.”

One small sob escaped through Jim’s teeth. Spock tightened his arms and for many minutes—Spock didn’t bother to count—they sat together in silence.

Finally Spock turned to rest his mouth against Jim’s temple. “I repeat my request that you not disappear again.”

“Ok,” Jim muttered. After a pause he said, “This was the clinic.”

Spock looked up at the gray concrete structure. The colony’s buildings were largely indistinguishable from each other, utilitarian and sparse. Spock could make out a faded, chipping red cross that revealed the intended medical purpose of this otherwise featureless facade. He could only imagine what Jim had seen here—a tiny, probably ill-equipped medical center suddenly responsible for the needs of a dying colony.

Spock took a sad breath against Jim’s hair. “We should return to the ship, Jim. You have done what was needed of you today.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, his body limp. “Ok.”

Jim slinks down the dormitory corridor, hoping not to be seen by any of the older boys. After four fistfights—and subsequent detentions—in only three weeks on the colony, Jim is anxious to avoid trouble without seeming like a sissy. So he’s trying to stay invisible.

Once outside the dormitory, Jim pulls his sweatshirt hood up against the chill December air and the stares of any boys hanging around the school building next door. He’s fucking starving—their meals are being rationed while Governor Kodos deals with the grain shortage. One of the replicators is broken or something, and everybody has to cut back a little until it’s fixed. Some of the colonists are freaked out, but most of them aren’t. It’s a colony after all, and a distant one at that. There are bound to be weird setbacks every now and then.

But today is Christmas, and the clinic is giving away bread and candy canes. Jim misses Grandpa and Sam and even his mom more than he cares to admit, especially today, and being hungry doesn’t help.

The city center is decorated with pine boughs and holly berries, and a dry gust of snow is blowing through, trying and failing to accumulate. It’s almost pretty, or it would be if there were some streetlamps lit or even a couple strings of Christmas lights. But whoever’s responsible for decorating the square seems to have half-assed it, or been distracted in the middle of the job.
There’s already a line stretching several buildings back from the clinic. Jim gets in at the end and huddles into his sweatshirt, watching a couple of guys weave around the bird fountain shouting Christmas songs. Although it’s the middle of the day, they’re obviously drunk. It’s not all that strange, though—this is starting to happen more and more as tension mounts in the colony, people drinking up the beer, afraid it’s about to go dry.

But these jerks don’t seem threatening or anything—they’re still in that cheery phase of being drunk, and since it’s kind of the merriest thing the colony has to offer right now, Jim finds himself laughing. They’re shouting so loud Jim can barely make out the words of the song, but he grins as two of the guys link arms and start swinging in a circle, singing,

I wish you a hopeful Christmas  
I wish you a brave new year!  
All anguish pain and sadness  
Leave your heart and let your road be clear!  
They said there’ll be snow at Christmas,  
They said there’ll be peace on earth!  
Hallelujah Noel, be it heaven or hell,  
The Christmas you get, you deserve!

They start laughing at themselves and stumbling over their own feet. The line moves slowly forward and eventually Jim gets his bread and his little candy cane.

He hurries back to his dormitory and wolfs down the bread, crusty and still a little warm, then lies on his bed staring at the ceiling, sucking his candy cane. The other boys are all still out and Jim is alone in the room, so he thinks about calling Grandpa. But he figures a few of the boys will probably come back soon enough, trying to steal somebody else’s bread, and Jim has been steadily lying to Grandpa about getting along with his classmates, lies which would be blown if Grandpa saw him interact with them. As far as Grandpa knows, the other kids like him and Jim even has plans to hang out with one boy for what is maybe a date. None of that is even remotely true. He’ll call Grandpa tomorrow.

Instead, Jim reaches under his bed and pulls out the sweater he has just about finished knitting. There are still yarn ends to weave in, so Jim sets about with a tapestry needle, thinking of how thrilled Grandpa will be when Jim comes home from the colony with this sweater in tow. If Jim can just stay under the radar, stop getting in fights, do ok on his schoolwork, then maybe his return from Tarsus IV will be triumphant—he’ll be a good kid once again who’s knitting like Grandpa taught him, no longer ashamed of being queer, nothing to feel guilty about anymore. Maybe things will start to get better from here.

- -

Spock woke up late that night in Jim’s bed, alone. He sat up, momentarily alarmed as when Jim had disappeared on the surface of Tarsus IV, but he found Jim sitting in the corner near his closet, holding something in his lap.

Spock slipped from under the blankets and sat on the floor across from his silent Captain. “Are you unwell, Jim?”

Jim, who hadn’t looked up, shrugged. “Nah, I’m fine. Just… sad.”

Spock could tell that admitting to such an emotion took great effort on Jim’s part. That he had done so anyway seemed somewhat hopeful.
Jim held out the white-and-red object in his lap. Spock could now see that it was an old button-down sweater; dingy, pilling, full of holes. Spock took it, running his fingers over the well-worn fabric.

“I made this for my Grandpa Tiberius when I was on Tarsus, before the famine hit.”

It was becoming clear to Spock how important this man had been to Jim, and how harrowing his loss. Jim had never before offered information about his grandfather without prompting.

“It must have been a gift of great significance to him,” Spock said carefully, not sure what response Jim was hoping for.

Jim smiled. “Yeah. I think it was. I know it was, I guess. I mean, I held onto it the whole time I was on the colony. He was wearing it when he died. So he must have known how important it was.”

“You did not lose it while hiding in the forest?”

“Nope. I kept it with me all the time. I wore it or kept it in my bag or whatever. Grandpa gave me the sweater yarn right before I left for Tarsus, and these expensive needles. I knitted his sweater on them. I lost the needles somewhere, but I managed to hold onto the sweater. I— I wanted them to find it… you know, if I died. After a while, I didn’t think I was going to make it home, and I really wanted Grandpa to know I’d made the sweater. Knitting had always been this special thing with me and him, but I had stopped a few years before Tarsus. I always felt bad about giving it up. Like I let him down, you know? I told him that, right before I left for the colony, and he gave me this yarn.” Jim reached out and touched the tattered sweater, his eyes far away. “He was really good about it—made sure I knew he wouldn’t be hurt if I didn’t start knitting again, but that I could if I wanted to. And I did want to. So, yeah. It was important that he know… what the knitting meant to me.”

Spock put his hand over Jim’s where it was still resting on the sweater draped across Spock’s knee. “What caused you to stop knitting originally?”

Jim shrugged, his face darkening. “My stepfather said it made me a fag. Once I realized that, you know, I was, I didn’t want to draw any more attention to it. I guess I let my embarrassment get the better of me.”

“Your stepfather berated you because he believed you to be homosexual?”

“Yeah,” Jim laughed quietly. “Really a modern 23rd century guy, right? But I didn’t know how out of touch he was when I was a kid—I just thought he was right. I thought I was disgusting. Grandpa was the first adult who ever told me that there was nothing wrong with being queer.”

Jim put his head in his free hand. “I miss him, Spock. I really miss him.”

“I grieve with thee,” Spock murmured, rubbing Jim’s hand with his thumb.

“Sorry,” Jim said, looking up at the ceiling and trying to subtly wipe tears away, an entirely unsuccessful action. “I know I keep getting all weepy on you, I’m sure it’s totally annoying.”

Spock shook his head in gentle exasperation. “I would like you to know, Captain, that I have made it my personal goal to change your opinion of yourself. You are processing emotions. There is nothing shameful or annoying about experiencing those emotions, and it may serve as a healthy form of release. You have been repressing these feelings for so many years because you believe them to be a burden to others—you have not allowed yourself to feel them and thus let them go.”

“Aren’t you a Vulcan or something? Isn’t emotional repression kind of your thing?”
Spock resisted the urge to roll his eyes. This man was incorrigible. “I am a Vulcan, yes. And you are not. I am capable of understanding human emotions, Jim, especially considering that I too experience them. I miss my mother daily.”

Jim looked up and whispered “Sorry,” but his eyes were still dark and skeptical. Spock leaned forward and kissed him, letting a faint impression of stubbornness and irritation drift in under Jim’s skin. “You have fooled me into abandoning you once, Jim,” he said against Jim’s mouth. “Any subsequent attempts to push me away will fail.”

He drew back to find Jim still glaring at him, but at least he was not trying to escape, physically or mentally. He did not attempt to distract Spock or make light of his own emotions. He was sitting in the midst of his discomfort and tolerating it. Although Spock was certain he did not realize it, Jim was making progress.

“Will you come back to bed, Jim?”

Jim stood up and tucked the sweater carefully into the recesses of his closet.

“I can’t sleep.”

Spock rose gracefully to his feet and settled back into the Captain’s bed. “Perhaps I will need to exhaust you so thoroughly that sleep cannot be avoided.”

Jim ginned reluctantly, standing in his typical on-duty pose, hands on his hips and feet apart—although the effect was diminished somewhat by his untidy hair and his cupcake-patterned boxers.

“We had sex like three hours ago. I still woke up.”

Spock regarded him levelly. “Perhaps I did not try hard enough.”

He watched Jim try and fail to repress a shudder of arousal, and finally his grin spread to its full wattage. Spock crawled to the edge of the bed and reached out, pulling Jim down hard by the arm. Jim tumbled into him, the familiar electric charge flaring up between their mouths. For tonight, at least, Spock was resolved to make his Captain forget.

- -

Uhura all but sleepwalked into her quarters, taking her hair down and her bra off with relief, tossing all of her clothes into a pile without thinking about it.

She had spent the entire day translating various records—both text and sound—related to the Tarsus IV incident. Some were made on the planet by non-standard-speaking colonists, and others were reports from alien ships that had been nearby at the time of the famine and had become aware of what was happening (all of them too late).

Wherever the information had originated, it was consistently disturbing and frequently horrific. Uhura was exhausted and sad; her brain felt hollow and too full at the same time. She poured herself a large tumbler of scotch and drank it in one go, then brushed her teeth and dragged herself to bed.

As she settled into her pillows, she caught sight of the fake little Christmas tree she had on her bedside table. Uhura wasn’t exactly sentimental, but it tended to get kind of lonely on a starship if you didn’t join in the fuss people made about one thing or another. On Earth, Christmas had long since lost its religious significance, but the general themes of celebration and family and friendship had stuck around, and those were the very things that kept people sane on a deep-space mission. Plus, Scotty had given her the tree, so.
But tonight, there was a present sitting under it. Thinking it was from Scotty—nobody else had her codes—Uhura grabbed the package and eagerly ripped it open. She had asked him for an antique copy of the first Earth book on Vulcan language written after first contact. But instead, she found was a sweater. There was absolutely no way in the universe that Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott had gotten her clothes for Christmas.

Who the hell had left this, then? Uhura held the thing up and looked at it skeptically, but she could feel that the fabric was incredibly soft, and the design seemed useful—it was a black ballet sweater that could be wrapped all the way around the back and tied up in front, or worn loose like a shawl with sleeves. She pulled it on and found it to be as warm and comfortable as she had suspected.

Uhura lay back and relaxed into her mattress, the sweater wrapped snugly around her. It had been a shitty day, and even Nyota Uhura needed a cozy sweater once in a while. As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered who could have gotten into her cabin to leave this here. Either someone had asked Scotty for her codes or—

Jim?

Jim declined to go down the planet the following day, a choice which Spock supported with relief. Uhura made a request to beam down as senior officer of the landing party, in order to cross-check some of her translations against colony sites. Thus both Jim and Spock were on their regular bridge duty—the first normal work day they had shared since arriving at Tarsus IV.

Before shift, they had coffee and tea in Spock’s quarters, Jim curled in a corner of the couch knitting yet another new project. Privately, Spock found the green, red, and silver yarn Jim was knitting with to be aesthetically unappealing, but he praised Jim’s impressive speed nonetheless, and Jim grinned into his coffee cup.

They walked to the mess hall together and ate breakfast with Doctor McCoy, whom Jim teased into a good mood. As they rode the turbolift to the bridge together, Jim briefly leaned into Spock, contentment on the surface of his skin, and the warmth of his arm seemed to linger against Spock’s own long after they had separated for their respective work stations.

Spock found himself experiencing an uncommon sense of peacefulness as he worked alongside Jim, who would occasionally catch his eyes and give him a small, secretive smile.

At 1400 hours, Spock left the bridge for a meeting with five of his subordinates in the science department. It was an exceptionally productive meeting and Spock left it feeling quite satisfied, looking forward to returning to the bridge and, admittedly, to Jim. As he neared the turbolift, however, someone called “Commander Spock!” and he turned to find Colonel Masters approaching him.

“May I speak with you, Commander?” She was as serious and composed as ever, but there was an emotion in her eyes that Spock couldn’t name. “Privately?”

Spock recalled his panicked reaction to Jim’s disappearance the previous day, and was momentarily concerned that Colonel Masters wanted to discuss the nature of his relationship with the Captain. But he merely gestured to the nearest conference room and followed Masters in, engaging the privacy locks.

Masters took a seat at the empty conference table, not looking at Spock as he tentatively lowered himself across from her. She set her personal PADD and a data chip between them, then folded her
hands and finally made emotionless eye contact with Spock. He was impressed by her professionalism; rarely had he seen a human so unhindered by emotion, especially on such a difficult mission. In fact, it was a little unsettling, especially as Spock himself was far from logical in the face of Jim’s history on Tarsus IV.

“Mr. Spock, my team and I have access to all files regarding Tarsus IV. As you can imagine, many of them are disorganized. We’ve been reviewing and classifying them so that all evidence regarding the Tarsus IV disaster is properly documented and available.”

At this she looked down, and for a moment fiddled with the data chip sitting on the table. It was the most uncertainty Spock had seen her display, though it was short-lived.

She looked back at Spock and said without inflection, “This morning I found a vid of Captain Kirk that had not been properly labeled, and was thus not included in his file. I’ll be blunt: this footage is hard to watch. I can’t in good conscience not tell him that I have it, and I’m going to relabel it anyway, so it’ll be in his file the next time he looks at it. But I’ve noticed that the Captain is… important to you. I think it would be best if you saw this first and told him about it yourself.”

Spock was momentarily taken aback, mostly by the realization that she had observed his romantic involvement with Jim, but then the reality of what she was saying began to set in. There was disturbing footage of Jim. It had disturbed the imperturbable Colonel Masters. Spock remembered the holo images he had deleted. Vid footage was sure to be much worse.

Colonel Masters held out the data chip, and Spock took it. She gave a small sigh before standing and heading for the doorway, but she paused with her hand on the privacy locks.

“I’ve read the rest of his file,” she said. “Starfleet let him down, there’s no question. Juvenile delinquency and non-cooperation in a teenage trauma patient aren’t good enough reasons to withdraw treatment and aid. They just wanted to wash their hands of the whole thing, and they let him go fester in his own head in the middle of nowhere. It’s pretty remarkable that he made it out of Iowa, let alone to a captain’s chair on a Starfleet flagship. I’m going to make a specific note of it in my report—that what Starfleet did to James Kirk was shameful, that they let down one of their own. I don’t know what will come of it, but I think it should be known.”

Spock was uncertain how to respond—this no-nonsense woman who had been patient, but certainly not empathetic, with Jim as he navigated the Tarsus mission was now showing the respect and understanding Jim had been denied at almost every turn.

“Thank you, Colonel,” Spock finally managed to say. “I appreciate your actions very much.”

She gave him a small smile over her shoulder. “It’s not hard to see why he means so much to you.”

And then she was gone before Spock could think of any appropriate thing to say in response.

- -

5.3 minutes later, Spock was back in his quarters with the data chip in hand. He stood staring at his blank computer for a moment, but decided that hesitation was illogical. Although he was, admittedly, dreading this footage, it would be better to simply watch it and be done with it. But a small part of him knew that he was not going to be done with it, maybe not for a long time, if he remained as close to Jim as he intended. It was the same small part that hoped—that hoped and hoped no matter how much he tried to meditate it away—that he and Jim were moving toward a bond. He could only imagine how disturbed Jim would be if he knew the serious turn Spock’s feelings had taken, but Spock was powerless—his blood wanted a bond, and it wanted Jim.
Spock sat down, slipping the data chip into his computer and staring hard into the vid window that opened and filled the screen. Fourteen-year-old Jim was in the center of the image, sitting at a conference table with two Starfleet officers. He looked as skinny with clothing on as he did in the naked pictures Spock had deleted—his collarbones sharp and cheeks caved in, casting shadows. He was looking down at the table and hunching into himself, as if he was cold. Indeed, he looked up and said, very quietly, “Grandpa, can I have my sweatshirt?”

The weak timbre of his voice left a painful hollow in Spock’s chest. He reinforced his emotional shields.

From out of the frame, a gray-haired man appeared, holding an article of clothing. He was sturdy-looking and had clearly been quite strong once, but his skin and musculature were now softening as was common in ageing humanoids. Tiberius’s face was emotionless, his mouth a hard line, but Spock had spent enough time around Jim to recognize this expression: tightly concealed fury at his own powerlessness to improve the situation at hand.

Jim took the sweatshirt and pulled it on. His right arm became tangled in the sleeve and Jim struggled to free it, suddenly on the brink of tears over something incredibly insignificant. Tiberius reached out and untangled the sleeve, guiding Jim’s arm through it. The garment hung shapelessly on his frail body. Tiberius squeezed Jim’s shoulder before disappearing out of view.

One of the Starfleet officers looked into the camera and said, “Tarsus IV victim testimony, James Tiberius Kirk, age 14. Stardate 2247.49. Commander Marquez,” he indicated himself, “and Commander Emerson gathering testimony.” He looked down at his PADD and continued, “Jim, we’ve already gone over some of this, but we’d like to get your answers on vid. Can you bear with us if we ask you to repeat yourself?” Jim nodded once, and Marquez went on.

“Why were you present on the Tarsus IV colony?”

“I was enrolled in the Starfleet-sponsored Colonial Structured Education Program.”

Compared to when he had spoken to his grandfather, Jim’s voice was now tight and angry, if still very soft. Here was the savage boy who had stared out from Spock’s computer when he first reviewed Jim’s Tarsus files.

“You explained to us yesterday that two weeks prior to the massacre ordered by Governor Kodos, you escaped the colony by establishing a camp in the woods south of the colony center. Why did you decide to do that?”

Jim continued to stare at the table. “There were a few kids whose parents died, and–”

Commander Emerson interrupted him. “How did they die?”

“I don’t know the details. I didn’t exactly give anyone a pop quiz before I helped them get out. I assume their parents starved? Or somebody killed them for food? Or they killed themselves before they starved? Pick one.”

Commander Emerson averted her eyes and started making nervous entries on her PADD.

“Please list the names of the children,” said Commander Marquez, who seemed a little more resilient in the face of Jim’s fury, although he too appeared unsure how to handle this weak, angry young boy.
Jim provided a list of names in a monotone. He paused before the last two and took a shuddering breath, but managed to say them without inflection. Spock assumed they were the two children who had been killed.

“Why did you feel it was necessary to remove these children from the colony?”

“Because everything was turning to shit. People were scared and they were going crazy. We were… easy targets. They were just little kids and I didn’t want to see them get hurt. And I can hunt and camp and stuff. I thought I could—” his voice broke. “I thought I could keep them alive.”

“Can you tell us about the night you encountered governor Kodos? Yesterday you started to tell us, but you were too upset to finish.”

Jim started scratching his head in slow, compulsive strokes. His eyes went wide and distant, staring at nothing. During their current mission, Spock had seen Jim act in a similar manner several times. It was disorienting to see his younger self, this damaged child, behave in such a strikingly similar manner to the adult Spock had so recently taken to bed.

“Jim?” Commander Marquez prompted. Jim did not stop his ritualistic scratching, but he said quietly, “We were out of food. The animals I had been hunting were all dead from eating the grain. We knew about the massacre ‘cause I had been sneaking into the colony to steal food the whole time, so I found out about it. We knew that we had all been on the kill list.”

Here Jim paused. He blinked, and two tears slipped suddenly down his cheeks. When he spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper. “Actually, I wasn’t. I wasn’t on the kill list. I was the only one in the camp who wasn’t, but those kids are a thousand times better than me. I was on Tarsus because I’m a delinquent. Why were all those kids on the list and not me? And Tom and Cecelia—I should be dead instead of them.”

There was a long silence. Clearly neither commander knew what to say. Eventually Tiberius said from somewhere in the room not visible on the vid, “Nobody deserved to die, Jimmy. Including you. Do you want to stop?”

“No,” Jim whispered. He started tugging on his hair again, but Tiberius said, in a voice that was gentle but brooked no argument, “Jimmy. Stop that now.”

Jim lowered his hands and for a moment struggled to keep them down on the table. Finally he took a deep breath and said, “So we knew about the massacre, but we were almost out of food, and our only hope was finding some in the colony. Tom and Cecelia were the oldest besides me so I brought them along. We chose a house, just a random house, because the chances of finding any more food in the colony were basically zero. But we tried, we did our best, I tried to find something for the little kids, but there was nothing. We looked and looked, there was nothing, but we kept looking. We looked over and over. We stayed too long. All of a sudden he was there—Kodos, right in my face. There were other guys, too. Guards. So I ran. It was selfish, but I ran. I looked back and… I saw Tom and Cecelia on the ground outside the house—they had tried to run too but they got caught and they were lying there, and they were dead, and I just kept running, I should have let them kill me too, but I still had a little food hidden back at the camp, I had to give it to the little kids, but—I didn’t want to die, either, I should have wanted to die, but I didn’t, I just ran, I ran, I shouldn’t have run—”

Jim broke off and covered his face with his hands, words dissolving into sobs. In a helpless whine that nearly broke Spock’s heart, he said, “Grandpa!”

Tiberius entered the frame again and all but lifted Jim out of the chair, putting an arm around his shoulders. Jim huddled into him, shaking, sobbing, gasping for air. Seeing him standing was like a
slap to the face—he was nothing but bones shrinkwrapped in skin.

“We’re done for today,” Tiberius said. “And I don’t want you to ask him about Tom and Cecelia again. You’ve gotten what you need from him about that.” He steered Jim out of the frame and after some inaudible muttering between the officers, Commander Marquez stood and the vid ended suddenly.

Spock sat for an uncalculated amount of time, staring at the empty computer screen. He was still frozen there when Jim peered in from the open bathroom door and knocked lightly on the wall.

“Hey, you busy? Mind if I come in?”

Broken from his trance, Spock took a deep breath and mustered a pleasant look. “Of course you may come in, Captain.”

Jim grinned and crossed the room to lean on Spock’s desk, bumping their legs together.

“We’re alone, Spock. Call me Jim.”

Spock reached up and touched his face, reassuring himself of the healthy skin and muscle underneath his fingers. “Jim.”

“You ok?” Jim asked, taking Spock’s hand from his cheek and kissing the tip of his index finger.

“I am currently… disturbed, Jim, and I regret that I must explain the reason. I would prefer not to burden you, but…”

Jim stood up from the desk, immediately suspicious and on guard. “Spit it out, Spock. What’s going on?”

Spock removed the data chip from his computer and held it out. “Colonel Masters has discovered vid footage of your testimony collected immediately after your return from Tarsus IV. It was improperly labeled and not included in your file, but Colonel Masters intends to restore it to its proper location. She requested that I watch the footage and inform you of its existence before you were blindsided by it.”

Jim stared at the data chip for a moment before looking back to Spock. “Did you watch it?”

“I did.”

“Are you… was it just too fucked up? You– you want out of this… thing we have?”

“No, that is not– of course not. Jim…” Spock sighed and touched his forehead briefly. Jim caused such a tempest of emotions and reactions in Spock; occasionally it was exhausting. “I am disturbed because I witnessed first-hand your trauma and physical deterioration. And I am concerned about you viewing this footage.”

Jim crossed his arms uncertainly and leaned slowly back onto the desk. “Was that it? You were just worried about me finding out about the vid?”

“I believe it will be… difficult for you to watch.”

Jim shrugged. “I don’t want to watch it. Not right now, anyway. That’s the last thing I need.”

“Are you not upset by its existence?”
“I mean, I remember them taking vid footage. I had always kind of wondered where it went, kind of worried it would jump out at me someday. I’m glad you let me know. I’d rather hear it from you than Masters.”

Jim reached out and closed Spock’s hand around the data chip. “Maybe I’ll watch it someday, but I’m not ready right now.”

Spock stared at him for a moment before turning to store the data chip in a locked compartment of his desk. “I confess I had expected a different reaction.”

Jim smiled. “I thought you were trying to break up with me. I’d be upset about that.”

Spock reached out and pulled Jim to him, between his legs, and looked up into Jim’s easy grin and slightly messy hair. Jim slipped his arms around Spock’s neck.

“I will eventually convince you, Jim, that I am here with you and will not be driven away.”

Jim ran a hand through Spock’s hair, still smiling, his eyes far off but calm, still, like resting water.

“This mission has strengthened you—are you aware of that?”

Jim traced a circle at the crown of Spock’s head with one finger. “I sure as hell haven’t noticed—I still feel like a mess.”

“Five days ago you would have broken down upon the revelation of this footage. I am impressed by your progress.”

Jim shook his head, but his face was open and free of artificial emotions. “I guess. I don’t know. You seem pretty impressed by everything I do—I think your dick is doing all your thinking for you.”

“Jim, I assure you that the Vulcan penis does not have a brain, and is thus not capable of thought.”

Jim rolled his eyes. He slung his legs around Spock’s waist and settled into his lap, an erection already pressing into Spock’s thigh.

“Sure about that?” he whispered against Spock’s mouth.

“Yes, Jim. Quite sure. Do you require a biological diagram?”

“You’re an annoying Vulcan,” Jim said darkly, reaching down between them to squeeze Spock’s cock with the force of a reprimand. Spock gasped despite himself.

Jim leaned in to kiss him, but before their mouths could touch, he said, “I came down here because you were due back on the bridge ages ago, Mr. Spock. We’ll have to save this for tonight.” He stood up and waited for Spock expectantly.

Spock sighed. He was going to have to find a way to prevent Jim from arousing him on duty. He calculated his chances of success at only 5.4 percent.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

As the Tarsus IV mission draws to a close, Christmas—and Sam Kirk—come to the Enterprise.

On the final day of the mission, Jim quietly beamed down to Tarsus IV by himself. From the ridge where he materialized, he could see the small, distant smudges of the investigative team moving around the colony, gathering final evidence, tying up loose ends.

Jim walked down the hill and into the town square, empty except for a couple of Federation detectives and one of Jim’s security guards. They were far on the other side of the courtyard and didn’t notice him.

The memories flooded in again. It wasn’t any easier to be here now than it had been the first day, but Jim was remembering what Spock had said about progress. He didn’t feel any different. He was still seeing ghosts around every corner, he still couldn’t breathe right on this goddamn rock. Was this progress? It didn’t fucking feel like it.

Could he have come here alone a week ago, though?

No. No way. The only way he had gotten through this thing was—

Well. It was Spock.

Jim took a deep breath and kept walking.

He went to each of the old spots—the fountain, the school, the dormitories, the warehouse, the medical center, even back out to the camp—and he stood, and he let the flashbacks wash over him like waves.

It felt like death, like hell, but at the end of it, Jim was still just standing in a dirty abandoned colony, a place like so many others he and Spock had visited and then departed in the past year, never to think of again.

It was just a place, a place that he hated, but just an empty place nonetheless. There was no such thing as ghosts—the only haunted thing now was Jim’s brain, and his brain was a thing he could control. This was a battle he could win.

Finally, Jim went back to the house. So far he had avoided it completely, but it was kind of the last test. If Jim didn’t make himself go there, go withstand that place like he had the rest, then all of this was wasted. Jim could have stayed on the ship the whole mission, but he had forced himself to face this planet. If he didn’t face this house too, he hadn’t really faced anything at all.

It was falling down now, the roof almost caved in. But it was easily recognizable, disturbingly familiar. Jim ducked inside and went carefully through each small room. He stood in the kitchen and watched Kodos’s face rush at him again and again until it stopped.

Outside, Jim knelt in the dust by the door and touched the places where he remembered the bodies
lying. They swam in and out of his vision, real one second and a distant, surreal memory the next. Jim crawled to the closest wall and for a long time leaned against it, watching Tom and Cecelia shiver in and out of existence. But after a while, Spock drifted into Jim’s thoughts, as he always, always did. What would Spock say now?

Jim squeezed his eyes shut hard against the flickering images of the dead kids. Spock would say I was a child, he thought. I was just a kid. I felt—feel—responsible for the other kids, but I was one of them. I was just a kid.

Jim opened his eyes. Tom and Cecelia were gone. Jim could see nothing but an old, crumbling colony, abandoned by the humans who had tried to tame it, but who had ultimately been defeated by it. It was an old story, one that kept repeating itself like a malfunctioning computer.

From the corner of his eye, Jim caught a flash of metal in the dirt. He must have unearthed something as he scrabbled there, where the bodies had been. He crawled over and brushed away the dust until the shining thing came to light.

Jim sat back. For a long, long time, he sat.

“Jim?”

Jim gasped and jumped, but he wasn’t really surprised to find Spock standing over him.

“It’s my needles,” he said.

Spock’s eyebrow went up and Jim was tempted to laugh at how sweet and predictable he was. He reached out and pulled the metal needles from the dirt. “My needles,” he said again.

Spock crouched in front of him, taking the hand that held the two silver needles connected by a thin plastic cable. “The needles your grandfather gave you?”

“Yeah,” Jim laughed. “I guess I must have dropped them—that night. I was carrying them around in my pocket. I guess they fell out when I was running from Kodos.”

Spock lowered himself all the way onto the ground. “Jim, why did you come down to the surface without alerting anyone?”

“I just needed to be down here for a while. I needed to, before we left.”

“Are you alright?”

“No,” Jim laughed again. “But for now, yeah. Right now I’m ok.”

Spock looked at him warily, like he suspected Jim was delirious, which maybe he was, since he’d been hallucinating for hours. He was suddenly exhausted, and he let his head fall into his hands, still chuckling. Spock was close enough for Jim to feel a ripple of warmth from his skin, too close for an officer who was worried about his captain in a purely professional capacity. The usual emotions Jim felt when Spock displayed his stubborn commitment to him—worthlessness, self-hatred, shame—drifted to the surface, but this time Jim let go of them, and they floated away. Spock’s choices were his own; Jim wasn’t in control of Spock’s opinion of him. Spock saw something good in Jim and was determined to make him see it too. Why should he fight that? If Spock didn’t want him, he wouldn’t stay.

And Jim wanted Spock to stay. Maybe for once, just this once, Jim wouldn’t feel guilty about getting
what he wanted.

“Hey, Spock? I think I’m falling in love with you.”

He hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Oh shit, why the fuck did he say that out loud? When he received no response, Jim glanced up, all of the negative emotions threatening to rush back on a gale-force wind.

Spock was staring at him in surprise, his mouth slightly open. “Fuck,” Jim said, “sorry—that was way too soon. Listen, I’m sorry, I—”

“Jim!” Spock said sharply. “Will you cease speaking for one moment?” At Spock’s raised voice—a rare occurrence—Jim shut up out of shock alone. Spock gave a distinctly emotional sigh of frustration before leaning in and kissing Jim hard, his hands curled against either side of Jim’s face.

After a moment of surprise, Jim laughed against Spock’s mouth and grabbed his head to pull him closer, and for a while they kissed in the dust and the rubble of Tarsus IV.

--

They delivered Colonel Masters and her team to Starbase 10 the following day. They were joined in the transporter room by an excited group of Enterprise officers comprised of Sulu, Chekov, and a few others who had been swept up in the Christmas planning, headed for a final supplies run. Colonel Masters watched them with poorly concealed judgement, and she turned a questioning eye to Jim, who gave a sheepish shrug.

When everyone was assembled and ready to beam, Masters shook Jim’s hand and said, “Thank you for your assistance, Captain Kirk. Our investigation was quite productive. I’ll keep you informed of our findings and further proceedings on the case, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Colonel. I’d appreciate it.”

“I never did get that interview. Maybe in the future?”

Jim nodded. “I think I’ll be able to do that.”

Masters smiled slightly. “Good. I’ll hold you to it.” She turned to Spock and offered the ta’al. “Mr. Spock, it was a pleasure to work with you.”

Spock returned the gesture. “And you, Commander. Live long and prosper.”

“Peace and long life. I wish you luck.” She flicked her eyes to Jim with the faintest hint of amusement. “Both of you.”

Jim said, “Energize,” with a slightly confused smile, and then Masters and her team were gone.

--

They stayed in orbit of Starbase 10 for the rest of the day, to give more of the crew time to beam down for last-minute Christmas errands. It was December 20, and Jim had been pretending that Christmas didn’t exist for most of the Tarsus mission, but it was pretty much impossible to ignore now. Chekov and Sulu had decorated a slightly alarming percentage of the Enterprise, and the first of five parties was scheduled for the next day. The crew was clearly getting swept up in the spirit—Christmas music was usually playing in the rec rooms, and Jim had overheard several gift exchanges being planned, caught more than a few couples kissing under the mistletoe Chekov had apparently
felt compelled to hang in as many corridors as possible.

It all grated on Jim’s skin like sandpaper, but it was undeniable that the crew was benefitting from the celebration. Jim owed it to them to let the festivities get as out of control as they safely could. A five-year mission was long and demanding. Jim was determined to get his crew through it in good shape.

Jim knitted in his quarters while he waited for the departure from Starbase 10. Unreasonably loud carols were blasting from one of the senior officers’ cabins—Jim suspected Scotty’s or Uhura’s, and had little doubt that they were together—but he didn’t want to bother telling them to turn it down. Besides, he had just finished an ugly Christmas sweater for Chekov and had started another one for Sulu, so the Christmas music was pretty appropriate. And since he was chanting stitches to himself, he had no room in his brain to make sad associations with any of the songs. In fact, he was kind of enjoying listening to them, just a little bit.

He was starting the colorwork design—santa heads and bells—when the bathroom door opened. “Hey, Spock,” he said without turning around, focused on a complicated set of stitches. Spock appeared in front of him and hovered.

“Captain, Lieutenant Commander Scott is currently breaking Starfleet regulation 124, section 5, regarding acceptable decibel level for recreational music on a starship.”

Jim finished his row and let his needles drop. “Yeah, I know. I think he and Uhura are probably drunk and feeling festive. I’m going to let it slide, since it’s Christmas.”

“I fail to understand the significance of Christmas upon enforcement of regulations, Captain.”

“Everybody’s getting a mood burst from this Christmas shit, so I’m letting it happen. It’s chemically necessary for deep-space crews to experience excitement and blow off steam. This seems to be pretty effective.”

“A compelling argument, Captain. Although I am not certain it is logical.”

“Well, I’m sticking to it. And I’m your boss, so fuck you.” Spock’s eyebrow shot up, lost behind his bangs. Grinning, Jim scooted to the edge of the couch and reached out. “Now will you come here and stop calling me Captain?”

Spock let Jim pull him between his legs, and Jim rested his chin against Spock’s stomach, smiling up at him.

“How did an arrogant cadet like you become my superior?” Spock said quietly, a dark edge of heat in his voice, as he ran a hand through Jim’s hair.

Jim shrugged. “Genius and irresistible charisma.”

The corners of Spock’s mouth turned up, just a little, and Jim buried his face in Spock’s uniform shirt, inhaling his heat and smell. As Spock sat next to him, moving Jim’s knitting with the same care he always did, Jim leaned back and stretched, the blare of trumpets and bells from Scotty’s cabin still filtering in under the doors.

Jim held up Chekov’s finished sweater, which had been folded on the couch next to him. “Look at this hideous sweater!” he said proudly, and then laughed at Spock’s predictably confused expression. “It’s a silly Earth thing. There were always Christmas sweaters and sometimes they were ugly, so people started making uglier and uglier ones as a joke and it turned into a tradition.”

Spock regarded the unsightly red sweater, decorated with green reindeer and a silver geometric stitch
pattern. “Then this is… intentionally unattractive?”

“Yeah! That’s the point. Did I do a good job?”

Spock gave an uncomfortable affirmative nod, which made Jim laugh; for what reason Spock could not discern.

“Did you think this was was ugly and didn’t tell me because you didn’t want to hurt my feelings? You’re sweet.”

Inexplicably, Jim leaned across the couch to kiss Spock, the sweater crushed between them. Spock felt utterly confused by such human disregard for logic, but nevertheless, he unfolded his arms and Jim settled in against him. For a few minutes, the music blaring around them, they lay together without talking.

Eventually Jim said, “Hey, Spock? I was thinking about inviting Sam and Aurelan and the baby on the ship for Christmas. We’re only a few hours from Deneva—if they agree to it we could pick them up without wasting too much time. I just– I don’t even know why I thought of it, I guess ’cause we’re close by, but—"

"I think that is an excellent idea, Jim."

Jim looked up. "Yeah?"

Spock nodded and Jim's face broke into a grin. "Great. Great! I'm gonna call him now."

He jumped off the couch and all but ran to his desk. Spock neatly folded the ugly red sweater and placed it in on the coffee table, listening to Jim's computer reaching out for Deneva Prime.

Sam and Aurelan were taken aback by Jim’s last-minute invitation, but accepted it nonetheless. That night, the Enterprise arrived in orbit around Deneva, and Jim and Spock went down to the transporter room. Two glittering columns were already solidifying on the transporter pad as they came through the doors, materialized into a tall man with a mustache and Jim’s sandy hair, and a smiling, brunette woman with a chubby baby in her arms.

“Jimmy!” Sam shouted as he hopped off the pad, and they embraced, laughing. Sam’s voice and mannerisms were immediately familiar to Spock, distinctly Kirk, not only because Spock was intimately acquainted with the younger brother, but also because of the footage he had recently seen of Tiberius.

Jim broke away to hug Aurelan, and then there was an inordinate amount of fussing from all adult humans as Sam proudly introduced Jim to his infant nephew, whom Jim had never seen in person. Jim took the smiling ten-month-old from Aurelan, the boy’s arms waving happily. Jim spoke to him quite seriously for a few moments, which little Peter seemed to find irresistibly amusing, based on his babbling laughter.

Grinning, Jim gestured to Spock, and Sam and Aurelan offered cheerful Ta’als even before Jim had introduced them. Sam said, “You must be Spock—every time I talk to Jim he won’t shut up about you. ‘My first officer this, my first officer that—’”

Jim punched Sam’s arm with his free hand. “Yeah, ok, we get it. Spock, this is Sam and Aurelan. And I guess you know that this is Spock, my first officer and, uh–” Jim paused and took a breath, “my boyfriend.”
There was an stilted, silent moment in which Sam and Aurelan both looked to Jim in surprise, but Jim’s embarrassed shrug and obvious discomfort must have convinced them that he wasn’t joking. Sam finally said, “Well, that’s a surprise, Jimmy.” He gave Spock a slightly awkward smile. “What have you done to my brother? You must be something special—I didn’t know Jim was even capable of commitment.”

“I have so far found him to be capable of great devotion and loyalty to his friends and crew, and I have the utmost confidence in his potential as a romantic partner.”

Another awkward silence followed, leading Spock to believe that he had not improved the situation as he had hoped to.

Jim scrubbed the back of his neck, but Peter laughed and smacked the side of Jim’s face, unaware of his social misstep. The air of discomfort broken, Jim grinned and hiked the baby up on his hip, heading for the doors. “Let’s get you settled in, ok?

- -

Spock returned to his quarters to attend to the day’s reports, and also to give Jim time alone with his family. Jim went along to the guest quarters to help unpack, and an hour later he found himself hunkered down in a chair across from Sam, giving Peter a bottle as he slowly fell asleep in Jim’s lap. Aurelan was passed out in the bedroom, thrilled to have another pair of hands to hold the baby. Both Sam and Jim had a big glass of whiskey, one ice cube each.

“He’s really cute,” Jim said, when the generic stream of catching up and “Jesus, did you see Mom’s new haircut?” had dried up.

“Thanks.” Sam reached out and took the bottle, which had all but fallen out of Peter’s puckered, sleeping mouth. “I have to agree with you there.”

“Is it weird?” Jim asked, “Having to be so responsible? Having to keep another person alive?”

“You have to keep 400 people alive, Jim. You tell me.”

Jim looked into his brother’s face, aware of Peter’s warm weight as he settled deeper into sleep against him. Jim shook his head. “Jesus, we used to be such fuck-ups. What happened to us?”

“We did better than could have been expected of us. You should give yourself credit for that, Jim.”

Jim didn’t answer. He looked down at Peter’s face and ran a finger over his wispy bangs. Babies, Jim was discovering, were excellent social aids. You could look at them indefinitely and no one would know you were just trying to avoid eye contact.

Sam had known him too long to be fooled, though. “What’s wrong, Jimmy? Is it about this thing you have with Spock?”

“No—no, not at all. I just... I just wanted to see you, ok? I’ve been thinking about Grandpa a lot lately. It sucks. It still makes me fucking sad. And you’re basically the only other person in the universe who gets it.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and swirled his tumbler of whiskey. “Why have you been thinking about Grandpa?”

“We just finished up a mission on Tarsus IV.” Sam hastily sat up. “It was the first time I’ve been back. Obviously.”
“Jim, I– Starfleet really made you do that? They let you do that?”

“Yeah. Long story.”

“Are– are you ok?”

Jim shrugged and shifted Peter a little so he could grab his own whiskey and take a long, burning sip. “I mean, no. But I’m getting there. I’m working on things, at least, not just pretending they don’t exist.”

Sam reached out and put a hand on Jim’s knee. They’d never been much for physical affection beyond friendly shoulder slaps or hugs at arrival and departure, but they both knew this time was different. Jim felt the familiar sting in his eyes and wasn’t even embarrassed. Sam understood.

“Do you like Christmas?” Jim whispered. He wondered if it would confuse Sam, but as he had suspected, it didn’t. Sam sat back and stared into the shifting circle of his drink.

“No. I hate it.”

“Me too.”

“Remember how exciting it was when Grandpa used to come, though?”

Jim smiled. “Yeah. It was the best.”

“Do you ever think about how he really was the only adult who knew how to handle us?”

“Yeah. A lot.”

“I always think about that time I pushed you and your gun went off, and he was so mad. Do you remember that?”

Two of the tears that had been hovering in the wells of Jim’s eyes slipped down his face, one splashing softly on Peter’s chest and disappearing into the folds of his fleece pajamas. Jim nodded. “I remember.”

“I can’t believe how well he handled that. He got mad but he was supporting me at the same time, you know? He understood what I was going through, and he wasn’t going to let it drag me under, but he wasn’t going to ignore it either. He took me so seriously. I really want Peter to feel like that, like I think he’s worth something. Because, you know, I was worth something too, but I didn’t believe that back then.”

“Do you believe it now?” Jim muttered, nearly inaudible.

“Yeah, I do. You should too.”

Jim shrugged.

“Seems like you’re worth something to Spock. I mean, I’m assuming this thing is serious, if you’re introducing him as your boyfriend.”

Jim laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, it’s serious.”

“Is it telling-Mom serious?”

Jim was silent for a few moments, but he answered quietly, “I think so. We’ll have to see.”
“Is he good to you?”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Jesus—yes! Are you getting protective of me?”

“Well, I am your older brother,” Sam grinned, and drained the rest of his drink.

“Yes, he’s good to me, and yes, I’m worth something to him. In fact, he’s obnoxiously fixated on improving my self-esteem.”

“Good.”

Jim rolled his eyes again and was trying to think of something snarky to say when Peter shifted in his sleep and began to whine, slowly and without much force. But Sam picked him up, probably sensing an imminent awakening, and rocked him into the bedroom. Jim heard him laying Peter down beside Aurelan, and a whispered conversation. Jim took a long drink, waiting for Sam to come back. From somewhere nearby, loud Christmas music started up, and Jim smiled. Some poor ensign had no idea that the Captain was down on this deck, well within his rights to bang on their door and cite regulations. Lucky for them, Jim had no intention of doing that, and instead he closed his eyes and put his head back, listening.

--

On December 21, Chekov and Sulu got up in the chill dark of ship’s night, alpha shift still many hours away. The first party was that evening, and they still had so much to do, despite having begun preparations over a month ago.

They met in the botanical garden that was now devoted almost entirely to Christmas; in addition to the Santa’s Menagerie, they had erected several Christmas trees and decorated many of the other plants. Gold and silver baubles hung down from the ceiling, glittering and turning slowly.

Chekov and Sulu sat down under the biggest Christmas tree, yawning, their PADDs in hand to make a checklist for the day. Sulu was complaining about Spock not approving their request for erotic dancers dressed like Santa’s elves when Chekov noticed two shiny packages sitting under the tree that hadn’t been there yesterday. He could just make out the gift tags in the soft, rainbow light from the Christmas tree: one addressed to him and the other to Sulu, both “From Santa.”

“Hikaru,” he interrupted. “Look!”

Sulu looked under the tree and saw the presents, brow furrowing. They exchanged a confused glance, but shrugged and both grabbed the gift addressed to them, tearing open the paper without hesitation.

“Zis is amazing!” Chekov cried, holding up a red and green sweater covered in garish reindeer and silver embellishments.

Sulu laughed out loud at his own sweater, silver and white with horrifying laughing Santa heads and bright gold bells. “These are awesome! Who on Earth are these from?”

Chekov’s eyes were wide. “Perhaps zey are really from Santa Claus.”

“Yeah, right,” Sulu grinned, but they stared at each other for a moment, not quite sure.

--

Jim went to all the parties. He had sworn he wouldn’t, but now Peter was here, delighted by the
lights and music and chatter, and the crew seemed to feel the same way about the presence of a baby on the ship.

Jim was suddenly thrust into the role of a person with a family, one he actually wanted to show off. It felt weird. Jim was constantly on edge: happy family time usually crashed and burned, and he was waiting for it to happen at any moment.

But it never did, and eventually Jim relaxed. As adults, he and Sam hadn’t spent much time together that wasn’t at an awkward family gathering or a depressing visit with their mom. In the absence of all that stress and frustration, they found a surprisingly easy rapport. Crewmember after crewmember remarked on how similar they were. They heard “You must have been so close as kids!” at least twice at every party. Neither would have ever thought to describe their young relationship as close, but in hindsight, there was no other way to put it. Although their childhood was little more than disappointment after disappointment, abandonment after abandonment, failure after failure, they had been united against their unhappiness. They had looked out for each other, when they could. They had been close.

So Jim took his brother to parties, showed him around the ship, introduced him to his friends. Everywhere they went, Spock came with them. Jim had never once brought anybody home or introduced his family to someone he was involved with, and he would never have guessed it could feel kind of good: watching Sam and Aurelan start to figure Spock out the more time they spent together, seeing Spock relax a fraction in their company.

Spock and Sam, both scientists, got along especially well, and Jim and Aurelan once had to leave them alone after a long lunch—Sam was telling Spock how they had prevented the infestation of a neural parasite on Deneva, based on a mysterious, anonymous tip. Spock was fascinated by the particulars of the case, and Sam was more than happy to go on and on about it, so eventually Aurelan and Jim gave up and took Peter to the observation deck by themselves.

On their third night, Bones offered to babysit Peter for a few hours. Despite Aurelan’s visible skepticism, Jim assured her that Bones was a great dad, and fantastic with other people’s kids. Beaming, Bones took Peter and headed off to show him the menagerie.

Jim and Sam immediately went to the party that was in full swing on deck three, and got wildly drunk together. Unlike other sad, angry drinking sessions they had shared over the years, this time they just got loud and laughed until their lungs burned. Spock and Aurelan watched them from the sidelines, bemused, but Spock was tolerant even when Sam shoved Jim into him and tried to get them to dance. He even awkwardly spun Jim in a circle and then caught him when he toppled over.

Eventually, Spock and Aurelan retrieved Peter and Bones joined the Kirk brothers, drinking merrily into the night.

---

On Christmas, the senior crew and non-essential personnel took the day off, and the rest of the crew cycled through short shifts. A big party in the botanical garden went on all day, and Jim spent most of his time there, chatting with crewmembers, horsing around with Sam, carrying Peter through the crowd, trying to kiss Spock and being constantly rebuffed but getting a lot of apologetic looks in consolation. After his first three egg nogs, he pulled out the big guns and offered two fingers to Spock under the mistletoe. Spock’s eyes softened and he returned the kiss, albeit quickly.

They snuck off to their quarters in the evening to have a quiet dinner together. Jim made Spock a big cup of hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon, and over the course of the meal he watched Spock’s eyes heat up in his direction. Eventually Spock pushed their plates aside and dragged Jim
into the bedroom. They made out for a while, but Jim had promised to be back at the party by eight, so he extracted himself from what had become a very handsy Vulcan, and grabbed a present from under his bed. He thrust it in Spock’s direction, not looking at him.

“Here,” he said. “It’s a sweater, obviously.”

Spock took the package and unwrapped it gently. “I had understood the tradition of gift-giving to entail secrecy until the opening.”

“Yeah, well. Whatever.”

Spock lifted a thin black sweater from the paper. It was knit in soft yarn, especially soft on his sensitive fingers.

“I wanted you to be able to wear it under your uniform so you won’t be cold on the bridge. But it’s a tight knit, so it should be warm even though it’s light. I don’t know if you even like sweaters, so I won’t be hurt if—”

Spock took Jim’s hand, interrupting him. “You do not need to explain yourself. This is a generous gift and I am most grateful. I admire your knitting greatly, and I know of its significance to you.”

Jim rubbed the back of his neck, blushing. “Well, thanks. I’m glad you like it. It’s the first one I made on the needles Grandpa gave me since I found them again.”

Spock leaned forward and kissed him, trying to convey all of his emotions, most of which he couldn’t even name, through the touch of their mouths. Jim rested his forehead against Spock’s, and Spock was pleased with the settled quality of Jim’s mind.

“I procured a gift for you as well,” he said quietly, and rose to retrieve it from his own quarters. Jim followed him shyly.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, hovering in Spock’s bedroom door.

“You will cease speaking now,” Spock said, and handed Jim a precisely wrapped package.

Jim tore off the paper and found the sweater he had knitted for Grandpa Tiberius, all those years ago on Tarsus. It was definitely the same one—he instantly recognized a mistake he had made that had always bothered him—but the holes were mended, the yarn clean and bright. Jim looked up at Spock in confusion.

A little sheepishly, Spock explained, “I discovered that there was a textile expert on Starbase 10. I privately sought his assistance in repairing your grandfather’s sweater. I thought that perhaps you would wish to wear it again as a reminder of how far you have come in healing from your grief and trauma regarding that time in your life. I hope it was not an intrusion.”

Jim stared at him. Eventually he shook his head, overcome. “No. No, that wasn’t an intrusion. Thanks, Spock. This is one hell of a present.”

Spock nodded, a hint of poorly concealed relief on his face. Jim slowly put the sweater on. As he buttoned it, he couldn’t help but think back to that terrible Christmas right after Grandpa died, when he wouldn’t take the sweater off, when everything had seemed hopeless. But for once the memories came and went. Jim suddenly realized that December 22nd, the anniversary of Grandpa’s death, had gone by without his notice.

In fact there were several times over the past few weeks, usually when he was knitting, that Jim had
thought about Grandpa, for some reason or another, but didn’t slip into other, darker memories.

Jim smoothed the front of the sweater and looked up at Spock. “How do I look?”

“Most aesthetically pleasing.”

Jim smiled and briefly squeezed Spock’s hand. “Let’s get back to the party.”

- -

When Jim and Spock returned to the botanical garden, Christmas music was blaring. Jim immediately noticed that his entire command team, as well as Chekov and Sulu, were gathered around the giant Christmas tree in the center of the garden. Everyone grinned when they caught sight of him, and Jim realized they were all wearing their sweaters—Bones in his country-doctor-in-space cardigan, Scotty in his tartan jumper, Uhura in her black ballet wrap, and Chekov and Sulu in their ugly Christmas sweaters. Spock, who had insisted on wearing his thin black sweater to the party, stepped up to join them.

Jim laughed out loud. “Did you plan this?”

“We sure as hell did,” said Bones. “Everybody else told me you were sneaking around giving out sweaters in secret like a goddamn Santa Claus.”

“We really love them, Jim,” Uhura smiled, and everyone else nodded enthusiastically.

“I had no idea you could do this,” Sulu said, holding out the front of his sweater to admire the colorwork, “It’s really impressive!”

“Yes!” Chekov agreed with enthusiasm. “I am so honored, Kepten, to be ze recipient of one of your gifts—you haf such incredible skill!”

Scotty raised his whiskey glass in Jim’s direction and said gravely, “No’ just anyone can make something out of the Scott family tartan, Jim. Ye did it justice. You have my respect for tha.”

Jim felt his face heat up and rubbed the back of his neck. “No problem. Glad you like them.”

“Alright, we’ve embarrassed him enough,” said Bones, although he had initiated the embarrassment in the first place. “Move along.”

No one did, but they at least stopped staring at Jim, breaking off into small groups and continuing to laugh and gossip. Bones slapped Jim on the shoulder and handed him another eggnog, which he had apparently been holding in anticipation of Jim’s self-consciousness. Spock drifted over to stand unnecessarily close to him and Sam, who Jim had noticed watching from nearby, joined them as well.

“I didn’t know you still knitted, Jim.”

Jim took a long, deep drink of egg nog. “Well, I haven’t for a long time, but I just started again.”

Sam looked over his shoulder at Jim’s assembled crew, all in their handmade sweaters. “You’re still really good at it. Grandpa would love that you’re still knitting.”

He and Jim exchanged a small, not-entirely-sad smile.

Spock, maybe still a little tipsy from his hot chocolate, asked them, “Have you enjoyed your Christmas this year, despite your shared hatred of it?”
Jim shrugged. “Yeah. I actually have, I guess. Did you, Sam?”

“I think I could get used to Christmas again, maybe. At least for Peter’s sake.”

Spock nodded and tucked his hands behind his back. “I find it to be a most perplexing holiday comprised of disparate and illogical traditions, but I am gratified that, despite past negative associations, you are able to find pleasure in it again.”

Bones rolled his eyes. Sam noticed, and started laughing. Jim grinned and leaned up to kiss Spock’s cheek before Spock could stop him. He looked appropriately scandalized, but under the cover of the soft, glowing lights, Spock took Jim’s hand and didn’t let go.

End Notes

Amazing Prompt

It has been years since Jim celebrated Christmas, but not that long since he became a starship Captain. He was kind of dead for that first Christmas. He hasn’t believed in Christmas miracles in a long, long time. Not since Tarsus, but when he receives some really good needles and yarn from Bones for his birthday. How the hell did he know? What did he know? He can’t stop himself. It brings up a lot of memories. Memories of his grandfather Tiberius. Tiberius taught him to sail, to knit, crochet, to weave, encouraged him to learn tracking, and shooting, to practice old skills that would serve him in the wild. That kept him and several (15?) other kids alive on Tarsus. He still has the sweater Tiberius knitted a freshly returned from Tarsus, Jim Kirk, who wore it constantly when Ti died a year later. It’s threadbare, and too small. But Jim knows the patterns, and the kneedle movements, and he can’t resist Bones’s gift. The sweater knitting becomes a sort of therapy, and Jim is determined to give his new family, his crew, the gift of his skills for Christmas. A chrstmas sweater, a sweater for warmth, and a sweater for everyday. He tailors his gifts for the person it is meant for, and his stunned crew doesn’t at first realize that they are handmade. A medical bird might clue them in. When they find out the connection, they are careful with their captain, appreciative of his skills, and the gifts Jim Kirk delivers every day as their leader, their protector, and their friend.

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