You Don't Have To (Say Yes)

by luminousbeings

Summary

The abridged sexual history of James Tiberius Kirk.

Or, Jim’s varyingly unhealthy idea of what sex is supposed to be (a it-gets-worse-before-it-gets-better story)

Notes

I am honored and humbled to report that my thank yous and gushy heart eyes for the amazing readers and artists of this fic got so long that I had to relocate them to the end of the fic. Please stop over there and take a look at the gorgeous work of these crazy-talented people. Thank you all so much!
Graphic by SilentBridge

You can find the Russian translation of this fic over here, thanks to the hard work and talent of the incredible Di Grange and Daria_T.

Kdin made an awesome playlist for YDHT that you can find right here, and it is perfection itself.

THE HUGEST, MOST-FREAKING-OUT THANK YOU TO ROSECREIGHTON FOR RECORDING THIS *TWENTY-TWO HOUR LONG* PODFIC !!!!!!!!!!%

Please make sure to read the trigger warnings. Stay safe!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Kodos

The physically and mentally ill are the first to go.

After that, it’s the elderly. Kodos puts the cut-off age for usefulness at sixty-five years old. Everyone above that age, regardless of health, profession, or income is forced to their knees and shot execution-style (quickly, mercifully, Kodos assures them) in the back of the head.

There’s still not enough food for the settlers there are left.

And so the cut-off age is dropped to forty and brought up to twenty. All those above or below those ages are put to death immediately. There are only three exceptions, chosen based on extraordinary aptitude scores that Kodos is loathe to waste, even as he executes four-year-olds in front of their mothers.

The kids on Tarsus IV call these three exceptions “the lucky ones.”

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Within two weeks there are only seven children under the age of twenty on Tarsus IV: the three “lucky ones” – Sam and Jim Kirk, Erika Riley – and the four kids they managed to rescue from the extermination – including Erika’s little brother Kevin, Thomas Leighton, Natalie Eldenwein, and Natalie’s as-yet-unnamed baby niece, whom Erika has aptly named, for the time being, Baby.

Natalie doesn’t know how to take care of a newborn baby. Nobody knows how to take care of a newborn baby. Especially when they’re camping out at some empty, godforsaken outcropping in the desert about two miles out from the settlement and they have nothing but the clothes on their backs and there’s no food and Baby won’t. Shut. Up.

They manage, though. Jim and Erika and Sam get into a pattern of what Sam cheerfully refers to as “the stupidest thing we’ve ever done,” and what Erika refers to as “the stupidest thing we ever will do if you don’t hurry it up”: that is, breaking into Kodos’s private storage house and bringing food to the other kids in quantities too small (they hope) to be noticed.

Between Natalie and Tom, and Sam’s oddly well-developed paternal side, they manage to keep Baby relatively happy and fed. The same can’t necessarily be said of the rest of the children, but they’ll take whatever good news they can get.

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Jim is fifteen and Erika is eighteen and Sam is nineteen and Jim is ninety-five percent certain that Sam and Erika are screwing like rabbits behind his back.

Not that Jim wants Sam and Erika to be screwing like rabbits in front of him (eugh.) But, besides for the general ‘gross, my brother uses his penis’ feelings, Jim is really very okay with Sam and Erika being Sam-and-Erika. He likes Erika. She’s sarcastic and a little bit belligerent and a lot a bit brilliant with all things medical. She’s going to be an interspecies neurogeneticist once they get off this rock.

He likes her little brother Kevin too. He’s ten and has these enormous brown eyes that gaze up at Jim like he’s the most incredible thing he’s ever seen. Kevin wants to join Starfleet when he grows up and become a hero just like Jim.

Jim’s never been a big brother, but he looks at Kevin and just knows he’s going to rock at being a
big brother-in-law.

He looks at Sam and Erika and knows he’s going to be an awesome uncle, too.

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Contrary to their name, the lucky ones end up eating even less than the other children, slipping away from lessons and “meals” with their rations and sharing whatever they have with the rest. When that isn’t enough, they break into the storage houses and “feast” on the dry, crumbling emergency nourishment bars and the precious few gulps of water. Sam bounces Baby on his knee and cheerfully blathers nonsense at her.

They end up forming something of a family.

Sam is the oldest, and the heart of the group. Despite his intelligence, he’s far too easygoing to be much of an academic, and so he spends his time taking care of Baby and keeping everyone sane and relatively positive with his goofy sense of humor.

Erika is the mind. She strategizes and plans and rations, and when anyone has a serious issue – usually these end up involving injury, illness, and/or Baby – it is inevitably Erika they run to. Erika tempers Sam’s optimism, not enough to bring down the group but enough to keep them organized and practical.

Jim isn’t sure where he fits in, exactly. He is Kodos’s favorite, although (or maybe because?) he’s the most outspoken and reckless of the three of them. He’s the quickest on his feet and the most manipulative, and so he generally ends up being the one to steal the food from the storage house and bring it back to the rest of the kids, trying not to flush at the adoring expressions on the their faces.

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He doesn’t always return to adoring faces, though.

“I’m still hungry,” Kevin whimpers, curled up around his stomach while Jim watches helplessly.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” Sam says quietly, rubbing Kevin’s back. “That’s all the food Jimmy could get without tipping the guards off.”

“It’s not about how much food you steal,” Natalie says, as if she’s ever done it. “It’s where you take it from and how you organize the stuff around it. If I could just get into the storage house—”

“Don’t even think about it,” says Erika sharply.

“It’s definitely possible to break in,” Tom adds. “We could overheat the locking mechanism, make it think it’s working when it isn’t. That will keep it open for just long enough to run in, grab some stuff, clean up, and run out.”

“You’ve been discussing this,” Sam says. His voice isn’t cold, exactly, but it’s significantly less warm than it usually is.

“Well, there’s nothing else to do,” says Tom.

Erika tousles Kevin’s hair and doesn’t reply.

“We could break in,” Natalie says again, holding the sleeping Baby to her chest. "Get as much food as we want."
“You can’t,” Erika says, her eyes like steel.

Tom is probably the one Jim gets on with best, and so Jim is taken aback when his friend turns on him with an expression full of helpless rage. “You just want to feel special as the lucky ones. You don’t want us stepping on your turf.”

“Don’t take it out on him,” Sam replies. “He’s been risking his life sneaking into the storage houses to get food for you.”

“We never asked him to,” says Natalie. Jim feels the sting of the hurt down to his toes, feels the anger rise up in response. His stomach rumbles in agreement. “We could risk our own lives to get food for ourselves.”

“And how will that be any better?” Erika demands. “If Kodos finds you he’ll kill you!”

“If Kodos finds Jim, he’ll kill him!” Tom yells, and his voice cracks on the last word.

“No he won’t,” says Jim confidently. “He’s got a soft spot for me.”

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This is where it all goes to hell.

Kodos always takes Jim on the weekly inventory of the storage house, an activity that, for Jim, is more about quelling the noises in his stomach and trying not to look too feverishly at the stacks of food everywhere than about resource management skills. Jim takes the opportunity to scope out the storage house and decide what and how much he can get away with, so that when the time comes he can sneak in and out as quickly as possible. As the food supply gets lower and lower with each passing week, it becomes more and more of a challenge.

Jim has always been up for a challenge.

Kodos is saying something about the ways in which the historical Andorian code of honor differed from how it is today and Jim is entering the storage house code when he realizes that the door is already unlocked.

The lock mechanism burns Jim’s fingers.

Jim vision goes blurry and distant.

“What is it?” Kodos asks.

He almost jumps out of his skin. “Nothing!” he squeaks. “Just – um – I don’t know. I’m not really in the mood for inventory right now.”

“Not in the mood,” Kodos repeats, bemused.

Jim rubs the back of his head, smiling sheepishly. “Yeah?”

Kodos smiles at him indulgently. “You’ve forgotten your code, haven’t you.”

As if Jim would ever forget something like that. He knows his code, and Sam’s, and Kodos’s, and a half dozen of the guards’ too. Jim laughs. “You got me.”

Kodos steps forward to enter his own code and Jim stops him. “It’s okay though – the door’s already open. I think some rats chewed through the wiring over there.”
The governor’s eyes darken. “The last thing we need is a rat infestation.”

Jim nods. “I can check, if you want,” he offers hopefully. “You don’t even have to come in. I mean, you’re so busy, you probably have loads of other things to –”

“My primary obligation is food rationing,” Kodos says. “If there are rats, they must be exterminated at once.” He pulls out his gun and takes it off safety.

Jim’s blood goes cold.

“I didn’t think there was any animal life left!” Jim shouts, hurrying after Kodos into the storage house and praying that, if anyone is inside, they’ve gotten the clue and are hidden away. All of the animal life had been killed and eaten by the inhabitants of Tarsus IV – wild birds, rats, pet dogs, they were all just food at this point.

“I was under the same impression,” Kodos mutters.

The two of them turn on the spot, inspecting frantically every inch of the large room full of nutrition bars and other non-perishables, both searching for the same thing, although for entirely different reasons.

“I don’t see anything,” says Jim, unable to keep the note of relief out of his voice.

Kodos lowers the gun. “I suppose it could’ve been a false—”

There is the tiniest rustle from the corner of the storage house.

In one motion, Kodos turns and shoots at the source of the sound. Jim’s heart stops.

The bullet embeds itself into the wall at the far end of the room.

They both stand there, motionless, as silence falls again.

“Hm,” Kodos murmurs.

Jim’s heart pounds a furious beat in his chest. “Maybe we should just get that inventory done,” he suggests.

Kodos tilts his head. “Maybe we should.”

They are about a third of the way through the weekly inventory when there is another sound. Jim and Kodos stiffen, looking at each other. Kodos takes out his gun again.

Jim sees Tom and Natalie over Kodos’s shoulder crawling behind the crates full of emergency water paks.

Kodos must see something in Jim’s expression because his mouth twists, and he lifts the gun and about to swing around when -

(Kodos and his men use guns instead of phasers even though they’re hopelessly out of date. When Jim had asked, Kodos explained patiently that phasers have three settings – sting, stun, and kill. Guns only have one.)

- Jim grabs his lapels and pulls Kodos down into a desperate, sloppy kiss.

The man makes a surprised noise into Jim’s mouth, but Jim keeps his eyes screwed shut and kisses
him like he’ll never kiss anyone again. For all he knows, he won’t, once Kodos finds out what Jim has been doing in his spare time over the past months. He hears movement and feels Kodos stiffen in response, but before the governor can break off and turn around, Jim stands on his toes for better leverage and grips his jacket tighter, ravaging the governor’s mouth with everything he’s got. Finally he hears the low whine of the storage house door; he’s aware, distantly, through the dizziness that may be panic or oxygen deprivation, that Kodos has started kissing back.

They finally break away from each other.

Kodos’s mouth is bruised and wet. Jim is breathing hard, his face heating, unable to look his mentor in the eye.

“Well,” says Kodos.

“I – I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know what came over me, I just – ”

Strong hands suddenly grip Jim’s hips and pull them roughly against Kodos's. The man is smirking. “I knew it.”

“What?”

“You’ve wanted this since you’ve laid eyes on me, have you, James?” Kodos cards his fingers gently through Jim’s hair, and it might’ve been like an uncle doting on a favorite nephew if not for the way Jim’s skin crawls. “You’ve been leading me on since the beginning. Always such a little tease.”

Jim draws a shuddering breath and makes himself nod, and then Kodos’s mouth is back on his, his hands exploring under Jim’s shirt.

Jim’s mom and dad had been each other’s firsts, and even though Jim kind of hated how horridly romantic that was (and why he even knew that; like he wanted to imagine his parents doing the dirty), he’d always secretly halfway hoped his first time would be with The One, too.

He can feel Kodos hard and warm against him, feel the governor’s hot breath on his neck, feel his fingers at the zipper of his jeans. Jim makes a low, helpless noise and Kodos laughs.

Jim manages to gasp out a, “Sir – I don’t – I’m not –”

Kodos pulls back a bit and smiles, like Jim is really being very cute. “Now, James, to back out at this point would be exceptionally bad form. After all this time, after all the hard work I put into teaching you, keeping you fed and looked after. Ignoring your – ah – ’rats.’”

The governor’s eyes gleam at Jim’s dumbfounded expression. “You think I don’t know what they’re doing? You think I couldn’t find them soon enough if I so wished? Heaven knows why you waste your sympathies on that pathetic lot – between the two of us, James, you really should know better. I am willing to humor you, of course…but everything comes at a price.”

Jim swallows hard.

“So you see, after everything I’ve done for you, don’t you agree it’s about time I received some form of reimbursement? Answer me, James.”

Jim whispers, “Yes. But –”

“I could, of course, seek recompense from your brother instead...” Kodos muses, and something in
Jim goes ice cold – “but I can tell you really do want this, despite your halfhearted objections. Don’t you, my sweet little tease? Answer, James.”

Sam’s smile flashes in Jim’s mind, the smile he gives Erika, the smile Dad is giving Mom in the photographs. “Yes,” Jim chokes out.

Kodos smiles fondly and strokes Jim’s cheek. Jim forces himself to not flinch away. “You were always one of my quickest learners. You owe this to me, James. You understand that, don’t you? Answer.”

He doesn’t reply – can’t bring himself to reply – and Kodos pulls Jim’s hair, baring his throat and dragging out a gasp of pain. “You don’t have to say yes, James. You just have to not say no.”

Jim twists his fingers in Kodos’s jacket, shuts his eyes tight, and tries to think of nothing at all.

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Jim swears Tom and Natalie to secrecy that night. They agree immediately, ashamed enough already by how badly the whole thing could have gone.

"That was really brave, JT," Tom says afterwards. "Was Kodos mad that you kissed him?"

"No," says Jim. "He wasn't mad."

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"You belong to me," Kodos tells him lovingly. "My little slut. You want this so badly, don’t you? Answer me, James."

"Yes, sir," says Jim.

Kodos smiles. "Then beg for it."

Jim bites his lip hard enough to draw blood and gets on his knees.

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The sun is setting outside, and Sam is watching Jim throw a handball against the wall in a constant, repetitive rhythm. It bounces off the wall, then the floor, then back to Jim. Wall, floor, back to Jim. Wall, floor, back to Jim.

“I don’t know why everyone makes such a big deal about their first time,” Jim says out of the blue.

Sam blinks. “First time doing what?”

“Having sex,” says Jim, an unsaid but very noticeable *duh* in his voice.

And nope, Sam is not having the sex talk with Jim. He’s not. He’s nooot…

“Why wouldn’t someone’s first time having sex be important?” he finds himself asking, even as he’s kicking himself for getting into this at all. Still, someone’s going to have to introduce Jimmy to the idea of sex, and Sam is sure as hell going to make sure it’s someone who loves him. “We make a big deal out of all of our firsts.”

Jim shrugs. He’s turned away from Sam, keeping the handball going with perfect consistency. Wall, floor, Jim. Wall, floor, Jim. “Not the first times we breathe, or eat, or drip snot. Sex is just a thing
people do, it’s just – you know – a couple people getting off. It’s not like it’s this huge event. It's not like it matters.”

“Jesus, Jimmy,” Sam says, taken aback. “Do you actually believe all that?”

He thinks he hear Jim mutter, “I have to,” but he can’t be sure.

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Jim has always been good at figuring out what people like. It’s his talent, his crowning glory, as it were.

So Jim figures out very quickly that Kodos likes him quiet and submissive, ideally gagged or bound or both. He likes to gag Jim with whatever’s handy – ties, belts, the barrel of a gun once – and take Jim on his knees or against a wall or bent over something… his bed, his chair, his desk, the man’s not picky.

What the man is, though, is angry – frequently, overpoweringly, until all he can think of is destruction of all threats to his careful control. Unless it has an outlet.

That’s where Jim fits in. He is the outlet.

The ragtag group of kids stealing food and resisting arrest known as the Children’s Rebellion (Sam, Jim thinks. Erika. Kevin. Tom. Natalie. Baby) is the primary threat to Kodos’s control, and therefore the primary feature in the governor’s fits of temper. Jim knows without a doubt that his continued survival is due only to the fact that Kodos is unaware of Jim’s activities as one of the group’s leaders.

Jim makes sure to be in the governor’s office the night after Tom and Natalie burn down the settlement’s main watchtower. He is there when the news reaches Kodos (Sam, Jim thinks) and he is there for the resulting explosion (Erika. Kevin) and tries not to flinch when that rage eventually directs itself at him (Tom, Natalie, Baby).

“They deserve to be taught a lesson,” Kodos hisses, his fists clenching and unclenching as he looms over Jim. “They deserve to be punished.”

(Sam, Jim thinks.) “Please, sir,” he says quietly, gazing up at him through his lashes (Erika, Kevin), even as the words burn in his mouth (Tom, Natalie, Baby). “Punish me instead.”

As always, Kodos indulges him.

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At the same time, Kodos never initiates anything. It is Jim who understands when Kodos’s anger reaches dangerous levels. It is Jim who knows what he likes, what he wants. It is Jim who comes to him with blindfolds and handcuffs and whips and…offers to distract him from the small but flourishing Children’s Rebellion, from the small but noticeable amounts of food missing from the storage house.

As the Children’s Rebellion’s steps grow steadily more significant, so must Jim’s. His repertoire grows quickly to include increasingly outrageous toys, techniques, and suggestions. Jim is nothing if not creative.

It is Jim who says everything Kodos wants to hear, so that he won’t look to hear it from someone else (from Sam).
Jim has no one to hate but himself.

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He’s keeping watch with Tom on the outcropping that night. The sky is speckled with an endless expanse of stars, and Jim leans back on his hands and marvels.

“Man, I love space,” Jim breathes. “Those stars have been around for millions of years and will be around for millions more. Our entire lifetimes are like…like sneezes to them. They get how little our drama matters. How little we matter.”

“Yeah?” says Tom. “The stars always made me feel kind of lonely.”

They make Jim feel kind of lonely, too, but he’s learned that not being cared about enough is infinitely better than the opposite.

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It is weeks before Jim voices what he fears more than Kodos, more than starvation, more than death: “I think Sam knows. About.” He can’t say ‘us.’ There is no ‘us.’ There’s only sex. And that’s fine, Jim’s fine with that. “About our, um. Arrangement.”

Kodos pauses, studies Jim, says carefully, “Surely your brother will understand that our arrangement was your idea.”

Jim’s not sure he will. Jim’s not sure he wants him to understand.

“We should show him, James,” Kodos whispers, his voice thick and hungry. “Show him how you bargain and beg for me. Show him what a slut his little brother is.”

Jim tries to forget the ropes slashing into his wrists; tries to forget the hunger and the blood and the dozens of tiny burnmarks on his back; closes his eyes and thinks of the stars.

“Who do you belong to, boy?” Kodos whispers into his hair.


“You, sir,” says Jim.

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Jim is desperate for Sam to find out.

Jim is terrified that Sam will find out.

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The Children’s Rebellion kills a guard.

Jim enters Kodos’s office and thinks I’m going to die.

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Jim bites down on the gag and thinks I’m going to die.

(SamErikaKevinTomNatalieBabyohGodpleaseSamErikaIcan’tdothisIcan’tICAN’TKevinTomNatalieBabyIc
Jim doesn’t die.

He doesn’t know how to feel about that.

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Eventually, Sam finds out.

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In the end, Sam finds out about Kodos when Kodos finds out about Baby. Because it turns out they can’t keep a starving, crying newborn baby a secret from the guards forever.

They march the Children’s Rebellion (Sam, Erika, Kevin, Tom, Natalie, Baby) into Kodos’s anteroom under the eyes of no less than a dozen settlement guards. Jim watches them from his position on the right-hand side of Kodos’s chair with a sinking feeling of dread deep in his stomach.

“All hail the mighty Children’s Rebellion,” Kodos sneers, gazing at the pathetic group before him.

To Jim’s horror, Kevin (he wants to go to Starfleet, flits frantically through Jim’s mind, he wants to be a hero) steps forward. “All hail Kodos the Executioner!” (wants to be a hero like Jim) “May he rot in hell where he belongs!”

Kodos is staring hard at Kevin, his eyes darkening, his hand clenching, and for Jim, it isn’t even a choice anymore.

Jim sinks to his knees in front of Kodos, his head bowed submissively. “Sir, please. He’s only ten years old. They’re all only kids. Let me take their punishments. You can do whatever you want to me. I belong to you. Show them that I belong to you. Please.”

The anteroom is silent.

Kodos’s eyes are gleaming in approval, and Jim can see the governor already growing hard, anticipating what he could do to Jim in front of his brother. Jim swallows and tries to think of nothing at all.

Over the pounding in his ears he hears Sam’s sharp intake of breath behind him, the moment of realization, and against his own will, Jim’s eyes seek out his brother, whose

Whose face is grey, his eyes wide, and then he’s

He’s screaming, launching himself at Kodos and

And before Jim knows what he’s doing he’s on his feet, his arms outstretched between Sam and Kodos, unsure whether it’s his brother he’s defending from the governor or the other way around.

He doesn’t have the opportunity to find out though because two of Kodos’s guards catch Sam by the arms, holding him back six feet away from the governor, where he stands with an expression more murderous than Jim has ever seen on his kindhearted, easygoing big brother.

“Sam,” Jim says, pleading. The panic is rising in his throat, choking him, blinding him. He needs Sam to understand. “It wasn’t him, Sam, I swear. It was me. Every single time, it was me. Please. It was me!”
Sam is shaking all over with suppressed fury, and Jim can’t tell if it’s because he doesn’t understand or because he does. “He’s just a kid!” he shouts at Kodos. His voice breaks on the last word.

“Sam, relax! It’s okay!”

“I suggest you heed your brother’s advice,” Kodos says mildly. “If you yield now I will consider reducing the consequences for your insubordination.”

“Yeah, you like that, don’t you?” Sam spits. “When people yield to you.”

“It’s okay, Sam!” Jim says, desperately willing his brother to understand why Jim had to do it, willing his brother to stop drawing Kodos’s attention to himself. “It’s just sex! I don’t mind.”

But Sam isn’t even looking at him. He’s staring at Kodos, struggling against his captors; fists curled, teeth bared, his face twisted up in what is either fury or agony. “He doesn’t mind. You monster—”

“I’m warning you, Samuel,” Kodos says calmly, “if you can’t control yourself, I will be forced to remove the threat you pose. You are bringing your own doom upon yourself.”

“Sam,” Jim begs.

“Bringing it upon myself?” Sam says incredulously. “I guess that’s what you told Jimmy too. ‘Don’t look at me, you brought this upon yourself!’ You’re nothing but a filthy rotten bast—”

Kodos waves a hand absently. “Do it.”

The guard shoots Sam in the heart.

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Jim’s world goes silent and staticky.

Red droplets on the floor.

A body buckling, the thump of flesh on wood.

Sam’s eyes finding Jim’s, like a prayer. Like a confession. Like an apology.

Sam’s chest heaving.

And then not.

Erika’s mouth open in a scream.

Sam’s unmoving chest. His wide, empty blue eyes.

There is nothing but Sam.

There is no Sam.

Sound and movement return in a rush. Jim knows, distantly, that he’s fallen to his knees. That the kids are shouting and crying behind him. There are guards grabbing his arms, hauling him back to his feet. None of it matters.

SamSamSam

“Tie them up on the platform in the courtyard where everyone can see,” Kodos says to the guards.
Then he turns, lifts Jim’s chin gently, fondly. “Unfortunately, your brother’s little outburst has made the both of you no longer suitable for my purposes. So you see, if you cannot be made an asset to me, you will at least be made an example to the others.” He cards his fingers through Jim’s hair, his touch lingering, affectionate. “You understand, don’t you, James? You were always the smartest of them all.”

Jim hears nothing, feels nothing. SamSamSAM—

“Take them away.”

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Jim doesn’t die.

He doesn’t know how to feel about that.

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Jim is able to sit up in his bio-bed a week later, and he is both “healing up very nicely, Mr. Kirk” and dead in all the ways that matter.

Tom is motionless in the bed next to him. They say he’ll wake up soon, but there’s very little they can do for the left half of his face.

Baby will live, they say. Kevin will live. Natalie will live.

They never mention Erika. Not once.

Jim never cries. Not once.

His mother is trembling when she tries to tell him that “Sam – he’s – he’s – oh God, Jimmy –”

Jim hears nothing, feels nothing.

“I know, Mom,” Jim says, wishing Sam had taken him along, wherever he is now. “I was there.”

Jim was there, unlike someone else. But there’s no point in saying it out loud, so he just stares, unseeing, out the window and lets his mom cry enough for both of them.
“What is it this time?” the woman asks wearily.

The officer stifles a yawn. The woman can’t blame him. It is, after all, 0430 on a Tuesday.

“Aggravated assault. But the victim dropped all charges, so you’re good to go once the bail is paid.”

She rubs her eyes tiredly, nods, takes out her wallet.

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Their footsteps echo in the darkened, empty station, and she keeps her gaze straight ahead, avoiding eye contact with the officers milling around the holding cell area. They turn the corner and sure enough, there’s a boy sprawled across the bench in Holding Cell A, relaxed and comfortable as anything, like he may as well be lounging in a beach chair. He’s whistling something indistinguishable, his arms crossed behind his head against the cell bars, one leg propped up on the bench while the other dangles off the side.

The blond head tips back as she approaches, and despite the cuts and bruises and the impressive shiner, George Kirk’s bright blue eyes fix on her and her chest constricts as always. The boy gives her a crooked, upside-down grin. “Hey. What’s a lady like you doing in a place like this?”

Winona Kirk sighs. “Jimmy.”

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“How did you even get into that bar, Jimmy?” she asks when they pull out of the parking lot.

He shrugs, looking out the window instead of at her. “Turns out a really good blowjob can get you almost anywhere.”

The car ride is silent after that.

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Tom wakes up a few days after Jim and starts screaming and thrashing and he needs three nurses to hold him down so he doesn’t hurt himself. His yelling is frantic and incoherent – all Jim can pick out is the occasional name: Natalie, Baby, Sam, Jim, Kodos.

Jim staggers over to Tom’s bed, clutching the rail to keep himself upright, and tells him that Kodos is dead, that Kodos is nothing but a pile of burnt flesh and ashes and he’s never, ever coming back, he can never, ever hurt them again. Tom’s eye flashes to Jim’s and for the first time there is recognition.

“JT,” he gasps.
“Yeah, Tom,” Jim says, grinning past the burning in his eyes. “It’s me.”

“Erika?”

Jim’s throat closes up and all he can do is shake his head. Tom lets out a low, mournful sound, like an animal in pain.

The nurses shoo him away then, and Jim watches while they check Tom’s blood pressure and give him water from a little straw and avoid mentioning his face.

When they’re all done with the basic vital signs and about eight different injections, the nurses leave and Tom turns to Jim and says, “I don’t believe it.”

“Don’t believe what?”

“That Kodos is dead. I don’t believe it for a second.”

“He has to be,” Jim bites out. Tom looks ready to argue but Jim turns to him with a look so ferocious that Tom shuts his mouth with a snap and doesn’t bring it up again.

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“Talk to me, Jimmy,” she says when they get home. She doesn’t bother to turn on the light.

“Aggravated assault?”

“Well, you see, I –” Jim cuts himself off with a theatrical yawn. “Oh, man, I’m whacked. Turns out beating up innocent bar-goers really takes it out of you. Raincheck on the heart-to-heart though?” He makes his hands into guns and mock-shoots them at her.

She just stands there impassively, eyebrows raised, arms crossed.

“Oh, wow, that’s nice. That’s a great look on you. Very mom-ish. You look like a proper mom and everything.”

The barb hits deeper and harder than Jim can possibly know. “Don’t say that. Don’t you dare say that. I’m here, aren’t I? I’m here using every bit of leave I have - so you have someone to bail you out of jail.”

“And you know, that’s real sweet and all,” Jim sneers, “but I never asked anyone to sacrifice for me. I’m doing just fine by myself.”

Winona looks at his beer- and blood-stained clothes, his bruised face, his empty eyes. “Of course you are.”

He tightens his jaw, turns, and storms upstairs to his bedroom. Winona can’t find it in herself to stop him.

---

Once the doctor declares Jim “mentally capable of personal evaluation” (and what does that even mean, “personal evaluation,” they make it sound like they’re going to help Jim come up with New Years resolutions), they bring Jim into Dr. M’L’Vann’s office, where he spends his time sitting cross-legged on a fluffy white couch and glaring at the psychiatrist on the armchair in front of him.

“You have been through an extremely traumatic time of your life,” Dr. M’L’Vann tells him calmly. “But it is over now. I want to help you unload the past few months so that you can leave this
experience behind you.”

Jim just stares at her in mutinous silence. He can’t leave Tarsus behind him – Tarsus is him now. And even if he could, Kodos would still be his first (and second and third and tenth and—) and Sam would still be dead.

She continues to ask him endless questions, but he has nothing to say. At long last she gives up and says exasperatedly, “I do not know what it is you want, Jim.”

After months of wanting so much so badly (food, safety, home, comfort, escape, SAM), Jim doesn’t want anything anymore. He can’t imagine wanting anything ever again.

If he does someday want something, though, he knows exactly how to get it.

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His mom, on the other hand, asks only one question.

“What were his last words?”

Jim looks at her, knows she’s looking for something specific – maybe for a final ‘I love you,’ like in a repeat of Dad. Or maybe for anything other than a repeat of Dad.

“He called Kodos a filthy rotten bastard,” says Jim.

His mother’s lips twitch in a smile for the first time in weeks.

---

Dr. M’L’Vann seems to have about as much luck with Natalie as she does with Jim. Tom, on the other hand, can’t stop talking about Tarsus. Everything he says has to do with Tarsus, or reminds him of Tarsus, or Tarsus Tarsus Tarsus. Tarsus haunts his every thought, his every step. He tells Jim that he keeps revisiting events in graphic detail, and when Jim tells him to stop, he replies that he can’t. He dreams so vividly that it may as well be happening all over again.

So Tom doesn’t sleep very often. Which works for Jim, because neither does he.

Then one day Jim’s physical therapy session is interrupted by Nurse Roberts, who barges in looking frantic and breathless and says, “Jim, we need you. Tom is—” and Jim doesn’t need to hear any more, he’s in his wheelchair and Roberts is pushing him out of the room, sprinting down the hall while Jim just tries to hang on for dear life.

They fly into Tom and Jim’s room where Tom is shouting and thrashing, held down by leather restraints just like he was when he first woke up. All Jim can understand of the garbled screaming is “Kodos.”

Jim stumbles up out of the wheelchair and goes to his friend.

“Tom,” he whispers, putting a hand on one of his friend’s. “Tom, hey. It’s me. Talk to me… You gotta talk to me, dude, you’re not making any sense.”

Tom’s feverish eyes focus on Jim. His wrists are held fast by the restraints, but Jim can feel his fingers scrabbling at the sheets uselessly anyway. “It was him, JT,” Tom rasps.

“Who?” says Jim. “Who was it?”
Tom opens his mouth, closes it, swallows, makes a strangled noise, clutches at the sheets.

Jim turns to the Nurse Roberts. “Let him out of the restraints.”

Roberts looks back at him doubtfully. “He’s going to hurt himself…”

“He’s trying to tell me something. Let him out of the restraints.”

Roberts hesitates, but eventually complies, although he stays nearby to protect Jim from Tom as well as to protect Tom from Tom. The fifteen-year-old reaches up and clutches Jim’s hand like it’s a lifeline.

“Who was it, Tom?” Jim asks again, his voice a gentle and quiet apposition to the pounding in his own chest.

Tom shudders, then whispers, “Kodos.”

Jim reels back. No. No, it can’t – Kodos is dead. He has to be…

Someone is making a horrible keening noise, and after a few long, labored moments of focusing on breathing and not blacking out, Jim realizes it’s him.

He staggers back and collapses onto his own bed, staring sightlessly ahead. If Kodos is alive – no. No, he can’t be alive, Jim CAN’T—

“You saw Kodos?” Nurse Roberts repeats, alarmed. “In this facility? Where?”

Slowly, Tom raises a trembling arm and points directly at Roberts.

Jim stares.

“I only saw him once,” Tom says. “But I know that face. That’s him, isn’t it, JT? That’s Kodos…”

Jim stares some more.

Nurse Roberts looks like he got hit over the head with a two-by-four.

“No,” Jim says at last, and suddenly feels unbearably tired. “No, that’s not Kodos. Go to sleep, Tom. You’re seeing things.”

Tom does.

Jim doesn’t.

---

It hits Jim at random intervals that Sam is gone.

The first time it’s when Mom is at his bedside at the emergency refugee hospital, and she’s just looking at him, pitying and a little scared, and Jim wants to turn to Sam and give him some sarcastic comment or maybe a grin or maybe an embarrassingly weepy hug but then Sam is dead and Jim stops breathing.

Jim stops breathing and his heart stands still and the room spins and his vitals go through the roof and Mom starts yelling and the doctors come in to sedate him and as Jim floats away in a current of empty, spinning black he hears himself calling for his big brother.
It happens again when he’s having lunch with Natalie, Tom, and Kevin, and Kevin just says, “Spaghetti is my favorite.” That’s all he says. Sam didn’t even like spaghetti but out of nowhere, Jim buckles under the weight of Sam’s absence all at once and has to leave the dining hall to throw up.

When he comes back, Kevin looks miserable and apologizes, and Jim says, “He didn’t even like spaghetti.”

No one makes fun of him.

Another time is when Jim is back home and Frank remarks, “Men are very mistreated too these days, y’know. People look down on ‘em for gettin’ ladies pregnant and not wantin’ to stick around. Well, that’s just the way of the world!”

Which, just, is a perfect example of one of the (many, many) things about Frank that Sam and he surreptitiously make fun of together. Jim rolls his eyes and looks over to his brother, and when he isn’t there Jim is hit with this nauseous, light-headed feeling like he’s been punched in the gut. He finds himself gasping for air and curling in on himself, the chorus of SamSamSam echoing like a siren, like a death toll, like he never left Tarsus at all.

If Frank notices, he makes no indication. Mom notices, but never says a word.

---

“With kids like that,” Frank tells her, and by ‘that’ he means Jim, like he’s ever dealt with kids like Jim before – like there are any kids like Jim, “you’ve gotta stop enabling them. Stop bailing ‘em out of jail. Let ‘em hit rock bottom. Otherwise they’ll never turn their lives around.”

---

Jim says his first words to Dr. M’L’Vann five minutes into his fourth therapy session, long after the psychiatrist has given Jim up as a lost cause, and told him so.

Jim’s first words to Dr. M’L’Vann are as follows: “Listen, Mel…”

Dr. M’L’Vann’s purple eyebrow twitches, but otherwise if she is surprised, she sure doesn’t show it.

“Yes, Jim?”

“I hear you’ve been terrorizing children again, Mel. You know that looks bad…what will the neighbors say?”

“Are you referring to yourself?”

Jim scoffs. “You wish. I’m talking about Kevin. He told me yesterday that you’ve been demanding answers about the Children’s Rebellion from him, even though he’s told you over and over again that he doesn’t remember what happened.” Jim pauses to send the psychiatrist a dirty look. “He was sobbing. He’s not trying to mess with you, he really doesn’t remember. He lost his whole family in a matter of months, don’t you think he could do without an evil psychiatrist to top it all off?”

“I am not trying to terrorize Kevin, Jim,” Mel tells him. “Repression of memories is extremely unhealthy for the psyche. The mind is protecting itself from pain, but that pain must be brought to light before it can heal.”

“Well I think if the mind is trying to tell you to back off then you should leave well enough alone, so it looks like we both have opinions.”
Mel studies him. “Do you wish you could forget, Jim?”

“Nope,” says Jim. “It’s been all giggles and fun times for me.”

“Jim,” she sighs. “Let us be serious.”

He leans forward. “Okay, let’s. You leave Kevin alone or else.”

“You are very protective of him. Do you see him as a little brother of sorts?”

The remark knocks the wind out of Jim, and he snarls back, “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters.”

“Well then you’re right. Kevin and I were sooo close. He’s been almost like a great-aunt to me.”

The psychiatrist sighs again and shakes her head. “I cannot ‘leave Kevin alone,’ Jim. His testimony is needed for case evidence.”

“Why? Kodos is dead.”

“Maybe so,” says Mel, and the slightly patronizing “maybe” grates on every nerve in Jim’s body. “But the Federation still wants the full story of what occurred here.”

“So ask Tom about the Children’s Rebellion. I know that you know that Tom knows everything Kevin knows, and God knows he’s more than willing to talk about it. Won’t shut up about it, in fact.”

“True,” Dr. M’L’Vann admits. “But there is another part of the testimony that only one person is alive to tell us.” She pauses, looks at his shrewdly. “Jim, can you tell me what it was like to be one of the ‘lucky ones’?”

Jim probably should have expected that.

(The lucky ones. What a joke. Out of the three, two are dead and one lies awake at night wishing he were, too.)

When he speaks, his voice is careful and flat, and his stomach is clenching with the too-familiar feeling of bargaining away everything he has. “If I tell you, will you promise to leave Kevin alone?”

He hears her quick intake of breath, the suppressed note of excitement-satisfaction in her voice. “Yes, of course – we can use Ms. Eldenwein and Mr. Leighton’s testimonies on the Children’s Rebellion. If we had yours to supplement them.”

So Jim takes a deep breath and tells her everything. He tells her how Kodos used to teach them, mentor them, take an interest in them. He tells her how he couldn’t believe that Kodos was behind the executions, at first. He tells her about finding as many kids as they could and running for their lives. He tells her about stealing, about hunger, about what Kodos did to Sam, what he did to Erika and the rest of the Children’s Rebellion in front of everyone on the day Sam died. The only thing he doesn’t tell her is what Kodos did to him in private. Dr. M’L’Vann takes notes.

“Now, don’t you feel better?” she asks when he finally finishes.

Jim feels sick and empty and violated. He feels like how he felt after his first time with Kodos in the storage house.
“Yeah,” he says. “Loads better.”

---

Winona spends her nights looking up at the stars.

There’s something about them, something almost physically perceptible, that pulls her in, calls her out into the beautiful, endless beyond. Into the infinite What Could Be and away from the ugly, painful What Is.

Maybe it’s how the stars look down on human emotions, human endeavors, human humanity and it never fazes them. They remain untouched by all, impassive, impregnably beautiful. A perfect contrast to the human, who is touched and molded and hurt by everything. Maybe it’s the magnetic attraction of opposite poles that pulls her.

Winona looks up and sees Jim sitting on the roof, staring at the same stars, and she knows that theirs were never difficulties of difference, but the magnetic repulsion of too-similar poles.

---

Jim isn’t home most nights, but when he is, he wakes up screaming.

Winona has never been able to sleep through the crying of her children, not when they were only babies and certainly not now, but it is only now that Jim’s cries paralyze her. She never, not once, goes to him. She would have no idea what to do if she did go to him. Instead she listens, and waits. And waits. She listens as her son’s screams cut off and slowly taper into whimpers, then to labored breathing, then to silence. She waits for when she’ll be able to go back to the stars, where she has always succeeded. She waits for when she will be able leave this house, this role, where she has always failed.

And every night Jim follows the lub—dub heartbeat of his nightmares (screaming—silence; screaming—silence; screaming—silence), and Winona waits. She waits, and tries to tell herself that she stays away because Jim won’t appreciate her interference, and not because seeing George’s face pale and wide-eyed with terror might just break her.

---

The dude Jim buys his drugs off is a) the friend of a friend of a friend, b) a Benzite appropriately nicknamed Pusher, and c) a huge wuss.

“I got to the handoff spot, right, but then I see this guy, he’s wearing this long coat and looking all suspicious, I coulda sworn he was a cop, and man, I gotta three-year-old girl to take care of, I can’t go to jail, so I high-tailed it outta there!” Pusher explains when Jim and his buddies from the club ask where the goods are. “I still got your money…” He gestures to the suitcase in his hands. “But I coulda gotten busted, or killed, or worse, man! I’ll get ‘em for you next week.”

Jim scoffs. “Nah, you’ll find some reason to drop the ball next week too. You’re just a chicken.”

The Benzite splutters and tries to deny it, but Jim cuts him off with some obnoxious clucking noises, and soon enough all of his hangers-on have joined in too.

“You think it’s so easy, huh? I dare you to try it yourself.” Pusher shoves the suitcase into Jim’s chest, obviously expecting him to back up, back out.

Jim tilts his head and raises an eyebrow. “You’re on.”
The fifth time Winona picks Jim up from jail – this time from a jail over fifty miles out of Riverside, how did he even get there? – she forcibly sits him down on the living room couch and makes him explain.

She can make him sit, and she can make him talk, but she can’t make him look at her. “It was just a dare, Mom,” Jim mutters to the couch cushions. Which, perversely, makes things easier, when she doesn’t have to talk to George’s face, George’s eyes.

“You could have gotten killed,” she says quietly.

Jim shrugs, plays with a hole in his jeans, doesn’t look the slightest bit perturbed by this possibility.

“Jim… Look at me, Jimmy.”

He doesn’t. His lips curl in a humorless smile. “Do you really want me to?”

The seemingly innocent question freezes the blood in Winona’s veins. “What - what do you mean?”

He laughs softly, shaking his head, and finally meets her eyes. She can’t stop her sharp intake of breath.

“You think I don’t see it?”

She recoils from the scorn in George’s expression.

“You think I never noticed that you can’t stand to look at me anymore?” he says, his voice low and oddly calm. “That whenever we make eye contact you actually flinch? I’ve seen the pictures of Dad when he was my age. I’m not stupid.”

Winona can’t reply, is struck speechless – speechless, horrified, exposed – and the seconds stretch into silence broken only by the muted ticking of the living room clock.

“So which is it?” Jim asks with a wide – and completely fake – smile. He stretches lazily. “Do you avoid looking at me because you miss him, or because you can’t stand to see what I’m doing with his face?”


“You can’t tell the two of us apart anymore, so it bothers you, where this mouth has been, where this dick has been. How many people have watched the carbon copy of your husband come…” He smirks. “Or maybe it bothers you because you know that if I didn’t have half your DNA you’d be first in line for a piece of me.”

There are so many answers that Winona will not, should not, cannot give to that.

“I know about Kodos” is the one that ends up coming out of her mouth.

All at once, something shuts down in Jim’s expression. He gets to his feet, scrubs a hand over his face, starts pacing the floor with the disquiet of a man twice his age.

“Who told you?” he demands eventually.

“Your friend Tom. Thomas Leighton.”
“I’m going to kill that guy,” Jim says, matter-of-fact.

“He was right to tell me. Don’t you think it’s important for me to know my child was raped?” she asks, her voice thick.

Jim flinches. “I don’t know what Tom told you, but it wasn’t rape. It was my idea every single time. But hey, you keep thinking it was rape if it makes you feel better. It’s a lot simpler that way.”

Winona knows she’s long lost any control she had over this conversation. “Are you trying to tell me that you liked what he did to you?”

“Oh, maybe I loved it,” says Jim offhandedly.

“You don’t know what you want,” she says. “You’re just a kid.”

Jim whirls, snaps a hand out, sends the porcelain table lamp to the floor in a shower of noise and blue shards. “Stop treating me like a child!” he yells, turning on her. Winona flinches away from George’s fury. “I don’t know where you’ve been, but I haven’t been a kid for a very long time. I’m not some confused little boy who fell victim to the evil Executioner of Tarsus, okay? I know exactly what I want and how to get it. You just can’t wrap your mind around the fact that maybe I wanted it. Maybe I wanted the chains and the whips, maybe I wanted to be violated down to every thought in my head and every cell in my body, maybe I wanted it so rough I couldn’t walk for a week. What?” he taunts when she winces. “You’re saying it doesn’t bother you? Go ahead, tell me I’m wrong!”

Winona feels the raw, helpless horror rise like bile in her throat, rises to her feet. “That’s enough!” she shouts. “I said that’s enough, George!”

Both Jim and Winona freeze.

Jim’s face twists and for a moment she thinks he’s going to cry, but instead George’s face smirks and his eyes gleam maliciously. “Sorry sweetie, I forgot how difficult it must be to watch your perfect hero husband get reincarnated as a slut.”

Jim stares hard at her and then turns abruptly back to the couch, and suddenly Winona can breathe again. She hates how obvious it is.

“That’s why this is so hard for you, seeing me all beat up or in jail or banging everything in sight… It’s not about me, not really. It’s that you can’t handle watching him crash and burn all over again.”

His voice is challenging, expectant, waiting for her to correct him. And waiting.

And the silence stretches on and Winona doesn’t correct him – can’t correct him – because they both know it’s true.

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She always brings colorful flowers when she visits their graves, because there’s something deeply unsettling about the simple grey headstones of her vibrant, dynamic, beautiful husband and son. She could sit and talk to George’s headstone for hours (and has, frequently), but today she talks to Sam, calling on the memory of the only person who’s ever been able to handle Jim.

“We haven’t spoken since the fight,” she tells him. “He wakes up past noon, eats, and goes out on that motorcycle of his, heaven knows what or who he did to get it... If he ever comes home it’s at an
insane hour of the morning. Frank says that if he doesn’t appreciate us, he should see he he likes it on his own. Sometimes I think he’s right.” Winona sighs, plays with a blade of grass. “But then I see him sneaking food into his room, just in case, and I can’t…” She cuts herself off, rubs at her eyes. “Either way I’m running out of leave.”

She sighs and tips her head toward the sleet-grey sky, where her beloved stars lay disguised behind a veil of light. “It’s been almost a year, Sam. I’ve been grounded for almost a full year, and I don’t know how to help him. I can barely look at him these days.”

Sam, of course, makes no reply. The wind keens and plucks at her coat, as if begging her to stay. “Maybe Frank is right,” she says at last. “Maybe there’s just…nothing I can do.”

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“What,” the guy with the gravity-defying bangs says, looking Jim up and down. “Skinny little thing like you? Don’t make me laugh.”

Jim grins. “Hey, this skinny little thing could top anybody in this room, and make ‘em like it.”

“Sure,” Bangs replies, chuckling.

“Point to anybody, I’ll prove it to you.”

He thinks about it, then points across the club. “All right. I dare you to top that fine lady over there.”

Jim turns. He’s pointing to a ten-foot Klingon woman in the corner. She looks like she could snap Jim in half without breaking a sweat and use his bones as toothpicks.

“You’re crazy,” Pusher tells Bangs, horrified. “People don’t top Klingons - it can’t be done! She’ll kill him if he even tries!”

Jim tilts his head and raises one eyebrow.

---

The seventy-ninth time Jim comes home smelling of blood and sex and weed, Winona fills out the form officially taking her off leave and back into the stars. Frank assures her that she’s doing the right thing.

She just prays to whatever’s out there that Jim doesn’t find out before she can find a way to tell him.

---

Jim finds out, of course.

A week later she walks in on Jim reading a message on the house’s holofeed, stony-faced, and Winona immediately wishes she had told Starfleet to contact her on her private line.

“So,” he says, his voice calm. “You’re going back to space.”

“Jimmy—” she tries, moving toward him.

He takes a step back, away from her, and for a moment the façade breaks and Winona can see the wide, betrayed eyes, the tiniest tremble of his hands on the PADD.
“Stop calling me that,” he hisses.

She blinks. “Jimmy? I’ve always called you that…”

“Well, you’re the only one who does. Everyone else calls me Jim.”

That’s not true, she thinks. She’s not the only one who calls him Jimmy. There was also—

“Oh, honey,” she says when she realizes. She takes another step closer to him. “I miss him too.”

Jim takes another step back. “I don’t miss him.”

Her throat tightens, but she forces herself on, desperate to find even the littlest remnant of the Jim she left on Tarsus. “Of course you miss Sam. You love him. You were always so close… I remember when you were little, and I would pretend to be leaving the house without you so you would hurry up, and Sam would think we were really leaving without you and start freaking out and yelling that we had to wait for you…”

Jim shakes his head, shuts his eyes like the story causes him physical pain. “I don’t love him. I hate him.”

“He died for you, Jimmy. Jim.” She can barely speak past the lump in her throat.

“Well, I didn’t ask him to!” he screams. He throws the PADD across the room and Winona takes a step back, for the first time fearing for her own safety. “I begged him not to! I could’ve taken what Kodos gave me – I was fine!”

He pauses for breath, his chest heaving, his eyes suspiciously bright.

“You think I want this?” he says wretchedly, not looking at her. “You can’t stand that I’m here when they’re not. You can’t even look at me because you blame me for their deaths. Everyone sees me and says, Too bad about that Kirk boy – his father and brother were really something. And I –” His voice catches. “I never asked him to sacrifice anything for me. My whole life everybody’s been telling me that Dad loved me enough to die for me, but if you ask me I would’ve preferred if he had loved me enough to stick around. And now Sam – Sam, he –” Jim’s voice goes high and strangled, and he presses the heels of his hands into his eyes like he can forcibly keep the tears back. “And now you want me to be grateful for Sam dying too, when all he did was die, just like Dad did. He went up against Kodos even though I told him – I told him – but he did it anyway, and –”

Jim pulls his hands away, gritting his teeth. The pain in his voice hardens into helpless spite. “He went up against Kodos and he got exactly what he deserved.”

The world stops. “What?”

“I said, he deserved it,” Jim says viciously. “It was his own fault for running his stupid fat mouth. He’d still be alive if he’d just shut up and taken what Kodos gave him, like – like I did—”

Winona slaps him, hard.

They stare at each other for a long, horrible moment. All she can see is the betrayal and bitter satisfaction in her George’s eyes, in his face.

“Maybe I should just go,” George’s face, George’s eyes – Jim – says, very quietly.

“Maybe you should,” Winona replies, and finds that she’s less tormented about it now that she’s said
it out loud.

Jim isn’t surprised either, and Winona doesn’t know how to feel about that. He just gives a tiny nod, a tight, bitter smile, and for another long moment they watch each other in the darkened living room, each caught in the mutual realization that they will not be seeing the other for a very long time. That they, perhaps, are seeing the other for the very last time.

“At least the timing’s convenient. You’re going back to space and I’m going to…somewhere.” Jim shrugs, like it doesn’t really matter, his voice too steady and too calm in the silence. “I’ll just get my stuff together and go. You don’t have to wait up for me if it hurts too much to watch him leave again.”

He goes upstairs and Winona moves like a ghost to her bedroom. Then she closes the door, sits on the edge of her bed, and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

And listens to the muffled sounds of her son’s footsteps downstairs, how Jim hesitates at the front door, waits for her.

(And waits.)

And then, finally, the slam of the door as both he and the ghost of his father leave her for what may be the final time.

She can’t breathe for the relief of it.

---

The rush of adrenaline and the wind in his face as he sends his motorcycle into high gear never fails to calm him down.

That is, until now.

He’s flying down the highway, probably pushing 120 at this point, he’s not looking at the speedometer. He’s not looking at the road. He stares into the golden-red glare of the sunset, seeing nothing.


_Do it again_, an inner voice urges him. Drive straight into that cliff. Do it again, but this time don’t cop out at the last minute - do it for real. Do what you were trying to do when you were eleven, but didn’t have the courage to finish. Do what you should’ve done when you were eleven.

It would’ve made everything a lot easier.

He sees the cliff approaching. Bends down over his motorcycle, urging it to go faster, take him faster, _end it faster._

He’s almost there; Jim’s breathing goes hard and erratic. All he has to do is _not stop_ and everything will be over. He doesn’t have to be burden on his mother or a stain on the name of his father or the failure to save his brother.

He’s almost there – he’s almost –
Ten yards from the cliff, Jim yanks the handlebars, swings out wide, and his wheels turn all at once, sending up a spray of dirt into the blinding sunset, over the cliff, down into nothingness. He stares down at the drop – *at his death* – a mere half-foot away, breathing hard and trembling all over.

He’s frozen there for what seems like hours, or maybe only seconds, following the drop with eyes and taking deep, shuddering breaths and feeling every bit like the stupid, weak, all-too-mortal kid he is.

Jim feels something wet land on his right hand and is startled to see a teardrop. And then another. Another teardrop lands on the handlebar. Jim puts a hand to his face and realizes that he’s crying.

He’s six inches from where he could’ve died, probably should’ve died, and he’s crying, and then he’s curled into himself, clutching his stomach and sobbing like a child who can’t help himself, can only scream and cry and make a racket because he doesn’t have any other way to say *help me help me HELP ME*—

Waiting for someone to find him.

And waiting.

But of course, no one ever comes.

---

Eventually the tears stop and Jim wipes his face on a dirty sleeve. He needs to get away from this cliff. He needs to find somewhere to stay tonight. He needs… *He needs*—

Jim has no idea what he needs, but he figures he can’t go wrong with the usual: getting laid, getting into a fight, and getting so drunk he can’t see straight, not necessarily in that order. And he knows just the place.

---

“Nice try,” the bouncer chuckles as Jim approaches. “But absolutely not. You’re just a kid.”

Jim smirks and grabs the bouncer’s tie, pulling him so close their noses almost brush. He licks his lips and watches the man’s pupils dilate. “Wanna bet?” he whispers.

---

“Well well.” The Andorian chick he’s been best buddies with for, oh, six minutes or so gives him a filthy grin that goes straight to his groin. “You *can* dance after all.”

He smirks, pulls her closer by the waist, replies, “I can do a lot more than dance.”

---

“I’m married,” the bartender mutters as he pulls him into the storage room. “So if anyone asks, I never said yes to this.”

Jim straddles the man’s hips and flashes him a wide, impish grin. “You don’t have to say yes. You just have to not say no.”

---

Jim wakes to an unfamiliar bedroom and a hideous hangover.
He groans and rolls over, squinting against the pounding in his head. Jim’s generous lodging donor for the night is turned away from him but obviously female. He doesn’t remember her name. He doesn’t remember her at all.

It’s still dark outside; prime time for him to get lost, before she wakes up. An unspoken infinity lies between sleeping with someone and sleeping with someone, and Jim has long understood the tightrope-walk of needing the one while being terrified of the other.

Jim closes his eyes, letting out a long, heavy breath. Then he swings his legs over the side of the bed, gets unsteadily to his feet, and gathers his clothing.

It’s all he has left, after all.
The only problem with never spending the night with anyone is that Jim is perpetually looking for a place to sleep.

He ends up on benches, fire escapes, in the backrooms of convenience stores, pretty much any horizontal surface that will stay still long enough for Jim to lose consciousness on it.

This kind of works for a while, but after Jim gets mugged for the eleventh time he finally asks around for possible vacancies and gets hooked up – in both senses of the word – with the friend of a friend of a friend (gotta love those) who’s willing to let Jim stay in the little room above her flower shop in exchange for a couple of hours of work per day.

Jim naturally assumes “work” means sex, but when he shows up and she pulls him into an apron, he realizes she actually means work, apparently.

(And sex, as he finds out later, when she pulls him out of the apron.

But mainly work.)

So Jim has a relatively normal life at Mira’s flower shop for all of two weeks before a hooker Jim refers to fondly as Idiot Stan dares Jim to hack into the Starfleet Riverside Branch Private Bank. He even offers the added (but honestly, unnecessary) motivations of fifty credits and, of course, bragging rights.

So because, okay yes, Jim physically cannot turn down a dare (even from Idiot Stan), he spends that Saturday holed up with Mira’s PADD and a six-pack of beer and only reemerges when the clock says 3:52 AM and he’s got a headache and ten million credits in his bank account.

(He also changes the Starfleet Central Bank’s executive security password to “password.” Because he can.)

Idiot Stan freaks out when Jim shows him his account balance at the club that night, and Jim gets fifty credits, more free shots than he knows what to do with, and a mind-blowing tête-à-tête with a visiting scientist chick who knows quantum field theory and rides him like an animal.

He also gets arrested, but. Priorities.

The police call Jim’s house, but Frank picks up the phone and tells them in no uncertain terms he’s never heard of that good-for-nothing Kirk boy in his life.

Yes, he’s married to Winona Kirk.

Yes, Winona Kirk is James Kirk’s only living relative.

No, he does not want to pay bail. No, he does not want to visit his stepson. Neither does James’s
mother. He doesn’t need to ask her what she thinks, he knows what she thinks. No, he does not want to pay for a lawyer. You know, he knew that boy would turn out rotten one day. Good riddance.

Long story short, Jim’s case goes to trial with a state-hired defense attorney named Mr. Hart who owns exactly one suit and immediately pleads guilty.

“However,” Hart adds, and Jim can see (and smell) that he’s already sweated through his suit jacket, “considering Mr. Kirk immediately returned the money and left no trace in the Starfleet firewall, I suggest we send him home with a slap on the wrist and no harm done.”

“Your Honor,” the prosecutor interjects. She’s tall and blonde and smoking hot. “This no small offense we are discussing – Mr. Kirk may have returned the money, but he still stole ten million credits from Starfleet. Not only that, but this is Mr. Kirk’s eighth arrest and his third trial. Slaps on the wrist have not been effective in the past; it would be foolish to allow ourselves to believe they will be effective in the future.” She looks hard at Jim, who has his feet up on the table and is amusing himself by watching Mr. Hart flinch every time Jim loudly pops his gum. “We cannot even ‘send him home,’ as Mr. Hart suggests, because his mother and stepfather no longer wish to take responsibility for him.”

“What have you been doing with your time since leaving home?” the judge asks him.

“Well,” says Jim slowly, leaning back even further and putting his hands behind his head. “I hacked into the Starfleet Bank on Saturday.”

The prosecutor grinds her teeth. Unfortunately it does not make her less attractive. “By all accounts, Mr. Kirk has been working part-time at the Eastern Sea Flower Shop. The rest of his time seems to be taken up by his sexual proclivities.”

Jim grins and bats his eyelashes at her. “Yeah I’m pretty busy, but don’t worry – I’m sure I can pencil you in somewhere.”

Mr. Hart is making abortabortABORTMAYDAYMAYDAY motions at Jim. The prosecutor glares.

The judge shakes his head sadly. “When I heard who you were I couldn’t believe—”

(Jim’s stomach sinks. He knows where this is going.)

“—that the son of Captain George Kirk would—”

(Aaand there it is.)

The judge keeps talking, but Jim’s mind has an excellent George Kirk Adulation filter and so it just sounds like “—stoop to petty crimes blah blah blah do you have any idea who your father blah blah blah a great man blah hero blah would be disappointed if he blah blah blah…”

Eventually the judge must either run out of glowing things to say about George or realize that Jim’s been paying far more attention to the pen he’s twirling in his hand, because he stops and says after a long pause, “I suppose genetics aren’t everything.”

And that’s it, in his mind. He’s written Jim off as a mishap of life, a shortfall on the part of genetics, an interesting story to tell his kids. The son of a hero, the impersonation of his father, the boy who couldn’t save anybody. Not even himself.

Jim’s knuckles whiten around the pen.
“What are the recommended sentences from both sides?” the judge asks.

“Five years in a juvenile detention center, Your Honor,” the prosecutor says promptly.

Mr. Hart glances at Jim helplessly and says, “Two years in a juvenile detention center and five hundred hours of community service.”

“Excuse me, Your Honor,” another voice interjects from the courtroom. Jim turns to see a man in a Starfleet uniform stand up.

“I would like to ask Mr. Kirk a few questions,” he says.

“Go ahead,” says the judge.

Mr. Hart gives him a look that says, *Don’t screw this up.* Jim rolls his eyes.

“How did you hack the bank’s security system?” the officer demands. He must be part of the security programming crew, because he looks deeply and personally offended by Jim’s very existence. “What code did you use?”

“Oh, that? That was just a little something I whipped up, I was worried I had used too much turmeric. Did you really like it?”

To his credit, he just narrows his eyes and says, “I would like to see it, please.”

Jim resists saying *I would like to see some things of yours too babe* and gives him the PADD.

He stands there for a while scrolling through Jim’s 338 pages of code, his eyes growing wider and wider with every passing moment.

“You wrote this?” he manages in a strangled voice after five minutes of staring at the PADD.

“Yes,” says Jim slowly, suspiciously, but the man is already turning away, telling his assistant to call some chief programmer, make her come immediately, and then less than a minute later there’s an entire team of a dozen programmers crowding around the PADD, staring at Jim’s code and whispering and throwing Jim stunned looks.

After about twenty minutes of this, the woman who must be the chief programmer steps forward and says, “We have an alternate suggestion for Mr. Kirk’s sentence.”

The judge waves her to continue.

She looks straight at Jim and says, “Instead of spending five years in juvenile detention, he can sign a five-year contract with Starfleet’s computer programming and engineering sector. He will be trained and paid a suitable salary for his work.”

Jim bursts out laughing.

“You do know who my Dad was, right?” he explains when he can breathe again. “There is no reason good enough to make me join Starfleet.”

“Fine,” she says, and Jim can see true anger in her face. “Then I’ll make you a deal. If Starfleet can use this code as a reference for our updated firewall, we will shorten the sentence to one year.”

The prosecutor looks appalled. Jim thinks about it.
“Three months,” he says.

She scowls. “Six.”

“Done.”

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It’s not like Jim doesn’t know who his father was, quite the opposite. Many of the people he meets seem to take it upon themselves to explain to Jim exactly who his father was, especially when Jim is doing something wrong.

Seriously, Jim gets it. His dad died heroically saving hundreds of people and all that, which means there are hundreds of people running around who owe his dad, which means there are thousands of people running around who indirectly owe his dad, which means there are millions of people who just generally admire him.

And so, because some of those millions obviously have too much money on their hands, Jim has been forced to attend dozens of donation ceremonies and building openings dedicated to the memory of George Kirk – usually orphanages and hospitals and children’s causes because who can resist a child who needs help, right?

Meanwhile Jim would be a walking spectacle at each of these parties, gathering looks of curiosity and pity, and then disappointment when Jim inevitably didn’t live up to hype of his name and face. His only respite was Sam, who would stick by him and distract him and dare him to try the sannakji.

So honestly it’s not like this stuff should surprise him anymore, but he still doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry when the police car pulls up to the George Kirk Juvenile Detention Center.

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The thing is, though – Jim actually enjoys juvie.

He soon learns that, unlike park benches and fire escapes and even Mira’s flower shop, the juvenile detention center has warm beds, regular meals, and plenty of other horny boys to hang out with. It even has a decent gym, with optional classes on everything from meditation to martial arts. Jim tries them all (he’s sucky at meditation and great at martial arts, to the surprise of absolutely no one). Jim even likes the life guidance workshops, where he gets to watch the career advisor’s face go pale when he says he wants to be a correctional officer in a juvenile delinquent center when he grows up.

Honestly the place would be heaven if not for that stupid P.A. system.

Mr. Bartholomew Mortimer – yes, his name does have its own zip code – is the director of the detention center and an enormous ham. He has this P.A. system hooked up to every cell, every room, every hallway, every nook and cranny of the place – you can’t even escape his voice in the bathroom. And his announcements go on and on and on. It wouldn’t surprise Jim if Mr. Mortimer started telling them every single ingredient in the lunch menu for the day. And he repeats things, like, “Attention all officers, attention all officers. This is your director speaking. I repeat, this is your director speaking. It is a beautiful day out, just beautiful…”

It’s so annoying that even the teachers and security officers cringe when the P.A. system beeps to indicate an incoming announcement.

But seriously, aside from that, Jim could probably live here forever.

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Perhaps his favorite thing about juvie is his English class with Ms. Williams, partly because the math and science classes are *soooo slow* and partly because Ms. Williams is a hardcore fantastic teacher. Unfortunately (or fortunately), she and Jim are the only literature nerds in the detention center, so they tend to direct all their comments during class at each other, even if they don’t do it outright. They spend an entire session once debating whether or not the potion that transforms Jekyll into Hyde is a literal potion or a euphemism for feels. (Ms. Williams likes the repressed feelings approach, and Jim actually agrees with her, which means he has to argue the other side because he’s a troll like that.)

One day she pulls him aside after class and tells him that she’s submitted a special request that Jim be allowed to take books into his cell. She even gives him an envelope with a copy of the letter.

*(To Whom It May Concern:)*

*I would like to request that an exception be made to the regulation forbidding books outside the classroom for my student, James Tiberius Kirk.*

*Mr. Kirk is intelligent, insightful, and eager to learn, and his creativity and articulacy set his work unmistakably apart from the rest. I have also seen from his literary insights that he has a deep sense of justice and a profound empathy for all life, unmatched in any student I have ever encountered. Mr. Kirk’s intuition and moral compass are forces both strong and sound in his reasoning that will serve him well if he allows them to do so.*

*It is my privilege to have a hand in educating Mr. Kirk, and in doing so, contributing to the development of someone I am certain will become a truly exemplary individual.*

*Ms. Lakira Williams*

When Jim returns to his room he takes one look at the first line of the letter and can’t read the rest. He doesn’t know why, exactly; maybe it’s because he already has enough people to disappoint. He puts the letter away and promises that he’ll make himself read it one day.

Either way, her request is accepted and Jim is allowed to take one book at a time into his room from the center’s severely outdated (read: perfect for Jim’s tastes) library.

So Jim spends all of his down time devouring the works of Shakespeare, Hemingway, Stevenson, Austen, Dickens, Twain…. He’s a pretty fast reader, and no single book sticks around in Jim’s cell for too long, with one exception: *The Great Gatsby*, the book about the boy with no identity of his own, only the identity of the person he’s expected to be.

Jim keeps that one for a week and reads it six times.

---

There are downsides to juvie too, of course. Like the fact that, between the officers and the prisoners, eighty-five percent of the population is bullies.

He manages to stay out of it for the first few weeks, but that idea goes up in smoke when Jim sees two huge guys cornering a kid half their size during lunch one day.

“I bet a twig like you doesn’t even need to eat,” says Tweedle-Dee.

“Yeah, the rats do okay around here, you’ll do fine too,” Tweedle-Dum agrees. “Hand it over.”

And the thing is, Jim has a giant bomb inside him labeled ‘KIDS GOING HUNGRY’, and as he
watches the idiot kid slowly hand over his lunch to Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, it starts ticking, counting down at a furious pace.

Before he knows what’s going on he’s in front of them and saying, “Hey. Back off.”

Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum look at each other, then turn to sneer at Jim. “Yeah? What’re you gonna do about it?”

Jim crosses his arms, tilts his head, and raises his eyebrows, unimpressed. “Really? You think I’m scared of you?” He takes a threatening step forward, and like all petty bullies, they take a startled step back. “I’ve seen things nobody should ever have to see. I’ve defied death more times than you’ve graduated grades. My life is the stuff of a suicide note, and I have literally nothing left to lose. Do you really – really – think I’m scared of you?”

They stare at him, speechless. Finally Tweedle-Dee turns and very swiftly not-runs away. Tweedle-Dum hurries after him.

“Thank you,” the boy says quietly, looking up at Jim with an adoration that reminds him uncomfortably of Kevin. “Um, I don’t think we’ve met? I’m Danny. Who’re you?”

Probably best not to tell everybody that he’s the son of the guy whose name is emblazoned all over the side of the detention center. “Gatsby,” Jim says. “Jay Gatsby.”

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Within a matter of hours reports of Jim’s temper tantrum have spread like wildfire, gaining added details in the process. By breakfast the next morning the story is that Jim terrified Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum into a full-on case of rabies. While normally this would make people think twice about being friends with Jim, suddenly he’s the guy everybody wants to know. Eventually he becomes one of the big names of the detention center, becoming something of a big brother to the younger kids and a leader to everyone else. Not everyone likes him; opinions on him tend to range from affection to adoration to grudging respect. One boy named Harcourt Fenton Mudd (in for smuggling) tells him straight up that he’s jealous of Jim and would take his position in a second, which is the sort of brutal honesty Jim appreciates. It’s nice having people to talk to during meals and classes and gym sessions, even if no one except for Ms. Williams has noticed anything wrong with his name.

Oh yeah, and there’s still that stupid P.A. system.

“Did you hear that?” Harry says one day during lunch, elbowing Jim in the ribs.

“Nah,” says Jim. “Whenever the P.A. turns on, all I hear is ‘Attention Kirk Detention Center: this is Mr. Mortimer and I am a tool. A tool. A tool, tool, tool.’”

“Well, maybe you’d better start paying attention – there’s a new kid coming to town.”

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Mom is going to kill me, Huddley thinks while the juvenile detention center officer takes his mugshot.

“Now turn to the side, Mr. Flynn. Um. P-please,” the officer adds, looking up – literally – at Huddley with badly concealed fear.

Huddley sighs and turns sideways. It’s not like he hasn’t gotten looks before as a seven-foot, 250-
pound sixteen-year-old boy, but he didn’t expect it from corrections officers of all people.

Another officer arrives, looking at her clipboard. “Mr. Flynn, I need you to sign the – ” (This is the part where she looks up.) “ – the – oh my God.” Then she seems to remember who and where she is and says, “I mean, um, Mr. Flynn. Please wait one moment.”

She disappears and Huddley sighs.

Of course he would be framed as a drug dealer and sent to juvenile detention the one time his parents finally went on a vacation together. Of course. He had tried to explain what happened to the officers who arrested him, the judge, his parents (they were out of signal range – which is why his Mom’s going to kill him when she finds out), the officers who took him here – but everybody took one look at his size and – well, to be honest, his naturally mean-looking face, and decided that he was a criminal.

Speak of which, the officer comes back (now with a phaser in her holster), and apprehensively approached Huddley to give him the paperwork he has to sign.

Once all the official stuff is done, they take Huddley into the actual facility, where they meet up with yet another officer, who says, “So is this the new – woah.”

Huddley gets a full three minutes of the officer’s staring before the other guard clears her throat and reminds him what he’s supposed to be doing. “Mr. Flynn needs a room, Mitchell.”

A slow, dawning look of epiphany crosses his face. “I know just where to put this guy.” And then at the other guards’ confusion, “Kirk.”

Kirk like the name of the detention center? But the other officers seem to understand what he’s saying because they all start smiling. “That’s right. Maybe this’ll make him take detention more seriously.”

“He should take it seriously, kid’s not going anywhere anytime soon. He’s the sort who’ll get out of juvie and end up right back in, and then when he’s too old for juvie he’ll end up in jail.”

“Shame, with those looks.”

They all murmur in agreement and soon enough he’s being frog-marched by two guards down several hallways and past a couple of rooms (some of the boys come forward to the bars to get a glimpse, and immediately back off again when they do catch sight of him). Eventually they get to what will apparently be Huddley’s room for the next six weeks, and one of the officers enters the code.

The door swings open, and they take off the handcuffs and push Huddley inside.

“Hey, Kirk. We got a new friend for you.”

His cellmate, a blond kid reading a book on his stomach on one of the beds, makes a noncommittal noise. Huddley cranes his head so he can see the title. *The Crucible.*

“Don’t be rude now. Say hello.”

Kirk glances up (and woah, that’s a lot of blue), and Huddley watches him do the usual double take at his size, the up-down assessment of how likely he is to kill them. What he doesn’t see is the usual fear; Kirk just seems vaguely interested by Huddley’ enormity.
“Hello,” says Kirk.

The officer who’d suggested this room (or, more specifically, this roommate) looks slightly put out, but all he says is, “We’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” and he and the other guard leave the cell.

So Huddley is left standing there while Kirk goes back to his book and seems to immediately forget that there’s anybody else in the room.

He tries to break the silence a few times, but every idea that pops into his head is stupider than the last (“is Kirk your real name?” and “what’s your favorite color?” and “if you were an eating utensil, what would you be?”), so eventually he just gives up and goes to sit on the bed opposite Kirk’s. The steel frame creaks.

They stay like that for a while, in a dead silence that makes Huddley want to scream but that Kirk doesn’t even seem to be aware of. Except that every now and then Kirk’s bright blue eyes will glance toward him, calculating and a little bit wary.

Eventually Huddley can’t take it anymore. “So…is that a good book?”

Stupid stupid stupid STUPID, he chants internally.

After a moment’s pause, Kirk looks at him, tilts his head, says, “Well it’s good so far. Why, you a big reader?”

“Naw, not really,” he says awkwardly. “Just trying to make conversation.”

Huddley actually just wants this conversation to be over so he can stop making a fool of himself, but Kirk smiles crookedly at him. “Name’s Jay. What’s yours?”

“Huddley,” says Huddley.

“Your name is…Huddley?” Jay repeats, as if he’s not sure he heard that correctly.

“It’s not the coolest name,” Huddley admits, rubbing his neck.

The other boy snorts. “Yeah, no kidding.” He gets to his feet and sits next to Huddley on the bed. The steel frame groans and Jay looks down at it, eyebrows raised. “Oh wow, they might have to really reinforce this thing. Nice.”

Nice. That’s one way to put it. “Yeah… So. Um. What are you here for, Jay?” Oh yes, so, tell me about your criminal record. What a conversation starter.

“Hacking and embezzling a private bank,” the other boy replies with casual hand wave. “How about you?”

“Well,” Huddley starts nervously. “I’m here for possession of marijuana. But I didn’t – I swear I didn’t…”

His roommate cuts him off with a comforting pat on the back. “Yeah, okay, I believe you. How much of it did you actually do?”

“Well. The littering,” says Huddley.

Jay stares.

“And creating a public disturbance?” he adds hopefully.
The blond grins, slaps Huddley on the back. “In that case, I think this may be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. We are going to have to do something about that name though… Do you have a middle name?”

“Um, yeah. Nicholas?” says Huddley.

A slow grin spreads across his roommate’s face.

---

That day at lunch, Jay tells Huddley – no, Nick now – to sit a few seats away from him. Huddley looks around at the sea of strangers and says, “But… I don’t know what to…”

“Don’t say anything,” Jay tells him. “Sit over there and don’t say a word. I’ll take care of it.”

So Huddley – or Nick, whatever – complies (trying not to look at the terrified faces he gathers from the other boys), and finds that the mess hall is loud, but if he pays attention, he can still hear most of the conversation going on a few seats away.

“Hey, who’s the new guy?” the boy across the table from Jay whispers.

“My roommate,” he replies, and sounds almost…scared?

Jay’s fear proves contagious, because the other kid speaks again, he sounds a little bit afraid too. “What’s he in for?”

Huddley watches out of the corner of his eye as Jay hunches down over his food and mutters, “No way, Harry. If he finds out I told you…”

“I won’t tell!”

Jay looks at him suspiciously.

“I won’t,” Harry insists. “Cross my heart and hope to puke.”

Jay looks around, cautious, then leans forward and says, “Dude killed his stepdad.” Both Huddley and Harry flinch in shock.

“No way…”

“He did it ‘cause the bastard was hitting his mom, but still. I wouldn’t want to be on that guy’s bad side.”

Harry nods and sends Huddley a furtive, worried look. Huddley fights to keep his gaze straight ahead.

A few minutes later Huddley risks a glance at Jay. His roommate winks back.

---

Harry obviously cannot, in fact, keep a secret because by dinner that day everyone knows about Huddley’s supposed murder and is deathly terrified of him.

“I thought we were trying to make me friends,” says Huddley dolefully. “No one will even make eye contact with me!”
“All part of the plan,” says Jay.

So Huddley tries not to think about it and goes to class and to the required therapy sessions and adamantly doesn’t worry about the idea of not having any friends (except for Jay) for his whole six-week sentence.

He shouldn’t have doubted Jay’s promise, though, because he’s a little bit late to the group sports activity they apparently have twice a week because he has to be escorted (by not one but two officers) from therapy to the gym, and by the time he shows up, all the boys in the place are clamoring to be his friend.

“I can’t believe you got him to agree to join our group, Jay,” he hears in between introductions to way more people than Huddley will ever remember. “You’re a genius. I could kiss you!”

“Well I hope you’re not going to stop there,” his roommate replies with a smirk.

“What group?” Huddley asks Nick quietly when he finally manages to cut through most of the people trying to become friends with him. It’s a nice feeling, being fought over instead of feared for once.

“There are a couple of main groups of friends – or alliances, if you will – here. Agreeing to join one doesn’t mean you can’t join another. But it does mean you won’t go beating up anybody in your own group.”

“But…I wasn’t going to do that anyway.”

Jay grins mischievously. “Well they don’t know that.”

Huddley opens his mouth to reply, but another boy comes barreling in between them.

“Harcourt Fenton Mudd,” he says loudly, extending a hand. Huddley shakes it.

“H—Nick,” Huddley replies.

“All right, all right, break it up,” says Jay when the handshake goes on too long. “Harry. Hands off the famous friend.”

“You always get the famous friends,” Harry pouts.

“This is literally my only famous friend,” Jay says, giving him a weird look. “And he’s not even really famous.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that,” Harry sneers.

He strides away all in a huff and Jay turns to Huddley and shrugs. “At least the people here are interesting, right?”

---

Jay and Nick (and yeah, that never fails to make Jim smile, even if he’s the only one who gets the joke) are pretty much inseparable after that.

Jim even lets him borrow The Great Gatsby, which – well, if that’s not an expression of friendship, literally nothing is. Nick reads it and never asks once what Jay’s real name is.

Like he said. Friendship. It’s a shame Nick’s so terminally straight or they would’ve gotten it on from
day one.

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Huddley wakes to a bloodcurdling scream.

He jolts up, disoriented and feeling around blindly, and it takes a full minute to realize the screaming has stopped and his roommate is breathing like he was almost drowned.

“Jay,” he hisses, and when there is no answer, “Jay. Jay!”

“What?”

Huddley draws back, cowed. “Nothing. You were yelling.”

Jay takes a deep breath, scrubs a hand through his hair. “Sorry,” he mutters.

“That’s not what I meant. It’s just…they sound bad.”

Jay doesn’t reply. He settles back into bed, facing the wall, consciously closing Huddley out.

“I mean…if you ever want to talk about it…”

“Drop it, Nick,” says Jay.

“But—”

“I said drop it.”

The steel frame creaks as Nick lies back down. They both spend the next hour pretending they’re asleep.

---

There’s something distinctly erotic, Bartholomew Mortimer decides, about boys’ group sports.

Which is probably why he makes it a point to arrange things so that his weekly overseeing of activities at the gym takes place during the boys’ group sports activity.

Okay, that’s definitely why he makes it a point to arrange things so that he ends up at the gym during the boys’ group sports activity.

All men have vices, Bartholomew thinks, watching the boys running and jumping for shots, the sweat soaking into their t-shirts. And his isn’t even such a bad one, like smoking or gambling. All he does is discipline his prisoners in a… creative way. They probably prefer his method to getting the cane like Bartholomew got as a boy, anyway. All of the kids here need disciplinary action for something. His is just a…more enjoyable way to do it.

A much more enjoyable way to do it, he thinks, as one boy in particular catches his eye.

He’s lithe and controlled and all over the court, obviously one of the frontrunners of the game and among his friends, because he gets the ball often, takes more than half his team’s shots, and gets it in almost every time. As Bartholomew watches, the boys jumps for a three-point shot, his t-shirt riding up, revealing hard lines of muscle and the barest hint of dark blond hair. He’s so busy drooling he hardly notices the ball going into the hoop until Kirk’s team explodes into cheers.
“Who is that?” he asks the gym instructor, pointing to where the boy is laughing as he gets manhandled by his team in congratulations.

“Oh, that’s Kirk. Good kid.”

Kirk like the facility? Then again, it is a relatively common name. Bartholomew frowns. “He hasn’t gotten in trouble for anything?”

“Um… Well,” he replies slowly. “At karate practice yesterday I heard that they’d found him stashing food in his room. He didn’t even have an explanation when they asked him why he did it. But aside from that…”

That’s good enough for Bartholomew.

He watches the Kirk boy feint around a taller boy guarding him, pass the ball off to a teammate, then run to receive the ball again and dunk it into the hoop.

God. Bartholomew’s already hard and all he’s doing is watching.

The game ends soon after, and ten different boys get to tousle Kirk’s hair, slap him on the back, put an arm around his shoulders and pull him close. Then the boys head to the locker room, and Bartholomew follow them inside.

The director finds Kirk by the water cooler, where he’s gulping from a paper cup, his head tipped back and his eyes closed in pleasure.

Bartholomew has to clear his throat so his voice comes out steady when he says, “Kirk, it’s come to my attention that you’ve been disobeying detention center policy.”

Except that everything after “disobeying” is swallowed up by a rush of hooting and hollering as two boys heading to the showers catch sight of Kirk and shower him in affectionate abuse, and Kirk laughs, whacking them with the towel he’d had around his neck.

“What were you saying?” Kirk asks when they leave.

“Er. It’s come to my attention that you’ve been disobeying detention center policy—”

His voice goes high and strangled as Kirk, obviously only halfway listening, absentmindedly pulls his t-shirt over his head, showing off the smooth shift of his muscles and the sheen of sweat on his chest.

“You mean with the food? Sorry about that. I’ll try not to do it anymore.”

“No – what’s done is done – and – ” The director forcibly has to pull his attention from Kirk’s body and on the actual conversation at hand. “Consequences – ”

This, of course, is when another five boys pass by and grab Kirk and start singing some dirty song Bartholomew doesn’t recognize about the man who gets his ball in the hoop. That takes a while, and then Kirk has to detach himself from them, grinning and making swipes at them, and by the time the boy grabs another cup of water and turns back to the director he’s lost track of what they were talking about.

“Disciplinary actions have to be taken, Mr. Kirk,” he explains, while the sixteen-year-old sips from the paper cup and looks mildly surprised but largely unconcerned.
He doesn’t respond though, which Bartholomew takes as agreement, so he continues, “I’ll have the officers escort you to my offi—uh—” His voice cuts out as Kirk pours the rest of the water on his own head and scrubs it through his hair, then on his face. The water drips down his hair into the curve of his collarbone and down his chest.

“You want to meet me tonight in your office for disciplinary action?” the boy summarizes.

Bartholomew swallows, then tries to make up for it by drawing himself to full height. “Yes.”

Kirk thinks about it. “Nah,” he says finally.

The director gapes. “What do you mean, ’nah’?” he repeats, flabbergasted.

“I mean I don’t want to have sex with you,” Kirk explains patiently. “No offense, but you seem like you’d be really bad in bed.” He gives Bartholomew an apologetic smile and heads off to the showers.

Bartholomew stares after him in shock.

Look, Jim has gotten a lot of offers for sex in his life, okay, and so he’s completely forgotten about the whole incident by the time next week’s group sport (soccer this time) rolls around.

Jim finds soccer a lot more chilled out than basketball, so he’s enjoying himself and messing around, spending more time messing up other people’s shots than taking his own. Nick is goalie, which was, just, excellent positioning on the part of everyone involved. He barely has to move and he still catches all the shots.

He “accidentally” trips Will when he tries to take a shot on Nick and steals the ball, leaving Will on the floor behind him, cursing and flailing. His shot at the opponents’ goal gets stopped by the goalie, and Jim takes opportunity during the short skirmish that occurs to rests his hands on his knees and take a second to breathe.

That’s when he sees Mr. Mortimer cornering one of the younger kids at the side of the gym. The director is turned away, so Jim can’t see his face, but the kid has his arms wrapped around himself, his expression hunted and confused and far too familiar.

No, Jim thinks, and the intensity of it blindsides him. NononoNEVERhe can’t—

But…he can’t…

His gaze drifts to the soccer ball, and he thinks, Huh. Maybe I can.

If only he can get exactly the right trajectory… He has just one moment to set it all up, but hey. Jim’s always had a knack for physics.

“Hey! Luke, over here!” Jim calls. Luke passes it over, and Jim handles the ball for a few moments (38 degrees, he thinks), turning to keep it safe from an attack (42 degrees). But instead of turning back to the field (59 degrees) he kicks it as hard as he can against the wall (at approximately 40 miles per hour. Let’s go).

The soccer ball hurtles across the room, hits the opposite wall at a 38-degree angle and bounces back, hits the near wall again at a 42-degree angle at approximately 50 miles per hour, hits the opposite wall again at a 59-degree angle at 40 miles per hour, and whacks Mr. Mortimer squarely in
the back of the head with just enough force to knock him out.

All the boys turn and stare at Jim.

“Oh, says Jim.

The gym teacher starts freaking out. “What did you do, Kirk?” he yells.

“Sorry – wild ball,” he says, shrugging.

“Don’t touch him – no, don’t touch him!” he shouts when Danny tries to see if Mr. Mortimer is dead. “I’m getting the nurse. I’ll only be right back, so you kids had better not get up to anything. All the doors are bolted and the security cameras are running.”

And he runs out of the gym, leaving the boys to themselves.

“Oh, Jim calls, stepping over Mr. Mortimer’s unconscious form and jumping up onto the table against the wall of the gym. “Everybody gather ’round. We only have ten minutes tops.” All the boys congregate around the table, looking up at Jim, expectant and wary.

He puts his hands on his hips and says, “By a show of hands, who has been propositioned by our friend Mr. Mortimer here?”

The gym is pin-drop silent. Not a single person raises their hand, not even the kid he just saw being accosted by Mortimer ten seconds ago. They’re too scared, Jim realizes. Or maybe they think they’ll be looked down upon for admitting it. Jim rolls his eyes and raises his own hand.

One by one the other kids follow suit until almost everybody has a hand in the air except for the bigger kids like Tweedle-Dee, Tweedle-Dum, and Nick, who looks slightly put out. None of them are meeting Jim’s eyes. Jim feels the sick, stinging anger twisting in his gut and rising in his throat. “Stop that… None of you have anything to be ashamed of! It’s Mortimer who should be ashamed.” As he’s speaking, an idea begins to form in Jim’s mind. “It’s Mortimer who will be ashamed when I’m through with him,” he promises fiercely.

Jim notices that Danny is among the boys raising their hands, and the nausea rises in his stomach. He’s just eleven. God…

He kneels down so he’s closer to Danny, but the boy looks away, ashamed. “Hey. Hey. Look at me, Danny. It’s all right… It’s just sex – it doesn’t really mean anything,” he tells him, desperate to ease the pain on the boy’s face. “It’s like eating. You don’t even remember the first time you ate, because it doesn’t really matter, you know? You’ll do it so many times after this you won’t even think about that first time.” Admittedly that approach hasn’t worked for Jim so far, but that doesn’t mean he’s stopped trying.

Danny nods doubtfully and Jim straightens up to address all of them.

“Now listen up!” he calls. “Each of us alone is just one kid, and just one kid against the rest of the world? You’re looking for trouble. If we’re all out for ourselves, we’re weak. If we don’t stick together, we’re weak. And right now, we can’t afford to be weak.”

“Why should we listen to you?” Tweedle-Dum demands.

“Do you see anybody else with a plan?” Jim replies, looking around theatrically. “Or I guess you just want us to roll over and take what they give us?”
A chorus of “No!” comes from the boys.

“Who here is fed up and ready to fight?” Jim shouts.

“Me!”

“Yeah, all right,” Jim says, kneeling down so he can talk to them more confidentially. “But that’s the thing – we’re not just a bunch of ‘me’s anymore. From now on, we’re an ‘us.’”

There are murmurs of agreement through the crowd.

“So here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to pair up into groups of partners, got it? Roommates go together, ideally, because you’re around each other the most. If Mortimer comes near you or your partner, you guys stick together, make it impossible for him to address one without the other. If you can’t be literally by your partner’s side, you make a diversion, kick up some fuss so he can’t get through the arrangement.”

Then he looks straight at Nick and says, “Nick, you pair up the smaller kids with the bigger kids, and make sure they’re being protected round the clock. My guess is that Mortimer’s afraid of you guys. Probably thinks you’ll beat him up if he even tries.” Nick looks away. “His mistake, big guy,” Jim assures him.

Once everyone’s paired up, Jim claps his hands to get their attention. “Okay. Harry, you tell your friends the plan and help them pair up. Luke, you tell your group and Will, you tell yours. Then report back to me what the partners are.” They nod back at him, faces attentive and solemn. Jim feels a swell of pride at their professionalism.

“Last thing before Mr. Fendrich comes back – we need to lay some ground rules.” He ticks off one finger. “First and foremost is loyalty. There will be absolutely no turning on each other, no abandoning each other, no tattling to the guards, got it? All we have is each other. Secondly” – he ticks another finger – “if anything goes wrong, you tell Mr. Mortimer it was my idea, got it? I forced you do it. Don’t try to be a hero.” He looks down at them sternly. “You all have families waiting for you to get out of here… You can’t make them wait even longer.” They nod and Jim continues, “Last but not least, no wasting food.”

The boys look back at him, confused.

“Look, you guys throw out a ton of perfectly good food, it’s just not right.”

They don’t look any less confused.

Jim sighs. “It’s a thing of mine, okay?”

They nod.

Jim grins. “Great. Now, let’s do this.”

---

Soon enough word has gotten around to all the boys at the detention center, and Jim watches the kids flourish with the new responsibility. The groups of partners are scrupulously careful to watch each other’s backs. Apparently some of the kids are even telling each other what Mortimer did, to make sure others don’t fall into the same traps.

Even better, nobody has had “disciplinary action” with Mr. Mortimer since that day in the gym.
Only Harry refuses to be paired up, and Jim’s not sure what he’s trying to prove, but all he’s managed to prove to Jim is that he’s an idiot. He’s even told Harry so several times only to get laughed off, so whatever.

Jim pairs Nick up with Danny, but somehow Nick manages to watch both Jim’s and Danny’s backs. The guy is a giant teddy bear, Jim thinks fondly. It’s hard to believe he was ever scared of him.

---

When Nick comes back from therapy he finds Jay in their room sitting cross-legged on his bed, smoking and staring into space, an open book on his lap.

“Where’d you get that?” Nick asks.

“Got a whole pack for twenty minutes with Officer Mitchell in the emergency stairwell,” says Jay. “Want one?”

“No thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” the other boy shrugs, and takes another long drag on the cigarette.

Nick is used to Jay’s contemplative moods by now, so he sits on his own bed and has fallen into something of a doze when Jay, with his head tipped back and his eyes closed, murmurs, “The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it, then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.”

“That’s beautiful,” says Nick.

Jay holds up the book on his lap. *The Once and Future King*.

“You really love classic books, huh? Are you going to be a professor or something when you get out of here?”

Jay bursts out laughing like that’s the funniest joke he’s ever heard. “Me? Nah, I’m not good for much of anything. Place like this is about as close to a career fit as I’m ever gonna get.”

He says it so casually, so confidently, that Nick doesn’t know how to respond, and eventually Jay rubs out his cigarette on the cell wall and changes the subject. “Did you find out where the button is?”

“Yeah…Danny said it was under Mr. Mortimer’s desk.”

His roommate doesn’t ask what Danny was doing under Mr. Mortimer’s desk. “And the computer?”

“It’s password-protected.”

Jay just grins.

“What are you planning?” Nick asks finally.

“We’ve been keeping everyone out of Mortimer’s clutches for the past few weeks, right?” - Nick
nods – “Eventually he’s going to get frustrated. In both senses of the word. He’s going to be desperate for a lay, and only one kid is going to be available.”

“And that kid’s going to be you.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you going to do once Mortimer has you, though?” Nick asks, not wanting to be negative but also not seeing the plan part of this plan. “How will we know if you’re in trouble?”

“Trust me,” says Jay. “You’ll know.”

---

The next day Harry doesn’t show up for breakfast. By lunch, word is that Harry got sent to a more secure juvenile delinquent facility for violent behavior.

“Harry?” Jim repeats incredulously when he hears that particular piece of gossip. “No way. He’s a liar and a crook, sure, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

By dinner Mr. Mortimer announces over the P.A. that due to the threat posed by Harcourt Fenton Mudd (Jim almost laughs out loud at that), he has been sent to the Fairbridge Secure Facility for Juvenile Delinquents.

Jim grits his teeth and mutters to Nick. “I bet he refused to go to Mortimer’s little ‘disciplinary’ meeting.”

Nick looks worried, but doesn’t disagree.

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When Mr. Mortimer finally corners Jim three weeks later after mandatory therapy with Mrs. Zylo, he’s more than frustrated – he’s furious. He waves off the guards escorting Jim back to his cell.

“Mr. Kirk,” he says, enunciating every syllable, which is always a good sign, “I was in the middle of an important conversation with Mr. Caulson when Mr. Flynn turned an entire table in the mess hall upside down.”

“Woah,” said Jim. “Did anyone get hurt?”

“No…but it took the janitors hours to clean it up. And I’m sure you’ll be very curious as to what he said when I asked him why he had done that…”

“He acted out helplessly due to a sudden attack of existential angst?” Jim suggests.

Mr. Mortimer’s lip curls and then Jim is against the wall. “He told me that it was your idea.”

“Huh,” says Jim, like he just remembered, yeah, I totally told Nick to trash the mess hall. He bats his eyelashes at Mr. Mortimer. “So what are you going to do, sir? Don’t you think some disciplinary action is called for?”

Mortimer watches him closely, then says, “Yes. The guards will bring you to my office this evening.”

“It’s a date,” says Jim, and moves to go, but Mr. Mortimer grabs his jaw and forces him to take a few stumbling steps forward.
“I will break you, boy,” he promises, sounding so much like Kodos in that moment that Jim, to his own mortification, feels something shudder inside him.

Mortimer looks satisfied by Jim’s lack of response, turns, and calls another guard to take Jim the rest of the way to his cell.

Finally, when the director is well out of sight, he lets his lips curl into a smirk.

Gotcha, he thinks.

---

The thing about Kodos is that he had a lot of kinks. But like, a lot, and his main one was probably sex in public.

One time, Kodos had Jim give him a blowjob during a video conference with some of the other settlement administrators. The governor was so self-possessed about it that Jim was almost completely certain that none of the administrators even knew that, while Kodos was calmly discussing renewable energy and stockpiles, Jim was under the desk sucking him off.

For a while Jim thought even Kodos had forgotten he was there. The only acknowledgement of his presence was at the very end, when Kodos reached under the table and held Jim in place by his hair while he thrust into his mouth like a battering ram.

After Kodos emptied himself into Jim, he patted him once on the head and seamlessly reentered the conversation about accumulation versus proliferation of resources.

That was the first time Jim really felt like a slut.

---

By the time Nick is brought back to the cell for the night, Jim has worked himself into a frenzy.

“I changed my mind,” he tells Nick, and he knows he must look insane like this, pacing the floor like a trapped animal, hair wild from running his hands through it repeatedly. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Nick sits down on his bed (creak) and stares at Jim, wide-eyed, obviously trying to come up with something comforting to say.

“Why does it have to be an office?” Jim asks, more to himself than to Nick. “Why does it always have to be an office?” Nick stares. “It’d be easier if it wasn’t an office. Or maybe harder. I don’t know. I don’t want to do this, Nick.”

“Maybe you don’t have to,” Nick says hopefully. “We can tell the guards you’re sick… Or…or you could just say no…”

“And get sent to Fairbridge Secure Facility for Juvenile Delinquents?” To be honest, Jim could probably pass as sick considering how he looks right now. But he takes a deep breath and closes his eyes and says, “No. I have to do this. If it isn’t me it’ll be someone else, someone who doesn’t know how to deal with him. I can’t say no.”

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The guards bringing Jim to Mr. Mortimer’s office for “disciplinary action” won’t look him in the eye,
and that’s how Jim realizes that

“You know exactly what’s been going on, don’t you.”

Neither of them respond. They just continue walking and pulling Jim along, staring straight ahead like robots.

“You’re exactly the kind of people I hate most,” says Jim, his hands curling into fists. “The ones who stand back and watch while people get hurt, and tell themselves there was nothing they could do. Worthless cowards.”

They still don’t respond.

Jim looks away, disgusted, and eventually they reach Mr. Mortimer’s office. They open the door, push Jim inside, and leave again without looking him in the face once. He hears the lock click before their footsteps fade away.

Jim immediately gets to work.

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To be honest Bartholomew has been completely unable to concentrate on anything since arranging to meet with Kirk. His mind keeps drifting to what he’ll sound like, what he’ll look like, when that arrogance finally breaks and Kirk comes apart in front of his eyes. That’s two-thirds of why he has the boys wait for him in his office – they pace, they worry, they work themselves up into a preemptive terror and Bartholomew doesn’t even have to be there. Jesus, but how glorious that terror would look on this face…

At long last it’s the end of his shift, and he can barely keep from throwing his door open when he enters his office…

… And is stopped dead by the sight of the Kirk boy sitting back in his chair like it’s a throne; knees spread wide and elbows on the armrests and eyes bright in the darkness, surveying Bartholomew with something akin to lazy curiosity.

“ Took you long enough,” Kirk says.

“ Took me…”?

“I thought maybe you’d chickened out,” the boy continues, as if this arrangement was all his idea. “I wouldn’t mock you if you had, you know. Much.”

“What are you talking about?” Bartholomew demands, feeling inexplicably nervous. He wipes his hands on his pants. “Get out of my chair.”

Kirk makes no move to comply, just props his chin up on one hand, the other hand hanging idly off the armrest. “Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Mortimer, don’t be shy. Or should I call you Bartholomew. Barty?”

“This isn’t a game, Kirk,” Bartholomew manages between gritted teeth.

“Ollie! Yeah… definitely Ollie. It totally fits, am I right?”

He fumbles, struggles to regain control of the conversation. “Am I right, sir,” he corrects.

Kirk’s smile widens into a full-on grin. “Oh, no need to call me sir, Ollie. We’re all friends here.”
Bartholomew comes around the desk and grabs Kirk by the front of his shirt, dragging the boy out of his chair. He slams him down on the desk and waits for the fear to dawn in his eyes, but Kirk looks just as composed, if not a bit more disheveled.

“Okay, okay,” Kirk murmurs, half-soothing, half-condescending. “You’re overcompensating, Ollie. Just relax. It can be very scary having sex for the first time.”

“What?”

The boy looks up at him innocently. “What?”

“You think I – you think I’m a –”

Kirk nods, expectant, encouraging him to finish the sentence, and when Bartholomew can’t, he finally supplies, “A virgin. Yeah. Why?”

“Listen here, boy. I’m the furthest thing there is from a virgin!” He hasn’t had a conversation like this since he was eighteen, can’t believe he’s having one right now, but somehow one look at the patronizing expression on Kirk’s face and he can’t stop himself.

“Seriously, you don’t need to be embarrassed. Okay so yeah, you’re on, you know, the older side to be trying out sex for the first time, but better late than never, right? I’ll talk you through it.”

That’s the precise moment that he loses his temper completely. “I know exactly what to do, Kirk,” Bartholomew growls, pressing his knuckles into the boy’s lower abdomen with bruising force. “You aren’t the first boy I’ve screwed into this desk and you won’t be the last. Although you may be the one I want most to break.” He grinds his hips against Kirk’s and groans at the friction.

“Let me go, you pervert,” Kirk mutters, trying to squirm free. “Get off.”

“Oh no, not when I’ve finally got you where I want you.” Kirk tries to lift his head and Bartholomew slams it back down on the desk, drawing out a gasp of pain that goes straight to the director’s groin. “I know what you’ve been doing, keeping that other boy around all the time – what do you call him? Nick? – as your little bodyguard. But guess what?” He lets his fingers skim the boy’s waistband and then underneath it, hungrily exploring the hard planes of muscle, digging his nails into the sensitive skin at the dip of his hipbone. Kirk’s breath hitches. “I’m not afraid of him. I could have him right here beneath me tomorrow night, and one of your other friends the next night…I’ve been doing this since before you were born, boy.”

“You won’t get away with it,” Kirk says in a strained voice. “I’m not going to stay quiet. I’m going to tell—”

“Oh, are you? Who are you going to tell? Your family, who hasn’t come to visit you once? The guards, who brought you into my office knowing full well what was going to happen? The other boys, I suppose?”

Kirk doesn’t respond.

“That’s why I’ve never gotten caught and will never get caught – because you boys are criminals and sluts. You have nobody to tell. And even if you did, no one would believe you. You belong to me, boy, you and all the other delinquents in this place.”

Bartholomew notices that Kirk’s eyes have gone blank, staring up at the ceiling, his jaw tight.
“Looks like all that talk was just trying to cover the fact that you’re the one who’s afraid, aren’t you. Are you a virgin by any chance, boy?” he coos, and can’t help the laugh that spills out.

He can feel the boy’s frame tremble, and then Kirk bursts out laughing right along with him.

The director’s own mirth cuts off abruptly. “What—”

“You know,” Kirk manages between snickers. “You’re really – oh God I can’t breathe – an idiot.”

Bartholomew stares.

Kirk pulls himself up so he’s sitting on the edge of the desk, swinging his legs and grinning like he’s just swept the board. “Hey, Ollie, what does that little light mean?”

“What little li—” Bartholomew follows the boy’s gesture and finally notices the little green light flashing next to the microphone on his desk hooked up to the building-wide P.A. system. His heart stops. “You—”

“Me,” Kirk agrees smugly, sitting back on his hands. “I’ll tell you what that little light means. It means that every person in every cell, every hallway, and every room in this facility can hear everything going on in this room. I’m sure they’re finding it fascinating.”

“How – how long has that been—?”

“Oh, since…hm… ‘you aren’t the first boy I’ve screwed into this desk and you won’t be the last,’ or so.”

A blind panic grips him, coiling around his lungs and squeezing, until suddenly he recognizes his escape and laughs, slightly hysterically. “Good try, boy, but it doesn’t matter. These people answer to me – everyone from the prisoners to the officers bend to my whims, and they always will. In fact – to most of the people in this place, none of this will come as a surprise.”

Kirk nods. “Excellent point, Ollie! That is precisely why I took the liberty of hooking up the P.A. audio system to your holomail account.” He laughs at whatever he sees in Bartholomew’s expression. “Oh don’t worry, I’ve only programmed it to send a live feed of this conversation to my mom, who just happens to be a Commander at Starfleet and – oh yeah – the wife of the guy this whole detention center was dedicated to. Say ‘hi, mom!’”

Bartholomew splutters furiously. “But your mother – she doesn’t – she’s never – ”

Kirk shrugs. “Yeah, there’s a lot of stuff between me and my mom. But some things will never change - she will always be super overprotective, and she will always be terrifying when she’s angry.” The boy tilts his head thoughtfully. “It’s not just her who you should be scared of, though – I’m sure the sponsors of the detention center will be very interested in how you’ve been treating the son of the man they donated all that money for in the first place.”

Silence falls as that sinks in. And as it sinks in that –

“That’s right. You’re going to jail, Ollie,” Kirk says cheerfully. “If you’re lucky, you might even work again someday. I think you’ll make a great gas station attendant, for the record.”

Bartholomew can’t reply – can’t even formulate the words to begin, and Kirk jumps gracefully off the desk and approaches him in no great hurry, like a cat tracking its prey.

“What’s wrong, Ollie?” he asks, coming right up into the director’s personal space, running his
fingers along the man’s chest. “Your whole career has just been ruined. Twenty years of work for this place destroyed by ten minutes with one brat.” He tilts his head, something dark and provocative in his smile. “Your whole life – gone. Does that bother you?”

Bartholomew pulls his fist back and punches the boy in his stupid, smiling face.

Kirk staggers back, rubbing his jaw, an odd satisfaction in his eyes. Like he’s planned this down to the last detail. Like he’s been pulling the director’s strings the entire time.

And finally the words come to him: “I’m going to kill you,” he snarls.

And then he’s attacking the kid with everything he has, shoving, punching, and Kirk falls against the desk and sinks to the floor with a groan, trying to defend himself but defenseless against the sheer difference in size. He kicks the boy in the stomach and hears something snap. The director smiles in grim approval when Kirk makes a strangled noise of pain, and Bartholomew kicks him until the guards break down the door and storm in, phasers drawn.

“How about time?” Bartholomew shouts. On the floor, Kirk makes a noise almost like a whimper and curls up on his side. “This boy was being rebellious and violent – he needs at least a week of solitary confinement and…” He trails off, realizing at last that the phasers are aimed not at Kirk but at him.

He looks up at Officer Jones, willing her to remember that he signs her paychecks. She stares back, her face flinty, her aim never wavering.

He raises both hands above his head in surrender.

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Once they drag Mortimer away, the officers pull Jim to his feet too and cuff his hands in front of him, which he guesses is kind of called for considering he hijacked the P.A. system and hacked into the detention center’s holomail account and messed with every wire in the room, but that still doesn’t make it any easier to stand despite the broken ribs and the bruises and the throbbing pain in his cheek.

Two armed guards escort him out of the office (if Officer Jones notices Jim leaning on her she doesn’t say anything, which he appreciates), down the halls and past the classrooms, the gym, the mess hall. As he passes the cells, the boys run to the bars and start cheering and hollering and slapping Jim on the back as he passes. Jim grins through his split lip and raises one fist in triumph and the kids go nuts. The noise follows them out into the warm summer night.

“Yeah, yeah, get in, Wonderboy,” the officer mutters, pushing Jim into the backseat of the police car. He tries not to wince too much as he gets in.

“Where are we going?” Jim asks when Officer Jones gets into the driver’s seat.

“After that stunt you pulled, where do you think? We’re going to the hospital.” She glances back at him in the rearview mirror. “And then your mother wants to see you, kid.”

Jim leans against the cushions, closes his eyes, and tries to decide which one he’s looking forward to less.
It turns out that the hospital part isn’t so bad—he gets a few minutes with a dermal regenerator for the bruises and a laser orthobiological restoration for the ribs. The whole thing only takes a couple of hours.

The less enjoyable part comes later, when he has to look at his mother’s strained expression through the holoscreen they’ve hooked up in his overnight room and tell her that he’s sorry for bothering her.

“I opened the message during a ship meeting,” she says. “The audio feed was broadcasted in front of all the highest-ranking crew.”

Jim nods sympathetically. Don’t you just hate it when your kid’s rape interrupts a perfectly good meeting?

His mom sighs. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you sent the audio feed to me.” Her voice goes hard. “We’re going to make sure that director is put away for a very long time.”

Jim just nods again.

“You’re not going to say anything?”

“What do you want me to say?”

She frowns. “Why didn’t you talk to someone about it instead of dealing with it by yourself? Were you trying to get yourself killed?”

“So what if I was?” Jim asks. “Everyone’s been telling me my whole life that’s what heroes do.”

Dad did it and you miss him, he thinks. Sam did it and you miss him. Maybe that’s what it takes for you to miss me. Certainly people prefer a dead legend to a living, mistake-making human being.

His mom’s face goes dark and Jim changes the subject. “How are things in space?”

She’s not stupid—she knows he’s deflecting. But apparently she wants to talk about it just as little as Jim wants to, so she lets herself be distracted. She tells him about Jakku, the desert planet they just made first contact with, about the completely different method of engineering they employ, how she wants to integrate it in future starships. As she talks he can see the obvious happiness in her eyes, in her gestures. She’s found her home on this five-year mission, and nothing is going to dampen that feeling of purpose, of fulfillment – not even Jim’s self-destruction can get her down.

He promises himself that this is the last time he leans on her, forces her out of her home to come to his rescue. He’s going to take care of the rest himself, whatever it ends up being. He’s not going to bother her anymore when she’s clearly content and in her element among the stars.

Except, that is, to tell her— “Mom, Frank’s cheating on you.”


“You’re going to be five years away in space. And Frank’s just dandy with this plan? He’s definitely cheating on you.”

Mom relaxes, smiles, shakes her head. “Frank loves me – that’s exactly why he’s okay with it. True love means doing the best thing for the other person, even if it’s difficult. In this case it’s Frank
loving me enough to let me go.”

Jim doesn’t know anything about true love, or even if he believes it exists at all, but he’s had plenty of people who’ve loved him enough to let him go. True love, to Jim, is someone loving him enough to make him stay.

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In the end, Jim gets two days’ solitary confinement and a month added to his sentence, but Mr. Mortimer goes to jail for twenty years, so Jim considers it a win overall.

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Solitary confinement is a six- by four-foot room covered in salmon-pink tile featuring absolutely nothing but a drain built into the center of the floor and a holovid camera in one corner of the ceiling. Jim takes one look at it and tries not to sound too anxious when he says, “How am I going to get food?”

“We’ll send your meals through there,” the officer says, pointing to a small, rectangular hatch in the wall. It’s bolted from the inside.

Then the officer leaves, the door sliding into place behind him, and it’s just Jim in the little room. He leans against one tiled, salmon-pink wall and slides down into a sitting position and decides he’s not going to let them see him freak out.

He is James Tiberius Kirk. He has driven a car off a cliff. He has survived a genocide. He has defrocked a priest. He’s not even hungry. He can survive two days alone in a little room.

He takes deep breaths and counts the twelve thousand six hundred and fifty seconds until lunchtime.

---

Twelve thousand six hundred and fifty seconds later, Jim is on his feet and glaring at the camera and very much not panicking. “Isn’t it lunchtime yet?”

There is a pause, then a beep, and then a tinny voice is projected into the little room: “It’s only 1040, Mr. Kirk.”

Something cold and desperate claws at Jim’s throat. “No…it can’t be… I counted—”

“You must have counted too fast, then,” says the voice, sounding bored a little bit irritated.

Jim slams his hand into the tile. “How do I know you’re not just screwing with my head? How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t.”

So Jim takes a shaky breath and recalculates and counts to six thousand five hundred and thirty as slow as he possibly can.

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“Is it lunchtime now?” he asks when he finishes.

There is no answer.
“Hello?” he calls, the desperation returning to claw at his throat, at his stomach, at his heart. “Is anyone there?”

The silence is deafening, blinding, suffocating.

That’s when Jim’s legs decide they don’t want to hold his weight anymore and he sinks to the pink tiled floor, his vision blurring at the edges. He keeps trying to take in breath but the air isn’t reaching his lungs.

*Oh, he realizes distantly, I’m having a panic attack.*

“Please…” His voice is so weak he can barely hear it. “Anyone…”

In a moment of dazzling, brilliant fear he knows they’ve forgotten about him. They’ve forgotten him, left him, he’s going to die in this cold, tiny, tiled room, curled up and trying to hold back tears and he’s not even hungry yet, he’s—

He’s gasping for breath now, he’s dying, *I don’t want to die, Sam, God help me but I don’t want to die, SamErikaTomNatalieKevinBabySAM help me I don’t want to die Idon’twanttodie, I—***

---

When he opens his eyes there’s an officer looking down at him and she’s not even naked, which is how Jim knows he isn’t dead.

“Whaaa…?” he manages, which okay, was trying to be a *what happened?,* or maybe even a *why yes you can frisk me, officer,* but he’s going to give himself partial credit for effort.

“You passed out,” she tells him, and looks kind of angry about it. Or maybe concerned. Jim’s seeing three of everything so it’s hard to tell. “Do you have a medical condition you neglected to tell us about?”

Does Tarsus count as a medical condition? Jim wonders vaguely, watching the spots of colors dance in front of him. Sometimes it feels like it should. He carries Kodos around with him, in every cell of his body and every thought in his head, like a cancer. Like a time bomb. He knows it’s only just a matter of time before it kills him.

“Mr. Kirk?”

“Y’ didn’t answer,” Jim mumbles. “I called but no one answered.”

“This is solitary confinement, kid. It’s supposed to be *solitary,* to make you think about what you’ve done. We’re not allowed to answer unless it’s an emergency.”

Oh, Jim doesn’t like the sound of that. Thinking is scary. As long as he doesn’t think he doesn’t have to ask himself just how much Kodos succeeded in his effort to own Jim, to make him over in Kodos’s own image.

However much he succeeded, it was too much.

*I’m scared,* Jim thinks.

“I’m fine,” he says.

*I thought you’d left me alone.*
“Leave me alone.”

“Did you think we would just forget about you?” the officer asks.

Yes.

“No,” he scoffs. “Get out, I don’t need your help.”

_Don’t go please don’t go help me help me HELP ME_

She scowls but gets to her feet and turns to leave.

“Wait,” Jim says, just before the door slides shut.

She waits.

He can’t make the words come out.

_Just say it!_ he tells himself furiously. _Say ‘I don’t want to do this anymore, you can add more time to my sentence but I can’t do this, I can’t – ‘_

But that’s the thing – this is punishment. Compensation. He went into that office knowing there would be a price to pay. Now that he’s paying it he can’t just say _no_.

Nothing’s happened to him that he didn’t deserve.

She’s still waiting. She looks kind of concerned now.

He takes a breath and forcibly unclenches his hands and says, “Can I have some kind of food?” The officer stares back at him, confused, so Jim hurriedly adds, “I won’t eat it unless I have to, just… I need something. Anything. _Please_.

Then the door is sliding shut and locking into place and Jim swallows, feels the panic returning, his heart pounding double-time (screaming-silence screaming-silence screaming-silence), and then _finally_, the hatch tilts open and a single granola bar is sent into the little tiled room.

To them it means nothing. To him it means a week of not dying if (when? _if_) they forget about him.

Jim curls up on the floor and clutches the granola bar for dear life.

---

The problem isn’t that solitary makes Jim think; Jim _always_ thinks, couldn’t turn off his brain if he wanted to. The problem is that solitary makes him _remember_.

He remembers the way Sam’s whole face would light up when he smiled, as if he had no worries at all, even on Tarsus. He remembers how Erika used to look at Sam, annoyed and helplessly affectionate and protective. He remembers how Natalie grew up faster than all of them, became a mother at fifteen, gave up her food, her sleep, her _everything_ for Baby and never once regretted saving her. He remembers laughing with Tom until their stomachs hurt, although he can’t for the life of him remember about what. He remembers – with crystalline clarity he remembers – everything Kevin was wise to forget.

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He remembers his private lessons with Kodos, lessons that ranged anywhere from fascinating to life-
changing, because whatever else could be said about Kodos (and a lot could be said about Kodos),
the man was (is? was) undeniably brilliant.

He remembers the day Kodos began teaching him economics, months before any hint of the
oncoming famine, and Jim had slouched and sighed and spun his pencil through the lesson until
Kodos had asked him what, exactly, he had against the subject.

“It’s useless and boring,” Jim had replied, pouting. “I don’t want to be an economist.”

“You will need to know the laws of economy if you wish to succeed in any area,” Kodos had told
him. “Everything is based upon the principles you will learn here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every interaction that occurs between people is, essentially, an exchange of goods and services.
Take, for example, this interaction we are having right now. The colonists of Tarsus IV pay taxes to
fund the schooling system under the assumption that investing in the education of you and your
classmates as resources will eventually benefit them in return when you contribute to the settlement
and to the galaxy as a whole.”

“Then, when you give me these private lessons…”

Kodos smiled. “I am investing in you, specifically, as a commodity that I am certain will eventually
compensate me, specifically, for my efforts.”

“But you’d still teach me it even if I didn’t, right?” Jim hedged.

“That’s the law of economy – of course I wouldn’t.” At Jim’s hurt expression he explains, “There’s
no need to be upset – it’s nothing personal. This is simply the basic mechanism underlying all
interactions and relationships. All of our decisions are, at their hearts, cost-benefit analyses. Even the
most loving spouse will leave the relationship if his or her partner poses too much of a cost in
contrast to the potential benefit. The more of the galaxy you experience, James, the more you will see
this is true.”

“People don’t just leave their spouses. They love them.”

“Yes, and love is a very valuable commodity. All feelings are. People will pay great prices – millions
of credits, decades of their lives – to achieve certain feelings: feeling honored and honorable, feeling
that they belong. Athletes, for example, are paid exorbitant amounts for the service of making their
fans feel part of something bigger than themselves. However, even the commodity of love cannot
override the laws of economy. Why do you think marriages end when their sex lives are no longer
satisfying? They still ‘love’ each other, but as the requirements of services are no longer being met,
the cost of the relationship outweighs the benefit.”

It was beyond weird hearing the man Jim thought of as a father even more than his actual father talk
about sex, especially so casually. “Is that even love?” he asked. “Love shouldn’t be just…another
factor in the calculation. It’s supposed to be” – something immutable, precious, everlasting – when
you find The One you’ll just know – all that stuff. “It’s supposed to be forever.”

“Perhaps the greatest love is between a parent and a child. And you are testament to the fact that
sometimes parents decide there is something more important than being with their child.”

Jim hadn’t responded and Kodos had gone on gently, “Everything has a price; all humans spend
their lives paying. What makes your cost-benefit analysis different – special, if you prefer – is how
much you are willing to give for what you are liable to gain.”
(Jim didn’t know – still doesn’t know – how much of it he agrees with. But like everything else, he didn’t have to agree for it to slowly take over his life. He just didn’t disagree.)

“So if everything has a price,” Jim had said slowly, “how do people pay for it all?” How will I pay for it all?

Kodos had always been good – second only to Sam, really – at reading the true questions behind Jim’s questions, and this time was no exception. The governor had just brushed his fingers through Jim’s hair, given him a smile he didn’t understand until much later, and said, “Don’t worry, James. I am certain you have plenty to give.”

---

He remembers one night almost a year later when he was sneaking back into the house well past 2 AM, drunk and stumbling and trying to remember the name he was shouting half an hour ago and how many tentacles were involved.

He made it inside without being caught only to be stopped in his tracks by the sight of his mom and Frank kissing in the doorway to the kitchen, the soft light highlighting her hair, his hand against her cheek.

For all the other stuff Jim can say about Frank (and there is, just, so much Jim can say about Frank), he and Mom really do seem to love each other. At the same time, though, here they are, paying each other off in kisses, in companionship, in sex. So what is it? Is it love? Or is it just another example of economics?

Jim ends up going the long way around to his room, climbing up the side of the house and picking the lock on his own window. He half-drags, half-rolls himself into bed and lies there wondering what will happen to their “love” when there’s no recompense. What happens when they’re, say, separated for five years on a Starfleet mission.

Who sticks around when love can’t pay up its side of the bargain?

---

He remembers one night, six months before that, under the stars with the rest of the Tarsus kids, sitting around and talking about what they wanted to be when (if? when) they grew up.

Tom, Natalie, Kevin, Jim – and Baby, obviously – didn’t know yet (Jim’s career plans changed by the hour, for his part). Erika, on the other hand, knew exactly what she wanted to do. Her eyes lit up as she explained why interspecies neurogenetics was pretty much the coolest thing anyone could ever do for the world, how she was going to create a standard medical baseline with which all practitioners will be familiarized so that any species can travel to any planet and know they’ll receive adequate care.

Kevin stopped her four different times to ask her to explain things, and each time she patiently broke it down for her little brother. When Jim stopped her to explain stuff (just to be annoying, really – he was easily following what she was saying), she just scowled and thwacked him on the head and said, “Don’t act dumber than you are. Someday you might start believing your own lie.”

Sam had equally specific career plans, but of an entirely different sort.

“I want to be a dad when I grow up,” he told them, completely straight-faced.

Jim rolled his eyes. “Yeah, okay, but what do you want to be.”
“That is what I want to be,” Sam insisted. “I’ll probably do something else too, to make money and whatever. But I want to be a father. I just want to be there for someone whenever they need me. If I can do that, I’ll be happy.”


I hate you.

I hate you for leaving me. I hate you for being noble and dead, just like Dad.

I wanted to save you, Sam. I tried to save you, I tried as hard as I could, I gave every commodity I had. But I – I –

He curls more tightly in on himself, the sob catching in his throat.

---

Jim looks up blearily when dinner is passed through the hatch in the door, has to blink a few times to remember where he is, has to deliberately pry his hand from the granola bar to take the tray. There are angry red marks where the wrapper cut into his palm.

He settles down to eat, his thoughts still whirling like he’s in three different places – or maybe three different times – all at once, like maybe he’s gone insane and just hasn’t realized it yet.

He’s so out of sorts that he’s already unwrapped his tin of scrambled eggs and his cup of fruit and is halfway through unwrapping the next item when he realizes it isn’t shaped like food. It’s shaped like…

He turns the book over. The Great Gatsby. It isn’t the copy from the detention center library.

He opens it up, finds a note in Ms. Williams’s distinctive scrawl on the inside cover:

For Jay—may you find a green light worthy of your aspiration.

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Immediately after hanging up with Jim, Winona places another call – to the social worker at the Kirk Juvenile Detention Center.

“I need you to find out whether my son is considering suicide,” she says when he asks what he can do for her.

He frowns. “Did he say anything to indicate he would be?”

“Yes – maybe – I don’t know,” she sighs. “I don’t have the” – time, she thinks – “skills to figure it out myself.”

The social worker promises he’ll bring it up, and he does, but he doesn’t get anything useful out of Jim. He tells Winona three weeks later that Jim has not shown any suicidal behavior.

Jim, for his part, doesn’t really know whether or not he’s suicidal. He’s not going to kill himself – that much he found out the day he left home. But if his starship’s autopilot failed during an evacuation and someone had to pilot its collision course into the Narada, he would volunteer to be the one who stayed behind.

That’s a good thing, isn’t it?
Jim returns from solitary confinement to an empty cell and the latest news that Nick got out of the detention center for good – that his mom came back and presented some new evidence (Jim translates that as *lots of money*) and got Nick out of there like she should have done in the first place. Without his larger-than-life roommate Jim’s cell becomes colder and lonelier; just another little tiled room. But he had always known that Nick was too good for this place… too good for people like Jim.

So life goes on. A new director is trained in, but it hardly matters since all the kids (and most of the staff) answer to Jim. The social worker tries to “subtly” figure out if Jim is likely to commit honorable hari kari on his own pencil. You know—the usual.

His favorite part of juvie is still Ms. Williams, especially when she assigns them literature analysis essays as part of an end-of-the-year project. Jim writes an essay comparing and contrasting Jay Gatsby and a plant, some of which is immature and purposefully exasperating (“*Jay Gatsby does not nurture himself via photosynthesis*”), some of which is legitimately perceptive (“*Plants, like Gatsby, are always reaching toward a light that’s a lot prettier from far away than it is up close*”) and some of which is far too personal. (“*Reaching toward the light is both why they are able to defy gravity and why they grow so crooked*”).
there. Is calling his name. The great unknown, the open, endless. What Could Be tempting him, pulling him, whispering in his ears and filling his eyes like the sirens of the Odyssey. Like nothing he’s ever felt before.

“Woah,” he breathes.

---

Turning eighteen is kind of a revelation for Jim because can have sex legally, which is pretty cool. Or at least one less thing to get written up for, and as everyone knows, Jim’s motto is the less getting arrested the better. Yes, he has gotten arrested eight times since juvie, for vandalism, drug possession, forgery, disorderly conduct, indecent exposure, pyramid schemes (that one was just one big misunderstanding. Kind of), breaking and entering, more disorderly conduct. But those were all necessary evils (especially the indecent exposure). Getting arrested for having sex is definitely an unnecessary evil.

Basically, now he can technically stop lying about his age. Not that he does. But he could, if he wanted to, and Jim’s all about choices.

So, yes, Jim has a lot of sex with every type of person in every type of position (for a while he averages more than one person per day – good times), but one thing he never does is get his companion’s name wrong.

This is partially because Jim makes a rule, which is bizarre in itself because he pretty much lives to break rules, but he has this one rule he adheres to with almost religious fervor. And that is: once the zippers are down, he only ever calls his hook-ups by pet names – baby, darling, sweetheart, whatever. Sometimes he knows their real names, sometimes he doesn’t, but once the action starts they all become baby so he never runs the risk of calling them someone they’re not.

After a lifetime of being called George, Jim decides it’s better to make everyone anonymous than to make them over in the image of somebody else.

---

Jim is an adult now, technically, and like a proper adult, he gets a job. Or, well, jobs.

He’s smart and intuitive and can figure out what people want, which ends up coming in useful considering he is hired and fired (sometimes he quits!) for seventeen jobs over four years.

He works in a kitchen (it was worth the verbal abuse to learn that killer roux recipe. And the roué wasn’t bad either), in a mechanic’s garage (his longest running job at a whopping three months), at a circus (he’s not allowed to talk about it because of the lawsuit, but he does occasionally drop the fact that he worked in a circus to pick people up in bars), teaching eighth grade math (glasses plus finally being able to grow a beard equals Jim looking like someone you’d trust your children with, apparently. The fake ID helps too), as a dolphin trainer (he’s still not quite sure how he got to California in the first place), a tennis instructor (it took two months for them to figure out that Jim never got his driver’s license), mailman (same), waiter (Jim always got his food out earliest – possibly because he was banging the head cook? – so the customers loved him, so his coworkers hated him, which was the end of that), telemarketer (just turned into phone sex), and a handful of other short-term odd jobs.

When those don’t pay the bills, Jim can always do a little bit of illegal fighting, or more often, stripping, which he’s actually great at, but since he finds he makes more credits doing – ahem –
private performances, it inevitably just ends up being prostitution. It always comes to back to prostitution.

Prostitution is also what lands Jim back in juvie, but that’s a whole different story. Jim still doesn’t get why he keeps getting arrested for having sex.

You meet a lot of interesting people in a job like that, some good, some bad, some ugly (mostly ugly, but Jim doesn’t judge), but they all want the same thing, which is not Jim.

It’s not that they don’t want Jim—they definitely do. But what they’re looking to get from their money is always something different, something nebulous and inexpressible. They want to feel in control or wanted or worshipped. They want Jim to become who they want him to be, and Jim is uniquely qualified to do just that. Sometimes he even believes his own lie; that’s what makes him so good at what he does.

One guy hired Jim for a whole night and then just set a chessboard down on the hotel bed and asked for a game.

Now, Jim knows charity when he sees it, and he doesn’t like it one bit. So he did the obvious thing and got his revenge in the form of wiping the floor with the poor guy.

So Jim had smirked and checkmated the guy in under ten minutes, to which the guy had stared at Jim and then at the board and then back at Jim and demanded another game.

He’d hired Jim every Sunday night for two months to play chess, which yeah, eventually turned into chess and sex, and then into just sex. Jim wishes he could say he was surprised.

(That guy was still Jim’s favorite customer by far. Chess is the best kind of foreplay.)

The point is, Jim actually has, you know, stuff. Responsibilities! People to do, things to see! So it’s not like he can just pick up and go every time Tom freaks out over what Jim is coming to think of as the Annual Kodos Sighting. Which, yes, he should not be making light of because Tom actually thinks Kodos has returned from the dead every time, actually freaks out every time, and every time Jim has to ask himself what he would do if Kodos really were still alive.

It leaves him raw and exhausted and desperate to run in the other direction, every time.

---

It goes like this:

Jim and his club buddies are minding their own business, enjoying the weekly drugs bust, when Jim gets a message on his com-line from Tom.

I’ve found him.

Jim takes one look at the message and wants to delete it. Or better yet, throw the pocketpadd at the wall.

“What are you looking at?” the police officer patting Jim down snaps.

“Nothing,” Jim mutters, just as the pocketpadd screen lights up with another message. He can hear the officer’s teeth grind.

It’s Kodos. He’s alive.
Jim closes his eyes, willing the message away. He opens them; it’s still there.

He sighs and types back, *It’s always Kodos.*

This time Tom doesn’t reply immediately. Jim watches the screen while the officer pats down his pant leg. Normally having another humanoid on their knees in front of him would be turning Jim on, but he really couldn’t care less at the moment.

*This time it’s for real,* comes Tom’s response.

*Sorrry. I can’t make it out right now.*

There’s an even longer pause before the next message.

“You’re clean,” the officer says, looking annoyed. Jim just nods absently. His pocketpadd buzzes with another message.

All it says is, *Please JT.*

“What,” the officer fumes, “is so important on that PADD that you—”

Jim puts his pocketpadd away, takes a step forward, and pulls the officer into a tight hug. “I’m sorry I made you feel neglected. Nothing is more important than you. Than us.” He looks up at the man, bats his eyelashes. “Let me prove it to you.”

The officer grimaces and pushes Jim away. “Just because you’re not in possession of drugs doesn’t mean I can’t bring you in for contempt of the law. You get out of here while I’m in a good mood, kid.” Jim just smiles beatifically back, gives a jaunty wave, and makes his exit, stage left, like the nice officer suggested. The smile slides off Jim’s face as soon as he’s turned away.

When he gets out on the street he glances over his shoulder to make sure nobody’s watching, then takes the nice officer’s keys out his pocket and twirls them on one finger, whistling.

Then he climbs into the parked police car and tears out of the place like a bat out of hell.

---

Jim fires up the sirens, floors the gas for nine hours straight, and manages to get to Tom’s address at five o’clock in the morning. He parks across three parking spots (hey, he stole a police car, he deserves to take some liberties!) and somehow manages to stumble up the stairs to the fourth floor apartment.

He thinks he’s going to have to pound on the door for ten minutes at least, but he knocks once and the door swings open to Tom, three years older than Jim remembers him but still wearing matching flannel pajamas.

“You look terrible,” says Tom.

“Well I was driving through the night for this loser friend of mine,” Jim replies. “What’s your excuse?”

“I haven’t been sleeping too well either,” Tom admits. Then he adds, with a gesture to himself and a self-deprecating grin Jim recognizes all too well, “At least my face only looks half as bad as yours.”

And yup, that’s about as much patience for niceties Jim has right now, so he foregoes the whole nice-to-see-you-come-on-in nonsense and pulls Tom into a hug. Tom squeezes back like Jim will
disappear if he lets go.

After a good full minute they separate, grinning dopily and pretending they don’t see the wetness in each other’s eyes.

Tom ushers him inside and closes the door. “I can’t tell you how good it is to see you, JT,” he says in a low voice. He also doesn’t turn on the light, so Jim has to assume someone is sleeping.

“It’s good to see you too, Tom,” he replies sincerely. “I’m still going to kill you if your mystery man isn’t Kodos, of course, but it is good to see you.’”

---

So Tom shows him the pictures.

It isn’t Kodos.

His knees almost buckle with the relief. Every. Single. Time.

---

Tom looks at him questioningly, pleadingly. Jim just shakes his head.

“Don’t kill me,” says Tom, giving him those big miserable eyes. Well. Eye.

And the thing is, no matter how irritated Jim is with Tom’s paranoia (and Jim is very, very irritated at this point with Tom’s paranoia), he knows that his friend actually believes he’s seeing Kodos every single time, and is actually terrified, every. Single. Time. And that’s why Jim can’t stay away, idiot he is. Every single time.

Not to mention the feeling of having someone actually rely on him, need him – even if Tom doesn’t really need him – well, Jim’s not going to give that up.

Jim sighs, the irritation flagging in favor of giving in to the relief and the exhaustion and the electric terror he’d been keeping at bay since getting Tom’s message. He collapses on Tom’s couch with a groan and lets his limbs out stretch out haphazardly. “Right now I just want to sleep. I’ll kill you in the morning.”

“By the way, you didn’t do anything illegal to get here, did you? Because if so, I don’t know you,” Tom says in a joking, overly-serious voice. “I’m applying to Ph.D. programs now and let me tell you, the acceptance process is brutal, so all unworthy friends have to go.”

“Ph.D. programs, huh? Well la-dee-dah. What area?”

“Biochemistry research. With a focus on, um.” He hesitates, then takes a breath and says all in a rush. “Synthetic foods that can be locally replicated, digitally transferred, and preserved over a long period of time, so we never have another famine.”

Jim is speechless.

“You know?” his friend says awkwardly, obviously anxious for a response.

He does know. “Yeah. That’s… Tom, that’s amazing.”

Tom flushes and, predictably, changes the subject. “So what have you been up to, JT?”
“The usual. Bouncing around odd jobs to keep myself from dying of starvation or boredom in between juvenile delinquent centers.”

Tom frowns. “Well, they seem to have been paying you well at least,” he says, eyeing Jim’s designer jeans and authentic leather jacket.

“Like what you see?” Jim waggles his eyebrows suggestively at Tom, who laughs. “I got these from my last modeling job. They let me keep the clothes.”

“You know, that’s really good to hear, because I was honestly starting to suspect that ‘modeling’ was your code for porn.”

“Well, the line between the two is, you know, blurry at best, but by modeling I really just mean modeling.” Jim considers that, then amends, “This time, at least.”

Tom doesn’t laugh. “Jim, I’m worried about you.”

Jim throws an arm over his eyes. “Oh look, it’s my favorite conversation.”

“JT, I’m serious. You’re too smart to get by on flipping burgers and porn starring and the occasional forged check.”

He pauses, waiting for a reply. Jim doesn’t even try to give him one.

“You’ve already been to juvenile detention twice, Jim!”

“You should really meet my mom. You’d like her,” Jim says.

“Sometimes I’ll see a blond kid in the news who got shot in some gang fight or cut up and left on the side of the road because he hitchhiked with a stranger and I have a heart attack until I’m sure it isn’t you. The life you’re living isn’t…”

“You guys can stay up all night worrying together. …Wow, that sounded really wrong. I changed my mind, you are not allowed to stay up all night worrying my mother, Tom.”

“I mean, it’s a miracle that you haven’t died from some exotic STD yet! I ask you, is there anything lamer than death by alien sperm?”

“But you guys can totally bond over how you both watch the same TV shows and love Josh Groban…”

“What if you get put into the hospital? Who will they call? Am I on your emergency contacts list? Do you even have an emergency contacts list?”

“No, seriously, I think this might be the beginning of something beautiful here—”

“I know you don’t want to talk about what happened on Tar—”

“Yeahhhno, we are not talking about—”

“I know. Really, I know, I just wish you’d talk to someone about what K—”

But Jim doesn’t hear the rest because he’s stuck his fingers in his ears and has started singing Mary Had a Little Lamb at the top of his lungs.

“Tom?” a quiet, sleepy voice interrupts from the hallway. “Who’s here so earl—“ She cuts herself
off with a yawn. Jim looks up.

There’s a girl standing in the doorway wearing what looks like one of Tom’s oversized t-shirts and nothing else.

“Well, hello there,” says Jim, grinning from ear to ear. He turns on Tom in mock-outrage. “Tom! I can’t believe you never introduced me to your…roommate.”

Tom’s face (or the half of it Jim can see, anyway) is bright red. “Jim, Martha. Martha, Jim,” he mumbles with a vague wave between the two of them.

“Martha,” Jim repeats, verbally molesting the name.

“Jim,” says Martha, bemused. She looks between the two of them. “How do you know each other?”

“I usually refer to Jim as JT,” Tom replies carefully, and understanding dawns in Martha’s expression, and Jim knows immediately that Tom told her about Tarsus. He fights down a wave of irrational irritation that he told her something so private. Or maybe that Tom found someone with whom he can share something so private, when Jim never will.

Jim manages to snap himself out of it in time to give Martha a pretty convincing grin. “I’m here to kill your boyfriend.”

“What did you do?” she demands, immediately turning on Tom. “Don’t tell me you called him here for that… for what you showed me.”

Tom blushes and doesn’t reply.

“Tom,” Martha says. “Forget Jim, I’m going to kill you myself!”

“I really thought it was him,” Tom mumbles, face downcast and ashamed. “I’m sorry, JT.”

“It’s all right,” Jim lies casually.

Martha looks at the two of them and sighs. “I guess no one’s going back to sleep.”

“Probably not,” Jim and Tom say in unison.

“Well then… there should at least be coffee. Jim, can you help me in the kitchen?”

Tom lowers his voice to a stage whisper. “That’s girl-code for ‘can I talk to you privately?’”

“Ahaa,” says Jim, grinning crookedly to hide his unease. “Sure—as long as that’s a euphemism.”

Tom doesn’t look perturbed by Jim’s flirting in the slightest. “Have fun.” Yeah, these two are getting married.

Jim follows Martha into the kitchen, where she actually starts making coffee. As far as Jim can tell, she’s lost in thought, seeming unaware of the dead silence between them.

Jim, on the other hand, shifts awkwardly for a while, then clears his throat and says, “Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

Martha looks up, amused, and Jim winces. “Sorry about that, I can’t figure out how to turn it off.”

This of course is when Martha decides to say, “I’m worried about Tom.”
Jim blurs, “Can I open the window?”

“What?” she says, distracted. “Yeah – yeah, of course, but listen… Jim, it’s been over three years and he’s still haunted daily by… by what you went through. I just…”

Jim opens the window, closes his eyes, and breathes in the fresh air, trying to dispel the feeling of being trapped. The nighttime breeze cools his face, but not the jagged restlessness under his skin. “I’m really not qualified to give anyone advice, Martha.”

“Maybe,” says Martha. “But you don’t see Governor Kodos everywhere, do you?”

Sure I do, Jim thinks. Just not outside my own head.

“I almost wish we could just find Kodos so Tom can finally lay the whole thing to rest.”

Jim turns abruptly. “Kodos is dead.”

“I know, JT,” she says softly. “I was only—”

“You don’t get to call me JT,” he snaps. “You haven’t earned that right.”

She flinches and Jim sags, pulls a hand through his hair, leans back on the windowsill. “I—Look… I’m sorry…”

“No, I’m sorry,” Martha replies, wrapping her arms around herself, looking lost. “I just wish I knew how to help him.”

Jim laughs mirthlessly. “I’m the last person who’d know. He’s got skills, goals, an apartment, a girlfriend—he’s doing pretty well if you ask me.”

“You don’t know the kinds of dreams he has.”

Jim doesn’t reply.

She lowers her head in acknowledgement. “Or maybe you do.”

“JT?” Tom calls from the other room, his voice strained.

“Yeah?”

“Do you happen to know why there’s a stolen police car in the parking lot?”

Ah. “Funny story, actually…”

That’s when four officers burst into the kitchen, phasers drawn and fully decked out in protective gear like Jim’s got a hydrogen bomb or something. Martha drops the coffee pot.

“Hands where we can see them!” the frontrunner shouts.

A fifth officer enters with his phaser trained on Tom, who has his hands on his head. Martha raises her own hands in surrender.

“Why are you here?” the officer demands.

Jim smiles. “That’s a pretty personal question. Why are any of us here? Will we ever truly know?”

“Don’t play stupid! Why did you come here? Are these your accomplices?”
Jim’s eyes flash to Tom’s, and he remembers with a jolt that even one arrest for questioning will destroy any chance Tom has of getting into that Ph.D. program he’s been dreaming about.

Just because Jim isn’t going to amount to much of anything doesn’t mean he’s going to keep Tom from becoming something great.

“Who, those two? Yeah right.” Jim glances at them dispassionately. “I’ve never seen them before today. Not the brightest folks, I could tell you that much. I just had to pretend I was stranded and ask to use their phone.” He sneers, letting himself believe his own lie for the moment. “They let me right in. Idiots. Too bad you came in before I could get anything of value off them.”

“That’s a confession if I ever heard it,” one of the officers mutters. “If you give in now, we won’t have to stun you.”

Jim thinks about that. “Nah.”

They stare at him in disbelief. “Nah?”

“I’m not really in the mood to get arrested tonight. See, I’ve been driving for nine hours and I’m kinda beat. How about we split up, get a little shut-eye, and reconvene here tomorrow afternoon to pick up where we left off.”

“He’s messing with us—stun him!”

Jim gives Tom and Martha a little salute, then sits back on the sill and flips backwards out the window. Phaser fire ricochets off the kitchen wall where he’d just been. For a split second he hangs from the ledge, looking down, calculating the drop (fourth floor apartment, about forty-five to fifty feet, minus six feet of my own height…probably won’t break anything) and then he drops, landing in a crouch that sends shockwaves up into his knees but, as he suspected, doesn’t break anything.

Jim can hear the officers yelling at each other from Tom’s apartment, unable to get through the window with all their gear and unable to get a clear shot on Jim in the dark.

He starts running, nowhere to hide, nowhere to go, just running and—

And is promptly almost run over by a car, whose driver sticks his head out the window and yells, “Watch where you’re going, moron! Are you crazy?”

Jim licks his lips and leans forward and tries not to make it sound rushed (like he’s, let’s say, being chased by five angry men with phasers) and replies, “A little bit. Are you?”

By the time the squadron makes its way out of the apartment and down the stairs and out of the building and into the parking lot, Jim and his wonderful, thoughtful (unwitting) getaway driver are long gone.

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“He was quite short, wasn’t he, Martha?” Tom muses, when the police arrive and ask them to describe the beastly young man who’d broken into their apartment.

“Oh, no, he was very tall. Very tall.”

“Maybe that was it. He had brown eyes, didn’t he? And dark hair…”

“His eyes were green, Tom,” she replies. “And he was wearing a hat.”
“Or was it a turban?”

“Well, it was made of wool. Like a ski cap turban.”

Tom nods. “Right, that’s exactly how I would describe it. A ski cap turban.”

The police officer, meanwhile, is jotting down notes only to have to cross them out again and visibly attempting to rein in her temper. “Do you remember anything for certain about the trespasser?” she asks between gritted teeth.

“That facial hair!” Martha says immediately. “Right, Tom?”

“That’s right,” says Tom. “He had this enormous goatee—”

“Enormous,” Martha agrees, nodding.

“It was just huge, and long, and, um. Massive…”

Martha tilts her head, considering. “Or was he clean-shaven?”

“You know what, you’re right, he might’ve been clean-shaven.”

“I’m pretty sure he was clean-shaven.”

“Like a bald monkey,” Tom agrees, nodding.

“So clean-shaven, in fact…” says Martha thoughtfully, “that are we sure he was male?”

The police officer actually puts down her notepad so she can bang her head repeatedly on the kitchen cabinet.

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Eventually the police get the far more reliable testimony of the officers who’d come to “help” Tom and Martha, and Jim is found and brought up on charges of grand theft auto and impersonation of an officer of the law. (Tom drops the attempted robbery charge – what are friends for, after all?)

This time when Jim is convicted, he’s too old for juvie.

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Jim learns quickly that things very work differently in jail than they did in juvenile detention.

In juvie, as much as nobody is willing to admit it, everyone is lonely and everyone is messed up, and everyone is looking for friends (for a family), even if the desire to belong is buried under a light-year’s worth of baggage. By the time these kids get to jail, they’ve gotten used to being alone. They don’t need or want a family.

In juvie, Jim was one of the older kids. Now he’s one of the youngest. He does okay though. He’s known for years that there’s no such thing as a free lunch – no such thing as free anything, including friendship, safety, food… Everyone has their own commodities to give and everyone wants something in return for what they have and jail is no different—it’s just more straightforward. Jim still has only one commodity to offer.

In juvie, they’re told all day that they can make themselves into something great regardless of their history; in jail they’re told that they’re the scum of the earth, like they’ve already lost their chance.
And like Gatsby, in both cases the inmates become who they are expected to be.

In jail, Jim’s cellmate is ten years older and fifty pounds heavier than Nick, and an actual murderer.

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Jail is better than juvie in one way, though: he actually gets calls. Mainly from Tom. The first one was just a string of sorry sorry sorry until Jim couldn’t take it anymore and hung up. The rest were better - about Jim teaching a martial arts class to the inmates, about Tom’s Ph.D. program, about anything other than Tarsus.

He even gets a call from his mother; he’s near the end of his sentence and she’s fresh off the starship from her five-year mission only to discover that Frank was cheating on her. What a shock. Jim is shocked. Exclamation points.

Jim’s not a complete jerk though, so he tries to muster some melancholy when his mom tells him she’s getting a divorce. “Aww…that’s a shame. I’m sorry, Mom.”

She gives him a faint laugh. “No you aren’t. You never liked him.”

“Sam never liked him either,” Jim volunteers.

“Yes he did! Sam and Frank always got along…”

“No way,” says Jim. “Sam was just better at hiding it.”

“Sam was better than us at a lot of things,” she says quietly.

“Kinda sucked at not dying though,” Jim points out.

His mother finds a reason to hang up shortly thereafter. He doesn’t blame her.

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He doesn’t even bother getting excited to leave jail this time; he knows he’ll just end up in the same wandering cycle he’d been in before, bouncing around from place to place, from bed to bed.

He sits on the jailhouse stairs and stares up at the sky for hours.

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He celebrates his freedom at his favorite Riverside bar, where he orders a drink in every color of the rainbow on money he doesn’t have, and the girl next to him (Jessica, he learns later) takes one look at the selection in front of him and says, “Expecting a party?”

“Party of one,” says Jim. He flashes her a flirtatious smile. “Unless you wanna join me?”

“Put all that alcohol in your system and you could actually die.”

“‘Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.”

“Seriously though, you are not actually going to drink all that. I dare you to even try.”

Jim tilts his head and raises an eyebrow.

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Jim doesn’t die.

He still doesn’t know how to feel about that.

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A few years and many more odd jobs later (bartending, construction, more mechanics’ garages…he even plays guitar on the street for a while), Jim is older and (maybe?) wiser and has an impressively multifaceted skill set for his résumé but is still equally broke, which brings him to the rest stop just a few miles from Riverside, where he’s just gotten a free pack of cigarettes from the girl behind the counter by flirting with her. Not that he was particularly opposed to the idea of going down on her for it—she was cute.

Sex, like money, never stays in Jim’s pants for long. Luckily sex, unlike money, is one commodity of which Jim has plenty to spare.

Partly because he keeps getting mugged.

He’s not even a full block away from the rest stop when he feels something small and hard press between his shoulder blades. “Don’t turn around. Just empty your pockets and put everything on the ground and no one has to get hurt.”

He pauses, hears the faint tremor in her voice, and knows she doesn’t have a phaser. He turns around.

“What did I just say?” the girl snaps, but she’s already retreating, the handle of a hairbrush still pointed in his direction. Jim wonders how much she’s gotten by holding people up at hairbrush-point.

“When you mess with people on the street you have to deal with people on the street,” he says, crossing his arms. “One day you’re going to try to mug someone who actually has a weapon.”

“If I live that long,” she replies.

He looks closer, at the familiar look in her eyes, the desperation hardened into a sort of bitter humor, caring only about surviving until the next meal.

That’s also when he sees a younger girl peeking around the corner behind her, about ten or eleven years old. She has the girl’s brown hair and hazel eyes.

“You leave her alone,” his would-be-mugger hisses, getting into a fighting stance. “You have a problem with me, you deal with me, you hear? Leave her alone!”

Jim puts his hands up in surrender. “Okay. Okay. You’ve scared me into submission.” He pulls out his wallet – whatever’s left in it – and pocketpadd and puts them on the ground. Then he takes out his keys and holds them up. “These are for apartment 3A on the corner of 53rd and Lafayette. The fridge has some stuff in it and rent’s paid through the end of the month. Then you’re on your own. Don’t do anything stupid for it. Your sister needs you.”

She doesn’t reply for a long time, watching him suspiciously. At last she says, “Are you going to be there?”

They both know what she’s really asking. He swallows at the dry, easy way she says it, because of course everyone wants something in return.
“No,” he says. He bends, puts the keys on the ground next to his wallet and pocketpadd. “That’s my only set of keys,” he lies. “I’m heading elsewhere.”

She watches him for a while, then darts forward, grabs the stuff, and is off around the corner before Jim can think better of it.

“Well,” Jim mutters. “That wasn’t that smartest thing I’ve ever done.” Not the stupidest thing either, to be fair. Not that that’s saying much in his case.

Night has properly fallen at this point and Jim shivers, rubs his arms. He checks his pockets to do inventory of whatever he has left. Let’s see… fake ID, spare keys, a couple of condoms, a lighter, some wire… hey, his free pack of cigarettes!

So, with nowhere to go and no way to get there, he sits himself down on the curb and pulls out a cigarette.

Jim takes a long drag and leans back on his hands, breathing the smoke out and looking up at those gorgeous, lonely stars and thinking of Tom. Tom, who’s halfway through his research program, Tom who just got engaged to Martha, the love of his life.

Jim privately thinks twenty-two is a few millennia too young to be settling down, but then they’ve always kind of been too young and that’s never stopped anything from happening before.

Jim intends to go to the wedding so he can give Tom a hug and a congratulations-on-not-letting-Tarsus-screw-you-over, have some crazy monkey sex, and drink himself blind. Not necessarily in that order.

He intends to go to that wedding so he can have one night of pretending that maybe someday he’ll be like that too. Moving on with his life, finding love and purpose and happiness, “leaving the experience behind him” like Martha and good ol’ Dr. Mel wanted.

In the meantime, Jim has a different theory of moving on, and it’s been treating him just fine so far. It goes like this: someday Kodos won’t matter anymore because he’ll have slept with everyone and everything else - why not Kodos too?

After all, there is no such thing as The One. Probably. At least, no such thing exists for Jim. Or maybe he’s already banged them, one of the many nameless steppingstones Jim’s used to get where he is.

That is, penniless and shivering and alone in the dark on a deserted curb in the middle of Nowhere, Iowa.

Jim thinks about how Tom looks at Martha. How Mom must have looked at Dad. How Sam looked at Erika.

“God.” Jim’s laugh plumes in the cold air. “If only you could see me now, Sam.”

No way would Sam have let himself get shot for Jim if he’d known where his little brother would end up – he was too smart for that. That was the problem, really. So wise so young, they say, do never live long. Then all you’ve got left is the stupid, human, still-not-dead kids like Jim.

He huffs another quiet laugh, rubs his cigarette out on the pavement, and picks himself up off the curb. He sticks his hands in his pockets for whatever warmth they can offer him, content to let his only goal be, for the moment, “let’s wander down this here street for a bit, see where it takes us.”
For all the good it does him, Jim sometimes entertains these ideas about the future that grow more and more bizarre as they go on: that maybe one day he’ll stop drinking, stop smoking, stop “borrowing” motor vehicles, stop getting into fights, stop sleeping around, stop driving too fast, start getting back in touch with his mother, start seeing a therapist, start getting eight hours of sleep a night and eating nothing but salad.

Yeah.

But hey, weirder things have happened. Maybe one day he’ll go straight.

In the meantime, Jim catches sight of the sexiest little motorcycle in the skimpiest little security system he’d ever laid eyes upon, and slows to give it a low whistle and a very thorough once-over.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he murmurs, running his fingers over the perfect black coat and feeling the sleek, powerful body underneath. He moans quietly in appreciation.

“Fierce woman like you… I wonder if you’ve ever had a man who could treat you right.”

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Well she sure does now.

As Jim suspected, she rides like a dream, and soon enough he’s back at his favorite dive in Riverside, eyeing up the other customers and ordering drinks he doesn’t have the credits for. Izzy’s manning the bar tonight, and he really should know better than to give him anything, but he seems to know that Jim needs to be drunk right now and cuts him a break.

He sits back to appreciate his Jack Daniels and thinks briefly of the stolen motorcycle parked outside. He probably has about twenty-four more hours to pawn it off on some gullible schlub before the owner realizes it’s gone. He’ll have to give them the other keys to the apartment so they don’t realize it’s hotwired and report Jim right away. No big deal.

So he sits there for a few hours, getting drink after drink and scoping out the clientele, until he catches sight of a stunner in a Starfleet uniform (cadet) ordering about a billion drinks.

“That’s a lot of drinks for one woman,” he comments, leaning forward to ogle her properly.

She ignores him. “And a shot of Jack, straight up,” she adds to Izzy.

“Make that two,” he tells Izzy. “Her shot’s on me.” Izzy gives him a look that clearly says he knows very well that Jim can’t even pay for his own drinks, let alone hers, but thankfully doesn’t say anything.

“Her shot’s on her. Thanks but no thanks,” she says to Jim with a patronizing smile. Ahh, playing hard to get. Just his type.

“Don’t you want to at least know my name before you completely reject me?”

“I’m fine without it.”

He grins. Too easy. “You are fine without it,” he agrees. “It’s Jim, Jim Kirk.” Then he looks at her expectantly.

She doesn’t reply.

“If you don’t tell me your name I’m gonna have to make one up,” he warns her. And boy does she
not want that. This one looks like a Theodosia.

She looks up, trying not to laugh. “It’s Uhura,” she says at last.

“Uhura! No way, that’s the name I was going to make up for you! Uhura what?”

“Just Uhura.”

“They don’t have last names in your world?”

“Uhura is my last name,” she says.

“Well, they don’t have” – it takes a minute for his plastered brain to come up with the word he’s looking for – “ah, first names in your world?”

She laughs and shakes her head and Jim knows he’s got her. He grabs his drink and heads over to lean on the counter next to her.

“So,” he says. “You’re a cadet, you’re stunning, what’s your focus?”

“Xenolinguistics,” she replies, all prim and scientific-like. Rawr. “You have no idea what that means.”

“Study of alien languages. Morphology, phonology, syntax,” he says. She looks up at him properly for the first time, surprised. “It means you’ve got a talented tongue.”

She smiles that smile and yup, he’s definitely got her. “I’m impressed. For a moment there I thought you were just a dumb hick who only had sex with farm animals.”

“Well,” he says. “Not only,” and she laughs for real.

Which obviously is when some other cadet – this big, meaty dude – comes up and says, “This townie isn’t bothering you, right?”

And the thing is, it’s so obvious he isn’t bothering her - she’s laughing, she’s looking up at him through her eyelashes - that the insinuation really shouldn’t bother him, but…

The very idea that Jim would pursue someone that doesn’t want to be pursued, that he’s trying to coerce her into something she doesn’t want, that he’s insisting even though she’s saying no…it raises his hackles like nothing else, and he has to forcibly keep himself from responding.

“Oh, beyond belief,” she laughs. “But it’s nothing I can’t handle.” She raises her eyebrows at Jim in playful challenge at this part, and Jim leans in closer.

“You could handle me, that’s an invitation.”

“Hey,” the other cadet says angrily. Probably has a crush on Uhura – who can blame him? “You better mind your manners.”

He should let Uhura get rid of the guy. He knows nothing about Kodos, he knows nothing about how terrified Jim is that he really will become the sort of person who makes people into what he wants them to be. Jim really shouldn’t let it get to him. He really shouldn’t.

It does get to him.

“Oh, relax, Cupcake,” he says, slapping the guy on the shoulder. “It was a joke.” He says it as much
to reassure himself as to refute Cupcake. It was. He would’ve noticed if she was really saying no.

Wouldn’t he?

He turns back to Uhura, tries to clear his mind of everything, only to be pulled back by Cupcake. “Hey, farmboy. Maybe you can’t count – there are four of us and one of you.”

“So get some more guys, and then it’ll be a fair fight,” he says. Then he gives Cupcake a condescending little smile and pats him on the cheek.

He sees the fist heading toward him but doesn’t have the time to stop it.

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Well, that wasn’t that smartest thing I’ve ever done, Jim thinks, groaning as he attempts to roll his bleeding, piss-drunk body off the bar table.

Not the stupidest thing either, to be fair. Not that that’s saying much.

The man who’d called off those Starfleet thugs has disappeared to do…something. (For lack of an actual name Jim decides to call him Captain von Trapp; the captain – going by his uniform – with the Fearsome Whistle of Ultimate Domination.)

Eventually he manages to get himself upright and in a chair, and strips off his jacket and sticks some napkins in his nose to stop the bleeding. Not the most attractive option, but plenty effective.

Captain von Trapp comes back and takes the seat across from Jim. “I’ve had them charge the repairs to my credit chip, as well as all those drinks you ordered on the money you don’t have.”

This is true enough. Jim did not, in fact, have the money for those drinks. How nice of the good captain to take care of the bill for him, how generous, et cetera.

More importantly, what does he want in exchange?

The man takes something out of his pocket. “Does this look familiar?”

Jim takes it, turns it around. It’s a USS Kelvin saltshaker. Classy. “It’s a really lame Happy Meal toy? Look, it’s leaking.”

Captain von Trapp looks hard at Jim, then just shakes his head. “Okay, you’re right, stupid question. Stupid answer.”

“Do you, like, carry these things around with you?” Jim asks. “So that if you meet someone and you want to shut them up you can give ‘em a little starship saltshaker to play with? Also does that actually work, because if so I want a dozen little starships please.”

The captain glances at him with what might be amusement. “It hasn’t worked with you yet, has it? Christopher Pike, by the way.”

Jim doesn’t bother giving his own name, isn’t even sure the man wants it. Instead he just lifts his glass in acknowledgement and takes a swig of beer, using the opportunity to discreetly observe his new buddy.

His first guess would be a member of the George Kirk Fan Club, but since he hasn’t tried to berate Jim for his reckless/drunken/delinquent behavior – and in fact paid for the damages caused by Jim’s reckless/drunken/delinquent behavior – Jim’s going to go with sugar daddy. And far be it from Jim to
He’s a little bit older than Jim’s usual benefactors but not bad looking… pretty in shape… an officer, and a captain no less. He’s probably cheating on his wife. Why Jim’s caught his attention – blood on his shirt and napkins up his nose and all – is its own mystery, but hey, Jim’s not complaining. He can milk this guy for all he’s worth.

Er. Financially speaking.

“I’m not the sorta guy to beat around the bush. My rate’s 400 credits a night, or 150 an hour. You up for it?”

“Your rate?” Pike repeats, baffled. A sort of dismayed understanding dawns in his expression. “I’m married.”

Jim gives a little drunken wave. “We both know that doesn’t mean anything.”

Pike looks at him, incredulous, then shakes his head. “You know, I couldn’t believe it when the bartender told me who you are.”

Alright, which of Jim’s many identities is he addressing here? Jimmy, JT, Jay, Jim, nameless guy ready for some no-strings-attached fun? He’s hoping for the last one, personally, so he gives a crooked little grin and says, “And who am I, Captain Pike?”

He gets a look for that. So he didn’t miss the fact that he never actually told Jim his rank. “Your father’s son.”

Ah. So he’s addressing George Kirk Junior. Wonderful. Not a customer or a friend, just another admirer/well-meaning wannabe father figure. Shoulda gone with his gut and run away when he first saw the Kelvin saltshaker.

Oh well. Might as well get a refill on this guy’s tab if he has to endure yet another episode of What I Love About Your Father.

“For my dissertation I was assigned the USS Kelvin,” Pike tells him, and Jim braces himself for the inevitable adoring comment like what immediately follows, which is, “Something I admired about your dad… He didn’t believe in no-win scenarios.”

Jim pulls the napkins out of his nose. Gross. “Sure learned his lesson,” he mutters. Ironically, being forced into corners with no good escape route is something – possibly the only thing – he and his dad actually do have in common. The day George Kirk died was the day James Kirk was born, and the last lesson that his father learned was the first one Jim learned – the immutability of no-win scenarios. Jim knows full well that sometimes you sacrifice everything for someone you love, and then he goes and gets himself shot anyway.

“Well, that depends how you define winning,” Pike says. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

It is primarily because of pep talks like this that Jim has begun to think of George Kirk as, essentially, his own personal Jesus.

Why should you love him, if you never knew him? Because he loved you, of course – well, yes, he didn’t actually know you but he did die for you after all, isn’t that the greatest possible display of affection? Oh, you have no idea, Jimmy, he was so kind and brave. So handsome, too. Pretty much as perfect as any human can be. Why can’t you be more like your father, Jimmy? Your father would never dream of doing something like that, Jimmy. Your father died for your sins, Jimmy, why aren’t
you worshiping him like the rest of us?

Jim is all too familiar with this species of Kirk Admirer, the ones who think that all Jim really needs to do is stop and wonder: What Would George Do? and then he’ll turn out all right. He’s also learned that the best way to deal with them is to accept the free beer and settle in for the long haul.

Except the hero-worship doesn’t come. “You know, that instinct to leap before looking, that was his nature too, and in my opinion something Starfleet’s lost.”

Okay, now Jim has no idea what this man wants from him. He doesn’t want sex, he doesn’t want to tell Jim how great his dad was (well, he does, but not predominantly), and Jim doesn’t have the patience to figure it out. Everyone wants something, of course – the sooner you know what that something is, the better. ‘Specially since the good captain here is trying to butter him up. Never a good sign. He gives a short, bitter laugh and cuts to the chase. “Why are you talking to me, man?”

“Because I looked up your file while you were drooling on the floor.” Jim raises his eyebrows back, waiting for him to get to the point. “Your aptitude tests” – ahh goodie, so this is the ‘I’m worried about you, Jim!’ conversation. His favorite – “are off the charts, so what is it? You like being the only genius-level repeat offender in the Midwest?”

“Maybe I love it,” Jim replies.

Pike frowns. “So your dad dies, you can settle for a less than ordinary life. But you feel like you were meant for something better. Something special.”

Yeah, all right, Jim used to feel like that, like he was some special little snowflake waiting for the moment he’d be recognized and pulled out of a world of ordinary people to follow some special-snowflake destiny. Doesn’t everyone believe that at some point? But it doesn’t matter what he used to think, what kind of life he thought he could have – this is the life he has, and God knows he’s tried hard enough to rid himself of it.

“Enlist in Starfleet,” Pike says.

“Enli—” Is that where all that talk was going? Jim can’t help but laugh. “You guys must be waaay down in your recruiting quota for the month.”

“If you’re half the man your father was, Jim, Starfleet could use you.”

Anyone could use me, Jim thinks. Anyone will, if I let them.

“You could be an officer in four years,” Pike is saying, like he’s trying to sell Jim a car or something. “You could have your own ship in eight.”

Then he launches into some kind of explanation of what the Federation does, and yep, that’s the end of Jim’s ability to endure people assuming he’s a stupid delinquent. He’s not a stupid delinquent. He’s a highly intelligent delinquent, thank you very much. “We done?”

There’s a pause. “I’m done,” says Pike.

Thank God. He can go back to his drink, go back to what he was doing before, go back to telling everyone to leave him alone when all he’s thinking is help me help me help me.

Pike gets to his feet, but he doesn’t leave. “Riverside Shipyards. Shuttle for new recruits leaves tomorrow at 0800.”
Jim makes a ‘cheers’ motion with his glass. Pike still doesn’t leave.

Instead he says, “You know, your father was the captain of a starship for twelve minutes.”

You know, they’re never done when they say they’re done.

“He saved eight hundred lives, including your mother’s. And yours.”

Jim almost snorts at that. *He* was his father’s idea of a winning situation? Apparently Pike’s trying to say that it was worth it for his dad to sacrifice everything because *Jim* is still here, and…

And…

And if Jim keeps doing what he’s been doing since he was fifteen, driving himself into the ground, trying indirectly to get himself killed, he’ll be doing to George exactly what Sam did to him – destroying everything the sacrifice was made for in the first place. Creating a no-win scenario.

Huh. Maybe he and his father really do have something in common after all.

“I dare you to do better,” Pike says.

Then he turns and leaves the bar without looking back.

Jim tilts his head and raises an eyebrow.
Leonard has only joined Starfleet ten hours ago and he’s already found the nearest bar, which makes sense considering his main (read: only) priority right now is getting drunk and staying that way.

So, he thinks as downs his third whiskey. So this is his life now. No wife. No kid. No job. Just some position in medical track at Starfleet he took on a crazy, drunken whim, completely forgetting that Starfleet operated in space. As his seatmate was kind enough to remind him.

He doesn’t remember much about the ride – not even the kid’s name – but that kid had started yammering about everything and anything and asking Leonard’s opinion about the most bizarre of topics and then they were at the Starfleet base and Len hadn’t had time to freak out about the shuttle at all.

He had somehow managed to get himself and his one suitcase to his dorm room, and then there had been the placement tests (thank God for his degree because otherwise he’s certain he’d be placed at the lowest classes for everything) and then he’d promptly made his way to the bar, where he is now a good ways into the process of getting himself too drunk to think straight.

“Let me go,” a girl’s voice interrupts his thoughts. “I’m not interested. Let me go!”

“Well, maybe you should have said so before I bought you that drink!” There’s some guy holding on to her arm, trying to pull her forward out the door.

“I was trying to – now let. Me. Go.”

“You know what I think?” the guy smiles nastily. “I think you’re just trying to be cute. Well, it’s working.”

Leonard is about to get to his feet when someone else – Leonard is too far away to see him clearly, but he looks like just a kid, mid-twenties at the oldest – taps the guy on the shoulder and says pleasantly, “Hey. Sounds like your information’s about four hundred years out of date - you can’t buy people, man. Leave her alone.”

The guy just sneers back at him. “I dare you to make me.”

The scuffle turns into an all-out fight as three of the guy’s friends come to the fore as back-up, but the kid holds his own against them, ducking and laughing at them and making swings that look wild and uncontrolled but land every single time. He uses his body like an expert tool. Or maybe a weapon.

The bartender steps in to break them up and the kid hesitates for just long enough for one of the guys to get a hit in. The kid goes flying, smashing into one of the tables and collapsing to the floor.

Leonard winces, and now he does get to his feet – that was the kind of blow he’d seen on his surgery table! – but the bartender is pushing them out of the bar, the bouncers showing up to drag the troublemakers away. The girl’s disappeared somewhere in the scrimmage.

The kid gets back to his feet, stumbling a little, and for the first time Leonard gets a good look at him. He’s not just some stupidly good-looking (and probably just plain old stupid) kid. That’s the kid from the shuttle.
The kid – John? Jacob? Jingleheimerschmidt? – is pulled upright and shoved out of the bar, and Leonard’s gut instinct decides that maybe now is the perfect time to repay a favor.

Leonard catches up with the kid half a block outside the bar. “Let me see,” he says, holding out a hand.

The blonde turns, automatically on the defensive, ready for a fight. “What?”

“Your injuries. You might as well let me see the damage you’ve caused that thick skull of yours.”

The kid waves him off. “I feel fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” says Leonard, raising an eyebrow.

The cadet gives him a slightly wobbly leer. “I think you’ll find most people would disagree.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Len says, scowling. “After that fool move you pulled I would be shocked if you weren’t concussed. It’s a blasted miracle you’re not dead.”

“Your mom’s concussed,” he mutters.

Leonard just crosses his arms and looks at the kid disapprovingly. At last the blonde gives in and sighs, “Fine. You go ahead and make sure I’m not dying if it makes you happy. I’m just gonna…”

He sways a little on his feet, and Leonard rushes forward to help him into a sitting position against a nearby wall. “- sit down,” the kid finishes lamely.

He closes his eyes as Leonard begins feeling his way around the kid’s scalp. “I may throw up on you,” he murmurs.

The doctor jolts. So the kid does recognize him.

“Wouldn’t be the worst I’ve had on me, with my career,” Leonard replies gruffly. “It’s more important to rule out serious head trauma. Tell me if it hurts when I press down…uh, John… James?”

The blonde winces. Leonard checks the spot he just pressed, but there’s nothing there. “Jim,” he mumbles, and then, “I’mma throw up now,” and stands up and staggers off to do just that.

He’s been gone long enough that Len considers going after him to make sure he hasn’t passed out in some alley when he stumbles back and nearly collapses into Leonard’s side trying to sit down again. “Hi,” he says with a bright, drunken smile.

“Hi?” says Leonard.

“Yeah,” he says, like they’re picking up from some cozy conversation Leonard doesn’t remember having. “Jim. Jim Kirk. And you had… you were… Bones?”

“No,” says Leonard, eyebrows raised, but the kid’s already off.

“So, Bones. You’re a doctor, you clean up very nice… What’s your specialty? I mean, aside from knight in shining armor.”

Leonard snorts at the blatant flirtation and goes back to checking Jim’s scalp, pulse, and pupils. He definitely has a pretty bad concussion, but most of his skin is covered in a layer of scrapes and bruises that make the rest of the diagnosis hard to tell for sure. He licks a finger and starts rubbing off the blood at Jim’s hairline while Jim looks on, bemused.
“I saw that fight back there. Were you trying to get yourself killed?”

Jim just grins. “What can I say? I’m high-maintenance.”

“No kidding,” Leonard snorts.

After Leonard has finished most of his impromptu examination, the kid says, “So. Now that you’ve put your saliva all over me in the non-sexy way, can we do it in the sexy way?”

Len ignores his attractive but very drunk and very concussed patient. “I don’t see anything more serious than a black eye and a concussion. I can give you something for the pain, but you really need overnight supervision. I’ll take you to the medical center.”

“No! Don’t – ” Jim seems to catch himself and abruptly abort his own agitation, instead giving Leonard a crooked little grin. “I don’t really like hospitals. Aren’t you a doctor? Can’t you” – here he lowers his voice – “supervise me? I promise I’ll make it worth your while…”

Clever fingers trail their way down Len’s ribs and to the hemline of his shirt.

“Well…” Leonard says weakly, “I guess it couldn’t hurt. I do owe you for distracting me on that shuttle…”

Jim grins. “That’s right, you do.”

“C’mon, then.” Leonard gets to his feet and manages to pull the kid up with him. He leans almost his entire weight against Leonard, barely shuffling along enough to keep himself moving.

“Where’s your dorm room?”

“Don’t have one yet,” Jim mumbles.

“You don’t have one?”

“Last-minute recruit…”

There’s probably a story there. Not that it’s Len’s business. “Fine, we’ll go to my room, my roommate hasn’t come to the Academy yet anyway.” Jim tries to nod his head, but it ends up just drooping onto Leonard’s shoulder. “Hey – hey, don’t fall asleep on me now. You’ve got a concussion, remember? Not to mention how much fun the stairs will be if I have to drag you up there by myself.”

Leonard keeps himself talking – he loses track of what about, exactly – the whole way back to keep Jim awake, and eventually they reach Leonard’s dorm.

“We’re here,” he tells Jim when they get inside. “Now it’s just the stairs.”

“Yeah?” the kid says blearily, his eyelids sliding shut.

A thrill of panic skips up Leonard’s spine. “No! Don’t fall asleep, okay?”

“Sorry,” says Jim, and promptly passes out.

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“You’re a doctor, he says,” Leonard grouses, finally managing to kick open the door to his dorm room. His knees sag under the dead weight of Jim Kirk in his arms. “You supervise me, he says.
Well I as sure as hell didn’t sign up for this.” The last word comes out in a grunt as he drops the kid on the bed and leans over to put his hands on his knees, panting. Nothing like five flights of stairs carrying 170 pounds of unconscious playboy to get the cardiovascular system working.

When he finishes reintroducing himself to the planet’s oxygen supply, he takes off the kid’s shoes, arranges him more comfortably on the bed, checking his eyes, his pulse, his breathing. His body seems to be functioning all right, definitely nothing to call medical at almost midnight over, but that doesn’t mean his brain is in the clear. Idiot kid.

So he sets his alarm for four hours from then (crying a little bit on the inside about starting class tomorrow on a hangover and a couple of hours’ sleep) and lays down on the dorm’s couch, pulling a sheet over himself for a blanket. “High-maintenance,” he grumbles. “High-maintenance doesn’t begin to cover it!” He closes his eyes and waits for sleep to come.

It takes a while for him to realize he never told Jim he was a doctor.

Leonard wakes to his communicator bleeping at him, cheerfully informing him that it is 0315. He grabs the com and throws it against the far wall, where its back panel smashes open and drops the microchip out onto the floor. The beeping shorts out abruptly.

He rubs a weary hand over his eyes, groaning. No human being should be conscious at this hour.

Except for one, he amends, suddenly remembering his overnight guest.

“Jim,” he hisses. His voice comes out low and raspy, so he clears his throat and tries again. “Jim!”

There’s no answer. A shot of fear drops into his stomach, propelling him off the couch to the bed.


Jim jolts up out of the bed, his eyes meeting Len’s, and both of them yell and jump away from each other.

Leonard recovers first and puts his hands up in a peaceful gesture. “Listen, kid… Jim. I don’t know what you remember from last night… Or, well, tonight…”

For some reason Jim immediately looks down at himself, still fully clothed and in Leonard’s bed, then to where the rumpled sheet lays half-on, half-off the couch, and then back to Leonard, his eyes a bright, almost eerie blue in the dark, his expression unreadable. “You’re… Bones.”


“You carried me up the stairs?” the kid asks quietly.

“Yeah. Give me some warning next time you decide to pass out!”

Jim looks bemused. “Sorry.”

“Sorry, he says,” Leonard grumbles.

“You didn’t have to give me your bed,” Kirk says. “I could’ve taken the couch.”
“Right,” says Len. “Let the concussion patient take the couch. I’m a doctor, not a moron.”

“No, I know… I’m just saying, you didn’t have to stay and take care of me…and wake me up in the middle of the night…”

“Well, as you said, I owed you for keeping me sane on that shuttle ride.”

“Yeah,” says Jim. “So now that you’ve paid me back and then some—how can I repay you?’"

Kirk licks his lips and despite Len being hungover and exhausted and (maybe) knowing better than to get involved with kids like Jim, he knows exactly how he wants to be repaid.

He also knows, somewhere deep in his gut, that this kid is like a bottle of Grappa Piave brandy – guaranteed fun, but the hangover will make you regret it.

Which is how he finds the strength to say, “No charge, kid. I’m a doctor – it’s what I do.’”

“How noble,” Jim says, eyes gleaming, and then he’s pulling Len down on top of him and kissing him very, very thoroughly.

Len groans into Jim’s mouth, and the kid makes a pleased kind of noise back and rolls his hips up against Leonard’s.

And then his hands are in Jim’s hair and Jim is sucking on his lower lip and he’s melting into it, pouring himself into the kiss, into the familiar-unfamiliar sensation of a body against his. After all it’s the first time he’s gotten any since he and Jocelyn…

Jocelyn—

“Hey,” Jim murmurs, sensing his sudden unease. “Relax, baby, this can be whatever you want it to be. I’m not trying to be your new ex-wife here.”

Something about the way he says it makes Leonard stop. Maybe it’s that Jim doesn’t do serious relationships and Len doesn’t do casual relationships (not that Leonard’s history with serious relationships has been all that great either). Maybe it’s the potential STDs the kid’s probably carrying around…. Maybe it’s just the fact that he knows (and Jim knows that he knows) that this – whatever it is – would only be a rebound. Whatever it is, at the end of the day, he’s got a bad feeling in his gut about it. And Leonard McCoy has many faults, but ignoring his instincts is not one of them.

But that doesn’t make it any easier to stop, to push back on his elbows and look Jim in the eye and say, “Listen, I don’t think we should…”

“I’m fine,” Jim says, smiling. “Do you hear me saying no?”

“Yeah, but still. It’s not…”

“You want me to do you instead? ’Cause I’m cool with that. I’m cool with pretty much everything. Except for being tied up, dunno, just not such a fan.”

“Jim,” Leonard manages to get in, “stop, you don’t have to—”

“I mean—” says Kirk, obviously misunderstanding Leonard entirely. “I didn’t mean I pointblank won’t do the bondage thing. We can do that too, if that’s your jam. You really did help me out there…”

“That’s not it,” Leonard says with difficulty. “You’re…not my type.”
Jim chuckles. “Oh really?” He bucks his hips up, grinds against Leonard’s obvious arousal. Len makes a needy sound and pushes back before he can think better of it. “Look, I can see you’re a Southern gentleman and all, but let’s cut to the chase: you’re hard, I owe you a favor, and I am good at favors. If you still want to think you’re straight or whatever, just lie back and close your eyes. I’ll take care of it for you.”

Jim’s lips have found Len’s throat and his fingers have somehow made their way past the waistband of his pants, and Leonard has to bite down on a moan as he pushes them away and sits up on his heels, away from Jim. “No, I—Let’s just go to sleep, okay? You can take the other bed until my roommate gets here, I guess. His own fault for showin’ up late.”

The kid sits up, watching Len with wide, confused eyes. He opens his mouth. Closes it. “You mean… you want it later?”

“Jim,” Leonard says, very firmly, especially since he’s trying to convince both Kirk and himself. “I mean I don’t want to have sex with you, in any form, at any time.”

Jim looks completely taken aback. “Really?” He’s staring at Leonard like the very idea is groundbreaking and a little bit scary. For all he knows, maybe Leonard is doing something nobody’s ever done before by saying no to a one-night stand with Jim Kirk.

“Jesus, kid,” McCoy mutters. “You don’t have to sound so hurt about it. Good-lookin’ guy like you, there’s plenty’a people who’ll take you up on that offer.”

For the first time since Leonard’s known him (which, admittedly, hasn’t been that long), Jim is speechless. Leonard takes the opportunity to dig a pair of pajamas out of his upended suitcase and throw them at Kirk. They land on his lap. “Get into those and for God’s sake, wash your face. I’m goin’ to sleep.”

Jim stares at the pajama pants like he’s never seen clothing before in his life.

Finally the kid says, “Do you want money? Is that it?” There’s a catch in his voice – doubt, or maybe desperation. “Because I don’t have——”

Leonard sighs. “Relax, kid, I don’t want your money.”

“I don’t have any connections. Except for Captain Pike, I guess, and he’s not really——”

“Jim!” says Leonard. The kid abruptly cuts himself off. “The last thing I need is your connections.” Anyway, he doesn’t really want to think about how Jim got the one “connection” he has.

“Then what do you want?” Jim blurs, frustrated and confused.

“I want you to shut up and let me go to sleep,” he huffs.

For a long, long moment Jim stays there, every muscle tense and frozen, his gaze darting between Leonard’s eyes like he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And then, finally, Jim slowly gets to his feet and takes the clothing into the bathroom.

He comes out a few minutes later, when Len’s already in bed and starting to drift off, wearing Leonard’s pajamas and looking a good deal cleaner.

Len closes his eyes, hears Jim climb into the bed on the other side of the room. “G’night, Bones.”
And then he’s answering, “’Night, Jim,” before he can rethink it.

His last thought before slipping into unconsciousness is, *Great, now that I’ve acknowledged that stupid nickname I’ll never be rid of it.*

---

Len wakes up to the smell of sautéed onions and the sounds of someone moving around in his kitchen.

“Whozzat?” he manages blearily.

“Morning, Bones! It’s me,” Jim calls back, as if he should just naturally assume that Jim is messing around in his kitchen (it comes far too easily to assume that Jim is messing around in his kitchen). “I’m making omelets. Yours has onions, mushrooms, peppers, and cheddar cheese, you’re not allergic to any of that stuff, right?”

“No?” says Leonard, disoriented. He somehow gets himself into a sitting position and rubs his face and his hair and his sore neck until he finally realizes, “Wait. I don’t have any of that stuff.”

“You do now,” says Jim cheerfully. “I went shopping earlier.”

Leonard looks at the clock. 0843. “When did you wake up?”


Apparently he did. Leonard looks around in awe at his immaculate dorm room—last night it had been a wreck of the contents of Leonard’s only suitcase of possessions and the miscellaneous items he’d bought en route to Starfleet.

“Here ya go, Bones!” says Jim, handing him a plate of restaurant-perfect omelet. “Bon appétit.”

“Thank – you?” He takes the plate and fork numbly, cuts off a piece, takes a bite. “Mmnghd” – he swallows – “that’s good.”

Jim laughs, takes a bite of his own omelet. “It should be. I learned it from Saraducci Montpelier.”

Leonard looks at him in disbelief. “The famous chef?”

“Well, he wasn’t famous when I knew him, but yeah. That one.”

Len waits for the background story to that. It never comes. He sighs, gives up on it, goes back to his food.

They eat for a while in companionable silence.

“You’re picking out the peppers,” Jim says out of the blue, like it’s a personal offense.

“I’m not allergic to them, but I don’t like them.”

Jim looks at him like he doesn’t understand the difference. “Well, don’t throw them out, they’re still perfectly good food. I’ll eat them if you want.”

“Uh, no thanks.”

Jim’s jaw clenches perceptibly, but he nods with obvious effort and goes back to his breakfast.
“I guess this means I’m making us lunch,” Leonard says.

Jim looks back up. He’s grinning – the same grin he had last night – but now, in the daytime Len can see something…off about it. He can’t tell precisely what. “Why, you rethinking my offer?”


“Quid pro quo.”

“Something like that.”

“I’d rather if you didn’t, actually,” Jim says lightly, his hand trembling on his fork. “At this rate you’ll have me so much in your debt that I’ll be your sex slave for a week by the time you change your mind.”

“Sure, kid,” says Leonard, distracted—can he really be blamed for barely paying attention to the conversation when he has a thing of beauty on his plate?

“Bones – Doctor McCoy.” Something about the way Jim says his name makes Leonard’s head snap up. Jim is watching him closely, wary and confused, exhaustion in the shadows under his eyes and the line of his shoulders. “What are you looking to get out of this?”

“What am I looking to get out of what?” Leonard asks, baffled.

For a long moment the silence lays thick between them.

And then Jim’s shoulders are shaking, and then he’s snickering, and then he’s laughing so hard there are tears in his eyes.

“What?” Leonard says. Is he missing some kind of joke?

“You,” Jim says in between laughter, “you don’t even – wow… I didn’t think people like you still existed!”

Leonard narrows his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The kid gets himself under control, wipes his eyes, but he’s still grinning like an idiot. “Nothing, nothing… So. What are your plans for the day?”

Well that was a smooth subject change. “I don’t have class until 1100 today. Why?” he asks suspiciously.

“Yeah?” says Kirk. “Me too. What class?”

“Medical Track 4320: The Ethical, Social, and Political Narrative of Xenomedicine. Why?”

“Hey, I’m in that class too! Dr. Kimble, right? Apparently he’s going to convince us that we’re all about to die of Suudaa Nem’ro’s or some other kind of soul-sucking disease. I’m psyched. Combat medics are the best.”

“No way,” says Leonard. “That’s for cadets with preexisting medical degrees. And anyway, aren’t you command track?”

“Needed a biology-based class, tested out of everything else,” Jim shrugs, like of course every random kid should have a medical degree’s worth of knowledge about the alien medical practice system.
“Right… What’s the rest of your schedule look like?”

“Well,” says Jim. “I have that, and Advanced Klingon, and Introductory Martial Arts (‘cause they don’t let people test out of it, lame, right?), and Information Security in the Quantum Age, and Combination and Reactivity in Synthetic Organic Chemistry – that one looks like fun, we’re going to be forming sigma-bonded organometallic reagents via cyclization of arenetricarbonylchromium complexes!”

“That’s…great,” says Leonard weakly.

“Wait, those are just my placements into the general education requirements, I haven’t even gotten to my command track classes yet—”

“Good God, man, how many credits are you taking?!?”

“Well, if I want to be the captain of my own ship by the time I’m thirty, I need to buckle down a bit.”

“A bit?” Len echoes in disbelief.

“Anyway, about that 45-page essay we had to read for Dr. Kimble’s class, don’t bother. It wasn’t too big a deal, I can just summarize it for you.”

Leonard stares. “That was his example of the sorts of articles we’ll be able to understand and use when we graduate from medical track.”

“Ohh,” says Jim. “I had been wondering what it had to do with the curriculum.”

“Are you a genius or an idiot?”

“Both?”

Aaand yep, that’s a headache coming on. “Are you screwing with me?”

“Well, I have to do it somehow,” Jim says with smirk, “since the obvious way is out.”

Leonard tries to scowl, but it comes out looking too much like a smile.

---

Jim is minding his own business, heading to first period when he hears a familiar voice say, “No way.”

He turns to see Uhura looking at him with her mouth open. “You joined? After the introduction to Starfleet you got? Are you crazy?”

“I am not the first, nor will I be last, to go to great lengths for a beautiful woman,” he declares dramatically. “After all, love is the unfamiliar Name behind the hands that wove the intolerable shirt of flame which human power cannot remove. We only live, only suspend; consumed by either fire or fire.”

She laughs, rolls her eyes. “Seriously Kirk, what are you doing here?”

He gives her a hurt look. “You doubt my dedication.”

“To getting laid? Never.”
“Ouch,” he says, mock-wincing.

She gives him a come-off-it look. “You couldn’t possibly have joined just to get my first name.”

“Honestly, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Do you ever give a straight answer?” Uhura asks, exasperated.

“I dunno,” he says. “Do I?” And then he turns and swaggers off, leaving Uhura spluttering behind him.

---

“Hey.”

Leonard looks up from putting his PADD and infochips away after Medical 4320 straight into the smiling face of a woman who’d been sitting a few seats down from him.

“Hello,” he responds, unaccountably nervous all of a sudden.

“You’re new here, huh? Could probably use someone to show you the ropes,” she says, and Leonard knows she’s talking about showing more than just the ropes. He swallows, tries to think of what he would say in this situation before his life’s mini-apocalypse, before Jocelyn…

“That would be…good. I’m McCoy, by the way. Leonard McCoy.”

“Samantha,” she says, and this time when she gives him that smile he gives her one back.

“Ooh, good choice!” says a familiar voice approvingly.

Leonard cringes. It had better not be…

Jim looks at him innocently from where he now sits straddling one of the chairs next to them. The only way he could have gotten there so fast is by vaulting over the rows of desks. Leonard doesn’t even bother to ask.

“I spent last night with him, so I should know!” Jim adds cheerfully.

Samantha looks between them, mystified. “You…last night?”

“Yup,” says Jim with a huge, obnoxious grin. “He took care of me aaall night long. Too bad he kicked me out this morning. But what can you do? Men like him, they can’t be tied down to anything, am I right?”

“So.” She turns on him. Leonard shrinks back a little bit. “Him yesterday, me tonight…who are you going to have tomorrow?”

“I’m not—”

But Samantha has already turned on her heel and is storming away.

Leonard glares at Jim, who just gets to his feet and puts an arm around Len’s shoulders with a who-me? kind of smile.

“This is for cockblocking you last night, isn’t it?” he says resignedly.
Jim pouts, his eyes twinkling. “Do I look the sort of guy who takes revenge, Bones?”

“Yes,” says Leonard.

“Bones, Bones, Bones… I would never do that to a friend. That is what we are now, after all – friends.”

“Friend…” Leonard repeats doubtfully. “I prefer the term ‘person whose nonsense I tolerate with gritted teeth and the lingering sense of impending disaster.’”

Jim shrugs. “You say tomato, I say tomato.”

“No,” Leonard says, appalled. “No, you’re supposed to pronounce them differently. To-may-to, to-mah-to.”

“Yeah, I know, but that phrase always bothered me because one of the pronunciations of ‘tomato’ is wrong.”

Len feels suddenly very, very tired.

Jim continues right along, “Anyway, when I use the saying ‘you say tomato, I say tomato,’ I mean that although it sounds like we’re saying the same thing, we’ll just have to come to terms with the fact that you’re talking about the small round red thing and I’m talking about the big, heavy green thing with the stripes.”

“You can’t just decide on a whim that common phrases mean the exact opposite of what they’re supposed to mean,” says Leonard. “Also what you’re referring to is a watermelon.”

“You say tomato, I say tomato,” Jim replies loftily. Len buries his face in his hands.

“C’mon,” the kid says, tugging on Leonard’s sleeve. “Let’s go tell the cafeteria ladies all the things I’m allergic to and watch them turn colors trying to figure out what I can eat without dying.”

Leonard looks up at Jim’s easy, mischievous grin and demands, “Are you a genius or an idiot?”

Jim tilts his head. “Can’t I be both?”

“I… guess?”

He nods and heads toward the cafeteria, and Leonard trails after him without really thinking about it. When considering it later he tells himself that he really did want to see what colors the lunch ladies turned. Or maybe it was because he thought he should know Kirk’s allergies. For medical purposes. You know.

So they go to lunch together, and then they spend their break period in the library nearly getting kicked out for being too loud, and then they meet up again after afternoon classes for dinner at Leonard’s dorm. Jim stays overnight again in Len’s mysterious missing roommate’s bed.

That’s pretty much the beginning of the end.

---

It turns into a routine. They find each other during classes, they study together, they write their essays together, they make their meals together. Jim mentions casually that considering he owns little more than the clothes on his back, he’s pretty much moved in already. It doesn’t bother Leonard as much as it probably should.
(His actual roommate does show up after a while, but then disappears just as suddenly. Jim didn’t kill him. Probably.)

Basically, they spend all their time hanging on to each other like limpets, which Bones – no! He will not call himself Bones in his own self-dialogue! Leonard – knows is probably at least a little bit codependent and still has absolutely no desire to change it.

Naturally they end up learning a lot about each other.

---

The following are some of the things Jim learns about Bones, in no particular order:

1) His accent gets thicker when he’s upset. It would be adorable if the Bones-being-upset part weren’t so scary.

2) He puts ketchup on everything. But everything. Jim is incredibly insulted that Bones puts ketchup on his omelets before he realizes that the man drowns literally everything in the stuff. Eggs, meat, fish, noodles, you name it, he smothers it in ketchup.

   Except for french fries, for some godforsaken reason. He eats those plain.

3) He doesn’t like anyone insulting his ex-wife, even though from what little Bones has told him about her, she sounds like the worst.

   The problem is that Jim wants to be all supportive and ex-wife-bashing (and if he’s honest with himself he’s actually kind of angry on Bones’s account that she took full custody of Joanna, their ten-year-old kid, not to mention the house and the cars and everything in them), but whenever Jim starts up about her, McCoy shuts him down.

   “It doesn’t matter anymore,” Bones says. “She isn’t a demon. We may not be married anymore, but that doesn’t mean she’s not being decent.”

   “‘Decent’?” Jim repeats doubtfully.

   “She is! She said she’d let me visit Joanna on holidays, as a favor…”

   “‘Favor’?”

   “Is there an echo in here?” Bones snaps.

   “Echo in here?”

   He glares. If looks could kill Jim would be going home in a little plastic baggy.

   “She stole your kid, man!” Jim protests. “Why are you not angrier about this?”

   Bones looks down. “If Joanna had to go to one of us, it’s best that it was Jocelyn. She doesn’t really need me.”

   Jim’s fingers tighten on the beer in his hand. “Kids always need their fathers.”

   Bones looks up at him and doesn’t reply.
4) He hates space. HATES it. Once Jim mentions a recent news story about a small starship that malfunctioned and blew up over Fedesa-II, and Bones just says, “Obviously,” like when starships don’t blow up it’s something to get excited about. Which is hilarious because he’s going travel around in one as his career. But between the man’s paranoia and his hatred of space, they agree that the two of them have to get into the same crew or somebody’s going to have an aneurysm. Probably Bones.

(Maybe Jim too, if he’s being honest.)

5) He has exactly twelve different expressions, all of which are variations on ‘it’s a shame I am too tired to kill you right now.’

6) He is, apparently, a plant, because he does not need sex to live. This is extremely convenient because—

7) He can’t pick up girls. Or boys. But like, he is truly and deeply awkward around girls, it actually makes Jim sad. Jim tries to help out, he really does, but Bones is so hopeless that more often than not Jim is forced to turn from wingman (“He’s a doctor - everyone knows they have very talented hands…”) to damage control (“His name is Leonard, okay, give him a break”).

8) He can’t lie, as a rule. But strangely enough, he can almost always tell when Jim is lying. In fact, he’s the best reader of bodies and faces that Jim’s ever seen. He’s also probably the best doctor Jim has ever seen, although that’s not saying as much since Jim has spent his life avoiding doctors. And succeeding, for the most part!

Apples. And a 1700 horsepower engine. They really work.

9) He also can’t tell jokes. Jim only found this out when he realized that he’s never heard Bones even try.

“Come on, you’ve got to have a joke or two stashed away in that doctorly head of yours,” Jim wheedles. “A knock-knock joke. A limerick. Something.”

Bones eventually gives in. “Fine… Here’s one I made up myself.”

Jim leans forward expectantly.

“How did the linguist realize that the brain is eighty percent water?”

“Uh…I dunno. How?”

“She noticed that four out of five of the letters in ‘brain’ spell ‘rain.’” He grins at Jim.

Jim looks back at him blankly.

“Get it? Because four out of five is—”

“Yeah, no, I got it. That was terrible.”

“It was not!”

“It was so bad. Promise me you will never try to make a joke ever again.”

“Shut up!”

“How did the linguist—Jesus, Bones.”
“I said shut up!”

10) He’s a good Catholic boy. Supposedly.

"You know," says Jim. “For a good Catholic boy you sure take the Lord’s name in vain a lot.”

Bones just kicks him.

11) He’s actually the best friend a guy could ask for.

Since Tarsus, Jim has followed a birthday tradition of going out, getting sloshed, and picking a fight with the meanest, toughest person in the vicinity, savoring the way the pain (or occasionally, the unconsciousness) makes everything go away, if only for a moment.

On his first birthday since he meets Bones, the doctor interrupts Jim’s little ritual (it’s a mystery how he even knows what day it is, because Jim definitely never told him) and takes him home after just three drinks. And then gets completely plastered with him.

He also gives Jim a rare first edition copy of The Three Musketeers, not wrapped or anything, like he didn’t know it was Jim's birthday and had just happened to see it somewhere and bought it on a whim. Jim tries to act like it’s not the best birthday party he’s ever had.

---

The following are some things McCoy learns about Jim in no particular order:

1) He’s a genius. Or something.

Whatever he is, he frequently goes out late and comes back insanely early, he hooks up with every student (and some of the faculty) under the sun, and Leonard can count on one hand the times he’s seen his roommate study.

“It’ll be your own stupid fault if you fail out of Starfleet Academy!” Bones yells at him the night before midterms, as Jim heads out the door wearing his take-me-right-here leather pants.

“It’s Dr. Vindi’s midterm tomorrow,” Jim calls back blithely. “If worse comes to worse, I can just give him a lap dance.”

Then he’s gone and the door shuts behind him and Leonard mutters, “I wish I thought you were joking.”

Jim gets the highest grade in the class. Obviously.

2) He has very…interesting ideas about relationships.

“You know what you need?” Jim says at one point. “A rebound. A proper one. I can set you up!”

“I can’t do rebounds,” Leonard tells him. “I can’t do just one night. I’m looking for a real relationship, with dinner, talking, getting to know her as a...”

He trails off because Jim is looking at him like he’s just admitted that his idea of romance includes slaughtering a virgin in the light of the full moon and pouring aged wine over the entrails while chanting ancient hymns, which doesn't freak Jim out at all because he's totally open-minded and never judges anybody for their sexual preferences ever.
“So, what, you don’t like sex?”

“Yes,” says Bones wearily. “Because obviously if I want to know the person I’m banging I must hate sex.”

“Weird,” says Jim.

3) He is allergic to EVERYTHING. And not just allergic, oh no, but deathly allergic, as Leonard finds out in what he likes to call The Incident That Will Never Again Be Mentioned As Long As They Both Shall Live So Help Me God.

4) He is deeply suspicious of tribbles (“anything that cute has to have some kind of sinister plan up its sleeve, Bones!”).

5) He doesn’t give up. Ever. He has this thing against no-win scenarios (“you can always do something to fix things, Bones. It’s only a no-win scenario if you give up”), like they’re a personal affront to everything he believes in.

Which is perhaps why failing the Kobayashi Maru hits him so hard.

At first Leonard thinks he’s just depressed because he’s been proven fallible like the rest of the mere mortals at Starfleet. But as Jim remains quiet and despondent into the third day after the Kobayashi Maru, he decides to call in the big guns.

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“Dr. McCoy’s informed me that you’ve been moping all over his dorm room,” Pike says, steepling his fingers. “You should cheer up before he gets sick of it and kicks you out.”

“He can’t do that, it’s my dorm room too!” Jim points out.

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Yeah, thanks for getting rid of my competition, that was nice of you.”

“You make it sound like I killed him.”

“Didn’t you?” Jim asks, surprised.

“I can neither confirm nor deny anything,” says Pike loftily.

Jim nods. “This is why it’s good to be friends with old people.”

“Hey. This old person is your commanding officer.”

“Right, sorry. This is why it’s good to be friends with old people, sir.”

Pike rolls his eyes. “Back to the original point of this conversation though, why don’t you just come to terms with the fact that the Kobayashi Maru is the one thing in existence that you can’t bring to its knees with intellectual gymnastics and charisma and sheer force of will, and move on with your life?”

“I don’t believe in no-win scenarios,” Jim says.

Pike looks at him long and hard.
“There’s always a way to screw with things until they go your way,” he repeats. “And I’m not going to give up until I find it. We only create no-win scenarios by giving up.”

“Don’t you think that sometimes we need to let go of winning in order to win?”

“No. That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“Maybe so,” says Pike quietly. He looks at his own hands for a while, lost in thought. “You’re taking it again, I suppose?”

“Yup,” says Jim. “And I’m going to beat it this time.”

Pike gives him a smile that halfway between chagrined and fond. “If you say so. In the meantime, you need to get back to functioning like a normal human being before Dr. McCoy starts injecting you with Prozac when your back is turned.”

Jim just slumps down into the couch, kicking at the stupidly perfect, shiny floor.

“What do you usually do to get yourself out of a rut?”

“Get drunk,” Jim replies. “Get high. Ride a motorcycle way too fast, beat up a punching bag or a bully, have crazy monkey sex with a species that could probably kill me by mistake.”

“So do that,” says Pike. “Do all that except the sex. You know the man upstairs doesn’t approve.”

“You mean God?”

"I mean Theodore Durner in the dorm room directly above yours. He's filed no less than four complaints about the noise."

Jim rolls his eyes. "The man's a first-class prude. Sir."

“And get some sleep, for God’s sake. You look like the walking dead.”

“You don’t look a day over sixty yourself, sir.”

“I’m only fifty-three, you brat,” Pike snaps, but Jim can tell he’s trying to hide a smile. “Now get out of here.”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

---

As fun as his meeting with Pike is, it doesn’t help Jim get to sleep after the Kobayashi Maru. He still lies awake at night, replaying the simulation, the supposed no-win scenario that so closely mirrored the mission that killed his father.

The Kobayashi Maru itself makes no sense – it is the truest of no-win situations, where losing was actually built into the crux of the thing. It is structured so that no matter what you do, you die. Jim had commandeered that ship in a way that would’ve assured them a brilliant victory if it were anything but the Kobayashi Maru.

He knows it’s a set-up. He knows that. He shouldn’t let it bother him.

It does bother him.
Rewind. Attack from a different angle. Mobilize only half the ship’s manpower for offensive – use the rest for maintenance. Try again.

The ship’s phasers are less powerful. The engines malfunction anyway. Game Over.

Rewind. Distract the Klingon warship and immediately jump to warp, dragging it into the hyperdrive. Try again.

The Klingons conveniently have a piece of technology that keeps them from being susceptible to outside ships’ warp launches. The Kobayashi Maru is left defenseless. Game Over.

“Don’t you think that sometimes we need to let go of winning in order to win?”

Is it true? Was it simply a no-win scenario? Were they all?

Rewind. Be more forceful when you tell Tom and Natalie not to break into the storage house. Don’t kiss Kodos in the first place. Try again.

Tom and Natalie go anyway. Kodos shoots them on sight. Game Over.

Rewind. Tell Sam after the first time with Kodos. Run away to join the rest of the Tarsus kids on the outcropping. Try again.

Sam only confronts Kodos sooner and dies sooner. With no one to stealing food and no one keeping Kodos from going after them, the rest of the kids soon follow. Game Over.

Was it true? Were all of his efforts useless? Was Tarsus just another Kobayashi Maru – every road leads to failure?

No – no, it couldn’t be. His father didn’t believe in no-win scenarios and neither does he. There has to be something he could have….

Rewind. Jump in front of Sam when Kodos gave the order to shoot him. Take the bullet instead. Try again.


(They had been tied up on the platform in front of everyone, Jim completely numb, the rest of the kids crying. Erika silent and furious and oddly regal. Maybe that’s why Kodos focused in on her.

“Samuel and yourself were romantically involved,” he says, almost gentle, almost apologetic; and not really a question, and so Erika doesn’t answer. Doesn’t even look at him. “I realize you are upset, Erika. But order must be maintained. You’re an intelligent girl – you understand why I must do this, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Erika, chin raised, eyes cold. “Because you’re a pathetic megalomaniac with mommy issues and a God complex.”

Kodos had slapped her and forced her to her knees, and for a second Jim thought he was going to make her an offer, like the offers he had made Jim. But then he pulled out his gun. Cocked it. Aimed it directly between her eyes. “This bullet is long overdue. I knew the moment I heard of your little Children’s Rebellion that it was your doing. James may have bought you some time, but we both know the truth – your life was over the moment you made me angry.”

Jim closed his eyes, unable to watch. He couldn’t keep himself from hearing the gunshot, though.)
Was it true? Was everything he’d done, everything he’d sacrificed – could it be he wasn’t saving them at all, just distracting Kodos? Could it be it was all for nothing, that every single time he let Kodos – let Kodos –

Was it all just to buy them a little more time? Was failure an inevitability, another Kobayashi Maru?

No – no way. It wasn’t for nothing. He was helping them, he was keeping them alive, keeping them safe. His sacrifices were the reason they lasted that long on Tarsus at all, and if he’d just been able to sacrifice more – if he could have just done more, given more – he could have saved them. There is no such thing as a no-win scenario.

He could have given up everything and saved them all. Like his father did.

*What was it like, Dad?* he wonders, staring into the darkness, listening to Bones’s soft breathing next to him. *What was it like to see death staring you in the face and not turn away? To not hesitate at the last minute like I did, not wrench the handlebars away like I did… I couldn’t do it, Dad. What gave you the courage?*

*Was it me?* he wonders. He doesn’t know if the thought warms or terrifies him.

Everything in life is economics. Every person lives paying, making their own cost-benefit analyses. What makes someone’s life different – special, if you will – is how much they are willing to give for the benefit they stand to gain.

He knows this; and yet he doesn’t understand why it is that his father was willing to give up everything, and he saved hundreds of people, became a legend, a hero. While Jim was willing to give up everything, and all it did was make the world fall to pieces around him.

---

Five minutes into Jim’s Introductory Martial Arts course with Professor Cupcake (apparently he has a name? – Giotto) he knows this class is not of the good.

“Before we begin, we have a demonstration of the skills you’ll be learning in this class, by myself and Professor Junai. Watch closely.”

Jim watches closely all right. And he doesn’t like a bit of what he sees.

It looks beautiful, of course – too beautiful. It’s structured, almost choreographed, each fighter taking his cues from the other. Performing. Worse than that, it’s *polite*. Nothing under the belt. Nothing deceptive or too rough.

It looks nothing like a real fight.

Jim’s hands curl into fists.

When the fight finishes, everyone claps. Jim joins in, half-heartedly.

Then he raises his hand and says, “Professor…” Cupcake looks at him, and his eyes widen in recognition. “Would you care to demonstrate another fight? With another opponent?”

“Which opponent?” he asks suspiciously.

“Me.”

A murmur goes through the group.
Cupcake gives a short, disbelieving laugh. “I knew you were an attention whore, but I didn’t know how much.”


Giotto’s jaw clenches perceptibly, but he doesn’t rise to the bait.

Jim smirks. “You’re real tough with all your friends around you, aren’t you, Cupcake?”

“As interesting as this is…” Jim looks up, Professor Junai is looking at them, arms crossed, expression Not Impressed. “I would like to hear what the point of this demonstration is, Cadet Kirk.”

It takes a minute for Jim to remember which demonstration he’s talking about. “The fighting style you’re teaching is all wrong. It’s too…perfect. Real fighting looks nothing like this, it’s brutal and instinctive and desperate. If you send kids out knowing this stuff they’ll be completely unprepared. They’ll die in the first situation combat they get into!”

Professor Junai tilts his head, considering this. “It is of my opinion that students must know the rules of fighting before they can learn the passion of the fight.”

“There are no rules of fighting!” Jim argues. “If you teach these kids to be predictable and respectful to their opponents, they’ll have those instincts for the rest of their lives. They’ll have to spend years unlearning those self-destructive tactics in order to be effective in a fight – if they live that long!”

Junai thinks about this for a long, charged moment. Jim holds his breath.

“I see your point, Cadet Kirk,” he says at last. “I believe your input would be extremely valuable in the restructuring of this course.”

Jim stares. “So…”

“So are you willing to accept a position as my teacher’s assistant?”

Jim stares some more.

“He can’t!” Cupcake protests. “I’m your teacher’s assistant!”

“If you are limiting me to one teacher’s assistant,” says Professor Junai calmly, “I’m going to have to choose him.”

Cupcake grits his teeth. Finally he mutters, “I guess there can be two of us.”

Junai nods to Jim, who’s still staring back at him dumbly. “See me after class.”

---

And so Jim becomes the only first-year teacher’s assistant in Starfleet history. The cool thing about being a teacher – aside from, you know, making sure kids don’t die – is that he gets paid.

His first paycheck just covers next month’s rent payment for his old apartment on 53rd and Lafayette. That girl could find the money for rent herself, Jim knows, but he doesn’t want to think about what she would have to give in exchange.
He sees Uhura in the hall on the way to their Advanced Klingon class (she still thinks he slept his way up through the placement exams, and Jim has no problem letting her believe that; he finds it very flattering). “Hey Uhura,” he greets her. “I was thinking of joining a student organization. Maybe xenolinguistics. Is that offer still open?” He waggles his eyebrows to let her know just which offer he’s talking about.

“Absolutely not,” she says primly, a smile in her eyes. “I’ve got bigger fish to fry these days.”

Waaay too easy. Does she hand these lines to him on purpose? “Babe,” he says. “They don’t come bigger than me.” Uhura tries and fails to smother her laugh in her hand.


“Shut up,” she hisses, smacking him on the shoulder. “My life is not porn! If you knew who I was talking about…”

Jim tilts his head. “He’s hot?”

“He’s brilliant.”

“Ah… He’s butt-ugly,” Jim says, nodding understandingly.

“He’s brilliant and hot,” she retorts. “He’s from Vulcan.”

“So by hot you mean…in the sense of temperature.”

“You can think I mean whatever you want,” Uhura says with a secret little smile.

Jim holds up his hands in surrender. “All right, all right, I get it. You’ve dumped me for a brilliant, sexy Vulcan professor who also happens to give off higher-than-human body heat. Has he even given you the time of day yet?”

She doesn’t reply.

“Ahh…” Jim wags a finger at her. “You like that. You like that he plays hard to get.” He puts his arm against the wall, leans into her personal space. “I can play hard to get.”

“Sure you can,” she says, less condescending and more like a long-suffering big sister.

“I totally can!” Jim insists. “What class does he teach?”

“Communications Track 5010: The Effect of Technological Advances On Xenolinguistical Analyses.”

Jim frowns, checking over his schedule on his PADD. “Professor Spock, huh? He’s not on the command curriculum at all! You know what? Forget command – I’m going into communications. All my teachers are old white men.”

“Poor baby,” says Uhura.

“Well,” he says as he puts his PADD away, “if both of us get rejected by Professor Sexy, do you want to do a consolation hook-up?”

Uhura just bites down on a laugh and walks away, shaking her head.
“I’ll take that as a maybe!” Jim calls after her.

---

“Nyota!” Beev-j’al grabs her as soon as she enters the xenolinguistics club classroom. “We have a new applicant. And he is gorgeous.”

“Really?” She looks around her to where Jim Kirk is sitting on top of one of the desks, chatting with the rest of the club in perfect Italian. “Oh no.”

That’s when Jim looks up and sees her, and his face lights up. “Uhura, hey! I totally forgot you go here!”

“What are you doing here, Kirk?” she demands.

He blinks at her innocently. “I’m joining the xenolinguistics club. Haven’t you heard?”

She doesn’t buy it. Not for one second. “In that case,” she says, crossing her arms, “you need to undergo the application process.”

“All right. What do I do?”

“Well, there are some interview questions, for one… Why do you want to join?”

“Why do I want to join?” Jim repeats.

“Yes,” says Uhura through gritted teeth. “Why do you want to join the xenolinguistics club?”

Jim honest-to-God climbs on top of the desk and faces his enthralled audience (and Uhura) and says solemnly, “Xenolinguistics is, at its heart, the appreciation of what can be accomplished with a shared vocabulary and a sincere respect for cultural differences; and, more importantly how we, as individuals and as a group, can bridge the gap between species that may otherwise feel estranged or even threatened by each other. That is why, as someone who intends to learn hard, work hard, and affect positive change, I see the xenolinguistics club as the ideal conduit for my personal and academic ambitions. If we can magnify the beauty of xenolinguistics, together we can create a reality wherein all species feel comfortable expressing themselves and knowing they will be understood, and in doing so initiate an honest dialogue about the real issues we face. It is our ardent hope that someday, there will be no creature, regardless of race, background, or species, that must overcome their heartaches in silence and solitude.”

They stare at him.

“Also to get into Uhura’s exceptionally fine pants,” he adds.

Uhura gives him a tight little smile. “Thank you for your application, Mr. Kirk. We’ll inform you of our decision within the week.”

---

And boy, does she inform him of her decision.

He’s coming back from class the next day when he catches sight of his dorm room door. Someone has put bright red paint across it like a giant stamp: REJECTED.

A grin spreads across his face. “Oh, this is war.”
Uhura storms through the cafeteria, searching for a very specific person.

She turns to one boy in second-year science track sitting with a group of other cadets. “Have you seen—”

Before she even finishes the question they all have their arms up in crosses, shielding their faces and shouting things like “NOT TODAY, SATAN” and “the power of the Holy Ghost compels you!”

Not like she expected anything different; she’d been getting the same since she asked a classmate to borrow a stylus during first period. She snarls and stomps away, searching the cafeteria.

She still can’t find him anywhere.

She taps an engineering officer on the shoulder. “I’m just looking for—”

“My Bible!” the officer shrieks. “Where is my Bible?!”

“Oh my God!” she yells, covering her eyes. “I’m going to kill him!”

“To whom are you referring?” inquires a smooth, familiar voice.

Uhura’s head shoots up and she pastes a smile on her face, hoping to every deity she knows that Spock didn’t see any of that. “Just – some dumb cadet. Anyway, I was looking for you - to let you know my office was open for our meeting.”

“I had surmised,” Professor Spock says blandly. “The students seem to have you confused with the metaphysical concept represented as ‘the Devil.’”

So he did see it! Mortified, Uhura turns and begins stomping up the stairs toward her office, Spock easily keeping up beside her. “I don’t know what’s going on,” she says, fuming, “but I know it’s his fault.”

Spock looks at her, prompting her to explain.

“He applied to the xenolinguistics club – for all the wrong reasons! – and I turned him down. And I may have also put a rejection stamp on his door. But that was…a small, tasteful joke – this is a totally immature…”

That’s when Uhura sees the door to her teacher’s assistant office. There’s a paper taped to the front with what looks like a full roll of quant-tape. Every inch of the door is covered in it. It’ll take hours, if not days, to peel it all off, not to mention destroying her nails.

She looks more closely at the paper, grinding her teeth. It says:

“Through me you pass into the city of woe;
Through me you pass into eternal pain.
Through me among the people lost for aye,
Justice the founder of my fabric mov’d.
To rear me was the task of Power divine,
Supremest Wisdom, and primeval Love.

Before me things create were none, save things

Eternal, and eternal I endure.

All hope abandon, ye who would enter here."

“I see,” Spock murmurs. She looks sideways at him and thinks she sees his lips curling into the first and only smile she’s ever seen on his face. But she must have imagined it, because a moment later it’s gone.

“I don’t,” she says, fists clenching. “But I can tell it’s nothing good.”

“It is an excerpt from Dante’s *Inferno,*” he says. “Namely the inscription on the gateway to hell, warning travellers of the horrors inside.”

“KIRK!” she screams.

---

Meanwhile, in Comparative Grand Strategy and Military Doctrine class on the other side of campus, Jim Kirk snickers quietly to himself.

---

Bizarrely, Bones sticks around even though they aren’t in jail and they aren’t having sex. Jim is still working on figuring out why, but more subtly now since he realized that asking Bones just seems to make him upset for some reason.

He also works on refining his ideas about The One. After all, Bones fell madly in love with Jocelyn when they were in high school, she was his first, they got married when they were only nineteen, had Joanna at twenty, and were divorced less than ten years later. It sounds like the perfect love story until it doesn’t anymore. So was she The One, and something went drastically wrong, or were they not meant for each other in the first place?

“It doesn’t work like that, kid,” Bones had said, frowning, when Jim brought it up. “It’s not like relationships are either forever or a complete failure. I’m glad I’m not married anymore, don’t get me wrong, but if I never got married I wouldn’t have Joanna. At a certain point we have to be grateful for the people who’ve affected us, even if they’ve only left scars.”

Jim wonders if there will ever come a day when Jim will be grateful for the people who’ve affected him, scarred him, owned him.

He highly doubts it.

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It’s a total fluke – he’s searching for the com-line number of one of his classmates on the student directories, and his eye lands on *First-Year Command Track: Riley, Kevin.*

For a moment he wants to click on the name, contact Riley, Kevin and find out if it’s the Riley, Kevin he thinks (knows? thinks) it is.

For a moment he wants to close the directory, never look at it again, forget he ever saw it in the first place.
For a moment he wants to track Kevin down and hug him tight and never let go.

For a moment he wants to run away from Starfleet – from all of it – and never look back.

He finds the com-line number of his classmate, arranges a time to talk about their group project, and then gets so drunk he can’t remember his own name, let alone Kevin’s.

---

“I have the best ideas for Christmas break,” Jim tells him enthusiastically as soon as Leonard sits down across from him at the cafeteria. “You’re actually going to cry.”

Leonard looks at him weirdly. “I can’t do anything for Christmas break.”

“Oh, no, you are not getting out so easy—”

“Christmas is one of my only days with Joanna,” he reminds Jim. “I’m going back home.”

“Oh,” says Jim. “Right.”

Leonard frowns. Never a good sign when Jim goes quiet. “I’d invite you to come with me, but doesn’t your family want to see you?”

“Right,” he says again, in that same strange voice.

Bones tries to reach across the table to check Jim’s temperature, but the kid slaps his hand away and the spell seems to be broken as the conversation turns to other things. Still, Leonard can’t quite shake that sense of unease.

---

So Jim spends Christmas break doing what he does best – he gets into fights, he gazes up at the stars, he gets money in dubious ways…

Oh, yeah, and he beds the President of the United States.

They had been having a perfectly pleasant drink together (long story involving a hyper-engine malfunction and Jim apparently looking just like someone named Eugene – don’t ask), and then Jim had asked about the rumors that she was cheating on her husband.

“You can’t believe everything you hear,” she had replied, cool as you please.

To which he’d leaned in closer and said sweetly, “Actually, I had wanted to find out for myself.”

(Jim still doesn’t know if she was cheating on her husband before that, but she definitely is now.)

The downside is that everyone else knows it, too, since someone managed to get some blurry pictures of the two of them in the hotel and had sold them to the newsfeeds, where they now stare accusingly up at him under the headline, “THE PRESIDENT’S STEAMY RENDEZVOUS WITH STARFLEET EYE-CANDY.”

Jim looks up from the projected newsfeed on the desk to Pike’s disapproving expression.

“Well, silver lining – they’re definitely not the most revealing pictures of me out there?”

Pike just narrows his eyes and swipes the screen to the next page, where there are more pictures,
including one relatively high-quality one, of Jim splayed out on white sheets, his hair in tangled disarray, the city lights dappling his skin like stars, highlighting the curve of blond eyelashes, the outline of muscles, the dark trail of hair disappearing into the blanket.

“Nope, still not the most revealing,” Jim confirms.

“And that’s great,” says Pike dryly. “But now you’re representing Starfleet.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’d say that’s a pretty attractive representation of Starfleet,” Jim points out.

Pike sighs, but Jim can tell he’s trying hard not to smile. “It appears the public would agree with you. Traffic to the Starfleet website has almost quadrupled, and applications for this semester have increased by two hundred percent.”

“Porn is the best kind of advertising,” says Jim sagely.

“In answer to the question ‘why do you want to join to Starfleet?’, one application just attached the last picture of you with the caption, ‘If I join Starfleet I might get to tap that.’”

Jim tilts his head. “Sounds reasonable to me.”

The captain’s looks briefly heavenward as if for assistance, tapping his fingers on the desk. “Do you at least understand why I’ve called you in here today?”

“To tell me to keep up the good work?”

“Yes,” says Pike wearily. “That’s exactly what I wanted to say.”

“Well, message received, sir. Can I go now?”

“Yeah, just – get out of here, Kirk.”

“Getting out of here!” Jim replies cheerfully, and then he’s out the door, whistling.

He hears the familiar thump-groan as Pike’s forehead connects with his desk.

---

Bones comes back from vacation looking not-murderous, which for him is the equivalent of a spring in his step. He tells Jim all about his weekend with his daughter, how they went skiing, how Joanna is a natural marksman (yes, he took his eleven-year-old daughter to a shooting range for Christmas), how they rode an old-fashioned horse and buggy around the city, right alongside all the hovercars.

At first Jim thinks he must not have seen the pictures until Bones continues, “…and you’re coming with me next year.” He gives an exasperated scowl when Jim looks surprised. “You could have just said you didn’t have plans.”

“I had plans,” says Jim defensively. “I think I had a very productive vacation!”

“Productive my eye. I leave you alone for one minute and you cause a national scandal!”

“Well I wouldn’t say alone…”

Bones just rolls his eyes.
Leonard didn’t so much find out about how Jim did on his first-year command simulation as much as he heard bits and pieces of rumors surrounding it. First he heard that Cadet Kirk had breezed past his simulation, passing it in record time, which did not surprise Leonard in the slightest.

Then he heard that Professor Wyndall was overheard ranting that Kirk must have cheated, he can’t have finished that quickly, his approach is unconventional… et cetera. Which also didn’t surprise Len.

Then he heard that he had broken the simulation. Which did surprise him. But probably shouldn’t have. Shame on him, really.

It turns out that the simulation was meant to be a strategy-oriented scenario wherein a cadet is given a virtual team and has to direct them in a fight against a simulated group of Bolians.

Instead, Jim had approached the chief Bolian and said, “Your culture is famous for having developed the Double Effect Principle, which states that while euthanasia has the positive side-effect of relieving pain and bringing peace, it also has the negative side-effect of death.”

“Yes…” said the chief Bolian slowly. “So?”

“So the same can be said of war.”

And then they’d all sat in a circle on the floor debating the philosophy of the fight that the programmer had intended them to have. After prolonged discussed they decided fighting was, in general, a bad idea, and the simulation apologized for the inconvenience and offered to throw a banquet in the honor of the good “Captain Kirk.”

And apparently, now the simulation refuses to fight anyone.

All in a day’s work for James Tiberius Kirk.

Leonard was expecting Jim to give him a play-by-play of how he broke the first-year sim’s brain, but when he comes back to the dorm all he says is, “You know – I might actually be kind of good at this command stuff.”

Leonard stares. “You’ve been in Starfleet command for almost a year and this is just occurring to you now?”

“Like I might actually want a career in it! This is big news, Bones!”

“Why did you join Starfleet if it never occurred to you that you might want a career in this stuff??!”

“Pike dared me to.”

Len puts his face in his hands. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Okay…” says Jim. “I’m joking.”

Leonard just groans.

Little known fact: Jim Kirk is, for some godforsaken reason, a morning person.
This is how he finds Jim glancing through the music on Leonard’s personal PADD at way-too-early o’clock one morning, looking obscenely awake and muttering, “Lame…lame…worse than lame…LAME…”

“What are you doing,” he growls – not because he’s any more angry at Jim than he usually is (he usually wants to punch Jim, at least intellectually) – but because his normal speaking voice doesn’t kick in until the third cup of coffee.

“Bones,” says Jim gravely. “We can’t be friends anymore.”

“It was that easy?” he wonders aloud.

“You have the worst music taste of anyone I know. Why do you have an entire Barry Manilow album? Why?”

“You give that back,” he mutters, swiping at it. Jim holds it out of reach.

“Bavarian folk music. Rock on, Bones.”

“Jim, I’m warning you—”

“Heyyy, Billy Joel! I guess we can be friends.”

“Thank goodness,” says Leonard, deadpan.

Meanwhile Jim has activated the song on his PADD, and a familiar bass line begins to play.

“Oh no,” says Leonard.

“Oh yes!” says Jim.

Mortified, Len makes another grab at it, only to be thwarted again by Jim.

“Come on, Bones, this is the only music you own that isn’t embarrassing!” He’s dancing around the kitchen in his pajamas and socks, hips moving to the beat. When the lyrics come on he sings with them, “Friday night I crashed your party, Saturday I said I’m sorry, Sunday came, trashed it out again… I was only havin’ fun, wasn’t hurtin’ anyone, and we all enjoyed the weekend for a change.”

He has to yell over the music. “It’s too loud, you idiot! People are trying to sleep!”

Jim ignores him. Of course. “I’ve been stranded in the combat zone, I walked through Bedford Stuy alone, even rode my motorcycle in the rain… And you told me not to drive, but I made it home alive, so you said that only proves that I’m insaaaane!”

“I give up,” says Bones, throwing up his hands. “When the murderous mobs come pounding on our door, I’m handing you over!”

“You may be right! I may be crazy… Oh! But it just may be a luuuunatic you’re lookin’ for!” he sings back, grinning at Leonard. “Turn out the light! Don’t try to save me… You may be wrong, for all I know, but you may be right.”

“I am not involved,” he mutters, focusing all of his attention on the coffee coming out of the caf machine, while Jim moonwalks across the kitchen and does a Michael Jackson twirl.

“WEEEEL remember how I found you there, alone in your electric chair, I told you dirty jokes until
you smiled… You were lonely for a man, I said take me as I am, ‘cause you might enjoy some
madness for a while.”

This is all fine and good, but then he grabs Leonard and tries to pull him into a dance.

“No,” he says. “No no no. No. No way.”

“Now think of all you tried to, find someone to satisfy you,” Jim sings, obnoxiously loud and smiling
from ear to ear. “I might be as crazy as you say… If I’m crazy then it’s true, that’s it’s all because of
you” – Jim turns and dips him, Leonard protesting and struggling all the while – “And you wouldn’t
want me any other waaay!”

Bones manages to get away and then Jim is grabbing the broom and using it as an extemporized
microphone. “You may be right! I may be crazy. Ohh! But it just may be a luuuunatic you’re looking
for! It’s too late to fight – it’s too late to change me. You may be wrong, for all I know, but you may
be right. Air guitar solo!”

Jim dances around the room using the broom as a guitar.

“Okay, very cute, now give that back.”

“Come on, Bones! This is proof that you must have been a teenager at some point before your heart
turned to stone.”

“Just because I used to be a stupid kid doesn’t mean I still have to be one!”

“You know what I think?” says Jim. “I think you don’t even know this song. Maybe you just put it
on your PADD so you’d have at least one song that wasn’t cringe-worthy.”

Leonard frowns. “I do too know this song.”

Jim raises his eyebrows, a clear challenge in his eyes. He shoves the broom at Leonard. “So prove
it.”

Len raises his own eyebrows back and takes the broom. “You maaay be right!” he sings into it. The
laugh he gets from Jim is worth how stupid he feels, and he quickly finds himself getting more
comfortable with his prop. “I maaaay be crazy… Hey! But it just may be a luuuunatic you’re lookin’
for!”

“Turn out the light!” Jim joins him, and then they’re dancing around the kitchen, scream-singing in
unison, “Aww, don’t try to save me… You maybe wrong for all I know, you may be right. You may
be wrong but you may be right! You may be wrong but you may be right! YOU MAY BE
WRONG BUT YOU MAY BE RIIIGHT—!”

This is when loud noise thumps down from the ceiling, followed by muffled shouting about
“disgusting behavior” and “completely insensitive” and “I’m going to file a complaint, Kirk!”

They both stop, looking up at the source of the sound. “It’s the man upstairs again,” says Jim.

“God?”

“No, Theodore Durner – he’s a prude,” says Jim, then turns toward the ceiling and yells, “Hey, quiet
down, Ted! People are trying to sleep!” He puts his hands on his hips. “God. Kids these days.”
So Jim’s second year starts with little fanfare. He and Bones are still roommates, and he doesn’t even seem to care to Jim hides food in strategic places all over the apartment (Jim still can’t figure out why he sticks around, but has decided he’s not looking a gift horse in the mouth). He gets a whole new group of naïve, bright-eyed brats to teach how to defend themselves (read: disillusion) in his Introductory Martial Arts course. He stops by the chess club every now and then to make everyone angry, then it’s off to xenolinguistics club to make Uhura angry, then off to class to half-pay attention and hopefully pick up a cadet or two. He’s still the top student of command track. Life is good.

For once in his life, the most pressing dilemma he faces is filing the paperwork authorizing his primary physician for the rest of his education at Starfleet Academy and the first five years of his commission.

“I think I’ll choose Dr. M’Benga,” Jim says thoughtfully as he fills the form out that night at the dorm. “He’s the type to be a professional in the medbay and a freak in the sheets.”

“Very funny,” says Bones.

“I need to get a full physical signed off by the doctor in question to finish the form. I bet Dr. M’Benga’s would give me a very intensive full physical.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll schedule you for 1030 tomorrow, Jim.”

---

The patient that comes in for the mandatory physical at 1030 that morning is something of a radical experience for Clarke, because after seven months of being Dr. McCoy’s intern, the man had never once shown any sign of being…well, human. With a personal life. And friends.

“Honey, I’m hooome!” the patient calls as he saunters into the medical center.

Dr. McCoy doesn’t even look up from where he’s showing Clarke, Savannah, and De-J’ang how to run sample tox screens on tribbles. “Take a seat over there and don’t touch anything.”

The blond cadet smirks. “I love it when you get all commanding.”

So…maybe not a friend? Clarke thinks. The thought of Dr. McCoy having any sort of romantic…anything is vaguely troubling.

Dr. McCoy finishes up the demonstration, takes off his gloves, and says, “I have a full physical now, but the three of you should keep running tests. I’ll check them when I come back – this shouldn’t take very long.”

“I don’t know, Bones,” says the cadet. “I have a lot of stamina.”

Dr. McCoy rolls his eyes, shoving the cadet into an examination room. “Shut up and take off your shirt, Jim.”

He hears the cadet – Jim – say, “Kinky,” and then the door closes behind them.

A while and many more drugged-up tribbles later, the door opens and Jim comes out, pulling on his shirt and looking smug and satisfied. “Well. That was very informative.”

“You’re healthy as an ox,” says Dr. McCoy, stripping off his gloves as he follows the cadet out. “And about as smart as one, too. I’ll sign off on your paperwork as soon as I run the blood tests.”
“I hope we can do this again soon?” he asks coyly.

Dr. McCoy, for his part, just goes about his usual post-patient routine, but Clarke has been with him long enough to see the suppressed smile – a smile! – on his face. “Your full file will be transferred to my log tomorrow morning. Any questions? Comments? Long, nonsensical anecdotes completely unrelated to anything we’re doing here?”

Jim’s hand shoots up at the last one.

Dr. McCoy rubs the bridge of his nose. “Put your hand down, Jim.”

He does. “This is going to be great,” he says. “You know, I never appreciated the whole doctor kink until now. I should stop by more often.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get out of here,” says Dr. McCoy. If it were any of his interns sticking around he would have been throwing a fit by now.

“See ya later, Bones!” says Jim cheerfully, turning to go with a little salute, pausing only to glare and mutter at a nearby tribble, “I’m watching you....”

And then he’s gone. The silence that follows seems a lot more silent than normal.

Clarke is the first to dare to speak up. “Um... Dr. McCoy? Did you and he just...” He trails off, makes a vague gesture.

The doctor’s eye twitches. “No.”

“Oh. Okay.” Then, “Can I call you Bones?”

“No.”

---

Later that night Jim and Bones are eating supper and watching a holoseries they agreed they would never tell anyone about when Jim realizes that by agreeing to take Bones on as his primary physician, he’ll be granting him full access to his medical history. It hits him a like punch in the stomach.

“Jim?” Bones says, concerned, and Jim floats back to reality, realizing that he’d trailed off in the middle of a sentence about the inevitable demise of fictional dogs.

Bones is going to find out about Tarsus.

“Jim,” he calls again, and he’s already reaching for his tricorder.

“No – it’s nothing,” Jim lies on instinct, before he remembers that there’s no point in trying to hide it anymore – Bones is going to know everything (or, well, everything he told Dr. M’L’Vann, so almost everything) soon enough. For a moment he’s so scared he wants to bolt right now just to save himself from Bones’s reaction.

At the same time... if he has to trust someone with Tarsus, he’s pathetically glad it’s Bones.

“Actually – no,” Jim manages to say. “It isn’t nothing. It’s something – something that –” He takes a deep breath and tries again. “It’s just, you’re going to see something on my medical record that I don’t want to talk about.”
“What—”

“Promise you won’t make me talk about it?” Jim asks.

Bones is staring at him, his expression worried, alarmed. “Jim—”

“Promise.”

“I…I promise.”

---

Of course, he doesn’t think Bones would actually keep his promise.

He goes through the motions like any normal day – wakes up, takes a shower, goes to class – but all he’s doing, really, is waiting. Bones will get his medical history sometime in the morning. So he can expect the explosion by noon.

He sits in class and maybe (possibly? hopefully? but probably not) looks like he’s paying attention, but all he’s thinking about is how Bones is going to react. Running through endless scenarios, each one worse than the last.

He checks his communicator every five seconds, but the morning drags on and there’s nothing. It’s 1100 and nothing. It’s 1145 and nothing. It’s 1158 and nothing. Its 1203 and nothing…

No messages from Bones. No calls.

No ‘why didn’t you tell me?’

No ‘get down here right now.’

Nothing. He even sends himself a message to make sure it’s still working.

He starts getting worried at 1430 because there is no way Bones hasn’t seen the file by now, and of all the reactions Jim was expecting, nothing was not one of them.

**Pulse check?** he messages Bones’s comline.

Ten minutes go by. No answer. Bones always answers his comline immediately.

After class he calls the medical center, and Clarke (he knows all about Clarke – Bones talks about his interns like they’re his kids) picks up and tells him that Dr. McCoy isn’t there. He left early. No, he didn’t say where he was going. Can he take a message?

No, that’s fine, Jim says, and hangs up.

And so Jim spends the next five hours in class, flirting with a complete and total mental breakdown as he tries to figure out where on earth Bones disappeared to and why.

Checks his comline. Nothing.

Five seconds later he checks it again. Still nothing.

He ends up leaving class early – not like he was learning anything anyway – and goes back to the dorm.
“Hello?” he calls. There’s no answer. “Bones?”

He checks every room, but the place is silent and empty. And so he waits, pacing and worrying and running his hands through his hair, jumping at every sound.

Bones doesn’t come back.

---

It isn’t like waiting is new to Jim – or at least, it shouldn’t be. His whole life has been a study in waiting.

When Jim had first heard of the food shortage he was sure that help would come before the famine became a true problem. He started every day with a certainty that they didn’t have to worry because today, this time, no really today for *sure*, would be the day that more supplies, more hands, more help would arrive.

It was only when the executions started that Jim realized help had already come too late.

He spent months waiting for Sam – for someone, anyone – to see what was happening between him and Kodos, both anticipating and dreading what would happen.

He watched Sam and Erika develop into Sam-and-Erika, each The One for the other, and he knew that there’s no point in waiting—Jim’s arrangement would never be on Sam’s radar. He wouldn’t see it unless it was staring him in the face.

He waited after the nightmares for his mom to come into his bedroom like when he had bad dreams as a kid, and smooth his hair and whisper comforting nonsense, but she never did. At first he thought she stayed away because the monsters under his bed now were too big for her – for anyone – to fight.

It was only when he was waiting by the front door for the very last time, carrying a backpack of everything he owned, that he realized that she wasn’t ever coming, and that she stayed away for reasons that had nothing to do with Jim. Somehow the latter stabbed deeper than the former.

He’s always been waiting. Waiting to get out of the little tiled room, waiting for someone to hear him…waiting for Bones to figure out that Jim isn’t worth his time and walk away.

Maybe it’s long past time Jim figured out that waiting is useless.

---

So Jim goes out and looks for him.

He checks the medical center again. He checks Bones’s classrooms. He checks some of the restaurants he likes to go to after hours.

He finally finds him in the off-campus bar and feels like an idiot for not checking there first.

Bones is alone in a barstool seat in the corner, slumped over a drink that is definitely not his first. He has that lost, agonized look he gets on his anniversary and when Joanna says that if he doesn’t need her then she doesn’t need him (Jim hears the *helpmehelpmehelpme* underneath it but he’s not sure Bones does).

He clears his throat when he gets right up next to Bones. “You know, when I made you make that
promise, I didn’t think you’d actually keep it,” he says, his voice light.

Bones looks up blearily, his eyes red, his hand trembling on the glass. “Jim—”

Jim sits down next him. “Oh no… You’re not going to CRY, are you?”

Bones turns away. “Of course I’m not going to cry,” he mutters.

“I swear to God, Bones, if you’re crying…”

Before Jim can finish the sentence Bones is hugging him tightly; Jim just sits there, embarrassed and painfully relieved, until he feels Bones’s shoulders shaking and a wet spot at his shoulder.

Jim takes an unsteady breath and tentatively hugs him back. “I’m okay, Bones,” he whispers, even though they both know he’s lying. He isn’t okay and hasn’t been okay for a while.

Still, sitting there in the warmth of Bones’s arms, he feels for the first time that maybe someday he will be.
True to his word, Bones never brings up Tarsus IV after that night. Jim can tell when he remembers it (“Hey Jim, let’s go to that all-you-can-eat place today, I’m starved”) because he gets this look on his face that’s so anguished (“I—”) and so aghast at himself (“I didn’t—”) that Jim just wants it to go away, which happens fastest if he just acts like he has no idea what he’s talking about (“Sounds good to me, Bones!”). But bless his bitter, jaundiced little heart, McCoy never forces Jim to talk about it.

That’s when Jim realizes that Bones is going to be his best friend until both of them drop dead of old age or, more likely, alcohol poisoning.

It’s nice. And kind of terrifying.

---

“I had an older brother,” Jim says conversationally while Bones is straining the macaroni for dinner one day. “Sam. He didn’t make it off Tarsus.”

Bones drops the steaming pot of macaroni all over the floor.

Jim jumps up as Bones starts cursing and spluttering and clutching his left hand, which is now branded a bright red from the hot water.

“Get it under the sink!” Jim shouts.

“You think I don’t know that?” Bones yells back. “I’m a doctor, not a ne’er-do-well!”

“A what?”

They finally get Bones’s hand under the cold water and he sighs in relief, but still has the available sass to say judgily, “Don’t tell me you don’t know what a ne’er-do-well is.”

“I know what it is, I’ve just never heard anyone say it outside old Western movies!”

They fall into silence and Jim realizes belatedly that the position they’re in – Jim holding Bones’s hand under the running water, their fingers intertwined – is undeniably intimate. With anyone else he’d already be scoping out the route to the nearest bed.

But the thing is, it’s not anyone else; it’s Bones – the person to whom he owes so much that he’s pretty much just given up on repaying his debts altogether. Honestly Jim wouldn’t even know how to have sex with him anymore.

“What was he like?” Bones asks quietly, keeping his gaze trained on his own hand under the running water, and Jim knows that the lack of eye contact is giving him room to run away from the conversation if he wants to. Maybe that’s what gives him the courage to stay.

“He was exactly like my dad,” says Jim.

---

Even so, Jim never tells him – or anyone else, for that matter – about Kodos. It isn’t relevant anymore, after all, and he just knows Bones is going to blow it out of proportion.
He loses count of the nights he wakes up half-hard with tears on his face and blood in his mouth from trying to keep himself quiet.

---

People assume that hookers hate their job, but the truth is, Jim thought prostitution was nice in a way. Straightforward. It was the simple exchange of a good (money) for a service (sex), and if Jim got off on it, it was collectively accepted as nothing more than an occupational hazard.

Kodos, on the other hand – Kodos had wanted him to enjoy it, especially at first.

He’d always taken care of Jim afterwards, praised his pain tolerance, his ability to keep himself from screaming. He’d be attentive, almost gentle, and all it did was remind Jim that as much as he may want to make Kodos into the bad guy, the only person he could justifiably hate was himself.

There was one time, about a week after Tom and Natalie snuck into the storage room, that Jim had come so close to saying no… That night, all the Tarsus kids had been gathered by the fire as Erika regaled them with a scary story (Sam had finally convinced her to do it, although nobody could even guess at how), and Jim had taken one look at Sam’s face as he watched her (affectiontrustlove) and felt nauseated by what he was doing with Kodos.

And so he gathered every bit of courage he had before he went to the governor’s office and took a deep breath and said, “Sir, I—”

Something flickered in Kodos’s eyes, and before Jim could finish the sentence the man’s mouth was closing over his, tipping his head back, purging the words from his lips.

He made Jim come once, twice, three times…the fourth time he kept Jim on the brink until he begged.

“Now, James,” Kodos said when it was over, as he untied the ropes. “What were you going to say?”

And Jim just shook his head, empty and trembling and too humiliated to even suggest that maybe he didn’t want it.

---

The first one to think of them as the Children’s Rebellion instead of just a bunch of hungry kids causing sometimes-purposeful havoc was Kevin. Nothing could deter him from the idea that they were doing something the historians would write about, that they were doing something life-changing, heroic. Something unforgettable.

“You know what you are, JT?” says Kevin one day on the outcropping. “A spy. Actually, a superspy.”

“What’s the difference between a spy and a superspy?” Jim asked.

“A superspy is half superhero, half spy! You’re a spy by day, making Kodos think you’re on his side and getting us food, and then a superhero by night, running the Rebellion and taking names!” He punches the air dramatically. “Bam! Pow!”

Jim grinned despite himself and caught one of Kevin’s hands. “You’d break your own thumb punching someone like that. Here.” He arranged his fist so that his thumb was on the outside. “Now, keep your wrist straight…like this.”
He demonstrated the proper punch, pushing it out from his shoulder down to his wrist, shifting back on his left foot for balance. Kevin frowned and tried to copy him, with questionable success.

Jim smiled at him anyway. “That’s right,” he said. “Now let’s say the person tries to punch you back…”

The evening sky darkened as he continued to run Kevin through the basics of self-defense; he couldn’t help but wonder if Kevin would still think he’s a superhero if he knew what Jim was really doing at night.

---

As time went on, the Children’s Rebellion became more and more of a threat, and Kodos became more and more irritable, his grip tighter, his foreplay more succinct (“Strip. Spread.”), but at that point he didn’t really have to say anything at all. Jim’s own body had become the envelope for Kodos’s message, reacting time and time again to the governor’s touch, arching up into him thoughtlessly, insatiably, even as Jim had to struggle not to cry. It was like every cell in his body and every thought in his mind was carding their fingers through his hair, whispering in his ears, “you love this, James, you little slut – you love it.”

The no in Jim’s heart was drowned out as his body exploded into a traitorous yes.

---

He doesn’t always manage to keep himself quiet.

It takes a few moments for the panic to bleed away, for him to remember that he isn’t on Tarsus, with Kodos, with Erika, with Tom, with SamSamSAM— He’s at Starfleet, in his dorm, in his bed, with Bones fast asleep on the other side of the room.

Or, well, not so fast asleep. He looks over, chest still heaving, and meets the very much open eyes of his very much awake roommate.

He turns away, tries to discreetly dry his face.

“Jim….”

He doesn’t have to strength to look at Bones right now. “I’m fine.”

“Like hell you are,” Bones mutters. He lifts his blanket slightly, beckoning Jim inside. “Get over here.”

“In your bed?” says Jim dubiously, too tired to even crack the obligatory come-on.

“No, in my hairstyling salon. Yes, in my bed, idiot. I used to do this for Joanna when she had bad dreams.”

“Are you comparing me to a little girl?”

“No,” says Bones. “I would never insult my daughter like that.”

Jim does smile at that, if a bit weakly.

“C’mere,” says Bones, and Jim makes his way over to his roommate’s bed and climbs in next to him. McCoy turns so his arms are encircling him, almost like he’s trying to protect him, and Jim’s eyes
close as Bones starts smoothing his hair.

““You know,” he says after a while, because he can’t just let a nice moment be, apparently, “this is
more than a little bit gay.”

Bones’s laugh – or maybe his sigh – huffs out against Jim’s hair. “Shut up, sweetheart.”

So Jim tries, honestly, he does. But the minutes pass and Jim can’t relax, just lies there stiffly,
berating himself for keeping Bones awake, which of course only makes him more tense.

Finally he blurs, “It’s just – been a really long time since I’ve slept with anyone.”

One hazel eye cracks open at that. “D’you think I’m blind? And deaf? And stupid? You’ve slept
with plenty of people recently.”

“I’ve had sex with plenty of people recently,” Jim corrects him. “But the last time I slept with
someone, it was…”

It was –

(It was after Kodos had bent Jim over the edge of his bathtub and spent an hour holding his head
under the water until the fifteen-year-old nearly blacked out. At the very last second, though, he
would pull Jim up for just enough time to cough and gasp for air, and then push him back down
again.

Every time Kodos came a little closer to killing him. And every time as his lungs burned and his
vision darkened he would shrink away from death, he would struggle and fight and
SamErikaTomNatalieKevinBabyPLEASE—

(Still, he felt almost disappointed every time Kodos brought him back up for air.)

The drowning thing got Kodos off twice, and so as he staggered back to his and Sam’s room later
that night he did his best to pat himself on the back for a job well done.

But apparently his body didn’t like being brought to and returned from the brink of unconsciousness
over a dozen times in an hour, because as soon as he got back to the room his legs buckled
underneath him.

“Jimmy!”

Sam’s concerned face appeared in his line of vision. “Jimmy, are you okay?”

“Hi, Sam,” Jim rasped.

Sam shook his head, incredulous. “I know how much it means to you to get enough food for
everyone else, but you have to eat too. Here…” He got up and returned with a nutripak, which he
shoved into Jim’s hands.

“I thought you were saving this for emergencies,” Jim mumbled, fighting to keep his eyes open. He
was so tired all the time these days…

“You just swooned like a lady in a Victorian-era romance novel. I’d say that’s an emergency. Eat it.”

So, too weak to argue, Jim ate it. As the feeling returned to his limbs and the ache in his stomach
abided somewhat, Sam helped him into a sitting position.
“Did you go swimming or something?” Sam asked, nodding at Jim’s wet hair.

“Something,” said Jim.

“Here, c’mon,” said Sam. “D’you need help getting changed?”

Panic flashed in his gut. “No!” (the rope lines, the bruises on his hips, the scars—)

Sam took a step back, surprised. “Okay! Okay, Jimmy. No need to freak out…”

So Jim went to get changed in the bathroom, where he washed the worst of it off his body and maneuvered his aching, heavy limbs into pajamas.

When he came back, Sam was already in bed. When he saw Jim he grinned, lifted the blanket, patted the vacant spot beside him.

“We haven’t shared a bed since we were kids,” Jim pointed out.

“That’s exactly why we should do it!” said Sam.

Well, he couldn’t argue with that logic. He climbed in next to him and Sam snuggled up close, slinging one leg up over Jim’s.

Sam sighed in contentment. “We’ll have to do this more when we get away from here.”

“If we get away from here,” said Jim.

“Hey. Don’t talk like that. We are getting out.”

Jim didn’t respond, just closed his eyes and listened to Sam’s strong, steady, perfect heartbeat, the proof that all of his sacrifices weren’t for nothing.

“We both need to be brave,” Sam said. “Fearless. Like Dad.”

Well, that didn’t turn out too well for him, did it, he thought sardonically.

“Sure, Sam,” he said instead. “I’ll be whoever you want me to be.” He’s getting good at that after all.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Sam murmured into his hair. “I’ll make sure nothing ever hurts you.”

Jim closed his eyes and listened to that beautiful heartbeat and wished with all his might that he could believe him.

Bones is still watching him when Jim comes back to reality, and his jaw is working like it does when he’s trying to keep himself from doing something stupid. Or when he’s trying not to cry.

Jim buries his face in Bones’s shirt, partly so he doesn’t have to look at that expression anymore, listens to his steady, comforting heartbeat. The heartbeat he now understands all too well could be silenced in an instant if Jim doesn’t play his cards right.

“Jim,” Bones says quietly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Wasn’t it?

(“He’s only a kid!”)
“There was nothing you could have done.”

Rewind. Kill Kodos the moment the executions started. Try again.

Rewind. Flub the aptitude tests. Die along with the rest of the people on Tarsus. Try again.

Rewind. Drive off that cliff at eleven years old, but this time, don’t jump out at the last minute. Try again.

(“James may have bought you some time, but we both know the truth – your life was over the moment you made me angry.”)

Is it true? Does every road lead to failure?

It can’t be. Jim won’t let it.

“There are some things we can’t control. You understand that…don’t you, James?”

Jim stops breathing. His head shoots up, every nerve and every cell sparking to life, as if he’s been electrified. “What?”

Bones looks slightly confused. And very worried. “I said, you understand that, don’t you, Jim?”

“I—” Great, now he’s even hearing Kodos out of other people’s mouths. He might as well call Tom to come right away.

“Your brother would never blame you,” Bones says fiercely. “Never.”

Wouldn’t he?

He doesn’t know what Sam was thinking when he saw Jim bargaining with Kodos. He doesn’t know if there was something more he could’ve done (Rewind. Try again. Rewind. Try again. Rewindtryagainrewindtrayagainrewind—). All he knows is – “I tried to save him, Bones. I swear, I tried….”

Bones kisses him on the forehead, heartfelt and gentle, as if Jim is something precious. “I know you did.”

---

Jim’s martial arts class is busy running drills when Uhura comes to visit, an insulated cup in her hand and a look-at-me-not-gloating-I-am-so-modest-and-mature look on her face, which cannot possibly mean anything good.

“I brought you a coffee,” she says, handing him the cup.

He takes it, against his better judgment. “Is it poisoned?”

“Well,” she says. “You’ll only know for sure if you try it, right?”

“What is this, Schrödinger’s coffee?” But he takes a sip anyway, and mmm. “Okay, what do you want?”

She smiles at him sweetly. “Oh, no, this isn’t bribery coffee. This is consolation prize coffee. Professor Spock just asked me to be his teacher’s assistant next semester.”
“Is ‘teacher’s assistant’ code for ‘bae’?” Jim asks.

She scowls and looks to the side. “No. Not yet.”

“Then I haven’t lost yet,” Jim says, smirking. “Congratulations though. And thanks for the coffee.”

“I may as well have won. You know how these things go—we’ll be working long hours together, and late nights, and… Hm…” She trails off, watching Charlie, one of Jim’s kids, while he practices his uppercut on a punching bag. “Well, that’s interesting,” she murmurs.

Jim follows her gaze, but he can’t see anything wrong. Kid could stand to loosen up, but that’ll come with experience.

He glances back at her. “Like ‘cool Snapple fact’ interesting or ‘bring a shovel and a garbage bag and don’t ask any questions’ interesting?”

“Look at his body language. He’s taking the lesson too seriously.”

“You can’t take self-defense too seriously,” says Jim.

She grabs his arm to point him in the right direction. “Look. He’s taking a defensive stance even though he’s up against a punching bag. He keeps moving after he hits it, like he’s afraid it’ll hit back. And look at the expression on his face.”

His eyes are flat and hard. That, at least, is a face Jim recognizes.

“He was abused,” says Uhura.

“Hey, wait, you don’t know that…” Jim starts to protest, but the longer he watches, the more he sees it. Charlie isn’t fighting a punching bag right now; he’s fighting a person. He looks at Uhura, impressed despite himself. “How on earth did you catch that? He’s been in my class for months…”

“Xenolinguistics,” says Uhura smugly. “It takes more than just a talented tongue.”

---

He tries not to worry about what Uhura can tell about him with that eagle-eyed perception.

And succeeds. For the most part.

---

Jim is sprawled out on the couch reading The Aeneid again, minding his own business, when Bones comes in and slams the door. And not just his usual slam, oh no, but The Slam. The Slam that Jim knows he will hear shortly before his brutal, hypo-related death.

“You’ve been screwin’ my intern,” Bones says, in a tone someone else might use to say “any last words?”

So, all things considered, it probably was not the ideal time to say, “Uh…which one?”

“YOU ARE GOING TO DIE, KIRK.”

“It was Rachael, wasn’t it? She told you... Oh, she was trying to make you jealous. Oh, clever, clever girl...”
“What are you talkin’ about?” Bones snaps.

Jim shakes his head sadly. “Bones, she’s had the most obvious crush on you since the day she started working in your wing.”

The doctor sinks into a chair by the kitchen table, completely taken aback. “She has?”

“See, this is why we can’t get you a girlfriend. You’re hopeless!”

“But if she has a crush on me…” Bones says slowly. “Why was she screwing you?”

Jim grins. “Because you’re hopeless. And I do a great Leonard McCoy impression.”

There is a ringing moment of silence as he lets that sink in.

“There’re so many things wrong with that, I don’t know where to begin,” Bones says, his voice strained.

“By the way,” says Jim casually, “she really likes it when you call her darlin’.”

He puts his head down on the table and groans.

---

One of the nice parts about taking about a bajillion classes is that Jim meets a lot of people, and even makes a couple of friends; like Gary Mitchell, who might well be half-telepath (a very useful trait in bed) but still can’t figure out when Jim is insulting him, which Jim finds, just, incredibly entertaining.

And, well, he also makes some enemies.

Speaking of…

Bones is trying to track down some long-forgotten holodrive about ancient bleeding rituals while Jim leans on the second-floor railing and offers alternately helpful and annoying advice, when Finnegan and his stupid grin saunter up.

“Jimbo!” he says amiably. “What a lovely surprise.”

“The pleasure’s all yours, I’m sure,” Jim mutters.

“Aww, don’t be like that. I’m sure I could give you plenty of pleasure if you let me.”

This from the guy who flooded Jim’s dorm room, hacked his holomail and sent insulting messages to all his professors, stole his clothes after a session at the gym? Right. “Could be, Finny,” says Jim, shrugging, turning to find Bones in the library aisles. “But I’m not letting you. So get lost.”

This is when Bones appears with three different holodrives in his hands, mouth open to say something, and Finnegan says, jerking a thumb in McCoy’s direction, “You must still be giving out, at least, ‘cause he’s still hanging around.”

Bones’s eyes narrow. “Hey—”

Jim puts a hand out to stop him. “It’s fine, Bones…”

“Well, I can see who tops in this cute little relationship,” Finnegan sneers. He turns to Bones. “Maybe that’s why your girl dumped you, Doc. Her daughter already has a mommy, she doesn’t
need you."

“That’s it,” says Jim, and punches him. Finnegan blocks most of it, but it gives Jim time to elbow him in the side of the head and kick him in the stomach, sending him staggering. Finnegan tries to get his own punch in, but Jim parries it - Distantly he hears Bones yelling for them to cut it out, and then Finnegan’s grabbing him, shoving him backwards, and then he’s falling over the railing, falling, falling—

Everything after that is a blur of sight and sound. Bones shouting his name, people moving around him, above him, someone calling the medical center, and then warm hands on his shoulder, on his wrist, on the back of his head. Someone (Bones) murmuring that he’s goin’ to be okay, telling him to keep his eyes open.

“Fair warning,” Jim mumbles. “I’m g’na pass out now.”

There’s a pause and then a strained kind of laugh. “Thanks for lettin’ me know, kid.”

Jim tries to nod (ow), and then the black swirls around him, swallows him whole.

---

He comes to gradually, first hearing distant sounds of something he can’t quite place, then realizing that he’s hearing words, then discerning Bones’s quiet voice, rambling about something or other. Talking to him.

“– do when you’re like this.” A pause. Then, “You scare me, Jim.”

“Sorry,” Jim croaks. Bones jerks away, surprised. “W’sn’t try’ng to scare you.”

He can’t make out his friend’s expression, quite, but he can tell it isn’t happy. “Well, then I’d be fascinated as to what you were tryin’ to do, with that stunt you pulled.”

“W’s try’n’ to help,” says Jim, and wow Bones must’ve given him the really good stuff, because it’s a lot harder to open his eyes and a lot easier to open his mouth than it usually is. “I don’t have ‘nything left, Bones. Just St’fleet ‘n this loser bes’ friend.”

Well, Jim can tell what that expression is, at least. “Well, I’m in exactly the same boat!”

“S not true,” Jim mumbles. “Jo needs you.”

There’s a longer pause this time, and then, “You idiot. What’ll I do if you get yerself killed? What will happen when we’re out in space – are you just goin’ to throw yerself in front of me whenever there’s danger?”

“Yes,” says Jim, without hesitation. The world starts spinning and he has to close his eyes, but at least his mouth doesn’t feel so numb anymore. “Everything’s economics, Bones. Decisions are just cost/benefit analyses… What makes your life different, or – or special – is how you spend your commodities. How much you’re willing to give. An’…an’ if I can spend my life to save yours, it will be the best bargain I could hope for.”

Bones doesn’t reply for so long that Jim thinks he must’ve walked away, starts giving in to the pull of the darkness behind his eyelids, starts drifting off, when Bones mutters, “Maybe I want you to spend your life with me instead of for me.”

He’s too far gone to reply, but as he falls asleep he thinks that maybe that’s what he was trying to tell
his father – trying to tell Sam – all along.

---

Yes, so maybe Leonard had been the one to confirm that Cadet James Tiberius Kirk was healthy (or as healthy as he was going to let Leonard get him without going out of his skin with boredom in the med center). Yes, he had signed him off as being fit for duty. He had been thinking of Jim going to classes, teaching some kids how not to kick themselves in the balls, reading some highfalutin poetry or some such.

He definitely had not been thinking of Jim being whisked away to some godforsaken spot in a forest in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a knife for his second-year survival simulation.

It wasn’t a rare occurrence for Jim to not be in the dorm when Leonard got back from his shift – quite the opposite, really. So he only realized something was wrong when morning came and Jim hadn’t returned; he never stayed the night with his hook-ups.

A little bit of asking around had revealed that Jim had been picked up the day before for the second-year surprise simulation (surprise! have fun starving in the wilderness for a week!). Which brings him to now, a man on a mission, that mission being tracking down Captain Pike, Jim’s commanding officer.

He actually catches the man on the way into his office, coffee in hand. “Good morning, Dr. McCoy.”

Len is in no mood for niceties. “Why wasn’t I informed that Cadet Kirk was to be dropped off in some damned wasteland with nothing but the clothes on his back? He was only released from the medical center two days ago!”

Pike takes a sip of his coffee. “They’re given knives too,” he says mildly.

Leonard grinds his teeth. “That isn’t the point! You can’t just leave these kids in the middle of nowhere, no shelter, no weapons, no food…” God, no food… “You can’t do that to them!”

“The survival simulation is the best way to test cadets’ self-preservation skills,” says Pike, resuming his walk to his office, so Len has to walk with him. “There will be situations that demand these same skills once they become officers. It isn’t like we leave them with no supervision whatsoever – if someone is truly in danger, or on their way to starving, the assessment team will pull them out.”

“But who knows what kind of damage you’ve caused by then!”

Pike pushes open his office door but doesn’t walk inside, just turns and looks at him, confused. “What kind of damage?”

That’s right, Leonard realizes, catching himself. Pike hasn’t seen Jim’s medical record. He doesn’t know why not having access to food is intolerable for Jim. And Jim wouldn’t want him to know; would feel (justifiably) betrayed if Len told him. So Leonard just splutters for a moment and eventually manages, “It’s just – it’s too dangerous!”

“I’m with Bones,” Jim volunteers from his perch on Pike’s desk. “You can’t leave kids out in the forest on their own, it’s totally dangerous.”

“See?” Leonard says, gesturing to Jim. “Even he thinks it’s a bad idea and that’s –” He freezes, does a double-take. “Wh—How did you – what –”
“Kirk,” Pike says tiredly, rubbing the bridge of his nose like he’s not even surprised. “The point of this simulation was to test your survival skills in a worst-case scenario.”

“Yeah,” says Jim. “And I think I’m doing alright so far. I’ll check in with you next week, though. Just to make sure.”

Then he jumps off the desk and grabs Leonard by the arm and starts taking the doctor with him out the door.

“What did you do with the knife?” Pike asks.

“You really don’t want to know, sir,” says Jim solemnly.

Leonard can hear him muttering, “there go another fifty hairs” as they head off.

---

Uhura can’t even say she’s surprised when she walks in to the xenolinguistics club meeting and finds Jim Kirk flirting with her club members, just whirls, grabs Beev-j’al, and hisses in her native Deltan, “Didn’t I tell you to send him away?”

“Yes,” she says apologetically, “but he said he had a very important message for you.”

“Of course he’s going to say that!”

She huffs. “If Jim Kirk were chasing after me, I wouldn’t be running in the opposite direction!”

Uhura sighs, exasperated. It’s not Beev-j’aal’s fault though – Kirk could charm the ears off a Gundark. She turns back to said cadet, who has been watching them with interest, and switches to Standard. “Sorry about that.”

Kirk shrugs. “No big deal,” he replies in perfect Deltan, and Uhura almost faints.

He grins at their horrified shock and says, in Standard, “I want you on my team for the Kobayashi Maru.”

“Huh, let me think about it,” says Uhura, rubbing her chin in mock-consideration. “No.”

“You’re an ambitious woman. You’re going to want to be on the team that beats that stupid test for the first time in Starfleet history.”

“And yet no.”

“Your loss! If I can’t get you on my side, can I at least get your name?”

“Oh my God,” she says, rolling her eyes, but there’s a laugh in her voice. “Is there anything that will get you to stop? A water spritzer? A safeword? A muzzle?”

“Maybe. What’s a safeword?” he asks.

“Very funny,” she says. Kirk doesn’t reply immediately, and she looks at him more closely, because it’s almost like… Her eyes widen. “Wait… You – you really don’t know what a safeword is.”

He laughs. There’s something discordant about it. “Of course I know what a safeword is! I was just messing with you. Maybe you’re not as good at reading people as you thought you were.”
“Maybe,” says Uhura carefully, but she’s questions are flying through her head, and soon Kirk is making his excuses and getting out of there (throwing a “call me!” over his shoulder to Beev-j’aal, who blushes purple), quickly enough to escape before Uhura can get a good read on him but not so quickly so as to look suspicious.

She can’t figure out what his eyes are saying, exactly, but she knows a distress signal when she hears one.

---

Bones schedules him for another enforced academic meeting with Pike after he tries the Kobayashi Maru for the second time, this time not because he’s sitting around the dorm feeling sorry for himself but because he barely comes back to the dorm at all. He walks through his day in a restless, irritable haze, spends every free minute beating things up in the gym, spends his nights provoking people to hurt him, in whichever way they want to, desperate for a moment of relief from the itch of the no-win scenario (“He’s just a kid!”) (“I suppose genetics aren’t everything…””) (“Your brother would never blame you. Never.”) (rewindtryagainrewintryagainrewindtryagain—) that plagues his thoughts.

He is going to take that test again. And this time, he is going to beat it, even if he has to destroy everything he’s built until now to do it.

---

“There’s a problem here that needs to be addressed,” Pike tells Jim at their meeting.

Jim is trying (and failing) to look like he cares. “What’s that?”

“You’re progressing too quickly, and too well. You’re taking nearly twice as many credits as the other students, plus teaching three courses, not to mention you’re still the top command track student…”

“So?”

“That’s all great,” Pike says. “But you have to know what you’re going to be up against. People will get jealous, they’ll start coming up with reasons they shouldn’t feel bad that you surpassed them. They’ll think…”

“They’ll think I got where I am by being a good lay,” Jim finishes.

“Right.”

Kirk shrugs. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Well, I am a good lay.”

Pike stares. “You really don’t see any problem with this?”

“Of course I do,” says Jim. “I’m gonna get credit for the awesome head I haven’t been giving you.”

“That’s…really not the point…”

“Excuse me, Captain,” a voice interrupts them. They both turn.

“Hey Professor Longo,” says Kirk, grinning. “Fancy meeting you here.”
“No need to stand on ceremony,” says Pike, gesturing for him to come in.

The engineering instructor looks a little abashed. “Well, thank you, Captain Pike. I’ve come to discuss a rather difficult problem…”

Pike nods. “Very well. Jim, you can go. We’ll continue this later.”

“You misunderstand,” says Dr. Longo. “I’m here to speak to Cadet Kirk.”

Pike gapes.

Jim perks up. “Is that thermonuclear transmission override giving you trouble again?”

“Precisely!” Dr. Longo says. He sits down next to Jim and pulls out a diagram, and Jim takes it, looks it over, worrying his bottom lip. “The transmission moderator is experiencing energy levels triggering fission reactions at a faster rate than the neutron coolant can handle. If it continues this way the xenon poisoning will shut it down in—”

“In about 54 hours,” Jim finishes, his eyes drinking in the diagram. “We need to be focusing on extra reactivity capacity. Then instead of the fission producing iodine-135 and killing the transmission, the override will kick in automatically when the burnoff power transient hits.”

Dr. Longo’s eyes widen. “Of course.” He grabs the diagram back, suddenly electric with energy. “We’ll get to work on it at once. Thank you, Jim!”

“No problem,” says Jim. “I’ll come by later to see what I can do about the energy output modifier.”

“I’ll be in my office by 1500,” says Longo, already halfway out the door.

“1500, then,” Jim calls back.

There’s a long moment of silence.

Pike clears his throat. “What were we talking about again?”

“Blowjobs,” says Kirk, helpfully.

Pike groans, rubs his temples. At least he knows who to thank for the head of white hair he’ll undoubtedly have by the time Kirk finally graduates.

---

Of three things Jim is absolutely certain. First, that Bones is, undeniably, unequivocally, a sexy beast. Second, that Jim does not in any way want to have sex with him. And third, that sometimes his internal dialogue sounds suspiciously like certain teen fantasy novel protagonists.

He tries to explain this phenomenon to Bones one night when they’re sprawled out on the couch sharing a joint.

“You’re, like, The One,” he says, drowsy and happy and warm. “Without the sex.”

Bones, ever the classy stoner, looks off vaguely into the distance like Jim’s just recited a Maya Angelou poem. “It worries me that I understood that.”

“Platonic soulmates, man,” Jim says, because it sounds a lot better than ‘like The One but without the sex.’ “We should probably get married.”
Bones snorts, but the truth is that Jim has come to love Bones with a candor he didn’t think himself capable of since Sam died. Jim’s not sure if he believes in The One, but he believes in Bones. Yes, even when there’s no sex. Maybe because there’s no sex.

The truth is that for all Jim knows, this right here with Bones is as close to The One as Jim will get. The truth is, he’d take it in a heartbeat and never look back.

(The truth is that he was only half-joking when he proposed to Bones that night.)

---

Two days before Christmas break, Bones sits Jim down for some kind of pre-meet-the-family training wherein he tries to teach him about something called propriety. The lecture takes over fifteen minutes and involves multiple usages of the phrase ‘respectable adult,’ which means Jim is duty-bound to hate it.

“Can I pretend to be your boyfriend?” Jim asks when Bones pauses for breath.

“No,” says McCoy.

“Why not? It would be awesome to make Mistress Monstrous jealous. Is she dating anyone seriously these days?”

“Mistress… what… no!”

“No, she isn’t the demon queen of the underworld or no, she isn’t dating anyone seriously?”

“Just no!” says Bones, which is pretty much his blanket response to everything. Or maybe just to everything suggested by Jim.

“Either way, I might be a little late to the tearful reunion on Thursday. I’m meeting up with a friend of a friend of a friend. You know how it is.”

He clearly doesn’t, but nods anyway and says, “Fine, just be back by 1700 so you can—”

“—Take care of Joanna for a few hours while you and Jezebel work out some custody stuff and most likely have spontaneous, impassioned post-divorce sex that you’ll both regret in the morning,” Jim finishes. “I know, you’ve told me like eight times.”

“I am not going to hook up with her again,” Bones says through gritted teeth. “That would be stupider than cookin’ a prize duck over a landmine.”

“Bones, how is anyone supposed to take you seriously with these analogies? I say this as your friend – you need to stop. Immediately, if not sooner.”

“I am not going to hook up with Jocelyn!”

Jim just studies his fingernails.

Bones, meanwhile, is making his ‘it’s a shame I’m too tired to kill you right now’ face. “Can we just finish making the arrangements for you to take care of Jo and put this conversation out of its misery?”

“It’s not a big deal. I’ll take her to one of my old haunts.”

“No bars!”
“I mean the places I used to work.”

“No strip clubs!”

“I didn’t work in strip clubs,” says Jim, all offended, and then ruins it by adding, “…exclusively.”

“You know what, never mind, maybe I should just hire a babysitter.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding, jeez!” (He’s not actually kidding, but Bones doesn’t need to know that.)

“I’m just going to take her to a music store!”

“You worked in a music store in Georgia?” Bones asks.

Jim shrugs. “I had my fair share of odd jobs.”

"You know, the more I know of your past, the less I want to know."

"Kind of like how I feel when I see you undressing," says Jim.

Bones points at him. "That is a filthy lie."

"The filthiest," Jim agrees with a leer.

“Now, see, this is what I’m talking about. There will be none of that” – here he makes a vague gesture in Jim’s general direction – “in front of my daughter. We don’t want to traumatize her for life.”

“Fine,” he says. “But can I kidnap Joanna and hide her away in our apartment if I really like her?”

“Maybe,” says Bones.

---

The good news is, Jim shows up at 1700 to pick up Joanna.

The bad news is Jim shows up at 1700 to pick up Joanna. Or more accurately, he *arrives.*

They’ve only been waiting outside the 3-D arcade they’d taken Joanna to (that girl is going to be deadly with a gun, Leonard notes with pride) for about thirty seconds, but Jocelyn is already winding up into a full-on case of babysitter paranoia.

“And you’re sure Jim won’t leave her anywhere?” she asks.

He suppresses a sigh. Joanna stares at her boots, as she’s taken to doing whenever Leonard and Jocelyn talk to each other. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“And he knows to be back by 2100 at the latest.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure he know where to meet us?” Jocelyn asks for the fifth time.

That’s when a motorcycle comes roaring around the corner, heading straight toward them, and Leonard gets this sinking feeling in his gut. Joanna perks up.

The motorcycle swings sideways in front of them, crunching to an abrupt halt. Then the driver reaches up to unbuckle his helmet, and there, shaking out his hair and grinning, is Jim.
He glances discreetly to the side; Jocelyn looks like all her worst nightmares have come true, and Jo… Well, he’d be the last to claim to understand his daughter, but if that face isn’t the beginning of an adolescent crush, he will eat his own tricorder.

Jim climbs off the bike and approaches them, the helmet tucked under one arm. “Hey, Bones! Sorry I’m late. Had to pick this baby up from that friend of a friend of a friend I was telling you about.” His gaze skips to Jo, who’s still staring. “And you must be Joanna!”

Jo blushed bright red. Great. Just great.

Jim turns to Jocelyn. “And you’re, uh…Jill?”

“Jocelyn,” she replies, glaring at Leonard like Jim is his fault.

“Ah, sorry about that,” says Jim, shrugging. “I guess Bones just doesn’t mention you that often.”

…Why did he ever think letting Jim and Jocelyn meet was a good idea?

Jocelyn gives him a chilly smile. “Len has told us that he knows you, but not…in what capacity.”

Leonard gets where she’s going with that, unfortunately, and sighs. “No, he’s not… Jim is just a friend.”

“Oh. Well.” Jocelyn looks slightly mollified. “I could’ve guessed. You haven’t dated anyone seriously since we broke up, after all.”

The comment is relatively innocuous by itself, but her tone is saccharine-sweet, almost pitying, like he’ll never find anyone since he hasn’t found anyone yet since the divorce.

These are just some of the myriad affronts Leonard has had to learn to deal with in order to maintain a civil relationship with Jocelyn, and therefore maintain contact with Joanna. Condescension is so much part of the way she talks to him that Len barely even notices it anymore.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Jim has definitely noticed it, though.

“Actually,” says Jim, overly casual, slinging an arm around Leonard’s shoulder like he belongs there. “Friends isn’t the word I’d use to describe us.” He looks at Len with an exceptionally fake contrite expression. Leonard glares back. “Sorry, Bones. I know you wanted to keep it a secret so Julie here didn’t feel bad.”

And, well, at the end of the day Leonard isn’t going to throw his best friend under the bus. Especially when he has to make Jim seem somewhat reliable if Jocelyn’s going to let him take Joanna long enough for him to try to renegotiate the custody terms. Even if Jim knew Len would have to confirm whatever he said. Little bastard.

Jocelyn’s eyes dart between the two of them. Leonard grits his teeth into a smile and subtly grinds his heel into Jim’s foot. Unfortunately he gets no reaction aside from a sharp intake of breath.

“You call him Bones? Is it because he’s a doctor?”

Jim smirks. “Well, that’s one reason…”

Leonard wishes he could cover his eyes. Or better yet, run away. Or better yet, never have showed up in the first place.

“That’s right,” Jim continues, ignoring the SHUT UP IMMEDIATELY messages Leonard is trying
to send him telepathically. “He turned me around from a life of crime, that’s how good he is in bed.”


“Right! Sorry Jojo,” Jim says, grinning a little sheepishly. “Anyway, point is, it’s awesome to finally meet you. Here, catch.”

She catches the helmet instinctively, and a moment later realizes what it is and looks up at Jim in awe. “We’re going on your motorcycle?”

“'Course,” says Jim. “You didn’t think I drove up on it just to look cool, did you?”

“Of course not, because that would be totally out of character,” Leonard mutters. Jim smiles and calmly pinches him in the arm. “OW. Why you little—”

“So!” Jim claps his hands together. “You ready to go?”

“Yes!” says Joanna.

“And where’s your helmet?” Len demands.

“Aww, I’ll be fine, Bones. I never wear a helmet... Only wore one here to be a good influence, really.” He winks at Jo, who giggles.

Jim kneels to help her into the helmet. Jocelyn, meanwhile, is getting edgier and edgier.

Jo climbs on the motorcycle behind Jim and Jim says, “We’ll have to agree on the signs we’ll use to communicate while we drive, since it’ll be too loud for a safeword.”

“For a WHAT?” Leonard and Jocelyn shout in unison.

Jim looks back at them blankly. “A safeword. A mutually agreed-upon term that indicates to all parties involved in a potentially dangerous activity that one desires to slow or stop the activity.”

“What is that, the dictionary definition?”

“Of course not,” says Jim, looking shifty.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Jocelyn hisses.

“Can we get out of here already?” Joanna says impatiently, squeezing Jim’s waist. He looks back at her and seems to see something Len doesn’t in her pleading expression, because he just nods and cuts to the chase.

“Let’s just say you’ll tap once if you want me to slow down, twice if you want me to stop. So what do you do if you want me to slow down?”

“Tap once,” she says dutifully.

“And what if you want to stop?”

“Tap twice.”

He nods, and Len sees the briefest flash of uncertainty cross his face. “Are you sure you want to do this? You can always say no...”
Joanna lowers the visor on the helmet, wraps her arms tight around Jim and shouts, “Yes!”

Jim laughs, revvs the ignition, and with a short nod to Bones, they’re off.

---

Their entrance into Treble Clef is announced by a little bell, and Jim takes a look around the music store in satisfaction. Nothing has changed, from the carpeting to the posters to the man sitting behind the counter, smoking an actual pipe.

“Hey, Max!” Jim calls.

Max looks at him and grunts, like it hasn’t been over four years since they’ve last seen each other. Good ol’ Max. He’s always been the strong and silent type.

“Is Serena in today?” Jim asks, to which Max grunts again.

Jim looks at Jo and rolls his eyes, then calls, “Serenaaaaa!”

From the backroom emerges a woman in long, luxurious (fake) fur coat over a t-shirt and ripped skinny jeans. It’s an interesting look. “Is that—” she starts, then sees Jim. Her face lights up. “Jamie!”

“Hi, Serena,” Jim says, grinning. She comes around the counter and they hug and kiss each other on both cheeks.

That’s when she notices Joanna. “And who’s this? Not yours, is she?”

Jim clears his throat. “Uh, no… She’s my bes—my boyfriend’s daughter.”

“Boyfriend?” she repeats in amazement. “As in, not a one-night stand? As in a relationship?”

“Yes,” says Jim through gritted teeth. “And let’s not make this any more awkward than it already is for his kid, who’s standing right here, mmkay?”

“Okay,” she says, with a look that says ‘I will be hearing about this, Jamie.’ “What brings you all the way back here, then?”

Jim grins and claps a hand on Jo’s shoulder. “We’re looking for a really loud instrument that will annoy her mom.” Joanna nods fervently in agreement.

“Well, for my favorite employee – no offense Max” – Max grunts – “you can take one for free.”

“Rena, you’re the best!”

“And don’t you forget it,” she replies, heading back to the behind the counter. “Let me know when you’ve found The One.”

“The One?” Jo asks him when Serena has left.

“Something special happens when a musician meets the instrument that’s right for them,” Jim says sagely. “You’ll see. You’ll know it when you feel it.”

So he takes her around to the keyboards, where he plays a jazz riff and has her sit and try it out for a while, but the instrument doesn’t speak to her. They move on to the bass guitars (meh), the violins (eh), the saxophones (definitely not)... They even try some of the really weird instruments, like the harpsichord and the organ.
The closest thing they find is the drums. Jo sits down at the set and starts whacking things and looks up at Jim excitedly. “Mom would hate this.”

“That’s true!” says Jim.

So he teaches her a basic beat and she likes it well enough, but it soon becomes clear that even though it would totally annoy her mom, it isn’t The One.

“Maybe I’m just not cut out for music,” Jo says, discouraged after almost two hours of searching.

“Don’t say that, everyone’s cut out for music. You just have to find the instrument that—”

This is when he sees that she’s stopped in the middle of the room, staring at something with this expression… Well, that’s the look of a woman in love.

Jim follows her gaze and sees the lime-green electric guitar hanging on the wall.

“Serena!” he calls, a grin spreading across his face. “I think we’ve found it.”

---

They pack up Joanna’s guitar and get some frozen yogurt, which they eat on the swings at a playground next door while Jo brings him up to date on all the middle school gossip. Then Jim pulls out her brand new guitar and plays Stairway to Heaven for her. Joanna leans her head against the swing rope and listens, her eyes drooping slightly.

She sighs when he finishes. “I don’t want to go back.”

He glances at her. “To your mom and dad?”

“Yeah. It’s awful when they’re together.” She laughs humorlessly. “But it’s worse when they’re apart.”

He stalls for time, messes around on the guitar a bit. “It must suck that your dad’s not home,” he says finally.

Joanna starts digging small trenches in the dirt with her feet. “Well,” she says. “He made his decision.”

“Sometimes,” he starts, and doesn’t know where he’s going with this, “people don’t make their decisions based on what kind of life they want to live – whether they want it with or without you, I mean – but what kind of life they want you to live. I think Bones – your dad – wanted you to have some kind of normalcy. Not to have your parents always fighting, at each other’s throats, with you torn between the two….”

Jo doesn’t reply, and Jim says, “I think he thinks he’s doing you a favor by not being with you.” Like Jim’s father did. Like Sam did.

Jo glares at the ground and mutters, “That wasn’t his choice to make.”

“I know,” says Jim quietly.

“I didn’t ask him to go. I was fine!” she says, and there are tears in her voice.

“I know, Jojo. I know you were.”
They sit and swing for a while in silence.

“I’m not really your dad’s boyfriend, by the way,” he says after a while.

Joanna cracks a smile. “Yeah, duh.”

He looks at her, surprised. “Was it that obvious?”

“Dad is afraid of nice people,” Joanna explains somberly.

“Aren’t we all, kiddo,” says Jim. “Aren’t we all.”

---

“Hey, you’ve reached the voicemail of Jim Kirk. Leave me a message and I’ll service you as soon as possible!” Beeeep.

“Jim!” Leonard shouts into his comline. “It’s nearly 2200, where are you?!” He paces, runs his hand through his hair. “I swear, Jim, if you’ve crashed that stupid metal bike of yours—”

His eyes slide shut in relief as he hears the familiar rev of an engine, and turns just as Jim pulls up next to Leonard’s car.

“Sorry we’re late!” says Jim, obviously not sorry in the slightest.

Jo climbs off the back of the bike, pulls off the helmet, and says excitedly, “We met one of Uncle Jim’s friends from jail on the way back!”

Leonard glares at Jim, who looks back at him all wide-eyed and innocent and says, “Actually this friend was from juvie. You’d like him!” he adds, when this obviously does not make Leonard any happier.

“He’s a giant nurse!” Joanna says.

“Well, he’s a giant and a nurse, anyway,” Jim says, like that explains anything.

Leonard keeps right on glaring, for lack of anything better to do, really.

“He seemed nice. I hope we can see Uncle Nick again soon,” Joanna says.

“Uncle Nick?” Len explodes. “Who is this man?!”

“He’s a giant nurse. Or more precisely, a nurse who’s also a giant.”

“Who you met in juvenile detention.”

“His real name is Huddley,” Jim volunteers, for no obvious reason. At Joanna’s wrinkled nose he adds, “I’m the one who gave him the nickname. Ha – get it, ‘cause it’s actually a Nick name? Take note, Bones, this is how to tell a joke.”

“Good call on the new name, Uncle Jim,” says Joanna fervently.

“Right?”

Jim puts his hand down, palm-up, and Joanna gives him a perfect low-five without even looking, which is when Leonard decides that it is past time to separate these two.
“All right, in you go, Jojo,” he says, opening the car door. “Your mother is worried about you.”

Jim and Jo make identical awww sounds.

“But you’re coming skiing with us tomorrow, right?”

Jim looks kind of startled. “Sure, if you, uh…if you want me to.” He turns to Leonard hopefully. “Can I?”

Does he actually think Len’s going to say no? Idiot kid. “Of course you’re coming with us. You didn’t make other plans, did you?”

“Uh, no!” says Jim, which means he did make other plans. Probably plans that involved alcohol and a cheap hotel room.

“Okay,” Jo says brightly. “See you tomorrow, Uncle Jim!”

Joanna hugs Jim around the middle, and the look on Jim’s face – well, if Jo has an adolescent crush, Jim is completely smitten. He knew letting them meet was a good idea.

They finally get Joanna and her guitar case into the car and the car out of the parking lot, a mere hour later than they were supposed to (Jocelyn's going to kill him, but what else is new?). They head home, Joanna humming Stairway to Heaven in the backseat.

---

For the first time Jim is sad to see vacation end, but between his double course load, plus teaching his two introductory martial arts courses and becoming Dr. Longo’s teacher’s assistant for Science Track 5220: Applications of Quantum Mechanics to Spectroscopansd and Lasers, he doesn’t have much time to dwell on it. He also doesn’t have much time to dwell on what people are saying about him behind his back, which is helpful because sure enough, the general populace has decided that he must be banging Pike. Which, really, is a lot more problematic for Pike than it is for Jim, so that hardly bothers him at all.

What does bother him is that Bones finally does start dating someone - another medical track cadet named Marlena Moreau - and at first Jim is terrified that that's it. That she's The One, and now Bones will stop needing him, stop caring about him, stop seeing him. It only takes seeing them together once for Jim to tell that she and Bones aren’t going to be like that. Maybe it’s because they get along too well, and Bones is afraid of nice people. Maybe it’s because Marlena is sweet, but that’s all she is – sweet; whereas all the important people in Bones’s life have had very strong personalities. Maybe it’s because her name doesn’t start with a J. Whatever the case, Jim knows – even if Bones doesn’t yet – that the two of them are going to part ways eventually.

He hates how relieved he is by that realization.

With the new semester also comes a new group of headstrong, overeager kids desperate to prove themselves in his martial arts course.

So he puts them through the usual paces – stripping away all the romantic ideas of war they’ve lodged in their heads, and giving them the basic survival skills: getting away, simple ways to defend themselves, ducking, falling... And then, when they’ve pretty much given up on ever learning anything cool, then he finally teaches punching.

So he gives the demonstration, but there’s only so much they can learn by watching, so he has them practice their technique while he walks around, correcting posture and wrist positions and making
sure they don’t knock out each other’s teeth.

“Is this right?” one cadet asks.

Jim looks at the kid’s fist and smiles. “You’d break your own thumb punching someone like that. Here.” He arranged his kid’s fist so that his thumb is on the outside. “Now, keep your wrist straight…”

Wrist straightened, Jim looks up at the cadet – and straight into the familiar brown eyes of Kevin Riley.

The sight knocks all the air out of Jim, leaves him gaping, dazed, TarsusErikaSamdon’twanttodie

Kevin tilts his head in confusion. “Have we met?”

*I’m the reason you joined Starfleet,* he could say.

*I’m the reason you don’t remember six months of your life,* he could say.

*I’m the reason you don’t have an older sister,* he could say.

“No,” he says. “I don’t think so.”

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According to the curriculum for Professor Gill’s history class (Command Track 3919: History of the Development of the Intergalactic Society), they’re slated to talk about Orion’s long and glorious history of sex slavery.

(Orion slave girls – or lodubyaln – are trained extensively in the entertainment arts, the holotext had said dryly, including music, art, storytelling, and most notably, exotic dance. They are also taught to be excellent conversationalists and gamblers, which contributed to the tendency for freed or escaped slaves (see “the Orion slave revolt of 2248”; see fig. 6c, “the seven-starred flag of the lodubyaln uprising”) to become diplomats, service agents, and educators. In response to the potential dangers welcomed by their legendary allure, lodubyaln are frequently well-versed in combat as well. However, they are discouraged and often actively forbidden from educating themselves beyond these necessary areas, instigating the development of the “animal woman” myth. Most lodubyaln are not taught to read or write.)

On a completely unrelated note, Jim decides that it’s a perfect day to skip history class to smoke pot and read Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* in a stairwell.

The thing is that between teaching three courses, taking twice the recommended amount of credits and taking care of his – ahem – personal needs, Jim hasn’t had much time lately to muck around with a joint and roll his eyes at Nietzsche being his usual cheesedickish self. And today just seems like the best time to fix that, because as much as he normally appreciates Professor Gill’s efficient, matter-of-fact teaching style, he’s not really in the mood to hear anyone talk efficiently and matter-of-factly about rape.

He just knows some idiot is going to insist that the Orion slave girls liked being sex toys for rich, entitled social climbers – they have more voracious sexual appetites than their owners, even! And they give off special, irresistible pheromones! And they’re doped up on Venus drugs to help them ensnare poor, unsuspecting rich dudes! Shudder, gasp, et cetera!

Never mind the fact that the Orion slave girls were (are) just regular Orions raised from childhood to
entice, to entertain, to cater to the whims of their masters. To empty themselves of the person they were and become whoever they are expected to be; a race of quintessential Gatsbys.

Long story short, Jim would much rather deal with Nietzsche’s ridiculous hatred of all things decent than some classmate who “isn’t xenophobic or anything, but…”

And so it’s ten minutes into the class he’s supposed to be in—he’s only gotten up to the part where Nietzsche laments that common folk were given basic rights (what can he say, the man’s a cheesedick) and about a quarter way’s through his joint, when a voice interrupts him.

“You’re in my hiding spot,” she says.

“I don’t see your name on it,” Jim replies, flipping the page instead of bothering to look up.

“I don’t see yours on it either,” she retorts. “So why don’t you move over and we can both sit here.”

Jim sighs. Well, there goes his nice, quiet, not-so-secret lair. “Shouldn’t you be in class?” he asks, his voice kind of whiny, and finally looks up at the—

Orion girl in Science blues who’s frowning down at him, her hands on her hips. “Shouldn’t you?”

He knows this girl, she’s in Professor Gill’s history class with him, and—and Jim is an idiot.

He wordlessly scoots over to one side. She sits down. “It’s Gaila,” she tells him, and wow, she’s gorgeous.

It’s not a supernatural, pheromone-fueled beauty, or even a porn star kind of appeal, but a simple magnetism, an easy grace to her movements, the way she looks at him, eyes bright and openly curious, like she’s not afraid of anything. At any other time, he would have hit on her and not thought twice about it, but today…


She looks into his eyes like she’s seeing into his soul and says, “You’re a very beautiful person.”

And Jim has been told that he’s attractive in many different circumstances, using many different combinations of words, from many different mouths, but never has it felt so personal, like she’s validating his very existence. To his horror, he feels his face heat up. “Ah—uh—thank you?”

She gives him an easygoing smile in return, as if admiring the souls of strangers is her go-to conversation starter (maybe it is, for all he knows). That’s when she catches sight of the book in his hand and her eyes go wide and fascinated. “Can I see that?” she asks.

He hands it over and watches as she struggles with the paragraph Jim had been in the middle of. Her lips move silently over each individual syllable of the first line, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

After a few minutes she hands the book back to him, looking a little deflated. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to read this.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Jim tells her as he stretches out and makes himself comfortable. “But it goes a lot easier when you read it in a reedy, high-pitched German accent. Basically, here” – he points at where he’s up to in the paragraph – “he’s talking about how gross it is that the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century wanted to give rights to everybody, even the regular, lowly people.”
Gaila grins. “Horrors.”

“Yes, yes, I know, it’s all very disturbing, but don’t you worry, because” – he switches to his best self-important, German-accented prig voice – “in opposition to that mendacious slogan of *ressentiment*, ‘supreme rights of the majority’… in opposition to the will to the lowering, the abasement, the leveling and the decline and twilight of mankind, there sounded stronger, simpler, and more insistently than ever, the overwhelming and rapturous counterslogan: ‘supreme rights of the few! supreme rights of the few!’”

He lets his voice crack in righteous indignation on the last word, and Gaila bursts out laughing. “Is this guy for real?”

“Wait, it gets better!” Jim says. “‘Like a signpost to this other path, Napoleon appeared! The most isolated and late-born man there has ever been, and in him the *noble ideal* made flesh.’”

“So Nietzsche was totally gay for Napoleon,” Gaila translates.

“Exactly! See, you got this.”

She scoots closer to him, eyes bright with laughter and eagerness to learn. “Don’t stop,” she says.

So he doesn’t, and by the time Dr. Gill’s class lets out they’ve finished the entire first essay of the book and agreed to meet tomorrow after class to read the second.

And, hey, maybe it’s not the ‘don’t stop’ he would’ve gotten from her under normal circumstances, but in a way, this one feels even better.

---

Bones comes back from his shift at the medical center to the sight of Jim and Gaila sitting side by side on the couch, both fully clothed, and gives Jim a look that says ‘I don’t know what you’re up to, but I figured I’d just generally disapprove, to get a headstart.’ Jim looks innocently back at him.

“Bones, meet Gaila. Gaila, Bones.”

Bones just grunts and heads into the kitchen area, probably to eat everything in sight, since he always forgets to eat while he’s on shift.


Bones snorts, rifling through the cupboards and pulling out a box of crackers, then a foil of tuna fish. “Let me guess, you got a ninety-six percent, and the highest grade in the class.”

“Ninety-eight,” Jim mutters. “And it was the second-highest grade!”

“Well in that case, you may as well drop out,” the doctor drawls.

Jim turns to Gaila with a pout. “Bones is mean.”

“Whoever got the top grade probably screwed the professor,” says Gaila supportively.

“Thanks, Gaila! You always know exactly what to say, unlike some other people.”

“Sounds like someone is getting a jelly sandwich for dinner,” Bones says pleasantly from the kitchen.
Jim switches tacks without missing a beat. “I wasn’t talking about you! Duh. You’re the best!”

“A jelly sandwich?” Gaila wonders.

“I’m allergic to peanut butter,” says Jim.

“Look at how easy that was!” Bones emerges from the kitchen with his most sarcastic smile. “Isn’t it nice that now you’ve shared some important information about yourself that will help others to not inadvertently kill you.”

“You know,” says Jim, “for The Incident We’re Not Allowed To Talk About Ever So Help You God, you sure bring it up a lot.” Bones scowls back at him.

That’s when both of them notice that Gaila has just been watching them quietly from the couch, a little smile on her face.

“What,” says Bones, just like that, with no inflection whatsoever at the end of what is presumably meant to be a question.

She shakes her head, still smiling. “Nothing! Now I understand why you never tried to hit on me.”

“Huh?” says Jim.

Bones, for his part, looks completely flabbergasted. “He never tried to hit on you?”

“No, of course not!” says Gaila. “He was a perfect gentleman.”

“He was?” Bones asks, alarmed.

“Hey! I’m capable of just being friends with people!”

“I know that,” says Bones, “but you still flirt with me all the time!” That’s true enough, actually… What can Jim say? He likes flirting.

“Of course he does,” says Gaila, nonplussed. “You’re partners.”

Jim laughs. “Oh, no, me and Bones aren’t like that.”

“And I have a girlfriend,” says McCoy, to which Jim mutters, “Finally.”

“If you’re not together,” says Gaila slowly, “then…why didn’t you…”

Jim gets to his feet. “Are you thirsty? I’m going to get a drink. Do you want a drink?”

“Uh—no,” she says, still looking kind of baffled. “Thank you.”

As Jim heads into the kitchen he notices Bones is looking at Gaila in an entirely different way than he had when they’d first met. Assessing her. Like she’s something that might just stick around for a while.

He’s getting his drink when he finally hears him say, his accent thick, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gaila. I’m Len.”

“LEN?” Jim yells, sticking his head out to gape at him.

“Was I talking to you?” says Bones.
“You let people call you Len? Why don’t I just call you Nerd?”

“Because you’ve already got your own stupid nickname for me,” Bones replies, crossing his arms.
“Also, jealousy doesn’t suit you.”

“Jealousy suits me just fine, thank you very much!”

“You’re definitely not together?” Gaila asks, just to make sure.

“No!” says Bones; Jim shudders.

---

Gaila does stick around for a while, and Jim slowly gets used to the idea of having not one but two people in his life he’s not having sex with.

He never gets used to the comments he gets when he’s with her, though.

“She yours, Kirk?” comes Finnegan’s voice behind him one day as they’re leaving the cafeteria together.

Jim turns, his hands already curling into fists, but Gaila touches his arm. Shakes her head.

“Well, it’s obvious who’s giving the orders here,” says Finnegan. “If I paid all that money for her I’d make sure she knows who she belongs to.”

Jim turns on Finnegan and snarls, “Gaila doesn’t belong to anyone. So why don’t you hurry along before I report you for sexual assault?”

The other cadet just laughs. “It’s not sexual assault if she likes it. Don’t you know anything about Orions? They’re a race of sluts. Being dominated turns them on – their bodies even release pheromones that make them irresistible to their masters. You trying to tell me it’s rape even if she wants it?”

Jim can barely breathe, can barely see, is about to slam his fist into Finnegan’s face and keep doing it until that face can never look at Gaila – at anyone – ever again, when Gaila turns to the other cadet and says coolly, “Just because your body wants something doesn’t mean you want it. I’d listen to Jim and leave us alone if I were you.”

Finnegan’s face twists. “Don’t you tell me what to do, you little slut—”

He grabs Gaila by the arm and she turns, shifts backwards on Finnegan’s momentum, and calmly high-kicks him in the face.

Finnegan drops like a ton of bricks, and Jim watches in speechless awe as Gaila nods matter-of-factly, smoothes out her uniform, and steps over the fallen body like it’s a mildly irritating hallway obstruction.

“Ready to go?” she asks, pushing a strand of wild red hair behind one ear.

“More than ready,” he says fervently, and they head off, leaving Finnegan and everything else behind them.
For reasons that supposedly have nothing whatsoever to do with the cute Engineering Track girl in the front row, Gary Mitchell joins Jim’s quantum mechanics class despite the fact that he a) is Command Track and doesn’t need it and b) never actually learned algebra.

Apparently he thinks Jim will cut him a break since he’s his friend (or whatever you call an occasional bed partner whom Jim enjoys insulting and/or getting drinks with), which Leonard could’ve told him was a bad idea. But instead of realizing that he’s completely out of his depth and dropping the class like a normal person, Gary just spends all his time hounding Jim for various kinds of extra credit.

*Exhibit A,* Leonard thinks, rolling his eyes as Gary plunks his tray down at his and Jim’s table at lunch. “Jim, you’re a pretty good teacher. But you have one big weak point.”

Jim raises his eyebrows. “Do tell.”

“You’re really smart. Really, really smart. Like a stack of books with legs.”

Leonard looks between them. “Okay, so what’s his weak point?”

“That is his weak point,” says Gary, as if Jim isn’t sitting right next to him, looking bemused. “You gotta hit him in the legs. Or, more precisely, between the legs.”

“Uh-huh. See, I really don’t think kicking Jim in the balls will help your grade,” says Leonard.

“No, not like that! I’m going to distract him with sex!” Then he turns to Jim and says cheerfully, “I’m going to set you up with someone. You’ll see.”

“Gary,” says Jim pleasantly, “do you remember what Lieutenant Laroue said about my class when you asked him if you should sign up?”

“’You either think or sink,’” Gary quotes. “Yeah, okay, but I’m more of a doer than a thinker.”

“You’re definitely not a thinker,” Jim agrees, nodding.

Gary just smiles back, oblivious, and so Leonard feels it’s his duty to elbow Jim on the poor moron’s behalf.

---

“Guess what?” says Gaila one night when it’s Jim’s turn to make dinner and she’s decided to stick around to help (read: sit on the counter and tell him he’s cutting the vegetables wrong).

“You’ve decided not to provoke the man with the giant kitchen knife?” Jim guesses, as he finishes dicing the onion he’s working on.

Gaila snorts. “No way. I got an 85 on my Written Standard test last week!”

Jim looks up. “Gaila, that’s amazing! Did you hear that, Bones?”

“That’s great, kid,” Bones says wearily from the couch, and turns over so his back is toward them. He’s been vegging there since Jim got back from class, which means one of his patients isn’t doing very well.
“And I got a 112% in Integer Programming and Combinatorial Optimization in Randomized Algorithms. But that's, you know. Duh.”

“Totally,” says Jim.

“I need to get stupider friends,” Bones mutters, and then, “Whatever you’re makin’, kid, it smells fantastic.”

Jim grins. Yeah, he could definitely get used to this.

---

Of course, there are some things he could get used to not having, too. Like the endless nights lying in bed, replaying, replaying, replaying, rewindrewindrewind…

He reads Pike’s dissertation on the destruction of the USS Kelvin, but it doesn’t tell him anything he didn’t already know.


None of the scenarios Jim runs make any difference, no matter what he changes or how early in the game he changes it. The moment that lightning storm hits, it’s over. As far as Jim can tell, the only way to win is to not check out the lightning storm at all, to ignore it, to turn tail and run. But that’s a scenario even more intolerable than failure.

*Rewind,* Jim thinks, tightening his jaw. *Try again. There has to be something…* 

There has to.

---

Maybe it’s a sign that Jim’s getting less messed up, or maybe just more creative, because he starts coming up with commodities that aren’t sex when he wants something. Sometimes he’ll pay for drinks, or help them study for an exam, or fix their car. Or he’ll have sex with them. It’s not like he stops sleeping with people, it’s just that he starts doing a lot of other things with them too. Like taking care of their dogs, for instance.

The first time Bones comes back to the dorm to the sight of Jim playing with Admiral Archer’s prize beagle, he assumes that Jim’s adopted the thing and immediately starts yelling about responsibility and destroyed furniture and allergens that kill people, not that he’s going to mention Any Specific Event.

Jim cuts him off when Bones starts looking like he’s going to hypo him in the face and explains that it’s not his dog, no he’s not lying to save his own hide, no really he’s not, it’s Admiral Archer’s and if anything happens to it Archer will probably have Jim stuffed and mounted in his office.

“Admiral Archer’s dog?” Bones repeats when he’s calmed down enough to process the spoken word.

“Yup,” says Jim.

“Okay… What’s in it for you?”

“Why does there have to be something in it for me? Maybe I just love spending time with Snoopy here. And he loves spending time with me! Right, boy? Right?” Snoopy barks in agreement and
jumps up and starts licking Jim’s face; Jim laughs and tries to keep him away.

“He is pretty cute,” says Bones, resentfully. “His name’s Snoopy?”

“Nope,” Jim replies, scratching the beagle behind the ears. “His name’s Porthos. But that’s a dumb name, right, boy? You like Snoopy much better, don’t you? Yes you do. Yes you do!”

“So you’re doing this…because you have a death wish?”

“No! Do I always need to have an ulterior motive?”

The look on Bones’s face speaks for itself, but he doesn’t argue.

And if a couple of weeks later Jim’s record just so happens to end up on Admiral Archer’s desk and he just so happens to sign off on Jim skipping his third-year simulation, allowing him to go straight to the fourth-year sim so he can graduate at the end of the year…well, that’s just a nice side benefit.

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If Leonard squints his eyes and tilts his head and thinks lovely thoughts, then he could maybe – maybe – believe that Jim didn’t manipulate that convenient little happenstance out of Admiral Archer. But what’s really suspicious is that the dog disappears as soon as Jim no longer needs it.

“Did you kill the beagle?” Leonard has to ask.

“I didn’t kill the beagle!” says Jim. “It just disappeared!”

“It disappeared,” Len repeats doubtfully.

“It did! Anyway, Archer sent some poor schlub off to an abandoned Starfleet outpost in the middle of nowhere over it, so even if I were responsible, I would have to be an idiot to admit it.”

Leonard crosses his arms.

“…Which is irrelevant because I didn’t kill the beagle, I swear,” he adds.

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“I don’t mean this in a bad way, but are you crazy?” Wu asks.

“A little bit,” Jim admits, attempting to smile flirtatiously at her. Considering he’s sitting propped up against the wall, breathing hard and bleeding from a wound in his side, it probably doesn’t quite sweep her off her feet.

“I can’t believe you got yourself shot on a simulation,” she mutters. “You almost died.”

Almost being the objective word. He always almost dies, never quite manages it, and the worst part is that it turns him on like nothing else. Maybe it’s his conditioning, or maybe he’s just screwed up, but for Jim, arousal and fear for his life tend to go hand-in-hand.

“Those weren’t simulated phasers,” he says. “What was I supposed to do, just let Kevin get shot?”

“Maybe not,” she admits. “But once you got hit you probably shouldn’t have taken over the whole operation. How did you manage that crazy backwards flip thing by the way? I thought only gymnasts could do stuff like that.”
Well, Jim’s not going to comment on that one. Probably not allowed to legally, anyway. “The bleeding’s not stopping. Is that bad?”

Wu grits her teeth and presses down on it harder. Jim inhales sharply. “It’s fine. The medic’s on his way.”

“Medic? Who’s the—” But his question is answered for him when Bones appears like some kind of avenging angel, striding toward them in silent fury, carrying his kit.

Here’s the thing: Jim has noticed that Bones has three levels of frustration. The first is sarcasm, which can mean he’s anywhere from content to only mildly irritated. The second is outright anger, which means he’s upset, but he’ll forgive Jim eventually.

The third level is silence.

“Hi, Bones,” Jim says, smiling weakly. Bones’s lips go tight and he ignores him, just kneels beside him, silently pulling out his medical equipment.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Jim says. “Right, Cadet Wu? It wasn’t my fault.”

Wu keeps her gaze forward and, wisely, doesn’t get involved.

“Kevin was—” His protest catches on a gasp of pain as Bones applies some kind of torture bandage to the wound in his side. “I couldn’t just—a-aahhh, Bones, easy!”

McCoy doesn’t reply and picks up a hypo, and Jim kind of just panics. “Nonono I’m sorry, it was my fault, don’t hypo me there—” Of course, the doctor ignores him and hypos him straight down into the injured nerve. “BONES!”

“Don’t you Bones me you little –”

“For what it’s worth,” Wu offers, apparently sensing that the worst is over, what with Bones being verbal again and Jim not bleeding anymore. “He got the highest fourth-year sim grade in Starfleet history.”

This should make Bones happy. It does not. He just gets this look like a feral animal.

“I’m tired,” says Jim.

“My heart bleeds for you.”

“You are a meanie.”

Bones rubs his forehead. Sighs heavily. “Don’t drool on anything and you can take a nap on the medical team travel cot,” he says at last. “Just this once.”

“You are marginally less of a meanie.”

“Stop. You flatter me.”

“Should I get the cot?” Wu asks.

“No, I’ll get it,” says Bones. He turns to Jim and growls, “I’ll be gone for less than a minute, d’you think you can keep yourself alive that long?”

Jim’s pretty sure he can do that (he’s not as sure he can keep himself awake, of course, but that’s
another story), but Bones is storming away before he can reply.

Wu stares at the doctor’s retreating back. “That’s your friend?” She shakes her head in disbelief. “I don’t ever want to see your enemies.”

“What can I say,” says Jim, giving her his best disarming smile. “I’m fearless.”

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Well. Almost fearless.

“BONES!” Jim shrieks

“What,” comes Bones’s muffled (but distinctly irritable) response from the bathroom.

“I’ve been attacked by a monster!” he yells. “It’s – it’s coming toward me – aaahhh it’s coming toward me, KILL IT, BONES! Kill it dead!”

There’s a pause, and then, “Are you talking about a spider?!”

“That’s no spider, that’s a friggin’ SPACE STATION, and I need you to KILL IT!”

So, grumbling and groaning, Bones emerges from the bathroom, clearly ready to give Jim hell for being a wuss, when he actually sees the thing.

“Oh,” says Bones. “Maybe we should just leave it be.”

“You’re afraid of it!” Jim realizes, pointing at him accusingly.

“Am not,” says Bones.

“Are too!”

“Says you, from on top of the couch!”

Jim pouts. “Fine, maybe it… it isn’t the most appealing creature to my sense of aesthetics.” Bones snorts.

“So how are we goin’ to get rid of the beast? You can’t lasso a bull with a shoelace.”

They look at each other, then yell, “GAILAAAA!”

“What’s the fire?” she asks, coming out from the kitchen with a sandwich.

“It’s ‘where’s the fire,’” says Jim. “And you need to kill that thing before it kills us!”

“Huh,” says Gaila, finally seeing it. She puts down the sandwich and gently picks up the spider in her palm.

“What kind of woman are you?!” Jim shrieks from a safe distance.

“The kind who embraces all life,” she says, smiling at the spider like it’s her best friend. “All the best on your journey, little drifter,” she tells it.

Then she turns and takes it outside, leaving Jim and Bones staring after her.

“So not only are we sissies, we’re also, just, fundamentally bad people,” Jim translates.
“Yeah, that’s what I heard too,” says Bones.

There’s a pause.

“Spiders are ewwy, Bones.”

“Shut *up*, Jim.”

---

Gary catches Jim as he’s leaving Captain Pike’s office after their monthly academic assessment (and is it just him or does he hear whimpering noises coming from Pike’s office? Probably just him). “Jim, listen. I’ve got the com number of this little blonde lab technician you are going to be _obsessed_ with.”

Jim raises his eyebrows. “So obsessed that I’ll be unable to mark the tests and just have to give everyone an A?”

“Yeah!”

“Gary, I’m going to suggest something kind of radical so don’t freak out, but have you considered _studying_?”

“What about me?” Gary tries.

“What _about_ you?”

“You could have sex with me.”

“I _could_ have sex with you,” Jim agrees. “But you’d still fail quantum mechanics.”

“Seriously? You’re not even going to consider it?” Gary sighs, his shoulders slumping. “Sandy said you wouldn’t, but I couldn’t believe her. Man. This is crazier than you going steady with that Orion girl you hang out with.”

Jim stops, gives him a look that tells Gary he should probably be shutting up around now. “What’s so crazy about me dating Gaila?”

“Oh my God,” Gary thinks as he walks away in a daze. No one’s gonna believe this.

---

So. Um. That story seemed like such a good idea at the time.

It feels a lot less brilliant now, as Jim hovers awkwardly outside Gaila’s classroom door while her
Advanced Troubleshooting and Emergency Reprogramming class lets out.

“Hi,” he says, his voice slightly higher than normal, falling into step next to her when Gaila finally emerges.

“Hi?” she says.

They start walking to the cafeteria together, Gaila humming one of her trashy human pop songs and Jim trying to figure out how to gently break it to her that she suddenly has a boyfriend.

What comes out of his mouth is, “So, um. Word is that you have a boyfriend.”

Gaila doesn’t even look surprised, just slightly curious, and yeah, this is why they’re friends. “Do I?”

“Yeah,” says Jim, nodding. “He’s not the best guy in the world, but hey, you coulda definitely done worse. He’s handsome… smart… funny… great in bed, too…”

“Jim,” she sighs. “As flattering as it is that you’re wingman-ing yourself to me…”

It all comes out in a rush, “I kinda… told Gary that we’re dating and he’s probably told the whole school by now?”

“So Jim explains, and Gaila shakes her head and says, “Jim, I appreciate it, I do, but I don’t need you to protect me.”

“I know you don’t,” says Jim.

That should be the end of it, but instead they both kind of stand there, letting the silence stretch on between them.

Gaila sighs, puts her hands on her hips. “Will you stop giving me the puppy-dog eyes if I go along with this boyfriend thing for a couple of weeks?”

“Yes,” says Jim.

“You’re a menace,” says Gaila.

“But I’m your menace now,” and ack, doesn’t that sound unsettling. It’s not that he hates the idea of him and Gaila together… and he does want to stick it to Gary et al… but he doesn’t know why the idea of pretending to date Gaila makes him so nervous. No, more like so anxious, like something’s going to go wrong any minute.

But hey, that’s probably just Bones and his paranoia rubbing off on him. She’s brilliant and awesome and gorgeous – anyone would be lucky to date her, and he’s not even really dating her.

What could possibly go wrong?

---

To the surprise of absolutely no one, the rumor that the two biggest sluts on campus have gone exclusive spreads like wildfire. The comments about Gaila stop, only to be replaced by knowing (and sometimes envious) looks whenever they’re together, and soon enough there are betting pools on how many times a day they have sex (the one Jim overheard was hovering at eight, which Jim found so flattering he wasn’t even offended).
Gaila, as usual, takes it all in stride, and Jim can think of many things worse than people thinking he’s banging a gorgeous, brilliant woman eight times a day, but Bones doesn’t like it.

“You can’t pretend to date someone to prove a point,” he grouses.

“Um, clearly I can,” says Jim.

“So, what, you’re not gonna drop the act until everyone admits that Orions can be monogamous? I hope you’re ready to marry her an’ put babies in her an’ raise beautiful, celery-colored children together.”

“You didn’t hear what they were saying about her, Bones,” Jim says.

He knows that’s really not a good reason for what he’s doing; he knows that they’re still saying the same stuff they were saying about her before, just not to his face. But Bones just looks at Jim with too-understanding eyes and doesn’t argue.

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“Is it true that you’re dating Jim Kirk?” Nyota demands the minute she gets back to the dorm room.

Gaila looks up guiltily from where she had been lying on her bed in her underwear (you get used to certain…cultural differences when your roommate is Orion) reading a book, a habit she’s formed pretty recently. Right around the time she met Kirk, actually. “Well…”

“No, it’s okay!” Nyota adds quickly, coming to sit on her own bed. “It’s more than okay. You should hear how much you’ve thrown the general xenophobic idiot population for a loop. They don’t know what to do with themselves now that you’ve proven Orions can actually limit themselves to one person. The guy who told me about it looked like he was having an existential crisis.” She laughs.

“Um,” says Gaila, looking uncomfortable. “Right.”

“Now, the likelihood of Kirk limiting himself to one person…”

Gaila sits up, gives her a disapproving look. “Leave him alone, Nyota! He’s not nearly as much of a jerk as he makes himself out to be.”

“No, I know that…” she replies. “And to be perfectly honest – and I will die before I admit to this – I think you two might be really good for each other. But you should still be careful.”

Her roommate tilts her head, curious, questioning.

Nyota tries to find the words for the distress signal she picked up from him and never quite decoded. “He’s…in pain, I think. And people do crazy things when they’re in pain.”

Gaila’s face breaks into a smile, and then she’s crossing the distance between their beds and kissing Uhura gently on the lips, in just one more of the cultural differences Nyota’s gotten used to as roommate to an Orion; they’re a lot more…demonstrative with their friends.

“Nyota, I think I love you,” she says, like a human might say ‘good morning.’ Case in point.

“I love you too,” says Nyota, grinning. “Just don’t bring Kirk back here, okay? Actually, don’t bring any guys here ever.”

“I won’t!”
“Promise me, Gaila,” Nyota says, mock-seriously. “Promise me I will not accidentally walk in on Kirk’s junk in my room. That is not something I want to witness in this lifetime.”

“I promise!” Gaila laughs.

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And it isn’t a problem, really. They just end up doing what they always did – both he and Gaila still sleep with other people, only more discreetly now, with people they know will keep their mouths shut.

Jim, for his part, starts hooking up only with people who have no connection whatsoever to Starfleet, and who are unlikely to get their pictures posted in the daily holos. When it comes to flirting, though, he doesn’t bother with discretion. In fact, now he does it even more – lets his gaze linger just a little longer, lets his fingers just brush a little lower, stands just a little closer than is appropriate, lets whoever’s watching wonder if he really never acts upon that wandering eye. And maybe eventually they’ll figure out that it doesn’t take an Orion to be a slut.

But yeah, aside from that, nothing really changes between them. They still hang out on Jim’s couch, reading and pestering Bones, they still don’t have sex or go out on actual dates, and they still have that same charge of sexual tension between them, only now it’s a lot harder to ignore because they’re supposed to be sleeping together.

They’re sitting on Jim’s floor one night, studying for their thermodynamics exam, and Gaila is reading the textbook out loud, slowly but accurately, and Jim’s supposed to be listening for mistakes and correcting her, but all he can do is look at her and think about how beautiful she is.

It’s not only her looks – although, yes, it is her looks. The green skin/red hair combination is, frankly, ridiculously hot, as is the way she moves – every motion easy, graceful, sensual.

But it’s also her mind, so suited to understanding systems, breaking them down and building them back up again, not just exploring new frontiers but creating them with her programming skills.

And it’s also her heart. Her courage in blazing a trail for herself in a subtly (and often not-so-subtly) judgmental institution full of light-skinned humans who’ve already made up their minds about her.

Jim wants her. Of course he wants her. He’d have to be comatose or dead not to want her. His dreams have gotten a lot more…vivid since he’s starting hanging out with her, and he knows that the sex between them would be a blast. But… at the same time…

At the same time, since meeting Bones, Jim has realized that there are two distinctly separate categories of people in his life: the people he loves truly, deeply, eternally, like Sam and Bones. And then there are the people he “loves” in the most superficial sense of the word, a category that includes – well, pretty much everyone else.

This is the principle of Jim’s life: people either get into his heart or into his pants. You can’t do both.

And the worst part is that Jim is certain that Gaila would have been well on her way to joining the first category if not for Jim forcing her into this weird, unnatural fake relationship just to prove a point. The only way he’s managed to keep hoping she’ll stick around regardless is by telling himself that he doesn’t owe her, that he’s doing her a favor too.

But the comments had never bothered Gaila as much as they’d bothered Jim, and the more time passes and all their “relationship” does is force her to sneak around like her sexuality’s something to be ashamed of, the less Jim can fool himself.
Jim comes back to the present, where Gaila’s in the middle of a sentence about gravity-generated energy consoles in thermodynamics technology.

“Should we have sex?” he asks.

She looks up and they just watch each other for a full beat.

“No,” she decides at last.

“Yeah,” he agrees, relieved. Then he says hesitantly, “Can I just…?” He leans forward, the same way he would if he were about to kiss her, but instead he puts his head on her shoulder, listens to her heartbeat. Closes his eyes.

Jim knows – and he knows Gaila knows – that she isn’t The One, but that doesn’t mean they couldn’t be something great. They’re kindred spirits in a lot of ways – which somehow only makes the fake-girlfriend thing harder; because it really does make a lot of sense for them to be together.

But that’s exactly why he never wants them to be together – because he wants to have her forever, not just for a night.

This is the principle of Jim’s life: people either get into his heart or into his pants. You can’t do both.

He just hasn’t figured out where Gaila’s going to end up yet.

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It’s relatively well-known that an Oedipus complex means that you wanna kill your dad and screw your mom, but what’s less well-known is that the actual Oedipus from the story never wanted to do either of those things. In fact, when heard the prophecy that he would, he ran away to Thebes, where he married the woman of his dreams and became the king. Problem is, it turned out he had been adopted all along (thanks for the info, mom and dad), and the guy he killed in the first recorded road rage incident was actually his biological father, and the woman he was making mad love to was actually his mom (whoops), so by trying to outwit the prophecy he ends up accidentally fulfilling it after all.

When Jim had first read Oedipus the King for Kodos’s class, he and Kodos had, as usual, agreed on everything (Oedipus was a good king, a good person, a tragic character because he only had himself to blame for his downfall) until the end, where Oedipus realized what he’d done and was so horrified with himself that he gouged out his own eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes.

Jim thought it was noble. Even though Oedipus hadn’t known it at the time, when push comes to shove he had still done something very wrong. Jim felt that Oedipus understood that the best intentions don’t excuse people from the horrible consequences of their actions.

Kodos thought it was stupid. “Man cannot possibly be held accountable for what he doesn’t know,” he had said. “Incest itself is not a sin – it is the desire for incest that society has deemed sinful. It is not the action but the intent that is disgraced. Therefore, since Oedipus didn’t know who his wife was and in fact specifically desired to not have sex with his mother, his extreme form of penance was irrational. Because of his own overactive moral sensibilities, he’s left Thebes to chaos, which I believe to be his more pressing sin.”

“Worse than killing his father in a fit of rage?” Jim challenged. “Maybe he shouldn’t have abandoned Thebes, but the other option is unacceptable too – he can’t just shrug off the fact that he’s been banging his mom and keep doing what he was doing.”
“No, perhaps not,” Kodos conceded. “But he also should not have blamed himself for a sin he never wanted to commit and was never aware of.”

“Maybe he gouged out his eyes because he was aware of it,” said Jim. “Maybe he really knew somewhere that he was doing something wrong, even if he didn’t want to admit it.”

And Kodos had scoffed and waved a hand (“Superstition and nonsense”), but in the later months and years, Jim would learn exactly what it felt like to know that something’s wrong, deep down in his core, even if he didn’t (couldn’t) acknowledge it.

---

And so, Jim and Gaila continue to “date,” and Jim continues to sleep less and eat less and just generally less, until Bones does what he does, and gets worried.

“I don’t think this is good for you,” Bones says to him one day at lunch while Jim pokes his fork absently around his chicken salad.

“It’s a salad, Bones,” says Jim. “It has leafy things in it. I thought you approved of leafy things.”

“Exactly! And since when do you do things I approve of?”

Jim shrugs. “I’ll eat anything, really.” And it’s true. Regardless of how much or how little he likes the food he gets, he always leaves the cafeteria with a clean plate. To punctuate the point he shovels a forkful into his mouth, not really tasting it.

“Listen,” says Bones, leaning in and giving Jim a look very similar to his ‘I will hypo you into submission, don’t think I won’t’ face. “I don’t know or care why, but this thing with Gaila? It’s taking a toll on you.”

Jim keeps right on eating and doesn’t reply.

Bones grits his teeth. “And you don’t even really like each other! You’re only fake-dating her, so why don’t you just…have a fake-breakup and move on with your life?”

“But I do like her, Bones.”

This (understandably) throws his friend for a loop, but he recovers a moment later and says, his voice more gentle, “Then…maybe you should stop fake-dating and start doin’ it for real.”

“Not like that. I like her in the same way I like you. I trust her.” He starts scooping food into his mouth, partially so he doesn’t have to look at Bones.

“Hold it. Are you tryin’ to tell me that you trust and respect a beautiful, available woman, and therefore you can’t imagine sleeping with her?”

“Um,” says Jim. “Yes?”

“Have you ever trusted and slept with the same person at the same time?”

Jim thinks about it. The only person he both trusted and slept with was Kodos, and not at the same time, so… “No. Is that a problem?”

Bones doesn’t reply immediately, which means that it is a problem. At least for people who aspire to semi-healthy romantic relationships.
“I’m going to die alone, is what you’re saying.”

“No. What I’m saying is…” Bones glances at him quickly, almost hesitantly and says, “Maybe…it has something to do with—”

Nope nope nope, just put him on the nope train to nope island and give him a tall, cold glass of nope. He gets abruptly his feet. “Wow I just remembered that I have to do the thing. In the place. Urgently. Like, now.”

“Jim…” Bones sighs, but he’s already picking up his plate and turning and leaving the cafeteria to the tune of nope nope nope.

“You're going to have to talk about it eventually!” Bones shouts after him.

“Says who?” Jim yells back.

---

It surprises Jim – although it really shouldn’t, by now – how fast the novelty of Starfleet’s Horniest Couple wears off and people go right back to being their openly douchebaggy selves.

When he walks in on some guy waving a credit chip in Gaila’s face saying, “C’mon, just a dance. Kirk can even join us – you can take care of both of us at once, can’t you?”, Jim is sorely tempted to teach him what exactly happens to people who mess with Jim Kirk’s fake girlfriend. But Gaila just looks at the cadet and replies coolly, “Unfortunately I’m into guys who don’t have to pay people to have sex with them.”

Then she sees Jim and her whole face lights up. “Jim! I was just talking about you.”

“Were you,” he murmurs, and gives the guy something closer to a bearing of teeth than a smile. He actually pales.

“I have to…go…” he mutters, and turns tails and goes as fast as his legs can take him.

“Can I kill him?” Jim asks pleasantly.

“No,” says Gaila.

“Can I maim him?”

“No.”

“Can I maim him a little bit?”

Gaila laughs and shakes her head, and then she grabs his hand and squeezes it in hers. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Oh,” says Jim, reflexively loosening his grip. He’s not sure what the hand-holding protocol is, he hasn’t done it since Sam was helping him cross streets.

She just squeezes harder. “I’m your girlfriend. I’m allowed to hold your hand.”

Well... “Fair enough. Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere,” she says, and she pulls him out of the lecture hall and out into the street, ignoring the looks that follow them, her hand tight around his and her head held high.
When Bones comes back from a double shift and finds him on the floor, half-conscious and high as a kite, he just stomps over to the curtains, throws them open, and says angrily, “That’s it, you’re breaking up with her.”

“Nooo,” Jim moans, shielding his face from the light.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?” Bones asks, and Jim can’t tell if he’s talking about the cocaine or his fake-dating Gaila.

“If I can’t even pretend to have a normal relationship,” he mumbles, “how will I ever…?” He can’t bring himself to the end of that sentence, which probably involves words like trust and family and The One and everything else he prefers not to admit he thinks about.

Bones, of course, understands anyway. “I don’t know, kid,” he says quietly.

“Bones, I think I’m broken,” Jim says, and it was supposed to be a joke, but it doesn’t seem very funny once he’s said it out loud.

He doesn’t reply, and then the curtains are closing again, and then he’s being dragged into his bed and a blanket is being put on top of him and tucked under his arms. “Why don’t we just…work on sleepin’ this off for now?”

So Jim does.

---

At lunch a week before Jim’s Favorite Test, Gaila pokes him and asks, “Why are you looking even sadder and limper than usual lately? Are you on your period?”

“I resent that,” says Jim. “I am full of manly ruggedness.”

Bones snorts. “He always gets like this around this time of year, when the Kobayashi Maru’s coming up. But he’s not taking it again this year, right Jim?”

Jim just mumbles into his pudding.

“He’s not,” Bones confirms to Gaila.

Gaila has the good sense to come to Jim with her “completely brilliant plan” only later, when Bones isn’t there.

“I could help you,” she says. “Between the two of us, we could beat anything!”

Jim sighs. “You can’t beat the Kobayashi Maru. It’s built into its programming.”

Gaila smirks. “Then we’ll just have to change its programming, won’t we?”

He stares at her. She just watches him right back, fearless, ready to take on anything. And he can’t help the slow grin that spreads across his face. “You know what, Gaila? You’re absolutely right.” He stops, considering that; adds, “But you have to promise me that if this all goes south, you won’t get yourself in trouble for me.”

She rolls her eyes. “I promise. But it won’t go south. I’ve already got your team together. Except for one – I thought you’d want to ask Len.”
“Aww, you mean I can’t pester Uhura to join us?”

“No,” she says. “Because she’s already your communications officer.”

“What? How did you manage that?”

“I have my ways,” Gaila says mysteriously. “But she wants me to make sure you know that she’s doing this as a favor to me, not to you.”

Jim smiles. “Of course she does.”

“Also that you’re still going to lose.”

“Normally I’d agree with her,” says Jim. “But with me and you and Uhura and Bones…I think we might just have a fighting chance.”

---

And so the day before the test, Jim heads back to Gaila’s room after getting Bones onboard (okay, so he never actually agreed but Jim knows he’ll show up), and they spend the afternoon writing code on their respective PADDs. Every now and then they’ll argue over how a certain line of code should go, or show the other a particularly clever idea, but for the most part they just sit, writing side-by-side in easy silence on her bed.

*If only the other cadets knew what the two biggest sluts on campus actually do together,* Jim thinks wryly.

“I’ve set up a wire-in on the Kobayashi Maru isodrive so that all you’ll have to do is com-message me the hack in a compatible format, and it’ll automatically override the system,” Gaila says after over two hours. “The only problem is that the wire-in has a very faint acoustic signature… It’s unlikely that they’d know what it is, if they even heard it, but with Spock as administrator anything is possible.”

“I’m not taking any chances,” Jim says. “What can we do to keep their attention off the acoustic signature?”

She twirls a lock of hair thoughtfully. “We’ll need to run audio interference. Like playing transmitter static, or… crumpling paper, or…”

“Eating an apple?” Jim suggests.

Gaila grins at him. “That’ll do.”

Another half an hour later, Jim puts the finishing touches on his portion of the code and looks over at Gaila, who’s typing so furiously he knows she’s almost finished. Sure enough, as he watches, she stabs the save button and throws her PADD across the room in triumph. “DONE! *Who is your daddy?*

“You are!” says Jim, laughing at her adorable mispronunciation of the human phrase, and then she’s laughing too, and then she’s throwing her arms around his neck, kissing him enthusiastically.

He kisses back on auto-pilot, but his eyes are wide open, panicked, his fingers curling in Gaila’s blankets, his mind spinning (*is this a congratulatory kiss? is it a friendly kiss? what is a friendly kiss anyway? does she want to—*) until it’s over and Gaila pulls back, frowns. “Are you okay?”
Before, Jim could tell himself that they owed each other equally – could tell himself that he was protecting her by pretending to be her boyfriend, even if Gaila never asked for (or needed) that protection in the first place. But now…now she’s helping him hack the unhackable test, possibly compromising her own place in the academy, very possibly destroying the Starfleet position she’s worked so long and hard to get. Now the balance has been tipped, and Jim definitely owes her. Owes her more than he knows how to pay for.

If this is what she wants in return…he can’t exactly say no.

“I finally get to kiss you and you ask if I’m okay?” he replies, smiling, and then before she can look at his eyes too closely, he’s the one kissing her this time, and then she’s relaxing, sighing into his mouth, and she’s taking off his uniform jacket and he’s running his fingers through her hair (he’s always wanted to do that, to be honest)…

(And his heart is pounding, he doesn’t know what’s going to happen to them, to their friendship, once Jim pays his end. He doesn’t want to lose her as a friend. He only has two of those, after all. But it doesn’t really matter what Jim does or doesn’t want; there’s no such thing as a free lunch.)

“Lights to fifteen percent. This is going to be awesome,” says Gaila, like they’re about to take a fieldtrip or something, and then she’s pulling off his pants, and Jim is healthy human male with a very active libido, okay, and that is…distracting. Which is good. If his body wants her he can pretend that he does, too. “My roommate’s gone for the night, so we have the room aaall…” – she slips her skirt off, grinning – “to ourselves.”

“Perfect… Any kinks I should know about, baby?” he asks, the words slightly muffled by the undershirt he’s pulling over his head.

Gaila shakes her head with a soft smile and murmurs, “Do you believe in true love?”

Like The One? Jim’s never come across that particular kink before, and considering his history, that’s saying something.

Whatever else could be said about Jim’s arrangement with Kodos, he had never expected, or wanted, to be The One for Jim. Neither had any of Jim’s clients, or any of the other anonymous hook-ups he’d had over the years. True love is – was – the one part of sex that no one had ever touched, that in a way still remained fifteen and idealistic and wanting the first time to be special. And now he’s bargaining away even that.

Jim had thought bondage was the only kink that made him uncomfortable, but in a way this is worse. So, does he believe in true love? He doesn’t really know anymore, but he knows it isn’t this – rushed, indebted, scared of the morning after.

Not that it matters – he owes her, so obviously the terms of payment aren’t his to choose. He knows better than most that everyone has their own preferred flavor of sex: some want Jim to beg for it, some want him not to want it at all… If Gaila wants Jim to pretend that this is true love or whatever, who is Jim to deny her?

“Sure,” Jim lies, and goes about becoming whoever she wants him to be. If she wants him to make like he’s The One, he’ll just have to suck it up and be The One.

“Jim,” she sighs. “I think I love you.”

Which, yes, he should have expected, given the kink, but it’s not just the words that make him pull
back; it’s the tone. She sounds like... She sounds like it’s not just a roleplay for her. It sounds like she means it. “That is so weird,” he murmurs, before he knows he’s saying it out loud.

Gaila raises her eyebrows at him, and in a completely different voice says, “Lights,” and the lights go back on, and idiot, idiot, idiot, of course she didn’t mean it, she was acting, she’s been doing this for even longer than you have, you moron. She sits up, looks at him all disappointed. “Did you just say ‘that is so weird?’”

“Yeah,” he stammers, “I did, but I—”

“You don’t love me too?” she demands.

“I—” Yes, he dropped the ball on that one. But he can do better next time! He tries to mentally practice his line: I love you too. I love you too. I love you too.

He can do this. Sex doesn’t really matter. The words don’t really matter. Economics is the only absolute.

The last time he messed up this badly he was seventeen and Jim’s customer handed him an actual whip. He stood there, frozen and terrified (I don’t want to do this, please don’t make me do this, I don’t want to hurt anyone) – not scared that he wouldn’t be able to do it but scared that he would.

I don’t want to do this, he thinks. Please don’t make me do this.

So don’t do it! another voice (that sounds suspiciously like Bones) says. Tell her you haven’t done this kink before and it makes you uncomfortable.

I can’t—

You can, his Mind Bones insists. She’s your friend, she’ll understand. Which is true. But…

But at this point he doesn’t even know how to say no. It’s never been an option before.

Just get through it. Try not to think too much. It’ll be over before you know it.

Before he can clean up his performance, though, there’s a noise, and then Gaila’s saying, “Oh, no, my roommate.”

Wonderful, just what Jim needs, some random cadet finding them together and confirming all the rumor mill’s greatest expectations. “I thought you said she was gone for the night!”

“Oh obviously she’s not,” Gaila mutters, pushing at him. “Quick, you gotta... just get under the bed.”

“Under...?” he repeats incredulously.

“Look, just get under the bed! She can’t see you here!”

“Why not?”

“Because I promised her I’d stop bringing guys back to the dorm!” Gaila says, like it’s obvious, and Jim’s stomach clenches despite himself.

“Well how...how many guys have y—?” How many guys have you brought to your room, made into The One, told that you loved them…?

And why does he even care? Why should it bother him that true love is a commodity just like sex,
just like anything? You’d think he would’ve learned that by now.

And then Gaila’s hissing to get down and then Uhura hears him breathing of all things, and then good old long-suffering Uhura is shoving him out of the room.

Jim has always been good at figuring out what people like. It’s his talent, his crowning glory as it were. But the door slides shut in his face and he just stands there, his head spinning from the pheromones, feeling hopelessly relieved; and he can’t figure out for the life of him what Gaila wants from him. Is she looking for Jim to love her or have sex with her? Does she want him to sleep with her or sleep with her?

Jim can’t do both.

---

He goes back to the dorm, restless, almost manic, barely seeing straight, and sits down at his PADD again and stares feverishly at the code Gaila wrote.

Gaila had wanted to help. She’d wanted them to hack the Kobayashi Maru together, and like an idiot Jim had been about to let her. But Jim hadn’t been able to pay her back (he’d never be able to pay her back) and so there’s no way he can use her service anymore.

So Jim lights a cigarette and writes his own hack, overwrites Gaila’s nimble, delicate code that would have won Jim the Kobayashi Maru by subtly inserting just one suggestion into the minds of the simulated Klingons, and replaces it with his own code, potent and direct and desperate – that, on Gaila’s opening, will crash the whole system, taking the Klingons’ shields with it. It’s not sophisticated in any sense, but it will work well enough.

His hand hovers over the send button, and he stops, imagining Gaila’s reaction.

Too late now. He was already too late to change anything ten years ago.

He adds the message, “I'm sorry,” and sends the file to Gaila.

Then he sits and breathes and breathes and breathes and reaches for his com and calls Gary for the number of that little blonde lab technician he was talking about.


Jim closes his eyes and bites out, “Gary. If you want to pass quantum mechanics you’re going to shut up and give me that number.”

---

“Kirk!” Nyota calls, knocking on his dorm room door. When there’s no response, she pauses, frowns, listening to the subtle sounds of someone trying not to make noise behind the door, too soft for the average human to hear. “I can hear you moving, just answer the door!”

This is met with sudden much louder noises. Someone hurrying around. Uhura grins.

A moment later the door is thrown open. “Uhura! Hi!” says Kirk, disheveled and a little out of breath.

Nyota lifts the file in her hand. “I was thinking about how pathetic it’s going to be when you fail the Kobayashi Maru for the third time tomorrow…”
“Your confidence means so much to me, really,” Kirk says dryly, leaning against the doorframe.

“…And I found the test records and ran them through a bunch of analyses along with the corresponding grades, and made up a rubric. How close it is to the actual rubric Spock uses…” She trails off, notices the mark on Kirk’s neck, just barely visible under the neck of his t-shirt. If Nyota didn’t know better she’d say it looked like a hickey, but he and Gaila definitely didn’t get far enough to…

That’s when the bathroom door swings open behind Kirk and a blonde woman wearing only a towel comes out, still dripping from the shower. “Jim, where do you keep the…” She sees Nyota and stops, eyes widening, looking between the two of them.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” says Kirk.

Nyota slaps him across the face.

Kirk takes a step back, his hand going to his cheek, and Nyota has to clench her fists to keep herself from hitting him again. “How could you?” she demands, tears burning behind her eyes. “Knowing what she’s been through – I didn’t want to believe what everyone was saying…”

“No, I – ”

The blonde woman bites her lip. “I’m just gonna…” And then she’s disappearing back inside the bathroom, the door closing behind her.

Nyota closes her eyes, shakes her head. “God. I just wish I could say I’m surprised.”

Kirk stops, and something crosses his face; almost a smile, but there’s something off about it. “You never thought very highly of me, did you?” Nyota doesn’t reply, and Jim’s smile widens into a smirk, his eyes gleaming, and he gives her a little sarcastic bow. “Well. I’m glad I could live up to your expectations.”

Uhura grits her teeth. “You can forget about me helping you on the Kobayashi Maru by the way.”

“I thought you were only doing it for Gaila in the first place,” says Kirk, eyebrows raised. “If your decision to join the team had nothing to do with me, this shouldn’t change anything.”

Nyota gapes. “Is that all you care about?” She steps forward, jabbing a finger toward him. “Fine! But I’m telling Gaila everything – ”

“Go ahead,” says Kirk flippantly. “She’ll be fine with it.”

“That’s exactly why you shouldn’t be doing it,” says Uhura, and something flashes across Kirk’s face before she storms away down the stairs, angrily wiping away her tears.

She throws the file in the garbage on her way out.

---

“So!” says Kirk, still munching on that stupid apple. “We’ve managed to eliminate all enemy ships, no one on board was injured, and the successful rescue of the Kobayashi Maru crew is… underway.”

*How did that scumbag beat Spock’s test?* Nyota wonders, staring at her now-blank communication screen. He obviously used some kind of hack to override the program, but that’s only possible if he
had access to the computers, and Gaila never…

Oh.

*Oh.*

*Kirk, you* bastard, she thinks, gritting her teeth. *Is this what you were planning all along?*

And the thing is, Nyota prides herself on being a good judge of character. She’d had Kirk pegged as one of those guys who seem like a douchebag but have another side to them, alternately charming and infuriating, sometimes downright irreverent, but never boring, and never cruel. She’d even secretly enjoyed their friendly rivalry.

She had been completely wrong about him.

---

Jim gets stopped on the way to the showers after his workout by some command track dude he’s come across once or twice who asks, “Is it true that you were cheating on that Orion chick that whole time?” because being useless is Gary’s actual job.

“You can think whatever you want to think,” Jim mutters, and tries to get around him. Some of the other guys in the locker room – a medical track guy he barely knows but hates because Bones hates him, and a command track kid named Sulu or something – are trying to look like they’re not watching the exchange.

“Well I *think,*” says Locker Room Troll, “that you were only using her to get into the Kobayashi Maru’s pants. Am I wrong?”

So it wasn’t just Uhura who’d never expected anything of him after all. It was *everyone.*

Well, if that’s what they expect, what they want, who is Jim to deny them?

It’s funny how at the end of the day, no matter what Jim does he always ends up in the role of Gatsby.

“No, you’re not wrong,” Jim replies, tilting his head, smiling. “You know, put Gaila next to some other Orion girl, I probably wouldn’t even be able to recognize her.”

Locker Room Troll stares back at him, half disgusted, half impressed. But not surprised. “But you said you were dating her for *months,* man.”

Jim shrugs. “You know Orions. They all look the same.”

---

And sure enough, within a few hours, word around the Academy is that “Kirk out-whored an Orion.” Jim tells himself he should be proud that he’s accomplished his goal of proving you don’t need to be a particular alien race to be a slut.

That’ll show them, Jim thinks, but there are lies too ludicrous for even him to believe.

---

In all her eighteen years as Director of Information Technology of Starfleet, Commander Roberts has only once before seen computer code as volatile and as incisive as the one she is looking at now, the
code that was used to hack the Kobayashi Maru. The style is as distinctive as a fingerprint, and she knows before she asks, “What was the name of the cadet who did this?” what the answer is going to be.

“James T. Kirk,” Spock replies, and there it is. That scornful, incorrigible boy she had met nine years ago really had joined Starfleet after all. So it wasn’t that there was no reason good enough to make him join; he just hadn’t liked her reason.

“I bring this to you because I find myself at conflict as to how to respond to Kirk’s approach,” Spock says, but she’s barely listening, she’s too irritated to listen. This Kirk boy has been flouting every rule he could since he was a child, and would continue to do so until Roberts did something about it. “His method, and particularly his coding, is both displeasing and…intriguing. I am torn as to whether it is best to penalize him for academic dishonesty or award him for creative thinking.”

Perhaps if Roberts had never known him she would decide differently. But she remembers the way he’d laughed at her, had preferred to go to juvenile detention than work for her, and snaps, “Write him up for academic dishonesty.”

Spock looks at her.

“If we don’t, other cadets will think they can skirt around the rules whenever they want and be praised for it,” she says. “What you need to do is make a public example of him.”

---

“Jim!”

Jim turns, straight into a chestful of Orion. They both take a step back and Gaila puts her hands on her hips, looks up at him angrily. “Why did you switch the code?”

“Because they would’ve found out it was you! You would’ve gotten kicked out of Starfleet, or at the very least they would’ve used it as an excuse to never trust you again…”

“It would’ve been fine,” Gaila insists. “I told you it was fine!”

“Yeah… but then I wasn’t able to pay you back. I couldn’t – ” Jim swallows, tries again. He can’t look her in the eye. “I can’t do the true love kink. I’m sorry. I can do anything else…”

“What?” She looks at him, surprised. “That wasn’t a kink. You…oh, Jim, you thought I was playing with you…”

“You weren’t?” He tries to regain his footing. “But…you said you’d been with tons of other guys…”

“And I’ve loved all of them,” she replies easily. “Of course I love you. You’re one of my closest friends.”

Jim stares. “But that’s – that’s not love. I mean, it is, but that’s… Of course you’re one of my closest friends too, but if I ever fall in love with someone, it’ll be only with them, forever. You can’t love everyone like that.”

Gaila grins. “Jim Kirk, closet romantic.”

“Hey, no need to get nasty now,” says Jim.
“Jim, I was ready to be with you because you’re a beautiful person. A lot of people are. And I love them, and I’ll always love them, in a way. Every person I’ve been with will always carry with them a piece of me, and I a piece of them.” She takes Jim’s hand, entwines their fingers. “All of life is connected.”

“‘Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,’” Jim quotes.

“Exactly,” says Gaila, smiling.

If that’s true… if sex can mean everything every time, if people keep a piece of every person they sleep with…Jim doesn’t want to think about how many pieces of Kodos he’d be carrying around inside him by now.

“Nahhh,” he says, shrugging it off. “I never liked John Donne anyway - stupid name. Sex is just sex.”

Gaila just laughs, shakes her head. “So, apparently we’ve broken up.”

“That’s what I heard too. Is it true?”

“I think so,” she says, mock-soberly. “Can we still be friends?”

“Wеееlll,” says Jim, rubbing his chin like he’s thinking about it. “I guess.”

They smile at each other.

This is when the P.A. system beeps on. “All cadets report immediately to Lecture Hall A for a disciplinary hearing. All cadets report to Lecture Hall A.”

“Disciplinary hearing?” Jim repeats. “Do they do those publicly now?”

Gaila looks worried. “You don’t think this is about your test yesterday, do you?”

It would be just his luck. “Maybe…”

“I’ll tell them I helped you! If it’s the two of us—”

“No,” says Jim sharply. “You are not going down with me. You promised.”

She opens her mouth to protest, sees his face, and closes it again. “Maybe it’s not about you at all,” she says hopefully.

---

Technically speaking, as senior medical staff Leonard is supposed to go straight to the Enterprise once his name and ship assignment are called, but when he turns to go, Jim says, too quietly for anyone to but him to hear, “Wait.”

“McCoy!” comes the shout across the hangar, again.

“Jim—”

“Wait,” he says again, and this time his voice is edged with something like fear.

“They’ve already passed the K names, Jim. You’re grounded—you know that.” Leonard looks at him sidelong. “Maybe it’s better if you’re here. Safe.”
Jim rolls his eyes. “You’re not my dad, Bones.”

“Well, neither are you, kid,” Len fires back. “Maybe the world appreciates a martyr, but I appreciate having a best friend who doesn’t come home in a box.”

“What are you talking about? You’re completely paranoid, I’m not going to come home in a box.”

“I was thinking about what Spock said at your hearing,” Leonard says, lowering his voice. “And I realized he’s right. You don’t have any fear. You’re not just reckless – you’re suicidal. You’ve been trying to get yourself killed since the moment I met you.” Jim’s hand curls into a fist, but he doesn’t deny it. “It’s hard enough keeping you alive down here; in space it’ll be…” He doesn’t say impossible, but they both know that’s what he means.

Jim laughs humorlessly. “I thought you said you couldn’t see yourself doing too well on one of those flying tin cans without me.”

Len grits his teeth. “I can see myself doing okay on some flying tin can with you being grounded here a lot easier than I can see myself doing anything with you being dead.”

“I’m not going to die, Bones,” Jim says irritably.

“Maybe not,” says Leonard. “But look me in the eyes and tell me you’re not gonna give it your best shot.”

Jim look at him, surprised. Licks his lips. Opens his mouth. “I—”

God. How did some green-blooded hobgoblin see this before Leonard did? His jaw tightens.

“You’re stayin’ here, Jim. Where it’s safe. I’ll be back soon, an’ you’ll come with us next time…” He turns to go, but is held back by Jim’s hand on his arm.

“No – Bones, please, just – wait?”

And so, since Jim’s puppy-dog eyes continue to be the primary reason for Leonard’s poor life choices, he stays and waits with him.

And waits.

And waits, until every last name has been called, and Jim’s wasn’t one of them.

“They didn’t call my name,” Jim says, like it’s a surprise, and storms off to confront the Powers That Be about this injustice.

Len goes after him, waits while Jim confirms that he’s suspended from the mission, and knows there’s very little he can do. It won’t be easy for either of them, but…maybe it’s best this way. Jim will get to go out to space soon enough. He just…needs a little more time.

“Jim, the board will rule in your favor,” he offers. “Most likely.”

His friend still doesn’t look at him and Len admits privately that, okay, that probably was not the best thing to say at the moment. He’s trying to think of something better, and glances up at the clock, and – Jesus – the shuttle will be taking off in nine minutes. “Look, Jim, I gotta go…”

Jim looks up, turns, gives him the most insincere I’m-totally-fine look Leonard has ever seen (and he’s seen a lot of those on the kid’s face), and says, “Yeah. You go.”
And then he gives Len a plastic smile and an honest-to-God handshake, like they don’t sleep in the same bed half the time, like they’ve known each other for all of ten minutes. “Be safe.”

He hates Jim’s fake smiles, hates leaving him like this, but it’s eight minutes to takeoff and he should’ve been at his post twenty minutes ago. He walks away, telling himself sternly not to look back, telling himself it’s best this way, it’s best this way, it’s best this way…

You’ll have to manage being in that steel deathtrap of a starship by yourself. You really think you’re up for that?

Shut up, he tells himself crossly. If you cared about him at all you would keep him out of this fight. He’s not ready yet. Spock saw it. I see it. The only one who doesn’t get it yet is Jim.

Leonard thinks back to that fake smile, to how Jim had shaken his hand like they were strangers. Or maybe like he was trying to make them strangers, in case Leonard never came back.

McCoy stops in his tracks. Rolls his eyes. Groans. He never even stood a chance. “Dammit.”

And so, before his rationality can kick back in, Leonard turns and stomps back to where Jim is still standing like a lost child waiting for his mother, grabs him, and mutters, “Come with me.”

---

Nyota can tell even from behind that Gaila perks up when Uhura's name is called followed by, "Farragut!"; and honestly, if all else were equal, Nyota would also be thrilled that she and Gaila have been placed on the same ship.

As it is, though, all else is not equal.

I'm going to kill him, Nyota thinks matter-of-factly.

Then they're being dismissed to their respective stations, and Gaila turns around and beams at her (God, she has no idea, Kirk you bastard) and Uhura manages to smile back. But the moment her roommate is gone, so is the smile, and Uhura is marching off toward her target, single-minded and deadly as a heat-seeking missile.

She did not spend hours, days, years of her life, working, struggling, studying, saving every dollar, taking every opportunity, finally clawing her way to her spot as top communications student of her year, only to be shunted out of her rightful place on Starfleet's flagship by her own boyfriend.

No. She may have been pursuing Spock since she was a second year, but she'd been pursuing the position of Chief Communications Officer since she was fourteen. And Nyota, unlike some people, had never lost track of her priorities.

Said "some people" just so happen to be approaching her, heading in the opposite direction, getting dragged along by McCoy and asking, "Bones, where are we going?"

(Doesn't have to wonder how bad a judge of character she actually is).

Nyota doesn't have time to waste on idiots like him; she has a job to do. She has to convince Spock, logically, why she should be reassigned to the Enterprise, where she belongs.
And if that doesn't work, she can always just punch her beloved boyfriend out, steal the PADD, and make the reassignment herself.

---

Leonard seems to have misplaced his fear of shuttles somewhere between his meeting Jim and now, because as they rise up into space toward the Enterprise (and isn’t it pathetic how nice it is that Jim is having a normal reaction to a vaccine in the seat next to him?), he’s still just as aware as he ever was of the numerous, grisly ways they could die…

And maybe it’s just that Jim is essentially distracting – it’s hard to focus on anything but him when he’s in the room. Not even sexually or anything, it’s just a fact. But the bottom line is that now, Leonard’s paranoia is combined with the certainty that as long as he’s sticking around Jim (and as far as he’s concerned he’ll be sticking around Jim for the foreseeable ever), there is no way his life is going to end in something as normal as a shuttle accident. Oh, no. He’s inevitably going to die in some manner more gruesome than even he can imagine.

The thought is bizarrely comforting.

---

“We gotta get you changed,” Leonard mutters as he drags Jim through the crowds on the Enterprise’s main deck, and it’s an indication of how disoriented Jim is that he doesn’t even make the obligatory ‘Bones wants to undress me’ crack.

“I don’t feel right,” he says instead, blearily. “I feel like I’m leaking.”

That’s when Len spots an “old friend” of Jim’s who’d be pleased as punch to see him here on the Enterprise. “It’s that pointy-eared bastard,” he hisses, pulling Jim into a side hall.

“I thought you said you liked him,” says Jim.

“I was joking, idiot! I don’t like anyone!”

“True.”

Soon enough Leonard gets Jim into his medbay (where he can barely stay upright but somehow finds the energy to give Rachael a cheerful “hi, how are you?”) and into a bed and out of consciousness; which is, in some horrible sense, the way Leonard likes Jim best – he might be too still and too quiet, but at least Len knows he’s safe.

---

Rewind. When Captain Robau leaves to negotiate the ceasefire just keep shooting on the Narada. Captain Robau dies, but he would’ve died anyway, and this way at least you have a fighting chance. Try again.

The Narada’s equipment is still too powerful for the Kelvin’s resources. Captain Robau dies. George Kirk dies, but this time less honorably. Jim still grows up without a father. Game Over.

Rewind. Keep one of the engineering officers (not the chief engineer unfortunately, she’d be a little bit preoccupied with giving birth) onboard with Captain Kirk. Have him fix the autopilot so that they can escape the Kelvin before it collides with the Narada. Try again.

By the time the repairs are finished it is too late to eject from the ship. Captain Robau dies. George
Kirk dies, this time saving only 799 people. Jim still grows up without a father. Game Over.

Rewind. Go around the black hole to—

Game Over.

Rewind. Mobilize emergency thrusters early enough to—

Game Over.

Rewind rewind rewind, but none of it makes any difference. The moment that lightning storm hits, the moment that black hole appears, it’s all over. All roads lead to failure. It’s a Kobayashi Maru. The only way to avoid the inevitable is to never have gone to investigate the lightning storm at all, and for that, Starfleet – and George Kirk – would have to be entirely different people.

...Anomaly in the neutral zone...

If only they would have known to stay away from that black hole, if only they had known what that lightning storm was hiding…

...Lightning storm...

Maybe if they had – maybe they would –

....distress signal…Vulcan…evacuations…

Wait, Jim’s fuzzy brain wonders. Vulcan?

“We should be arriving at Wulcan in three minutes. Zank you for your time.”

Jim shoots out of the biobed, his heart pounding, his head spinning, but wide awake. Lightning storm.

“Oh, Jim, you’re awake. How do you feel?” Bones asks, and Jim feels…pretty terrible, but right now that is so unimportant it doesn’t bear wasting precious seconds.

Right now he need to… he need to – What does he need to do, what can he do? If he could go back, to that decision that changed everything (the Narada, the Kobayashi Maru, Kodos), what could he change to fix everything, to save everyone? To salvage the no-win scenario?

His mind is whirring with the rewind, try again, rewind, try again, rewind, find it find it find it…!

Apparently his fingers are blowing up to the size of cucumbers, but he has no time for allergic reactions, he needs to get himself over to the communication console, needs to replay the announcement video, needs to…. “May I … appears to be a lightning storm in space.”

His chest tightens. So it wasn’t just a dream.

“Bones!” he yells, grabbing his friend’s face, stopping him from doing…whatever it was he was doing, pulling the doctor in close enough to know he means business. (Also he might still be a little high.) “We’ve gotta stop the ship.”

---

“What?” says Leonard, but Jim is already sprinting away, and Len grits his teeth and runs after him, because of course Jim Kirk can’t get one stupid vaccine without it turning him delirious. “Jim!
You’re hallucinating – you need to… Jim, get back in bed before I…”

And then somehow he’s hacked the medbay executive keycode (he really needs to get stupider friends) and is out the door and running like his life depends on it, Leonard on his heels.

“Catch him!” he yells to Clarke, but the kid never did have the best reflexes, and he just stares as Jim goes flying by, followed by McCoy, who’s now puffing and cursing.

“Jim,” he says, trying to sound non-threatening but also wanting to stab Jim multiple times with a blunt object. “I know you think we’re in some kind of danger or something, but you need to get back here. Right. Now.”

The kid skids around the corner, and Len yells, “Jim, I’m not kidding, we need to get your heart rate down!” And then thank God the idiot kid starts pressing random buttons on the central computer directory, probably wreaking all kinds of havoc, but at least he’s staying still long enough for Leonard to stab him with something.

Jim is still pressing stuff, trying to find someone, which gives McCoy time to get his prepare his hypo artillery.

“I haven’t seen a reaction this severe since medical school,” he mutters. Well, except for The Incident That Shall Not Be Named For As Long As They Do Live So Help Me God, but as the name suggests, Leonard makes a point of not mentioning it.

Then Jim is running away again, but this time, Leonard finally gets him.

But then the seconds pass and the swelling’s not going down and the delusions aren’t going away and now he’s babbling nonsense at Uhura, something about a ship, and Klingons, and he’s having numb tongue for God’s sake, and then Len manages to get rid of the swelling but the hallucinations are only getting worse because suddenly Jim decides he needs to be on the bridge. Like now.

“Are you crazy??” Leonard yells. “Pike will dropkick you into space!” But Jim’s already out the door. “JIM!”

---

“Captain!” Jim shouts. “Captain Pike, sir, we have to stop the ship!”

Pike turns, sees him, gets to his feet doesn’t even look surprised, just kind of irritated. “Kirk, how the hell did you get on board the Enterprise?”

Bone steps in front of him, puts one hand out to stop Jim and the other to stop Pike. “Captain, this man is under the influence of a severe reaction to a vaccine—”

“Bones! Bones, please—”

“He’s completely delusional, and I take full responsibility,” Bones continues over him, and yes, Jim loves Bones, and the fact that he’s willing to take the blame for Jim’s…Jim-ness is very nice, but he has a ship to save.

“Vulcan is not a experiencing a natural disaster,” he says loudly. “It’s being attacked by Romulans!”

“Romulans?” Pike repeats. “Cadet Kirk, I think you’ve had enough attention for one day. McCoy, take him back to medical. We’ll have words later.”
“Aye, Captain,” Bones mutters, and tries to hold Jim back, but Jim squirms out of his grip.

“Sir, that same anomaly...”

Pike looks at Jim like he actually wants to punch him, but before he can do anything about it, they’re interrupted by the pointy-eared bastard himself. “Mr. Kirk is not cleared to be aboard this vessel, Captain,” he says, like they didn’t already know that.

Jim rolls his eyes, turns to him. “Look, I get it, you're a great arguer—”

“By Starfleet regulations that makes him a stowaway—”

“I'd love to do it again with you soon,” says Jim, and okay, this probably is not the best time to flirt, but it’s default mode by now.

“I can remove the cadet—” Spock says, and that’s the last straw.

“Try it!” he snaps. “This cadet is trying to save the bridge!”

Spock looks straight at him. “By recommending a full stop mid-warp doing a rescue mission?”

Ugh. Screw him. Jim turns to Pike instead and says, “It's not a rescue mission, listen to me, it's an attack.”

“Based on what facts?” Spock demands, as if Jim was talking to him.

Jim takes a deep breath. “That same anomaly, a lightning storm in space that we saw today, also occurred on the day of my birth. Before a Romulan ship attacked the USS Kelvin. You know that, sir, I read your dissertation,” he adds to Pike, who gets that half-impressed, half-pained look he tends to take on whenever Jim uses his brain.

So then Jim has to explain his father’s death, has to explain the circumstances he’s gone over hundreds of times late at night, has to get them out of making the exact same mistakes his father did. If he can.

Rewind. Let them know what sort of danger they’re getting into beforehand. Try again.

“And you know of this Klingon attack how?” Pike asks, which means he believes him. Jim looks over at Spock, just a little bit smugly.

Then he glances back at Uhura. Looks at her pleadingly. Their eyes meet for a moment and then she nods, and Jim feels the relief flood through him. She might hate him, but she still has far too much integrity to hide important information for a grudge.

“Sir, I intercepted and translated the message myself,” she says. “Kirk's report is accurate.”

“We're warping into a trap, sir,” says Jim. “The Romulans are waiting for us. I promise you that.”

Pike turns to Spock. Huh. Pretty clear who wears the pants on this ship.

“The cadet's logic is sound,” Spock says, to Jim’s surprise. “And Lieutenant Uhura is unmatched in xenolinguistics. We would be wise to accept her conclusion.”

Well, Jim thinks. That was pretty...logical of him.

Pike orders the communications officer to search for transmissions from Vulcan, but – surprise,
surprise – there are none.

“It’s because they’re being attacked,” Jim says, and this time nobody argues. He watches Pike stalk back to the Captain’s chair and tries to ignore Spock’s unnerving gaze on him.

“Shields up. Red alert.”

*Rewind, Jim thinks. Prepare the Starfleet ship for what they’re about to encounter. Try again.*

But Jim knows – Jim knows better than anyone, that it’s not going to be enough. The only way out of this no-win scenario is to not come to Vulcan’s aid at all.

But standing by while innocent people suffer… That’s a scenario more intolerable than failure.

The last time this lightning storm appeared, Jim lost everything. Now there’s someone else who could end up the same way. He looks over at Spock and for the first time he lets himself acknowledge that for all the guy’s faults, he is gorgeous.

In a I-could-probably-kill-you-with-my-eyebrows-alone kind of way.

As if sensing Jim’s thoughts, the Vulcan looks back at Jim, oh sh—

And then they’re shooting forward into space, and there’s Vulcan, and sure enough, it’s chaos, the wreckage of starships littering the area, the sky alight with phaser fire.

The rest of it is a blur of shouting and movement and sound, and Jim just watches, holds on, runs the scenario in his head, over and over and over again. *Rewind try again rewind try again rewind—*

This is what he’s been waiting for all his life. This is what he’s been raised to do. To win the no-win scenario.

*You’ve been given a chance to redeem yourself, Kirk,* he thinks. *Don’t screw it up.*

---

“You will man a shuttle,” Nero tells him. “Come aboard the Narada for negotiations. That is all.”

And then the video shorts out and the bridge falls silent and the crazy thing is he knows Pike is going to do it and no, he can’t lose someone else, *why can’t the people he cares about just stop being noble and dead?*

“They’ll kill you. You know that!” he argues, at the same time as Spock says, “Your survival is unlikely.”

And for a split second he meets Spock’s eye and they’re actually on the same side for once, and it feels…good. It feels really good.

“Captain, we gain nothing by diplomacy.”

“Going over to that ship is a mistake.” And Jim knows that better than anyone. (*Rewind. The Romulans never intended to negotiate; the moment Captain Robau leaves, you lose him. His death accomplishes nothing. Game Over. Rewind. Don’t let him go to the Narada. Try again.*)

“I too agree. You should rethink your strategy,” says Spock, and no, it feels better than good. Good is having someone on his side, someone he can respect. But this…this is right. They take opposite approaches to the same conclusion, and in doing so they cover each other’s blind spots. Between
Jim’s quick intuition and Spock’s crystalline logic and both of their ridiculous IQ’s, it feels like they could take on this argument and actually win. It feels like they could take on the galaxy and win.

But they don’t. Pikes says, “I understand that” like he does understand it. And is going to go anyway.

For a moment he wants to punch something, wants to make a scene or physically stop Pike from going – but he knows the man won’t appreciate it, and more importantly that it won’t work, because this is a Thing Pike Has To Do.

After all, Pike has looked up to George Kirk – and his sacrifice – since he was Jim’s age. And in doing so, his way of thinking, his expectations of himself, were shaped by Jim’s father the same way Jim’s were shaped by Kodos. Jim and Pike may have never actually agreed to those standards, but here they are anyway, determining and defining their most important decisions without their explicit consent.

“I need officers who've been trained in advanced hand-to-hand combat,” Pike says, and well, Jim’s never really been trained, per se, but he does qualify skills-wise, he’s been teaching a martial arts class for three years, he wants to go, wants to do something so he doesn’t feel so helpless, watching everything happening all over again (rewindtryagainrewindtryagain…). But he knows he shouldn’t push it.

“I have training, sir,” says the helmsman. Oh, it's Sulu. What's his first name? Kaoru, maybe?

“Come with me,” says Pike. Then he adds, almost in a sigh, and looks at Jim for the first time since he showed up on the Enterprise with the barest hint of a smile, “Kirk, you too. You're not supposed to be here anyway.”

Jim follows, and wonders if Pike has any idea how grateful he is.

---

Jim didn’t speak at Sam’s funeral. He didn’t even cry at Sam’s funeral. He wore his nice suit (the same one he wore to all the donation ceremonies and building dedications to the memory of his dad) and sat in the front row next to his mother and stared straight ahead, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing.

His mom cried the entire time, her body curled up under Frank’s arm, wracked with almost painful-sounding sobs while her husband rubbed soothing circles on her shoulder.

“Jim is just in shock,” people had assured his mother afterwards, like they’d barely believed it themselves. “He’s had too much to process lately, poor boy… He doesn’t really understand yet that his brother is gone.”

He hadn’t been in shock, though, and he was all too well aware that his brother was gone – he had taken most of Jim with him, after all. He wasn’t in shock; he was numb.

It’s that same numbness he sees in Spock’s face when he returns from evacuating Vulcan – thousands saved, but all of them worthless for lack of his mother.

Spock’s eyes are lost, empty (seeing nothing, hearing nothing) – staring straight ahead as if he can still see the ghost of the person who cared about him most (the person he loved most) in the world.

Jim can feel his grief, his helplessness, his self-hatred, as if it were his own – as if they share one head; one heart. He knows it isn’t that Spock feels nothing; it’s that he feels far, far too much, to do
something as simple as crying.

As if in a daze, Spock takes the few steps forward that would’ve taken him to his mother – would’ve either saved her life or extinguished his own (either is a better alternative to this).

 Crossing the distance is so easy now. So stupidly easy.

_Rewind. Be just a little bit faster. A little bit stronger. A little bit smarter. Try again._

Maybe then – _then_ – you wouldn’t have failed her.

Even as he’s being carted off the medbay (where Bones, predictably, freaks out when he realizes that Jim went down to Vulcan), even as he listens to the familiar, soothing sound of McCoy giving some other patients his usual tough love about why they’re idiots if they don’t get their vaccinations, even as his hand is being bandaged by a nurse he probably should be flirting with, he can’t get Spock’s dark, empty eyes out of his mind.

Maybe it’s the not-flirting, or maybe it’s those eyes that remind him about –

His chest constricts painfully, his breath coming in double-time. “Bones,” he rasps.

The doctor looks at him, halfway to a sarcastic remark before whatever he sees on Jim’s face turns his expression to unease. “What, kid?”

_“Gaila.”_

---

_“I need everyone to continue performing admirably.”_

_Oh, Spock_, she thinks, and her heart is breaking for him, and she can’t even…

She can only watch him leave, his back straight, his head high, and somehow his determination to not cry, to not show any emotion at all, is what breaks her open and forces her to cry for both of them.

That is, of course, until she sees Kirk - honorary Person She Least Wants To Talk To Right Now – at the end of the hallway, heading in her direction.

Uhura turns away so won’t see her crying and presses the button to bring the turbolift back up to the bridge, but Kirk manages to slip in right before the doors close. Uhura just crosses her arms and stays pointedly facing the other direction.

_“Uhura,”_ he says quietly. She tightens her jaw and doesn’t reply.

_“Look, I know you hate me, but I need to know… What ship was Gaila assigned to?”_

The absolute gall of that him would almost be funny it weren’t so infuriating. She whirls on him and snaps, _“Now of all times you decide that you care about her?”_

Kirk staggers back at like she’s landed a physical blow, his eyes widening in horrified understanding as he takes in her tear-streaked face.

She stops, a little bit taken aback. Could it be that he really does care about her?

But… He was…
The turbolift doors open on bridge-level and Kirk walks away slowly, as if in a daze.

Uhura’s mouth opens, her hand reaches out, but he’s too far away, and she’s about to follow him when Sulu calls her over to assist in confirming the Narada’s flight pattern, and soon enough she’s so deeply entrenched in numbers and gridlines and communicator signals that she can’t remember what she wanted to tell him in the first place.

---

“Now of all times you decide that you care about her?”

Jim is going somewhere, but he doesn’t know where, or why, or how, his head has gone blank and foggy, all he sees is

_Gaila, that first day in the stairwell, open and curious and beautiful, her wild red hair falling into her eyes as she tries scan the words while Jim reads them out loud_  

_Gaila, walking proudly across campus with Jim’s hand in hers_  

_Gaila, telling her that she loves him_  

Uhura had been crying – asking him why now of all times—

_GailaGailaGaila_  

Jim collapses into an empty chair on the bridge, puts his head in his hands, tries to breathe.

_You’re an idiot, Kirk. Don’t you know by now that no one ever sticks around for long?_  

Gaila, dead. Brave, kindhearted Gaila, blown up somewhere over Vulcan, for reasons that had nothing to do with her; that strong, perfect heartbeat, gone, for _nothing_.

He wishes he would’ve asked her how she was able to carry around pieces of all the people who’d been with her, who’d hurt her.

He wishes he would’ve said _I love you too_.

“Kid…” Jim looks up and sees Bones’s tired, haunted face. Spock’s reappeared on the bridge at some point during the time that Jim was in his own world, too.

“Aren’t you busy?” Jim asks, trying to remember how to talk. “You’re the CMO now, there’s no way you have time to follow me around…”

“Couldn’t leave you alone like this, idiot,” Bones says gruffly, putting a hand on Jim’s shoulder. Jim tries to smile back and doesn’t really succeed. Spock’s dark eyes flicker toward the two of them and then back to Uhura’s calculations.

“We don’t know for sure what happened to everyone yet,” Bones says bracingly. “Uhura doesn’t know either. Or – maybe you misunderstood… Gaila could be just fine… But we can be pretty certain that Pike isn’t going to be okay if we leave him with the Romulans much longer.”

That’s right. Jim can’t fall apart just yet; he has to focus on the task at hand, has to clear his head if he wants any chance of getting Pike back, and he _has_ to get Pike back. He can’t lose anyone else, not today, not to these bastards. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, brings himself forcibly back to the Enterprise, to black holes, out of his own personal tragedy and into the tragedy of the entire Vulcan race. What could be the tragedy of the entire human race. “Okay. Yes. Pike. We need to get
on that ship and we need to get him back, and we need to stop those tattoo parlor rejects before they stop us.”

At least he knows there is one other person who understands what he’s going through, will understand why they can’t abandon Pike – and that’s Spock. Despite their differences, Jim knows that Spock is just as devastated, just as hell-bent on destroying these guys as he is. He’ll understand, even if no one else does, why Jim can’t lose anyone else.

---

Or not.

He feels almost betrayed when he wakes up on some godforsaken ice rock in the middle of nowhere, although he probably shouldn’t.

How could he possibly be stupid enough to look for emotional validation from a Vulcan? It seems so obvious now that Spock doesn’t understand his grief in the slightest, that the connection Jim felt with him on the transporter pad was all in his imagination. The pointy-eared ice statue probably doesn’t feel anything at all. Must be nice to watch your mother die and not bat an eyelash.

“*Remain in your pod until Starfleet finds you,*” says the electronic voice, and Jim rolls his eyes and kicks out the door, because yeah, right. He’s done with waiting.

Never did anything for him anyway.

---

Okay, so maybe waiting might’ve been the right thing to do in that particular case.

He’s still trying to get his breath back after running for his life from the giant spider lobster thing while his knight in shining armor chases the creature away with his torch. His knight is grey-haired, fairly tall, and… Jim looks closer at the man’s ears in disbelief. Vulcan?

His savior turns around and sure enough, he is a Vulcan; a Vulcan with such emotion in his face that Jim almost feels as if he should look away. The Vulcan’s eyes are bright and sorrowful, like he’s lost everything, like he’s seeing a ghost of person he loved most in his life. They’re eyes Jim has seen only once before – in Spock’s face, on the transporter pad.

Then the Vulcan says in wonderment, “James T. Kirk.”

“How did you find me?” he asks, like Jim planned all of this, which is, um, flattering? But sadly inaccurate.

“How do you know my name?” says Jim, because a) he doesn’t know this man and b) no one, not even his mother, calls him by his full name.

“Woooah, woah.” He gets to his feet, in case he has to fight back. “How do you know my name?”

“I have been, and always shall be, your friend,” says the Vulcan, his voice intense, sincere…almost practiced. Like how Jim’s mom sounded when she said her wedding vows.

So, what? This guy thinks know Jim intimately – thinks he’s Jim’s husband, or something – when he has no idea who the Vulcan is? It’s not...completely impossible, Jim supposes, considering the likelihood of there being other time travelers hanging around.
But… Jim huffs out a tired laugh. But he’s never been, and never will be, the sort of person to inspire loyalty like that, let alone wedding vows. So. Next option.

Mr. Cave Vulcan Dude is off his rocker. Which is infinitely more likely.

“Look…” He starts, trying to break it gently to the old nutcase. “Ah…I… I don’t know you.” And by that he means, *So therefore I can’t be married to you. Dig?*

“I am Spock,” Cave Vulcan Dude says, and now Jim *knows* he’s crazy.

---

Jim’s insistences that he’s not his husband fall on deaf ears, as the old Vulcan seems content to ignore Jim and chatter on about Day 2 on Planet Ice Rock while he makes a fire. And the thing is, Jim would escape, but he *can’t*. He owes the Vulcan his life – and debts like that aren’t so easily repaid.

Also he tries to escape once and Cave Spock just drags him back with that creepy gentle smile of his.

So Jim pries the man’s fingers off his hood and sits down and lets Cave Spock ramble, which works because the man seems to be so happy to have his “friend” back that he doesn’t really need any outside input.

“It is remarkably pleasing to see you again, old friend, especially after the events of today.”

And the truth is, Jim feels for the guy. He may not have seen another humanoid face for who knows how long, and he’s glad he can give him that, can repay his debt in a relatively painless way.

Even if Jim’s isn’t the face he’s really looking for.

“Ahh… Sir, I – I appreciate what you did for me today, but if – if you *were* Spock you’d know we’re not friends. At all. You hate me. You *marooned* me here for mutiny!”

Spock looks surprised. “Mutiny?”

“Yes,” says Jim. Maybe now he’s starting to get it? Maybe? Please?

“You are not the Captain?”

He asks the question like of *course* Jim should be the Captain of his own starship by now, and Jim feels a familiar itch under his skin; the same itch he felt when he read Ms. Williams’s letter. Great, another person expecting greatness from Jim only to be disappointed. He shakes his head and starts pacing, unable to stay still. “No. No, I’m…” – a cadet under academic lockdown? a stowaway? a soon-to-be Starfleet reject? – “You’re the Captain. Pike was taken hostage.”

“By Nero,” Cave Spock says, and Jim stops breathing, turns. How on earth would Crazy Cave Vulcan know that?

Could this man actually be Spock? How else could he know about Nero, when nobody in Jim’s dimension has seen hide nor hair of him since… since the day of his birth.

(And does that mean he and Spock actually…?)

No. Jim doesn’t believe in all that romantic nonsense, not anymore. Stick to the task at hand, Kirk.

“What do you know about him?”
“He is a particularly troubled Romulan.”

That’s right. And if Cave Spock knows the sort of person Nero is, why shouldn’t he know the sort of person Jim turns out to be?

Cave Spock stands. “Please. Allow me.” He strides forward and Jim watches, still kind of dazed by this realization, while Spock raises his hand.

Jim steps back. “Woah woah. What are you doing?”

“Our minds,” says Spock, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “One, and together.”

Again with the wedding vow stuff. Jim doesn’t know how to tell Spock that he isn’t the Jim Kirk he needs, wants, respects (loves?) – but the Vulcan did save his life; he can’t exactly say no…

And then he’s hurtling into the dizzying chasm, bridging the distance between Spock’s mind and his own.

---

Billions of lives, lost – because of me, Jim, Spock says, his voice tired. Broken. And then another voice follows his, joins his, like an echo, and Jim realizes it’s his own. Because I failed.

Jim pulls away from Spock, and he’s gasping for air right before being pushed under again, he’s alone, cracked open, lost, his t’hy’la is gone, he’s leaving home for the last time, he has nowhere to go, no planet, Sam dead because of him, Erika dead because of him, his mother dead because of him –

No! his mind cries back. No, that’s Spock, my mother never—

“Look at me.” And Jim does. Sees everything racing through his own mind reflected in Spock’s dark eyes. “Emotional transference is an effect of the mindmeld.”

Jim turns, takes stumble steps to – somewhere – it doesn’t matter, as long as it’s away. He has to go – has to go – has to keep driving straight, straight over the edge of that cliff into nothingness – has to control himself while the other children mock his mother, the woman worth one thousand of them – he has to protect the other children in juvie – Kevin – the galaxy, Jim, protect it – preserve it – Protect Vulcan.

It will never be home, Jim. But it will always be mine. It wasn’t what I wanted, but it was exactly what I needed.

“So you do feel,” Jim chokes out. It’s a laughably inadequate response to the pain in his mind, in his chest, in every cell of his body and every thought in his head.

“Yes,” says Spock.

But, he reminds himself, that doesn’t necessarily mean you and Spock are going to be all buddy-buddy someday, because… “Going back in time,” Jim murmurs, “you changed all our lives.”

“Jim.” Jim turns, tries to pull himself back to his own mind, back to the cave. To Spock. “We must go. There is a Starfleet outpost not far from here.”

Going back in time, he’s changed all their lives. Which means… “Wait,” Jim says, before he can think better of it. Spock stops. Turns. “Where you came from…”
(What good will this do you, Jim? his mind reproaches. Why do you care?)

But that’s the thing – Jim does care. Always has cared. Even if he, like Spock, is too numb and too angry and too broken to show it.)

“…did I know my father?” he asks, before he can put himself off.

“Yes,” says Spock. “You often spoke of him as being your inspiration for joining Starfleet. He proudly lived to see you become Captain of the Enterprise.”

Wow, Jim thinks, his chest tight, imagining it. His dad. His mom. Sam. All beaming at him from the audience as he’s promoted to Captain and given his own ship, honorably and straightforwardly, without manipulation or tricks, just talent and determination and intelligence. “Captain.”

It’s nice, in a way, to think that there’s some Jim Kirk out there who has the life he’s always wanted.

“Whose ship we must return you to as soon as possible,” says Spock.

Spock leaves the cave, and Jim is left grasping, waiting – searching for the True North of his green light, and realizes suddenly that all the expectations of him – Spock’s expectations, of all people – have changed. The green light he’d been reaching for, growing toward…. Well.

That’s just not going to cut it anymore.

Because expectations are only unintentional dreams. And dreams, well – dreams consume your waking and haunt your resting, and define for you triumph and failure. Expectations are power in sidelong glances and the subtle implication that Jim is needed somewhere.

Captain, he thinks, and feels that much more powerful.

---

While he of course does not allow it to influence his judgment, Spock is, in fact, aware of others’ estimations of him. And therefore he is well aware of the sense of unease and resentment that descends upon the bridge after he sends Kirk down to Delta Vega.

This does not make him regret his decision in any capacity, obviously – Kirk had been given a more than sufficient amount of chances considering he had ignored an academic suspension and disobeyed direct orders to stay behind. Spock had discharged him from the mission only when it was clear that he would simply be disruptive to their endeavors.

Still, when Sulu sends yet another badly-concealed look of disdain, he is…compelled to investigate the case further.

First he com-calls Ensign Walker, who had been stationed at the Enterprise door, registering the officers and assigning them to their stations. “Ensign, how did Cadet James T. Kirk board the Enterprise despite the academic charges against him?”

“Oh,” comes the intelligent response. There is a pause for the almost-certain frantic scrolling of a PADD. “He was in the process of a medical treatment, and since his attending physician was a senior medical officer on the Enterprise, regulation stated he must board along with his doctor. Sir.”

Spock already knows the answer to his next question, but sees no harm in substantiation. “And who was his attending physician?”
“Doctor Leonard McCoy, sir.”

Spock cuts the call and places another to Dr. McCoy (“Report to the bridge immediately.” “Don’t you think I’m a little busy—”), then cuts that as well and leans back in his chair, considering this new information. Yes, he had observed Kirk’s and McCoy’s behavior around each other, had been aware that they were friends… That fact was singularly inescapable as the two were constantly together, whether it was in their dorm assignments or on the Kobayashi Maru or even as Kirk was fighting (quite literally) to rescue Pike immediately. But this – McCoy having jeopardized his own position and in fact his entire career in order to remain unseparated from Kirk – was another level of devotion by which platonic human relationships are not typically characterized, at least to Spock’s knowledge.

And yes, perhaps it was (as humans would phrase it) overkill to summon his CMO to the bridge to discuss it, but the realization had…piqued Spock’s curiosity.

“You wanted to see me,” Dr. McCoy mutters from his left.

Spock turns, takes in his sullen expression. “Yes, Doctor.” He stands, mentally plots out the route that this conversation must take in order to bring him to the topic he seeks. “I am aware that James Kirk is a…friend of yours. I recognize that supporting me as you did must have been difficult.”

“Is that a thank you?” McCoy asks. He does not sound particularly pleased about it.

“I am simply acknowledging your difficulties,” Spock replies, suppressing a flash of frustration.

McCoy sighs. “Permission to speak freely, sir.”

Ah, it seems perhaps McCoy is going to bridge the subject Spock cannot. “I welcome it.”

“Do you,” says the doctor dryly. “Okay then.” He lowers his voice and hisses, “Are you out of your Vulcan mind?”

Spock has observed over his course of human interaction that oftentimes the depth of human relationships can be assessed via the level of emotion exhibited when one’s companion is threatened. The anger McCoy displays now is potent and barely suppressed, which is…informative to Spock, although perhaps not in the way McCoy hopes.

“Are you making the logical choice, sending Kirk away? Probably. But the right one?”

Another trait of human love is that it often features declarations as such – championing a loyalty beyond logic. Truly and deeply irrational. It is a wonder that humans are not yet extinct.

“You know, back home we got a saying: if you’re gonna ride in the Kentucky Derby you don’t leave your prize stallion in the stable.”

“A curious metaphor, Doctor, as a stallion must first be broken before it can reach its potential.”

His expression twists in a mixture of disbelief and disgust. “My God, man, you could at least act like it was a hard decision!”

“I intend to assist in the effort to reestablish communication with Starfleet,” Spock replies. “However, if crew morale is better served by my roaming the halls weeping, I will gladly defer to your medical expertise.”

With McCoy staring at him, speechless with fury, and the conversation at an impasse, he sees no reason to continue the exchange. Opportunely, his father enters the bridge at that very moment.
“Excuse me.”

Spock will admit to himself that he finds it… vexing that Dr. McCoy neither confirmed nor denied any sort of romantic relationship with Cadet Kirk. However, he reminds himself, Kirk’s personal life is not strictly relevant to the task at hand.

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Jim’s pretty proud of himself for hacking the Enterprise water system release valve in under two seconds and saving Scotty at the last minute, but apparently Spock (his Spock, that is) isn’t so much, because he sends the security team after them.

The good news is that they bring him straight to Spock. Which is kind of a necessary step in Jim emotionally compromising him in front of everyone.

He feels like how he did when he was hired for the night and given that whip. He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to and—

(I don’t want to do this, please don’t make me do this, I don’t want to hurt anyone)

—And, as always, what Jim wants or doesn’t want doesn’t matter, because apparently the world – the galaxy – is depending upon Jim destroying Spock’s self-control, and probably destroying whatever the two of them could’ve had with it.

And, as always, Jim can’t say no.

“How did you manage to beam aboard this ship?” Spock demands.

“You’re the genius, you figure it out,” says Jim, tilting his head and looking at Spock expectantly. The procedure is familiar. He’s used it on Mr. Mortimer and countless other bullies. He knows exactly how to get people to punch him and ruin themselves in the process.

Jim knows how people tick. He knows what they like, and that kind of knowledge only comes with knowledge of the flipside as well – how to humiliate people. How to hit them where it hurts.

Except this? This isn’t a bully. This is the victim. This is the lonely, terrified fifteen-year-old boy he sees in the mirror when he tries to wash away his nightmares.

“As Acting Captain, I order you to answer the question,” says Spock, and Jim knows from the way he says Acting Captain, the way he’s pulling rank like that’ll help anything, that he doesn’t believe in his own ability to lead. Aha. A weak spot.

So that’s where Jim has to hit.

“Well I’m not telling. Acting Captain,” he replies. Spock stares back at him, unable to reply. Jim silences the part of him still deluding itself that Jim gets to make his own choices (I don’t want to, don’t make me—) and continues, “Oh, that doesn’t frustrate you, does it? My lack of cooperation? That doesn’t make you angry…”

Please make it make you angry, he prays. It would be so much easier if I didn’t have to hit deeper…

But he does have to hit deeper.

And when Spock wipes the floor with him effortlessly and pins him to the console screen by his neck, he can’t even bring himself to really fight back. Maybe it’s because he knows he deserves it for
what he said, or maybe it's because he always has wondered somewhere in the back of his mind if people wouldn’t be happier if he just died like any decent Kirk would. Or maybe it’s because he’s always known he was going to die like this: against his will, unable to breathe,
SamErikaTomNatalieKevinBabyplease—

And he’s already half-hard, and God he doesn’t want to die, and

And he’s struggling to draw breath, choking, pulling at the iron grip on his neck, and

And Bones has gotten to his feet, is watching helplessly, unable to approach the paragon of logic gone berserk, and

And Jim’s vision darkens and all he can see is the beautiful, furious face in front of him, and he can’t breathe, can’t breathe, and Jim feels a perverse kind of thrill, closes his eyes, thinks (hopes), Maybe this time he’ll never let me up for air.

“Spock.”

And then the hand on his neck is gone and he’s gasping, breathing, he’s been given permission to live for another night – like always.

And then Spock is renouncing his captainship, is leaving the bridge, and everything goes completely silent.

Right, Jim thinks, as his breathing gets back under control. And now I’m supposed to take the captain’s chair?

Spock is super intelligent, super strong, superhuman, and Jim knows he’d be a fantastic captain, despite his other self’s misgivings.

And Jim? Jim’s just a stupid kid. He never really grew past fifteen years old in a lot of ways. His other self got Captain properly – he worked his way up, was chosen because he was the best. Spock was the best, and now Jim’s forced him out on – what? The word of a time traveler? Some stupid paragraph in a rulebook?

But, then, that’s how it’s always been. Jim has always had to fight, flirt, bargain, manipulate, claw his way up, fight, just to not die. The other him took the turbolift straight up into honor and glory and a promising future. That life, with all it entails (with Spock), doesn’t belong to him anymore. This Jim is going to become whoever is wanted, needed, expected.

He looks around at all the people expecting a captain and thinks, Well then. I guess I’ll just have to be captain.

---

When the new Acting Captain finishes his announcement, Leonard respectfully requests a word. Jim looks up at him, a bit apprehensive, but agrees and follows him to a more isolated spot – ironically the same spot in which he yelled at Spock for sending Jim away.

“What was that,” Leonard asks when he’s certain no one is watching or listening, his voice deadly calm.

Jim looks away. “What was what?”
“Don’t give me that,” Leonard hisses. “I know what you look like when you have a plan. And that little display you put on? That was planned.”

“If you’re so sure it was all planned then you shouldn’t be worried.”

“He could’ve killed you!” Leonard grits out.

“But he didn’t,” says Jim blithely. “So happy endings all around.”

Len runs a hand through his hair, too agitated to stay still. You’re not just reckless – you’re suicidal, he had said; he just hadn’t known how much. “God… I knew I should never’ve snuck you on the Enterprise in the first place.”

“I wasn’t trying to die, Bones,” Jim snaps. “Drop it.”

“Really? Then how do you explain why you got off on him almost killing you!”

Jim turns on him, and for the first time Leonard sees true anger in his eyes. “I said, Drop. It.”

Len takes a step back.

“So what if I did?” Jim demands, taking a step forward, tracking him like a predator. “You’ve made it exceedingly clear on the day we met that you want nothing to do with my sex life. So unless you’d like to change that…” – Jim takes another step forward and this time Len refuses to step back, and then he’s in Leonard’s face, sharing his breath, like he’d done when he was baiting Spock – “…it’s none of your business what gets me off.”

And Leonard doesn’t back down, but he doesn’t reply, either. Jim tilts his head, looks at him unblinkingly – a proposition; a challenge. Len swallows.

He’s hit with the same feeling as when Spock had gone insane, had been strangling Jim (and God if that memory isn’t going to be showing up in Leonard’s nightmares) – like any sudden movement means instant death.

But maybe this time that’s a risk he just has to take.

Jim starts to turn away and Leonard grabs his arm, turns him back around. “No. You don’t get to give me the sex-or-nothing ultimatum you give everyone else. Dammit, Jim, you’re my best friend. Everything to do with you is my business.”

And Jim’s expression breaks wide open, and for a moment he looks lost and confused and painfully vulnerable.

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“What’s keeping you here, Bones?” he asks, his voice quiet, drained. “Why haven’t you walked away yet?”

“You backwater idiot,” Leonard bites out. “I’m not goin’ anywhere. You’re the one who’s always tryin’ to leave me.”

Jim stares at him. His mouth opens (no response comes out), closes again.

Leonard leans in and points a threatening finger in his face. “You’re not allowed to try to protect everyone else from everything when you couldn’t care less about your own safety, it’s damned hypocritical and I’m sick of it. So stop tryin’ to die or I’ll hypo you so hard you’ll be coughin’ up epinephrine for weeks. Capiche?”
And miracle of miracles, Jim just nods.

“Good,” says Leonard curtly. “Now let’s save the galaxy.”

---

Of course, that doesn’t turn out to be as easy as Leonard made it sound.

“Whatever the case, we need to get aboard Nero’s ship undetected,” Jim repeats for the fifth time.

Leonard rolls his eyes. “We can’t just go in there, guns blazing, Jim, not when they’re expecting us to—”

“I’m telling you the math doesn’t work,” Sulu insists.

“Captain Kirk, Captain Kirk!” calls Ensign Jailbait, tapping Jim on the shoulder about fifty times.

“Captain Kirk” pulls away from the argument with difficulty. “Yes, Mr. Chekov, what is it?” Jim glances back at Len briefly and the two of them share a ‘Captain Kirk, huh?’ look.

(If Leonard is perfectly honest, it does roll off the tongue nicely. Much better than Captain Spock anyway.)

Speak of the green-blooded devil…

As soon as Ensign Actual-Freaking-Jailbait finishes explaining his idea, Spock decides that now is the perfect time to sally on back to the bridge and join the party.

“Doctor. Mr. Chekov is correct. I can confirm his telemetry. If Mr. Sulu is able to maneuver us into position I can beam aboard Nero’s ship, steal back the black hole device and, if possible” – he looks at Jim for the first time – “bring back Captain Pike.”

Jim takes a deep breath, shakes his head. “I won’t allow you to do that, Mr. Spock.”

Spock tilts his head and for a moment Leonard thinks he’s going to demonstrate exactly why he doesn’t need Jim’s permission to do anything; but instead he only says, logically, “Romulans and Vulcans share a common ancestry. Our cultural similarities will make it easier for me to access the ship’s computer to locate the device.”

Jim doesn’t look convinced, and Spock hesitates.

“Also, my mother was human,” he says. “Which makes Earth the only home I have left.”

Leonard boggles. Either Spock is even more brilliant than Len had given him credit for and realized that the only way to persuade Jim Kirk is to appeal to his emotions, or the Vulcan had suddenly developed a case of feelings.

The first is much more likely, he grumbles to himself, still not ready to forgive and forget.

Still. He did just lose his mother a handful of hours ago…

Jim steps forward. “I’m coming with you,” he says, and Leonard grimaces. This is Jim trying to not get himself killed?

But then he realizes – Jim isn’t trying to get himself killed this time. He’s trying to apologize.
Spock’s gaze flicks down to…somewhere (if it were anyone else Leonard would say to Jim’s lips, but this is Spock they’re talkin’ about here) and murmurs, “I would cite regulation but I know you will simply ignore it.”

They stay like that for a while, less than a foot apart, and Len can’t tell if they’re staring each other down or staring each other up.

Then Jim smiles. “See? We are getting to know each other.” And he slaps the Vulcan none-too-gently on the arm and strides past him toward the transporter.

And maybe it’s just that Jim is essentially distracting – it’s hard to focus on anything but him when he’s in the room. But it’s only when Spock glances uncharacteristically after Jim that Leonard realizes the commander hasn’t looked once at his girlfriend the whole time.

---

“Whatever happens, Mr. Sulu,” Jim says, “if you think you have the tactical advantage, you fire on that ship, even if we’re still onboard, that’s an order.”

There’s a pause and then: “Yes, sir.”

“Otherwise we’ll contact the Enterprise when we’re ready to be beamed back.”

“Good luck,” says Sulu.

See, he knew right from the beginning that Sulu and him would get along – they have so much in common. They’re both awesome fighters, they both were made to look like idiots by Spock, and they both follow orders like the best of them. Jim’s following Pike’s orders to save him, and Sulu’s following Kirk’s orders to blow him up if necessary. It’s a beautiful little circle-of-life thing, if you think about it.

Okay, maybe Jim’s not generally all that great at following orders, but he also saved Sulu’s life, so whatever. He and Sulu could still totally be buddies – weirder things have happened, like Spock and Uhura kissing passionately on the transporter pad.

Jim stops. Runs that through one more time. What?

He turns and sure enough, there they are, making out like it’s the end of the world. (Okay, bad choice of words. So sue him.)

*Spock kisses people?* is his first thought.

(*Spock kisses people who aren’t me?* is his second, and is promptly beaten down with a mental stick.)

“I will be back,” Spock says, and his voice is so gentle it makes Jim want to vomit. Or maybe punch something repeatedly.

So Uhura actually got him in the end? She never told Jim about it. Maybe she just didn’t care enough to.

She certainly cares about Spock, though. That much is obvious from the way she looks at him, leans toward him, kisses him; says, “You better be. I’ll be monitoring your frequency.”

No one will be monitoring Jim’s frequency, obviously, but that’s par for the course.
“Thank you, Nyota,” says Spock. And, oh, is that her name?

Uhura leans in for another kiss, and now Jim is starting to suspect she’s just doing it to make him jealous. (If so, it’s working.)

His suspicion is confirmed when Uhura turns away from Spock, toward Jim, and her expression hardens into a look that says, all too clearly, “I win.”

Jim’s not normally one to admit defeat, but… Okay, he thinks, as she leaves the room without looking back. Yeah. You do win.

And that’s the thing, isn’t it? He has to get it through his thick head that the powerful, wedding-vows-inspiring relationship that Cave Spock had with his dimension’s Kirk is not guaranteed – or, more accurately, is extremely unlikely – to happen in this one. Different dimensions, different people, different rules. Different relationships.

It’s not that he loves Spock, exactly – he barely knows the guy. All he knows is that somewhere, there is a James Tiberius Kirk to whom Spock was everything. And this James Tiberius Kirk will never get to know what that’s like.

Get it through your head, Kirk, he tells himself sternly. He’s not yours. He never will be. You don’t get what the other Jim Kirk had – a father, a mother, a brother, a normal life… and not Spock either. You knew when you were fifteen that you’d given up The One. So get over it.

Somehow the moments they stand there alone on the transporter pad feel like an eternity, like they’re on some horribly awkward first date. Not that Jim has ever been on a date, granted. But he imagines they’re pretty awful; Jim can’t think of anything worse than three-hour-long foreplay. With talking. Except for maybe this oppressive silence right here. Even Scotty looks uncomfortable, and he’s not even technically in the same room.

The moments of silence continue and okay, the chances are only a few seconds have actually gone by, but during those endless few seconds, eight galaxies have formed and thirteen different endangered species have died out. Seriously, the pressure could curdle milk. He has to do something to lighten the mood… Say something, Kirk! Anything!

“So her first name’s Nyota?”

Anything but that!

“I have no comment on the matter,” says Spock sharply. Ookay. Jim will be over here, then.

Finally Scotty’s ready to beam them out of there; Jim is all too happy to go.

---

“It appears that you’ve been keeping important information from me,” says Spock.

*Mayday! Mayday!* Jim’s brain shrieks.

“You’ll be able to fly this thing,” he replies instead, deflecting. “Right?”

“Something tells me I already have.”

He knooooows, he knows he knows he knows, Jim’s mind chants hysterically.

“Good luck,” he says, and skedaddles.
Or tries to skedaddle.

“Jim,” says Spock, and the sound of his name in that mouth…

“The statistical likelihood that our plan will succeed is less than four-point-three percent—”

“It’ll work,” says Jim.

Spock just keeps talking though. “In the event that I do not return, please tell Lieutenant Uhura—”

And, yes, even Jim has a limit, and that limit is passing on some heartfelt message of eternal love for somebody else, from the one who could’ve been The One. “Spock.” The Vulcan stops. “It'll work.”

And with that, he turns and leaves Spock to his ship.

One day he’ll come to terms with the fact that, for him, there’s no such thing as true love. But not today.

Today he has a future to mourn, and a Captain to save.

---

The moment he finds himself back on the transporter pad, back on the Enterprise, safe, he looks over at Pike, at Spock, and it sinks in that all of them are back, all of them are okay, and breaks out grinning. But there’s no time to spare.

“Jim,” and there’s Bones, right on cue, running over to them.

“Bones!” Jim cuts him off at the pass, hands him Pike instead, catches his ‘we’ll be talking about this later, kid’ look and keeps right on walking, Spock by his side in perfect, wordless synchronicity, and there’s something right about it, like this is how they were always meant to be.

Like they’ve been doing this for decades.

“This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise,” Jim says when they reach the bridge and hail the Narada, still kind of high on the thrill of adrenaline, of confronting Nero with Spock by his side. Of the conviction that between the two of them, they could do anything. “Your ship is compromised. You're too close to the singularity to survive without assistance, which we are willing to provide.”

Spock turns so his lips can’t be read by the vidcam. “Captain, what are you doing?”

And wow, is it just him or is Spock calling him ‘Captain’ the hottest thing seven letters he’s ever heard? “You show them compassion, it may be the only way to earn peace with Romulus,” Jim says. “It's logic, Spock. I thought you'd like that.”

“No, not really,” he replies. “Not this time.”

Luckily though, Nero doesn’t take Jim up on his offer, and Jim gets to watch him choose nobility and death the same way he made Jim’s father choose twenty-five years ago, and Spock gets to watch him be pulled away into nothingness the way Vulcan was not only twenty-five hours ago.

*It will never be home,* Spock had said, *but will always be mine. It wasn’t what I wanted, but it was exactly what I needed.*

Maybe for Spock, Jim isn’t The One. Maybe Jim isn’t what Spock wants – but something tells him he can be exactly what he needs. And maybe Spock is exactly what Jim needs, too.
So when they finally manage to maneuver safely out of the black hole’s gravitational pull and start heading home – a little torn, a little bruised, but safe, alive, whole (in a way more whole than he was when he left Starfleet), the first thing he does is look back at Spock.

Maybe Spock senses his gaze or maybe he just had the same idea, because his First turns and looks right back at him. And then he’s giving Jim a nod, a tiny smile, and there’s something in the warm way Spock meets his eyes straight on…

*Approval*, Jim thinks, before he can second-guess himself. Spock approves. Of him.

His good mood proves contagious because Sulu starts laughing with him, and then Chekov joins in, and then pretty soon the bridge is filled with cheers and smiles and strangers hugging one another, and for a moment Jim feels like maybe he’s finally found the home he was looking for all along.

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The thrill of victory and newfound friendship and generally not dying starts wearing off, though, when Jim realizes awhile later that he hasn’t slept in over twenty-eight hours. Apparently Bones realizes this at almost exactly the same time (apparently their relationship has moved from ‘more than a little bit gay’ to ‘telepathic connection’), because pretty soon the doctor appears on the bridge, scowling and pointing, and sends all the on-duty command staff off to their rooms for some rest.

So Jim stumbles his way to the Captain’s quarters because a) he wasn’t given an actual room and b) uh hello? Captain’s quarters? That’s awesome. Who knows if Starfleet will even let him stay after this fiasco, let alone ever promote him to Captain, so he’ll take his opportunities as they come.

What he didn’t count on was the Captain’s quarters and the First Officer’s quarters being adjoined.

“Um,” says Jim, when he opens the random door in his room out of sheer curiosity only to find himself face-to-face with Spock.

And the thing is, somehow, in the aftermath of everything that had happened that day, in the semi-darkness of their adjoined rooms, alone for the first time – somehow the chance meeting feels a lot more intimate than even their camaraderie on the bridge.

If Spock is surprised, though, he hides it very well. He immediately straightens into perfect military posture and says, “Captain. May I help you?”

“Oh, no,” Jim starts babbling. “I was just wondering what was behind this door. Your room, apparently. Cool. So. Um. Okay then. I’ll just…” He trails off, pointing back inside his own quarters, and is about to close the door when he changes his mind.

“Actually,” he starts, turning back to Spock, who’s still perfectly straight and perfectly unmoving, like some kind of Vulcan statue. “Maybe we should talk.”

“I had been under the impression that we were, in fact, talking,” Spock says dryly.

“Gah, no, I mean we should talk about – about things.” Great, Kirk. You’re definitely not winning any awards for eloquence tonight. “About us, I mean. I know I cause you a lot of, um…unnecessary feelings…”

Something flashes across the Vulcan’s face; if Jim didn’t know better he might think it was alarm. “To what feelings are you referring?”

“Oh,” says Spock, stiffly. “Yes. Those feelings.”

“And, um. I just wanted to… apologize – for what I said…” Jim takes a deep breath, forces himself to look straight into Spock’s eyes. “It was unforgivable. And I would completely get it if you want to have nothing to do with me from now on…”

“That will not be necessary,” says Spock. “I understand now that there were other forces in play of which I was not then aware.” The words are innocuous enough, but combined with the too-intelligent, searching look he pins Jim with ("He knooowwss!" his brain shrieks) it’s daunting enough to make the newly-minted Acting Captain look away awkwardly.

“Jim. It is…okay,” Spock says slowly, like it’s the first time he’s used the phrase.

“No,” says Jim, already halfway to angry on Spock’s behalf. “It is not.”

Spock gives him a long, contemplative look, then says, “I also wished to apologize for marooning you on Delta Vega. And for my unacceptable behavior on the bridge—”

“It’s okay,” says Jim, shrugging.

“No,” says Spock. “It is not.”

Jim stops. Looks up. Smiles at the Vulcan tentatively.

Spock doesn’t quite smile back; but it’s a start.
The Enterprise’s return to Starfleet is met with utter chaos. Bones and Clarke rush Pike to the better-equipped medical center at the Academy, and everyone else tumbles out of the ship in a mob instead of the orderly single-file they were meant to exit in, shouting and finding their friends in the hangar, hugging and crying and finally allowing themselves to feel the loss they suffered at the hands of Nero.

Jim thinks of Gaila and suddenly can’t breathe.

That’s when two hands cover his eyes, it’s someone behind him, someone whose skin looked – for a moment – almost…green?

“Guess who!” says Gaila’s voice.

Jim freezes, the breath catching in his throat.

“If this…” he says, and can’t finish the sentence at first. “If this is some kind of joke…”

The hands fall away and Jim turns around.

Gaila, standing there, looking confused, looking beautiful, looking alive.

“Gaila,” he says, his voice strangled. She squeaks as he crushes her in a hug. “God, Gaila. I thought… I thought…”

She hugs him back, still stiff with confusion. “Jim, are you okay?”

“No,” he mutters. He finally releases her and turns to Uhura, who had been standing next to him, watching with wide eyes. “I’m not okay. You told me she was dead!”

“What?” says Gaila.

Uhura gapes. “I never said that! And – and you… You told me you were cheating on her!”

“What??” Gaila shrieks.

“I didn’t say that!” says Jim. “And it’s not like I’m the only one who’s been keeping things secret. You never told me that you were dating Spock!”

“You’re what???” Gaila shrieks.

Uhura closes her eyes. “Okay. Let’s calm down. Why do you think I told you Gaila was dead?”

“I asked you what ship she was on, remember? And you were crying… you didn’t…” Finally realization dawns. “You didn’t give me an answer.”

“But – “ Uhura stammers. “That was – oh, God, I’m so sorry…”

“And what made you think Jim was cheating on me?” Gaila demands, turning on her.

“I – he – ”

“It’s kind of hard to think otherwise when there are naked women walking out of my shower,” Jim
supplies. Uhura throws him a thankful look.

Gaila looks at her roommate sheepishly. “Nyota, Jim and I were never really dating to begin with. It was just a rumor. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. You just seemed so proud of me… I couldn’t…”

“It’s okay,” says Uhura. “I never told you about Spock either.”

“No kidding!” Jim and Gaila cry in unison.

“He swore me to secrecy!” Uhura protests. “He didn’t want people to think I’d gotten to where I was by sleeping with him.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine what that must feel like,” Jim mutters.

She ignores him. “I thought you must have known, though… McCoy saw us one time… I made him swear not to tell anyone, but I figured he would’ve told you anyway.” Oh, really. Et tu, Bones?

“All of this could have been avoided,” Uhura sighs, her shoulders slumping. She looks at Jim. “The only thing I still don’t get is… Why didn’t you just tell me that you hadn’t cheated on her? Why did you act like you had?”

“Because…” Because that’s what Uhura expected. Because he’s spent his whole life living up to people’s expectations of him. But he can’t use that as an excuse anymore—because the truth is, his bad decisions are still his decisions. “Because I’m an idiot,” he says at last.

“You are!” she says, and then Jim is being hugged like he’s the one she thought was dead. “You are the most idiotic genius I know,” she whispers. “Captain.”

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“I am not our father,” the older Vulcan says, and everything—everything—suddenly makes perfect, blindingly obvious sense.

They approach each other slowly, almost warily. His alternate self murmurs, “There are so few Vulcans left—we cannot afford to ignore each other.”

If there is no reason for him to not know of his other self’s existence in this dimension—and in fact Spock cannot think of one—then… “Then why did you send Kirk aboard when you alone could have explained the truth?”

“Because you needed each other,” he replies, as if the answer should be obvious. After meeting Kirk, after experiencing the natural magnetism between them, perhaps it should be. “I could not deprive you of the revelation of all you could accomplish together. Of a friendship that will define you both, in ways you cannot yet realize.”

A revelation. That is an accurate summarization of his encountering Kirk. However, the term ‘friend’…

To a human, the word friend means very little. A friend could be a person someone met only that morning, or even a person they do not even particularly like. To a Vulcan, a friend is everything. A friend is t’hy’la.

Spock does not have the courage to ask his other self which definition he is implying.

Still there lies one other mystery; the mystery of his alternate self’s success in taming the untamable.
“How did you persuade him to keep your secret?”

“He inferred that universe-ending paradoxes would ensue should he break his promise.”

“You lied,” Spock translates.

“Awww,” his other self says. It sounds disturbingly like something he might have picked up from Kirk. “I implied.”

Now that – that is irrefutably something he picked up from Kirk. “A gamble.”

“An act of faith,” the other Vulcan corrects him. “One I hope you will repeat in the future at Starfleet.”

Faith. Ridiculous. And yet… Knowing that he would have been content at Starfleet does not make what he is now obligated to do any easier. “In the face of extinction it is only logical I resign my Starfleet commission and help rebuild our race.”

“And yet you can be in two places at once,” his other self says, and could he mean…? “I urge you to remain in Starfleet. I have already located a suitable planet on which to establish a Vulcan colony.” He pauses. “Spock, in this case do yourself a favor. Put aside logic; do what feels right.”

The words are Kirk’s, even if the voice is his own, and it strikes Spock that his alternate self had not been exaggerating; he has been defined by Kirk.

And he seems to think himself better for it. He seems happy.

And Spock… Does he have the strength to take that happiness for himself?

Does he have the strength to deny it?

The other Vulcan has begun to leave, but now he turns back. “Since my customary farewell would appear awfully self serving… I shall simply say, good luck.” He raises his hand in the ta’al; Spock instinctively raises his own in return.

He walks away, and Spock thinks of the feelings that Kirk inspires in him and wonders if his alternate self has any idea what he is suggesting.

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It is a full week later, after Pike has made a (mostly) full recovery and the pandemonium has died down somewhat, when the continuation of Jim’s academic hearing is called.

Once again the entire Starfleet is gathered and once again Jim’s name is called and once again he makes way to front, just as he did…only a week ago? Really? So much has changed since then.

Jim used to be focused only on barreling through the Starfleet system, breaking as many rules and as many standards as possible, following the path of a stupid dare. Now he wants to be a captain someday because…because he knows he could. A week ago he was doing his best to go down in flames, now he has a promise to keep that he’ll try to keep himself safe. A week ago he was in this very room, facing off against Spock – now they’re friends. Or something.

But what’s changed most of all since Nero’s appearance is Jim himself.

He reaches the front of the room and takes a deep breath. “I apologize for subverting the rules of the Kobayashi Maru test. I understand that my actions were inflammatory and disrespectful, and I take
full responsibility.”

“This is not an academic hearing, Mr. Kirk,” says Admiral Barnett, smiling. “As of last week, all academic charges against you have been dropped.”

“Really?” He really wants to shoot a look at Spock, but there’s no way to do that subtly. “Then what is this, exactly?”

“We are addressing actions more recent than the Kobayashi Maru. Mr. Kirk, you have done far more than subvert a simple simulation. You snuck onboard the Enterprise against direct orders, took over bridge operations, commandeered a vessel you were not authorized to, and conducted a suicide mission to rescue Admiral Pike without any input whatsoever from Starfleet base.”

_They’re going to kick you out of Starfleet_, Jim thinks, keeping his gaze trained straight ahead, even as his vision blurs. _They’re going to kick you out of Starfleet, and you are not going to fall apart until you’re out of this room._

“Mr. Kirk, this is an awards ceremony.”

“I understand,” Jim blurts.

“Kirk,” says Admiral Barnett. “You’re not being expelled. You’re being _promoted._”

“I’m… Huh?”

Barnett laughs. “This assembly calls _Captain_ James Tiberius Kirk.”

 Calls _who?_

“Your inspirational valor and supreme dedication to your comrades is in keeping with the highest traditions of service, and to reflect utmost credit to yourself, your crew, and the Federation.” Another cadet steps forward with a medal – a captain’s medal. “It is my _honor_ to award you with this commendation.”

He puts the medal on Jim’s uniform and Jim just smiles and smiles and what? _Is this actually happening?? and if I wake up from this I am going to be pissed_ and smiles and tries to not look like an idiot because he’s smiling too much.

“By Starfleet Order 24855, you are hereby directed to report to Admiral Pike, USS Enterprise, for duty as his relief.”

He gestures over Jim’s shoulder to – to where Pike is in his new wheelchair and even newer Admiral’s dress uniform, and Jim walks over to him and sternly tells himself not to mess up his line (_I relieve you, sir. I relieve you sir. See? Not a big deal, I can do this, I am a professional…_).

“I relieve you, sir,” he says, without messing up even once.

“I am…relieved,” Pike replies dryly. See, even _he_ can’t say this stuff with a straight face, and he’s been doing it since the beginning of time!

Jim grins. “Thank you, sir.”

“Congratulations, Captain.” He reaches out to shake Jim’s hand. “Your father would be proud of you.”

And the thing is, Jim knows that—he knows that his father _was_ proud of him. And it’s not like that
doesn’t mean a hell of a lot, because it does. But watching the smile spread across Pike’s face, affectionate, proud – but not surprised, like he’d known Jim would get here all along – somehow that means even more.

The room bursts into applause, and the entire Starfleet is clapping for him, cheering for him, like he’s some kind of hero – and he didn’t even have to die.

And he looks up and there’s his family, beaming at him, just like he’d imagined it: there’s Gaila, with an enormous smile and what might be tears in her eyes; there’s Scotty, Sulu, and Chekov clapping like maniacs and hollering things that may or may not be multilingual expletives; Uhura biting her lip, shaking her head, clapping louder than anyone else; Bones, his face is so unused to positive expressions that it doesn’t even know what to do with itself… And Spock, standing perfectly straight and impassive as always, just one corner of his mouth curved up almost imperceptibly in silent accord.

It’s not his mother, his father, his brother. It’s not what his other self had. But it’s what he’s got, and it’s just as breathtaking as he thought it would be.

_Captain_, Jim thinks, and feels that much more powerful.

---

Being respected is something of a learning experience for him. There are the little changes, like the fact that he never has to approach anyone in bars anymore; and then the bigger changes, like how his tendency to sleep around has suddenly been promoted from shortcoming to adorable quirk. Suddenly the very people who were sneering at him in the halls or resenting his success are being all buddy-buddy, like they always knew Jim would become something great.

And you know what, Jim doesn’t mind it at all – he appreciates the new set of expectations, the attention. And the free drinks are nice too!

Still, the best kind of attention is the kind he gets from the people who were there for him all along.

“Well, if it isn’t Captain Kirk!” Tom greets him from the viewscreen.

“Doctor Leighton!” says Jim, grinning back. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m trying to get in touch with this friend of mine. Brilliant young captain, savior of the Federation, superstar of the galaxy… Seen him anywhere?”

“Might’a heard of him,” says Jim. “You know, now that you mention it, he’s a scientist, just finished his doctorate but he’s already a respected researcher, doing some work on Planet Q right now, married to a great lady, maybe a kid on the way…?”

Tom’s face shuts. “No kids on the way, unfortunately. Martha and I…can’t…”

Jim’s stomach sinks. “Oh…God, Tom, I’m so sorry…”

Tom gives him a weak smile. “We’ve known for a while. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you before now. We… We’ve been considering alternatives….”

“You’re looking to adopt a baby?”

“Actually…we were thinking of adopting an older child. Maybe someone from foster care.”
Jim raises an eyebrow. “You specifically want to take in some angry, screwed up kid?”

“You know, those angry, screwed up kids turn out all right in the end,” says Tom.

“Yeah,” says Jim, softly. “I guess they do.”

---

Probably the most surprising response to Jim becoming a captain comes in the form of an envelope – an actual, physical envelope – that arrives through the Starfleet postal service, addressed to Captain J.T. Kirk.

Jim spends a minute turning the envelope over in his hand, frowning at the lack of return address, and eventually loses patience with the whole mystery and figures that whatever’s in it won’t kill him (probably) and opens it up.

Inside, crumpled and stained and almost ten years old, is the recommendation letter Ms. Williams had written for him in juvenile detention – with just one change. Now there are four words at the bottom of the page written in his English teacher’s distinctive scrawl:

_I told you so!_

And Jim can’t help but laugh.

---

And then there’s the least surprising response to Jim becoming a captain.

_Commander Winona Kirk_, says his video message log, and Jim’s first reaction is to shout ‘NOPE’ and turn tail and run.

For a moment he wants to click on it, wants to see his mother’s face again, hear her voice again.

For a moment he wants to delete the message, never look at it again, forget he ever saw it in the first place.

He doesn’t delete it. He doesn’t click it either. He leaves the message there for a week, blinking at him from his com, addressed to a Captain Kirk that Jim knows isn’t him.

---

For the next week, Jim’s main job is recruiting his team of department heads, and since he already know exactly who he wants for what, it’s really just a matter of tracking them down.

Gaila is the easiest to recruit, so he takes care of that first. All he has to do is pass her in the hallway.

“Hey – Chief of Information Technology?” he says, putting his hand up.

“Duh,” Gaila replies, high-fiving him back without ever breaking stride.

She keeps right on walking; Jim takes a breath (just say it, say it, say it—), turns, says, “Gaila, I think I love you.”

Gaila looks back over her shoulder and gives him a smile like the sun coming out. “That is so weird.”
Jim knew before walking into the gym that he was catching Sulu during one of his training sessions, and it isn’t like Jim hasn’t seen the guy at action with that sword and those mad skills of his, but he wasn’t expecting Sulu’s practices to be so…enthusiastic.

“Richelieu, beware!” Sulu is saying dramatically, his rapier slicing into the air in front of him. “Stand!” Stab. “No farther!” Stab. “No escape for you!” Stab. “You either leave this bois bloodied… or with my blood on your swords!”

“Sulu…” Jim starts, but the pilot doesn’t hear him.

“For honor, Queen, and France!” he shouts, whirling with his rapier, its point missing Jim by a millimeter.

“Easy, D’Artagnan,” Jim says, putting his hands up defensively. “I come in peace.”

Sulu jumps back, his face coloring. “Captain! I’m sorry—”

“Sulu,” says Jim, very seriously. “Never apologize for referencing classical literature while handling an actual rapier. That is awesome.”

Sulu laughs. “You didn’t come just to sweet-talk me, did you?”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I came to do.” Jim holds out the personnel assignment form. “I want you as my helmsman, Sulu.”

Sulu stares at it, then at Jim.

“Your piloting is second to none, your fighting is spectacular, and – let’s face it – we almost died together, that’s gotta mean something.” Jim’s grin fades a little as he sobered, looks at Sulu straight on. “But most of all, I want you on my team because you were next in line after Spock, not me. You should have been First Officer when Pike left, and you should have been Captain when Spock was emotionally compromised. You had more than enough reason to get angry, to kick up a fuss... but you didn’t. You put aside your own issues and did your job, and you did it well, because it had to get done. That’s why I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have at the helm of my ship when things get rough.”

Sulu keeps right on staring. Jim raises his eyebrows and holds the paper out. “Sign it, Sulu.”

“Well,” says Sulu, taking the form, his voice a little unsteady. “If you insist.”

---

“Listen. You’re a good guy. And I know you’re not going to do anything intentionally to damage my little girl. But she’s been hurt before, and I can’t let that happen again.”

“Oh, no, sir, I would never…”

Jim puts his hand up to silence the protests. “Words are cheap. I want to see you treat her like a princess. No, like a goddess. I want you to take care of her every need and whim. Because if you hurt her… Well, let’s just say I’m not afraid to go back to prison.”

Scotty nods fervently. “Aye, Captain. I’ll see that she never goes without.”

“Good,” Jim says, giving the man a solid handshake. “Glad to have you as Chief Engineer, Scotty.”
“Chekov, hey, I finally found you. You’re going to be my navigator. Sign this.”

Chekov looks up at him with big, blue eyes and a smile that lights up his face. “Of course, Keptin! But I will have to send this back to my parents in Russia.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I am seventeen, Keptin – I cannot sign documents.”

Jim stares.

---

“Cupcake!” Jim calls jovially, clapping the guy on the shoulder when he finally finds him. “Buddy!”

To his surprise, Cupcake takes a step back, puts his hands up. “Look, man, I was just doing my job when I took you in, okay? I’m sorry.”

“You weren’t just doing your job,” Jim counters. “You got to work in a matter of seconds, directed a team and executed a strategy that not only tracked us down but backed us in, and got the best possible results at the least possible risk. You were excellent, and that’s the kind of performance I want to see from my Chief of Security.”

Cupcake stares at the form in Jim’s hand, wide-eyed.

“This is where you take the paper,” Jim says in a stage-whisper.

He takes the paper. “I – I don’t…”

“No one does,” says Jim cheerfully. “But I’ve worked with you for three years now, and I know you’re a fast learner.” He walks off, sending a wave goodbye over his shoulder. “You’ll figure it out.”

---

Finding Uhura is easy enough. He just has to catch her as the xenolinguistics club is letting out.

“Hey, you’re going to be my Chief Communications Officer, right?” he asks when everyone else has gone, putting the form down on the desk in front of her.

Her eyes widen, and he watches her try (and fail) to not look overjoyed. “R-right,” she says, looking from the form to him. “Of course… I mean obviously… I mean thank you…”

Jim puts on his most serious face. “I have to stress, though, that this was a purely empirical decision based on your abilities, not influenced by any personal feelings I have about you.”

She blinks, her posture instinctively straightening. “Yes, sir.”

Jim nods solemnly. “Good. Because you were chosen strictly due to Spock’s account of your talents; and because I believe the Enterprise, and myself in particular, will greatly benefit from your oral sensitivity.”

There’s a pause, and then…
“Oh my God!” Uhura yells, smacking his arm and laughing at the same time. “It’s aural sensitivity, you prick!”

Jim laughs, ducking away from her.

Uhura takes the form, her mouth still twitching. “Of course I’ll be your Chief Communications Officer, Kirk.” She signs it, hands it back to him, says quietly, “I’m glad we’re back to normal.”

“Yeah,” says Jim.

She grins at him and turns to go. “Or as close to normal as you’ll ever be.”

“Hey,” Jim protests. “I resemble that statement!”

---

Spock is accustomed to the shame of experiencing emotions, but less familiar is the shame of not experiencing them, that has plagued him since the destruction of Vulcan.

It is not that he has not encountered the loss of his people – he unquestionably has, and it is a loss so sharp and so raw that he still shies away from acknowledging it – but his is a grief for his mother, while his race mourns its planet.

Yet, this dichotomy is not entirely accurate; both Spock and his people are mourning their homes – only, theirs was a place. Spock’s was a person.

For Vulcans, family is not a right – it is a privilege. One must prove oneself to gain acceptance; to be considered a son, a brother, a friend, is not a simple process. Such an honor is conferred based on one’s ability in a range of experiences, on a gradually-built trust. And Spock in particular has always had to prove himself to be considered part of his race. Part of his family.

The difficulty lies not in the matter of proving himself – Spock has always excelled at his endeavors both academic and professional, has proven himself to be capable and trustworthy beyond any reasonable doubt, has been offered a position at the Science Academy and turned it down. But still he imagines, foolish though imagining may be, a place where he doesn’t have to prove himself at all in order to be valued – a home, as Vulcan never was.

He had thought, at first, that perhaps Starfleet would become that home, but instead he had only fallen into the same pattern of being forced to prove himself, of being forced to earn respect. Even if he has succeeded in earning that respect, it does not counterbalance the fact that he needed to. And so it remains that he has yet to find that place, or that person, that would notice his absence; that would feel a loss if he were gone.

There was only one person to whom he never had to prove himself, who – to Spock – was home in all the way that mattered. And now she, too, is gone.

What he does know is that he will not find what he is looking for on New Vulcan, because he does not want to return to his planet—he wants to return home.

He just does not yet know where that is.

“Hey,” says a familiar voice from behind him, and he turns…

…To Jim – the Captain – smiling, looking delighted to see him. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you.”
He is strongly reminded of his alternate self’s advice, to “do what feels right.” But how can he follow the counsel of his feelings when they are so strong, and he is so weak?

How can he trust them when they can so easily overpower him?

Kirk’s smile has dampened slightly, perhaps due to Spock’s lack of response, but he nevertheless continues, “I know they want you on New Vulcan, but I’m putting together the new crew, and I, uh – you’re – would you consider staying with…with the Enterprise?”

Spock hesitates. “I…do not yet know.”

“Oh,” says Kirk, his voice going somewhat stilted, his smile almost gone now. “Okay. Take your time deciding. No big deal. It’s just, I – I hope you’ll join us. I’d miss you.”

The Captain freezes, seems to realize what he has just said, and looks absolutely horrified, although Spock cannot imagine why. Of all the potentially embarrassing things he has seen Kirk do, an admission of emotion is by far the least of them.

The Captain bids him goodbye and leaves quickly, and Spock watches him go, wondering if he has the strength to follow his own advice.

---

Ten minutes after his failed overture of friendship toward Spock, Jim is aggressively eating lunch and feelings-ing all over Bones, who, to his credit, just sort of takes it all with a kind of saintly fortitude.

“And you know what?” Jim says, stabbing into a green bean. “I don’t even care that he doesn’t want to be part of the crew, you know? It’s not like my whole life will be different whether or not he comes with us. Although it might. You never know. I’m just saying, I don’t need him there, potentially life-changing or no.”

“You do realize that you sound slightly codependent, right?” Gaila points out.

“I am not codependent!” Jim scoffs. “Puh-lease! Like I said, I don’t need his approval. Or even want his approval! As if I care what Spock or anyone else thinks about my ability as a captain!”

“Well,” says Gaila, snagging a brownie off Jim’s plate, “that makes two of us.”

“That guy thinks he’s so much better than everyone just because he’s brilliant, and crazy strong, and unfairly hot, and has this presence, and… You shut up, Bones!”

“I didn’t even say anything,” Bones mutters.

“…But really, at the end of the day? All he is, is a sad, embittered malcontent who feeds off the insecurities of others! He’s a self-doubt vampire!” The undeniable truth of this statement sends him into another spasm of righteous flailing and yelling.

Gaila turns to Bones, who seems to be completely absorbed in his chewing, and says, “Len, sometimes I worry for our son.”

“MY STAKE, BONES! BRING ME MY STAKE!”

“I didn’t even say anything,” Bones mutters.

And sure enough, he does. Eventually. After half an hour of this, Jim runs out of ways to deny that he just wants the epic friendship™ he was promised and lets his forehead thunk down onto the table.
“Why do I always act like such an idiot around him?” Jim moans.

“At least you’ve still got your looks,” says Bones. Jim kicks him under the table.

---

Jim doesn’t ask Leonard to be his Chief Medical Officer because he doesn’t need to; Leonard applies for the job and Jim signs off on it and all the paperwork goes through without them ever really discussing it, because there was never any option wherein Bones wasn’t Jim’s CMO.

But then Jim wants him to be his First Officer too, and that’s an entirely different story.

“Have you gone crunchy-munchy crazy?” Leonard demands, when the kid brings it up. “I can’t be CMO and First Officer.”

“You won’t be,” Jim assures him. “Spock’s going to change his mind and take over as XO. But Starfleet won’t let us go forward with the launch unless someone’s signed up for the job.”

“Uh-huh,” says Leonard, long-suffering. Jesus, he hasn’t seen the kid this needy with anyone since…well, since he and Jim became friends. “And you’re so certain that this sudden and very out-of-character change of heart will occur because…?”

“Bones, sometimes you just have to believe in something even if there’s no evidence for it,” Jim says. “Spock’s sense of humor, for example.”

Leonard sighs, and yup, there’s that Jim-Activated Headache, right on cue. “Fine, so you need a stand-in First while you wait for Spock to make up his mind, but why does it have to be me?”

Jim looks at him, all of a sudden completely sober and completely sincere. “Because you’re the only one I trust to always watch my back.”

Leonard groans, rubs the bridge of his nose. He knows when he’s beaten. “Gimme the damn paper.”

The moment he’s finished signing his name at the bottom, Jim adds gleefully, “…And because now I can honestly tell Jocelyn that you were my First.”

“You –” He reaches to snatch the document back, but Jim pulls it away. “Give that back!”

“Ah-ah-ah, I’m your superior officer, you can’t make me do anything!”

Leonard grimaces and tries to make a grab for it, but Jim just steps out of his reach, laughing.

“Superior officer,” he mutters. “Whoever made you captain must’ve been one sandwich short of a picnic.”

“Screw you, McCoy,” says Pike amiably, wheeling his way into the office.

“Really?” says Leonard. “He’s playing keep-away with my personnel assignment form and you decide to antagonize me?”

“Well, yeah, ‘cause he’s biased toward me. Haven’t you heard?” says Jim. “I’m a good lay.”

Leonard really, truly, deeply does not want to know.

Pike, for his part, just looks resigned to the assorted foibles of life with Jim Kirk. “On that happy note, I’m here to relay personal congratulations on your promotion from the President of the United
States.” He clears his throat. “Her very personal congratulations.”


“Why are we friends?” Leonard asks, and Jim slings an arm around his neck.

“Because you didn’t run away when you had the chance.”

---

“This is stupid,” Jim mutters.

“Y’know what’s stupid?” says Leonard. “Not visiting your brother’s grave for ten years.”

Jim scowls, crosses his arms tighter as if protecting himself from the cold; he still can’t look at the tombstones. Leonard, for his part, can’t look away.

_Capt. George Joseph Kirk_

2202 – 2233

_George Samuel Kirk_

2229 – 2248

Jim scuffs at the ground with his foot, his jaw set, his posture defensive. Bones can easily imagine what he must have looked like as an angry, cynical fifteen-year-old. “So what? This is just a generic rock with some letters and numbers.” He glares at the rest of the cemetery, at the graves stretching as far as the eye could see. “It’s not him. It’s nothing like him. Too much gray.”

“Well, if you’re not going to pay your respects, then I will.”

Jim snorts. “Be my guest.” And then he marches off across the cemetery toward the gate.

Leonard looks back at the tombstones, clears his throat. “Hi Sam. It’s Leonard McCoy… Although you probably know who I am at this point.”

He likes visiting graves, likes the tradition of talking to them, honestly feels like the deceased can hear what he’s saying – but he’d forgotten how awkward it was to talk to a rock.

“Me, though, I don’t know anything about you,” Bones continues, and has to laugh a little. “Occupational hazard of knowing Jim Kirk, I guess. Y’just have to get used to the fact that you’ll perpetually have no idea what’s going on. You probably knew something about that.”

He stands there for a while, looking at the two gravestones, the two deaths, that shattered Jim’s life, and the smile fades from his face. “I don’t really know how to feel about you, to be honest. I kind of hate you for dying when Jim needed you… You know you put him through hell, right? …But…” A gust blows through the cemetery, picking at Len’s clothes and tousling his hair. “I know you loved him. I don’t know why you left him – and don’t get me wrong, I’m still not happy with you, I’m not a fan of martyrs – but I understand why people leave. See, I’ve got this little girl, and…”
He stops, shakes his head. “Well, I didn’t come to talk about her. I didn’t come to yell at you either. I guess… I guess I came to show off your brother. He’s a Captain now. Gonna be a damn good one too. He’s been through a hell of a lot – something tells me I don’t even know the half of it – but he never once gave up fighting. You’d be proud of him.

“And I guess I also came because you’re important to Jim, and so you’re important to me. Yeahh, he tries to pretend you mean nothing to him, even that he hates you, but that’s only because he loves you so much.” He takes a deep breath. “I thought you should know that, since Jim was probably never able to say it.”

The only response is the wind coiling its way through the tombstones.

“So,” says Leonard, suddenly feeling unaccountably awkward. “Thanks for listening, Sam. Have a good…eternity, I guess.”

He turns to go and realizes that Jim hadn’t walked that far away at all. The kid turns his face away as Leonard approaches.

They leave the cemetery together, and Len pretends not to notice when Jim wipes his eyes on his sleeve.

---

On his last day at Starfleet he finally checks the video message from his mother.

“Hi, Jimmy,” she says, and she looks happy, looks tired, looks just how he left her, looks completely different. “I saw the pictures of you in the holos—well, everyone saw the pictures of you. You saved thousands of Vulcans, and Earth… probably the entire Federation…”

Is she calling just to congratulate Jim on finally becoming a hero? On not screwing up this time? Jim closes his eyes and blows out a long breath and forces himself to not delete the message.

“And you’re a captain now! I’m sorry I couldn’t make it for the ceremony. I saw the pictures, though. You look so much like…”

And even though Jim knew this was coming, had prepared himself, it still catches in his throat.

His mother seems to freeze at the same time he does. Stops herself. “You look so…” She swallows. “You look so happy, Jimmy.” She smiles, and Jim can see tears in her eyes. “I thought I’d never get to see you happy again.”

---

The day before takeoff – fondly referred to as “loading day” by the Starfleet officers – is an unmitigated disaster.

Correction: Loading day is a partially-mitigated disaster, since it started out okay.

Long story short, first Jim decides to do the personnel check-in himself so that he has a chance to meet all of his staff at least once and start getting to know them (a task that’s, actually, made a great deal easier by the fact that he’s slept with an impressive percentage of them), which – aside from the typical stragglers – goes perfectly smoothly, until a kid in command yellows steps up, salutes, and says, far too proudly, “Lieutenant Kevin Riley reporting for duty, sir!”

And suddenly it’s like the floor has dropped out from underneath him, like he’s just seeing Kevin for
the first time since Tarsus, even though Jim has seen him dozens of times, has taught him how to
fight (all the while trying to avoid looking at him whenever possible, but still), and it isn’t fair, God,
it isn’t fair, because Kevin has a life and Tom has a life and Jim should be leaving Tarsus further and
further behind him, but he isn’t. It still hits him like he never left at all, like he’s still fifteen and
terrified and mustering the strength to knock on Kodos’s office door. Every. Single. Time.

Maybe he should’ve known it would be like this; after all, you can’t leave it behind if it’s a part of
you.

“Very good, Lieutenant,” Jim manages, dazed.

And Kevin strolls up the ramp into the Enterprise, humming “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen,”
as carefree and as oblivious as any other twenty-year-old kid, and Jim puts his head in his hands.

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Once he finishes with check-in, Jim heads in to unpack his personal belongings, which takes all of
twenty minutes – he only owns one backpack of stuff, plus the box of books he just bought with the
remainder of his captain’s salary after paying the rent for his apartment in Riverside as usual. He
finishes moving into his quarters in a timely and low-stress fashion, which is really where everything
goes wrong because then he fools himself into thinking that everyone else is doing the same.

Oh, look, his comline is beeping at him! “Kirk,” he answers, feeling all official.

“Keptin, the transmission is giwing off false starts. It thinks we are in warp, but ze engines are not
even activatwed…”

Well, that doesn’t sound good. “I’ll be right there, Mr. Chekov.”

Of course, it isn’t just the transmission. It turns out the transmission is screwy because the central
activators are screwy, which sends him down to engineering, where Scotty yells that he knows, he
knows, he’s dealing with it, and Jim mentions that he’s been fixing cars and starships since he was
sixteen, and Scotty’s eyes light up and the two of them crawl into one of the Jefferies tubes and
debate the benefits and potential downfalls of invasive repairs.

Jim’s comline beeps. Still pretty cool. Jim pushes the com button and says, “Kirk.”

“Captain, the replicators are offline.”

“So put them online.”

“We tried that,” says the lieutenant. “The replicator exploded.”

“It did what?” Jim rubs his face, probably getting engine grease everywhere. “Look, I’m busy trying
to make sure we all don’t explode the minute we enter space. Whose job is it to make sure the
equipment is functional?”

“The First Officer, sir. But when I contacted Doctor McCoy he said, and I quote, ‘if you call me
again so help me God I will scalpel you in the face.’”

Jim winces. “Okay. Let me deal with it.”

So he calls Bones, who, sure enough, is frantically putting his medbay together and very much Not
In The Mood. “I keep getting calls about every problem under the sun!” he tells Jim in between
yelling at his staff to put something somewhere, or to get out of his way, or to stop touching that. “I
told you before, I can’t be both CMO and First Officer!"

“Spock’s going to show up,” Jim says confidently.

Bones just grumbles, “If he doesn’t I’ll be taking it out of your hide.” There’s a crash in the background, followed by, “Who the – Clarke! Get your grimy paws off the – the silver contraption!”

The silver contraption. Seriously? Part of having the newest and most awesome Starfleet flagship is having the newest and most awesome technology, all of which is completely lost on Bones, who continues to maintain that ninety-five percent of medical problems can be solved with sleep, water, and not picking at it.

“Jim, this hunk of wires is speaking Parseltongue at me and I am going to kill it.”

“Don’t kill it,” says Jim. “I’ll be down there in a second.”

So he climbs out of the Jefferies tube and bids his goodbyes to engineering and heads over the medbay, passing Sulu along the way.

“Captain! There you are, I wanted to ask you about one of the automatic pilot features. Where are you headed?”

“I need to rescue Bones from the perils of modern technology,” says Jim.

“Oh,” says Sulu, nodding, like that’s a completely normal response. “Okay.”

They both keep right on walking and Jim enters the medbay to the disappointing but not especially surprising sight of Bones executing swift and painful justice upon the wayward symptom analysis projector.

“The contraption isn’t working,” Bones says, unnecessarily, in an ominous, flat voice.

Jim looks at the mutilated remains of the device. “Well it definitely isn’t now.”

Bones growls. “What sort of modern technology can’t take a bit of accidental everyday damage, anyway?”

“You accidentally came to blows with the projector?”

“I said the damage was accidental, not the blows.” He marches over to Jim and points at the offending object like it’s a dangerous criminal. “It wasn’t working, no matter what I did. What did you want me to do, give it a bubble bath and sing lullabies to it?”

“No, you’re right, better just punch the thing,” Jim agrees.

“I don’t like your tone,” says Bones.

“I don’t like your face,” says Jim. Then he stops, frowns. “Bones, are we still going to be able to do this when I have to be all responsible and captainly and whatever?”

McCoy snorts. “Do you honestly think we could stop?”

“Fair enough.”
If Jim had been hoping that things would calm down when they finally took off (and when Spock finally decided to make his grand entrance – Jim knew he would show up, he knew it), he was sadly mistaken.

If anything, the ship’s maintenance becomes even more time consuming – or maybe just more urgent – once they’ve officially entered space, and it turns out his beeping comline is much less cool the fifty-billionth time.

Long story short, Jim’s first day as captain involves a lot less sitting in his chair looking authoritative and a lot more running around than he’d originally thought. He helps Chekov plot the vectors to the Ta’keidra system, and then Gaila is calling him from central programming to inform him that the automatic backup has overwritten some of Pike’s previous data, which makes no sense because they haven’t actually backed up anything yet, and so Jim runs down to IT and spends three hours poring over code until Cupcake coms that one of the phasers is missing from the artillery rooms, which could just be a technical oversight from before they took off or it could mean they’re all going to die, so Jim mobilizes a security team to search the ship, and they’ve only just confirmed that there are no immediate threats onboard when Scotty wants to know why the medbay emergency power generator isn’t hooked up, so Jim grits his teeth and tells him to hold on, he’ll be right there.

He happens to glance at the clock on his way over and realizes that it’s past dinner and he hasn’t eaten a thing all day, but that’s fine, no big deal, he’s gone a lot longer without food.

Jim gets back from engineering only to realize that everyone else has changed shifts for the night, so he sits down to finish the launch paperwork he probably should have been doing earlier, and he has to write up the new shift schedules, which is a lot harder than it sounds considering he has a crew of 400, each with their own preferences of when and in what capacity they’d like to work, but he manages to bang out a decent timetable. And then Spock is showing up for alpha shift (five minutes early, of course, and looks surprised and a little bit suspicious to see Jim there already) and Jim realizes he hasn’t slept yet.

He’s about to go back to his quarters for a nap, or at least for a break, when Chekov asks about the transporter abilities on Rodia, their first destination in the Ta’keidra system, and well, Jim knows he should say something to Spock, like help me, or even just I need ten minutes, but he’s already on such thin ice with Spock and he’s so scared he’s going to mess everything up that he just…he can’t put himself in debt already.

And so day two continues along the same lines of breakneck insanity, except that this time he manages to grab a coffee and a piece of toast for lunch, and he ends up sleeping for a couple of hours when he literally trips and falls into his bed and just passes out. Luckily (?) he’s woken up less than two hours later for alpha shift by Sulu reporting an asteroid field they shouldn’t have hit based on the Federation maps, and Jim drags himself out of bed (or off of it anyway – he never actually made it under the covers) and goes back to the conn to navigate him through it.

Spock catches him on day three, on his way from the administrative sector to the science labs. “Captain,” he calls, and Jim turns, only to notice someone behind Spock that….

“Spock, hi!” he says, a little hysterically, and then grabs his arm and pulls the Vulcan into a side room.

Jim only relaxes when the door is shut, and turns back to Spock with what he hopes is a smile. “So, what did you need?”

Spock is watching him intently, unnervingly, his eyes flicking from the bags under Jim's eyes to the way he’s leaning back against the door for support. “There was no one else in that corridor apart
from Lieutenant Kevin Riley.”

“Very true,” says Jim, would-be-casually. “What did you need?”

Spock obviously isn’t planning on letting it go, though. “I have yet to witness your fear of death or danger, but Lieutenant Riley—”

“Spock,” Jim cuts him off, because _wow_, that’s way too close way too soon. “What do you want?”

His First stops, seems to visibly change tacks. “I wish to know what you would like me to do. As First Officer it is my duty to organize the shift schedules…”

“It’s fine, I already did that.”

Spock hesitates, slightly taken aback, and after a moment says, “Then I will arrange and message the staff with the time slots for the upcoming month’s department meetings…”

“Oh, yeah, I did that too,” Jim says. “Thank you, though.”

Spock doesn’t reply, seems too surprised – or maybe confused – to reply, and Jim takes that as his cue to exit stage left.

---

Several hours of running later, Jim and Uhura are elbow-deep in transmission printouts, trying to sort through and correct all the translations of one unfortunate ensign who though he was listening to Ishballan instead of Xingese, and nobody noticed the mistake until the communications officers logged no less than forty-nine Xingian transmissions about ugly potatoes.

It’s relatively easy, if slightly mindless, work, but the words keep swimming on the pages, and his eyelids keep threatening to slide shut…

He’s starting to slump over in his chair when Spock says, “Captain,” and Jim turns, struggles to get his eyes back in focus.

“Yeah, Spock?”

“Doctor McCoy called to report an emergency in the medical bay—”

“Christ,” says Jim, running a hand through his hair. “All right. Uhura, I’ll be back as soon as this is cleared up. Spock, you have the conn.”

But Spock doesn’t take the conn; instead he follows Jim into the turbolift.

“I can attend to this issue,” he says, as soon as the doors close. “As both First and Chief Science Officer I am qualified—”

“No, I know you’re qualified,” Jim assures him. “I think I can handle it though, you take a break.”

The Vulcan doesn’t look upset, exactly, but he definitely doesn’t look pleased. Well. He’ll deal with that later. Jim nods a goodbye at him, leaves the turbolift, and promptly walks into a wall.

He staggers back, cursing and rubbing his nose. “Who put that there?” he demands.

Spock doesn’t reply. Just watches him like some creepily lifelike statue.
“Haha,” says Jim weakly. “Just joking. I remembered that was there. I mean – I remembered it was there before I walked into it.” He frowns. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Captain…” says Spock.

“I’m fine, Spock! Just dandy! You head back to the labs. I mean the conn.” His First doesn’t move, so Jim makes shooing motions at him. “Go! I’ll be back soon.”

So Spock finally leaves, looking tight-jawed and kind of exasperated, and Jim takes off in a sprint for medbay (this time taking care to avoid the unruly wall).

“Bones,” he pants when he finally gets there. “What’s the emergency?”

“Ah, good, you’re here,” says Bones, but then he just keeps right on calmly washing his hands, so Jim takes the opportunity to lean a hand against the wall and catch his breath. Whew. He probably shouldn’t be this exhausted from a fifteen-second run. Also the floor isn’t supposed to be tilting, is it?

“Is there something wrong with one of the crewmembers?” he asks when Bones starts drying his hands.

“No, no, the crew’s fine,” the doctor replies mildly. “Take a seat on that biobed, Jim.”

Jim sits down on the bed and has to close his eyes as a wave of dizziness passes over him. “Ahh… Is there something wrong with the ship?”

“No, the ship’s fine too. As fine as a thousand-ton hunk of steel hurtling through space and piloted by five-year-olds ever is anyway.”

“So what’s the emergency?” he asks. His stomach sinks as he’s hit with a horrible possibility. “Did you find something in my blood tests? Bones–”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then…?”

“Spock sent me your time card,” Bones mentions casually, putting something together at the table next to Jim, seeming to be in no hurry to get around to this medical emergency of his. “You’ve been very busy lately.”

“Time card? I never filled out a time card…”

“The ship’s central computer keeps an automatic record,” says Bones, flicking the air bubbles out of a hypospray. “You may be interested to know that you’ve logged hours in engineering, IT, the labs, the bridge, the kitchens, navigation, the laundry rooms… In fact, you’ve spent significant amounts of time in every area of this tin can except for one. Do you know what that one area is, Jim?”

“Look, Bones, I don’t have time for—” He tries to stand but McCoy pushes him back down on the biobed.

“Your quarters. Do you even remember the last time you slept?”

“Oh,” says Jim. “Uh…”

“Wrong answer,” says Bones, and then there’s a hypo on his neck, and then nothing.
Waking up is like climbing out of a ditch. Jim opens his eyes, hates everything, and closes them again with a groan.

“Good morning to you too, sunshine,” comes Bones’s voice from beside the bed. “How do you feel?”

“I hate you,” he rasps.

“Trust me, the feeling’s mutual,” Bones mutters. “Have you ever heard of delegation?”

Jim opens his mouth to give a cutting response (probably something along the lines of ‘shut uuuup’) when it hits him that – “Did you say morning?”

He shoots up out of bed and looks around frantically for the clock. The one over the medbay door says 0758. “Damn it… Where’s my – how’s the – who’s got the – why did you let me sleep for more than fourteen hours??”

“I was going to wake you up for alpha shift, but Spock told me to let you sleep.”

Jim blinks. “Spock did?”

“Difficulty hearing…” says Bones, pretending to record that on his PADD. “How else do you feel?”

Now that he stops to pay attention to it, Jim realizes that he feels…better. A lot better. Yeah, he still has a bit of a headache, but he can sit up without feeling like he’s going to fall over and it doesn’t hurt to keep his eyes open, and he just feels a lot more…sane.

“I still hate you,” says Jim.

“Good,” Bones says, and starts piling things into Jim’s lap. “Here’s your com, here’s your PADD, now get a coffee from one of the replicators and go. Nobody likes having Spock on the conn, not even Spock.”

So Jim heads to the bridge, wondering what that’s supposed to mean.

---

Spock gets to his feet the moment Jim enters the bridge. “Captain.”

This is followed by, “Captain!” and “Good morning, Keptin!” and “Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty.” He glares at Uhura for that last once, but she just turns back to her console innocently.

“Sorry about the, uh…enforced time-out, Spock,” Jim says, grinning lopsidedly. “Bones ambushed me. Won’t happen again.”

Spock gives him a look he can’t identify. “It is illogical to apologize for accommodating your physical needs,” he says, because of course Spock can even make sleeping awkward.

“I appreciate that,” he replies. “And I can take the conn—”

“May I speak with you privately?” Spock asks.

Jim pauses, surprised. “Sure… Speak away. You have the conn, Sulu.”

Sulu nods, and Jim follows his First Officer away from the bridge to a largely-unused hallway behind the transporter room.
“What’s up?”

The Vulcan takes a breath. “I have been considering the option of resignation.”

Out of all the things he’d imagined Spock would want to talk to him about, that wasn’t one of them. “What?” he shouts. “Why?”

“I believe it may have been a mistake to replace Doctor McCoy as your First Officer. You do not—”

“What?” he asks, his voice kind of desperate, but he’s beyond caring. He can’t lose Spock as The One and as a friend, too. “What am I not doing? I’ll fix it, I swear. It’s that I haven’t been spending enough time on the bridge, right? Or – or is it my logs? I know they’re a mess, but I can—”

Spock is looking at him strangely. “I have no concern regarding your abilities or your involvement. You have thus far made for an exceptionally capable captain.”

Jim stares. “Really? Then…”

“That is precisely why I presume to resign. You do not…require my services; and in fact, you have made my job, as well as at least a dozen others, redundant. I was not given a single task until McCoy had rendered you unconscious.”

“Oh,” says Jim, realizing that Spock wanted to be given tasks. “I wasn’t trying to discount you or anything. I was just doing what I could…”

“You were doing more than you could,” Spock corrects him, an unfamiliar glint of steel in his eyes. “You preferred to drive yourself past the point of exhaustion rather than allow me to help. The logical conclusion is that you do not trust in my abilities.”

“But I do trust in your abilities!” Jim protests. “Of course I do, I’m the one who asked you to be my First Officer in the first place, I mean, you’re – you’re brilliant, and professional, and great in a fight, and…” Okay, Kirk, time to shut up before you blurt out something you’ll regret. “It’s not because I don’t think you can do it,” he finishes, a little lamely.

“Then allow me to help you,” Spock says, and something softens in his voice, in his posture. “Please.”

Oh, he realizes. Spock wants to help. And Jim can… Jim can give to Spock by letting Spock give to him.

Huh. Is this how economics is supposed to work?

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. I’m sorry. I’m just – I’m not used to this,” which, ack, is kind of an over-share, but hopefully Spock will think he means he’s not used to being a captain, and not that he’s never been good at asking for help. Or having people to ask, really.

Before Spock can reply, Jim’s comline beeps, because of course this ship can’t handle itself for five minutes. He throws his First an apologetic look and says, “Kirk.”

He can barely hear Scotty’s voice over the sounds of metal shrieking against metal in the background. Jim and Spock both wince. “Captain, the transmission has gone back into warp mode without input from the activator. It cannæ keep up with the rising temperatures coming off the dilithium reactors…”

“Oh, I’ll be right down,” Jim says, and then he catches Spock’s gaze and stops. “Actually…”
Jim turns off the com and takes a deep breath. “Mister Spock, can you… Can you take care of that for me. Please?”

His First Officer looks at him. “Yes, sir,” he murmurs, like he’s been awarded some kind of honor. He gives Jim a short nod and heads to the turbolift.

And so Jim goes back to the bridge and settles down in his chair, spends a few minutes breathing deeply and actually sitting in one place for the first time since the beginning of their journey.

You know, he thinks, leaning his chin on one hand and looking out at the stars. We might just be able to pull this off after all.

---

Now that he’s actually in one place for long enough to appreciate it, it’s kind of awesome being a captain. There’s the chair, and the uniform, and the chair, and the stars, and the chair…

Oh, and there’s the mandatory weekly meetings between the Captain and CMO! That’s pretty awesome, because he’s basically getting paid to do something he would’ve done anyway.

“Dear Lord, I’ve needed this all day,” Bones mutters, pouring himself a generous amount of whiskey. “All week.”

Jim downs his own shot. “I’m going to pretend you’re talking about having private time with me.”

“Better you than the morons I run this madhouse with. Ensign Smith came in reporting a headache and Savannah diagnosed him with debellium brain rot disease…” Jim winces. “That’s not the half of it!” Bones yells, pouring himself another drink. “I spend the last three years training a dozen decent residents and now they turn around and tell me they don’t know where to put a hypo! And Chapel has her hands full just trying to keep Clarke from creating a epidemic with the sample Sakuro’s disease bacteria we’re working on…”

“Clarke?” says Jim, surprised. “I thought you said he was your best intern. You said he was going to be a talented doctor and a great man.”

Bones scowls, throws back his whiskey in one go. “Don’t tell him that, I have a reputation to uphold.”

“Of course.”

“He’s a good kid,” McCoy sighs, after a contemplative moment. “But he hasn’t been the same since we failed to save the nerves to Pike’s legs. He was so sure we would be able to do it… Hasn’t figured out yet that medicine isn’t magic – y’can’t save everyone…”

Bones starts to pour himself his third drink in as many minutes, and Jim gently tips the bottle back upright.

“He takes after his boss,” he says when Bones looks up at him.

The doctor sighs, and it seems to deflate his whole body. “Yeah… I know. I’m as bad as he is, lettin’ that one failure screw with my head.” He puts his head in his hands. “It was twenty minutes, Jim. We could’ve saved his legs if I’d just gotten to him twenty minutes earlier …”

“You did the best you possibly could,” Jim says, gripping his shoulder comfortably. “You’re not responsible for everything that goes wrong.”
Bones snorts. “That’s ironic, coming from you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Jim loftily.

---

Of course, there’s also the mandatory weekly meetings between the Captain and the First Officer. Which aren’t quite as…comfortable.

“You have the names of all the crewmembers memorized?” Jim repeats, flabbergasted.

Spock raises one eyebrow imperiously, like Jim is wasting precious time with his merely genius-level IQ. “Of course.”

“That’s…that’s…” incredibly impressive? unreasonably attractive? “good,” he says weakly.

Spock looks at him, expectant, like he’s waiting for Jim to say that he, too, memorized all the names of the crewmembers, or has catalogued where everyone on the staff will be at any given moment, or has recently discovered the cure for teenage angst.

“I fixed the bridge caff maker this morning,” Jim offers.

“I see,” says Spock, because why be polite when you can be dry and vaguely sarcastic, and scrolls down the meeting spreadsheet (yes, Spock made up a spreadsheet for their meeting, who does that?) on his PADD.

“Until the Enterprise reaches Rodia, there is little more to discuss as far as the First Officer’s duties are concerned. As Science Officer the primary subject of interest is the research proposals the laboratories wish to submit to Starfleet. The medical team is studying the deterioration effects of Sakuro’s disease, the sociological team has been drafting a proposal for the study of explicit bias in primitive alien races, the chemistry team is beginning their work on the generation and replication of synthetic food—”

“Oh, hey,” says Jim, perking up. “I know someone who does that kind of stuff – my friend Tom. Tom Leighton.”

Spock gives him a look that might be surprise. “Are you referring to Dr. Thomas Leighton, currently residing on Planet Q?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“His dissertation on the formulaic analysis of carbon compounds necessary to replicate and remotely transfer food and other edibles was incontrovertibly groundbreaking,” Spock says. “Although he has only recently received his doctorate, he has been lauded as one of the forerunning researchers in the area of synthetic nutriment production.”

“Really?” says Jim, beaming. Tom had mentioned that he’d gotten some acclaim, but he hadn’t said that!

“How do you know him?” Spock asks, and…

“Ah,” says Jim, because that’s…kind of a minefield right there. “We, uh. We went to school together.”

Spock’s mouth opens and Jim gets to his feet. “You know what, why don’t I get you his contact
information right now? Better late than never! I mean, better early than late!” And Jim busies himself with his com while Spock looks at Jim like he’s one of those homeless guys who walk around smelling of weed and piss and making rude comments about people’s dogs, or maybe like he’s a puzzle he can’t quite figure out.

“Thomas Leighton and Kevin Riley,” Spock murmurs, more to himself than anyone else, and Jim goes cold.

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Either way, Jim gives Spock Tom’s comline number, but not before quickly messaging Tom.

>>MY XO’S ABOUT TO ASK YOU TO SCIENCE, DON’T TELL HIM ABOUT THE PORN<<
>>DON’T TELL HIM ABOUT THE STOLEN POLICE CAR EITHER<<
>>ACTUALLY JUST DON’T TELL HIM ANYTHING<<
>>K?<<

A moment later Tom’s reply comes (>>K…<<) and Jim puts the whole thing out of his head until the next day, when Spock tells him matter-of-factly that he will be working extensively with Dr. Leighton on the chemistry team’s project, and the day after that, Jim vidcalls Tom to demand what he did to win over Spock so quickly.

“I didn’t do anything,” Tom says, confused (probably less by Spock liking him and more by Jim’s overreaction to Spock liking him). “We just talked about our projects and where we see our research going in the next few years, and we have very compatible approaches, so…”

“Great,” says Jim, kind of sullenly. “I’m glad you’re so compatible.”

“He likes you too,” Tom offers.

Jim snorts. “Sure.”

“No, really. He asked me a bunch of questions about you.” Jim looks up, alarmed. “But I didn’t say anything, I promise!”

“Well… Well, good.” He sighs, gives Tom a little smile. “I really am glad that your research is compatible. Between the two of you we’ll have that synthetic food you were talking about in no time.”

“Yeah,” says Tom, but he looks worried. Almost drawn. “I hope you’re right.”

---

So Tom and Spock start working together, and they get along famously as far as Jim can tell, or at least as famously as anyone can get along with Spock.

Which Jim is happy about. Really!

But it just. But at the same time, it just seems to highlight the undeniable, impenetrable distance that still exists between Spock and Jim.

It isn’t like Jim doesn’t try to cross the distance, either. But the more he reaches out, the more Spock seems to retreat, and two weeks into his captaining they don’t seem to be any closer to that epic
friendship he was promised than when they were facing off over the Kobayashi Maru.

And so, pinned to the wall and out of ideas, Jim finally goes for his last resort: Old Spock.

>>Okay, I give up,<< he messages the Ambassador’s comline. >>How did the other me win you over?<<

He figures between Old Spock’s busy schedule and the time difference, it might be hours of even days before he gets a response, but his com beeps almost immediately.

>>d4 to Nf6<<

Jim frowns. A chess move? Is that an answer or an invitation?

Well. He’s not one to turn down a challenge, either way.

>>e4 to c5<<, he types back

>>c4 to g6<<, Spock replies.

>>Nf3 to d5<<

>>Nc3 to Bg7<<, says Spock, and hmm, King’s Indian Defense, not bad.

The game of virtual chess goes on for a while, with a handful of breaks for either Jim or Spock to take care of Real Life Things, but sure enough, three hours later Spock has cornered Jim into a masterful checkmate and Jim has lost his first game of chess since he was thirteen.

>>No fair<<, Jim writes, although he can’t help the surge of delight at finally finding someone who can match him. >>I don’t have a photographic memory like you. I need an actual board in front of me.<<

>>As you might say,<< Spock writes back a moment later, >>bring it.<<

---

So Jim sets up a chessboard in his room to mirror the moves Old Spock has been sending him and the ones Jim has been messaging back, and Jim wins the next game and Spock doesn’t seem surprised in the slightest and soon enough the virtual chess becomes a regular thing between them.

They don’t just talk about chess though. Jim starts looking forward to Spock’s little comments about his day and observations on life in general. And the poetry.

If Jim needed proof that Old Spock was in fact very good “friends” with the other him, he’s gotten it, because it turns out nothing makes him melt like poetry. It’s almost like Old Spock is…is wooing him, or something, and just. Jim’s never been wooed before. And it’s kind of… well, it’s kind of nice.

And also kind of sad, if Jim thinks about it too much.

---

When Jim thinks about Tarsus, he thinks of Kodos, of economics, of hunger and exhaustion and sneaking around in the dark, carrying a backpack full of food, jumping at every sound. He thinks of gunfire, of “your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony”, of Sam, Sam, Sam,Erika,Tom,Natalie,Kevin,BabyleaseIdontwanttodiepleaseplease—
When the history books mention Tarsus, they talk about the civil war.

_Tarsus IV originally had a population of 8,000, they say. 4,000 were killed by Kodos in the massacres, and the other 4,000 killed each other in the civil war. There are only nine known survivors of the colony._

They usually don’t include the details: that the civil war was instigated by a grieving mother. That the death of 3,990 people had taken all of twenty minutes. That when Kodos had publicly executed Erika, he had been hoping to intimidate, but all he did was infuriate.

It was Mrs. Riley, Kevin and Erika’s mom, who had been among the survivors of the colony, who had been forced to watch an example be made of her children, of those who dared stand against Kodos’s authority. When Kodos had ordered Erika to her knees and picked up his gun, she had been crying and begging him to kill her instead.

*(Bang.)*

Jim knew where the first bullet was aimed. But he wasn’t expecting the second shot. Or the third. He opened his eyes and saw Mrs. Riley with tears in her eyes and a stolen gun in her hand, shooting at Kodos. And then one of the guards were shooting back at her, and then one of the colonists jumped him from behind, grabbed his weapon, and the guard turned to defend himself, but a mob of colonists attacked him from behind, another shot, a cry, a body on the ground…

Soon the air was filled with gunfire and screams, while Jim looked on, chained to a post and numb and hearing nothing, feeling nothing.

It didn’t stop until all of them were dead or dying, until there was nothing but wind and death and silence silence silence. Aside from the vestiges of the Children’s Rebellion and Kodos, there were only four people – four of Kodos’s guards – left.

Kodos walked over to one of the bodies and kicked it over onto its back, and Jim realized it was Mr. Barnes, their biology teacher, who had told them at least fifty times not to smoke, that it would bring them to an early grave. Mr. Barnes’s arms were limp at his sides, his mouth agape, his eyes staring blindly at the sky.

Kodos sighed, looking out at the expanse of fallen corpses, the smell of blood in the air, the horrible, sickening silence after the massacre. “What a ghastly waste of resource.”

And then he glanced over at Jim as if to say that he would get it; he would understand what Kodos meant.

And the thing is, a part of him did.

---

Jim tries, but he can’t go back to sleep after that, so he goes up to the observation deck and lights a cigarette and looks up at the stars and thinks about nothing at all.

He’s well aware that it’s not a great idea for him to be alone at times like these – he ends up getting too deep into himself, too broody, too poetic, as Bones said once, like it was a nasty word – but it’s not like he’s going to wake someone up just to…

This is when he gets a message on his comline. Jim looks down at it, startled.

>>Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,

But on earth indifference is the least

We have to dread from man or beast.<<

>>W.H. Auden,<< Jim messages back, surprised and pleased. >>That's one of my favorites.<<

A moment later his com lights up with the Ambassador’s response: >>I know.<<

---

The Enterprise Christmas party is actually a pretty lowkey affair, just a tree and some food and a gift exchange, mainly because no one was specifically in charge of party-planning. Jim receives a bunch of great presents (including a yoyo, which he actually gets amazing at over the course of the party) and gives a handful of ’em too, some well thought-out (he spent days looking for Bones’s) and some of them…not so much, like the book he got Chekov about all the stuff Russia invented, which…might be racist? But Chekov seems to like it, so who really cares, right?

The party ends relatively early and one by one everyone heads back to their quarters to vidcall their families, until only Spock and Jim remain in the celebration hall.

“You’re not going to call your dad?” Jim asks.

Spock says, “It is illogical to create a collective obligation to contact family members simply due to an annual remembrance of an event with no particular relevance of its own,” which Jim translates as ‘it’s still weird between us.’ He totally gets it – that’s how it is with him and his mom, too.

“In any case, I am more accustomed to celebrating Hanukkah, as was my mother’s tradition.”

And, gah, Jim was not prepared for the Dead Mom to pop up in conversation all of a sudden like that! What does he say? What does he say?!

He manages to reply weakly, “That’s cool” while inside his head, sirens blare, red strobe lights flash, and over it a deep, authoritative voice announces, “We have encountered a Dead Mom Alert. This is not a drill. Repeat: this is not a drill. There is no route of escape. Destruction is inevitable. Attempts at consolation will result in an unsatisfactory incident report on your Starfleet personnel record, followed by death.”

“It was…cool,” Spock agrees, slowly. “I…enjoyed it. I never told her that.” He hesitates. “I never told her many things.”

And sometimes (most of the time) Spock is an ice statue of professionalism and rationality, and even Jim starts to believe Spock’s lie, starts to believe that Vulcans don’t feel. And then there are moments – rare, precious moments – when all the shields come down for an instant, and Jim remembers that just because Spock is Vulcan doesn’t mean he isn’t human, too.

This time what comes out of his mouth is, “Hey, Spock…are you up for a game of chess?”

---

It’s not like this is the first time Spock has ever been in his quarters, but it is the first time Spock has been in his quarters for personal reasons, and somehow that makes it, just, infinitely more awkward.

Spock seems to sense the difference too, because he walks into Jim’s quarters with a wariness Jim
has never seen, looks around, his sharp gaze taking in everything, probably committing it to memory, the bookshelf, the pile of clothes on the floor, the chessboard…

His gaze halts on the chessboard, and Jim feels a little jolt of apprehension. But there’s no way Spock could know who…

“Against whom are you currently playing?”

“Ah,” says Jim, grinning to hide his nervousness. “Just an old friend.”

Spock is still staring at it. “The style is…familiar.”

Of course Spock would recognize the style. Of course. That’s what Jim gets for trying to hide something from a friggin’ genius.

He rushes over and starts putting the chess pieces back to their original positions, even though he knows it’s useless – Spock will have committed the board to memory by now and will have plenty of time to mull over why the style seemed familiar. He’s so screwed.

“Do you prefer black or white?” he asks when he finishes.

So they sit down to their game, and it doesn’t take very long at all for it to become obvious that they’re well-matched.

“You are quite adept at this,” Spock murmurs.

“You can only tell that because you’re brilliant at it yourself. It’s like Sherlock Holmes said —’mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognizes genius.’” Jim grins at him. “Nice to meet you, genius. I’m talent.”

Spock’s lips twitch as he moves his rook forward.

“C’mon, you gotta give me more than that!” says Jim. “I know you’ve read Sherlock Holmes. You quoted it on the bridge on our first day! ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’”

Spock looks back up at him, clearly surprised that Jim recognized the reference. “I have. I have read many of the books in your collection” – he nods toward the bookshelf – “though it is quite extensive – and an unusual combination of literature, poetry, philosophy…”

“My tastes are kind of unusual, I guess,” says Jim. “How do you know so many Earth-based classics anyway?”

“My mother enjoyed them. She worked as a translator, converting Vulcan works to Standard and vice versa. She was the original translator for the Code of Surak.”

Jim shuts down the shriek of Dead Mom Alert! going off in his head. “It sounds like she was an incredible woman.”

“She was,” says Spock.

“I wish I could have met her.”

Spock doesn’t respond, and yup, there it is – another conversation, killed at the hands of the Dead Mom.
“So…” Jim starts, trying to lighten the mood. “I haven’t read the Code of Surak, but if you’ve read human philosophy, how do you feel about Nietzsche?”

“I cannot fault him on his logic.”

Jim stares at him in disbelief.

Spock pauses and then adds, hesitantly, “Nevertheless I admit I find his writing…rather distasteful.”

Jim knows there’s probably a special place in hell for people who think that Spock is cute, but – damn, the guy is adorable. He really just wants to pinch his cheeks. Or maybe stick his tongue down his throat.

Aaand that train of thought is stopping right there.

Jim devotes himself to the chessboard in front of him and realizes where Spock’s moves are headed – the King’s Indian Defense. Well. He’s not going to fall for that twice.

The astonishment on Spock’s face when Jim checkmates him an hour later is awesome, but it’s nothing compared to his request to play chess again next week.

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The Enterprise scheduled to arrive in Rodia in two Standard days and in classic bureaucratic form they’ve only just received the specifics of their mission that morning. Nyota read the actual mission briefing immediately, in all its convoluted language and oddly-specific instructions about who is allowed to have sex with who (she suspects this part of the briefing might have been customized for Kirk), and then Kirk had gathered the department directors in the conference room and announced: “The Rodians signed with the Federation last year and are now kinda regretting it, so Starfleet’s sending their youngest and prettiest crew to remind them that they love us.”

Which, though lacking in tact and detail, pretty well summarizes the mission. So now all there is left to do is to choose the away team.

“There are only two communications officers onboard fluent in Rodian,” Nyota points out.

Kirk stretches out in the captain’s chair and looks at her with ill-disguised pride. “One of which is you, of course.”

Nyota can’t help but smile back. “Of course.”

“Then you’ll come down with us. All the Rodian officials speak fluent Standard, but the option for them to not have to is a huge plus for the Federation…”

This is when his comline beeps and Kirk cuts himself off, goes for the com like he’s been waiting for an important message all day.

Apparently he’s too eager to care about anything else, though, because Kirk reads the message right there, where it’s almost impossible for Uhura to not see it.

>>Surround yourself with human beings, my dear James. They are easier to fight for than principles.<<

Nyota watches in shock as the Captain’s face breaks into a smile. Not a smirk, or a crooked grin, but a real, sincere smile.
>>James Bond,<< he types back. >>I wouldn’t have thought that you’d enjoy that series.<<

>>I did not,<< comes the almost instant reply. >>But you did.<<

Nyota clears her throat and Kirk’s head shoots back up, his expression almost guilty. “Sorry, sorry, what were you saying?”

“Oh,” Nyota says, trying not to smile. “It’s nothing.” Then in a lower voice she adds, “And you don’t need to be embarrassed about messaging them on the bridge. It doesn’t get in the way of your duties, and I think it’s cute.”

“What? What’s cute?” Kirk asks, but Nyota just shakes her head and heads back to her chair.

She passes Spock on the way and leans down, whispers in his ear, “Someone’s got a crush.”

She expects Spock to show some sign of amusement, but he just looks back at Kirk and doesn’t reply.

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>>I wander in the streets, in my desperation
Calling out her name, Creüsa, Creüsa,
Calling Creüsa, over and over again.<<

This is one of those bittersweet messages from the Ambassador that Jim ends up just staring at, that he can’t reply to immediately, because they remind him all over again who Old Spock is really addressing these texts to.

But bittersweet or not, Jim knows the procedure here isn’t all that complicated: Old Spock cares about Jim, and Jim cares about Spock (in every form), and if it will make the old, lonely Vulcan happy, Jim is more than willing to play Creüsa’s part; to play his other self’s part. He’ll be whoever Spock wants him to be.

Jim writes back,

>>“Beloved husband, what use is it for you
To persist in this insanity of grief?”<<

“Captain,” says Spock from directly over his shoulder, and Jim jumps.

“Y-yes?”

“If you are quite done with your personal endeavors it would be agreeable if the Enterprise were to be given the privilege of your full attention,” Spock says, like he’s caught Jim passing notes in class, and Jim’s face burns.

Still, ten minutes later he goes back to his com, if a little more discreetly. Because despite the progress they’ve made, Spock – his Spock – still exudes a kind of stiff resignation to deal with Jim, and the more time passes, the more likely it seems that this is how their relationship is going to be forever.

So, yeah, he’s going to cherish his interactions with the Ambassador; because if he and his universe’s Spock are never going to have the epic friendship they were meant to, at least Jim can get a glimpse
Conversations between Vulcans do not tend to last very long at the best of times, but between the universe’s two Spocks, this principle applies all the more.

“I demand to know your intentions toward the Captain,” Spock says without preamble.

“I fail to understand in what way his matters concern you,” the Ambassador replies, placid, from the other side of the viewscreen. “You are romantically involved with Lieutenant Uhura, are you not?”

“My concern is for the Enterprise, of which Kirk happens to be the captain.”

“I see,” says the older Vulcan dryly.

“Your behavior toward Kirk has been brought to my attention, and as it is uncharacteristic and unseemly for a Vulcan, particularly of your age and stature, I recognized the necessity for clarification,” Spock says, his back very straight and his voice very even. “Games of chess. Love poetry…”

“I am merely finding solace in old habits,” the Ambassador replies. “Would you deny me even that?”

The younger Spock stares back at him hard. “You are attempting to seduce the Captain.”

The Ambassador’s eyebrows climb. “Is this, too, concern for the Enterprise?”

There is a very long pause.

“That will be all, Ambassador,” says Spock stiffly, and ends the call.

That evening is his and Bones’s mandatory meeting night (which basically translates into the usual dinner and drinks, except with more glaring if anyone disturbs them), and Jim loves mandatory meeting night, so he decides he’s not going to ruin it by leaking feels all over the place. Good thing he’s awesome at hiding the fact that he’s upset.

Bones eyeballs him. “What’s wrong with you?”

…Or not.

"It’s just," Jim says. "Do you ever get the feeling that everything we perceive is only our own wishful constructs of reality, and then start thinking that maybe there’s no point in trying to find truth, because how can essentially subjective human beings find a truth which is by necessity objective, and anyway even if truth were real and accessible, do you even want it? and then you realize that each of our very existences is built upon this shaking and fragile foundation of assumptions that may or may not hold up in ten or fifteen years, let alone at the end of our lives, and that after all is said and done, all of our efforts might be nothing but a shout into the void?"

“No,” says Bones. “Now eat your vegetables.”

“Okay,” says Jim.

So they eat for a while in silence until Bones succumbs to the awe-inspiring power of Jim’s puppy-dog eyes and puts down his fork and knife with a clatter. “Okay, spit it out. What’s really the matter?
In English this time, please.”

“I overheard one of the officers insulting Spock when he left the bridge after his shift today,” says Jim.

Bones just sits there, waiting for the rest. Jim watches as it dawns on him that… “This is what sent you into philosophical turmoil?”

“Yes!” Jim pokes his fork in Bones’s direction. “I had half a mind to go show that guy what happens when people make xenophobic comments on my ship! You can’t backtalk my First Officer and get away with it.”

“Uh-huh,” says Bones, looking done with this conversation already, and it’s only just started. “Was there truth to the backtalk?”

Jim hesitates. “It was… it was exaggerated! Spock isn’t that socially inept…” Bones gives him a look. “Okay, yes, he has all the people skills of roadkill. And…and yeah, he tends to deal with unpleasant emotions by, well. Traumatizing people. But it’s not like he’s a being made up entirely of rage. He’s only, like, seventy percent rage.” He pauses. “Seventy-five, tops.”

“It’s very difficult to make an argument that your officers shouldn’t be calling Spock a jerk when he is, in fact, a jerk,” says Bones.

“Spock is not a jerk! He’s just… misunderstood. Except by me,” Jim adds. “We totally have an understanding. We’ve been playing chess since we spent Christmas together – fine, shut up, we didn’t exactly spend Christmas together, it just kind of happened by mistake, but in any case! ever since then we’ve been getting along famously.”

“No, you actually have not been getting along famously. You have been getting along like two adults who work together and have to be civil. If that. Remember how he called you out for looking at your com today?”

“Yeah…” says Jim reluctantly.

“That was him being a jerk,” says Bones, his tone slow and patient, like he’s explaining it to a preschooler. “People call him a jerk because he acts like a jerk. Especially towards you. So please do yourself, and me, a favor, and get over the fact that you’re not friends with Spock. No one is friends with Spock.”

“See, that’s what everyone says, but it’s totally not true! Yeah, he isn’t exactly the… the friendliest of people, but he’s starved for human contact, you know? I think he just really needs a hug is all.” Jim pauses. “Hey, Bones, do you think he would kill me if I—”

“Yes,” says Bones immediately.

“You don’t know what I was going to say! Maybe I was going to say… ‘do you think he would kill me if I acted in a professional manner and respected his cultural values.’”

“Jim. Leave Spock alone. Stop being a donut.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re a dum-dum,” Jim retorts. “A root beer flavored one!”

Bones makes a noise that might be a snort of amusement and then he’s kicking Jim out of his office so they can both go to sleep. Meanie.
Finally the ship arrives over Rodia, and Jim is psyched. The rest of the away team is on the bridge, preparing for contact; Jim has been ready for hours.

“I am willing to do whoever it takes to get this contract signed!” he declares.

“Captain,” says Spock. “I believe the human term is ‘whatever it takes.’”

“That too!”

Spock looks confused. Bones gives a sigh to end all sighs.

“You appear to be highly stimulated by the anticipated proceedings of this away mission,” Spock observes.


Jesus. Can’t a man be a thirteen-year-old boy in his own head anymore?

“Look,” Jim says, lowering his voice so only his First Officer can hear. “Our job is to make the nice folks on this here planet remember why they wanted to be in the Federation in the first place, which pretty much means we’ve got to figure out what they want and we’ve got to give it to them. This is my niche, Spock. Whoring myself out to people is what I do!”

“Metaphorically speaking,” says Spock.

“Sure,” says Jim agreeably. “Point is, I’m excited to be back in my element.”

“Your element of manipulation and seduction.”

“I prefer to call it persuasion, but yes.”

“Fascinating,” says Spock. “And what, exactly, is your procedure for effective persuasion?”

Fascinating. Spock thinks he’s fascinating.

Jim clears his throat, kind of flustered by the praise. “Well, it’s…” It’s about intuition, about expectations, the little looks, the way people sit, the way they talk. It’s about understanding them, seeing what they think of themselves, what they want to think of themselves, and creating that reality for them, it’s about becoming whoever is necessary, erasing everything of himself…

The problem is that this line of thought translates roughly into a series of vague gestures. “It’s… Uh…hmm. Nrrmm. Look, it’s hard to explain… Why don’t you just meld with me? It’ll be easier.”

So Jim closes his eyes and leans forward and waits for him do the Creepy Finger Thing.

And waits.

Jim opens his eyes.

Spock is staring at him.

“Who,” the Vulcan says, with what sounds like difficulty, “implied that mindmelds are so casually initiated?”

“Uh,” says Jim, surprised. (*You?* he thinks.) “No one, I just figured… Aren’t mindmelds used to…
you know, explain things you don’t have the words for?”

Spock’s eyebrow lower. “No. That is the function of vocabulary lessons.”

There is a pause, and then…

“Was that a joke?” Jim demands.

“You must be mistaken. Vulcans are not inclined to merry-making.”

“You can’t pull the Vulcans-don’t-blah-blah-blah act with me! That was funny, so it must’ve be a joke!”

“Your logic is impeccable, Captain,” says Spock dryly, and Jim laughs because, oh, he’s doing this on purpose. He’s being overly bland, overly analytical, playing up the very traits that make him different from everyone else. Becoming what’s expected of him.

The tactic is so familiar it’s almost like a private joke, like a secret language, just between the two of them.

Spock looks at him, and maybe it’s just Jim, but he’s picking up on some definite amusement in his First’s eyes. “I will, however, take into account your emphasis on creating a positive interpersonal experience during this mission, and engage in social intercourse.”

Jim stares.

“To rephrase my statement colloquially, I intend to… ‘make friends’ with the Rodians.”

“No, no, feel free to use phrases like ‘social intercourse.’ I love it when you talk nerdy to me,” Jim says, and then freezes, horrified.

It’s not such a big deal, and even Spock just looks kind of bemused, but something in Jim revolts against the very idea of carelessly flirting with Spock as he does with everyone else. Maybe it’s the Vulcan thing.

Maybe it’s how – dare he say it – intimately they work together.

Maybe it’s the weird feeling in his stomach he gets whenever Spock is around.

(Jim’s best guess is heartburn.)

Whatever the reason, he suddenly feels the need to go, to move, to distract himself. “Well! Let’s go charm some Rodians. Everyone ready?”

“Aye, Captain,” comes the general response.

“How do I look?” Jim asks his crew. “Hair?”

This is met with varied expressions of approval, including “good”, “adequate”, and “hot.” (And a “who the hell cares?” from Bones, but Jim has long been used to his comprehensive meanie-ness.)

“What?”

This gets him round another vaguely positive responses (“yellow”; “adequate”; “hot”; “are there really people who actually care about this?”).
“Overall sex appeal?” Jim asks.

This is met with a chorus of exasperated sighs.

Jim claps his hands together. “All right, then. We’re ready to go!”

The landing party gathers on the transporter pad, and Jim puts a fist in the air. “To glory or death!”

“Glory!” Sulu, Chekov, Scotty, and Uhura cheer.

“Death,” says Bones grimly.

“The results of this excursion are exponentially more likely to lie somewhere in between those two rather extreme scenarios,” says Spock, logically.

Jim smiles. “Man, I have the best crew.” This is when he gets the all-clear from Lieutenant Montenefeau; he gives her a thumbs-up back. “Energize!”

---

When they arrive planetside they’re greeted by a Rodian with large, lavender wings who shakes everyone’s hands except for Spock (Jim frowns. Seriously? Is everyone xenophobic everywhere?) and takes them on a brief tour of the capital city on their way to the palace.

“We are currently passing the city’s only interplanetary communication center,” he intones in a heavily-accented voice. “It is fully equipped with transmission devices of the latest technological caste, including an iconovision excellerator, an automatic transmission translator, and a hyperwave recording frame.”

“Did you know that the original version of the hyperwave recording frame, the wideotape recorder, was invented in Russia?” says Chekov.


They cross the bridge to the palace gates, and as they pass the guards on either side of the entrance, their tour guide says, “These guards were given the position of protecting His Majesty by graduating at the top of their police training class. You can see the weapons they are holding are a combination of the contemporary phaser and the antiquated rifle gun.”

Someone tugs on Jim’s sleeve.

“Keptin,” says Chekov. “Did you know that the first rifle was invented by the Russians?”

“No,” says Jim. “That’s cool.”

They enter the castle and walk through a labyrinth of corridors and an impressive series of security measures, until they finally reach the banquet hall.

The room is dark, lit only by multi-faceted lights hung from the ceiling with some kind of thin, invisible material, so the hall seems to be glittering with starlight. The tables are set with finery befitting a king, but no one is sitting. Instead, the guests – some hundred or so Rodians – are flying casually around the room, draped in fabric that must be worth hundreds of credits per foot.

No wonder the Federation is eager to keep them, Jim thinks wryly. This planet is loaded.

“Why are there tables if no one is sitting down?” Scotty asks.
They will sit soon,” says Uhura. “But in Rodian culture it’s considered impolite to sit before the Emperor does. In the meantime they set up a buffet and let people mingle.”

“Uh-huh,” says Bones, already scowling. “And is there alcohol in this hellhole?”

“There is, but the Rodians believe substance use should be carefully monitored. So any drinks have to be ordered from waiters flying around… You can tell who they are by their gold uniforms. They can be summoned by those call chimes, but they’ll generally come to you.”

Chekov turns to Sulu. “Did you know that the call chime was invented in Russia?”

“No…” says Sulu.

“Why do I get the feeling I’m going to regret giving him that book?” Jim mutters to Spock, who wisely doesn’t answer.

“All right, Jim, I’ve scanned the compound breakups of the food they’ve put out,” says Bones, reading something off his tricorder. “And it looks like you can eat…the fruit.” Great.

“Thanks, Bones. Okay, everybody! Listen up! We have to cover some ground here, so let’s split up into two parties. Spock, Uhura, and Chekov, you can check out the scene over there; Bones, Sulu, Scotty, you stay with me over here.”

“Yes, sir,” they chorus. Bones just grunts.

So Spock, Uhura, and Chekov head off and Jim makes his way around the room, mingling and flirting and trying not to commit any cultural taboos, and he’s just taken a break and pulled their group back together for a quick check-in when one of the waiters makes his way over to them.

“What are your preferences, sirs?”

“Bones likes mainly vaginas, sometimes dicks,” Jim says helpfully, pointing out who’s who. “Sulu likes small Russian geniuses, Scotty is in a committed relationship with the Enterprise, and I don’t really care as long as I’m in somebody’s pants.”

There’s a long pause. Sulu clears his throat.

“Oh – you meant drink preferences!” Jim says, comprehension dawning. “Hey, ask them, I don’t presume to know these things.”

Everyone gives the waiter their orders, the Rodian floats away, and Sulu leans over and hisses, “What did you mean, small Russian—?”

Jim gives him an unimpressed look. “Please. I see how you look at him—I am fluent in hopeless crush.”

Sulu snorts. “You would be.”

“What?”


Jim snags an arm around his helmsman’s neck, pulls him a bit away from the rest of the party. “Look, Sulu, I get it. Chekov’s cute. And the whole child prodigy thing? Total turn-on.”

“No kidding,” Sulu mutters.
“Buuuut, he’s also seventeen. Which means no matter how brilliant he is, he can’t actually give legal consent. Which means if you have sex with him, I’ll have to have you written up for improper conduct, or most likely, castrated.”

Sulu has been nodding fervently until the last word, where he stops and stares at Jim, his eyes slowly widening in fear.

Jim smiles beatifically back. “And that would be sad for me, because I like you, you know? I don’t really want you to have a bloody, gaping wound where your dick should be.”

“Oh my God,” Sulu chokes.

“So you keep your hands off him ‘til his birthday, mmkay?” Jim claps him on the back. “Well! This has been a good talk. Now go out and win over those natives. Those nice, legal natives.” His helmsman doesn’t move, is still just kind of standing there, staring in horror. “Go! Have fun!”

So he goes, looking shaken, and Jim calls after him, “Make good choices!”

This is when Spock shows up, and the two of them watch Sulu lurch away like he just saw a ghost.

“May I inquire as to the subject of your conversation with Mr. Sulu, Captain?”

“Just a short motivational speech, Spock.”

Spock’s gaze flickers to Sulu. “He does not appear to be very motivated.”

“Well, we does what we’s can.”

Spock’s mouth opens. Closes. “I see. It is humorous because the grammar is purposefully fallacious.” He pauses. “I do not believe I enjoy this particular genera of humor.”

Actually it looks like it makes him vaguely nauseous. Jim has to bit down on his lip, internally chanting, don’t smile don’t smile don’t smile... “I apologize, Mr. Spock. I will endeavor to avoid it from now on, then.”

The last few words are drowned out by a sudden blast of music, and everyone in the hall turns. There are seven Rodians playing strangely-shaped instruments on each side of the entrance. Another two open the large, ornate door...the music swells...

And out flaps a Rodian with huge, purple wings like a cape, an enormous potbelly, and a crown on his head. He’s carrying a long, golden scepter even more ornate than the overstated door.

“Long live Emperor Voracio!” the doorman shouts.

“Forever may he conquer!” everyone else replies, including Uhura.

“Forever may he conquer,” Jim, Scotty, Sulu, and Chekov say, a little belatedly. Bones just grunts.

“Showtime,” Jim says quietly to Spock, and goes to greet the Rodian leader.

Uhura puts her hand out to stop him. “Captain, wait. Before you approach the Emperor you have to be announced, and you’ll have to bow. Only if he considers you of equal status will he extend the scepter toward you and accept you as his honored guest.”

“I know that, Uhura. I read the mission briefing.” He moves around her and approaches the Emperor. The crowd parts. The room goes silent.
“…But if he doesn’t consider you of equal status, he’ll have you killed,” Uhura finishes tightly.

Jim swallows. “That was not in the mission briefing.”

The Rodian who had greeted them when they’d arrived flies up beside Jim and announces, “Your Majesty. Captain James Tiberius Kirk, Savior of the Galaxy.”

Well, if he doesn’t have a shot with that kind of title, who does?

Jim lowers into a respectful bow and closes his eyes and waits and waits…

And then, finally – “Welcome, Captain,” says Voracio, and Jim feels the tip of the scepter on his shoulder and looks up.

“It’s a pleasure to be here,” he replies, smiling. “Thank you for hosting our group. If you would prefer to speak in Rodian, we have an exceptionally talented translator –”

The Emperor interrupts, “I will not debase myself to speak with one of your underlings.”

Oookay. This oughta be a fun meal.

Jim is escorted to the head of the table, where he respectfully waits until Voracio settles heavily into his throne before sitting down at the seat next to him.

At first Voracio just dedicates himself to eating; he downs several cups of wine (apparently substance use should be controlled, unless you’re in charge of the place), three loaves of bread as long as Jim’s arm, and an entire cooked bird-like thing by himself, while Jim picks at the fruit platter and tries not to watch.

Finally the Emperor has eaten enough to give Jim the time of day. He gets right to the point. “I know what you were here to do. And it will not work.”

“What won’t work?” Jim asks, playing dumb.

“I will not be persuaded to remain under the sovereignty of the Federation. It has proven a venture high in costs. It has proven low in benefits. You are familiar with the law of economics. Are you not, Captain?”

“I am,” says Jim. “That’s why we’re here, actually. The Federation wants to understand your point of view on this matter, so that it can reduce some costs and add some benefits, and make your collaborating with us a more… worthwhile investment.”

Voracio gestures to the banquet hall. “As you can see, Rodia is flourishing. We are at the forefront of the galaxy in culture. We are at the forefront of the galaxy in economy. We are at the forefront of the galaxy in technology. There is very little the Federation can offer us that we do not already have. And, I do not wish to offend, Captain. But your argument would have been more convincing had Starfleet sent a female representative. I am not customarily interested in males.” He gives Jim a smile full of eighty-two tiny, sharp teeth. “Although you are welcome to persuade me otherwise.”

Ugh, not if Jim can help it. That right there is definitely his last resort.

He doesn’t notice Spock approaching until he’s right in front of them. “Excuse me, Your Majesty. Captain.” And then suddenly there are four guards on the Vulcan, pointing their long-barreled phasers at his chest, and Jim is on his feet before he knows what he’s doing. “Woah, woah, wait!”
Voracio glances at him. “It is important to discipline one’s minions for small infractions before larger problems arise. They must be taught to speak only when spoken to. They must understand to whom they belong.”

Jim grits teeth, wants to kick something, but this isn’t trading verbal (and sometimes physical) blows Finnegan anymore; he can’t just mouth off and hope everything turns out all right. He has a job to do.

“My First Officer was not aware of this difference in our cultures,” Jim manages to bite out.
“Therefore it is only appropriate that he be given a reprieve.”

Voracio’s gaze slides lazily from Jim to Spock and back. Then he gives a dramatic sigh and waves a hand at his guards, who put their weapons down and step back. Spock inclines his head slightly and walks away.

“I understand that Earth ascribes to different methods,” Voracio says, when he’s gone. He reaches for a grape and puts it in his mouth, making stomach-turning slurping noises as he chews and swallows it. “However, Rodia has long known that a ruler must subjugate his minions with an iron fist. This is also why I wish to resign from the Federation. The noble kingdom of Rodia has no use for the weak dominion endorsed by Starfleet.”

Jesus. “Excuse me for a moment,” Jim mutters, and pushes away from the table and goes to find Spock.

It doesn’t take too long – he’s standing only a few meters behind their seats, close enough to observe but just out of sight, which is good because Voracio would probably throw a fit if he saw them talking.

“You appear to be having some difficulties finding common ground with the Emperor.”

Jim runs a hand through his hair. “Ya think?”

“Yes, I do.”

There’s a brief pause.

“I apologize,” says Spock. “I realize now that the question was rhetorical.”

“Anyway, Douchenugget over here” – he jerks a thumb over his shoulder – “might just be the most condescending bastard I have ever met, and trust me, that is saying something. If I have to sit next to him for another minute I’m going to stick that stupid scepter up his nose.”

“That would be unwise,” says Spock. “Voracio does not—” He stops. “I apologize—Douchenugget does not seem to be particularly amenable to method adjustment, even without a large, ornamented staff in one of his orifices.”

It’s times like these that remind Jim that while he’s going to have to bluster his way through foreign cultures like these on away missions, Spock is always trying to navigate a foreign culture. And even though the Vulcan is underratedly fantastic at tolerating the bizarre sometimes emotionally scarring world of humans, he still unconsciously takes Jim’s lead, uses his example when figuring out how to relate to humans. It’s kind of sweet. And probably a super bad idea on Spock’s part.

The right thing to do would be to uphold that trust in him and tell Spock that his nicknames are not exactly a rechristening.
… He’ll tell him later, when it isn’t so endearing.

Bones stomps over to them in his usual, Bones-like fashion. “I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess that things aren’t going so great with His Highnessness if y’all are having a powwow over here.”

“The proper designation is Douchenugget,” Spock says primly. Bones stares.

“Let’s focus on the job, guys,” Jim interjects, putting his hands up between them. “It’s not going badly, I just needed a break. But I’m positive I can get him to reconsider.”

“How optimistic of you,” Bones mutters.

“Bones, once I know what they like, it’s all over, and I know what Douchenugget likes—himself. Once I’ve got that, it’s easy to figure out what he wants from me.”

He looks at Bones and Spock expectantly, but they just stare back at him, uncomprehending.

“It’s simple, guys. He wants a groupie.”

Spock raises his eyebrows. “You aim to pretend to be a…groupie?”

“It’s not about pretending; it’s about becoming,” Jim replies, even though he knows his First won’t understand what that means. Spock doesn’t pretend to be anything other than what he is – probably couldn’t even if he wanted to. That’s part of why Jim likes him so much.

But as for Jim… Well, Gatsby is a role he’s all too familiar with. So he pulls in a deep breath, takes a moment to get into character, and heads back to the banquet table.

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The Captain goes back to the table, and Spock watches him sit down, make his apologies to Emperor Voracio, and leans in to the ruler, asking him questions about himself and his leadership. The transformation is startling; in an instant, everything about the Captain has changed, from his facial expressions to his body language.

“…And of course!” Voracio is saying, while the Captain listens attentively. “The Rodian government far outstrips that of Earth. On Earth, they want to make every equal. Everyone should be equal! This is why there is so much chaos on Earth, Captain. They have abolished complete control, and order is brought about by complete control of the dictators. Strong authority – an iron fist – that is what is needed to lead a planet to greatness.”

“Well, I have to tell you,” Kirk says, “Growing up on Earth, I’d always thought that dictators were bad… I’d thought that no one was clever enough to have that kind of power without it going to their heads, you know? But now, after meeting you…” He looks up at the Emperor through his eyelashes. “Well, I’m starting to rethink my opinion.”

Kirk had not been exaggerating when he said that his skills laid in persuading others to do what he wants, in understanding them and manipulating them, in obtaining their sympathies. Spock is reminded of the Earth-native chameleon, capable of blending in with whatever environment in which it finds itself.

Voracio preens. “Well! Bragging is so vulgar a practice… so I will not tell you of all the ways my leadership has brought Rodia to greatness.” He flings out a massive hand to the banquet hall, and Kirk’s eyes obediently follow his gesture. “You can see it for yourself, in this very palace. The planet used to be nothing, Captain. Nothing! Now since my reign we have made enormous advances, in
every area – our economy has soared… Our military is one of the most feared in the galaxy. Our neighbors know we are not averse to some lighthearted conquering and subjugating of our enemies every century or two!”

Spock expects this to set off some kind of reaction in the Captain, but it doesn’t. Kirk just nods and smiles back, as if this doesn’t bother him at all. As if he has become some other person entirely.

“Our technology is also impressive – as you must have seen when you beamed down…”

“I did,” Kirk agrees. “It was incredible. This whole place is incredible – like a utopia.”

“It is precisely the human utopia!” Voracio roars, clanking his goblet down. “Rodia is superior to all other planets, it is more pleasant, it is kinder…”

“Really?” the Captain asks admiringly. “It’s all that and kinder too?”

“Of course! What do you suppose possessed me to join with the Federation at all? Rodia is successful, Rodia is perfect. A utopia, as you said. It is only pure-hearted generosity that compels me to join other, inferior planets, to give them assistance even their inadequacy can only pale even further in comparison with Rodia…”

“Wow… That’s so noble…” Kirk’s face falls suddenly, and he sighs. “But even you have your limits, I guess. No wonder you’re considering leaving the Federation.”

Voracio sits up straight in his throne. “Limits—? Wh— Oh, no, no… That? My resignation from the Federation was simply Rodian jest.” He lowers his voice, and Kirk leans in even closer. “If I have limits, Captain, I have yet to find them.”

They both laugh as if this is an exceptionally humorous joke.

“No, no… Of course, my reign is more than successful enough to continue collaboration with the Federation. Rodia is the best planet in this galaxy…”

“With the best Emperor,” says Kirk, raising his goblet in a toast. Voracio lets out a loud, rumbling laugh and clinks their glasses together.

The Emperor swallows whatever had been in his goblet in one gulp. Kirk sets his back down on the table without taking a single sip.

“In fact!” Voracio adds, and now it has become quite clear that he is well and truly intoxicated. “I will contact the Federation now to renew my contract!”

Kirk looks at him, surprised and impressed. “What, now? You’re kidding!”

“I am not!” The Emperor rises up into the air, his wings flapping slightly off-rhythm.

“Wow…” The Captain shakes his head, awestruck. “You were right – things are completely different when a planet has a strong, decisive ruler.”

Emperor Voracio nods categorically, and bellows for one of his servants to escort him back to his quarters to complete an important communication. Spock takes the opportunity of his absence to approach the table.

“Captain.”

The Captain turns, a smile on his lips and a glint in his eyes. “Yeah?”
“I would like to be able to do that.”

“Do what?”

“I would like to be able to understand and imitate the emotions of others in order to persuade them effectively, as you do. Are you willing to teach me your techniques?”

The Captain’s expression goes slightly wide-eyed. “Oh. Uh. I dunno…”

“Scientific enquiry compels me to ascertain whether your methods are truly effective, or if they are simply yet another inexplicable success of your methodology, and therefore irreproducible by another party.”

A slow grin spreads across Kirk’s face, and he tilts his head. Raises one eyebrow. “Was that a dare, Mr. Spock?”

---

They return to the bridge together after the banquet, and Jim settles back in his captain’s chair and grins up at Spock. “So when do you want to start these lessons, anyway?”

The Vulcan tilts his head slightly. “Due to the ill-defined and volatile nature of the emotions which you will be teaching me to understand and manipulate, perhaps it will be best for you to instruct me on a case-to-case basis. On the job, as it were.”

“Sounds good to me,” says Jim. “What do I get in return?”

“In return?”

“You know. Economics. Quid pro quo. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. I teach you something, you teach me something.”

“I understand the principles of economics,” says Spock. “However, I fail to grasp the application of mutual back-scratching to the current situation.”

“Forget about it. The point is, I wanna learn the Vulcan Death Pinch Thing!”

Spock closes his eyes briefly. “It is not called the Vulcan Death Pinch Thing, Captain.”

“Yeah, okay, but you knew what I was talking about, which is the important part.”

“The to’tsu’k’hy requires years of training, both in physiology and in Vulcan offensive maneuvers. It would be more logical to begin with self-defense, particularly as your official duties will undoubtedly involve a degree of peril, and you seem to have a propensity for… misadventure.”

Jim frowns. “Are you calling me weak?”

“No,” Spock replies shortly. Jim waits for elaboration, but none comes, so he just sighs and gives in.

“Fine. We’ll do some sparring. And then the Vulcan Death Pinch thing?”

“Perhaps,” Spock says, not looking too thrilled about it.

“Yes!”

This is when Sulu returns to the bridge, looking just a little bit tipsy. “Sulu!” Jim calls. “Guess what,
I’m learning the Vulcan Death Pinch Thing!”

“Perhaps,” Spock says again. “And please cease referring to it as the Vulcan Death Pinch Thing immediately.”

Jim just grins.

---

Another part of being a captain that Jim hadn’t anticipated is the bit where he gets taken hostage all the time. Maybe it’s because people know that Jim’s crew is the least experienced in the ‘Fleet and people assume they’ll negotiate to get him back (famous last words right there), or maybe it’s because Jim has, apparently, become some kind of interplanetary prize after saving the Federation and becoming the youngest captain in Starfleet history, but whatever the case. Jim spends a lot of his time on missions getting kidnapped. And staying quiet when he gets kidnapped, which tends to get him tortured. And, for that matter, staying loud (read: acting like a douchebag) when he gets kidnapped, which also tends to get him tortured. And apologizing to Bones for acting like a douchebag when he’s kidnapped, and getting himself tortured. Things have been featuring heavily in kidnap and torture! But it’s not all bad – Spock is usually the one who rescues him. Which…really should not be as much of a silver lining as it is.

The first time Jim gets kidnapped he learns something interesting about his First Officer, which is that Spock doesn’t negotiate. At all. Ever. Instead, he listens to the kidnappers’ demands, tells them he will consider their offer, and then executes Jim’s rescue single-handed, silently and systematically annihilating the entire regiment of Denobulan rebels that dared take his Captain and successfully returning Jim to the Enterprise in one piece.

Or mainly one piece, anyway.

“You care about me!” Jim says cheerfully as he’s being rushed to medbay, in between coughing up blood. Bones, meanwhile, is next to him yelling something about idiots and internal bleeding and sharp objects in sensitive places.

“You are privy to an extraordinary amount of classified information, Captain,” Spock replies evenly.

“Sure,” Jim sing-songs. “You just don’t want to admit that you have feelings.”

He inadvertently saves Spock from responding to that by coughing up so much blood his lungs feel like they’re going to explode, and then everything goes kind of dark and twirly and he remembers to mutter, “I’mma pass out now, ‘kay?”

The last thing he hears is Bones’s muttered, “About time.”

---

For better or for worse, the partition between the Captain’s and First Officer’s quarters is not very thick at all, which isn’t really a problem for Jim; he’s used to keeping himself quiet at night.

Spock isn’t, though.

When Jim is startled awake by someone screaming, it takes him a moment to realize where it was coming from. Who it was coming from.

For a moment he understands his mother all too well – it would be so much easier to pretend he hadn’t heard anything at all.
He gets out of bed, pads over the door separating them, and puts his ear to the door.

Spock’s voice is muted, but still obviously grieving, almost on the verge of tears.

“I am in control of my emotions,” he mutters, and then his voice cuts out abruptly. “Control of my emotions. I am an officer. An officer. My duty. My duty is… is. My duty is to, to… Too late. I was – too late. I’m sorry— T-too… Two, four, six. Six. Six times six….”

God. Is it even really a decision anymore?

He presses the intercom button next to the door, even though he technically doesn’t have to, as captain. “Spock? Can I – can I come in?”

There’s a long, almost endless silence. And then, finally: “Enter.”

The room is a mirror image of Jim’s, so it’s easy to make his way over in the dark, to pull over the desk chair to Spock’s bedside and sit down, wondering what to say.

“It never told her I loved her,” Spock says to the wall in front of him.

Something rises up in Jim’s throat, in his eyes. “She knew, Spock. Trust me, she knew.”

But it’s as if he hasn’t said anything at all. “I respected my father,” Spock continues, his gaze still fixed on the wall. “Our customs. I was ashamed of my Earth blood. When I felt love for her then, I was ashamed.” His eyes flicker to Jim like he wants to say more, but he doesn’t.

Jim swallows. “I grieve with thee.”

The Vulcan looks at him, surprised.

“But you have to stop beating yourself up,” he says, leaning closer. “You did the best you could at the time. You can’t judge your past actions by what you know now.” It isn’t lost on him that ten years ago, over a copy of Oedipus the King, he had been arguing the opposite point. But now, here, with his friend in front of him, in pain, the alternative seems too preposterous to even consider.

Spock takes in a deep breath, but when he speaks, his voice is still edged with pain. “I tried to save her.”

“I know you did,” Jim whispers.

“It feels like my heart has been ripped out of my body.” Spock looks at him with helpless eyes. “When do these feelings go away?”

“They don’t,” Jim says softly. “You just learn to live with a hole in your chest.”

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Eventually Jim’s captaincy falls into a pleasant routine of exploring strange new worlds, getting drunk with Bones, sparring and playing chess with Spock (junior), trading semi-romantic messages with Spock (senior), a lot more mission-ing around, and… Did Jim mention that he gets kidnapped a lot?

“Spock?” says Jim, tentative.

Unfortunately Spock seems to not hear him, possibly because he’s kind of occupied with punching Jim’s captor repeatedly in the face.
Which is fine, except Jim can’t do much of anything when he’s, you know, strapped to a durasteel torture table in the middle of the room.

Whatever. It’s Tuesday. Jim was due for a torture session.

He’s been trying to figure out the keycode for the microelectronic chains around his wrists and ankles since he woke up, but it hasn’t been going too well since the Ventanian letter system looks like they let a two-year-old go crazy with a box of crayons and called it a language.

He tries again. “Uhh… Spock?”

Spock keeps right on punching the guy, though, and Jim keeps trying to tell himself that it’s not ridiculously sexy.

The only problem is that the way Spock’s going, he might actually beat this poor Ventanian to death. Which would not be less hot, unfortunately, but would be a bit more problematic.

“Commander!”

Finally his First Officer stops, turning to look at Jim. The guy sags, gasping and coughing and begging for mercy. “Yes, Captain?” says Spock calmly.

“You probably shouldn’t kill him, you know. It’s not very, uh… logical to kill him. It would be better if we could convince him to join the Federation.”

Spock turns back to Jim’s captor. The Ventanian whimpers. “It is logical to kill him. He is a threat,” the Vulcan says, his voice flat and deadly calm.

“He hadn’t even started the torture yet,” Jim points out. “You came in during the evil monologue.”

“He was holding a meat cleaver,” Spock says quietly. His grip tightens around the Ventanian’s neck.

“Okay… okay, yeah, that was pretty threatening. But…” The guy starts making really bad-sounding noises. “Spock, c’mon, let him go. We need him alive to punch in the keycode and get me off this table.”

At last Spock releases him, and the Ventanian dude stumbles over to Jim and puts in the code, and Jim gets to his feet, rubbing his aching wrists. The way Spock is watching the poor guy kind of reminds Jim of a cat surveying a mouse that’s cowering just out of reach.

Jim turns to his kidnapper. “Anyway,” he says pleasantly, like the last two hours never happened. “As I was saying before you drugged me - would you like to join the Federation?”

The Ventanian stares back at him, incredulous. “Ventani II is the founder of the Cardassian Union,” he protests, even as his eyes continue to dart back to Spock in fear every few seconds. “It is a alliance directly opposed to the purposes of the Federation! If we join the – ” Jim doesn’t know what kind of expression Spock is wearing behind him, but the guy suddenly looks absolutely petrified and stops talking.

“The Captain is giving you an offer,” says Spock calmly. “You would do well to consider it.” It’s kind of funny how every word out of Spock’s mouth sounds like a death threat when he’s in these kinds of moods. Jim makes a mental note to talk to him about his murderous tone.

“W-we would be honored to join the Federation,” the Ventanian squeaks.
It’s not always Spock rescuing Jim, though – sometimes it’s the other way around.

It’s easy enough to make his way into the dungeons once he gets one of the guards’ uniforms; he only got stopped and asked for his registration number once, by one of the prison administrators, and Jim just counted off random numbers until the administrator’s eyes glazed over.

The executive entry card he’d pickpocketed from the pretty ambassador helped too.

He makes his way through the dungeons, pulling the hat down over his face, until he reaches Spock’s cell. The Vulcan seems to recognize Jim at the same moment Jim recognizes him, and Jim puts a finger to his lips in warning, just before the guard watching Spock turns to glance at Jim.

“Hey, Skid.”

“Hey,” says Jim, trying to modulate his voice to something neutral enough to be mistaken for any other voice. “Fedirr’s sent me to take over. You can go.”

“Really? I only just got here…” he says, and then, “Hey, you’re not—” and Jim grabs the guard’s shoulder in an attempt at the Vulcan Death Pinch Thing, but the guy only stares back at him in confusion.

So Jim just punches him in the face.

Spock looks on, bemused, as the man drops to the floor. “Your nerve-pinچ technique leaves something to be desired, Captain.”

“I thought it went pretty well actually,” he replies mildly. It takes him only a moment to fish the keys out of the guard’s pocket, and another while to figure out which one opens Spock’s cell.

“How did you manage to fool the entire gauntlet of officials necessary to gain access to the dungeons?” Spock asks when Jim starts working on his cuffs.

“Persuasion lesson number one,” Jim mutters. For whatever reason, every time he touches Spock’s hands by mistake the Vulcan takes in a sharp breath, so he’s trying to work the chopstick-shaped key into the lock without touching anything else, which is harder than it sounds. “It’s all about figuring out what the person expects to see, you know? And then you just have to become that. Acting isn’t going to cut it a lot of the time. You have to believe it – make it part of yourself – until not an act anymore. If you can convince yourself, you can convince anyone of anything.”

Jim can’t see Spock’s face, but he seems to be thinking that over. “Would that method not leave its user open to the risk of believing his own lie? Being trapped in the illusion, as it were?”

“Yeah,” says Jim. “Yeah, it would.”

His First seems to be waiting for more, but Jim doesn’t really know what to say, so it’s good that that’s when he finally gets the cuffs open.

They check that the route is clear and leave the cell together, leaving the dungeons the way Jim came.

“And how did you avoid having to memorize the Treatise of Amuine Heilxxes every guest to the Baydetan Consulate must learn to gain entrance?”
“Oh, no, there was no way around that,” says Jim. They exit the dungeons only to be confronted by another guard, whom Spock nerve-pinches before he can make so much as a sound.

“You too have a photographic memory?” Spock asks, after Jim’s looted the guy’s phaser.

“Hahahano,” says Jim. “Me and the rest of the mere mortals of the galaxy actually have to work to retain information.”

“Still, you managed to memorize the entire treatise,” Spock says. “That requires enormous mental discipline, especially considering you do not have an eidetic memory. It is…impressive.”

“I try, I try,” says Jim. That’s when he sees another pass Beydetan approaching them.

“Captain…”

“Don’t worry,” says Jim. “Trust me, okay?”

Spock falls silent and Jim grabs his arm and points the phaser at him as if he’s escorting a prisoner. They pass each other in silence.

Finally they reach the end of the corridor and Jim takes the ambassador’s executive entry card out of his pocket. Spock raises one eyebrow.

“Look, I had a lot of odd jobs as a teenager, okay?”

The other eyebrow rises the join the first.

“Screw you and your oddly well-controlled eyebrows,” Jim mutters, and pushes open the door.

Inside, the ambassador is saying something angrily to the administrator Jim had passed on his way in. She turns when Jim and Spock enter.

“That’s him,” says the administrator, getting to his feet. The ambassador goes for her phaser, but Jim stuns her before she can get a bead on them, then turns and stuns the administrator too, for good measure.

He turns and realizes that Spock is staring at the ambassador, and a horrible realization sinks in his stomach. “She’s the one who took you… I never asked… Did they hurt you?”

His First hesitates. “Not physically.”

Jim kind of wishes his phaser hadn’t been set on stun. “Then—”

“They are a semi-telepathic species. The ambassador initiated psychic techniques meant to find the Enterprise’s coordinates in an attempt to contact you to state her demands. Luckily I was able to resist their attacks.”

“They mind-rape you,” Jim translates, and he’s smiling; it’s not a happy smile, or even fully human. It’s the final baring of teeth someone sees before they die.

Spock is staring at him. Has taken a step away. “Mind-rape is perhaps too extreme a descriptor…”

A sound eerily similar to a snarl comes out of Jim’s throat. “They made you do a mindmeld against your will. That’s mind-rape. Melds are intense and painful enough without having one forced on you—”
“Captain,” Spock interrupts him, and his tone is kind of strange. “When have you undergone a mindmeld?”

Oh. Uh. “I haven’t. I just assumed…” He clears his throat. “Look, let’s get to somewhere we can contact Scotty to beam us back up. The crew is probably worrying about us.” Jim walks over to the ambassador, unconscious on the floor, her peaceful face belying what she’s done…

“Captain. Jim,” says Spock, and Jim realizes that he’s been fingering the trigger of his phaser.

“She—” He can’t go on, grits his teeth. “She deserves to die after what she did to you.” He looks up at Spock. Challenging. “Give me one good reason I shouldn’t.”

There’s a long pause. And then…

“Because the death of alien officials requires the submission of Form RM-67, which is inordinately long and cumbersome,” Spock replies. “When you decide to complete your own paperwork, Captain, you can kill her.”

And Jim can’t help it—he bursts out laughing.

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And so Jim figures they’ve passed the mindmeld hurdle after that, but they obviously haven’t because the moment Spock gets cleared for duty from medbay he turns to Jim and says, his voice low, harsh. “You did not answer my question, Captain. Who was it that initiated a painful mindmeld with you?”

“Spock, I can’t,” Jim says apologetically. “I swear I would give you the rundown if I could, but he specifically asked me not to tell you.”

Spock’s eyes narrow. “Did he.”

---

Spock not-glares as the Ambassador’s face appears on the viewscreen. In a cool, clipped voice, he says, “You performed a meld with the Captain in a moment of emotional compromise, causing him pain and potentially resulting in adverse side-effects, such as trace memory residue and cognitive abstraction. Is this not so?”

The Ambassador doesn’t blink. “Shortly after which you attempted to asphyxiate the Captain, causing him pain and potentially resulting in adverse side-effects, such as death. Is this not so?”

There is a long, not-resentful pause, and then both Spocks end the call simultaneously.

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“Captain,” comes Spock’s voice over the intercom. “It is Commander—”

“Open,” Jim interrupts, because while normally he loves hearing Spock’s long, awkward requests to enter the Captain’s quarters, as if Jim doesn’t know Spock’s voice by now, today he’s just not in the mood.

Spock enters and the door slides shut behind him. He just stands there for a while, watching Jim pace the floor.

“Doctor McCoy reports that Lieutenant Parker’s surgery has been completed successfully,” he says,
hands behind his back in perfect Vulcan posture. “He expects her to survive with no lasting physical trauma.”

Jim runs a hand through his hair. “Good. That’s good.”

There’s a pause, and then Spock says, uncertain, “Your facial expression suggests that you are displeased.”

Jim stops in his pacing. “She never should have gotten hurt in the first place.” His hands clench at his sides. “Do you know who taught her how to defend herself?”

Spock just tilts his head, looks at him inquisitively.

“It was me,” Jim says, meeting Spock’s gaze. “And I taught her better than that. I taught her how to keep herself safe.”

“Then it is illogical to assume that your instruction was deficient, as Lieutenant Parker was not injured due to carelessness on her part. She took the full brunt of the enemy fire by entering the Zeta base before her three crewmembers. Her actions were both proper and noble, given the circumstances.”

Jim tightens his jaw, doesn’t reply. He hates nobility.

“Three lives are more important than one,” Spock says, like that’s just how it is – simple math. “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Lieutenant Parker understood that.”

And Jim understands Spock’s reasoning, he really does. But something about it makes him want to tear his way out of his own skin.

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“It is our duty to nurture greatness, James. At whatever cost. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

Someone clawing at the door, crying. Begging, please, please, Mommy, I’m scared – please—

Jim shudders awake, his heart pounding, phantom fingers still carding gently through his hair.

---

For Vulcans, family is not a right – it is a privilege. One must prove oneself to gain acceptance; to be considered a son, a brother, a friend, is not a simple process. Such an honor is conferred based on one’s ability in a range of experiences, on a gradually-built trust.

Humans, Spock has learned, take the opposite extreme.

He had long suspected this was so, but his suspicions were confirmed earlier that day, when the Enterprise had been scheduled for a brief stop over Pluto, and Spock had referred to it by its classification – a dwarf planet.

The bridge had gone suddenly silent.

“Spock,” the Captain had said, putting an arm around Spock’s shoulders. “Spock, buddy, we don’t call Pluto a dwarf planet. It’s still a planet in our hearts.”

He had not understood, of course. “You deny the validity of its reclassification?”
“Oh, no, nothing like that,” says Jim. “They’re right, it’s too small to be a planet. But we just don’t talk about it, it’s too hard, you know? Emotionally.” Seeing Spock’s face, the Captain had explained, “Look, it’s just kind of a… a touchy subject with humans, that’s all.”

“The academic classification made over two hundred years of a largely ice-composed dwarf planet is a touchy—?”

“See, there you go again! You can’t call it a dwarf planet! You’ll hurt its feelings.”

“Scientific categorizations are based on empirical criteria,” he had said, very slowly and very clearly. “If Pluto does not meet those criteria, it should not be considered a planet.”

The Captain had crossed his arms and set his jaw. “Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.”

Spock stared at him, utterly baffled. “Pluto is, as you sometimes say, a space rock. It does not have feelings to hurt. Therefore it cannot be family.”

“Sure it can,” Jim had insisted. “We got used to it being there and we were very upset when it was taken away. Isn’t that what family is?”

This philosophy is ridiculous, of course; as unreasonable as the Vulcan perspective of family, if not more so. But in a way, Spock…prefers it to the alternative.

That, in a sense, summarizes his experience aboard the Enterprise. It is unreasonable, illogical, sometimes downright bizarre, but somehow, he cannot imagine a place he would rather be. It is the only place where he does not have to prove himself in order to be accepted; the one place full of people who would miss him if he were gone.

It is home.

“Hey,” comes the Captain’s voice. “There you are. Everyone was wondering where you went.”

Spock looks at him. “Everyone?”

The Captain colors. “Well. Just me, I guess…” He looks out at the stars, and some of the ever-present kinetic energy, some of the tension of Kirk’s being constantly in motion seems to fade. “You’ve been here the whole time?”

“I have been observing Pluto,” he replies. “As an inanimate object considered a member of the ‘family’ to humans, for no identifiable reason, it is an interesting subject.”

Jim laughs. “You don’t need to go out on the observation deck to see a member of the family. You could just look in a mirror.”

Spock swallows and does not – cannot – reply, suddenly realizing that it isn’t the Enterprise, exactly, that has become his new home.

In fact, his home isn’t a place at all.
Bones, again

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings in this chapter for genocide and mass shooting. Please avoid any flashback scenes (anything written in the past tense) if they might trigger you. Stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For all the fun and games, it’s not actually all that easy being the captain of a Starfleet flagship. Jim gets an almost ridiculous amount of forms to sign and fights to break up and places to be. But more distracting than what Jim gets is what he’s not getting.

“Bones, I’m dying,” he announces at their weekly meeting.

Bones doesn’t even look up from his paperwork. “That’s nice, dear.”

Jim frowns. “As my CMO I find your reaction to my impending demise very unsatisfactory.”

The doctor just grunts.

“Bones. You are my attending physician. You need to attend me.”

“Jim. You are twenty-five years old. You need to shut up.”

“What, you want my request to be more mature? All right, if that’s what you’d prefer.” Jim lowers his voice and bats his eyelashes. “Attend me, Bones.”

McCoy does look up this time, exasperated. “Fine, I’ll bite. What’s wrong with you now?”

“I’m dying,” he repeats solemnly. “Of blue balls.”

“Oh for the love of—”

Jim tips his chair back way farther than is probably safe and puts his feet up on Bones’s desk. “No, seriously! I haven’t gotten laid in two months!”

“Stop that, you’re going to fall and break your neck,” says Bones.

“Hello, Bones, two months? That’s my longest dry spell since when I was a virgin! My longest dry spell by, like, seven weeks.” He stops to think about this. “Although… does it count if I was unconscious?”

“It’s hard to imagine you were ever a virgin,” Bones mutters.

“Exactly!” says Jim. “So what should I do?”

The doctor puts a hand on Jim’s knee and pushes, forcing Jim to bring the chair back down to all four legs with a thump. “I have a novel idea for you: if you’re feeling sex-deprived, why don’t you – have sex?”

Jim waggles his eyebrows. “Is that an offer?”
Bones calmly flicks him in the forehead.

“Ow! Ungrateful wench,” Jim mutters sullenly, rubbing his forehead. “Look, you know I can’t do that. Have sex, I mean.”

Bones looks surprised, and a little suspicious. “Why not?”

“The only two people onboard whose jobs I don’t control are you and Spock, and you also just so happen to be the only two people in the universe resistant to my charms.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” says Jim plaintively. “I assume it’s due to some sadistic twist of fate, life hates me, et cetera.”

McCoy rolls his eyes. “No, why can’t you just sleep with one of the many attractive people who work under your command? It’s not against regulation.” He pauses, considering. “Unless you’ve got Chekov in mind, and then yeah, don’t do that.”

“Because it’s against regulation?”

“Because Sulu would skewer you.”

Jim puts his head down on Bones’s desk, partly because he’s well into a good, solid sulk and it seems like the next logical step, and partly so he doesn’t have to look at his friend. “Look, it’s not Chekov. It’s just that… I can’t hook up with anyone I have the power to fire. I don’t want them to feel like… like they have to… You know I don’t do that kind of thing,” he finishes lamely.

“Huh,” says Bones, like this is a new and exciting development in the ongoing adventures of Jim Learns To Adult. Then, “Spock and I can’t possibly be the only two people in the universe resistant to your charms.”

“You are,” he replies with complete confidence. The table feels nice against his cheek, actually.

“What about Uhura?” Bones challenges.

Jim snorts. “Please. I would’ve totally gone home with her that first day if not for Cupcake and his Merry Men.”

“Okay then, what about Pike?”

“I bet I could get in his pants if I really tried,” Jim tells the table thoughtfully, and Bones makes a strangled did-not-need-that-mental-image-thank-you kind of noise. “But I’m not totally convinced that him and Dad weren’t bumpin’ uglies and, you know, gross.” He makes a face.

“Repress, repress, repress,” McCoy mumbles to no one in particular, squeezing his eyes shut and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Come on, Bones,” Jim whines. “What does a guy have to do to get some pity sex around here?”

“Well, if your only available options are me and Spock, why don’t you just ask Spock?”

Jim’s brain quietly short-circuits. “Why don’t I ask Spock what.”

Seconds pass and Jim realizes, vaguely, that he should be formulating some kind of response, but for some reason there’s nothing in his brain but static.

It must be really bad, because Bones is…yup, he’s getting concerned. Already halfway to doctor mode. “Jim? It was a joke. You all right?”

“Yeah,” Jim says, laughing halfheartedly. He doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t really get it himself; why comments like that make him feel so…weird.

And yes, obviously he’s attracted to Spock; he’s attracted to everyone to some degree, and Spock is an exceptionally attractive person. And yes, he likes and respects Spock; he likes and respects everyone on the Enterprise to some degree, and Spock an exceptionally likable (at least to Jim) and respectable person. It makes sense.

And yet none of that explains the excitement, the nervousness, the thrill Jim feels when he’s with him, or the hypersensitivity to every word he says and every expression he makes. He’s almost glad that Spock is with Uhura so he can’t do anything stupid.

It’s okay, he reassures himself. You never trust and want the same person at the same time. One or the other will go away soon, and then you’ll see if he’s going to end up in your heart or in your pants. He can’t do both.

These feelings will go away soon, he tells himself, because they will. They have to.

Any day now….

---

The feelings don’t go away.

---

There’s a reason Jay Gatsby’s lover and betrayer is named Daisy.

A daisy is a flower that’s white – pure, innocent, good – on the outside and yellow – twisted, diseased – on the inside. Daisy’s name describes her character; what she is on the outside is completely different from what she is on the inside.

In a way, she’s just another Gatsby.

That duplicity is what he hates about Daisy (about Gatsby; about himself) and what he loves about Bones.

Bones has no pretenses. He’s not white on the outside and yellow on the inside, or yellow on the outside and purple on the inside – he’s exactly the same, all the way through. He’s completely trustworthy, completely honest—he puts his true self right out there for anyone to see. That’s a lot of why Jim felt so comfortable with him so quickly; why their friendship didn’t develop so much as happen all at once, because although, yes, Jim has learned plenty about Bones over their years together, he knew everything that mattered about him from day one.

Spock has no pretenses either, but it’s different. Really different.

Because even though Spock is undoubtedly honest—his honesty rivals that of Bones’s (Jim is hands-down the most tactful of the three of them, which is really kind of tragic)— he’s not at all predictable. It would be a lot simpler if he were.
Thing is, Jim can’t get a good grip on him. He can’t quite figure out what his First Officer wants, what he thinks, how he approaches things. And every time Jim thinks he’s starting to pin him down, Spock says something that completely throws him for a loop.

Maybe it’s the cultural difference. Maybe it’s a symptom of finally interacting with someone he has to work to match wits with.

Maybe it’s heartburn.

All Jim knows for certain is that it’s unbelievably fascinating frustrating.

This new running theme in his life of wondering what Spock would say about [insert topic here] takes root in Jim’s head and doesn’t go away, until finally he just starts a kind of guessing game between them, usually over chess.

“Okay,” he says, moving his knight up. “Religious beliefs. Go.”

Spock studies the board, but Jim knows he’s thinking about both it and the question. Simultaneously. Which…shouldn’t be possible, really, but is because it’s Spock.

“As I have stated previously, I am not entirely comfortable with conjecture,” Spock says slowly, “but I would hypothesize that you believe in some nature of life after death but do not consider yourself to be particularly spiritual. This may be partially because no one religion speaks to you, but it is more likely due to your mistrust for figures of authority.”

Jim laughs. “Spot on! And for you… Well, you’re super-logical, so… agnostic, right?”

“No,” says Spock, as he takes one of Jim’s pawns with his bishop. “Science has proven that all of existence came spontaneously into being; that in the span of one instant – one Big Bang, as it were – nothing became everything. In one instant hundreds of billions of galaxies were created, each with tens of millions of stars, each with dozens of planets and sub-planets inhabited by hundreds of billions of innumerable life forms, from nothing. However, in the entirety of documented scientific inquiry into the gamut of natural processes, not so much as a single grain of sand has spontaneously come into being after that point. Therefore it is patently illogical to believe in nothing beyond the natural, as it does not explain matter’s existence in the first place.” He looks up at Jim and frowns. “Is there something wrong, Captain?”

Jim realizes he’s been staring, and quickly blinks and shakes his head.

“No, nothing’s wrong, it’s just you’re…” But he can’t finish that sentence because the end of it is, … unlike anyone else I’ve ever met.

That’s when he knows he’s screwed.

---

Nyota is working in Rec Room 2 when Kirk approaches her, uncharacteristically hesitant and almost worryingly polite.

“Oh, you’re busy,” he says, when he sees the four communication sector PADDs she’s working on spread out in a half-circle front of her. “I’ll just…I’ll leave you to your…things…”

“I’m not that busy,” she says, not because she isn’t that busy (because she actually is) but because her curiosity is piqued.
Kirk doesn’t need very much assurance, apparently, because he sits right down and says, all in a rush, “I’ve been having these – feelings lately…”

Ahhh, he wants a therapy session. It’s funny how being the only person on staff with any kind of interpersonal intelligence automatically makes her the ship social worker.

She crosses her legs. “What kind of feelings?”

He takes a deep breath. “It’s just… Sometimes I’ll be – you know – and I’ll just get these…” Jim trails off, gesturing vaguely for a good few seconds.


“Right, and at first I was thinking, maybe? But now I’m kinda thinking it’s not… Do you know what I mean?”

“Not even a little bit,” she replies understandingly.

“They’ll go away eventually,” Kirk says, running a hand through his hair as she’s seen him do sometimes when he’s distracted and anxious. “Right?”

“Um,” says Nyota.

He nods. “Right. Of course they will. They always do. I just have to be patient.” He gets to his feet. “Thanks, Uhura. You always know what to say.”

And Kirk leaves and Nyota is left staring after him, wondering what on earth just happened.

---

“I know!” Jim cries suddenly, during a vidcall with Old Spock later that night. “It was you!”

“Me?” Spock murmurs, eyebrows raised.

“It was that meld thing! You’re the one who gave me feelings!”

“Jim,” says Spock carefully, “a neglectful mindmeld can occasionally transfer memories, but it cannot create feeli—”

“Shhhhh,” says Jim. He sits back in his chair. “Yeah. Yeah, I like this explanation. I feel a lot better now.”

“But—”

“Shhhhhhh.”

---

Of course it has to be the morning of the big meeting that he wakes up only to find he has no uniform shirts left.

Jim turns to his yeoman, who’s making the bed behind him. “Um… Rand, do I have any more shirts?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Do you?”
And she goes right back to making the bed and ignoring him. Because you haven’t really had a yeoman unless you’ve had a witheringly passive-aggressive yeoman.

“Oh, let me rephrase that – I have no shirts left.”

“I wonder why,” Rand mutters. “Could it be because you somehow destroy or lose your shirt every time you leave this ship?”

“That’s not true,” Jim protests. “Sometimes I destroy or lose my shirt even when I don’t leave the ship.”

Rand looks tired. “That’s great.”

“It’s not my fault. The universe likes me shirtless.”

“Maybe your crew will like you shirtless too. Why don’t you go to the meeting like this and find out?”

“You’re still mad about that time I woke you up in the middle of the night to kill a spider, aren’t you?”

“What would make you say that?” she replies, casually flipping open a little blade she says she uses to get the gunk out between the tiles in the bathroom but actually uses as a handy little carving knife (conveniently pocket-sized, now available in blue, green, and cotton candy pink) to ritually slaughter her enemies.

“You know,” he comments, “in the olden days they didn’t have passive aggressive non-arguments, where people said that they weren’t angry at each other and actually were. They would just walk right up to the person and slap ‘em with their glove and say, ‘I demand satisfaction!’ I like that method. It’s much more straightforward.”

“I see you’ve conveniently left out the part where they shoot each other.”

“I’m just saying, if you ever want satisfaction from me you can feel free to ask.” He pauses. “That was not meant to be innuendo, I swear.”

“I appreciate the offer,” says Rand dryly. “But let’s focus on getting you a shirt in time for the meeting. Isn’t there someone else you can borrow one from?”

He has to think for a second. “Chekov’s would be too small… But I could probably fit into Sulu’s, yeah.” He looks at Rand expectantly.

She just raises her eyebrows back at him. “I’m your yeoman, not your housekeeper! Go do it yourself!”

“Hey,” says Jim indignantly. “Who’s in charge here?”

---

“Hey Sulu, it’s me,” Jim says sheepishly into the intercom. “Can I borrow a shirt?”

The door slides open and Sulu pops his head out.

“You don’t have any left?”

He shrugs. “The universe likes me shirtless.”
“Sure,” says Sulu, like he’s been there.

He lets Jim into his room and grabs a spare shirt from the closet. “You can borrow this – as long as you don’t mind that I wore it a couple days ago.”

“I’m desperate. I’ll take anything not decorated with the glistening sweat of victory.” The last few words are muffled as he pulls it on.

Sulu looks at him critically. “The sleeves are a little short for you, but it’s okay.”

So he thanks Sulu and heads off to the meeting, where, of course, Spock is already waiting.

“Good morning, Mr. Spock,” says Jim, sliding into his seat Risky Business-style.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“I was thinking yesterday—I know this mission is slightly different from the last one, because this isn’t technically First Contact, but—” It’s really hard to hold on to his train of thought when Spock is making a face like Jim just stuck gum in his hair. “What? What’d I say?”

“I do not have argument with anything you have said thus far,” Spock says. And then, “You reek of Lieutenant Sulu.”

“I do?” Jim picks up the front of the uniform shirt and sniffs it. “It doesn’t smell like anything to me.”

Spock doesn’t reply, but the pinched look on his face doesn’t go anywhere either, so finally Jim gets to his feet and turns to the room at large (it’s only Spock and Uhura and Bones so far, because showing up on time is for losers, but still). “Excuse me, I have to take care of something urgently,” he says, and walks – he walks, not runs – okay, power-walks is probably a more accurate term – back to his quarters.

Rand looks up from sorting Jim’s mail and frowns at him when he opens the door. “Captain, what are you doing back here? Hasn’t the meeting started already?”

“It should have,” says Jim. “Spock doesn’t like my shirt.”

“Uh-huh,” says Rand, nodding. “And how old are we today?”

“I will have you know that it is very important for the Captain to gain approval from his command crew whenever possible. That’s one of the basic principles of democracy. Or do you hate democracy. Huh? Is that what it is? Are you a communist, Yeoman?”

Rand just looks vaguely into the distance with an I’m-too-old-to-deal-with-this-crap expression that Jim has become intimately familiar with over the course of his friendship with Bones.

“Maybe I should just go shirtless,” Jim suggests. “Maybe I was destined to be shirtless.”

“Please don’t,” says Rand, pained. Then she sighs heavily and says, “Look, I’ll find you something, okay? You wait here.”

So Jim sits obediently on his bed and waits until Rand comes back a few minutes later, carrying another shirt.

She throws it at him. “Here, put that on. It’s the closest I could find.”

Jim holds it up and looks at it doubtfully. “Rand… What is this?” he asks, because he really,
sincerely hopes that it is not, in fact, a v-neck wraparound shirt that is almost definitely a size or two too small for him. With sparkly things.

“It’s an alternative,” says Rand shortly. “Put it on.”

“Uh, I hate to rain on your parade? but this is not actually a uniform shirt.”

“Here.” Rand takes the Starfleet Insignia clip out of her hair and pins it on the shirt. “Ta-daaa. Now it’s a uniform shirt.”

“It’s not even yellow!” Jim protests. “It’s light green!”

“It’s either this or bearing Spock’s disapproval of your apparel choice.”

---

Considering the fact that Jim is wearing a v-neck wraparound shirt almost definitely a size or two too small for him with sparkly things, he does a great job of re-entering that meeting room like it ain’t no thang.

“Captain…” Scotty starts, tentatively, halfway to raising his hand.

Jim gives him the I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-it eyes. “I was feeling fabulous today, okay?”

Scotty puts his hand down. “Okey-dokey.”

“Any other questions?” he asks, glaring around the room. No one dares speak up. Hardly anyone even dares to look at him. “Good. Then let’s get this meeting started.

“Some of you know, and by some of you I mean Spock and Uhura, because nobody else reads the mission briefs, that on our latest routine patrol, our own Mr. Chekov here” – he gestures to his left; Chekov waves dorkily – “discovered the wreckage of a Federation Merchant Marine survey ship called the SS Beagle, formerly under the command of Captain Regulus Merik. Captain Merik and his crew have been missing, presumed dead, for almost five years. We’re going to go down to the wreckage and do some investigating, and see if we can learn anything more about what happened.”

Jim sits down and Spock starts outlining the details of the mission, and soon enough the weird looks taper off as everyone forgets about Jim’s unusually-fabulous outerwear in favor of the actual point of the meeting.

Well, almost everyone.

There’s this one guy in the corner, this freakishly tall science officer that Jim has seen around and actually had several conversations with, but for the life of him he can’t remember the guy’s name. LeBron, maybe?

That’s not it.

Anyway, LeBron is still giving Jim these weird looks every now and then that are inappropriate to give one’s commanding officer and, more importantly, making Jim feel self-conscious, but unfortunately, stern glares have never exactly been Jim’s forte. So he consults the master.

“Spock, I need you to glare sternly at somebody for me,” he whispers.

Spock inclines his head in agreement.

“Thanks,” says Jim quietly.

“You are welcome, Captain,” says Spock. And then, “Also, in regards to the extemporized uniform shirt... I rather like it.”

Jim sits back in his seat and thinks, *I’m never taking this shirt off.*

Followed almost immediately by, *Dammit.*

---

The next theory is that maybe he just needs to get laid.

Because, look at the evidence – lately Spock has been making him feel wired and restless and kind of horny, which is exactly how he feels when he’s gone without sex for too long (read: over twenty-four hours). Of course perpetually cockblocking himself is going to cause weird feelings! And if those weird feelings happen to be Spock-related, well. It’s just another symptom of the sex deprivation, and easily fixed.

Which is why when they’re about to go down to the wreckage of the SS Beagle to investigate Captain Merik’s disappearance, and Scotty reports a transporter interference allowing only one person to beam down, Jim volunteers to go alone. It’ll make it that much simpler to find some native to bang.

Bones, of course, disapproves.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Jim asks.

“Brain damage and death,” says Bones, immediately.

“It’s a planet with the technological capabilities of Earth’s first century,” Jim says, rolling his eyes. “What could possibly go wrong?”

---

A whole lot, as it turns out.

“Our demands are realistic,” says the leader of the cozy little cult – the Children of the Sun, they call themselves, and the uniforms are actually ridiculous – while one of her cronies pulls Jim’s hair, forcing him to look straight into the vidcam. He *really* hates people pulling his hair.

This society shouldn’t *have* vidcams at all. They shouldn’t have any of the technology they have. And yet…

“When your starship crash landed on our planet we became aware of the far more developed societies on the planets all around us,” she tells Spock, who is staring into the viewscreen at Jim, captured by these idiots in togas, handcuffed to a chair, slightly bruised and bloodied, held for ransom – the usual. “We realized how very vulnerable we are to the planets around us. They could destroy us on a whim if they so wished!”

“Why would anybody want to get rid of you guys,” Jim mutters, and one of the toga-wearing beefcakes punches him in the gut.
Luckily they haven’t noticed yet that Jim has pulled a loose splinter out of the chair he’s bound to, and is working on picking the lock on his handcuffs. Spock just needs to keep them distracted for a little while longer…

“We assimilated the starship crew into our culture. One of them, the captain, refused to cooperate. So we neutralized the threat he posed to us.”

“I see,” says Spock.

“We took apart the ship so as to understand be able to copy its workings, so that we may be able to defend ourselves from similar weaponry. As you can see,” – she gestures to the vidcam – “in many respects we have succeeded. However, there are many features of your ship we cannot yet comprehend, and many more that we lack the resources to reproduce. We require an operational starship.”

“And you would like the USS Enterprise,” Spock finishes.

“Yes,” she replies easily. “We will give you and your crew the opportunity to join us. Anyone who resists the assimilation process will be neutralized.”

“As if,” Jim bites out. “Spock would never allow that t—” He breaks off as the dude behind him pulls his hair hard enough to make his eyes water. He grits his teeth and works harder on the cuffs.

“And if we refuse?” the Acting Captain asks.

She raises her chin. “Then your captain will join Captain Merik.”

Spock doesn’t reply for a long time.

“Our transporter is currently nonoperational,” he says finally. “And we cannot land the Enterprise without the precise coordinates. The chemical current is too powerful for our dilithium reactors to find a safe landing route. I suspect that is what caused the Beagle’s crash in the first place.”

“Spock, what—” He gets a fist to the head for his efforts, but he keeps talking. “What’re you saying, you never negotiate. You can’t negotiate!”

“These are not idle threats, Captain,” Spock replies tersely. “It is a no-win scenario.”

“How many times,” says Jim between gritted teeth, and finally he hears the faint click of the cuffs, “do I have to tell you,” and the metal clatters to the floor and Jim rises, elbowing his captor hard in the stomach, flips him over and grabs his phaser from his belt in one motion, “I don’t believe in those?”

The rest of the Children of the Sun pull their phasers out and point them straight at Jim, and everything slows down and all in one moment Jim knows that he has just one moment to make a decision. It’s like when he was lining up the soccer ball in juvie, like when he was trying to convince Pike that Vulcan was under attack. He has just one shot before he’s taken down; he has to make it count.

He looks straight into Spock’s eyes and shoots out the vidcam.

A split-second later something slams into the back of his head and he—
He wakes up to... nothing.

Or, more accurately, to a whole lot of darkness.

The first thing he does is feel around for the door. Here’s a wall... a corner... Then this must be the doorjamb... So this would be – aha, a handle!

Jim tries to push it, tries to pull it, tries to twist it, but it doesn’t budge. He turns and slides down the door so he sitting on the floor, and even though he can’t see the room he’s locked in, all at once he sees it in his mind’s eye, small and tiled and salmon-colored, with no one but the impassive mechanized eye watching him from the corner.

This is just like then, except in juvie he had known – at least subconsciously – that they wouldn’t let him die.

Here, it seems a lot more likely that they will.

His palms start getting sweaty and his breathing starts coming in fast and shallow when suddenly his hand grazes something, some kind of container... pottery, it seems like... Jim picks it up and something sloshes inside. Water.

They want to keep him alive.

The idea calms his rapidfire heart, his unsteady breathing, and he takes a few gulps to clear the vague feeling of dust in the back of his throat. It tastes a little weird, but whatever. Food is food.

Now that he doesn’t feel like he swallowed a puffer fish, Jim goes about exploring the room he’s trapped in, slowly feeling his way along the wall. Attached to the wall there’s a bed... On the bed there’s a mattress.... On the mattress there’s a – person.

Jim yells and jumps back in shock.

“Jesus!” he says, laughing a little as his heart rate gets back under control. “You scared me! Why are you sitting there so quietly?”

No answer.

He can dimly make out a yellow Starfleet uniform in the dark. “Uhh... Captain Merik, I presume? Regulus?”

No answer.

“Hey, are you okay...?” Jim moves forward and tries to shake the man, but he just slumps lifelessly to the side and Jim can see his gleaming, oddly-wide smile, his gaunt form, his endless, empty eyes...

“Oh – God,” he chokes, and staggers backward away from the skeleton, falls over, tries not to throw up.

Suddenly the little room seems a lot littler, and suddenly it’s a lot harder to ignore the fact that while he may have water, he still has no food. Not even a granola bar this time.

Someone will come for me, he tells himself, trying to breathe. I’m going to be fine.

“You’re going to die,” says the skeleton of Captain Merik.
It isn’t just metaphorical.

Captain Merik stares back at him from the eyes of the skeleton, adjusts his uniform – the same uniform as Jim’s – says casually, “No one came for me. What makes you think you’ll be any different? You’re going to die.”

“I’m not,” says Jim. “They’re going to find me.”

And then the Merik is shifting, everything is changing but the uniform, until the person staring back at him is one Jim knows from the photo albums. From the mirror.

“It’s not as bad as you think it is, dying,” his father tells him. “Millions of people admire and revere me. If I hadn’t died, none of that would’ve happened. I would’ve just been some kid, trying to pretend he know what he’s doing, making mistakes like anyone else… By dying I became a legend, but you…” He smiles at Jim sadly, shrugs. “They’ve probably forgotten about you already.”

“I’m not going to die,” Jim insists. “People need me…”

And then it’s his mother, one hand on her hip, asking, “Which people? I’ve gone without you for almost ten years and I’m fine.”

“You would be upset if I died.”

“Who do you think I would really be mourning?”

Jim has no reply to that.

And then it’s Sam, adding, “Yeah, Jimmy, you should join us! Why not?”

“You aren’t Sam,” Jim tells him, but it’s getting harder to figure out what’s real and what isn’t. What he was expected to be and what he is. “Sam would never want me to—”

“I want what’s best for you. And you look so tired… Aren’t you tired, Jimmy?” Sam asks. “Don’t you want to sleep?”

“Yes,” he whispers.

“Then come on! There’ll be no more pain, or hunger—no more anything. You’ll be with me… and Dad… He’ll be so excited to meet you. You’ll be happy.” Sam stops. Smiles at him, and God, Jim had forgotten how much he loved that smile, how much he lived for it. “I’ll be happy. I miss you, Jimmy.”

“I miss you too, Sam,” says Jim, his voice breaking.

“Let me show you, Jimmy, you’ll see. It’s beautiful here. Come with me.” He puts his hand out.

Jim reaches forward—

And Sam disappears.

He’s left him again.

“Wait,” he calls, turning, searching frantically. “Wait for me!”
There’s no answer.

Jim crumbles, presses his palms to his eyes and wants to scream.

“Sam, don’t leave me behind, I…I want to— I want to go with you, take me with you…” There’s a hole in his chest where the bullet hit, where his heart was ripped out of his body ten years ago, and he’s crying and no one is there, no one is coming for him, he’s going to die....

---

Jim doesn’t know how much time has passed. It could be a day. It could be a decade. The people come and go, but the message is always the same.

It’s Erika, looking at him coolly. “No one is coming for you, Jim. You’re going to die.”

It’s Kevin, looking disappointed in Jim. In the hero he’d idolized and then forgotten. “No one is coming for you, Captain. You’re going to die.”

It’s Tom, sympathetic but resigned. “No one is coming for you, JT. You’re going to die.”

It’s the little girl who had been scratching at the door. “No one is coming for you. They never come for you. They never find you. You’re going to die.”

“I know,” he says, and he wraps his arms around himself and closes his eyes tight and wishes the hunger, the weakness, the cold weren’t familiar old friends.

---

He has been in this little tiled room forever; he’s going to be in his little tiled room forever, somewhere between waking and resting, somewhere between consciousness and death, watching the colors swirl in front of him, ebbing and flowing and coming and going and nothing stays, no one is coming for him. He’s going to—he’s going to—

“You’re going to die,” the skeleton says, and Jim’s breath stops in his throat. No. Nonono…

“Look at me, James,” it says softly. Gently.

Jim can only shake his head, can only shake his head and shut his eyes tight and pray that someone finds him, that someone makes him go away, please—please, please…

“James. I said look at me.”

And as always, he’s trapped, he can’t say no, like the first time, like the fifth time, like the thirty-second time, and he looks up at Kodos, at his empty eyes and skeleton’s smile.

“Did you miss me, pet? It has been such a very long time...”

“No,” says Jim, and now that he’s finally said it he can’t stop. “No no no—”

He stumbles back as the skeleton’s bleached, withered hand reaches forward.

“You’re dead,” he tells it desperately. “You died in – in a fire, they found the ashes, they –”

“They found someone’s ashes,” Kodos agrees, smiling.

He shakes his head. “I don’t belong to you. I never belonged to you.”
“Perhaps not. But look at me, James, and tell me a piece of me does not belong to you.”

And he can’t. He can’t say no.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees the door and it seems to creak, to swing open just the tiniest bit, and Jim turns, runs, reaches the door, finds nothing but unyielding stone. No – no…

“Let me out.” He pushes at the door, throws his whole weight against it, pounds on it with whatever strength he has left. “Let me out! Help me – helpmehelpmehelpme… I…” No one is coming, no one will find him, his fists fall uselessly against the stone. “Help…”

He hears Kodos coming up behind him, and his legs go wobbly, he feels him, feels him everywhere – in his hair, in his mind, in his breath—

“Please – please…”

“Come now, James. You aren’t afraid of me, are you?”

“No,” Jim manages. “I’m afraid of—”

He can hear Kodos’s smile. “We are so similar, you and I.”

---

Jim wakes up with his cheek pressed against the stone floor, knows there’s someone there with him even before he opens his eyes.

He’s too tired to try to run. He’s too tired to move. He’s too tired to open his eyes.

He’s too tired to breathe, but he doesn’t know how to stop.

“Captain,” says the person.

“Leave me ‘lone,” Jim mutters, shutting his eyes tighter. “Just wanna – go ’way…”

“Captain, I recommend you attempt to remain conscious as much as possible. Your heart rate is already dangerously low.”

He knows that voice… “Spock?” It takes a few moments of peering blearily at the figure before his First comes fully into focus. “Oh, good, you’re here too. Let me guess—I’m gonna die, right?”

“You are going to die,” Spock confirms, “as all organisms do eventually. However I fail to see the relevance of that event to the current predicament.”

It’s hard to think over the emptiness in his stomach, the pounding in his head. He tries to sit up but the whole world tilts and nnnhhh, maybe that’s not the best idea right now. “If you’re not going to warn me of my inevitable demise, what are you doing here?”

“Captain, I am not here. You are hallucinating.”

Jim lifts his head weakly to stare at him. “I’m what?”

“Consider the circumstances logically,” Spock says. “Your last lucid memories are of returning to consciousness inside a locked room including only yourself and the late Captain Merik. As you can see by the layer of dust where the door meets the wall, it has not been opened since your arrival, therefore it is impossible for me – or anyone else for that matter – to be present. However, you
Jim groans, rubs his forehead with his palm. “Did you really just use the word *ergo*?”

“It would be more precise to say that you have just used the word *ergo*, as I am merely a product of your altered state of consciousness.”

“Altered…” Jim repeats distantly. “You mean with drugs? But… no, that can’t be, I must’ve been here for *days* already…”

“Yes. Your drug-induced temporary psychosis has had too long a duration to have resulted from one dose.”

“You’re saying… I’m still… ugh…” Jim manages to sit up through the vertigo. It feels like his head is going to explode. “I’m still being drugged right now. But, nobody’s come into the room, and…” That’s when his gaze lands on the pitcher next to the bed, and – and *of course*. “The water. They laced the water with something…”

“Yes,” says Spock. “You have been unintentionally but regularly administering the hallucinogen yourself.”

“But – I can’t just *stop*… I can’t just not drink.” An idea, dark and terrifying and horribly tempting rises up in the back of his mind. “Can I?”

Spock looks at him, his expression unreadable. “If you do not drink you will die within three days.”

And – *three days* – doesn’t that just sound like beautiful, beautiful relief?

“*Captain.*”

“Spock, I can’t—I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m tired.” He tries to laugh, but it comes out more like a sob. “I’m so, so tired, I… I just want to be where Sam is.”

“What about Doctor McCoy?” says Spock quietly, and Jim closes his eyes because *Bones*… “Do you not wish to be where he is?”

“Of course I do. But—”

And then, so quietly that he almost doesn’t hear it, “What about me?”

If Spock – the real Spock – is missing him… If he’s out there right now looking for him…

“But either way I’ll run out of water eventually,” Jim points out. “At least if I don’t drink I’ll be able to die in my right mind…”

“You will not die,” Spock says tightly. “We will find you.”

“But…” Jim licks his dry lips, tries again. “But I’ve been gone for, for—God, I don’t even know, and… You guys must’ve given up by now…”

“We have not, and will not, give up.” The Vulcan is almost glaring at him now. “The concept of family is expressed by an unwillingness to abandon or disregard one another, Captain. I learned that from you.”

And something about Spock butchering a line from Lilo and Stitch – or maybe something about Spock calling him *family* – cuts through every defense he has, leaves him wide open and vulnerable
“I don’t want to die,” he says, exhausted and ruined.

“Then the problem still remains—in order to live, you must drink. And if you drink, you will be haunted. As long as you choose to live, you will be haunted.”

Jim thinks about it. Thinks about the Enterprise, about his family, his home. Takes a deep breath. “I think I would rather live with my nightmares than die without them.”

Spock’s mouth curves almost imperceptibly in approval. “Good.”

And Jim closes his eyes and drinks.

---

The physically and mentally ill were the first to go. But they were not the last.

Jim had known – they all had known – that people had been disappearing. The sick, the elderly, people who were ignored at the best of times. Their absences were ignored, too.

No, not ignored. Avoided. No one, including Jim, wanted to admit what it meant if they were gone. If they’d been killed.

Eventually the day came when Jim could no longer avoid it. It was a regular day at school.

Class was interrupted and the entire school was directed to the assembly hall. At the doorway Kodos was there, ushering the children to the left, into the room. There were guards all over the place.

When Jim and Sam got to the front of the line, he directed them to the right, next to him, where a girl about Sam’s age – Erika Riley – was standing.

When all the kids had filed in, Kodos heaved a sigh and told one of the guard to stay with the three of them. He entered the assembly hall after the students, leaving Jim, Sam, and Erika with the guard in the hallway. The doors closed. And locked.

“I don’t like this,” said Erika immediately. “Why do I have to stay out here? My brother’s in there.”

“Quiet,” said the guard.

A moment later, Kodos’s voice, amplified by the microphone, echoed through the wooden door. “Some of you may know that our settlement has been threatened by a fungus that threatened our food and our very existence.”

Jim, Sam, and Erika looked at each other. None of them had known that.

“It will comfort you to know that we have called for help. We have attempted to evacuate. And services have been promised, but not delivered. The Federation has abandoned us. But we will not give up the fight to survive. We will continue to give the colonists of Tarsus IV the very best opportunity to live that they possible can. And that refusal to give up, that refusal to give in to weakness is a revolution the likes of which has never been seen.”

“I don’t like this,” said Erika.

“Quiet,” said the guard.
“And the revolution has been successful. But survival depends on drastic measures.” He paused. “Your continued existence represents a threat to the wellbeing of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death. Your execution is so ordered, signed Kodos, Governor of Tarsus IV.”

Jim stood, silent, frozen, listening and understanding and hoping desperately that this is a dream, just some horrible dream he’s going to wake up from any minute now…

That’s when the gunfire started.

“NO!” Erika screams. “My brother is in there!” She starts pulling on the door, shouting, “Kevin! KEVIN!”

“Quiet!” said the guard, drawing his gun, and Erika turned and kicked him in the stomach. When he instinctively doubled over, she knee’d him in the face.

He dropped to the floor, unconscious.

“You be quiet!” Erika snapped. Sam stared. “Don’t just stand there, help me get this door open!” They went back to pulling on the door. The wood did nothing to muffle the screams coming from inside.

“The lock is a simple push-button cylinder code,” Jim said. “I can do it.” And he could. After eleven tries (he can’t think with the bullets, the crying, the shaking of his fingers) he got the door open and Eika ran inside without so much as a glance back. “Kevin!!” she yelled, and disappeared into the chaos, into the gunfire.

There was a voice in the hallway behind them, around the corner. Coming toward them.

“Sam, we have to close the door, they’ll find us, they’ll—”

“I know,” Sam said, and then he ran inside too.

Jim cursed and followed him.

The next bit he doesn’t remember that well. He saw the children running away, screaming, begging for mercy. Falling.

The first person he could get to was Tom. He grabbed him and pulled him out into the hallway, where Sam and Erika had returned, Erika hugging a crying boy who looked just like her, and Sam with a dark-haired girl holding a baby, wide-eyed and shaking.

“She just gave her to me – my sister – she’s a teacher – she – I told her to come with me! She – ”

“I know,” said Sam. “Just go. Run!”

“Where?” Tom cried.

“That outcropping we went to last week when we ditched class,” Jim said, shoving them toward the door. “We’ll meet you there! GO!”

They went, Sam and Erika and Kevin and Natalie and Tom and the baby and with shaking fingers Jim closed the door and reactivated the lock and turned around—straight into Kodos.
The man he trusted, looked up to, imagined to be something of a surrogate father – was a murderer, and suddenly it was all he could see. The emptiness of his eyes. The gun in his hand.

Jim backed away, terrified, but there was nowhere to go. His back met the door and his legs were shaking too badly to hold him up, and he slid down until he was sitting. Staring in horror, unable to speak, unable to move.

“James. What have you been up to?” Kodos asked, his voice soft. Soothing.

Jim didn’t answer and he shook his head, smiled almost fondly. Stretched out one hand to help Jim to his feet.

The other was still holding the gun.

Jim swallowed hard and took his hand.

He couldn’t hide the way he was trembling, though, or the way he couldn’t stand to meet Kodos’s eyes.

The governor put a finger under Jim’s chin and gently turned his face. “Come now, James. You aren’t afraid of me, are you?”

And Jim can’t – he can’t say….

“Answer me, James.”

“No,” he whispered.

“Good,” said Kodos, brushing Jim’s hair aside. “Because I would never hurt you. You are far too valuable. Don’t you see? These unfortunate deaths, this cost I’ve paid in order to maintain even greater benefits… They’re all for you. For you and the rest of the prized members of this settlement.”

Jim stared back. No. That can’t be true….

“Yes,” Kodos said calmly. “What you will accomplish someday will be far greater than whatever wearisome, unremarkable achievements these people” – he gestures to the room next to them, to the gunfire and the sobbing and the screams – “can even dream of. This sacrifice was necessary to preserve the extraordinary futures of people like you.” He tilts Jim’s face up so he can’t help but look straight into Kodos’s eyes. “We are so similar, you and I.”

No, Jim thought desperately. I’m not like you. I’m nothing like you. I’m…

There was someone clawing at the locked door, screaming for help—a little girl. By her voice she couldn’t have been much older than Kevin.

“Please let me out… Let me out, Mommy, I’m scared! MOMMY!”

Kodos sighed. “You are angry at me now—that’s reasonable; I would be angry as well, were I in your place. But you’ll come to understand my methods in time. You’ll understand eventually that it is our duty to nurture greatness, James. At whatever cost. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

The little girl clawing at the door had started crying. “Please, please, Mommy, I’m scared – please —”

“Don’t think of it as a tragedy, James; think of it as a victory for the greater good.” Kodos cocked the
gun, and Jim flinched.

“Don’t think of it as a murder…”

He turned and shot straight through the door.

The screaming stopped. There was the sickening thump of a body hitting wood.

“Think of it as one less mouth to feed.”

---

“You are still intoxicated.”

Spock’s voice isn’t all that condescending, actually; just matter-of-fact, especially considering that he was dismissed from his duties as CMO that day for coming in to medbay drunk.

Worse, it had been Clarke who’d pointed it out. He’d been blinking at a patient’s chart (in medbay for a fever, while Jim could be – God…), trying to make sense of it, when Clarke had come up to him to ask a question about Ensign Heiss’s bloodwork.

“I ran it through three times but it…” He stops. Sniffs the air. “You smell like…” He stops again, finally seeing Leonard’s bloodshot eyes and three-day beard. “Dr. McCoy, how drunk are you?”

“No drunk enough,” he’d muttered.

And then Clarke had gotten this shocked, almost betrayed look on his face, and then McCoy got banned from his own medbay by his own intern.

(Len always knew that kid would make a great doctor.)

He should be ashamed of himself, really, but it’s hard to feel anything at this point.

“Jim’s still missing,” he replies, not bothering to look up from his glass.

Leonard knows very well what alcohol overdose does to the liver. He’s seen it in graphic detail, actually, has watched the liver work to repair itself hangover after hangover, building up scar tissue in the process—eventually it just gives up trying, essentially shuts down. Leonard knows this, and yet he can’t bring himself to care. He hasn’t shaved, he’s barely slept… Mainly he just walks around with his scruffy beard and his hair a mess and what Jim calls his ‘crazy eyes’…

It’s been four days. He spent the first three pretending to function like a normal human being, and the last one being evicted from medbay and staring at the form on his desk.

FORM GX-12 – MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD

Kirk, James T.: Captain, USS Enterprise

…Followed by a paragraph of legal gobbledygook, then a blank section where he’s supposed to outline the details of the situations, and a little line at the bottom for his name, like that’s all Jim’s life adds up to. A document and a signature.
Spock speaks up again. “I trust you have been updated on the medical bay’s daily report.”


“The bridge has been quiet as well,” Spock murmurs, and Leonard knows it has been. It’s as if when Jim left, all the ship’s life left right along with him. The Captain’s chair remains empty; Spock has been taking care of his duties as Acting Captain from the First Officer’s seat.

“The search for the Captain has proven difficult due to his being held underground, where the dilithium-rich soil has interfered with our tracking mechanisms,” Spock says, like he’s narrating a documentary. Len has no idea how the kid can stand listening to this all the time. “We have only just posited an approximate location, and are preparing to send in a search-and-rescue team in a matter of hours—”

“I know, Spock,” Bones sighs. “I have been paying attention. I’m drunk, not deaf.”

Spock raises one eyebrow. “I have discerned that humans prefer when background information is given before a disagreeable statement, even if that background information is redundant.” He pauses. “Doctor. You must attempt to rest before we beam down. This mission necessitates your maximum functioning.”

Leonard sighs again. “You too,” he says, and Spock gives him a look, but McCoy just flaps a hand back at him dismissively. “Oh, don’t give me that face, I know you haven’t slept once since—” Aaand, nope, not thinking about that. “Y’know, since. Even Vulcans can’t go five days without sleep. And…” He swallows, stares at his empty glass. “We don’t know what we’ll find down there.”

Spock watches him for a while longer, and then, “Very well. Good night, Doctor.”

He leaves, and Leonard pours himself another cup.

---

Vulcans’ dreams are qualitatively different from humans’ in a number of ways. First, they tend to last far longer than human dreams, which only span a handful of minutes. Second, Vulcans always remember their dreams, whereas humans more often do not.

Most importantly, however, humans’ dreams consist of a random assortment of thoughts, memories, and desires, both conscious and subconscious; Vulcans’ dreams are simply a subconscious method of sorting through matters the individual had been consciously contemplating.

Lately, Spock’s dreams have taken place over chess with the Captain—which is logical as he has found that it is the setting in which he is best equipped to analyze various quandaries.

It is also a setting that is hideously ironic considering the nature of his current quandary.

“Well, of course you know what happened to me,” the Captain says, idly toying with one of Spock’s captured bishops. “They probably shot me in the head a matter of seconds after the video shorted out.”

Yes, Spock had known that that option was statistically the most likely. Still, it is unacceptable. “They may not have,” he tells the Captain, trying to focus on removing his queen from a well-placed trap.

“No, they may not have,” Jim agrees easily enough. “They could have made it last longer, as punishment for messing up their plan.”

“I could’ve been beaten to death. Or stabbed, or electrocuted, or burned alive, or – hey, strangled, you’d appreciate that one.”


“Hey, you of all people know how easy it is to kill a human. They’re so fragile after all…”

Spock snarls, lunges across the chessboard, pulls the Captain into a hungry, desperate kiss. Unacceptable

The Captain kisses back, moans; but it is a sound of pain, not of pleasure, and Spock pulls back in shock, opens his eyes—

And finds himself alone in his dark quarters, aching all over and more exhausted than he had been before he’d slept.

---

Only once does he open his eyes to two hallucinations instead of one.

It’s weird because he’d never imagined Bones and Spock together before. Hadn’t imagined Bones at all, actually. Maybe it’s because even Jim’s wrecked brain couldn’t imagine Bones calmly telling him he’s going to die.

The hallucinations are talking to him now, but it’s not portents of death or unsolicited advice. It’s Bones saying, “Jim – God, Jim…” and Spock just standing there in ringing, ominous silence

“You’re all skeletons,” he tells them faintly, and he has to close his eyes because there’s light coming in from somewhere and it hurts. “Not there, the – the fire… Never said…”

“He’s been drugged,” Bones says through gritted teeth. “His pupils are dilated, even with the light exposure. I’m gonna need to sedate him…” He pulls something out of his kit, and one moment it looks like hypospray; the next it glints in the light like the blade of a knife.

“No,” he says desperately, and Bones stops. “No, please, I’m sorry…”

Bones looks like he wants to throw up. “Jim, you’re not… afraid of me, are you?” He takes a step forward, that skeletal hand reaches out to—

Jim shudders, tries to back away but there’s nowhere to go. “No, nonono, I don’t want to do this anymore, please…”

Bones blows out a long, sharp breath; puts away the knife. Jim relaxes.

“It’s a catch-22,” the doctor says, and his voice seems very far away. “He won’t let me near him with the hypo, but we need the hypo to calm him down.”

“There is,” says Spock slowly, “one other method available.”

Spock comes forward and Jim stiffens instinctively, but he knows Spock is safe, he’s safe and warm, almost too-warm, too-bright and burning though the pit of his stomach, and

And then there are fingerprints of pressure on his face and
And it’s safe and warm and bright and love and family and Jim could stay here forever, he wouldn’t mind…

And the pressure releases, and he opens his eyes and instead of knives and terror and swirling colors and wobbly lines there’s just Spock, and Bones, and the hypo in his hand, and something against his neck and –

And suddenly everything gets kind of nice and calm and loopy, and he slumps over to the side without really thinking about it, is caught by warm – too-warm – arms.

His eyes are half-closing, but he can dimly make out a tricorder floating – somewhere, somewhere inside the blob of blue in front of him. And Bones’s voice, his hand on Jim’s pulse, all restrained fury and concern, muttering, “He hasn’t eaten a thing in almost five days… His blood pressure is dangerously low –”

The chest Jim is leaning on moves a bit, someone asking something quietly, and then Bones’s voice replying, “…some kind of hallucinogen – damned miracle he didn’t have an allergic reaction…”

_Spock?_ he tries, but it only comes out as nonsense.

He tries again. “‘ones…?”

There is a pause, the tiniest tremble in the fingers brushing the hair from Jim’s eyes. “Yeah, kid?”

“I tried to save them… Promise… Sam ‘n Erika ‘n… ‘n Kevin he… He doesn’t…”

“I know,” says Bones quietly.

“I wan’ed to…”

Bones swallows, says, “I know you did, Jim.”

“I di’n’t…”

“Shhhh…” And there are lips against his forehead, a scratchy beard against his skin. “It’s okay. You’re safe. You’re safe. Go to sleep.”

---

There’s something holding him up under his back and knees, there’s movement – he’s being carried – warmth… A lot of warmth, actually… Something blue… _Spock_. Jim’s head is resting against Spock’s chest, over his heart, so he just lets his eyes fall back shut and listens…

And he… He doesn’t hear anything.

And that’s it, he just _panics_, he’s struggling against the arms around him, thrashing, trying to call for help but his voice comes out garbled and unintelligible. “No… no, please—” Not Spock, not his heartbeat, it can’t be gone, he _can’t—_

The hands holding him are steady, strong, but the voice speaking by his ear is the opposite. “Captain, what is it that you wish for me to do?” he asks, sounding almost _scared_. “Please, tell me what to do…”

Someone else is muttering, but Jim can’t make it out.
“Can’t,” Jim tries to tell them. *I can’t hear your, “– heartbeat, where –” is it? Where…?*

“Doctor, he’s – saying something about a – a heartbeat…”

“Heartbeat?” There’s a pause, and then another noise, and then a soft voice very close to his ear. “Jim, Vulcans’ hearts are in a different place. That’s why you can’t hear it.”

He relaxes. *But you can, “– hear it?” It’s still…?*

“Spock will let you listen to it later.”

“Spock?” Jim manages.

There’s a sharp intake of breath. “Yes, Captain.” And then, “Jim.”

Okay… Spock’s okay… Jim can go to sleep, just for a second…

---

Kirk has already been stabilized by the time Nyota enters the medical bay, but that doesn’t make the sight of him – unconscious, too-thin, hooked up to four monitors and three IVs – any less scary. Nyota has never seen him looking so helpless.

She’s never seen Spock looking so helpless either.

He’s been at Kirk’s bedside since he was brought in, just staring. According to Doctor McCoy, he hasn’t spoken to anyone the whole time.

Nyota gently touches his arm. “Come get some rest. You look exhausted.”

He doesn’t even look at her. “I must fulfill my duties to the Enterprise before tending to my own needs.”

And Nyota speaks forty-six languages fluently, can understand over a hundred more, and she knows more than anyone that even if you’re speaking the same language, depending on the dialect – depending on the person – the same words can mean completely different things. Every person has their own language, and she has learned that in the Spock-to-Standard dictionary, whenever he says “the Enterprise” he really means its captain.

“I believe I have identified the most unpleasant emotion,” Spock says, out of the blue.

It’s unusual enough that he admits that he has any emotions at all… “What’s that?” she asks.

He’ still staring at Kirk. “Helplessness.”

“Oh, Spock…” Suddenly Nyota desperately just wants to hug him, but she knows now isn’t the time. “He was hallucinating… There’s nothing you could have done.”

It doesn’t seem to make him feel any better. “He was calling to me for help, Nyota. He was in pain…”

“You can’t fight someone else’s ghosts.” He doesn’t answer and she tries to hold his hand, to gently rub their fingers together, but Spock pulls his own hand away.

“The Captain seems to have many ghosts,” he says quietly.
That is the moment Nyota starts to wonder.

---

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Spock turns from the viewport. “Yes, Lieutenant Riley. I appreciate your timeliness. Take a seat, if you will.”

The boy sits.

“Lieutenant, I am going to ask you a series of questions. I suggest you answer them honestly; if this proves difficult for you, I will make it an order.”

Riley just stares back at him and nods fearfully.

“In what capacity do you know the Captain?”

The lieutenant breaks into a smile. “He taught me martial arts! Best Starfleet professor hands down!”

Spock frowns. “Is there anything else?”

“Uh… nope, don’t think so.”

“Anything that might be cause for…lasting distress? Nightmares?”

Riley thinks about it. “Well… he stepped in front of a turbo phaserbeam to save me on one of our Starfleet sims...?”

“He risked his life for you?”

“Sure,” Riley shrugs. “But he would do that for anyone. I’m nothing special.”

---

Spock has to admit he is rather surprised when his younger self vidcalls him to ask – or, more precisely, demand – to know about Jim’s connection to Kevin Riley and Thomas Leighton.

“I assume if you are asking me, you have exhausted every other option – including consulting with Kevin Riley and Thomas Leighton themselves.” He knows himself too well to ask if he’s talked to Jim.

“Yes,” his alternate self responds immediately, unashamed of the fact that they are both well aware that he would only come to Spock as a last resort. “Dr. Leighton was extraordinarily close-lipped on the subject. Lieutenant Riley was more than willing to share his story, but it did not seem to have much relevance to the Captain’s…situation.” He gives him a searching look. “You are aware of the common denominator between them, then.”

“I do,” Spock confirms. “May I ask why you require this information?”

The younger Spock watches him steadily. “No.”

Fascinating. Was he so defensive when he was this age? “Unfortunately these are not my secrets to divulge. However, I can assure you that while Jim’s shared experience with Dr. Leighton and Lieutenant Riley were certainly not pleasant, they did not cause lasting harm. His father was able to protect Jim and his older brother from the worst of it.”
“I see,” his younger self murmurs. And then, “In that case, I no longer require your assistance.”

“No?” the Ambassador asks mildly.

“Allow me rephrase my statement: in that case, you can be of no assistance in my efforts to understand Jim’s experiences.”

Spock frowns. “To the contrary – I understand Jim and his experiences quite well.”

“Incorrect. You understand your universe’s Jim and his experiences.”

“I have not observed many differences between the two.”

“No, you would not have,” the younger Vulcan says tightly. “James Kirk can become whomever his audience desires him to be. Performing a convincing imitation of himself would be child’s play.”

“There may be several small differences between your universe’s Jim and my own,” Spock admits, “but they are essentially the same. They have the same destiny.”

“They are not the same,” says his counterpart, and the certainty in his voice takes Spock by surprise. “There may be just one disparity between our two Captains, but that single alteration has made them different to the point of unrecognizable.”

“And what, may I ask, is this one critical alteration?”

“Where your universe’s Kirk has had his family by his side, mine has been alone.”

---

He knows he’s in medbay even before opening his eyes, recognizes that low hum, that distinct smell of disinfectant, that vague feeling that he’s not in his own bed. Still, it’s weirdly quiet, far too quiet for medbay, why…?

He opens his eyes to a dark partition surrounded by blue curtains. The clock says 0251. Oh. That’s why.

Jim sits up to roll his aching shoulders and look around, and – and there’s Bones, sprawled out, fast asleep in the chair next to his bed. Jim looks closer and sees the dark bruises under his eyes, the unkempt beard, that overall bedraggled look he gets when he hasn’t slept properly in a week.

Or five days, in this case.

Bones is shivering slightly in his sleep. The medbay is freezing, and… Jim looks down.

Bones had piled three blankets on top of him and forgotten to get even one for himself.

Which makes sense, because at closer inspection, the doctor clearly did not plan to spend the night in that chair. He’s still wearing his gloves, even.

It’ll take a little maneuvering with the IV in his wrist, but Jim can’t just sit here while Bones shivers, and there’s an extra blanket on the a cart just a few feet over… No big deal.

He’s a little unsteady on his feet (probably should ask Bones how long he was out), but he leans on the IV pole and manages to retrieve the blanket. He lays it over his friend and Bones mumbles a little and burrows into it, and Jim thinks he’s gotten away with it for all of ten seconds before Bones’s eyes open, his face already going to scowl-mode.
“What the hell are you doing out of bed?” he snaps.

Jim climbs back into the biobed. “I’m not.”

Bones sits forward, groans, rubs the back of his neck, all the while still glaring at Jim. “I don’t even know why I bother to tell you anything anymore. You clearly don’t listen to a word I say.”

“I listen to you,” Jim protests.

“Right,” says Bones dryly. “Then tell me, what, exactly, did I say about getting yourself killed?”

“Uh… Don’t?”

Bones takes off the gloves, rubs his eyes, and picks up the PADD with Jim’s medical chart, sighing. But it’s not his usual it’s-a-shame-I’m-too-tired-to-kill-you-right-now sigh. It’s just… tired.

“I thought I had lost you for good,” he says quietly. He’s staring at the PADD, but Jim knows it’s less about the chart and more about not wanting to look at him.

“I’m sorry,” Jim says, and means it for once.

Bones puts down the chart with more force than is probably necessary. “I don’t want you to apologize,” he snaps. “I want you to not do it in the first place.”

“I can’t go back in time, Bo—” But somehow saying the name is very different from thinking it, reminds him of empty eyes and a too-wide smile, makes him feel dizzy and sick. “Doc.”

Bones gives him a weird look before looking away, rubbing his jaw, his eyes dark and grim.

“There’s a certain procedure, you know,” he says at last, and Jim knows it’s bad if Bones is going off on a non-sequitur. “After an officer has been three days in enemy territory with no contact. There’s a form. A GX-12, it’s called. Starfleet sent me one for you.” He stops, breathes, working hard to keep his voice steady. “Missing, Presumed Dead.”

Jim doesn’t know what to say to that.

“It’s basically an official way for Starfleet to tell us to stop looking for you. I was supposed to sign off on it two days ago.”

“Pike sent you that?” Jim asks, surprised.

“No,” says Bones. “He had to give the case to another admiral. Starfleet felt he was too personally involved.”

Jim opens his mouth.

“If you say any variation of ‘it’s because I’m a good lay’ I swear to God I will beat you to death with your own chart.”

Jim closes his mouth.

Bones is breathing deeply, the way he does when he’s trying not to explode at someone. Or when he’s trying not to cry.

“Even when we finally found you,” he says finally, “you were… you were pretty out of it. Wouldn’t let me near you with a hypo. Spock had to do that psychic voodoo of his—”
Jim blinks. “A mindmeld? Isn’t that kind of a big deal?”

“It’s a very big deal,” says Bones. “Family members and spouses only, in general.”

Oh.

Jim’s world has kind of stopped, but Bones keeps talking. “This place was like a wake or something, the way everybody was walking around, defeated, ready to snap. Gaila had to leave her shift early one day. Chekov punched someone out for talkin’ about you in the past tense… not that I blame him…”

“Chekov did?”

“Forget Chekov, you should have seen Spock. Barely talked to anyone, barely looked at anyone the whole time you were gone. He was… He was like an actual robot. Well…” Bones sighs heavily. “He was until we brought you back. I wouldn’t’a believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself, the way he was hangin’ around medbay, just staring. He was worried, Jim. Really worried.”

_Oh._ His hallucination was right. Spock _was_ worried about him, cares about him…would miss him if he were gone.

“Where is he now?” Jim asks, his heart pounding.

Bones gives him a look. “Considering that it’s past 0300, he’s probably at tap dancing lessons.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“Uhura came to get him after beta shift… I imagine he’s still with her.”

Right. With his girlfriend.

His girlfriend, who Jim _likes_. Who Jim is happy to see together with his First Officer and close friend.

He IS.

It’s not like he’s expecting anything from Spock that the Vulcan doesn’t want; Jim doesn’t – he doesn’t do that kind of thing, because…

Because he’s already come to terms with the differences between this universe and Cave Spock’s.

Anyway, even if he and Spock did have a chance, which they don’t, Jim has never actually _had_ a romantic relationship, and he doesn’t want one. True love is a myth he’s dispelled long ago.

It shouldn’t hurt. It _really_ shouldn’t hurt.

It does hurt.

_We’ve gone over this before, Kirk. Different universes, different rules, different relationships._

_You’re lucky enough that you got Spock to be your friend. Don’t get greedy._

“The so-called Children of the Sun had cleared out by the time we got there,” Bones is saying, “which is good, because we probably would’ve killed them if they weren’t, what with the state they left you in. It was the water, they laced it with some kind of hallucinogen, you couldn’t have known…”
“I knew,” says Jim. “I took it anyway.”

This seems to take Bones aback. “You knew?”

“What, you think I wouldn’t have taken it if I knew?” he asks, one eyebrow raised, as if there hadn’t been a very real possibility that he wouldn’t.

“No… Of course you would…” Bones replies, but there’s something vaguely awkward about it, like he wants to talk about something, and oh holy mother of disco, kill him now.

“Jim, when… When you were hallucinating, you said some…some things…” He looks at Jim as if hoping he’ll start spilling his guts just like that. Jim stares back at him.

“I mean, it’s not just this time that you’ve said something that…” Bones tries when he realizes he’s getting no help from Jim’s end. “When you were with Gaila…” He stops, rubs his jaw, looks at him helplessly. “Dammit, Jim, I’m a doctor, not a shrink. Just talk to me.”

Jim closes his eyes. “I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong.”

There’s a pause. “No one ever… There was never any kind of…?”

“No one made me do anything I didn’t want to - that I didn't agree to.”

“But—”

“Bones,” Jim says, and the doctor abruptly stops talking. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. Because I do, and…” Jim swallows. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me. But I really don’t want to talk about it now. Okay?”

“By ‘now’ you mean…”

“Ever.”

Bones just looks at him, looking so concerned and vaguely sick, and who knows what he’s searching for in Jim’s face, but after what seems like a decade of searching he leans forward and hugs him and whispers, “Okay. Okay.”

---

Lenore is jarred awake by the sound of shattering glass from the other end of the suite.

“Father?” she calls.

There’s no answer.

She gets out of bed and makes her way over to the other room. The first thing she sees is the glittering shards of what used to be the hotel desk lamp scattered across the floor. The next is father sitting up in bed, drenched in sweat, breathing hard and staring feverishly at nothing.

Lenore makes her way carefully around the glass.

“Father,” she whispers. “It was just another one of your nightmares.”

He doesn’t respond. His eyes dart around the room, never seeing Lenore, searching, always searching, for something. Someone.
She touches his arm lightly and he jolts, stares at her with barefaced terror until he finally sees her. Still, he doesn’t relax.

“It was him,” her father says, his voice choked, his arm pointing into the darkness. “I heard him. I saw him. I—”

“You don’t know what you saw,” she says soothingly.

His breath hitches, flattens into a kind of sob. He puts his head in his hands. “Those eyes could belong to no one else.” He inhales shakily. “He’s going to find me, Lenore. He blames me. He blames me for all of it. He won’t listen to reason. No matter where I go, he follows me…”

He can’t go on, and she sits with him, her hands trembling and her eyes stinging, wishing desperately she could fight her father’s ghosts. Wanting desperately to see him free.

To see him happy.

“I would do anything to rid you of your nightmares, Father,” Lenore says quietly, a cold, powerful need rising in her. “Anything.”

---

“Enjoying your cancer stick?”

Jim nearly jumps out of his skin and makes a noise that is most definitely not a shriek. Nope. It is a battle cry to banish those unwieldy doctors to whence they came.

“I thought you were going back to your quarters to catch up on sleep!” Jim shouts.

“And I thought you were semi-intelligent, so we’re both wrong! Do you have any idea what nicotine does to your brain cells, let alone your lungs?”

Jim shrugs and takes another drag on his cigarette. “He that cuts off twenty years of life cuts off so many years of fearing death.”

“You don’t actually believe that crap, do you?” Bones asks, appalled.

“No,” he replies, kind of surprising himself. “I don’t.”

Bones looks less than impressed, though. “Then put it out.”

“Oh come on…”

“Put it out, Jim. No smoking in my medbay. If you want to choke on pleural effusion you can do it in your own time.”

“Can I really?”

Bones scowls at him. “No.”

Jim rolls his eyes, but puts out the cigarette on the metal bedside table. “Fine. Your medbay, your rules, Doc.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Jim looks at him. “What?”

“It’s what you are.”

“No, it’s not,” says Bones. “Not with you. I’ve missed it, these past five days. I’ve… missed you calling me Bones.”

“Aww,” says Jim. “You love me.”

“Damn straight,” Bones huffs. He’s about to say something else when a female voice interrupts, “Captain.”

Jim turns. “Nurse Chapel. What’s up?”

“Commander Spock is here to see you,” says Nurse Chapel, gesturing to the doors just a couple of feet behind her to where Spock is standing straight and still, with his hands behind him.

Jim waves for him to come in. “Spock, dude, what are you waiting for? A trumpet fanfare?”

“I was merely giving indication of my presence,” Spock replies. “You seemed to be involved in a personal conversation.”

Bones rolls his eyes. “Don’t worry, that moment’s over. I just came back here to get some files, I’m going to sleep for real this time.” He gives Jim the avenging-angel eyes. “Still, if you light another cigarette, I will know. And I will smother you in your sleep.”

“That’s reasonable,” says Jim.

With that last tender statement of undying affection, Bones leaves the medbay, and Spock comes to stand by Jim’s bed.

“Besides for the stimulant content, the act of smoking itself can contribute to permanent damage of the trachea—”

Jim gives him a look. “Are you just here to lecture me on my lifestyle choices?”

Spock stops. “No. I wished to evaluate your condition.”

“Right,” says Jim. “Bones told me you were one of the people who went to get me back. You mindmelded with me…”

And is it just Jim or does he look almost uncomfortable? “I apologize. It was an… extenuating circumstance.”

He’s sorry. He’s sorry for melding with him.

Well, of course he is. They may be friends, but Jim isn’t that special to him. Not like the other Jim was to the other Spock.

“I also wished to fulfill my promise,” says Spock.

“What promise?”

“You… asked to listen to my heartbeat.”

Well, that’s awkward. “I did?”
Spock studies him pensively. “What do you remember of the past five days, Captain?”

“Not very much,” Jim admits. He remembers his conversation with Hallucination Spock with embarrassing clarity, but the rest of it has been slowly floating back to him in bits and pieces, mainly in his dreams. He remembers enough to know it’s probably a kindness that he doesn’t remember it all.

“In any case,” says Spock, “I made my commitment while fully cognizant. Therefore I am obliged to it.”

“Great,” says Jim dryly. “I’m glad you’re so eager.” But curiosity wins out over his pride, and he asks, “Vulcans’ hearts are in a different place, right?”

“Yes. Where a human’s liver would be.”

Once Jim has pretty much forfeited any illusions of self-respect he may as well enjoy it. So Jim leans over and rests his head against Spock abdomen, and sure enough, there it is. That constant, steady rhythm, strong and perfect and wonderfully alive.

“Wow,” he breathes. “That is awesome.”

When he finally pulls away, he notices Spock’s face looks greener than usual.

“You okay?” he asks.

Spock hesitates. Takes a seat. “Are you?”

“You’re deflecting,” says Jim accusingly.

“Perhaps,” says Spock. “Nevertheless it is a warranted circumvention. When I last saw you, you were unconscious.”

Jim sighs. “I’m fine, Spock.”

“‘Fine’ has variable definitions.”


Spock looks at him. “I have been told that oftentimes when humans are upset, they can be assisted through the application of a procedure referred to as ‘talking it out.’ I have been led to believe it is a sort of emotional dialysis.” He pauses. “I am willing to act as facilitator of this treatment if you so desire.”

And he sits there, attentive and a little bit apprehensive, like he thinks Jim is going to punch him or something.

Jim sighs. “Thanks, but no thanks. Talking it out is a good idea for humans in general, but this human isn’t really a fan.”

“Oh,” says Spock.

This is followed by an incredibly awkward silence.

“Would you prefer mathematics?” Spock asks.

“Mathematics?” says Jim.
“I find it to be…rather comforting in its constancy. Even under the most unfamiliar of circumstances, one plus one is two, two plus two is four, and so on. Even when all else is uncertain, one can place their faith in the stability of mathematics. It leaves room for no uncertainty – it is either right or wrong, and the difference between the two is straightforward, and quite obvious to anyone who cares to check. No matter what else changes, two plus two is four, four plus two is six, six times six is thirty-six, thirty-six times thirty-six is—”

“1,296,” says Jim.

Spock pauses, surprised. “Yes,” he says. “And 1,296 times 1,296 is…”

Jim has to think about this one for a second. “1,679,616.”

Spock stares at him for a long, long while.

“That is correct,” he says, at last.

Jim grins. “Math sounds good to me.”

---

Eventually Leonard’s overprotectiveness is outweighed by his desire to not go completely insane trying to keep Jim from making several daring escapes from medbay, and he lets Jim resume his duties with the condition that he take it easy for the next few days.

And so, because being a thorn in Leonard’s side is Jim’s actual job, the kid completes not one, not two, but three shifts on the bridge, has a two-hour-long workout at the gym, and even joins Spock on his rounds overseeing the labs for literally no reason.

So Bones considers himself completely justified in pouncing on him when they get around to medical.

“Doctor,” says Spock, while Leonard checks Jim’s vitals and draws up a quick assessment chart comparing his latest stats to his current ones. “We are here to determine the recent progress of the medical team’s research laboratory. Has your sample of Sakuro’s disease reacted to the experimental vaccine?”

“No new developments since last time,” Leonard replies, ignoring Jim’s eyeroll as he starts taking his blood pressure.

“There have been no developments whatsoever within the past month?” the hobgoblin repeats, somewhat judgily.

Len scowls at him. “Experiments take time—I’m a doctor, not a shaman. Although…” – he glances at the Vulcan – “there has been one recent change. One of the tribbles has gone missing from animal testing. You don’t happen to know where it would be, do you?”

“I do not,” says Spock. “Although considering the animals’ intellect as proven by several xenozooology research studies, it is rather illogical to use them to conduct potentially perilous experiments under the assumption that they are less complex than humans and therefore less valuable. Using that rationale, Vulcans should test their experimental vaccines on humans.”

Jim stares at Spock, then turns to Leonard. “All I heard was, ‘They’re cute and I want you to stop injecting them with exotic diseases.’”
“That is perhaps how a human would perceive it,” Spock replies primly. “The tribble’s small, furry exterior seems to calm the overactive human psyche. I, of course, am immune to its effects.”

“Fifty credits says he sleeps with that tribble more than he does with Uhura,” Leonard mutters to Jim, who grins back.

“In any case,” Spock interjects, “the Captain has already stated that in a hypothetical contest between the Enterprise laboratories, regarding which one’s research is ‘most pimpin’, my personal team’s work on synthetically produced and transported provisions would win with many airborne colors.”

“He’s right,” says Jim, and he’s smiling, wide and genuine and openly affectionate in a way Leonard’s never seen before.

“It’s not a fair competition,” Len points out. “Jim’s fear of tribbles biases him against us.”

“It’s not a fear, Bones, it’s a suspicion!”

“Oh, yes, sorry, a suspicion. Of the breathing pom-poms. That’s much less ridiculous.”

“I don’t have to sit here and be mocked,” Jim says. “I have lots of important captainy things to do!” And with that declaration he sticks his nose in the air and walks huffily out of the medbay. Already having checked one that time that his stats are all within the norm, Leonard lets him go.

“I had not been aware of the Captain’s personal vendetta against tribbles,” Spock murmurs, as Jim disappears around the corner.

McCoy snorts. “He’s never liked ‘em. Says anything that cute has to have something up its sleeve.”

“I am inclined to trust his judgment,” Spock replies, and that’s already weird enough, but then he continues, “as he would be uniquely qualified to make such an assertion.”

“He would be – ” This is when the Vulcan’s comment actually sinks in. “He would be what?” Spock just stares back at him, completely blank-faced. “I am afraid I do not understand the question.”

“Like hell you don’t,” Leonard hisses. “You—”

“You appear to be upset,” Spock notes calmly. “Is it because you are romantically involved with the Captain?”

“Because I’m… what?”

“It is only logical to ask. You seem unduly distressed by my remarking on the Captain’s objective attractiveness.”

Leonard stares. “His…” He cuts himself off, rubs the bridge of his nose. “Y’know what, on second thought I am not nearly drunk enough for this conversation. Enjoy your damn tribble.” And so he turns and goes back to his office, feeling Spock’s dark, piercing gaze on his back all the way.

Great, just what he needs; a jealous Vulcan. A jealous Vulcan with a crush.

A jealous Vulcan with a crush he probably isn’t even aware of himself.

God help them all.
That week marks another first—specifically, the first time Jim stays behind on a mission, a.k.a., the first time Bones forces Jim to stay behind on a mission, because the doctor is traumatized.

That isn’t what he said, of course. His actual words were, “You’ll beam down over my dead body, or more likely your dead body, because if you so much as look at that transporter I will get out my shotgun and shoot you in the face, don’t think I won’t.”

“You have a shotgun?” Jim asked, aghast.

“I’m from Georgia,” Bones replied. “Everyone has a shotgun in Georgia.”

“Spock,” Jim whined. “Bones is threatening his commanding officer!”

“As averse as I am to agreeing with Doctor McCoy,” said Spock, “I believe in this instance he is correct.”

And Jim just stared, too surprised to argue.

And so the landing team went down without him, which seemed to make sense at the time, since the captain hardly needed to be present for a milk run and there was no one in particular to be seduced, but as the hours tick by and they haven’t returned yet, Jim starts feeling left out. And bored.

Which is why he starts spamming their groupcom.

>>WHAT’S CRACK-A-LACKIN’, HOMESLICES??<<

The first reply, to the surprise of nobody, is from Spock. >>There have been no new developments as of 1.38 minutes ago, Captain. The mission is proceeding smoothly.<<

Followed by, >>TEXT US ONE MORE TIME AND I’M THROWING MY COM INTO THE PURPLE SPARKLY SEA I SWEAR TO RICKROLLING JESUS.<<

>>That’s a great mental image, Bones.<<

>>Are such oaths and irreverent language not considered sacrilege on Earth?<< Spock asks.

>>Shut up<< says Bones.

>>Oh, no, they definitely are. Bones is gonna have some ‘splaining to do when he gets on over to that all-you-can-eat buffet in the sky.<<

>>I said shut UP.<<

Jim grins. >>I bet he’s making his >:| face right now.<<

>>Affirmative, Captain.<<

And then, >>Is that not Doctor McCoy’s standard facial expression?<<

Jim bursts out laughing.

>>Says the Vulcan.<< comes Bones’s predictably curmudgeonly reply.

>>Now now, boys,<< Jim texts back. >>Play nice. I want to hear good things from the babysitter.<<
Despite Bones and Spock’s misgivings, Jim does eventually go back on missions; mainly diplomatic negotiations and routine patrols and the occasional summons from some Federation planet crying for Starfleet assistance, all of which basically entail Jim smiling and nodding and looking sympathetic over the latest disturbance in the Force.

He gets back from one such mission, essentially a full day of acting blonde and blue-eyed and not stupid enough to be insulting but not smart enough to be threatening, only to realize that it was his birthday. Is his birthday, technically – there are still forty minutes left to it. It’s the first year he hasn’t gotten stone-cold drunk.

Or the first year he hasn’t gotten stone-cold drunk yet, anyway, because Jim had figured if he forgot his own birthday then certainly everyone else did too. But sure enough, when Bones and Spock come over to his quarters to finish their respective mission reports, Bones shoves at him what is obviously a bottle covered in giftwrap.

“There,” he says, thoughtful as always. “I spent almost an hour getting Chapel to wrap it.”

“I’m touched.” Jim holds it up against his ear and shakes it. “Aha! Bones, how did you know I wanted a new supply of Klingon aphrodisiacs?” Bones rolls his eyes and Jim unwraps the bottle of Romulan ale, grinning. “This is actually perfect though. And I know just the occasion for it.”

Bones has already gotten the cups by the time Jim pops the bottle open. Really, Jim has no idea how he ever got by without him.

“I have a gift for you as well,” Spock says, and gives him a book. Vulcans probably don’t believe in wrapping paper. Jim grins.

“A Tale of Two Cities! Oh, man, I haven’t read this in years…” He flips it open to the first page. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…” He looks up. “Is that a message, Spock?”

“None that I am conscious of, Captain.”

Jim laughs. “Thank you - this is a wonderful gift. But for the last time, when we’re hanging out off-duty you need to call me by my name, okay? Don’t make me make it an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Spock says instinctively, then corrects himself: “Jim.”

“Why does there always have to be a message anyway?” Bones interrupts. He’s already downed his first glass and is reaching for a refill. “Why can’t it just be a book?”

“You can learn a lot from books,” says Jim. He takes a gulp of his own ale, breathing in the burn that travels down his throat. “You recognize yourself in them.” And oh, wow, he’s already kind of feeling it, Bones got the real good stuff this time. “For instance! Gulliver’s Travels is about a doctor with such a stupid first name that everyone calls him by his last name, who leaves his family to go on adventures on a ship to the great unknown.”

Bones looks kinda pissed. Maybe because of the ‘leaving his family’ thing… “Uh-huh, and how does Gulliver solve his problems?”
Jim thinks about it.

“Mainly by urinating on them,” he says at last.

“Great,” says Bones wearily. “I’m so glad we’ve had this talk.”

“Seriously, Bones, books can teach you all sorts of life lessons!”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that part,” he replies. “For instance, there’s this one character I know named James, like you…”

“Right…” says Jim.

“Who paid way too much attention to his hair, like you…”

“Right…”

“Who was pretty smart and very arrogant…”

“Right…”

“And then he got eaten by a crocodile.”

Jim pauses. “See, I was thinking Harry Potter and you went Peter Pan.”

“Are you suggesting that the Captain is likely to be eaten by a crocodile?” Spock asks, his voice so mild it’s actually insulting.

“You never know,” Bones mutters.

Spock turns to Jim. “In that case, we must remember to be vigilant for possible hostile encounters with the illusive space crocodile from now on.”

Jim bursts out laughing.

Bones scowls. “Y’all think it’s so funny, who was it that just got attacked by a space lemur last month?”

Jim stops laughing.

“We do not joke about the space lemur, Bones,” he says gravely. “That was terrifying.”

“I too reflect back upon that particular confrontation with a certain disquiet,” Spock admits.

“Hell yes you do,” says Jim, and lifts his glass toward him. Spock looks a bit bemused, but obediently clinks their cups together.

“Happy birthday, Captain,” he says quietly.

“And many more,” Bones adds like it’s a threat, and Jim gives his glass a little clink too, even though he brought up the space lemur. The doctor’s scowl softens. “I’m glad you’re alive, kid.”

Jim smiles back. “Me too,” he says, with his whole heart.

Spock looks back and forth between them. “I, too, am gratified that you are still living, Captain. I simply had not volunteered the information because I did not realize it was under debate.”
Bones puts his ale down with a clatter. “For God’s sake, you green-blooded leprechaun-wannabe! I am not competing with you!”

Jim grins into his glass.

---

The next away mission is a little bit different. It’s a First Contact, for one, and for another, it’s actually pretty easy to coordinate. The Ryloth representative seems friendly and intelligent, which Jim knows from experience means nothing as far as likelihood of future torture is concerned, but it’s still a lot easier to smile and make contact arrangements when the person on the other side of the viewscreen is smiling back.

Another difference is that Jim doesn’t have to convince anyone to let him beam down. In fact…

“Who amongst you is the highest-ranking officer?” the Ryloth interplanetary ambassador – Aiala, Jim thinks her name is, or maybe she was having a bout of tooth pain – asks.

“That would be me,” says Jim.

She inclines her head. “The royal family requests that they meet you first, alone, before authorizing a larger party to descend.”

“That,” Spock interrupts, and even Jim flinches at the cold, unyielding edge in his voice, “is not an option.”

Aiala looks at him. “If you are worried about potential danger, allow me to reassure you—”

“I will accompany the Captain,” says Spock.

“It is Ryloth custom for visitors to—”

“I will accompany the Captain,” he says again.

---

Long story short, Spock accompanies the captain.

It turns out the royal family really did just want to meet him, though, and the twi’leks really are friendly and intelligent, and those tentacle-ear things are actually kind of hot. Even if their jungle kingdom includes an…interesting idea of indoor plumbing.

Having met Jim and confirmed that he is not, in fact, a serial killer (they gave Spock a pretty wide breadth, which Jim couldn’t really blame them for), they let them call down the rest of the representatives. Scotty tells them it’s going to be a few minutes, so Jim and Spock wait on the balcony of the giant royal treehouse thing for the landing crew to beam down. It’s hardly a chore – the scenery is beautiful, and it’s kind of nice to be alone with Spock in a non-chess setting.

Spock doesn’t seem to feel the same way, though; Jim can see the tension in the line of his shoulders and the angle of his chin, just a tiny bit too perfectly straight to be at ease.

“What’s wrong?” Jim asks, dreading (hoping?) that it’s something he’s done.

Spock looks at him. “If I am to be entirely honest, I find First Contact rather tiring.”

“Really?” says Jim, surprised. “I love it, I love taking the first Federation steps on a brand new
planet. I love new experiences. They’re… comforting, you know?”

“No,” says Spock, tilting his head. “I find repetition and consistency to be comforting. Matters that always remain the same are the only matters in which it is logical to be confident. That confidence is comforting.”

“Like math.”

“Yes, like math. New experiences, unfamiliar experiences, on the other hand, are… interesting. Useful, perhaps. But I fail to see how they are comforting.”

“Well, think about it.” Jim gestures out to the beautiful jungle landscape around them. “Just a few hours ago this place was completely unknown. It was some kind of gray, nebulous wasteland, nobody had any kind of clue what was here. That’s scary. In a way it’s even scarier than if we could just be confident in our knowledge that it was a hostile planet. And now… Now we’ve seen gray, murky wasteland, we’ve stood on it, we’ve touched it. Here, look.”

He reaches out and rubs a petal of one of the snow-white flowers growing around the treehouse palace, then puts his hands out palm-up in front of Spock, who looks at them, confused.

“These hands just touched something that, four hours ago, was a mystery. That’s why I love new experiences – they turn the scary into the familiar. And if you can turn the scary into the familiar, you can deal with anything. I guess it’s comforting because the next time I’m faced with a situation I’ve never been in, something that scares me, I can look down at my hands and remember that this isn’t the first time I’ve done stuff I was scared to do – I’ve explored strange new worlds, sought out new life and new civilizations, I’ve gone boldly where no man has gone before… and every time it’s turned out okay. And maybe when what’s out there no longer scares me, I won’t be afraid of what’s in here either—and even when I’m dying, I won’t afraid to go into the final strange new world, where every man goes eventually.”

Spock doesn’t reply at first, and in the silence that comes, Jim’s monologue suddenly seems a lot more personal and a lot more embarrassing than it seemed when he was saying it. He only ever usually talks like that in his own head, really. Something about Spock just… puts him at ease.

“Fascinating,” says Spock.

---

As he and Spock get gradually closer, some of their conflicts, both personal and professional, end up fixing themselves.

Others don’t.

One of these is the issue of temperature on the bridge. Aside from the first few days of Jim’s captaincy, Spock has been the first one at his station for alpha shift every morning, and therefore he has set the temperature. The problem is, for Jim – and for the rest of the humans onboard – desert-dweller is not exactly their default state.

Spock even brings it up himself, offers to keep the bridge cooler, but Jim just feels like… as a Vulc an he already has to make so many accommodations for them. The least they can do is get a little hot for him.

Er. So to speak.

“It’s not a big deal,” he tells Spock. “The temperature difference isn’t that huge. And it’s a good
“excuse to take off a layer of clothes!”

“You want to make the uniform shirt optional?” Sulu asks. “Because I would be okay with that.”

“Oh no,” says Jim. “I was talking about underwear.”

Spock looks pained. It’s weird how Jim can tell even though his face doesn’t change. “Please do not, Captain.”

“What? Why not?” he asks, because yeah, it was a joke, but Spock is acting like it would just about ruin his life.

And Spock just looks at him dead-on and says, “Your posterior is already more than adequately accessible to the eyes of all crewmembers that wish to observe it.”

“Excuse me,” says Jim, rising abruptly. “Spock, you have the conn.”

---

Which brings Jim to one of the sinks in the men’s bathrooms, or more specifically on one of the sinks, where he spends a very productive ten minutes contorting himself into bizarre positions and sticking his butt out in an attempt to see it in the mirror. Yup, he confirms. Still as fabulous as he remembered it. So why doesn’t Spock want to see it?

“It’s okay,” Jim tells it supportively. “I still have faith in you.”

“What on God’s green and blue and magenta earth are you doing?”

Jim nearly falls off the sink whirling around. “Bones!” he shrieks. “Hi!”

The doctor is rubbing his eyes tiredly. “Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not,” Jim admits.

“And if I tell you to get down from there before you smash your pretty little head open, you’re not going to listen to me, right?”

“Probably not.”

Bones just nods dully and heads over to the urinals and goes about his business, and Jim returns to twisting himself into pretzels to get a good look in the mirror.

Eventually Bones frowns up at him and says, “Okay, what’s wrong?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“You didn’t even pretend to try to look at my dick,” Bones says, concerned.

“Oh,” says Jim. “Sorry about that. Do you want me to?”

“No, I’m good, thanks.”

“All right.”

They fall into a companionable silence while Bones finishes his business.

“I’m sad, Bones,” Jim announces.
“Didn’t we agree I didn’t want to know?”

“Spock wants me to wear underwear on the bridge.”

Bones gets that look on his face like he just swallowed a lemon.

“Er. Among other things,” Jim amends. “I was joking about going commando because it’s so hot on the bridge and he said he thinks my posterior is already too accessible to the eyes of all the crewmembers.”

The doctor makes a choked little noise that might be exasperation. Or pain.

“Bones. Spock doesn’t like me.”

“That’s what you deduce from this?” Bones cries.

“Well, he doesn’t like my pants.”

“He does like your pants. That’s the problem.”

“Bones. Focus. The task at hand.” Jim turns so his back is to his friend. “Are my pants obscene, yes or no?”

The doctor just tightens his jaw and washes his hands sourly. The fact that anyone can wash their hands sourly is impressive, but Bones would be the one to pull it off.

Jim unfastens the button on his pants and tries to see if the extra space makes them look better, but it’s hard to tell.

“Is this less obscene?” he asks Bones, who has at this point disowned Jim’s quandary and doesn’t respond. Jim undoes the zipper and tries again. “What about this?”

“The fact that I’m having this conversation is obscene,” Bones mutters.

“So much for Bones,” Jim tells his backside sadly. “I guess we’ve got to take care of this dilemma on our own.”

“Can you please stop speaking to your own body parts?” Bones grouches. “It’s highly disturbing.”

Jim ignores him. “Bones is so mean. You’re the only one who’s never let me down.”

This is when, in accordance with Murphy’s Law, he tries to turn further, steps back to get a better angle, and then all of a sudden he’s slipping off the edge of the sink and Bones is yelling something, and then he’s smashing into him as they both topple to the floor.

“Ow,” Jim whines, rubbing his nose where it hit McCoy’s collarbone.

The doctor just groans, flat on his back and his arms pinned by Jim, now splayed on top of him.

“Get off,” Bones huffs. “You’re heavy.”

Jim gasps. “You take that back!”

“No!”

Bones tries to squirm out from under him, but Jim grabs his wrists. Between the skills he learned
from sparring with Spock and the advantage of gravity, he’s able to effectively pin the doctor to the floor. “I’m not getting off until you say I’m not heavy,” he informs Bones. “And that I’m a sexy beast. And the most beautiful thing you’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“I refuse to compromise my integrity.”

“I respect that in a permanent bathroom floor fixture.”

McCoy starts struggling again, to no avail. Finally he gives up and mutters like Jim’s tortured it out of him, “Fine. You’re not heavy.”

“And?” Jim prompts.

Bones is giving him that ‘it’s really a shame I’m too tired to kill you right now’ face. “And you’re a sexy beast, okay?”

“And?”

The bathroom door opens. Jim is too busy terrorizing the good doctor for either of them to pay it any attention. “And you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on,” Bones says.

“Captain,” says the chilly voice of his First Officer. “Doctor McCoy.”

“Spock!” Jim squeaks.

He scrambles off Bones and Bones scrambles off the floor and they spend a long, uncomfortable minute awkwardly smoothing out their clothes and not making eye contact. When Jim finally musters the courage to look back up, the first thing he notices is Spock’s gaze at… at his… - Jim looks down at his own crotch - oh.

Jim zips his pants, his face heating up. Spock stands there, perfectly silent and perfectly calm, but something makes Jim feel like he’s planning a murder.


Jim whirs to face his First Officer. “It wasn’t what it looked like!” he babbles. “I was just – getting him into my pants.” Spock raises one eyebrow. Jim winces. “I mean, letting him into my pants. I mean letting him into the conversation about my pants! That we were having on the bridge.”

Spock just stares back at him like one of those Easter Island statues.

Bones looks as if he’s resigned himself to a brief and bloody death.


He practically runs for the door, not even stopping when Bones expression goes frantic and he hisses, “Don’t leave me alone with him!”

“See ya later, Bones!” Jim shouts, and is out and around the corner before the door closes behind him.

---

Jim does stop by medbay later, though, partially to check that Bones is still alive and partially to apologize for throwing him to the dogs, but mainly to confirm that they’re still on for Alcohol and
Feels tonight.

Bones is alive, which is good. But he also starts looking really cagey as soon as Jim shows up, and even more so when he reminds him of their plans.

“We can do it some other time. Let’s...let’s stay on the down-low for now, all right, kid?” says Bones, his eyes constantly flicking over to the medbay door, like he’s afraid of getting caught.


Has he mentioned that Bones is a terrible liar? The doctor can’t even make eye contact as he mutters, “I’m...very busy in medbay...”

“You don’t love me anymore!” Jim cries.

Bones’s crazy-eyes suddenly go a lot crazier. He leans in and hisses, “You can’t make jokes like that, Jim! Especially not in front of other people!”

“Why not? Bones, you’re acting really weird...”

“It’s because of the severe psychological trauma I’ve sustained during my friendship with you. Don’t worry yourself too much about it.”

“Is that why you don’t love me anymore or why you’re acting weird?”

“Unbelievable,” Bones mutters, walking away.

“I hope you step on a lego!” Jim yells after him.

---

So, suddenly finding himself free for the night, Jim goes to Spock instead.

The Vulcan’s eyes narrow. “Doctor McCoy was otherwise occupied, I presume.”

“No way!” says Jim, even as his brain is kind of freaking out about Spock’s creepy ESP-ness. “You’re always my first choice!”

Spock looks at him doubtfully but agrees to come by later, which is the important part.

---

Of course, they end up playing chess.

Usually their conversation ranges anywhere from philosophy to silly small-talk to comfortable silence, but this time there’s something thick and heavy between them. Whenever Jim tries to bypass it, tries to direct the conversation to more enjoyable ground, Spock shifts it straight back to duty-oriented topics. Their respective tasks for tomorrow, their next command staff meeting, the ongoing repairs in IT.

“You know,” Jim says when he can’t take it anymore, “we could talk about something other than the ship.”

The Vulcan looks at him like non-ship-related things never enter his mind, which is both horrible and sadly easy to believe.
“Like what we do in our free time.” Spock is still looking at him blankly. “Like the stuff we used to do before we came to Starfleet. You know. Personal stuff!”

Spock cuts him off, his voice harsh and uncompromising. “I am already aware of far too much about your personal life, Captain.”

“Oh,” says Jim. “Okay.” And he stares at the chessboard without really seeing it, trying to force down the stinging hurt rising to the surface, threatening to swallow him.

“I did not intend to imply that I am not interested in learning more about you,” Spock says, and he looks helpless and guilty, and Jim realizes that this is just as uncomfortable for Spock as it is for him.

He’s also trying to make things better between them.

“Okay,” Jim says. “So… what’s one thing about you I would never guess?”

Spock thinks about this. “I imagine it would surprise you that I am betrothed.”

“You’re…? You’re engaged?” What?? “You and Uhura—” Because Jim has told himself over and over again that he’s not jealous, that he’s happy for them, that he wants them to be together, so many times that he’s almost started to believe it, but this… This is way too fast, he’s not ready, he can’t—

“I am not betrothed to Nyota,” Spock says, and something inside Jim goes boneless with relief. And then, “I am betrothed to a Vulcan woman named T’Pring.”

“Uh,” says Jim, because… “Does Uhura know about this?”

“Oh, of course,” Spock replies, and Jim doesn’t bother to get his hackles up about it because he knows he’s not trying to be condescending.

“Every Vulcan is betrothed to another of the opposite sex during childhood,” Spock explains. “When as adults they wish to procreate, they are expected to do so with their betrothed, unless a specific and compelling counterargument is posed.”

That sounds… It sounds horrible to be honest, but Jim knows better than to say that. “How logical,” he mutters.

“Yes,” says his First, in a voice that makes it very obvious that he doesn’t want to talk about it. “And yourself?”

“Me? I’m not… Oh. Oh, right, something about myself you wouldn’t guess. Okay…” He pauses, considering. “Well, I used to play poker to pick up money as a kid. I got really good at it too. It’s all about observation… In poker, you have to play the people, not the game. And if there’s anything I can do, it’s play people. So I got good, started gaining something of a reputation for it, attracting customers…. That’s why I suspect the casino never bothered to check my age even though they I’m pretty sure they knew I was only seventeen.”

“That does not surprise me in the slightest,” says Spock.

“No?” He doesn’t really know how to reply to that, so instead he smiles and says, “You’re saying that doesn’t count, I get it. Hm…. How about this, you probably wouldn’t guess that I worked as a manicurist for a while.”

Spock blinks. “No. I would not.”
“Well, for two weeks. And for most of it I wasn’t actually working…” Spock raises his eyebrows. “Most of the people working at that place were immigrants, and all of them were desperate, and the owner took advantage of that – made them work sixteen hours a day for half the minimum wage, treated them like something you’d find on the bottom of your shoe…. It wasn’t right.”

“You led a strike on the salon,” says Spock.

“Hell yes I did! We made signs, we marched, we made inspirational speeches, sang songs, did everything but people’s nails for a week and the owner finally had to fold or lose all his customers. I got fired at the end, of course, but in the meantime I got the ladies at the salon reasonable hours and a decent salary. And they taught me Vietnamese, so it was worth it.”

“I see.”

“And I learned how to give a mean manicure! Which probably doesn’t interest you, fine, but even the most stoic of customers appreciate the hand massage at the beginning. Here, I’ll show you…”

He takes Spock’s hand in his, and the Vulcan stiffens but doesn’t quite pull away.

Jim starts his routine, presses the center points of his wrist until Spock relaxes his hand somewhat, then works his way up, rubbing firm circles into his palm. He’s either doing a great job or a terrible job because Spock’s breath hitches.

Encouraged by the reaction, Jim moves up to his fingers, massaging the inside of the knuckles, and then pulling along the length of each one. Finally he laces his fingers together with Spock’s and pushes his hand gently back, guiding it into a full rotation.

“Feels good, right?” Jim asks when he’s done, and as he untangles their fingers, Spock makes this… this needy sound, and Jim nearly chokes because he is going to his own special kind of hell for thinking that that noise sounded almost like a moan.

He looks up, about to ask what’s wrong, and stops; the Vulcan’s lips are slightly parted, his eyes so dark they seem black.

“What—” says Jim, but Spock finds his words before he can finish.

“Excuse me,” he says, his voice strangled. “I must…” He seems to fight for the words, and then, “I must go.”

Spock is out the door before Jim can so much as call his name.

“What the hell…?” he wonders, looking at their unfinished game.

---

“Access granted to: Admiral Christopher Pike. For: Captain’s log transmission, USS Enterprise,” the computer chirps.

Pike sits back in his seat. “Play.”

“Captain’s log,” says Kirk’s voice. “Stardate – uh…”

“2259.548, sir.”

“Thanks, Spock. We have recently returned from Potak III, where we had the fortune to encounter Ms. Clarabelle Seine—”
There’s a snort somewhere in the background, and then a creaking noise that may be Kirk turning in his chair. “Oh I’m sorry, Bones, I didn’t realize my Captain’s Logs were up for public opinion.”

This is followed by a brief pause, and some indistinct grumbling.

“…As I was saying, we met Ms. Clarabelle Seine, a uniquely beautiful, intelligent woman, with fire-red hair and a graceful gait, who would never speak the word ‘failure’—”

This time it is Spock’s voice that interjects, “Primarily because Ms. Seine can no longer pronounce the letters ‘f’ or ‘r’ as a result of an unfortunate gesture of affection involving her lips and her childhood pet dunghill bird, Nippy.”

“Having been fully briefed on the matter of Potak III’s razorcat infestation,” Kirk continues, ignoring him, “the landing team immediately confronted the problem. We managed to locate the leader of the razorcat pack, and made our strategic approach as per my fiendishly clever plan of attack…”

McCoy’s voice cuts in. “Your plan of attack consisted of, and I quote, ‘Let’s get in its face and see what happens.’”

“Any plan you walk away from is a good plan in my book.”

“You have very low standards.”

“Yes,” comes Spock’s voice. His tone is vaguely judgmental. “He does.”

McCoy groans. “Nothing is going on, you flip-headed alien cyborg! You’re crazier than a Minarian scorpion dipped in syphilitic fish custard.”

“Guys, shut up, I’m getting to the good part.” Kirk clears his throat and puts his Official Captainy Voice back on. “For reasons still unknown to us, the razorcat queen felt threatened by our presence in her domain…”

“Reasons still unknown to us”? You tried to scratch her behind the ears!”

“Yeah, and for some reason she got mad! I mean, she reacted aggressively…”

“Fortuitously, our party was equipped with the state-of-the-art model heat-activated carbonizer pistol, operationalized through the combined frequencies of several bronze-sheathed micro-reactors projecting a charged and compressed hydrogen laser that can disrupt any variety of material—”

“Yeah, but it didn’t work so I threw it away and grabbed a rock that did.”

“Is that what hit her? Good God, man, are you an idiot!?”

“However, the blow to her cranium did not seem to mollify her agitated state—”

“No, really? What was your first clue?”

“I believe it was the fact that she continued to bare her teeth and growl at us—”

“All right, Han, Leia, chill out—”

“…Prompting the Captain to approach the issue via a divergent method, namely shining a small laser at the cave wall in an attempt to distract it—”

“Hey, it works for cats, it was worth a try—”
“…Which was about as helpful as tits on a bull—”

“A rather ill-chosen metaphor, Doctor, as under certain circumstances male breasts have been known to produce milk to the same extent as their female counterparts, thus making a bull’s nipples in fact quite helpful.”

There is a long moment of silence.

“Spock, that is an incredibly disturbing piece of information and I never, ever want to find out how you learned it. Also, I’m a doctor, not an idiot. Also, your ears are stupid.”

“Isn’t this fun?” Kirk’s voice says brightly. “The three of us getting along so well.”

Pike looks at the half-full bottle of headache pills on his desk and wonders if he shouldn’t get another one, just in case.

---

It doesn’t hit him all at once, it more… creeps up on him slowly.

It’s partly the way she greets him after missions, looking disgruntled but distinctly relieved that he’s okay, her arms folded and muttering, “If you’ve destroyed another uniform shirt I swear to God…”

It’s partly the way she shuts down idiots without a second thought, even if technically she’s just supposed to clean his room and sort his mail, once cutting off a particularly stupid episode of The Gary Mitchell Show with a, “Mitchell, you need to learn to give your opinion when it’s valued, which is never.”

It’s partly the way she knows Jim has boxes upon boxes of nonperishables hidden all over his room and never says a word about it.

Maybe it’s all or nothing of those things, but he’s going through the shift schedules one day, idly glancing at the names in front of him when he finally has the epiphany, realizes who Rand reminds him of.

He opens her personnel form. Takes a closer look.

**Yeoman: USS Enterprise.**

**Rand, Janice.**

Huh.

---

“By the way,” Bones says the next day when he, Spock, and Jim are eating lunch in the mess hall after alpha shift. “I noticed you switched our yeomen, so mine will be working for you, and yours will be working for me…”

“Yep,” says Jim.

“Was there something wrong with Rand’s work? I thought you liked her. Why’d you reassign them?”

Jim shrugs and takes another bite of his chicken sandwich. “No reason,” he lies.
The doctor obviously doesn’t believe him, but lets it go, maybe so he can nag him about more important things. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, it’s disgusting. Now you’ve got some of it on your face…” He licks his thumb and starts rubbing at the corner of Jim’s mouth, and stops a moment later when Spock starts looking kind of terrifying.

“It’s, uh. It’s right there,” Bones says, pointing vaguely in the direction of Jim’s face.

“Okay,” says Jim, confused, and scrubs the spot where McCoy’s thumb had been a moment ago.

Of course, there’s no rest for the medical staff, and a moment later Bones gets paged about some organ trauma patient and has to go, leaving Jim and Spock at the table alone in the semi-awkward silence.

“Captain, if I may ask,” says Spock eventually. “Why did you exchange yeomen with Doctor McCoy? I had been under the impression that you were quite satisfied with Ms. Rand’s work.”

“I was,” says Jim. “But you know the human phrase—if you love something, let it go.”

Spock tilts his head. “What is the suggested procedure, then, if one does not love something?”

“Well, then you should definitely let it go.”

The Vulcan stares at him, confused.

“Basically, let everything go, who even cares,” says Jim.

“Fascinating,” Spock murmurs. “The continued existence of the human race remains perplexing to me.”

Jim pats him on the shoulder. “Hey, I’m right there with you.”

---

Leonard is having a bad day.

Correction: Leonard is having a Horrible, Terrible, No Good, Very Bad day.

First the medbay replicator wasn’t working, so he had to go over to Engineering to get his caff, during which one of the damn fools keeping this tin can running asked Leonard if it was okay to touch that with his bare hands.

“Touch what?” said Leonard, and then the moron had reached out and stuck his palm flat on it, and promptly electrocuted himself.

Anyway, after a lot of cursing (from Bones), crying (from the idiot engineer), and a none-too-gently applied membrane preservant followed by twenty minutes with the dermal regenerator, the guy was fine, if a little bit electricity-scented. Of course, dealing with Mister Flambé made him late to a vidconference between the CMOs of twelve Starfleet flagships, which Leonard had actually been looking forward to, hoping they would address common problems like how to keep the idiot geniuses in engineering from burning their fingers off, for instance, but ended up just being an intergalactic pissing contest over whose medical research is most advanced/interesting/expensive.

So with his morning shot and already cranky, he’d gone back to his patients only to discover that the repairman had come to fix the replicator and Savannah had started taking his temperature, and W’taufma had been having flu symptoms all morning and just kept treating his highly...
immunodeficient patients, claiming his headache and bloodshot eyes and running nose were “allergies.”

And then, to top it all off, just before lunch he received a notice that Spock has requested to transfer physicians, asserting that Dr. M’Benga was more capable of addressing his medical needs.

So, yes, by the time Leonard gets to the mess hall for lunch he is well into a Bad Mood. He puts his meal together, glaring at everyone and everything and sending interns and lieutenant colonels alike skittering out of his way, pressing themselves against the walls to avoid the warpath. Even getting the last chocolate pudding doesn’t help.

He sees Spock sitting at a corner table and stomps over, plunking his tray down at the seat across from the green-blooded cyborg.

“Doctor McCoy. What a pleasant surprise,” Spock says, like it’s such a pleasant surprise that, oh dear, he just remembered he has to go somewhere else immediately.

Leonard glares at him and hisses, “I can’t believe you of all people would be so… so illogical! You don’t switch doctors over some crazy, paranoid jealousy about me screwing Jim!”

Spock’s expression goes flat and emotionless. “You confirm it, then.”

“No!” Len shouts. “I didn’t say we were actually doin’ it, I said that’s what you’re jealous about! Listen to me very closely now, because I am not going to say this again: Jim and I. Are not. In a. Romantic. Relationship.”

“Then it is a purely physical arrangement,” Spock muses. “That is a far more logical possibility. I have had some difficulty speculating as to what the Captain would see in a sub-par doctor such as yourself.”

Leonard gapes. “What?”

“I said, I have had some difficulty speculating as to what the Captain would see in a sub-par doctor such as yourself. Was my phraseology unclear?”

“I heard you the first time, you dick—”

“I apologize if my observation offended you,” says Spock, not at all apologetically. “Of course, I am qualified only to speak from my own experience in your care. Perhaps you are more… knowledgeable in the medical matters of humans. However, it has become exceedingly clear to me that you do not know, as it were, ‘the first thing’ about Vulcans.”

Leonard splutters, inarticulate with rage.

This, of course, is when Jim shows up in the mess hall.

“Bones!” he says cheerfully. “Buddy! Pal! Song of my heart, brother of my soul!”


“Why do I always have to want something?” Jim asks, wounded. “Why can’t I just want to spend time with a couple of my closest friends?”

Leonard stares him down.

“I don’t have any ulterior motives!” Jim insists. And then, “But I wouldn’t say no to a teeny tiny bit
Len is about to go for his usual response ("no," or "hell no," if he’s feeling creative), when an idea occurs to him. A nefarious idea.

(He’s probably been hanging around with Jim too long.)


“Really?” Jim says in delight.

He takes some on the pudding on his finger. “Here,” he says, and watches Spock stiffen out of the corner of his eye.

Jim grins. “You’re the best, Bones!” And he leans down to suck off the pudding, moaning around Len’s finger, his eyes half-closing in pleasure, and yeah, that’s erotic even for a human.

For a Vulcan it must be downright pornographic.

“Mmm…” Jim straightens, licks his lips in satisfaction. “That was great. Well, I have a vidconference with Pike and Archer—see you both later!” He pats Spock on the shoulder and is off, whistling.

Spock is sitting ramrod straight, his fists clenched, his eyes dark and furious. It is an expression Leonard has seen only once on his face; right before he almost choked Jim to death on the bridge.

“I demand that you apologize for your reprehensible behavior immediately,” he says, his voice almost a snarl.

“What behavior?” Leonard asks innocently. “I don’t know the first thing about Vulcans.”

Spock’s jaw works for a long, long moment, and then he pushes his chair back and storms away.

I’m probably going to regret that one day, Leonard thinks, watching him go.

Then he shrugs and digs into his chocolate pudding. But today is not that day.

---

“Do you know what feels great?” Jim asks over chess that night, apropos of nothing.

Spock seems to be waiting for more. When none comes, he replies, “I presume you are hoping to employ the human technique in which the speaker presents a hypothetical question and the listener is meant to supply a generic response in order to optimize the speaker’s verbal presentation.”

That is not cute, Jim tells himself sternly. And it is most certainly not the cutest thing you’ve ever heard. Don’t smile, don’t smile, don’t smile… ahhh, too late. “Never change, Spock,” he says, grinning, and Spock glances away. He looks a little bit greener than usual, actually…. Or maybe that’s just the lighting.

“It is highly unlikely that I will be able to adhere to that request, Captain. The natural developments comorbid with aging—”

“You know what feels great?” Jim asks over chess that night, apropos of nothing.

A pause. “Very well… Jim,” he says, like he’s not sure he’s earned the right to.
Keep it together, Kirk. It's just a name. ...Aaand he's smiling again. “So. Where was I…? Oh, yeah. You know what feels great, Spock?”

This time Spock is prepared. “What is the stimulus to which you are referring?”

Jim moves his bishop three squares up and over. “Saying no to sex.”

Spock raises one eyebrow. “I was not under the impression that you undertook that particular activity very often.”

It’s not like that should come as a surprise. Jim can’t even argue that it isn’t usually true.

“Wow,” Jim says, hoping his smile doesn’t look as fake as it feels. “That has got to be most pretentious way I’ve ever been called a slut.”

“I – apologize, Jim – I did not intend – ”

Jim waves him off, even if the comment still doesn’t settle in his gut immediately. “I know,” he says, and sits back to study the board. “Now, don’t get me wrong, saying no to sex isn’t as good as saying yes to sex. Obviously. But there’s definitely something orgasmic about it.”

“Fascinating,” Spock says, in his special I’ve-given-up-on-making-sense-of-you kind of way. “Are you referring to a specific event?”

“Yeah, actually… You know how Yeoman Rand is working for Bones now, and his yeoman, Ross, is working for me?”

“I had been aware.”

“Well, she kind of… ahh, she kind of made me an offer today. A pretty obvious one.”

“A proposition,” Spock says.

“Yeah,” says Jim. “And I said no. It was… I dunno, it was kinda cool. It felt good, saying no to a one-night stand to preserve more important things.”

Spock’s lips go tight and thin. “You are referring to your relationship with Doctor McCoy.”

Jim blinks. “What? Why would my relationship with Bones keep me from sleeping with Yeoman Ross?”

“Then the two of you are not…exclusive?”

“Exclusive?” Jim echoes, baffled. “Exclusively what?” That’s when he realizes – “Oh, Spock, no, we’re not… That time in the bathroom, that really was just a misunderstanding. Me and Bones aren’t like that.”

Spock looks at him, eyes narrowed. “Your relationship seems to be closer than the average human male platonic friendship. Your behavior toward each other is more akin to the romantic.”

“It does,” Jim confirms. “And it is. But we’re still not sleeping together. Never have and never will.”

Spock’s face doesn’t change, but Jim is picking up vibes from him that are…content. Or – no… more like self-satisfied.

“Actually, when I said I switched yeomen with him for no particular reason, I wasn’t being entirely
honest.”

Spock raises one eyebrow. “I had presumed as much.”

“I’m playing matchmaker. See, ‘cause they’re both smart and sarcastic and about two hundred percent done with me. And her name begins with a J. It’s perfect!”

“You believe them to be romantically compatible because of the first letter of her name?” Spock asks.

“No! Well, okay, yeah, but that’s not the whole reason. It’s just that, as got to know her, I got this feeling… Spock, do you believe in fate?”

“Absolutely not,” says his First Officer.

Jim sighs. “Okay, forget that, then. How about… You know that feeling when you meet someone, and you might not even know them that well, and you have no idea what you’re going to be to each other, but you just get the sense like if you don’t hold on to them you’ll regret it?”

This is met by a longer silence than Jim thinks the question warrants, until finally: “Yes,” says Spock quietly.

“That’s how I feel about Bones and Rand. Just from the mutual snark I know they’ll get along, but that doesn’t mean they’ll have any sort of spark. So I made her his new yeoman, because even though Bones says he’s open to relationships with lower-ranked officers, I know in the end he’ll be too squicked out to make a move on his yeoman. So he’ll basically have this smart, sarcastic, beautiful girl hanging around in his quarters all the time and he won’t be able to do a thing about it.”

Jim laughs evilly. “He’s going to get so frustrated. It’s going to be glorious.”

“Your plan is rather insidious,” says Spock. “I approve.”

Jim actually does laugh this time.

“If I may ask one more question, Capt—Jim. If what you were hoping to preserve was not your relationship with Doctor McCoy, why did you not agree to sexual congress with Yeoman Ross?”

“Oh,” says Jim. “It’s nothing mysterious. I just don’t… I don’t want to get into that kind of thing with someone I could fire. You know? The power imbalance thing is just… it’s weird.”

Spock seems to consider that. “It must be challenging, then, to satisfy your sexual appetite, as you have the ability to fire almost everyone on staff.”

Jim doesn’t know if having this conversation with Spock of all people is more horribly ironic or just plain old awkward. “Well… yeah. It hasn’t been easy. But I can keep it in my pants if I have to.”

“Still,” says Spock. “Sexual deprivation in humans can cause distraction, agitation, difficulty sleeping…”

“Thanks,” Jim says wryly. “You really know how to encourage a guy.”

The Vulcan keeps going like Jim never spoke. “They are negligible symptoms under normal circumstances, but you in particular need your faculties at top ability at all times.”

He sighs. “Yeah. I’m going to have to do something about that eventually.”

“Everyone besides for the First and Chief Medical Officers are inapplicable, and since you do not
intend to have sex with Doctor McCoy, I…” Spock freezes, seems to get hit with some kind of realization. “Ah. I understand what you are circuitously telling me.”

“Uh,” says Jim. “You do?” That’s good, because Jim sure doesn’t.

“Yes, and I… approve of your approach.” Spock looks at him. Almost smiles. “It is… highly logical.”

And truth be told, Jim has no idea what he’s talking about (not sleeping with his lower-ranked staff? recognizing that he needs to screw the first off-ship aristocrat he can?), but he’s grateful just for the opportunity to be the reason for that look on his face.

“Thanks, Spock,” he says, smiling back.

“You are welcome,” Spock replies. And then, “Check.”

“What? Ohhh, no you don’t.” And Jim grins and leans forward to do what he always does—turn the game around.

---

Maybe Nyota is a pessimist, or maybe just realistic, because she’d always kind of known that her romance with Spock would end with the words, “I would like to renegotiate the terms of our relationship.”

“In what way?” says Nyota, wary.

“It has come to my attention that it would serve the ship more effectively if our sexual affiliation were to be nonexclusive,” says Spock.

Well, that part she hadn’t been expecting. “You want to be able to sleep with other people?”

“With another person.”

“Kirk,” she says, and can’t even say she’s surprised.

Spock certainly seems to be, though. “Yes. Had you been aware of his sexual circumstances?”

Nyota knows far too much about Kirk’s sexual circumstances, unfortunately. “No, I just…guessed.”

“The Captain does not wish to engage in coitus with crewmembers over which he has an excess of power. This combined with his elevated sexual drive has proven to become an issue of distraction and possible endangerment of the Enterprise. As Doctor McCoy is an unviable alternative, the Captain has expressed his request for my assistance in this matter.”

Either Nyota’s Spock-to-Standard dictionary has gone all wrong, or Spock just said… “You mean like a booty call?”

“I am not familiar with this colloquialism.”

“You want us to be nonexclusive so you can be available when Kirk gets horny.”

Spock nods, seeming almost relieved that she gets it.

“That doesn’t sound like him,” says Nyota, frowning. “Are you sure he—?”
“Yes. I hope you can consider the option logically. This is no way reflects a devaluation of my respect or regard for you, of course; however, my duty to the Enterprise comes first.”

If Nyota needed confirmation that her and Spock are over, that they’ve always been over really, she just got it. “You know,” she says, and she manages to keep her voice light, almost conversational, even as the misery twists in her chest. “I’m very good at xenolinguistics.”

“You are,” Spock agrees, obviously confused by the non-sequitur.

She continues, “And I’ve noticed that everyone talks in code, when you get right down to it. For instance, you… Whenever you say ‘the Enterprise,’ you really mean Kirk.”

Spock stares.

Nyota touches his cheek, feels the tears rise behind her eyes, smiles at him. “It’s okay,” she says softly. “This is how feelings work. They don’t follow our rules – we follow theirs.”

Spock stares at her. "Are you terminating our relationship?" he asks.

"Never," she replies. "You will always be one of my closest friends. That's why I want to let you do what feels right."

The Vulcan closes his eyes. “I have been given that advice before. And yet I still do not understand... How can I follow my feelings when they are so powerful, and they can change so suddenly?”

Nyota leans forward to give him one last, gentle kiss. “They don’t really change. We just figure out what we were really feeling the whole time.”

“I see,” he murmurs, when she pulls away. He looks at her, almost awed. “You are one of the kindest and wisest individuals I have ever met. I care, and will always care, for you deeply…”

“I know.” Uhura smiles, even though she kind of wants to cry instead. “But your duty to ‘the Enterprise’ comes first.”

---

The next day is bright with new possibilities, new horizons, new alien epidemics for Bones to cure, new medical safety protocol for the rest of the crew to ignore, accidentally getting like half of them infected in the process.

All things considered, Jim is really quite impressed that Bones only storms around the bridge shouting expletives and threatening a whole lot of unnecessary surgery rather than actually murdering anyone.

Spock is calmly watching the doctor’s circuit with a kind of bemused disdain. “The general conclusion I have gleaned from this display of histrionics is that there is an inordinate amount of medical care to be given at this time. Is that not so?”

Bones gives some sort of nod/twitch thing that’s essentially an agreement, even if only by lack of disagreement.

“In that case, would not the more logical response be to begin administering that medical care, rather than to waste time impressing upon the command crew how very much work there is to be done?”

“No it would not be more logical, you helmet-haired vegetable killer” – Spock raises one eyebrow –
“because the reason I am impressing upon you infants how much work there is to be done is so you can find me people to help me do it all. Some qualified medical staff, maybe! An assistant! Something! I’m a doctor, not a god!”

“I’ve seen you naked, and I know that last part is arguable,” Jim volunteers.

Not only does that successfully arrest the legendary Wrath of Bones – he actually blanches. “Jim. I told you,” he hisses, and his eyes dart to the First officer’s chair, “you can’t go around making comments like that!”

“Why ever not?” Spock’s voice asks smoothly, as the person himself comes up behind Jim. “It is illogical to be perturbed by statements that bear no resemblance to reality.”

Bones looks confused and kind of suspicious, and as Spock hands Jim the PADD with the list of the crewmembers in quarantine, his fingers brush against Jim’s in this oddly purposeful way, which, uh…all right? It feels good. Kinda weird, but good.

“Jesus Christ,” says Bones.

Jim looks up at him questioningly, but Bones just gets this constipated look on his face and stalks off, cursing and muttering to himself.

And Spock… Spock seems a tiny bit smug, actually.

“What just happened there?” Jim asks.

“Please be more specific, Captain,” says Spock. “There are countless events that have occurred recently across a variety of locations.”

Jim sighs. “Forget it, never mind.”

---

For all the fun and games, it’s not actually all that easy being the captain of a Starfleet flagship. Jim gets an almost ridiculous amount of forms to sign and fights to break up and places to be.

And then there are the issues he has to deal with not because he’s a captain but because God just seems to enjoy giving him the occasional pie in the face, like having not one but two Spocks that tell him absolutely nothing.

“What do you mean he knows!?” Jim yells.

Ambassador Spock looks back at him innocently from the viewscreen. “I mean precisely that. The alternate version of myself is well aware of my existence. We have had several conversations, in fact. Though perhaps conversations is an overstatement…”

“But,” Jim stammers, “paradoxes! Worlds exploding! General mayhem and death!”

“Thus far we have managed to avoid most of those events,” says Spock mildly.

Then… he had lied to Jim to…to what? To make him go back and…

And create the same scenario that he and his Jim Kirk had been in.

To give Jim a chance of getting The One.
And on the one hand, *oh that pointy-eared bastard*, and the on the other hand…

“I get what you were trying to do,” Jim says at last, deflating. “And I appreciate it. But me and you – the other you – it’s not happening in this universe. In fact, I think you made it worse.”

“He cares for you more than you may think.”

“He tried to *kill me* on Sulu’s console.”

The Ambassador pauses, looks almost uncomfortable. “Yes. Perhaps that was not the most extensively strategized plan I have developed in my considerable lifetime.”

“Ya think?” Jim mutters, sitting back and crossing his arms.

They sit for a while in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, and Jim knows he should probably be pissed right now, but he just… He finds he just can’t look at Spock – at the deep lines on the old Vulcan’s face, the interplay of warmth and pain in his eyes whenever he sees Jim – and even pretend to be able to stay angry at the guy.

“What do the two of you even talk about?” Jim asks.

“You, generally,” says Spock.

Well that can’t possibly be good. “What about me?”

“The last time we spoke we discussed the similarities and possible differences between yourself and my universe’s Kirk.”

“There don’t seem to be that many differences,” Jim says, mainly because he knows it’s what the Ambassador wants to hear.

Sure enough, he smiles. “Those were my sentiments as well. Regardless of the route you took to get there, both you and he took command of the same ship…” And Jim says at the same time as Spock does, “The Enterprise.”

“You have much of the same crew,” Spock continues. “And much of the same leadership style. You even have the same favorite food…

“Chicken pot pie,” Jim and Spock answer in unison.

“And the same favorite book…”

*The Sun Also Rises,* he says, at the same time as Jim says, *The Great Gatsby.*

They stop and look at each other, surprised.

“Really?” says Jim. *The Sun Also Rises?* I mean, it’s fine… It’s very well-written, obviously, Ernest Hemingway and all. But the doomed romance thing isn’t my cup of tea, it’s just so overwrought and unnecessarily exhausting. Like some kind of glorified soap opera.”

The Ambassador stares at him for a long moment. Finally he says, “Does *The Great Gatsby* not tell the story of a doomed romance as well?”

“No,” says Jim. “Well, yes. It does. But *The Great Gatsby* isn’t really about Gatsby and Daisy’s affair at all; it’s about the great Gatsby. It’s about a kid who gave up being *good* so he could become *great* – so he could be flashy and rich and impressive, but empty – because that’s what Daisy wanted
from him. It’s about a kid who tries to be loved and fails. On the other hand, *The Sun Also Rises* is essentially an epic romance. It isn’t about why Brett Ashley couldn’t be loved—it’s about the men who tried and failed to love her. So, you’re right, both of them cover the same ground. They’re almost mirror images of each other in fact. But because of where they’re coming from, they end up creating completely different stories.”

The Vulcan doesn’t respond.

He doesn’t respond for a very long time.

“I see,” he says at last, and Jim wonders how much he really does see. “It seems my younger self has proven that age is not always proportionate to wisdom.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was correct—you are not your alternate self at all.”

His tone – sad? accepting? disappointed? – sends Jim to the edge of panic, and he opens his mouth to take it back, to rave about *The Sun Also Rises*, to say whatever he needs to say to make Spock not disappointed in him anymore.

But then Spock says, “I have done you a disservice.”

Jim stops, feeling confused and derailed. “What?”

“You are your own person, Jim,” he says. “That much is already quite clear, and I imagine will become all the more so as time goes on.”

“I’m—” sorry, Jim tries to say, but Spock cuts him off.

“Do not apologize for who are and who you will become. You are not bound by anyone’s expectations, not even your own, and I apologize for assuming otherwise.” He pauses, looking at Jim as if peering into his soul or something. “If you will allow me the opportunity, I would like to say what I should have said when we first met.”

Jim nods, curious and wary.

And the Vulcan says, “Hello. I am Spock. It is a privilege to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Jim says, and the smile that comes is enormous and uncontrollable and relieved. “I’m Jim Kirk. You know, I think this might be the beginning of something wonderful.”

Chapter End Notes

Several scenes and lines here have been influenced by the works, "My New Pants" by Punk and "My Big Breakup" by Sab. Head over to their pages right now and if you’re lucky you’ll influenced by them too, I cannot recommend their writing highly enough!
When Jim gets to the medbay for their meeting, Bones is gazing morosely into the distance, looking for all the world like someone just shot his dog.

If he had a dog, which he does not.

And if he had a gun to shoot it with, which Jim is still kind of holding out hope that he also does not.

And if Bones himself were not the person most likely to shoot the dog if he did have the aforementioned dog and gun.

Anyway.

Bones catches sight of Jim in the doorway of his office, glares, and says “come in” (as if Jim has ever needed an invitation) in a tone more suited for saying “it’s a shame that baseball bat to the head didn’t quite kill you. Next time I’ll use the shovel.”

“Well, someone’s looking cheerful today,” says Jim, being the rubber to his glue like a boss. “What’s wrong?”

“Haven’t been sleeping well,” he mutters.

When Jim looks closer, he feels like an idiot for not noticing it sooner. His friend looks exhausted, like he’s barely keeping his eyes open; hunched over his desk, glass of whiskey already in hand, staring at some indiscriminate spot on the wall behind Jim.

“You don’t look too hot,” Jim says, starting to get worried. “Maybe you should take some time o—”

“We should switch our yeomen back around,” the doctor blurts.

Jim stops, surprised, and then: “Oh,” he says, finally understanding, the smile spreading across his face. “That kind of losing sleep.”

Bones looks at him suspiciously. “What kind?”

Jim grins back, waggling his eyebrows. “The kind where you can’t settle down ‘cause you wanna get you some cute blonde yeoman.”

“Die,” says Bones.

“You know, Rand is great at bossing people around. I bet she’d look fantastic in a tight little dominatrix—”

“Die in a fire,” says Bones.

“Or you could give her a very, very thorough medical examination…”

“Is this your doing?” McCoy demands, cutting him off. “Did you know she was like… Did you know she was studying to be a doctor before her mother got sick and she had to switch career tracks?”

Jim blinks. “No, I had no idea.” Which is an answer to the second question, not the first, but Bones doesn’t have to know that.
“I’ve tried to get her out of my head – I’ve tried like hell, but I can’t.” He sits back in his seat and groans. “I must be some kind of pervert, lustin’ after my yeoman like this…”

“Actually,” says Jim helpfully, “perverted means aberrant or unusual, and the maid kink is not at all unusual. You’d be surprised how many people—”

Bones gets this look on his face like he kind of wants to die. “Really not helping, Jim. The point is she’s turned me into a lecherous old man!”

“You wish you were lecherous,” says Jim. “You’re about as lecherous as a blindfolded thirteen-year-old Puritan girl with self-esteem issues.”

“And you say my metaphors are ridiculous,” Bones mutters.

“And she’s only six years younger than you, dude, she’s older than me, and we almost—”

Bones scowls. “Yes, great, let’s bring that back up while we’re talkin’ about bad decisions.”

“Hey,” Jim protests. “It would’ve been an awesome decision. I’m a great lay.”

“If it were just about getting laid it’d be one thing! But it’s about a… a relationship, and she’s young and gorgeous and single, and I’m…”

“Young and gorgeous and single,” Jim finishes. “I honestly don’t see the problem here.”

“Divorced,” Bones corrects him.

Jim narrows his eyes. “So you’re divorced. She won’t be your first. So what? You’re damaged goods?”

And then there’s the part he doesn’t say, but he knows Bones hears: If you’re damaged goods, what does that make me?

Sure enough, he looks slightly apologetic. “No…”

“Look,” Jim says. “If you really don’t want to make a move on her, just ignore her. Schedule her to be in your quarters when you’re on shift or something.”

Bones rubs his face wearily. “She can carry an intelligent conversation about heart stents, Jim.”

“Ah,” says Jim. “Well then, you’re screwed.”

Bones sighs. “Just… change her position, okay?”

Jim stares hard at the doctor, who just stares right back until Jim finally gives in.

“Fine. She’ll get her position reassignment tomorrow.”

Bones relaxes, looks at him with obvious relief, that Jim almost feels bad about what he’s about to do.

Almost.

---

“I am going to kill you,” says Bones through gritted teeth, storming onto the bridge the next morning.
“Hi, Bones, how are you doing this fine morning, it’s so nice to see you!” Jim says brightly. “‘Hi Jim, buddy, pal, it’s a pleasure to see you as well!’”

“The Captain is playacting as both you and himself,” Spock clarifies. “Although he seems to be portraying your character in a highly inaccurate manner…”

“Thanks for the update,” Bones mutters, chagrined. Then he turns on Jim, “I told you to switch our yeomen back around!”

“No you didn’t,” says Jim. “You told me to change her position, and I did.”

“To my *personal assistant*?” the doctor says in a voice that would not be called a shriek, mainly because the person stupid enough to call it that would find themselves in possession of a dramatically shortened life expectancy. “REALLY?”

“Hey, you were just up here yelling about how you needed a personal assistant last week!”

Bones looks about ready to tear his own hair out. “Yes but not *her*!”

Jim frowns. “Why not? Are you not happy with her work?”

“No,” McCoy admits huffily. “She does great work. Even I can’t find fault with it. But—”

“Are you not happy with her attitude? Her professionalism?”

“No! She has a great attitude, she’s patient, and sensible, and competent, and she knows more about medicine than all my interns combined, but—”

Jim puts a hand up and says seriously, “Bones, you asked me for a personal assistant. Due to her organizational skills, incisive thinking, and medical background, I deemed Yeoman Rand to be the best person for the job. I will demote her only if it turns out she’s *not* the best person for the job, not because she had the misfortune of being pretty.”

Bones stares at him, the anger bleeding out of his expression and something like guilt bleeding in.

“If you can’t stop thinking about how she looks under her uniform, that’s your own problem,” Jim finishes, his tone allowing for no arguments.

“Right,” says Bones, looking dazed and kind of shell-shocked. “You’re right. Sorry… I’ll just go… to the…” He blows out a breath and shakes his head and goes back to the turbolift, back toward medbay.

By the time the doors close behind him, Jim can’t hide his smirk anymore.

“You appear to be pleased by the result of your exchange with Doctor McCoy,” Spock observes.

“Pleased does not *begin* to cover it, Mr. Spock,” Jim says, turning to face Spock, grinning like a maniac. “He’s basically stuck with her forever. He’s going to want her all the more because she’s around all the time, and he’ll have no one to blame it on but himself. *Plus*, now that I’ve introduced the idea of what’s under her uniform, he’ll barely be able to think about anything else.”

Spock looks at him, head tilted. “Fascinating,” he murmurs. “Your talents of manipulation are truly to be feared.”

“Aww… You always say the sweetest things.”
A moment later when his First gives him the PADD listing the day’s duties, their fingers rub together – as they often do these days, actually – sending electricity up Jim’s arm.

“Captain,” Spock says, too low for anyone else to hear. “Do you require my… services?”

Like his First Officer-ing services? Jim looks back up at him, confused. “Not any more than usual. Why?”

Spock just nods curtly and goes back to his seat.

---

It isn’t even a full eight hours later, when he’s heading back toward the bridge after his break between alpha and beta shifts, that Rand catches him in the hallway. “Captain, you need to demote me.”

Jim blinks. “Well that’s not something I hear every day.”

“Doctor McCoy hates me,” she says, looking miserable. More miserable than just an employee with a difficult boss.

“Ah,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “Look, the fact is… Bones hates everyone.”

“He hates me more than most,” says Rand.

“No, listen to me. Bones hates everyone—but if he actually shows it… Well, that’s a big compliment, coming from him. That’s how you know he likes you. It means he feels comfortable with you, and you can feel comfortable with him.”

“Really?” she asks skeptically.

“Have I ever lied to you?” says Jim.

Rand gives him a look.

“. . . I mean, in this room?”

So, yeah, it takes a while, but to Jim’s (very well hidden) shock, she actually ends up buying his story.

Which is the primary reason he enters the bridge that morning for his shift with an enormous smile.

“Either he’s in a really good mood or he’s about to kill somebody,” says Sulu.

Jim bursts into evil laughter.

“He’s about to kill somebody,” Sulu confirms.

“You know,” Jim says, plunking himself down into the captain’s chair and rubbing his hands together mad-scientist-style. “If the whole captaining thing doesn’t work out I think I’ll go into professional matchmaking.”

“Dear Lord,” says Uhura.

“It is probably best for all involved, then,” says Spock, in that dry tone Jim has come to adore, “that you are an exceptional captain.”
Jim just turns and grins at him.

---

Which is all nice and good, except it’s pretty easy to pretend he doesn’t have a massive, unrequited crush on his First Officer when they’re eight feet apart (yes, he’s counted the distance between their chairs, shut up) on the bridge in front of the entire command crew.

It’s not as easy when they’re just one foot apart and Jim is opening his door to let Spock in for chess and budget reviews, and Spock is dressed…differently.

Differently as in better. Differently as in hnnngh.

He’s wearing a tight black shirt and even tighter black pants like a Vulcan James Bond or something, and Jim really should not be so looking forward to watching his friend enter his quarters and take a seat all because Jesus he is dying to see what those pants look like from behind, or even better, on the floor next to his bed.

In Jim’s defense, though, Spock brought it on himself by wearing those pants.

And cologne.

A lot of cologne, actually.

A lot a lot of cologne, actually.

Jim’s eyes start watering, and he covers his mouth and nose to try to dampen the smell. “Spock… it’s kinda…hard to b-breathe with all that…”

“I apologize,” Spock says stiffly. “Humans’ senses of smell differ greatly from those of Vulcans. As I could not locate a recommended cologne dosage, I was forced to estimate the amount of scent you would find pleasing. It appears my calculations were mistaken.”

Human senses aren’t that bad, Jim wants to say, but it really is getting hard to breathe, even with the bottom half of his face covered. He keeps trying to inhale but nothing enters his lungs, almost like his throat is closing up, stopping his breath and kicking his pulse into overdrive and everything goes kind of twirly around him, and oh. Oh, he knows this feeling, this is a…

“Spock,” he manages to gasp. “C-can’t—”

“Captain?”

Luckily, Spock catches him as he collapses, the Vulcan’s arms tightening around him in what is probably the world’s quietest panic attack.

“Bones,” Jim chokes out, and then he hears the oddly-distant beep of a com and Spock’s voice saying something he can’t quite make sense of, and then he hears nothing at all.

---

“Of course you’re deathly allergic to a perfume,” Bones is muttering angrily when Jim wakes up in medbay. “Of course you are.”

“It’s a cologne,” Jim tells him, but it comes out sounding more like “ssuklulhgn” because of the stupid mask over his nose and mouth. He reaches to pull it off but Bones stops him and does it himself, grumbling all the while.
“Spock was going to take you to the medical bay himself, but he didn’t want to further expose you to the allergen,” says another voice, and Jim turns to Uhura sitting in the chair next to him. “He asked that I ‘ascertain that the Captain will yet survive’ while he showers.”

Jim can hear the dry sarcasm in Spock’s words even through the medium of Uhura’s voice, and it stings, the fact that Spock never sends other people to handle tasks he cares about. So either Jim is a task he doesn’t care about, or he trusts Uhura deeply, implicitly, completely.

He’s not sure which possibility is worse.

“Well,” he says, pushing himself up into a sitting position and even managing to smile at her. “I’m pretty sure I’ll live.”

“This time,” says Bones ominously.

“Never let anyone dampen that optimism of yours, ‘kay, Bones?”

Uhura gets to her feet. “I should tell Spock you’re awake. He’s waiting for me.”

She says it so casually, like having someone waiting for her, missing her, noticing her absence – having Spock waiting for her – is a typical, run-of-the-mill experience, and a rush of jealousy washes over him, overwhelming and unfamiliar, and it widens his grin and pulls barbed words from his mouth. “If you hurry you might even be able to join him in the shower! You would be conserving water, you know. Sharing resources. Very logical.”

Uhura doesn’t reply, just looks at him, long and hard. And then, “He was wearing the pants I bought him,” she says out of nowhere. “What did you do to make him wear those pants?”

“What did I do?” Jim repeats incredulously. “I didn’t do anything to him! Meanwhile he almost killed me via olfactory warfare!”

“Wow. Still? Really?” Uhura rolls her eyes. “You’re an idiot. Almost as much of an idiot as he is. The two of you deserve each other.”

“Huh?” says Jim, but she’s already walking away.

---

There are two reasons Nyota decides the new command officer promoted to the communications sector deserves a closer look, one obvious and one less so.

The first, of course, is that she has a new, young, bright-eyed command officer who will either a) try to undermine her control, because command track is notorious for its control issues, or even worse, b) slow them all down with his idealistic but well-meaning conception of what communications is supposed to be. So it’s good to scope out the kid beforehand, to start troubleshooting before the real problems arise.

The other reason is because when he comes up onto the bridge to thank Kirk for the promotion, the Captain reacts— Well. He reacts.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in communications sector these days?”

“Yes!” says Riley, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet. “My shift starts in five minutes. I just
wanted to thank you for promoting me! It means so much to me that you—"

“Think nothing of it,” says Kirk, his voice slightly stilted. “I didn’t do it for you—I mean, I did, because you’re the best person for the job—But I didn’t—” He stops and blows out a hard breath.

Riley takes the opportunity to add quickly, like he’s eager to get it out in the open, “Also, just know that if you ever need help with anything, you can count on me! I’ve always looked up to you, sir—”

“Oh,” says Kirk. His eyes are wide. Almost panicked. “No, I don’t…”

Which is really quite strange, because although it’s par for the course for Kirk to act like a jerk because he’s uncomfortable with praise, now it seems like he’s just… uncomfortable.

“I think what he’s trying to say,” Nyota puts in gently, “is ‘you’re welcome.’”

Riley turns and smiles at her. “Lieutenant Uhura! I guess you’re my new superior officer.”

Nyota smiles back. “I guess so. I’m looking forward to working with you. You know, you are the youngest officer ever to hold your position – it’s a big honor. Have you told your parents about the promotion yet?”

“Well, I told my grandparents,” Riley says. “My parents died when I was young. My whole family was on Tarsus IV.”

Horror stabs into her, steals her breath. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry…”

“It’s okay,” says Kevin. “I mean, it’s not, I just… I don’t remember it.”

“You don’t remember it?” she repeats.

“I don’t remember anything about the six months of the famine. Except…” Suddenly Kirk’s head snaps up, his expression surprised and almost frighteningly intense. “It’s weird, I remember certain little things,” Kevin continues, oblivious. “Like the smell of the hideout we kids were in? And sometimes I’ll get these – these random flashes of color, and I know it’s from Tarsus. And… and I remember part of this one song my big sister used to sing to me when I was sad. It’s called ‘Beyond Antares,’ I think. It still makes me feel better, even now. ‘The skies are green and glowing,’” Riley sings quietly, and both Kevin and Nyota look at him in surprise. “What?” he says, defensive.

“‘The scented lunar flower is blooming,’” Kirk sings quietly, and both Kevin and Nyota look at him in surprise. “What?” he says, defensive.

“I wouldn’t think you’d like that kind of music,” says Nyota.

Kirk leans back in his chair and gives her a flirtatious grin, but there’s something halfhearted, almost tired, about it. “There’s plenty of me you haven’t seen yet, Uhura.”

She scoffs, rolling her eyes in her usual response to the daily sexual harassment, but her mind files the song away as important information. Even if she doesn’t know what it means yet.

---

The Tarsus guards had known about Kodos’s arrangement with Jim – they had even been allowed to watch, once – and so it was only a matter of time before one of them requested to borrow Jim as a reward.
Kodos had refused.

When Jim asked him why, Kodos just looked mildly surprised and said, “Of course I won’t simply lend you out. I would never force you into anything you didn’t want.”

“Right,” Jim said, though that had just made him more confused. If being lent out to random guards was something he didn’t want…then what was this?

The governor noticed him staring, leveled Jim’s gaze with his own. “What do you want, James?”

And Jim had no idea what he wanted, but he knew what Kodos wanted, which was all that mattered.

“You,” he said, and was rewarded with a smile.

---

Even after nearly four months of captainhood, even with the consequent obligation to act like he has his act together at least some of the time, Jim still has to sternly tell himself that he is an adult, dammit, and he is not going to hack into Bones’s quarters and climb into bed with him like he used to, no matter how vivid the nightmare, no matter how real and close and alive Kodos had seemed. Especially now that Bones actually has someone he wants in there with him.

Instead he goes to the observation deck.

And to his not-really-so-surprising surprise, someone is already there.

“You know,” Jim says, by way of greeting. “I know you say Vulcans require less sleep than humans and all that, but whenever I’m up at 4 AM you always seem to be awake. Do you really sleep or is that just a clever misdirection from the fact that you’re actually a vampire?”

“The same could be asked of yourself, Captain,” Spock replies, turning. “Considering the frequency of your late-night circuits, I calculate a 78.433% likelihood that you do not complete the nine hours of sleep per twenty-four standard hour unit recommended for humans.”

“You included the percentage!” Jim says, delighted. “I’d thought you’d stopped doing that.”

“To most humans, scrupulous accuracy is perceived as an endangerment of their exaggerated sense of efficiency,” Spock explains. He hesitates for just the slightest moment, and then, “However, it seems to… give you pleasure.”

Jim leans forward on his elbows, letting the boundless canvas of stars and the familiarity of Spock’s presence ease the tension from the muscles, the memories from his mind. “It gives me pleasure when you do you without caring what anybody else thinks of it. You shouldn’t stop calculating likelihoods to the thousandth decimal just because everyone else is jealous that they’ll never have a fraction of your brilliance.” Jim pauses. “Unless you’re doing that thing where you calculate how likely we are to die some horrible, ouchy death, then yeah, you should stop that.”

“I will take your feedback under consideration,” Spock says dryly, but there’s a hint of warmth – amusement, maybe – there, so Jim just grins and looks back up at the stars, at the uncharted constellations calling to him, filling his ears, tugging his feet forward.

When he was little, he used to pull his blanket over his head and imagine he was in outer space. Now that he’s in space he imagines he’s back inside his enormous blanket cocoon, in the warm, safe darkness interrupted only by pinpoints of light as perfect and impassive and immaculate as they have been for billions of years.
“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” Jim murmurs.

Spock follows his gaze. “It is a trivial virtue, to be beautiful from so far a distance.”

Jim had never thought about it that way… or maybe he just hadn’t thought about it that way for a very long time. He’d just kind of gotten used to the pattern of everything – everyone – being more beautiful from far away; less so when he got up close, saw them for who they really were. Somewhere along the line it had turned into an expectation instead of a disappointment: everything is better from far away. It’s just a fact of life.

With one exception, Jim thinks, looking at Spock out of the corner of his eye, at the one thing that has only gotten more and more beautiful the closer he gets.

He could stay like for hours, in easy silence, free to surreptitiously watch his First Officer and friend, held fixated, fascinated by dark eyelashes and pale skin and the way he moves, stands, exists carefully, a prison of feral power kept constantly under perfect control, intimidating and mesmerizing all at once.

Crises of the dear-God-why-are-you-so-attractive variety aside, an equal if not greater force Jim has to reckon with is Spock’s mind – his distinctive, unfathomably complex synthesis of moral and logical integrity, as brilliant and as multifaceted as any jewel Jim could compare to the stars millions of miles away. Then there’s his unending loyalty, his matchless competence, his absurdly well-honed intellect… And then he had to go and be kind, and curious, and surprisingly funny, and easy to talk to, and tolerant (if slightly resigned) to the nonsense that comes out of Jim’s mouth… The truth is the guy has no business existing in real life.

Jim wonders if Uhura has any idea how lucky she is.

It hurts, of course to remind himself of the way things are (and, more importantly, the way they’ll never be), but it’s a good hurt; it’s a hurt that will eventually (maybe? eventually) make the feelings go away.

Because they will go away.

They have to.

This is the principle of Jim’s life: people either get into his heart or into his pants.

But the thing is, he wants Spock in both.

And it terrifies him.

---

He’s so desperate to get rid of the wayward feelings that he’s even prepared to tell Bones about them, if only so the doctor can remind him of what a terrible idea it would be to act on them, but Bones gets to the self-pity line first that night, after just one drink.

“I can’t do this,” he tells Jim, and it takes him a second to remember what he can’t do.

“Seriously?” Jim demands. “Are you still going on about this?”

“Your advice is the worst,” Bones groused.

“Because your problems are stupid!” Jim says. “‘Oh, woe is me, I have an enormous, embarrassing
crush on this hot, available adult, who just so happens to have an equally enormous and embarrassing crush on me. I’m so conflicted. Whatever should I do??’"

“I do not sound like that,” Bones grumbles. “It isn’t that simple.”

“It really is though. The two of you have been practically humping each other’s legs for weeks and it’s incredibly annoying. Shore leave’s in less than a week, we’ll be on Risa for crying out loud, they’ve got these steam-pools, you have to get naked before going in, so—”

“Jim.”

“Or, if you can’t wait that long you can just call her into your office for a meeting, pull the blinds, lock the door, throw her on your desk and—”

“JIM!”

“You’ll feel a lot better afterward,” Jim finishes, unrepentant.

“It’s not that part that worries me! It’s the bit that comes next.”

“Round two? ‘Cause there are meds you can—”

“No, the part where actually try to build a relationship.”

“Oh. That part.”

“I really like her, Jim,” Bones says, and the hopelessness in his voice almost physically tightens something in Jim’s chest. “An’ I might even be able to keep her for a while, but sooner or later she’ll figure out that I’m…”

“That you’re what?” Jim says sharply. “That you’re intelligent and trustworthy and a bleeding heart under all that Southern curmudgeonlyness and a fantastic doctor and an even better human being?” Bones flushes a little. “You’re my best friend. You’re contractually required to say that.”

“Also, have you looked in a mirror lately?” Jim gives him a very obvious up-down and a wolf-whistle. McCoy snorts.

“Seriously, Bones,” Jim says, and now he lets himself be completely honest and straightforward, because Bones needs to know he means it. “You were the first person who never wanted anything from me. You are one of the best people I know. And if Rand can’t see how incredible you are, she’s an idiot.”

“But Jocelyn—”

“—is an idiot,” Jim concludes. “Case in point.”

“I can’t do another divorce, Jim,” Bones says miserably. “I can’t.”

“Woah, woah, hold up. You haven’t even gone on a date and you’ve already married and divorced her?” Bones opens his mouth but Jim cuts him off. “Look. You like her enough to ask her out. Let an expert in one-night stands tell you: forget the long-term. You might’ve gone stupid-fast with Jocelyn, but it doesn’t have to be like that. You’re not committing yourself to her ‘til death do you part – you’re committing yourself to her for dinner. And after that you can see if you liked it enough to do it again sometime.”
Bones stares at him. For a full minute of silence.

Until finally the doctor says, “Jesus. Am I about to take dating advice from Jim Kirk?”

Jim grins. “Chyeah you are!”

“Jesus,” Bones mutters again, looking off somewhere into the distance.

“C’mon, what have you ever lost by giving a pretty girl a shot?”

McCoy raises his eyebrows. “Y’mean aside from my house and my job and my car and my income and my daughter?”

“Yeah, aside from all that,” says Jim, waving off those pesky details. “Absolutely nothing!”

“You know,” says Bones, “if you just ignore the general idiocy of your advice, it’s actually pretty okay.”

“Flatterer. I bet you say that to all the boys.”

---

Despite all the grumbling and groaning on Bones’s part, when shore leave rolls around and they finally manage to beam down (it took a while to pry Scotty from his control panel), Jim is about to head toward the nearest bar when Bones pulls him back and actually pulls out a bouquet of roses.

“Awww, that’s sweet, thank you! But you know I like carnations better.”


“Yes, yes, and yes,” says Jim. “Now get out there and dazzle her, Bones. You’re gonna do great.”

And he turns the doctor around and shoves him straight into Rand.

Of course, this is Bones, so he can’t do anything the easy way and they just have a minute of awkwardly sorting themselves out, looking at the floor like sixth graders, mumbling and gesturing vaguely, and it’s getting to the point where Jim kind of just wants to stomp over there and shove their faces together when Bones finally thrusts the bouquet at her and mutters, “Here.”

Jim almost slaps himself on the forehead.

“What…” says Rand.

“These are probably expensive enough to justify a couple of hours with me over dinner,” Bones grits out. It sounds like he’s trying to murder her rather than trying to ask her out. “So take them.”

“You’re saying,” Rand says slowly, “once I take these I’m obligated to go out with you to dinner.” For a second Jim thinks she’s going to refuse, but then she laughs and takes the flowers. “Well, if you insist.”

Mission accomplished, Jim thinks as they walk away together.

If only he could be happy about it.

Speaking of things to not be happy about, he’s so busy watching Bones and Rand walk off into the
sunset that he almost misses the way Chekov is talking to Sulu, or, well—more *plastered* to Sulu, chattering away and getting very, very close into the helmsman’s personal space in what may or may not be adorably inexperienced flirtation.

Too bad the kid’s still underage.

Jim catches Sulu’s eye (which is actually quite difficult with the way he’s drinking Chekov in) and just *smiles* at him.

Sulu pales.

They’re too far away for Jim to tell exactly what he says to Chekov then, but he watches with righteous pride as Sulu weakly peels the kid off him.

A gentle brush against his index and middle fingers alerts him to his First Officer’s presence beside him.

“Hey Spock,” he says, turning and smiling at him. “We should hang out together! We can go to the water park or something…” Exceeeept that Spock has an actual *girlfriend* he’s going to want to spend time with, and go to the steam-baths with, and have hot, logical sex with, and Jim’s smile kind of wilts before he can catch it. “Uhura can come too!”

Spock frowns. “I am not interested in three-party activities,” he says, sort of sharply.

“Right,” Jim babbles, kicking himself. What made him even consider that Spock would want a third wheel along with him and his girlfriend over shore leave? “Should’ve figured. Introverts and all that. You’re practically an alien species,” he says, laughing nervously. “Not that there’s anything wrong with being an alien species. Or an introvert. Aaand I’m gonna shut up now.”

Luckily Spock seems willing to ignore that whole embarrassing display of human-ness and asks politely, “You mentioned a water-based recreational area?”

And no, Jim is not that desperate, he is *not* going to make Spock hang out with him just because he’s lonely.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, I’ll find someone to go with. You know people like me.”

Spock tilts his head, looking kind of confused. “Extroverts?” he asks, and Jim’s heart almost melts. Of course Spock would say ‘extrovert’ where everyone else would say ‘slut.’

“Sure,” says Jim, unable to hold back his smile. “I’ll see you after leave, okay? You just enjoy yourself.” And he pats Spock on the shoulder and walks off toward the bar, trying to ignore the fact that a week without Spock isn’t a vacation at all, and that the Vulcan hasn’t moved an inch from where Jim left him.

---

If someone had told Sulu that he would end up spending his shore leave with Commander Spock, he would have laughed in the guy’s face (and then maybe quickly made plans to guarantee it wouldn’t happen). But no one did, and so here he is, at a table in a Risan beachside bar with *Commander Spock* of all people, each with a drink (though the Vulcan’s is water) each not spending shore leave with the person they want to be spending it with.

Hikaru, for his part, doesn’t know where Pavel is, which is how it should be, because apparently the navigator gets really touchy-feely when he’s drunk and Sulu has enough of a hard time as it is and…
yeah. Best for all involved (and for Hikaru’s own balls) to stay here with Spock. Because who cares if Pavel is surrounded by aliens who don’t know or care how old he is, who just see a pretty face and a night with no consequences and could very well be kidnapping Chekov for their own devious deeds right now?

_Not me_, Sulu thinks grimly, and takes another gulp of…whatever it is he’s ingesting.

As awkward as it is sitting here with Spock, it also serves as a reminder that it could be worse; at least _Hikaru’s_ isolation is self-imposed.

Sulu follows Spock’s gaze across the room to where Kirk is downing shots and flirting with everything in sight, armed with his most charming smile and a pair of dark jeans that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination. Right now he’s talking up some Risan dude, both of them angled toward each other in the way people do when they’ve about to have sex, because a whole lot of words can be used to describe Kirk but xenophobic is not one of them.

“And you are certain he is not intentionally tormenting me,” Spock says. Asks? It might be a question. Sulu has no idea anymore. He has no idea how many drinks he’s had, actually, nor does he remember what he’s drinking, which is probably more problematic.

“Yeah, I’m sure. This is just how he is.” With that Hikaru finishes off his glass and mutters, “At least yours is legal.”

“He is not _mine_,” says Spock immediately, and Sulu almost snorts. He hasn’t taken his eyes off Kirk once the entire time they’ve been here. “Still, I fail to understand why the Captain prefers to solicit anonymous aliens rather than…” He cuts that sentence short and says instead, “I do not understand.”

“Yeah, but you can’t possibly be surprised.”

Spock looks at him, tilts his head. “Elaborate.”

“Well, I love the captain….” Spock’s expression shifts infinitesimally, and a chill goes down Hikaru’s spine. “As a friend, of course, not in that way,” he adds hurriedly. “But from what I know he’s kind of a slut.” Spock’s expression only gets stonier and scarier, so Sulu quickly amends, “Not…I mean… Look, monogamy’s just not built into his programming, which is…weird.” Hikaru frowns, drunkenly searching his brain for the words to describe what’s weird about it. “He gets so emotionally invested in everything… And then when it comes to his romantic relationships it’s like he couldn’t care less. He was sleeping around when he was dating Gaila too, you know. Even said he wouldn’t able to tell Gaila apart from any other Orion.”

“That is highly uncharacteristic of the Captain,” says Spock, his forehead just the slightest bit crinkled. “He possesses an exceptionally unaltering memory.”

“Oh, normally I would agree with you. Not on the memory thing, I don’t know about that, on the cheating part. I wouldn’t think it was his style. But I heard it from his own mouth, so.” He shrugs and makes a vague gesture toward the bar, to where the Captain and his companion are obviously very close to needing a private room. “At least he’s upfront about it, right?”

Spock watches Kirk from across the bar and doesn’t respond.

---

Slipping back into random hookups is as natural as falling, and as painful. He’d forgotten the rush of conquest, the desire to take, to touch, to make his own. The feeling of shame and dirtiness that came afterwards, as he was pulling his pants back up, the _this is your fourth one today, you slut, you want_
it so bad, you could’ve done something more, you could have saved them, rewind try again rewind try again rewindrewindrewindrewind to somewhere safe and try again and again and again until you’ve fixed it.

He ignores it, avoids being alone, avoids Bones and Spock and the rest of his crew as much as possible, throws himself into his latest impulse and pretends to think of nothing at all until he almost believes it himself.

And if a lot of his hookups are male and light-skinned and dark-haired, well.

Maybe it doesn’t mean anything at all.

---

If Jim had been hoping for some kind of heartwarming greeting from Spock after shore leave (which he hadn’t been, because that would be ridiculous and needy and good God he has it bad), he has another thing coming because Spock actually welcomes him back to the Enterprise with a kind of curt, “Captain. Have you sated yourself?”

“What?” says Jim, because…what? “You know, there are less awkward ways to ask if I had a good vacation. You could just say it like… Well, really any way other than that.”

“I will take your feedback under consideration,” says Spock, but there’s none of that old warmth in his voice, and Jim frowns.

“Have I done something wrong?”

“No,” says Spock, after the shortest pause. “I must see to the launch preparations.” And then he’s heading off across the landing bay, and Jim is about to follow him and pester him until he admits what’s bugging him (which usually requires getting past a good bit of “Vulcans are not susceptible to the feeling of irritation, Captain”), when he hears Bones call, “Jim!”

He turns around and sure enough it’s Bones striding toward him, wearing that not-scowl he gets after a good vidchat with Joanna.

Things must’ve gone well with Rand, then.

He hates how his chest tightens at the thought.

“We haven’t talked the entire shore leave,” Bones says, frowning a little. “Is something wrong?”

“I just figured you’d be busy.”

Bones looks at him sharply. “Well then you’re an idiot. Haven’t I told you I’m not goin’ anywhere?”

“I know,” says Jim. “But things are going to change. That’s what happens when you fall in love. Everything else just kind of falls to the wayside, that’s all. You stop… noticing things.”

“In love?” Bones echoes. “Hold on there, cowboy, don’t go gettin’ your gussie up already. I thought you said I was takin’ this slow.”

“Gussie,’” says Jim in disgust. “That can’t possibly be a real word. You totally made that up!”

Bones rolls his eyes. “I was thinking about what you told me last week, and I realized you were right. I know what it’s like to be madly in love, an’ so obsessed I couldn’t think about anyone or anything else, could barely walk straight, and I’m not doin’ it again, ‘cause just look where all that
got me with Jocelyn. So yeah, I have no idea where this thing with Janice is headed. It could be everything. It could be nothing. But this?” He makes a back-and-forth motion between the two of them. “This is never going to change. No matter what happens, you are always going to be my… My…” He gestures around vaguely, searching for the word. “My whatever-the-hell-you-are.”

“Platonic soulmate,” says Jim. “We’ve gone over this.”

“Right, that, whatever.”

“I offer to marry him and he says whatever,” Jim mutters, mock-indignant.

“Speaking of which, I might just be taking you up on that offer because if this thing with Janice goes down in flames I will most likely never date anyone again, and the alternative is dyin’ alone as a bitter old man who drinks too much tea and pays in exact change and threatens to shoot the kids who run across his property.”

“Too late, you’re already that guy,” says Jim. “Except you don’t own any property.”

“Don’t talk to me,” says Bones.

---

True to his word (and to be honest, did Jim really expect anything different from Bones?), nothing does change between them, except Bones is significantly less stressed out now that he has an excellent personal assistant and is finally getting laid, not that you can tell by the ever-present scowl on his face. The good thing is that he still time to pay attention to Jim.

The bad thing is that he still has time to pay attention to Jim.

“You may be wondering why I’ve called you here today,” Bones says in his lecture-mode voice when Jim shows up in his office in response to the cryptic summons the doctor had sent to his com.

“Rand is pregnant,” Jim guesses.

“No,” says Bones.

“You’re pregnant.”

“No.”

“I’m pregnant?”

“No! No one is pregnant!”

“You want a threesome?”

Bones looks disturbed by the very idea. “NO. No pregnancy and no threesomes!”

Jim sighs, crossing his arms, instantly losing interest. “Fine. Can I go?”

“No you cannot go,” Bones snaps. “I was looking at the meal codes you’ve logged in the replicators over the past month. Are you aware that you’re rotting from the inside out?”

“Seriously?” Jim groans. “You have a girlfriend now, you’re supposed to be too busy for this kind of crap!”
McCoy ignores him. “Do you want me to read you the replicator transmission output of the food you logged yesterday?”

Jim waves a weary hand at him to continue, knowing it wasn’t really a question anyway.


There’s a short pause.

“You’re right,” says Jim. “I probably shouldn’t have had that spaghetti and meatballs after midnight.”

Bones glares his I-will-end-you glare.

“But they say that coffee is good for you,” Jim offers.

“Uh-huh,” says Bones. “You mean the part where it contributes to heart disease and cardiac arrest or the part where its acidity wears down the stomach lining or the part where it causes ulcers or…?”

“You’re exaggerating. Gary Mitchell has like twice the amount of coffee I do and he hasn’t had a single heart attack yet.”

“Mitchell?” The doctor scowls. “He couldn’t figure out how to pour water out of a boot with the instructions printed on the heel.”

“But he has a great body,” says Jim. “You know why? Because he drinks coffee.”

“Or maybe because he spends eight hours a day working out in the gym.”

“Or that,” Jim concedes.

“You know what,” Bones sighs. “Forget about it.”

“What?”

“Forget about the cutting down on caffeine thing. You obviously can’t do it.”

“I can do it!” Jim protests. “I just don’t want to!”

Bones shrugs sadly. “You don’t have to worry about saving face in front of me, you can just tell me it’s too hard.”

Jim tilts his head, raises an eyebrow. “Fine. I’m doing this new diet thing.”

“Jim…”

“I’m doing it, Bones!”

---

And so Jim does it, because he still cannot physically say no to a dare, but at least now he can tell when he’s gotten the rotten end of the deal because it isn’t even ten hours later that he starts regretting his decision.

Specifically he regrets his decision ten hours later when he does his usual morning yawn-and-stagger over to the caff maker and puts in his code and out comes…. A teeeeeny little bit of coffee. Like the
Barbie version of his usual breakfast.

“What is this?” he demands, shoving the tiny little cup in Bones’s face, having given Spock the conn for the very-essential reason of yelling at Bones (Spock had been surprisingly agreeable to the idea, actually).

“It’s a half-cup of coffee,” says Bones calmly. “That’s how much you should be having. And you’ll need at least three times that amount of water to neutralize the acidity, so don’t forget to stay hydrated.”

Jim groans. “I’m changing my mind, I can’t do this. I literally can’t do this. I’m gonna be too tired to do my job!”

“Good,” says Bones gruffly. “This is what your body is feeling without the help of drugs. It’s tired. Because you should be getting nine hours of sleep and you’re not.”

“You want me to get nine hours of sleep too??” Jim cries. “That’s cruel and unusual! And impossible! I’m important and busy and all that, I’ve got stuff to do!”

“Yeah, actually I had been wondering what, exactly, you were doing so late at night, so I monitored your com…” – “You did what?” – “and kid, you shouldn’t be messaging anyone after 2300.” He gives Jim a look. “Let alone Spock, who’s in the next room over for crying out loud.”

And with that Bones moves off to take care of some other dumb patient, and Jim stands there, trying to think of a snappy response to that, his face burning.

---

As it happens, after a whole day without coffee he actually does fall asleep at 2100 – something he hasn’t done outside the medical bay since he was about ten years old – because he physically cannot keep his eyes open anymore, despite the piles of paperwork he’s supposed to do that night.

The problem is he’s even more exhausted after nine hours of sleep. And even worse – when he does manage to roll into his uniform and stumble over to the caff maker and punch in his code, only half a cup of coffee comes out, and he kind of wants to cry.

---

“Captain,” says someone.

Jim jolts awake, his elbow falling off the armrest and his eyes snapping open. “Mnhuhwhat? M’awake…”

He looks up to the sight of Spock, looking down at him disapprovingly and realizes he’d just fallen asleep in the captain’s chair. He rubs his forehead and mutters, “Sorry… It’s just this new diet thing Bones has me on. He’s trying to detox me from caffeine.”

“And this diet adjustment is meant to…improve your performance?” Spock asks doubtfully.

“Yeeahh, it’s not working all that well so far.”

Spock doesn’t reply, which means he agrees with him but doesn’t want to say it out loud because Vulcans don’t believe in positive reinforcement.

“Spock,” Jim says sorrowfully, giving the Vulcan his best puppy-dog eyes. “Can you get me
Spock gets him coffee.

Which is, just, wonderful and heavenly and adorably illogical of him (Spock insists it’s for the purposes of maximizing the Captain’s administration efficiency or something, but Jim knows it’s really because he lurves him), and Jim is forever grateful, but of course the coffee-boosted joy lasts only the twenty minutes or so before Bones coms him down to the medbay for a meeting as soon as possible. The wording of the message suggests he’s not going to walk out again any time soon.

So Jim does the mature thing, and runs away.

His first thought is to hide in the laundry rooms or the kitchens or something before he remembers that the ship’s central computer keeps a log of where everyone is, and Bones can easily pull that up and find him... So instead he goes to rec room 4, because the computer will just report him being in the “recreation rooms,” and who ever uses rec room 4 anyway?

To his surprise, when he skids into his new hiding place (under the foosball table machine, behind the unnecessary tablecloth flap), there’s someone already there.

“Hey,” says Jim. “Come here often?”

“I’m lying in wait,” Sulu explains.

“Okay,” says Jim, nodding, because that’s not even close to being his helmsman’s weirdest extracurricular.

“Pavel won’t speak to me,” says Sulu.

“Bones is hunting me down and trying to rip me away from everything I love,” Jim offers.

“Oh,” says Sulu. “Well.” Then he sees something under the tablecloth flap that has him ducking back down again and hissing, “He’s coming!”

Sure enough, footsteps enter the rec room and stop just a few feet in front of them.

Sulu suddenly bursts out from under the table. “Pavel!”

Chekov actually shrieks.

“H-Hikaru!? What—”

“I’ve been waiting for you all day,” Sulu says plaintively. Which sounds, just, incredibly creepy coming from the guy jumping up from underneath the foosball machine, but Jim’s not judging. Especially because he’s the other guy under the machine. “Are you mad at me?”

“I’m not angry with you,” Chekov says, but even Jim can tell there’s something he’s not saying. Chekov might actually be worse than Bones at lying. “I’m sorry, I must go, the Keptin is calling me...”

Jim pulls out his com. >><Did not<<

There’s a beep, then a rustle of clothing, then a pause. “No, he isn’t,” Sulu says, and he must be stepping in front of Chekov, cutting off his route of escape, because the footsteps stop abruptly.
“Why are you avoiding me?”

Chekov’s voice sounds utterly miserable. “You do not even know. Zis only verifies why…”

“What?” says Sulu. “What are you talking about??”

“I have to go,” Chekov mutters, and then his footsteps are disappearing and someone else’s approach, stopping just inside the rec room door. “Have you seen Jim?” says Bones’s voice, and Jim huddles down further into his refuge. “I know he got off shift twenty minutes ago.”

“Um,” says Sulu.

Jim pulls out his com and quickly messages Sulu: >>>You distract him while I run!<<<

He presses send and hears Sulu’s com beep, and then a much longer pause.

“What?” Bones asks. “What’s it say?”

“Yeah,” Sulu says finally. “I have seen him. Right over there!”

Jim takes that as his cue to start sneaking out from under the table as Sulu points in the opposite direction and Bones turns around to follow his gesture.

“There isn’t anyone…” He turns back around and sees Jim crawling frantically toward the door and his eyes widen and his mouth opens and—

And Jim yells, “Sulu! Use tackle!” and without missing a beat the helmsman is grabbing Bones and wrestling him to the floor, and Jim is up and sprinting out of the room so fast all he hears is, “JIM YOU LITTLE—”

“It’s a critical hit!” Jim shouts, and runs for his life.

---

There are days that Spock suspects that the goings-on of the Starship Enterprise are not precisely the same goings-on of other Federation flagships.

And then there are days that he knows it for certain.

Today seems to be one of the latter, as the sound of running footsteps grow closer and the Captain appears around a corner, sprinting at full speed with someone clearly in hot pursuit.

Spock is about to inquire after this unusual turn of events, or perhaps prepare for defensive action, but then the Captain is grabbing him, dragging him bodily into a darkened side corridor and pushing him against the wall, his arms on either side of Spock, as if to protect him.

Spock opens his mouth again but the Captain puts a finger up to his lips – his lips that are now very, very close to Spock’s own – in the human gesture indicating that one should be quiet. He falls silent immediately.

Outside in the main corridor, the running footsteps slow somewhat, surely attempting to predict in which direction the Captain turned.

Finally Kirk’s tracker walks past their hiding place. They hear his footsteps disappear down another hallway.
“Captain,” says Spock.

The Captain does not pull away, even though the ‘danger’ has passed. “Yeah?” he says, his voice lower than its usual pitch.

“May I inquire as to why you are attempting to escape from Doctor McCoy?”

“What do you mean ‘attempting’? I totally got away from him right there!”

His breath fans over Spock’s face, cooler for his body’s lower temperature, and suddenly it is rather more difficult to ignore his own physiological reaction to the Captain’s presence, his arms around him, Kirk’s dilated pupils, his elevated respiration rate…

“You do realize,” he says, and to his own mortification his voice rasps slightly over the words, and Jim’s breathing hitches in response, “that your behavior is highly illogical.”

Jim’s mouth quirks up in an affectionate smile. “How so?”

“Doctor McCoy was looking for you, not me. And yet you pushed me against the wall, further out of his sight.”

“Yeah, well – sorry,” says the Captain, abashed, and Spock wishes for a moment that the corridor were not dark as to obstruct view of the color surely rising to his cheeks.

“You misunderstand,” says Spock. “Although it was illogical, I did… appreciate your intent.” He reaches one hand up to press his fingers against the Captain’s, the contact sending a thrill of expectation down sensory nerves, across synapses, up to the primary somatosensory cortex…

Suddenly the contact disappears and Kirk pushes away from the wall from Spock, seeming to struggle with something as the Vulcan struggles with his own thought process, with the absence leaving him almost dizzy, and the wondering what he did wrong to deserve it.

But such thinking is foolish, of course. If the Captain required sexual congress he would request it, or merely continue their previous activity to its logical end. Considering his failure to do so, the only rational explanation is that his services are not necessary at this juncture.

Though logical, his understanding does not free him of the strange sense of confusion at the Captain’s behavior. Nor the disappointment.

Kirk clears his throat. “Can I use your com?” he asks. “Bones is monitoring mine.”

Spock gives it to him immediately, gratified to have at least this one service he can provide without complication.

The Captain puts in a number he doesn’t recognize.

“Hello, this is Pizza Shanty intergalactic delivery service sector, how can we help you?”

“Hi, can I place an order for Kirk? That’ll be… a pizza, an order of mozzarella sticks, some chili fries… Oh, and as much coffee as you can get.”

---

Leonard is calm. He is so, so calm.

“Delivery for Kirk?” says the kid who has just beamed aboard their ship, holding two boxes of pizza
and big brown bag with grease seeping through the bottom. He’s wearing a Pizza Shanty uniform and standing on the transporter pad awkwardly, like he doesn’t know whether to walk forward or back away, and cannot possibly be older than nineteen, and Bones really should-very-much-not take out his fury on the poor idiot, so he turns on Scotty instead. The engineer flinches away from the expression on his face.

“What is he doing here?”

“I cannae say for certain, Doctor,” Scotty says nervously, “but if I had to guess I’d say the Captain has got the munchies. This is the seventh delivery today.”

Leonard’s eye twitches. He is so very, very calm.

---

You know, Jim had imagined himself and Spock, alone, in a dark supply closet in some unused hallway a surprisingly large amount of times, and yet never once had he imagined that they would end up like this – sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by takeout boxes, used napkins, and discarded coffee cups, Jim polishing off his fourth slice of pizza and Spock picking decorously at his salad.

“Sure you don’t want a chili fry?” Jim offers. “They’re amazing. I guess it’s true what they say, stolen waters taste the sweetest. …Aaand before you say it, yes, I know, these are neither stolen nor waters, it’s pizza and I paid for it. Whatever. It still tastes awesome.”

Spock raises one perfect eyebrow. “That I do not doubt. However, Vulcans are vegetarians. It is my practice to avoid consuming any meat, least of all that of the…chili variety.” At this last bit he glances sort of disdainfully at the beautiful, sexy mess of chili fries in the plate on Jim’s lap, which is really just rude and uncalled-for, but hey, more fries for him.

“Riiight, right… Huh.” Jim licks some sauce off his fingers. Spock averts his gaze. “How is that logical? Doesn’t it make more sense to just, yanno, eat whatever’s there? Or whatever you can get? Survival of the fittest and all that.”

“Survival of the fittest is not a practicable paradigm of logic,” says Spock primly. “If it were, Vulcans would be consuming humans for sustenance.”

*I wouldn’t mind one particular Vulcan consuming me,* is Jim’s automatic reaction, and to his own horror he flushes at the mental image alone.

This is when, because unused corridors are only used when Jim doesn’t want them to be, the closet door flies open and someone runs in, almost tripping almost him and Spock, and then the door is slamming shut again and Jim’s eyes are still trying to adjust to the sudden light followed by sudden darkness, but he definitely saw—

“Chekov?” he says, and the navigator leans against the closet door, sinking into a sitting position.

“Hello, Keptin,” he says, like hanging out in supply closets is something they do every day, and twice on Sundays. “Hello, Mr. Spock.”

“Are you still running away from Sulu?” Jim asks. Chekov doesn’t respond, and a horrible possibility occurs to him. “Does he want… something from you… that…?”

Chekov actually laughs, but it doesn’t sound very happy. “No, Keptin. He does not want anything from me.”
Jim is about to force the truth out of him when the door swings open again, blinding him for a second, as the big fuzzy shadow in the entryway says triumphantly, “There you are!”

Jim blinks and Sulu comes into focus, and Chekov starts scooting away and Jim starts wondering if how he would fare against his helmsman in a fight and if the plastic fork he’s holding will be an advantage or a disadvantage, and then Spock murmurs, “Captain. What is the current standard time?”

Jim looks at him, confused, and then looks at his com and says, “It’s only 1336, beta shift doesn’t start for another…” His stomach sinks. “Negative thirty-six minutes.”

They all look at each other, as the realization and dread sinks in.

“Wait,” says Jim slowly. “If everyone is here… Who’s on the bridge?”

---

“Call battle stations, Mister Stiles.”

“Battle stations,” says Ensign Stiles. “All hands to battle stations. Battle stations. Battle stations. All decks acknowledge.” He turns back to the captain. “All decks acknowledge, sir. All stations show green.”

Captain Uhura leans back in the position command crew have long dubbed “Kirk-style,” propping one elbow up on the armrest and nodding authoritatively. “Energize main phasers, Mister Stiles. All weapons to full power.”

"All weapons to full power,” says Ensign Stiles. “Come in, phaser control room, do you copy?”

A throat clears behind Nyota. She freezes.

…And turns very slowly, to the sight of Kirk, grinning like an idiot. “Hey, don't let me stop you, I’m enjoying this little roleplay as much as you are. Pretty sure I had this wet dream, actually.”

Spock, Sulu, and Chekov are all standing behind him, gaping, and Nyota gets to her feet, hiding her embarrassment by putting her hands on her hips and demanding, “Where have you been?! You were all late to shift!”

Jim holds up in hands in a defensive gesture. “Don’t worry, we have a perfectly logical explanation for our tardiness.” He pauses, and then, “Right, Spock?”

Spock blinks, and stares at Kirk, then at Uhura, then back at Kirk.

Saved by the bell, Nyota thinks wryly, as the turbolift doors swoosh open and they all turn toward the sound.

That is, until Dr. McCoy emerges, his “so very much not pleased” scowl firmly in place. “There you are! I can’t believe you would—”

“No,” says Nyota, cutting him off. “My rant comes first.” She turns on Kirk, Spock, Sulu, and Chekov. “I can’t believe you would all be late for your shifts! Especially you!” she tells Spock, who looks at the floor, contrite. “You’re adults now, not children—you have actual jobs!”

Kirk raises his hand. “Actually, Chekov—”

Nyota keeps ranting right over him. “What if there had been an emergency?” Kirk raises his hand again, which she ignores. “Who’s going to explain the forty-minute absence of nearly all the
command staff to Admiral Pike? Who is responsible for this?"

“Chekov,” says Sulu.

“McCoy,” says Chekov.

“Jim,” says McCoy.

“Responsible for what?” says Jim, with an expression of pure, highly improbable innocence. “Sorry, I wasn’t listening to a word you just said there. Still thinking about you, in that chair, with your legs like—”

Nyota glares at him. “Just get back on the conn and pretend to be a grown-up, okay?”

“Actually, the captain is coming in for a medical consult,” McCoy says, like ‘medical consult’ is code for ‘durasteel chair to the face,’ grabbing the back of Kirk’s uniform shirt.

“Nooo, no I’m not, Bones, I have work to do! Didn’t you hear her? I’m an adult! With a job!”

McCoy, of course, ignores him, and continues dragging him toward the turbolift.

“Spock, save me!” Kirk shouts, struggling against his CMO’s deathgrip.

Spock looks at him dispassionately. “Perhaps you can distract yourself from Doctor McCoy’s persecutions by speculating upon the sight of Nyota in the captain’s chair.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, that was bad form, now save me—”

“Don’t make me sedate you,” the doctor threatens.

“You need an outlet for your sadistic tendencies,” Kirk mutters, as McCoy finally yanks him into the turbolift. “I have a pair of handcuffs Rand can—” and then the doors close and the bridge falls into utter silence.

The first one to move is Spock. He sits in the captain’s chair and presses the button to record a new transmission and says calmly, “Captain’s log, stardate 2259.623. The Enterprise’s fifth day on routine patrol has been, thus far, uneventful, with the exception of an… imperative resource-assembling excursion on the part of much of the command crew, cutting unavoidably forty minutes into beta shift. I have taken over temporary duties as Acting Captain while Captain Kirk undergoes a” – his eyes flick toward the turbolift – “mandatory medical consult. More information on the proceedings of the Enterprise’s perambulation shall be supplied upon his return.”

The Vulcan turns off the transmission and looks up, straight into the shocked silence and wide eyes of the entire bridge crew.

“The Captain has been training me in the techniques of persuasion,” he tells them, and if it weren’t Spock, Nyota would swear his voice was defensive. “They have proven rather useful under a variety of conditions.”

Nobody replies.

Spock adds, composed and detached as ever, “Is there an explanation for your continued failure to report to your stations, or…?”

Everyone hurries back to the work immediately.
When Jim finally emerges from medbay (his ears still ringing from the ‘medical consult’ but having reached a compromise with Bones of two cups of coffee a day, which is a possibly maybe livable option), he literally stumbles over Chekov, who’d been crouched in the hallway behind the bridge.

“Seriously, what did Sulu do?” Jim cries, after he’s gotten back to his feet and Chekov has apologized about fifteen times.

“He did not do anything.”

“C’mon, spit it out, don’t make me make it an order.”

“He did not do anything,” Chekov says again. “Zat is the problem.”

“Huh?”

“I spent shore leawe practicaally throwing myself at him and he newwer responded – he even ran away. And now he wants to know what is wrong, but the fact that he does not even know just proves how much he obviously not want me.” Chekov looks up at him miserably. “And now ewerytime I see him I become so embarrassed… I worry that I hawe ruined our friendship.”

“Oh,” says Jim. “That’s – no – look, he wants you. Trust me on this, he definitely wants you. But neither of you can do anything about it – you’re still underage for another couple of months.”

The navigator stares at him. “Is zhat what you told him?”

“No in so many words, but yeah.”

“Keptin,” says Chekov, deliberately, like he’s trying not to lose it. “Zhe legal age in Russia is sixteen.”

This is followed by a long, awkward pause.

“Um,” says Jim. “Oops?”

“I must talk to Hikaru,” Chekov mutters, and then he’s heading toward the bridge, a man (boy? man) on a mission.

“Go get ‘im, Chekov!” Jim cheers after him.

---

Sarek must say he is surprised – although certainly not unpleasantly so – when his son vidcalls him for no reason other than to ascertain his wellbeing.

“I am healthy,” Sarek tells him calmly. “I trust that your state is satisfactory as well.”

“Affirmative,” his son replies.

They fall into silence, having nothing further to discuss, logically.

It is this silence that allows Sarek to hear a particularly abnormal noise in the background of the call.

“I trust that, although it may sound as such, there is not a stream of running water inside your quarters?” Sarek says.
“There is not,” Spock confirms. “However, the unusually thin walls of the Enterprise command quarters can appear to create the illusion of a shower running within my rooms, when in fact it is operating within the Captain’s and First Officer’s shared facilities.”

Then it can be deduced that the Captain is the one currently controlling the showering device. Sarek seizes the new potential topic of conversation. “I trust the Captain, too, is performing acceptably.”

“His performance far exceeds that of the merely acceptable.”

Interesting. “Elaborate.”

“His intelligence quotient is undoubtedly within genius range,” his son says, and he has never been the one to notice these things, but his tone seems to be tinged with something like…pride, perhaps? “He could have excelled in any of the Starfleet tracks. However, it is his practical knowledge that contributes to his extraordinary leadership and mission success rates. In addition, he is more adept in the skills of persuasion than any individual I have met thus far.”

“You admire him,” Sarek infers.

Spock does not reply immediately. Sarek can hear humming – surely the undertaking of the Captain – from inside the showering chamber.

“It is logical to admire him,” his son says. “His talents are objectively impressive, as well as particularly useful in regards to his duties as captain, and his success is nearly synonymous with my success—in the sense of my Starfleet career.”

Sarek cannot claim to be specifically observant in matters of interpersonal relations, and yet even he comprehends that these are explanations peripheral to the genuine reason Spock admires his commanding officer. He wonders briefly if his reasons for courting Amanda appeared to others in a similarly obvious manner.

If so he is rather embarrassed, in retrospect.

As he endeavors to establish an appropriate response, the sound of the Captain’s voice filters through the thin walls: “Yeeah it’s pretty clear, I ain’t no size two, but I can shake it shake it, like I’m supposed to do. ‘Cause I got that boom-boom that all the boys chasin’, all the right junk in all the right plaaaces…”

Vulcans do not experience the emotion of awkwardness and therefore do not avoid one another’s gazes, but for the first time Sarek rather questions the wisdom of this cultural choice. Kirk continues singing, blissfully oblivious, in the background.

What, precisely, is a ‘boom-boom’, and what causes males to pursue it? Sarek wonders. Is not the definition of ‘junk’ that there is no correct place in which it can be placed? Would such questions be suitable for inquiry? Would they be advantageous to inquire about? Amanda would have known what to say. She was so much better at these things. As it is, he manages to murmur, “Is this…vocalization procedure a…common practice of the Captain’s?”

“Yes,” Spock replies. His cheeks have taken on a green slightly darker than their typical hue. “I have been told it is a ritual undertaken by many of the human species. They tend to favor the improved acoustics within the showering compartment.”

“If you got beauty-beauty, just raise ‘em up…”

“Your mother, too, was exceedingly fond of music,” Sarek says, into the heavy discomfiture
between them.

“Yes,” says Spock stiffly.

“Yes my mama she told me don’t worry about your siiiiize… wop-wop, sha-oooh-wop-wop… She says boys like a little more booty to hold at niiight… that bootay-bootay, uh, that bootay-bootay…”

“I do not believe her tastes in musical composition were quite… identical to Captain Kirk’s, however,” Sarek says, doubtful.

“No,” says Spock. His son’s facial expression suggests he would rather be doing anything other than having this conversation.

“So if that’s what you’re into then go ‘head and move alooooong… Because you know I’m all about that base, ‘bout that base, no tribble. I’m all about that base, ‘bout that base, no tribble…”

“I am grateful for your sacrificing your valuable time to speak with me, Father,” says Spock, in what is obviously meant to be the end of the conversation, as soon as possible.

“It is never a sacrifice to speak with my son,” Sarek replies, and yes, that is it. That is what would have made Amanda smile and nod at him encouragingly. The thought of her approval of his statement causes him…emotions.

Spock looks almost surprised. “Thank you, Father.” He holds his hand up in the ta’al. “Live long and prosper.”

“Peace and long life,” Sarek responds, mirroring the gesture.

They both end the call, and Sarek thinks, as he does so very often now, of what his wife would have said.

Conjecture is illogical, of course, but he suspects she would have rather liked Captain Kirk.

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Even if Jim hadn’t been in on what was going on between Chekov and Sulu (and really kind of responsible for the problem in the first place, but whatever) he would have been able to tell that they got together by the sheer relief of the palpable sexual tension they’d be creating on the bridge.

Which is not to say that there’s less tension on the bridge, because there’s totally not, thanks to Spock and Bones going at it as per usual.

Today’s squabble has to do with some complaint logged by the Ktaris chancellor, Jim wasn’t really paying attention, the point is that Starfleet put it up for grabs and the Enterprise has been circling the same stupid couple hundred thousand miles on stupid patrol doing stupid nothing, and Jim is ready to do anything to justify a change of pace.

But, since Jim is not, in fact, a tyrant, he puts the issue up for debate to his XO and CMO. Predictably, Spock has no feelings on the matter, and Bones has some teeny-tiny objections, like the fact that Ktaris is in a completely different quadrant, meaning there are exactly two hundred and eleven Federation vessels closer to the place, which really shouldn’t explode into a full-on hissy fit between Spock and Bones but does, and may or may not involve Jim threatening that he will “turn this starship around if you two don’t stop fighting back there, I swear to God.”

“What is your opinion, Captain?” Spock asks, while Bones rolls his eyes behind him, probably
knowing already what Jim is going to say.

“Someone needs to defend Starfleet’s honor!” Jim declares.

“Yeah, but why does it have to be us?”

“Uh, because we’re awesome? And by awesome I mean hella qualified!” He leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees and says more seriously, “You know why it has to be us, Bones?”

“Why,” says Bones flatly.

“Because the best defense is a strong offense,” says Jim. “And there is no crew more offensive than this one right here!”

This is met with a pause.

Jim clears his throat. “That came out wrong.”

Bones crosses his arms across his chest, unimpressed. “Which would be different from everything else you say…how?”

“It was certainly ambiguous,” says Spock, diplomatically.

“See?” Jim turns to Bones. “I’m not stupid. I’m ambiguous.”

“You’re definitely something,” Bones grumbles.

“For my part,” says Spock, “I am in agreement with the Captain—he in particular is exceptionally proficient in the art of offensiveness.”

“Two against one!” says Jim, punching the air. “You know what this means!”

“Road trip!” the bridge crew cheers.

---

The moral of the story, Jim thinks, as Chancellor Qoryschjjearkg starts in on his second hour of ranting about the impunity of the Federation, is always check the mission report first.

This is the important part – literally the only important part – of the ongoing rant of Chancellor Q (because who can pronounce a name like that anyway? Aside from Uhura. And Spock. And – well, whatever): that Ktaris was attacked by Klingons, and they called for Federation aid, and no one came. It’s a story Jim is all too familiar with.

What’s different between this story and Jim’s is that Chancellor Qoryschjjearkg has now officially logged his charges with the Federation, and is planning on going to war against them, in the hopes of taking over. The mission was logged with Starfleet as a last-ditch attempt to talk him out of violent retaliation, despite his own insistences that he will not be moved.

Right now he’s yelling about how “this is the aid Starfleet sends me! Some infants to prompt my paternal instinct and dissuade me from annihilating them! Well they will learn soon enough…” Et cetera, et cetera.

“Captain,” Spock says quietly into his ear. “Chancellor Qoryschjjearkg does not appear to show any signs of slowing or stopping his outburst.”
“That’s true,” says Jim. “What do you suggest?”

“I posit that we return to the Enterprise immediately and inform the Federation of the imminent danger of Ktaris’s attack. If they act quickly, they can neutralize the threat before too much damage is caused.”

“But that’s the problem,” Jim murmurs, more to himself than to Spock. “They don’t act quickly.”

“Sir?”

Jim looks at him. “Let me try something. I think I might be able to change his mind.”

“Very well.”

“No, I mean… let me try something alone with him. The Ktarians may have almost declared war on the Federation but they’re still notorious for being pleasant to guests. They’ll have set up rooms for us.”

Spock’s eyebrows lower in puzzlement. “You would like me to leave?”

“Just for a few minutes,” Jim assures him. “Let me see if I can persuade Curious George here to not kill us all.”

Spock’s mouth quirks up at the truly horrendous pronunciation of the Chancellor’s name, and he finally agrees, and stands, excusing them and requesting their lodgings. The rest of the landing party looks blatantly relieved.

“See you soon,” Jim calls after him.

The door closes behind him and Jim looks back to the Chancellor.

“There is nothing you can say that can surprise or persuade me,” says Qoryschjjearkg.

“I was on Tarsus IV,” says Jim, all in a rush.

The Chancellor stares at him.

“There—there were only nine survivors…” he says at last, and Jim nods.

“Did you know that we sent for Federation help three weeks before the massacre? It came six months later. Two days after the civil war that killed half the population. Did the Federation tell you that?”

“No,” Qoryschjjearkg whispers, horrified. “They told us that Kodos never sent for help.”

“He did. He sent for help several times. Starfleet never realized how urgent it was until it was too late.”

“Then… then you agree with me.”

“I completely agree with you. Something has to change in the Federation. They keep expanding their reach, their control, over the universe, without having the resources to maintain and protect what they’ve already promised to protect. But attacking the Federation planets—killing billions of innocent people—that’s not the way to go about it.”

“They will not listen any other way!” Qoryschjjearkg protests.
“They will,” says Jim. “What if I promised you that they will listen to you? I’ll talk to my superior officer, Admiral Pike. And you know what, if they don’t hear you out, you can declare war again. Maybe it’ll make them think twice about it.”

The Chancellor stares at him long and hard. “That does sound reasonable.” And Jim is just about to relax when he adds, “However, this arrangement benefits you and your Federation far more than it does me. You gain billions of lives and trillions of credits by the war avoided, and I gain nothing.”

“How about the moral high ground?”

“The moral high ground is nice,” Qoryschjjearkg agrees. “But I believe you can offer me something even better to make it worth my while.”

And, well, economics is a language Jim knows like breathing. “I’m open to suggestions,” he says softly, licking his lips. Maybe in nervousness, maybe in anticipation, even he doesn’t know which, really. “So?”

Qoryschjjearkg smiles. “Your mouth first, Captain.”

“Whatever you want,” Jim murmurs, and sinks to his knees.

---

The good news is it doesn’t take all that long, and an hour later Jim is back in his room, showered, and already getting dressed in a completely different change of clothes, as per part two of his Forgetting It Ever Happened routine, now with the added plus of hiding his questionable methods from his First Officer’s super-smell.

Speaking of which…

Jim finishes pulling on his spare uniform shirt and runs a hand through his wet hair and presses the button to open the door.

“By the way, I know what your voice sounds like,” he says while Spock enters.

“It never hurts to clarify one’s intentions previous to acting upon them, as they say.”

“Nobody says that, Spock.”

“I received a message from Admiral Pike,” his First Officer replies, ignoring that, “stating that he wishes to discuss a recent missive from Chancellor Qoryschjjearkg dropping all charges against the Federation on condition that a conference be scheduled immediately to address the issue of Starfleet aid response time. I have given him the holocode address for the viewscreen in your room. He shall be contacting us momentarily.”

“He wants to talk about it? We got him to fold, what’s there to talk about?”

“Any explanation I could offer would be founded in conjecture and therefore illogical.”

“Right, of course,” Jim sighs.

“If I may inquire, Captain,” Spock says after a moment, “what procedure, exactly, did you employ to compel him to forego his charges?”
“I have my methods,” says Jim, hoping against hope that Spock won’t pursue it.

He does pursue it, of course. “What methods?”

Jim shrugs, even as tension grips his shoulders and clenches his stomach. “It’s nothing magical, just simple economics. He gives me something I want, and I give him something he wants.”

Spock’s eyes narrow. “And what is it that he wanted?”

So Jim takes a deep breath, and looks aside, partly because there’s a beautiful view from his window of the blue-green-silver sunset but mainly because he can’t do this while looking at Spock, and tells him.

The silence that follows this confession is deafening.

Maybe Spock is taken aback. Maybe he’s amused. Maybe he’s disgusted. Jim doesn’t know and he doesn’t want to know.

When his First speaks again, it seems to be with some difficulty. “Do you…frequently make such…exchanges?”

Gahh. Is he really having the safe sex conversation again? With Spock, of all people? It was bad enough with Bones.

Jim continues studiously focusing on the scenery outside. “Sure,” he says casually. “If the benefit’s good enough.”

Spock doesn’t reply. Jim can’t see his reaction because he’s purposefully turned away from it, but he knows it’s not good. Jesus, why does everyone make it into such a big deal?

He finally looks back at Spock and snaps, “It’s just sex. Just a one-night stand, okay? Chill out.”

Spock, predictably, does not relax. “The term ’one-night stand’ implies sexual intercourse with no consequences and no strings attached. This is… intercourse with a steep imbalance of power and a potential war over your head. They are in no stretch of the imagination comparable—”

He’s interrupted by a shrill beep from the viewscreen behind Jim. He turns around and looks at it: Incoming call from Christopher Pike.

“It’s Pike, all right, so try to be professional about this, okay?” Jim says, a little more sharply than he meant to, pressing the accept call button.

“I am continually professional regarding all matters,” Spock snaps. “An attribute which cannot be ascribed to yourself.”

“Wow, really? That’s mature—”

“Uh…hello?” They both turn to the source of the interruption. Pike gives them a cautious smile back.

“Can’t you see we’re busy?” Jim snaps.

“Apparently not too busy to fight,” Pike says mildly. His knowing look grates on every nerve Jim has, and he turns so that he’s side-by-side with his First Officer, crossing his arms and glaring at the viewscreen.

“What are you talking about? Spock and I never disagree.”
“We disagree at times,” says the Vulcan.

Jim elbows him. “No we don’t, Spock, shut up!”

“Well, you two should definitely figure that out amongst yourselves,” Pike says, bemused. “After your mission report. I want to know how you got Qoryschjearkg to retract his statement. He told us he was unwilling to accept any kind of compromise.”

“Well, let’s just say he was more amenable to…private negotiations.”

Spock looks straight at the vidcam and says evenly, “Admiral, I feel it necessary to add that Captain’s Kirk’s usage of the term ‘private negotiations’ is, in reality, a euphemism for sexual congress. Sir.”

In an unusual bout of professionalism, Jim manages to keep his eyes trained straight ahead, but he knows his expression is sliding into a muted form of what Pike has laughingly named his ‘Spock, oh my God’ face.

“I appreciate the clarification, Mr. Spock,” Pike says, obviously trying not to smile. “But I had been aware.” At Spock’s puzzled expression, he explains, “I assume everything in Kirk’s reports are euphemisms for sex unless proven otherwise.”

“Hey!” says Jim.

Pike gives him a look. “Are you trying to tell me that when you ‘danced with the Sikarian officials,’ there was nothing but dancing involved?”

“Well, uh…” Jim feels his face heat up. “Well… there was dancing too!”

Spock looks kind of sick. Jim has half a mind to remind him that he doesn’t call the shots on Jim’s sex life (regardless of how much Jim wishes he did), when the Vulcan’s hand reaches discreetly toward his own.

“Look, it seems like the two of you have something you need to…discuss, and…” Pike trails off, his gaze glued to where Spock’s fingers are pressing almost painfully into Jim’s, and he gets this look on his face, something between chagrin and understanding. “Aaah-huh, soooo, um. I’m just gonna… call back later. When you’re not…”

They never actually find out what, exactly, they won’t be doing, because Pike seems to just give up on the whole conversation and press the call ended button without so much as a “see ya.”

As soon as Pike’s face has disappeared from the screen, Jim turns on his First Officer, pulling his hand away. “Okay, spit it out – what is your problem?”

Spock doesn’t even look at him. He stays perfectly toy-soldier straight, facing the viewscreen. “Is it not obvious?” he replies. His lips barely move.

Jim looks at him incredulously. “Come on. Really, Spock? You of all people should be above these ridiculous romantic ideas of sex. You think it’s some kind of special-snowflake experience? You think it defies the laws of economics? Because, sorry to break it to you, it doesn’t. Everything, sex included, is about goods and services, costs and benefits, and the sooner you figure that out, the better off you’ll be.”

“That is… logical,” Spock says. But for the first time it doesn’t seem like a compliment. It seems like he’s struggling for control.
“Spock? Are you…?”

“Throughout my life,” the Vulcan says abruptly, “many people have told me that human emotion is shameful, that sentiment is the enemy.” He stops. “I did not think you would be one of them.”

“Spock—”

“You would have made a fine Vulcan,” he says, and the bitterness in his voice lands like a physical blow, almost knocking Jim off his feet.

“Spock, you know that’s not what I meant… Look, I don’t think it’s bad to put sex and love together. There are even people like Bones, who need them together, and I think that’s great. I just…. can’t. That’s all.”

Spock looks at him. “Can’t?” he repeats.

“Don’t,” Jim corrects himself quickly. “I don’t put them together.”

“Why not?”

“Why not what?”

“Why do you not put sex and love together?”

Derp.

And that’s… that’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it, what exactly is broken inside Jim. He’s been trying to figure that out himself for ten years, and the best answer he’s come up with is— “I guess when you get into the thousands of sexual partners it kind of loses its glamor, you know?”

“I see,” Spock says quietly, like he had hoped there would be something different, or more, or – something, and the shame of it burns like poison in Jim’s stomach, and he wishes he had just told him the truth.

If only he knew what the truth was.

---

Spock doesn’t bring their squabble home with them, per se, but it’s definitely weird between them for a few days after that, and so it comes as a pleasant surprise when Bones tells him that he invited Joanna to beam up to the Enterprise for one day out of her spring break, because a) he hasn’t seen Jojo in about a bajillion years (although they talk about every other week over vidchat, but it’s not the same) and b) his relationship with Joanna is one of the only things in his life he can be confident he’s actually doing right.

He does it so well that it probably shouldn’t surprise him when Rand comes around after hours and says, “How do you make your boyfriend’s fourteen-year-old daughter like you?”

“Well, my boyfriend’s fourteen-year-old daughter just happens to have great taste, I can’t speak for yours.”

Rand closes her eyes briefly and lets out a long breath. “You know what I’m talking about. Len told me the two of you hit it off the moment you met and I need you to tell me how. How did you find things in common with her? Aside from the fact that both of you have the maturity of a fourteen-year-old.”
“Well, if you’re just going to insult me…”

“No, I’m not—” Rand makes a frustrated noise and cuts herself off. “I’m sorry, I just… I really need your help.”

“All I could tell you is the basics, really. Make eye contact with her,” Jim says. “Don’t talk about her in the third person in front of her. Don’t talk down to her. And for the love of God, don’t try to be her second mommy.”

“Eye contact, no third person, no condescension, no mommyming,” Rand repeats. “Got it.”

“Oh, and by the way. If you mess this up it’s over between you and Bones, because if he has to choose between his girlfriend and his kid, he will choose his kid every time.” Jim grins as Rand’s eyes widen. “So no pressure!”

She nods kind of distractedly and starts heading out of his quarters, when he remembers one more thing. “Oh and Rand?” She turns around. “Relax.”

“Because it’s going to be fine?” she asks

“Nah, because they can smell fear.”

---

It is, of course, endlessly amusing to freak Rand out, but also has the added consequence of putting this super-disapproving look on Bones’s face when he comes to the transporter room to greet Joanna and finds Jim there already.

“I only told her the truth!” Jim protests.

Bones glares. “You have a very flexible definition of the truth.”

“I’m very flexible in general,” says Jim with a leer. “You’d be shocked at the positions I can get myself into.”

“You know, it never fails to astonish me how you seem to get older physically, but your brain remains perpetually at twelve years old.”

“Now that’s just not true,” says Jim. “Rand said my maturity was squarely at fourteen.”

“Jim…”

“Look, I’m sorry about Rand, I really was just trying to help. Tell you what, I’ll take Joanna off your hands tonight to make up for it.”

Bones raises an eyebrow. “He says, like he’d be doing me a favor.”

“Okay, yeah, I really just wanna have a sleepover with Jojo. So sue me.”

“That sounds very heterosexual. You can braid her hair and give each other manicures…”

“Heterosexuality is overrated,” says Jim loftily. “And for your information I could give her a great manicure.”

“Fine,” Bones sighs. “You can have a sleepover. Heaven knows Jojo will throw a fit anyway if she doesn’t have enough time with you.”
“Yes!” Jim cheers. “This is going to be the best sleepover ever. We’ll watch holovids and eat ice cream and talk about boys… You don’t want to join us, do you?”

“Do I need to literally vomit or do you get the general gist of my response to that question?”

“Good, because you’ll probably be the main topic of conversation, so.”

Bones looks at him suspiciously. “Actually maybe I should—”

“Nope, no grown-ups allowed, sorry Bones.”

“You just made that up right now!”

“Did not,” says Jim.

“Did too!”

Before Jim can shoot back his crazy-clever response (“did not!”), Scotty clears his throat and says, “Cap, Doc, she’s beaming up now.”

They both turn to the transporter pad, where a sparkly blur has appeared, dazzling and dizzying and arranging itself into a gradually more human-looking form….

Finally the sparkly blur solidifies into an actual person, who immediately cries, “UNCLE JIM!” and launches herself forward.

“JOJO!” Jim says, overjoyed, throwing out his arms to catch her and twirl her in the air, before settling her down for a long, tight hug.

“Hey, I’m here too,” Bones mutters, but Jim can tell he’s not particularly displeased.

Joanna laughs and pulls away from Jim to give her father a big hug too. “Hi, Dad.”

“Hi, sweetheart,” he whispers into her hair.

“I can’t wait for you to meet everyone!” says Jim as soon as they step apart. He leads her to the bridge, where Jim announces, “Attention everybody! It is my honor to present to you—Miss Joanna McCoy! Everybody say hi!”

“Hi,” choruses the bridge crew.

Spock tilts his head. “McCoy…”

“Dr. McCoy’s daughter,” says Uhura patiently. “You’ve never heard him talk about her?”

“He has,” Bones mutters. “He probably just deemed it irrelevant to the task at hand and forgot about it.”

“And in what way, may I ask, is your daughter’s activities relevant to our duties as Starfleet officers, Doctor?”

“You green-blooded—pointy-eared—”

“That’s Spock,” says Jim conversationally, while Bones yells semi-xenophobic obscenities. “My First Officer.”
“Duh,” says Joanna. “You’ve only told me about him like five hundred times.”

Spock looks at her curiously. “Indeed?”

“Sure, and it was super ga—”

“And THIS IS UHURA,” Jim interrupts loudly. “Communications!” Also Spock’s girlfriend! Small details! “And this is Sulu, helmsman, and Chekov, navigator…”

“And, uh, this is Janice Rand,” Bones adds, gesturing to where Rand is standing awkwardly behind Chekov, even though she’s actually not supposed to be here. “My assistant.”

“Hello!” says Rand, making way too much eye contact. “I assist your father.”

Joanna looks from Rand to her father and back, eyebrows raised. Then she looks at Jim, who nods solemnly back. Watching your parent date is always sucky and kind of surreal, but at least Rand isn’t half the moron Frank was.

“And here’s the captain’s chair!” says Jim, going over to it and running his hand along the back, The-Price-Is-Right-style. “This is where the magic happens.”

Jojo’s eyes light up. “Can I…?”

“Of course!”

She plunks down in his chair, sliding down in it and sighing in contentment.

“Nice, huh?” Jim says, grinning.

“Uncle Jim, if I joined Starfleet would you enlist me to your crew?”

“Hell yeah. I could use someone with your mad phaser skills.”

“Would you promote me to Chief of Security?”

“Totally,” says Jim. “Cupcake’s as good as gone. Nepotism all the way.”

“He is being facetious, correct?” Jim hears Spock mutter to Uhura.

Uhura just laughs.

---

To Jim’s delight, Joanna brought the guitar he’d gotten for her (she’d named it Jasmine), and they kicked off their Epic Sleepover with her rendition of Layla by Eric Clapton, accompanied by both of them singing along at the top of their lungs, which Jim felt slightly bad about afterwards when he remembered how thin the walls are between his quarters and Spock’s. Which is why he suggested that their next activity be a little bit quieter—namely bad holovids and popcorn.

Of course, like any good sleepover, all the really good confessions come out after midnight.

In this case the fact that Joanna has recently found herself a boyfriend.

“Have you told your dad?” Jim asks, when he’s recovered from the minor heart palpitations.

“No!” Joanna shudders. “God, no. Do you have any idea how much of a disaster that would be?”
He can only imagine. “We need food for this conversation,” he says, and programs a pint for both of them from the replicator.

He gives her the ice cream first, and one of the spoons. “So,” he says, settling down on the bed next to her. “What’s his name and address?”

“What? Why?”

“Just name will do.”

“Skylar,” she says, focusing on the ice cream, her face coloring. “Skylar Rafferty.”

“And?”

“And… And he’s in eleventh grade, he’s super smart, and really respectful and all that… And hot…”

“Scale of one to ten?”

Jojo thinks about it. “Eight-point-five.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah. And he already has his driver’s license, which is, you know. Convenient.”

“Uh-huh,” says Jim, taking the ice cream from her and digging in with his own spoon. “So you don’t need a chaperone. What percentage of dates does your mom know about?”

Her face turns even redder. “Like thirty?”

“Girl after my own heart. So what happens the other two-thirds of the time?”

“Nothing bad! Mainly it’s just to hang out, go to a coffee shop or a movie or something. We could do nothing together for hours.” And she’s smiling, her eyes bright and her tone warm, and Jim realizes that if she gets her heart broken it’ll break his heart too, which is kind of… scary. And amazing.

“I really like him, Uncle Jim,” Joanna says, suddenly sounding so similar to her father, who had just said almost the exact same thing to him a few weeks before. “It’s not like I think he’s The One or anything – I’m not even sure I believe in all that – but…” She looks at him, skeptical and desperately hopeful all in one. “I just want to fall in love with him like both our parents aren’t divorced. You know?”

“Yeah,” says Jim quietly. “I do.”

She takes the ice cream back from him, fiddling with the spoon, not looking at him for a while. “And… it’s also more complicated because… because he wants to… you know.”

He does know, and it curls like a fist in his stomach, in his core. “Jojo…”

“It’s not like he’s pressuring me or anything!” she adds hurriedly. “But I can tell he wants us to, to… do it.”

“Do you,” Jim starts, and has to swallow and start again because he’s probably the worst person on the planet to have this conversation with and he doesn’t want to get it wrong for Joanna. “Do you want to sleep with him?”
She looks kind of helpless, and says, “No? I don’t know, I’ve never… I think I do, eventually, but… I’m scared.” She tries to laugh and mainly fails. “Which is stupid. It’s just sex, right? Half my class has already done it…”

And Joanna is fourteen, about to turn fifteen, and Jim remembers exactly what this felt like and he has no idea what to say but what comes out is, “Jo, it’s not stupid to be scared. There is no such thing as ‘just sex.’”

She just watches him, curious and expectant, and Jim explains, “There’s casual stuff, sure, but it’s never nothing. You give a piece of yourself to them and take a piece of them with you every time.”

And there it is, what he’d been trying all this time to tell himself he didn’t believe. But now that he’s said it and it’s out there and it’s Jo’s heart on the line, he knows with an agonizing certainty that it’s true.

Not that he can deal with the implications of it being true for him. But at least Joanna won’t make the same mistake, maybe.

“The first time you have sex isn’t as life-changing as people make it out to be,” he continues. “But it is important. It’s really important. It’s gonna affect the whole way you think about sex with everyone, whether you want it to or not. That’s why… you need to trust him.”

“I trust him to pick me up on time,” she says. “I trust him to not say stupid things about my dad, even if he hates his. I trust him enough to go on a road trip with him? How do I know if I trust him enough to do this with him?”

“There’s no right answer, Jojo. It’s about how you feel. If you’re comfortable with it, you’ll know.” Or something. At least, that’s probably what Bones would say in this situation.

She smiles at him, and the whole horrible conversation seems worth it. “Okay. Thanks, Uncle Jim.” And then, “So when were you going to tell me about your crush on Mr. Spock?”

He almost chokes.

“My what!??”

“Come on,” she sighs. “It was so obvious from the way you talked about him, even over holovid. Also, you looked at the door to his room when you said ‘you need to trust him.’ Also, when you were introducing everyone earlier today you called him ‘my First Officer.’ You didn’t say that for anyone else.”

“You get all your observational skills from your dad’s side,” Jim grumbles, trying to hide his embarrassment. “Gimme that ice cream.”

She hands the ice cream over obediently. “So?”

“So what?” says Jim, stabbing his spoon into the pint with more force than strictly necessary. “Nothing’s going on there. Nothing will ever go on there. End of story.”

“Why not?” she asks, looking kind of crestfallen. “Is there some kind of rule against it?”

“No. Remember Uhura? That gorgeous communications officer? That’s his girlfriend.”

“Really? They seemed kind of… distant, to be honest.” Joanna frowns. “No, not distant exactly, more like… She seemed like she was his big sister or something.”
Jim snorts. “Well she’s definitely not his sister, not unless Vulcans are into some really weird kinky incest stuff he hasn’t told me about. They’re always that professional, in case you were wondering. They’re, like, Starfleet’s most logical couple.”

“And the hottest. Can you even imagine the kids they’d have?”

“Great,” Jim mutters. “Thanks, Jojo.”

“You’re hot too!” she offers.

Jim stuffs a big scoop of ice cream in his mouth and tries to pretend that doesn’t make him feel at least a little bit better.

---

Bones takes the whole next day off to spend time with Joanna and it’s back to business as usual for Jim, with the exception of one veeeery important vidcall he places during lunch break.

“Skylar!” Jim greets the sixteen-year-old when his face appears on the viewscreen. “Hello!”

Skylar Rafferty stares back at him in awe. “Are you really Captain Kirk? Like… the Enterprise Captain Kirk? Like… saved the galaxy Captain Kirk?”

“That’s me,” he replies cheerfully. “Joanna told me about you and I wanted to introduce myself, since I’m pretty much her uncle and all…”

“Wow,” Skylar breathes. “Yeah. Yeah, she told me about you, but I didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think what?” Jim asks, and suddenly his voice is a lot sharper.

“No—nothing—I just didn’t—”

“You didn’t believe her?”

“Of course I did! But I—”

“You didn’t think she meant what she said? Do you frequently decide for her what she means, Skylar?”

“No! I wouldn’t—”

“Let me tell you a little bit about myself, Skylar. The first time I got arrested was at fifteen because I nearly killed a guy twice my size in a bar for putting something in a girl’s drink. I got arrested again a month later for putting four people in the hospital, then again a week later… You get the picture. Anyway, I kept getting out of it because my dad’s kind of famous and all that but finally there were just too many charges and by the time I was seventeen I’d been in and out of juvenile detention twice.”

“You went to juvenile detention?” the kid repeats, his eyes wide.

“Sure,” says Jim casually. “Best fourteen months of my adolescence really. Jail was a lot more annoying, and longer, too. My roommate was a serial killer actually, good guy, even if he had a weird affinity for ducks…”

Skylar stares at him in what might be shock. Or maybe terror.
“Sorry, I’m getting off track, aren’t I! Sooo I got arrested eleven times after that, I’ve killed people and haven’t once regretted it, and I have very little patience for mistakes these days, because a mistake in a starship means death and destruction and general bad things. Oh, and I have fantastically aim,” Jim adds. Skylar keeps right on staring. “Yeah, actually I got an offer to be trained specially as a sniper, but I decided against it ‘cause I’d rather kill people to their face? But you never know, I might pick the hobby back up if the situation calls for it. What do you think, Ky? Can I call you Ky?”

The kid makes a little terrified noise.

Jim leans forward. The smile drops off his face like it was never there at all. “Look, kid. If you pressure Joanna into anything, I will know. If you treat her with anything less than perfect gentlemanly respect, I will know. If you break her heart, I will know. And I will find you. And I promise you, you will spend the rest of your life regretting that lapse of self-control.”

Skylar looks about ready to faint.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he squeaks.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir,” comes the tiny, petrified response.

Jim leans back and smiles beatifically. “Great! You seem like a really nice kid, Skylar. Have a wonderful day, all right?” Without waiting for a response he ends the call, which is good because a moment later Bones comes in and all there is to see is his name on Jim’s viewscreen.

“Who’s that?” he asks.

Jim laces his fingers behind his head and kicks up his feet, grinning. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

---

Having time with Jojo is always kind of bittersweet because he gets enough of her to remember how awesome she is and then she gets taken away again.

At least they have one last big hug next to the transporter pad, right before she gives hugs to both Bones and Rand (by all accounts she did a great job wooing Joanna, even with her false start).

“By the way, Dad?” she says when she gets up on the transporter pad and is waiting for the go-ahead from Scotty.

“Yeah, sweetheart?” says Bones, his eyes suspiciously bright.

“I don’t mind if you marry Miss Janice,” says Joanna matter-of-factly. “But I still have dibs on Uncle Jim.”

And then the transporter fires up and she’s gone, which is a shame, because the look on Bones’s face is priceless.

---

It isn’t an uncommon occurrence for Jim to find Spock in a hallway somewhere and just spontaneously drag him off to the mess hall or the rec room or the gyms to hang out or talk, but it is
an extremely uncommon occurrence (read: extremely never-happened-ever occurrence) for Spock to
do the same to Jim, as the Vulcan seems to prefer scheduled Encounters of the Kirk Kind. So it’s
already pretty weird when he asks Jim after a sparring session if they can speak privately, and it only
gets weirder when Spock leads him around to the back of the ship to the last-ditch meeting quarters,
or as Jim likes to call them, Room Very Dark and Room Strangely Stinky.

Spock heads into Room Strangely Stinky, Jim trailing after him kind of warily, and then the doors
close and Spock says, out of the blue, “The average adult human male requires sexual congress
approximately once every seventy-two standard hours.”

“What?” says Jim, and Spock takes a step toward him like a prowling cat and Jim takes a step back,
suddenly and inexplicably nervous.

“Adult human males with above-average levels of testosterone and adrenal activity such as yourself
function optimally with an energy outlet of intercourse every thirty-six or even twenty-four hours.”

“Wh-what is this, some kind of biology lesson…?” Jim asks, trying to laugh it off, even as Spock
keeps approaching and he keeps backing up.

“It has been 371 hours since your last single-night engagement,” his First Officer continues.

“You’ve calculated it to the hour?” says Jim, baffled.

And then Jim’s back hits the table and Spock’s hands are on either side of him, trapping him between
the Vulcan and the table.

“Jim,” he says, low and oddly urgent.

Jim stares back at him in wonderment and confusion. “You finally called me by my name. Without
me reminding you, I mean.”

“Affirmative,” Spock replies. “Though your unnecessary attachment to the designation remains as
meaningless and illogical as ever.”

Jim grins. Even when he’s acting weird, he’s still just the same old Spock. Even as his hands move
to the hem of Jim’s shirt and –

“Woah, wait!” Jim squeaks, pushing his shirt back down. “What is this, some kind of experiment or
something?”

Spock’s eyebrows lower slightly, but before he can answer, the door to the meeting room slides open
and there, of course, of course, is Uhura. She opens her mouth and then closes it and then opens it
again and Jim pushes Spock away and starts babbling something about oh my God and I’m so sorry
and nothing happened I swear please don’t kill me, barely aware of what’s coming out of his own
mouth, and then he’s running out of there for life, his mind singing a little ditty that goes something
like, AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!

Of course there is only one place to run to when faced with a crisis of feels and/or a homicidal
Uhura.

He has to find Gaila.

---

He tracks her down in her quarters, where she’s sitting cross-legged on her bed, stripped down to her
underwear and a plain white tanktop, weaving some kind of flowery, decorative-looking thing. Above her bed hangs the flag of the Orion slave girl revolt – seven silver stars in a circle against a purple backdrop as dark as the Orion sky.

He sits down next to her. ‘Gaila, I’m having a crisis. I need your advice.’

“Does it have something to do with why you smell like you’ve been in that weird stinky meeting room?” she asks, putting down the flowery weavy thingy and looking at him.

“It does,” says Jim.

“Go ahead, then,” she says kindly, scooting away to a safe distance.

“I was talking to Spock, you know, like normal, nothing out of the ordinary, and then out of nowhere he pulled me into Room Strangely Stinky and started talking about testosterone… and adrenal activity… And he seemed kind of… I don’t know. Agitated?”

“What was he trying to get at?”

“I don’t know! And he called me Jim.”

“Haven’t you been trying to get him to do that, though?” she asks.

“Yeah!” says Jim. “But now that he’s actually doing it it’s really weird!”

Gaila twists a lock of hair around her finger thoughtfully. “It sounds strange but not terminal. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

---

So he takes her advice and tries not to worry about it.

But he doesn’t tell Gaila about Uhura, and how he keeps making her think he’s an insatiable slut, which might be because he is an insatiable slut, and how much he just wants her to think he’s a decent human being. And he doesn’t tell her that he could’ve sworn Spock was offering to have sex with him, despite the fact that Jim knows that’s all just wishful thinking. And he doesn’t tell her about the turn that the incident tends to take in his dreams over the following nights. Because he might want Spock – and God he wants Spock, it’s actually painful sometimes – but that doesn’t mean he sees sexual overtones in all their interactions; it doesn’t mean he makes himself believe that Spock wants him, too. He isn’t Kodos.

He isn’t.

---

Of course, when Kodos brought up the offer for private lessons less than a year after Jim had come to Tarsus, the first person he told was Sam.

“Waaaait, wait, slow down,” Sam said, but he was already grinning at Jim’s excitement. “Start again – what did Kodos say?”

Jim couldn’t sit still, he had to move, had to walk around, had to wave his arms in big, enthusiastic gestures and eagerly tell him that – “I dunno, some kind of enrichment focusing on my critical thinking skills or some crap? I wasn’t really paying attention, basically he wants to make some kinda specialized curriculum for me. ‘Cause he says normal class isn’t challenging me enough,” he added
proudly.

Sam laughed and grabbed him in a hug that knocked the air out of his lungs. “Of course it isn’t!” he crowed, cuffing Jim on the head. “So what does he want to teach you?”

“I don’t know!” said Jim.

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No, it sounded like he didn’t even know yet himself, I think he’s just gonna teach me stuff…?” He shrugged. “It was all kind of vague. But hey, private lessons with the most brilliant person on this rock, so who cares?”

And Sam had frowned, had looked kind of confused and almost…wary. Jim hadn’t realized it at the time because it was such a foreign expression for Sam’s normally trusting face. And because after the briefest moment, the guardedness had cleared, leaving only his usual smile. “That’s amazing, Jimmy. He must really like you!”

---

“I’m picking up a distress signal, Captain,” says Uhura. “It appears to be coming from Efros.”

“Efros?” Jim repeats. “We’re right next to them, they don’t seem to be under attack… What kind of aid are they asking for?”

Uhura frowns. “All it says is ‘please help.’”

“Can you open a line of communication with them? Are they responsive?”

“I’ve answered the signal on all frequencies, sir. They haven’t replied.”

Jim taps out a rhythm on his armrest, considering it, and then: “We’ll have to go down there,” he says decisively.

“Of course we will,” Bones mutters.

“Don’t worry, Bones. Everything’s going to be awesome.”

“Famous last words,” says the doctor grimly. “Right up there with, ‘I wonder what this button does.’”

“C’mon,” says Jim. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Bones points to the officers on the bridge like a conductor giving a cue.

“Brain damage and death,” they chorus obediently.

“You trained them?” Jim asks, incredulous.

“I did. Does that affect your decision at all?”

Jim thinks about it for a second. “No.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” McCoy mutters.

---
So Jim puts together a small landing party, including himself and Spock and a couple of Security guys, and they’re about thirty seconds from beaming down when Spock pulls him aside and says, “You seem to be laboring under the assumption that Uhura and I are still romantically involved.”

And Jim just stares and stares and stares because about fifty billion thoughts just exploded into his head, most of them completely inappropriate, and manages to say, “You’re not?”

“We terminated our entanglement nearly two months ago.”

“How come?” he asks.

And Spock looks back at him, and if Jim didn’t know any better he’d say the Vulcan was frustrated.

“Ready to beam down, Captain?”

“Y-yeah,” says Jim, turning from Spock’s oddly intent gaze and going to the transporter pad.

---

They beam down directly into an argument.

“—have no sense of perspective, Atreonid! The Federation has far more important missions to be taking care of than your foolish rebellions!”

“You have always thought the Federation more important than me, even before my so-called rebellions!”

Jim clears his throat.

They both turn, their eyes widening as they take in the landing crew.

“We’re here about a distress signal?” he says tentatively.

“I am so sorry,” the older man says immediately, rushing forward to shake Jim’s hand. “My daughter, here, she—look what you’ve done! Do you know who this is?”

She’s batting her eyelashes at him in the way people do when they know exactly who he is. “Of course, Father. He’s Captain James Kirk.”

“Now don’t you start distracting him,” he scolds.

“Um,” says Jim. “We’re here about a distress signal?” he tries again.

“Yes,” the man says, wringing his hands. “I am Sir Koortwud, Captain. I am the Prime Minister of this sector of Efros, and this is my daughter, Atreonid.” Atreonid waves cheerfully from behind her father. “I’m afraid this is all one big misunderstanding, you see, my daughter has a rather… irresponsible sense of humor…”

“She sent the distress signal as a practical joke,” Jim finishes.

“I am so sorry,” Koortwud repeats.

“It’s not a big deal,” says Jim. “In all honesty I’m surprised more signals aren’t false alarms.” He turns to the Security boys. “You head back to the Enterprise and let them know what happened. Mr. Spock and I will get an official statement from Ms. Koortwud of the signal and join you momentarily.”
“Of course!” Koortwud says. “I will prepare the documents for you right away.”

“This must be Mr. Spock, then,” says Atreonid, the moment her father and the Security boys have left. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Spock just stares back at her.

“And it’s a real pleasure to meet you,” she says, sidling over to Jim, not seeming to care that he never actually responded. “I’ve seen pictures of you, of course. I have pleased myself to pictures of you.”

“Oh, um.” Yeah, he’s never going to get used to how frank most aliens are. Which is kind of a problem, because Efros is one of the most powerful members of the Federation, and if he’s ever had to make a good impression, it’s here, and he’s already blushing. Spock’s not exactly helping out any either, with his stone-like silence. “Thank…you?”

A moment later he feels Spock’s fingers against his, almost like a reassurance, and he can’t help but relax.

“Oh!” says Atreonid. “Are you a Vulcan? Wow, I’ve never met a real one. I’ve heard they are extremely smart…. I can’t imagine what it must be like to have your brain.”

“That is true,” says Spock blandly.

Jim grits his teeth into a smile and turns to his First Officer. “Spock, why don’t you go do… something?”

“I am currently doing something, Captain,” Spock says in that purposefully expressionless way that Jim has learned means the Vulcan knows exactly how annoying he’s being. “I am doing many things, in fact.”

“Why don’t you do something somewhere else?” says Jim.

“Or we could do something somewhere else,” says Atreonid coquettishly, and Jim knows what she’s referring to but she just goes ahead and adds, because aliens have zero chill, “Such as intercourse.”

Jim looks her up and down, at her sunburn-red skin and white hair and nice curves and thinks, Yeah, all right. It’s always good to be on a powerful government’s side, after all. Even if his tastes have strayed more to the male and dark-haired lately. “Why not.”

Jim thinks he hears the sound of something splintering behind him.

“Very well,” says Atreonid, grinning. “I will see to the preparations.” And she flounces off, and Jim turns around, and it takes a full minute of staring at the chunk of wood in his First Officer’s hand to realize that Spock has torn off a piece of the table.

“Dude, put that thing back!” he hisses, grabbing the chunk away from him and trying to fit it back in to the table, while Spock watches, blank-faced. “Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘you break it, you buy it’?”

Eventually he gets it to fit back in somewhat, aside from the small detail that the next person to put pressure on that spot will break the table all over again.

“And now?”
“Now we get as far away from the crime scene as possible,” says Jim.

They just manage to get outside the building, to a little garden with a stone bench and a fountain and some truly weird plantlife, when Spock turns on him.

“Do you enjoy it?” he asks sharply. “Is that why you continue to do this to me? Do you enjoy having coitus with only those who could destroy you or those who mean nothing to you?”

“Maybe I love it,” Jim says blithely, trying to end the conversation as quickly as possible.

“Because you are desperate. Because you have sexually starved yourself.”

“Hey, I’m not desperate,” says Jim, affronted. “Even I can keep it in my pants when it matters.”

“Yes, you refrain from intercourse with anyone of a lower rank, and with Doctor McCoy,” Spock says, and he’s almost hissing now. “However, you have no qualms engaging in ‘private negotiations’ with any other person – with one exception, of course….”

And Jim knows, he knows, where this is going, and he can’t… No, he can’t, please let him be wrong…. “You,” he says, and Spock looks almost relieved, and something breaks inside him. Or maybe it’s that something breaks all over again; something that was just beginning to heal. “You’re wondering why I’ve never jumped your bones, since I’m a slut and can’t go five minutes without a screw.”

“That is not what I meant to imply.”

“Then what did you mean?” Jim says, the tone soft, the words scalding. “I’ve used everyone else for mindless sex, why haven’t you gotten your piece yet? Is that not what you were asking?” Spock doesn’t reply and Jim snaps, “Answer me, Spock.”

The Vulcan hesitates, and then, “I suppose… In a manner of speaking... I am merely aware of your unique bodily needs” (unique bodily needs, Jim could almost laugh if he knew he’d be able to stop) “and I gathered from your… companions during shore leave that you are attracted to individuals of my approximate physical qualities. I believe we would be able to keep the arrangement from becoming overly personal. It is only logical, then—”

He can’t listen to this anymore. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Spock stops. Stares at him.

Jim smiles back. It’s the smile he uses during negotiations, the smile he had been giving Atreonid just five minutes ago. The smile he never thought he’d be using with Spock. But nobody sticks around just because they like you. Everyone wants something – he was an idiot to think that rule didn’t apply here.

“Hey, you've given your life for our crew,” he says with a cheerfulness he doesn’t feel. “I could never manage running the Enterprise – or doing any of this, really – without you. So if you want something in return I guess I can't say no.”

Spock keeps on staring.

“So? How do you want me?” The Vulcan doesn’t reply, just stands there, looking confused and kind of frightened, so Jim steps closer and says softly, “You’re a pretty private guy, we could go back to your quarters right now…” He takes another step closer, grinning wickedly, even as the words taste like blood in his mouth. “Or maybe you’re sick of all that self-control, maybe you want it right here?
Up against that wall, maybe? Over that bench, or in that fountain…?

“No,” says Spock, although there’s very little force behind the word. “This is not what I intended.”

“All right, then you tell me, baby. Whatever you want.” And now they’re toe-to-toe, close enough to punch, close enough to kiss.

“I,” Spock says, more firmly this time. “I do not want this, Captain.”

“Maybe you don’t want it with me,” Jim replies, and realization hits him all at once. His smile goes cold and rigid and darkly amused. “Ohh, I get it. You recently broke up with Uhura, didn’t you? You’re probably still reeling from it – you need her back, just for a little while. Well, that’s fine.” Spock stares back at him, uncomprehending, and Jim’s grin widens. “Just sit back and close your eyes, I’ll be whoever you want me to be. I don’t mind if you call out someone else’s name. Like you said, this is nothing personal.”

And he seals Spock’s mouth with his own, sucks on bottom lip, licks his way in, closes his eyes and tries to think of nothing at all.

It’ll be no different than the other thousand people he’s had before, he tells himself. It’ll be no different than Kodos. He can do this. It doesn’t mean anything, none of it means anything—

Spock pulls away abruptly. “Captain,” he says, his voice almost a gasp. “No.”

And Jim doesn’t move and Spock pushes him away, looking confused and horrified and painfully vulnerable and, and—

Oh.

God.

Spock had said no, he had told Jim that he didn’t want it, and Jim had just ignored him, just kept going, because he’d wanted it, not because Spock did, because he still wants it, and Jim looks at his hands, at what he’s touched with these hands, at the hands that have taken and have killed and have been turning him into Kodos all this time without him noticing…

“I’m sorry,” he says, stumbling back, trying to stay standing, trying to breathe. OhGodohGodohGod. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry…."

He probably could have kept repeating it forever, but a soft female voice interrupts, “Captain Kirk?” And Jim looks up at Atreonid, who’s watching him from the garden gate openly and curiously. “Are you prepared for our session of intercourse or is there…?”

“No,” Jim says, pulling himself together. He doesn’t dare look at Spock. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

And she smiles and leads him out of the garden and Jim never once looks back.

---

He’s only just pulled off Atreonid’s shirt when she suggests, “We could ask him to join us.”

“Who?” Jim asks, feigning ignorance, and starts placing kisses under her jawline, down her throat, to her collarbone…

“Your – ahh – your Vulcan. He is extremely a-attractive.”
“No,” Jim snaps, harsher than he intended, and she stiffens slightly. He can’t bring himself to regret his refusal, though.

*He’s mine,* he thinks fervently, irrationally. *My First Officer, my friend, my… whatever he’s going to be to me now. No one else can have him.*

That’s when it truly hits him that he doesn’t know what Spock is going to be to him anymore. Worst case scenario he files a sexual harassment claim and Jim gets suspended or even formally dismissed. Best case scenario he stays on with Jim, but all the progress they’ve made over the past months together are ruined. Destroyed, probably forever.

*Wouldn’t it be better to have him just one night, then?* Some part of him asks, and is immediately shoved away.

Atreonid is watching him, curious. “He is…important to you.”

And even though Jim is confused, and hurt, and angry—at himself? At Spock? At Kodos? At every damn person he’s ever felt anything for? that fact remains undeniable. “He is important to me. I…I trust him. Even after…” He has to stop and try again. “I know there’s a good reason for everything he does. He’s the most intelligent Vulcan, and the kindest human, I’ve ever met. I’d support him to the ends of the galaxy. No matter what.”

“You’re in love with him,” says Atreonid, like it’s just that simple, and Jim stares back at her.

“No,” he says. Pleads. “No… nonono…”

But everything slots together, all the feelings that wouldn’t go away and the magnetic attraction between them and how they complemented each other, made each other better, just like the relationship Cave Spock had with his other self, and everything finally makes sense, finally forms one dazzling yes.

And Jim staggers over to the nearest chair and collapses into it, and buries his face in his hands.

He’s in love with Spock. And he’s completely screwed it up.

---

It’s almost a parody of the first time they did this, when Jim opens the door to Spock’s room that night, too distracted to remember to knock first, and his First Officer is already standing there, his back straight and his hand poised to knock.

In his other hand is a bouquet of flowers.

Spock’s gaze goes to Jim’s hand as well, to the rock he’s clutching for moral support.

“Uhura told me that rocks are a Vulcan gesture of apology,” Jim manages, too ashamed and too terrified by himself to look Spock in the eye. “And I just wanted to s-say I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry…”

“You are forgiven, Jim, of course,” Spock murmurs. “I also wished to apologize…” He lifts the bouquet, and finally Jim hesitantly looks up at him, and wants to melt at the trust he still sees there in his face. “I have meditated over our exchange, and I understand that my offer – and my implications – were ill-informed and disrespectful.”

Jim smiles back, a little weakly. “I’m sure you were just being logical.”
“No,” says Spock. “I realize now that my reasoning was the furthest thing from logical.” He stops abruptly, seeming to want to say more, but he doesn’t, and Jim is left standing there, playing with the rock in his hand and wondering what that was supposed to mean. And adamantly not interpreting it to his own benefit, because he doesn’t do that.

“Why do Vulcans apologize with rocks anyway?” he asks, if only to move the conversation to smoother waters.

“They symbolize eternity,” says Spock. “Permanence. When one punctuates one’s statement with a stone, it is a promise to preserve that statement – a promise or apology, generally – for the remainder of their lifetime. To incorporate the new resolution into their very essence.” He pauses, looks at Jim curiously. “Why do humans apologize with flowers?”

“I dunno,” says Jim. “’Cause they’re pretty?”

Spock’s eyes take on that subtle warmth of amusement, and Jim’s chest loosens a little bit.

“Do you wanna come in?” he asks, standing back and gesturing back in toward his quarters. Then he realizes how that could be taken and quickly adds, “Play a game of chess or something?”

“That would be…good,” says the Vulcan.

And so they sit down to a game and Spock studies the board and Jim studies Spock, and tells himself that his new realization doesn’t have to change things. That just because he wants more than Spock wants to give doesn’t mean he has to take it. That the important thing right now is getting them back to normal. To how they used to be.

It will just have to be enough.
“Incoming transmission, Captain,” says Uhura. “From a Doctor Thomas Leighton.”

“Oh, hey.” Jim turns to Spock, who’s already looking back at him. “Is he calling for me or you? Are you guys still working on that synthetic food together?”

“Yes, although not as often as we were. Most of the science officers, including myself, have put aside the chemistry team’s work to focus on the medical team’s research, which has been progressing at an exponentially more rapid pace.”

“How very commendable of you, Mr. Spock,” says Jim, trying not to smile. “That couldn’t have been easy to admit.”

“If you are imagining me to be resentful that Doctor McCoy’s research has developed more quickly than my own, you are quite mistaken. I am interested only in the advancement of scientific enquiry. Jealousy—”

“—is illogical, right,” Jim finishes, unable to hold the grin back anymore. “I guess Vulcans just take it if they want it and leave it if they don’t.”

Spock gives him a long, unfathomable look. “Some things are more complicated than that,” he says at last.

Uhura clears her throat. “Captain, the transmission…”

Jim jolts a little and finally drags his eyes away from Spock’s. “Right! Sorry. Patch him through, Lieutenant.”

Tom’s face appears on the viewscreen. “Captain Kirk.”

Jim grins, leaning back in his chair. “Well, if we’re being all formal – Doctor Leighton, it’s a pleasure to speak with you! How can we be of assistance?”

His friend smiles at him, but there’s something... off about it. “In this case I think I can be of assistance to you. Or at least my research can. It’s the synthetic food - we’ve finally developed it.”

“You’re kidding! Tom, that’s amazing! And you’ve credited Spock and his team, of course, right?”

“What?” says Tom.

“You know,” says Jim. “Credited them? Put their names on the research paper? They might not have finished off the job with you, but they still put hundreds of hours into the project.”

“Oh!” says Tom, looking uncomfortable. “Of course—of course I did.”

Jim frowns. “Are you okay? You’re acting kind of—”
“I’m fine,” he says abruptly. “Look, I could sell this discovery privately for millions of credits, but I’d like to contribute it to Starfleet instead, so all the Federation planets can benefit from it. That’s why I’m calling you.”

“Of course! We’re actually heading to the Magna Phi Y’ingla system for a mission right now, but it shouldn’t take too long.”

“No,” says Tom, and his sharp – almost desperate – tone takes Jim by surprise. “It needs to be now!”

Jim stares at him, taken aback.

His friend seems to visibly deflate. “I mean… There are a lot of investors who are going to be vying for this technology. If Starfleet wants it, you should come right away.”

“All right,” says Jim slowly. “I guess if it’s an emergency… I’ll let the admiralty know why we’re rerouting. I’m sure they’ll understand that this is an opportunity they can’t refuse.”

“Great, and—there’s no need to send a big landing party. You can beam down by yourself to pick up the materials.”

Jim can practically feel Spock narrowing his eyes behind him.

“Sure,” says Jim, before his First Officer can object. “Sulu, reroute us to Planet Q.”

“Yes, sir,” says Sulu.

“Chekov, how long should this little detour take us?”

“Planet Q is slightly over three lightyears away from our current location,” his navigator replies. “We should arrive within seventy-two standard hours.”

“Hey, just in time for your birthday!”

“Yes, sir!” says Chekov, his face lighting up with a smile.

“All right, then.” Jim turns back to the viewscreen, grinning. “See you in three days, Tom.”

“See you, JT.”

Jim ends the call, and turns around to Spock, who is still staring at the viewscreen, his eyebrows slightly furrowed.

“What’s wrong?” Jim asks.

“It does not make sense,” the Vulcan murmurs. “Why would Doctor Leighton not inform me of his progress earlier? Although we have not worked together in the past month, we have maintained a positive relationship. And although I do not claim to know him intimately, I have never seen him act in such an erratic manner…”

“He is acting weird,” Jim agrees. “But he’s probably just stressed out; he’s got a lot on his plate.”

Spock looks at him. “You are not habitually inclined to such bouts of naivety, Captain.”

“I’m not being naïve, Spock,” says Jim. “I trust him. Tom is my friend—has been my friend for years. He would never try to hurt me.”
Spock doesn’t respond to that, and Jim turns back around in his chair and presses the record transmission button on his console.

“Captain's log, stardate 2259.176,” he says. “Starship Enterprise diverted from scheduled course. Purpose: to confirm discovery by Doctor Thomas Leighton of an extraordinary new synthetic food which would totally end the threat of famine on Cygnia Minor, a nearby Earth colony, and other planets like it.”

---

They finally arrive, and after checking in with Tom one more time and making the whole bridge crew promise to behave themselves for Spock, Jim prepares to beam down.

His First Officer, of course, follows him to the transporter, and his accompaniment feels far more natural than it probably should. The weird part is going to be when they’re separated. Aaand Jim really should stop thinking along those lines.

“Spock, you have the conn,” he tells him, as if there was any doubt there. “Don’t forget to stay on top of the science team’s research proposals so we can get right on confirming and reproducing Tom’s work.”

“I will not,” says Spock.

“And check in with Gaila to see if there’s anything we still need to order for Chekov’s surprise party tomorrow. And make sure to slap anyone who looks like they’re about to give the secret away!”

“I will,” says Spock.

“And if you can, remind Yeoman Karena to take his lunch meds. He always forgets, and Bones—”

“Captain,” his First interrupts. “The ship will be fine.”

“Of course she will,” Jim says, letting himself relax, smiling a little bit sheepishly. “After all, you’re the one taking care of her.”

“Affirmative,” says Spock. “Far more worrisome than the proceedings on the Enterprise are the proceedings on Planet Q. I fail to understand the logic of your beaming down alone.”

“All I’ll be doing is picking up his research paper and preliminary sample. This mission only requires one person, and he’s my friend. It makes sense for me to be the one to go down.”

Spock doesn’t respond, but he still doesn’t look very happy.

“It’ll be fine, Spock. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Please do not say that phrase.”

Jim grins. “Now you’re sounding like Bones. Isn’t it illogical to think that a particular phrase can bring bad luck?”

“Not at all,” says Spock. “Statistically, I have heard you say those very words eight times previously, and—”

“And it’s always turned out okay,” Jim finishes. “Relax, Spock!”

“’Okay’ is an ambiguous expression. You seem to use it to describe any circumstance that does not
end in death or dismemberment.”

“Exactly!” says Jim, slapping him on the arm and walking past him to the transporter pad. “Just keeping my eye on the important things. And as they say, everything’s survivable except the last thing.”

“That is not particularly comforting, Captain.”

Jim laughs. “I’ll be back soon, okay? And all in one piece, I promise.”

“Ready to beam down, Cap,” says Scotty, who’d been sitting there, pretending not to listen, with a little smile on his face.

“Let’s do this,” says Jim, and the ship – and Spock – fade away.

---

Tom doesn’t look any better up close than he did on the viewscreen. If anything, he seems worse; more on-edge, the dark lines under his eyes darker, the weariness in his posture more pronounced. Still, he gives Jim a hug and rather stilted smile when he beams down, and shows him around his and Martha’s new house on Planet Q.

It’s obviously been set up in the hopes of having kids, with a nursery and a playroom and everything, and Jim finds himself being louder and rowdier and more effusive than usual, to distract himself from how clean and quiet the house is.

After the grand tour, he asks Tom about the new synthetic food, and somehow the conversation ends up turning to dinner instead (almost like it was deliberately directed that way), and the next thing Jim knows, he’s eating beet-artichoke-sweet-potato salad with the Leightons and being invited to a play.

“It’s an Arcturian troupe,” Tom explains, “called the Karidian players, led by Anton Karidian and his daughter Lenore. They perform reinvisioned Shakespeare plays—they’re putting on Macbeth at the Stockholm Theater tonight.”

“Ahh, I don’t really do reinvisioned Shakespeare. It inevitably sucks.” Jim stops to think about that. “Except for She’s The Man. That was a good holovid.”

“We’re going,” says Tom. “I already bought you a ticket.”

“Martha can go with you, you can make a night of it. I should go back to my ship as soon as possible anyway.”

“I want you to come with me,” Tom insists, and if he realizes that his response is kind of insulting to his wife, he sure doesn’t show it.

Jim glances at Martha, who is looking in the opposite direction. Almost purposefully so.

“All right,” Jim relents. “I guess it’s hard to ruin Macbeth.”

---

On stage, a velvet-clad arm raises a bloody knife, then plunges it again into his sleeping victim. The audience is rapt.

Jim leans over to Tom and whispers, “The book was better.”
“Shhh,” says Tom, his eyes never leaving the stage.

“I take back what I said—they have succeeded in ruining Macbeth. All the lines out of order,” he says indignantly, “if not completely changed. The themes are so obvious in this version, the challenge is gone. They’ve sapped out all the fun.”

“Watch him,” Tom mutters back. He clearly hasn’t heard a word Jim said. “Watch Macbeth.”

“Is he dead?” Lady Macbeth asks urgently, and that is totally not a line from the actual play. Jim suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. “Speak. Is King Duncan dead?”

Macbeth doesn’t respond, doesn’t seem to even be aware of his wife’s presence. He’s staring at his own hands in horror.

There’s a sound from offstage. Macbeth jumps.

“Whence is that knocking?” he demands, his voice shaking. “How is ’t with me when every noise appalls me? Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?” He takes a deep, shuddering breath, staring at his own trembling fingers. “No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.”


“Who, Karidian?” Jim whispers back. “Yeah, he’s doing a good job, especially considering what they did to the script.”

“No, JT, it’s him. That man on the stage. It’s Kodos.”

Jim looks back to the stage, where Macbeth – Karidian – is crying, “What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes!”

And Jim blows out a long breath and rubs the bridge of his nose and prays that this is some kind of horrible joke.

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“How could you do this to me!?”

Tom looks up at him helplessly from where he’s seated next to Martha at the kitchen table. “Please, JT…”

Jim is so angry he’s shaking with it, pacing the floor and trying to resist the urge to break something. “You lied to me. You—you called me three lightyears off my course just to accuse some random actor of being Kodos!”

“He is Kodos,” says Tom. “I’m sure of it.”

Jim resists the urge to pull out his own hair. “You’re always sure of it!”

“But this time it’s for real! Listen to me—”

Jim whirls on him. “No, you listen to me, Tom! For the first time in my life, there are people who depend on me, okay? There are people who respect me, and need me, and actually expect me to not screw up, and—and you’re trying to jeopardize all of that!”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do!”
“Well that’s what you’ve done!” Jim yells back. “You don’t get it! I have to justify every damn minute of my life to the admiralty. If I’m even five minutes late for shift, I need a good reason! What do you think they’ll say when they hear that I diverted the Enterprise across the quadrant, took it away from Federation business to some tiny colony three lightyears away, for what? Personal reasons? They’ll have me court-martialed! And Tom, I’ve already used my second and third and fourth chances, if I’m court-martialed I will *never* get another shot!”

“So don’t tell them that you came for personal reasons,” says Tom stubbornly.

“Right! Great! What *am* I supposed to tell them, then? That you lied about your discovery? They’ll take away your research license!”

Tom tightens his jaw. “It will be worth it to trap Kodos.”

“Kodos is dead!” Jim shouts.

“How can you be so certain?” Tom demands, getting to his feet. “They never positively identified him! The body was burned beyond recognition—”

“Stop it, Tom,” Jim says lowly. He has to clench his fists to keep his hands from shaking. “Don’t do this to me. Don’t you dare do this to me again. He’s dead.”

Tom falters for a moment, his eye suspiciously bright. “JT, please. Help me catch him. Help me bring him to justice. I can’t identify him by myself, I only saw him once, you’re the only one who can—”


“Because that man had a full facial reconstruction, Jim! I looked up his medical files, and the medical records for the so-called ‘Anton Karidian’ start eleven years ago, when he received plastic surgery to completely change his face—just two weeks after Tarsus!”

“So, what, every person who’s had plastic surgery around the time of Tarsus is Kodos now?” Jim demands. “That’s insane! Tell him he’s being insane, Martha, he listens to you!”

Martha avoids his gaze. “I’ve tried, Jim. He’s been like this since the company of actors arrived.”

“Kodos is dead,” Jim says again, and even he doesn’t know if he’s talking to Tom or himself.

“Then we’ll have a ghost at our house tonight, because I invited the whole company to an afterparty here,” Jim doesn’t respond and Tom sighs. “Look, if you’re so certain it isn’t him, just stay for a while. Talk to Karidian. You’ll be able to tell if it’s him, and I—I have to be sure. Please…”

The idea of laying himself bare like that, of the possibility that it will be Kodos, that he’ll recognize Jim on sight and Jim will be unsure, making smalltalk, trying to draw out the secret, horribly vulnerable— “No.”

“Please, Jim,” Tom begs. “Stay. For the four thousand people who were butchered. For the people who died in the civil war. For Erika. For Sa—”

“Shut up,” Jim snaps. “Shut up right now, or I swear I’ll—”

“He’s out there, JT. And he needs to pay for what he’s done to them…to you—”
And that’s it, he’s had enough. He stalks out of the kitchen and heads toward the door.

Tom follows him. “JT, please, please don’t go, I need to—”

“‘You need!’” Jim repeats, turning on him. “It’s always about what you need! I got arrested last time I tried to give you what you needed, and I’m not going to get court-martialed for it too! I can’t do this anymore! There is no benefit good enough for this cost!”

Tom stops, taken aback. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s simple economics,” says Jim. “I can’t keep making payments and getting nothing in return! It isn’t—”

“It isn’t what?” Tom asks, and now his voice is incredulous and angrier than Jim’s ever heard it. “Our friendship isn’t economically sound? Is that all I am to you? A cost-benefit analysis?”

“That’s what everything is.”

Tom is shaking his head, staring at Jim like it’s the first time he’s ever seen him. Maybe it is. “God. You sound just like him. Like Kodos.”

And it sends a jolt of fear, almost a sick thrill, down his spine, into his stomach, because he knew it, he’s always known it, now more than ever; now, with his body becoming Kodos. It’s only logical to give in to the fact that Jim’s mind belongs to him too.

The harsh laugh that comes out of his mouth, though, is one-hundred-percent Jim Kirk. “Found another Kodos lookalike already? You’re lucky I’m here to tell you it’s another false alarm, because I’m pretty sure you can’t afford to pay the cost for the benefit of another visit.”

“What are you saying?” Tom asks, his eyes wide, his stance like…like he’s preparing to run away. “This isn’t you, JT. You sound like…like some kind of sociopath.”

“I’m not a sociopath,” says Jim. “But I can be one, if that’s what you want.”

“Mister Tom, what’s a sociopath?” asks a small voice above them, and Jim looks up to see a girl—she has to be only about ten or eleven years old—with dark eyes and short dark hair standing at the top of the stairs.

“It’s…” Tom actually looks at Jim as if hoping he’ll bail him out of having to answer this one. But Jim doesn’t respond, and Tom mutters, “It’s complicated.”

“Is he the bad guy you’re waiting for?”

Tom almost chokes. “No! No, he’s not—This is JT, Sam.”

The girl turns bright, eager eyes on him. “You’re JT?”

Jim, for his part, is getting more impatient by the minute. He just wants to be out of here, but he’s not going to blow off a little girl to do it. At least not completely. “And you are…?”

“Sam,” says the girl, with a shy smile. “But I think you know me as Baby.”

Jim’s throat closes up.

Sam. They had spent so many hours jokingly coming up with terrible names for Baby, and in the end Natalie had named her Sam…
“Where is Natalie anyway?” he asks her, when he can speak again. “Is she here too?”

His questions are met only by silence.

Jim looks between Tom, and Martha, who’d reemerged around the same time as Sam, and the little girl on the stairs - the little girl who is now much closer than she had been, after inching her way down step by step. The little girl who is now looking like she’s about to cry.

“What?” he asks, his stomach already sinking with the inevitable—

“She died only a few weeks ago,” says Tom quietly. “She was killed. We’ve been taking care of Sam ever since. Keeping her out of foster care.”

And Jim stumbles forward to lean one hand against the banister, because Natalie, Natalie the ultimate survivor, steady and sensible and almost ruthless in her determination to live, Natalie who Jim wasn’t even that close to, but had always just assumed that she’d be alive until the end of time, because that’s the kind of person she is. Was.

“Who…” he manages. “Who killed…?”

“Natalie’s was the latest in a string of murders,” Tom says urgently. “The four of Kodos’s guards who survived Tarsus? They’ve all been killed within the past few months.”

“You’re saying it was Kodos,” says Jim flatly.

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense, Jim! All five of them in the span of three months—and all when the Karidian Players were in the area!”

“How did she die?” Jim asks, and is met with another long, stilted silence. “C’mon, what is it? How did she die?”

This time it’s Sam that speaks up. “I found her in the bathroom in—in a lot of blood. There were big cuts on her wrists.”

Jim closes his eyes. God.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Tom cuts in. He’s talking very quickly, like he knows Jim is about five seconds from bolting. “It looks like a suicide. And yes, it’s damning that Natalie had been struggling with clinical depression since Tarsus—”

“So you’re saying… a woman with clinical depression killed herself in her bathroom and a theatre troupe happened to be in town, and therefore Karidian is Kodos? Was that actually all your evidence?” Jim demands.

“She didn’t kill herself,” says Sam, her voice steely, at the same time as Tom pleads, “JT—“

“Look, I get that you don’t want to admit that your aunt killed herself—really, I get it, I’d probably do the same thing. But you just can’t frame her death on some random actor because you’re hurting.”

Sam bristles. “I’m not—”

Jim looks at her, dead-on and completely unapologetic. “People leave, kid. I don’t know why they leave, but they do, and I—” He thinks of motorcycles heading at full-speed to the edge, of skeletons and little tiled rooms, of waking up with blood in his mouth and tears on his face and his sheets fisted in his fingers and wishing it could all just go away. “I’m still not fully convinced they don’t have the
right idea.”

Sam stares back at him, uncomprehending. Or maybe not wanting to comprehend.

“Now I’m going back to my ship,” he says sharply, “and figuring out how to enter this all into my log without getting both of us arrested. Tom. Martha.” He falters then, unsure of which Sam he’ll be addressing if he calls the eleven-year-old in front of him by name. And if Jim has one rule it is the refusal to make anyone over in the image of someone else; even if that someone else is the girl’s own namesake. Or Jim’s brother. “Baby,” he says eventually, and turns and opens the door and—

And is stopped by an eleven-year-old girl blocking his way.

“Aunt Natalie didn’t kill herself,” Sam says, her voice quiet, her eyes resolute. “She wouldn’t have. She promised never to leave me.”

Her face is open, trusting. Like Sam’s used to be. Like Kevin’s is now. Like everyone who’s lost everything and just hasn’t figured it out yet.

“People don’t keep their promises, kid,” says Jim. “The sooner you learn that, the better off you’ll be.”

And then he goes around her and walks away from the Leightons’ house, never once looking back.

---

Still, he walks back to Planet Q’s transport location and it niggles at him. He calls Scotty to beam him up and it niggles at him. He gets back to the Enterprise and it niggles at him, all the correlations, all the strange coincidences…

Maybe it’s worth the handful of minutes it would take to prove that Karidian couldn’t be Kodos.

Not because Jim is worried, of course—because Tom is his oldest friend.

Was his oldest friend.

And of course, there is only one place to go when faced with a crisis of feelings and/or a potentially illegal file transfer.

He has to find Gaila.

---

The search doesn’t prove too difficult; the moment he enters the IT deck, Gaila runs over to him and starts telling him eagerly about her arrangements for Chekov’s birthday party in two days. Normally he’d be matching, if not exceeding, her enthusiasm, but right now…

“I got him the best present!” she tells him, practically bouncing with excitement, while Jim tries to look like he cares. “Wait, I’ll go get it for you!” And before Jim can protest, she’s off, leaving him shifting from foot to foot impatiently in the middle of the IT deck.

A moment later she returns with a collector’s item box. “You know that starship model saltshaker series? Well, they just came out with the Enterprise, look!” She holds up the saltshaker. “It’s not on the shelves yet, but I was able to get a special early edition. It looks just like it! Down to the damage to the left hull we sustained after Nero—”

“That’s cool,” says Jim noncommittally. “Gaila, I need to talk to y—”
“And we got these party favors, they look exactly like phasers, except when you pull the trigger, it shoots out confetti and a little banner that says ‘Happy birthday, Chekov!’”

“Wow. Listen, Gaila…”

“And there’s cake!”

“Gaila!”

She stops abruptly, her expression sobering at his tone.

“I need you to hack into some private medical files.”

Gaila looks intrigued. “Do you have a name?”

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It takes her less than ten minutes to hack into Natalie’s autopsy report, and thirty seconds to send it to Bones (“Bones, how soon can you give me cause of death?” “I can give you cause of death right now, it says it right at the top: suicide.” “Just…just look at it again, okay?” “What do you mean, ‘look at it again’? Jim—”)

To Gaila’s credit, she never asked Jim who Natalie was or why Jim was reinvestigating her death, not even when he hung up on Bones and resisted the urge to throw his com at the wall and shatter it into a hundred tiny pieces. Which brings Jim to the library, feeling only marginally more in control of himself. At least in control enough to ask a few questions. But that’s all he’ll do in the interests of chasing this phantom of Tom’s, that’s where the cost begins to eclipse the benefits to the point of insanity. That’s where he draws the line. Really.

“Library computer,” the console chimes. Jim sits forward, tries to clear his head.

“History files,” he says. “Subject, Anton Karidian.”

“Director and star of traveling company of actors sponsored by galactic cultural exchange project, touring official installations last nine years. Has daughter, Lenore, nineteen years old, adopted stardate 2248.592 from—”

“Stop. Give comparative identification between actor Karidian and former Governor Kodos of Tarsus IV, also known as Kodos the Executioner.”

There is a pause. And then, “No comparative identification records available.”

Jim frowns. They don’t have any of the same documents? Basic vaccinations? High school diplomas? Birth certificates? “Give information on actor Karidian prior to Kodos’s death.”

Another pause. “No information available on Anton Karidian, prior to stardate 2248.516.”

Jim runs a hand through his hair, tries to make sense of the information he has. The records are certainly suspicious—almost as if Anton Karidian spontaneously came into being just a few weeks after the death of Kodos the Executioner. But they still have no evidence directly connecting the two. Is a suspicion enough to stake his career—his life—on Tom’s assumption?

He’s grimly considering the variable ways in which this could go horribly wrong when the library door slides open.

“Captain,” Spock greets him, and Jim sees his eyes flicker to the hair he’s been mussing for hours,
the bottom lip he’s been chewing on. “You did not report to the bridge upon your return from Planet Q. Is there something amiss?”

Jim sighs and turns so he’s facing his First Officer fully. “Spock, you’ve worked with Tom. What’s your take on him?”

If the Vulcan is surprised by the complete non-sequitur, he doesn’t show it in the slightest. “A good empirical research scientist. Steady. Reputable. Occasionally brilliant.”

“He certainly doesn’t forget anything,” Jim mutters. “I’ll give him that.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “I have no information on that particular aspect of his intellect, Captain.” Jim doesn’t reply—doesn’t have anything to say, really, and Spock says, “I came to inform you that we are ready to leave orbit.”

So this is it. He’s going to leave Planet Q behind, leave Tom to his scheme. No—his party. His normal, perfectly safe party—or at least as normal and safe as a party with theatre people can be. Nobody is going to get hurt.

Even if Jim is starting to get a horrible, sinking feeling of dread about the whole thing.

But no, he is not going back! He’s not, he’s given too much and gotten too little, and that’s just how economics works. He doesn’t owe Tom anything. Right?

Good relationships, after all, are the ones that make sense – that balance out, that have an equal proportion of costs to benefits. It’s a good life principle. A solid principle. A logical principle.

Too bad none of his relationships actually follow it.

“Spock,” he says, and looks up only to find his First Officer already watching him. “How do you deal with everyone being so illogical all the time?”

Spock studies him a long moment. Then, “I am beginning to hypothesize that no individual is truly illogical. While it is true that some subscribe to approaches that are more practical, or more objectively accurate, or more readily comprehensible than others, I believe that if I had access to sufficient information, the rationale of every person would make perfect sense.”

It really shouldn’t surprise him anymore that Spock has a mindset Jim had never even considered, perfectly balanced on the fulcrum of compassion and logic. But for Jim… Well, Jim has all the information he needs to know about Tom. He knows exactly why he called Jim out all this way, he knows exactly how Tom must be feeling right now, waiting for the man he thinks is Kodos to visit his home, to have access to his wife, to Sam…

Not that that makes his lie any less of a lie. Regardless of how much Jim understands, Tom lied to him. Betrayed him. It was horrible. Unforgivable. And… and… and Jim needs to be there, at the party, with him.

The realization is somehow startling, jarring (the part of his brain that is always calculating costs and benefits immediately goes berserk), and also somehow…not. Because there’s very little economics can say to the fact that Jim just can’t leave Tom alone to face Kodos—or who he imagines to be Kodos—alone like that. He just physically can’t.

And that’s the thing—the thing Jim has never thought too deeply about, or maybe just hasn’t allowed himself to think too deeply about: that the law of economics has never fully explained his circumstances, his decisions, his relationships. Would someone living by the mandates of economics
keep making payments to Kodos, even though in the end he got nothing in return? Would he keep paying rent month after month for his apartment in Riverside for those two girls whose names he doesn’t even know? Would he let Pike watch out for him, with no discernible gain to the admiral himself? Would he care so deeply for Joanna? For Gaila? Would he ever have built this friendship with Bones, too deep and complex and with too much on both sides of the ledger to remember who owed what to who? Would he have ever been able to develop—whatever it is he has with Spock?

Everyone does want something. That truth is undeniable. But that doesn’t mean they need to have what they want, or that every relationship depends upon having what they want. Jim himself proves that every day, every time he interacts with Spock, constantly wanting and never taking.

Never taking because Jim wants many things. And some of them are more important than others.

And almost none of them make sense.

“Let’s…” Jim says, and once he’s started, the words come out more easily than he’d ever thought they could. “Let’s delay departure for a while. I'm beaming back down to the planet.”

“Captain?”

“I’m going back down!” Jim repeats, almost awed by his own decision, and strides out of the library before he can second-guess it, heading straight to the transporter, dizzy and dazed with the freedom.

And the thing is, even more freeing than throwing away the principle of economics is the realization that he’s not throwing it away at all—he never had it to begin with.

---

Unfortunately for Jim and his triumphant return, Tom isn’t there when he gets back, although the party is well underway, and a lot of other people are.

“Where’d he go?” he asks, when he finally finds Martha in the kitchen, placing the final pieces of fruit into the pretty little designs on a platter. She looks up at him with the tightened jaw and the badly-concealed glare of people who think they’re really good at hiding their emotions and actually are not.

“All I know is he’s outside somewhere, probably in the forest behind the house. He left right after you did.”

Jim sighs. “Look, I’m sorry—”

“Do you have any idea,” she interrupts, “what I would give to be in your position?”

Before he can formulate a response, she’s continuing, low and furious, “You have no idea how important you are to him. You’re the one he runs to when he’s scared. He trusts you. He doesn’t trust anyone but you!”

“What are you talking about? He married you.”

She smiles, half bitter, half sad. “He loves me. There’s no doubt about that. But he doesn’t trust me, not completely. He has these detailed, almost obsessive contingency plans for everyone he knows—for what he’ll do, how he’ll cope, if they abandon him.”

Something thick and heavy and smothering settles itself in Jim’s throat.
“He has a contingency plan for me. He has one for everyone—everyone except for you. The one person he actually needed it for.”

Whatever is in his throat is getting heavier, thicker, making it hard to breathe. “Martha—”

“Just—” She stops, angrily wipes her eyes. “Just find him, okay? He needs you.”

---

He finds him outside, jumping at every sound and shouting at shadows.

“Who is it?!” Tom demands, whirling on the spot, as Jim approaches unseen. “You’ve been skulking around here for hours, waiting for me—waiting for the chance to get me. Well, I’m here!” He spreads his arms out wide to the invisible threat, shaking with anger, or fear. “Come out and face me!”

As if in response, there is a loud, terrible crumbling sound. Jim looks up.

Balanced there, precariously on the cliff above them is an enormous boulder, moving as if being slowly pushed until it—

“TOM!” Jim yells, and he lunges forward, tackling his friend and pushing him away just as the boulder falls exactly where Tom had been standing a moment before, sending up dust and pebbles and getting in their eyes and in their throats.

Jim rolls off Tom and sits back on his elbows, coughing.

Tom is staring at him. “You came back.”

“Yeah,” says Jim, licking his lips, suddenly ashamed and inexplicably nervous. “Tom, I’m so… I’m sorry for all the things I said – I didn’t—”

Before he can finish, he’s being crushed in a hug.

“Thank you,” Tom whispers into his shoulder. “Thank you… I’m so sorry for lying. I just needed… I need to…."

“I know,” says Jim quietly, putting his arms around his friend. “And I’m going to stay. We’ll do this party together. And when we confirm that Karidian isn’t Kodos, I will find some fiendishly clever way to get us both out of trouble for it, like I always do.” He stops to think about that. “Well. Like I usually do.”

Tom pulls back, his face painfully grateful, and then the expression shifts to something more cautious. “What do you want for it, though? What benefit are you looking to gain for this cost?”

“It’s not about economics, idiot,” says Jim fiercely. “I’m here because I care about you.”

---

“Ground rules,” says Jim, as he and Tom reenter the party. “Don’t eat anything. Don’t drink anything. Don’t be alone with anyone. And if possible, we really should stay in each other’s sight at all times.”

Tom flushes. “We both know you don’t actually think there’s any danger. You don’t need to patronize me.”
“I’m not patronizing you. A wise man—person—told me that if I knew enough about the person’s perspective, everyone would make sense. So even though I don’t know how this is logical, I know it is. It’s real to you. So it’s real to me, too.”

Tom throws him an amused look. “Sounds like a very wise man-person.”

Jim flushes and elbows him, and Tom laughs, the tension finally beginning to fade from his expression, from his stance; making it that much easier for them to blend in with the rest of the laughing, mingling guests.

It doesn’t take long for Tom to be recognized as their gracious host, or to draw a somewhat steady stream of guests thanking him for hospitality (and the cute little finger sandwiches).

All of which creates the perfect screen for Jim to stand by his side, smiling, scanning the crowd for Karidian, his heart pounding despite himself (he’s only doing this for Tom. There’s nothing here to be afraid of), his heart clenching every time he sees someone who fits the basic profile, before realizing it isn’t him.

Jim hates waiting, has always hated waiting. It prickles beneath his skin, oozes into his mind, itches at his palms. Even when he was a kid playing hide-and-seek with Sam and their friends in the park, he could never just sit there and wait. If it became obvious that he was about to get caught, he would jump out at the person who was playing It, because at least then he has some kind of control over his own losing the game. It’s a lot worse to just wait there like a sitting duck, in hide-and-seek, and in everything else, in Jim’s opinion; better to scare it before it can scare you. And if he’s going down, at least he’ll go down in a blaze of glory.

Blazes of glory are something of a family tradition at this point, anyway.

He picks up one of the mini-margaritas from the table and clinks on it lightly with a knife.

“Everybody! I’d like to propose a toast.”

Someone in the crowd hisses “sshhh!” and slowly but surely, everybody quiets down, their eyes on Jim.

“First of all, to our host and hostess, Tom and Martha Leighton. Thanks for letting a bunch of drunk strangers wander around your home.” The audience laughs and hollers and gives the couple a round of applause.

“And to Anton Karidian, our very own Macbeth, leader of the Karidian Players, and resident Man of the Hour.”

The room bursts into cheers and clapping, but no one comes forward.

“Mr. Karidian?” Jim calls.

Everyone looks around expectantly. No one answers.

Finally there is movement somewhere at the other side of the room, and Jim’s stomach clenches, and the crowd parts to show—

—a girl, no older than twenty, beautiful and blonde and definitely not Kodos. “I’m afraid Mr. Karidian has a rigid rule against attending parties or accepting audiences personally. I can step in for him, though, if you wish.”

“And you are?”

Interesting. “Well then. I guess I’ll just have to ad-lib a bit.”

She smiles. “I apologize for the extra effort expended on my behalf, Captain.”

“No need to apologize,” says Jim. “It is the unexpected that keeps us on our toes.” He raises his glass, looking straight at Lenore. “To Lady Macbeth. The true power of her husband and the true instigator of all the events of tonight. A woman as brilliant as she is beautiful—and as deadly. Which, perhaps, explains the attraction.”

Jim takes her hand and kisses it gently, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Your face, my thane, is as a book where men

May read strange matters. To beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,

But be the serpent under’t. He that’s coming

Must be provided for: and you shall put

This night’s great business into my dispatch;

Which shall to all our nights and days to come

Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.”

His soliloquy is met by a brief, rather baffled silence, and then the room bursts into applause. A moment later the sounds of eating and laughing and making light conversation resume, Jim and Lenore forgotten.

Lenore smiles back at him, an actual, honest-to-God twinkle in her eyes.

“You are a very talented man, Captain,” she says softly. “Any more of that and I might find myself out of a job.”


“Everyone knows Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. You are a great man.” Something shifts in her expression, in her twinkling eyes, too quickly and too subtly for Jim to quite catch. “And great men are so rarely good ones.”

Interesting. She didn’t quite compliment him, but she didn’t exactly insult him either; she’s just stating a fact. A fact that could have come straight from Kodos’s own mouth.

Still. That doesn’t mean anything. He might be seeing phantoms himself now. He has to find out more if he wants to deny Karidian as Kodos. He has to get closer—a lot closer.

“It sounds like you know a lot about me. That’s not really fair, is it? Since I know nothing about you—nothing but your name, that is.” Jim pauses to fake another sip. “‘For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore, nameless here for evermore.’”
“Edgar Allan Poe!” she says, obviously pleased.

“You’re familiar with him, then?”

“Of course. My father loves the classics, and he’s passed that love on to me.”

Coincidence. It could just be another coincidence. “Well, then allow me to extend a literature lover’s highest compliment—you do the classics justice. You were very impressive tonight.”

She lowers her head demurely, looking up at him through blonde eyelashes. “As Lady Macbeth or as Lenore?”

And, well. Even in a situation like this, in an exchange more like a spar than a conversation, flirting is flirting. He grins lazily back and lets his voice dip lower. “Both. In fact, there are a lot of roles I’d like to see you in. And even more I’d like to see you out of.”

She laughs, and the sound is just like the woman herself—beautiful. Charming.

Hiding something.

“So what’s your next move?” he asks, leaning in just a little bit closer. “I know your father is the leader of the troupe, but something tells me I’m already talking to the keystone of the operation. Maybe it’s because your father isn’t here.” She gives him a smile he recognizes from his own face, from picking up clients in bars and Starfleet negotiation missions, and hmm… “Maybe not.”

“We play two performances at Benecia next week,” Lenore says. She doesn’t confirm his observation. Nor does she deny it.

“That’s quite a distance,” he comments. “How are you planning to get there?”

“A passenger starship called the Astral Queen. Have you heard of it?”

Well, he’s never seen the ship, but he’s certainly seen its captain, Jonathan Daily. Seen many parts of him, in fact.

“She’s a good ship,” says Jim. “Still, it’s a shame that you’re leaving so soon. I was looking forward to getting to know you.”

“You mean professionally?”

“Professionally,” he agrees. “And…personally.”

Lenore smiles at him with that same twinkle in her eye. “In that case it is a shame that we have such an unforgiving schedule.”

“Well, you don’t have a schedule now, do you?”

She looks at him, surprised. “You mean leave the party? But I only just arrived.”

Jim grins. “So did I.”

“And it would be very rude to overstay our welcome,” she says slowly, a grin spreading across her face.

“Incredibly rude,” says Jim, nodding.
Well then—why not?

Suddenly Jim feels his com vibrating in his belt. “Great. I’ll let Tom and Martha know we won’t be, ah…available for a while.” And yes, he knows that one of his and Tom’s ground rules was to not be alone with anyone, but… “I’ll meet you outside by the forest in a minute.”

With one last smile over her shoulder, Lenore walks out the back door to the patio leaves, and Jim immediately pulls out his com.

“Kirk here.”

“I looked over that autopsy report you sent me,” Bones says, cutting right to the chase, as usual. “And you were right—there’s more to this girl’s death than it seems. Based on the pictures of the crime scene, she couldn’t have died of blood loss; there just wasn’t enough blood.”

“Okay. So she didn’t die of blood loss? What does that mean?”

“It means that by the time the cuts on her wrists were made, she was already dead.”

Jim’s vision blurs around the edges. So there’s truth to Tom’s theory after all.

As if from very far away he hears Bones demanding, “Jim, who is this woman? Why—”

“Kirk to bridge,” he mutters, and the call abruptly cuts off.

“Bridge here, Captain,” Uhura’s voice replies.

“Put me through to Captain Jon Daily of the Astral Queen on orbit station. And put it on scramble.”

It isn’t like he needs the reminder that he has the best Chief Communications Officer in the galaxy, but it’s kind of hard to ignore when less than five seconds later Uhura says, “Captain Daily is on the line.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” says Jim. “Jon?”

“Jim! It’s been, what, three years? How’ve you been?”

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old. Can you do me a favor?”

Jon laughs. “Can I? I owe you a dozen. What can I do for you?”

This is how relationships are supposed to work, Jim thinks, somewhat grouchily, watching Tom talk to his guests. You do something for someone and they give you something in return.

It would be a lot more convincing if it weren’t for the fact that he’s currently putting his career and/or life on the line for Tom, and he couldn’t really care less about Jon Daily.

“In this case it’s more what you can not do for me,” he says. “Don’t make your pick-up here.”

“You mean strand all those actors?”

“I’ll pick them up. And I’ll take responsibility if there’s any trouble.”

“Will do,” says Daily. He’s a good guy, doesn’t ask too many questions. That’s a good quality in a friend. “Anything else?”
“Just keep this between the two of us, all right?”

“Sure. We have to catch up properly sometime, yeah?”


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Illogical though it may be, Spock experiences something akin to relief when Jim returns from his undetermined mission, safe and whole and back in the Captain’s chair, where he belongs.

“Ready to resume course, Captain.”

“Actually,” says Jim, turning in his chair and giving Spock a smile. It is sincere and intended to be devil-may-care, but instead it seems almost wan. Spock calculates the likelihood that Jim’s weariness is due to the physical exertion of his endeavors on Planet Q (23.718%), “I think we're about to be called upon for a favor.”

“What kind of favor?” Spock asks, already drawing up several very bad possible correlations between the Captain and his ‘favors.’

Before he can respond, though, Uhura interjects, “Captain? A Miss Lenore Karidian has been transported aboard ship. She requests permission to see you.”

The Captain nods to her. “Tell her to come up to the bridge, Lieutenant.”

“How did you know she was coming aboard?” Spock asks.

Jim grins at him again, wider, but just as tired. “I’m the Captain, Spock. I know everything.”

As if on cue, the turbolift doors slide open and a young woman, blonde and blue-eyed but otherwise rather distasteful, emerges and saunters right up to the Captain’s chair as if she were about to lay claim to it.

Or perhaps lay claim to the person in it.

“Captain Kirk,” she says. “I didn't think we'd be meeting again so soon.”

“What if I told you I arranged it?” the Captain asks, smiling at her. Spock forcibly prevents his hands from tightening into fists.

The girl—Lenore—laughs. “I wouldn’t believe it for a second, of course, but it's a delightful thought.”

“Well, if it wasn’t my own desire to see you again that drew you here, what was it?”

Spock notices Sulu making gagging motions to Chekov (who is trying not to laugh in response), and finds he rather agrees with the sentiment.

“Captain, I'm afraid we need your help. The Astral Queen never showed up - no cancellation, no delay notification. Nothing. It seems like we’re stranded here.”

Jim looks concerned. “That’s awful. Do you need help making other arrangements?”

“I appreciate the offer,” the woman says. “But we don’t have time to find another ride. We have a performance next week, and well, our schedule is like a chain. One break and the whole thing
“It would be a shame if that happened,” the Captain murmurs.

“If ever we needed a Good Samaritan….”

“I would love to help out, but the regulations are very clear about taking on non-personnel passengers.”

“From what I’ve heard,” says the woman, “you are not the most ardent admirer of the regulations at the best of times.”

The Captain laughs. “Well…”

“Let me make you a bargain, Captain. If you can supply us with a ride, I’ll give you something very valuable in return…” Her hand, which had been on the Captain’s arm begins to snake lower, down his chest, lower— “Somewhere alone…where no one can hear us…”

Spock finds he is too distracted to access his mental log of the Starfleet regulations, but he is 97.1% certain that Ms. Karidian’s behavior can be categorized as sexual assault and should be punished by immediate eviction from the vessel.

Jim, however, is watching the woman; watching her for a long while, in fact, with an expression Spock cannot identify. For a moment he almost believes the Captain is going to agree.

“No charge, Lenore,” says Jim, finally. “We’re heading in that direction anyway.”

Lenore beams. “Thank you, Captain! I’ll let the company know we won’t have to cancel our tour. This means so much to them.”

The Captain smiles back, and then: “Mister Spock, prepare to leave orbit as soon as the Karidian company is aboard the ship.”

Spock waits until Lenore and her escort enter the turbolift and the doors close behind them.

“May I inquire as to our course, Captain?” he asks, trying and failing to keep the questions—the accusations—out of his voice.

The Captain does not turn around to look at him as he customarily does when they discuss the ship’s matters. “Benecia Colony.”

It is difficult to determine Jim’s thoughts at the best of times. It is impossible without access to his facial expressions. “Benecia Colony is eight lightyears off our course.”

Kirk still does not turn, but his hand tightens infinitesimally on his armrest. “If my memory needs refreshing, Mister Spock, I will ask you for it.”

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The procedure is relatively quick, and is it only twenty minutes later that Uhura says, “All of the Karidian Players are onboard, Captain. I will dispatch our command track communications sector officers to show them to their rooms, brief them on ship protocol, and answer any questions.”

The “very good, Lieutenant” is already on his tongue when it hits him that “communications sector command officers” includes Kevin. And Jim still may not be convinced the Karidian is Kodos, but he believes that someone is trying to silence the Tarsus survivors.
Kevin wouldn’t even know what he was dying for.

“Spock.”

Either Spock had been prepared to be called, or he’s showing off his crazy-fast Vulcan reflexes again, because Jim turns and his First Officer is already by his side. “Captain.”

“Lieutenant Kevin Riley in communications…” He thinks of how excited Kevin had been the day of his promotion and has to push the image out of his mind. It’s for his own good. “I wish to have him transferred down to engineering.”

Spock tilts his head. “He only recently came up from the engineering decks, Captain.”

“Well I’m sending him back down.”

“I see,” says Spock. “Shall I include an explanation with the extension of his demotion? Lieutenant Riley is a fine young officer with an excellent record. He is bound to take this transfer as a disciplinary action.”

“He can take it however he wants,” says Jim tightly. “I want him demoted immediately.”

“Captain—”

“That’s an order, Commander,” Jim snaps.

Spock holds his gaze for what seems like an eternity, like he’s trying to keep himself from saying something more. Or like he’s trying to peer straight into Jim’s brain through sheer force of will.

“Yes, sir,” says his First Officer, at last.

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Doctor McCoy looks up balefully from his tox screen console. “Seriously?”

“I assure you, I am quite serious,” Spock replies. “The Captain is acting strangely. I am asking if you have noticed.”

“The man on top walks a lonely street,” says the doctor, bending back over his medical tests. Spock briefly entertains the urge to render the console nonfunctional, thereby directing McCoy’s full attention to the matter at hand. “The chain of command is often a noose.”

“Spare me your philosophical metaphors, Doctor. He beamed down to retrieve a new piece of technology that would revolutionize synthesized food, and beamed back up with a theatre troupe with whom he has never before been affiliated. In what way is that not illogical?”

McCoy looks back up, but this time it is not at Spock, but rather at some indiscriminate point in front of him. “You know, he is acting kinda weird. Maybe there was something in that autopsy report…”

“Autopsy report?”

“Yeah, some lady who got killed and made to look like she’d killed herself. Jim had me look over the report. I don’t know why it’s important to him.”

Spock looks at him sharply. “You do not know?”

“Listen,” McCoy sighs. “I stopped tryin’ to figure out Jim’s brain years ago, and I advise you to do
the same. Has it occurred to you that if he’s keeping something secret, maybe there’s a *reason*, and you should take his advice and leave well enough alone?"

“It occurred,” says Spock. “I dismissed it.”

“Of course,” says the doctor dryly.

“Did you know that he suddenly demoted Lieutenant Riley back to engineering?”

McCoy doesn’t seem particularly bothered by this. Of course, he didn’t hear their conversation on the bridge on the day of his promotion. “Lots of things go on around here that I don’t know about, and that’s the way I like it. The captain can transfer whoever he wants, wherever he wants, you can look that up in regulation Something, paragraph Whatever. All right? Just relax.”

“No, thank you,” Spock replies, and leaves the medical bay.

---

Spock returns to the bridge, however, only to find Ms. Karidian already there, hanging off the Captain’s chair and batting her eyelashes in a manner both infantile and infuriating.

The Captain is smiling back, but Spock has learned the subtleties of his posture, of his mannerisms, of his speech, the minuscule tells that indicate when Jim is not socializing, but strategizing.

“I wish I could,” the Captain is telling her apologetically, “but I don’t get off shift for another four hours.”

“You’re the Captain, aren’t you?” she simpers. “You can take time off anytime you’d like. And I think a personal tour of the ship would be an excellent time for us to…get to know each other better. Don’t you?”

Spock is vaguely surprised to find that he would rather enjoy seeing the young woman shot out of an airlock.

“Ms. Karidian, the Captain is occupied with many things far more important than—”

“I can speak for myself, Mister Spock, thank you,” Jim cuts in sharply. “And I would be honored to show you around, Lenore. And even more honored to get to know you.”

He gets to his feet, and the little blonde woman wraps her arm around his.

“Captain—” says Spock.

“You have the conn, Commander,” says the Captain, ignoring him.

They leave the bridge, an almost surreally beautiful, smiling couple, and Spock takes the conn and wonders.

---

Luckily, Nyota is at her station in the communications sector when Kevin coms in from the engineering deck.


The reaction is immediate, and loud, and extremely enthusiastic:
“Kevin!”

“Kevin, is that you?”

“Hey, guys, it’s Riley, get over here!”

—which, while not exactly welcome (it’s very difficult to do a communications job when everyone is yelling into the com next to you), is only to be expected. The communications officers had fallen in love with Riley from day one, had pretty much adopted him as their collective little brother. Not to mention appreciated the fact that he was enthusiastic and sweet and actually good at his job, knowing when to step in and when to just get out of the way.

Even Nyota had been upset at the news of his transfer, not that she was so unprofessional as to say so.

She did mention to Kirk, though, that Riley would be difficult to replace. Also there may have been a glare or two involved. Whatever.

Kirk had just closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead and muttered, “That’s exactly why I transferred him.”

Soon enough there are at least two dozen communications officers crowded around the com. “Larry Matson here,” says one. “Is that you, Riley? You doing okay? What’s up?”

“Not me,” says Riley miserably. “I’m as down as anybody can get. In the engineering room. I miss you guys.”

The group explodes into a chorus of responses, and Nyota has to quiet them before any one person is even coherent.

“We miss you too, kid,” says Matson. “What’d you do to get sent back down there so quick?”

“I have no idea!”

“Oh, c’mon, you can tell me, what could be a more private setting than this?” The rest of the crowd laughs.

“But I really don’t know!” Riley insists. “I tried to ask Captain Kirk but he completely shut me down, told me to get back to my station.” Nyota can tell he’s put his head down on the table by the way his voice is muffled. “He’s ever liked me very much. I always knew that. I just didn’t want to admit it to myself. He’s so cool.”

“I think there’s more to it than that,” says Nyota.

There’s a noise in the background as Riley sits back up. “Lieutenant Uhura?” he asks hopefully.

“What can I do for you, Riley?”

“Promote me back into your sector?” She can practically hear the puppy-dog eyes.

“You know I can’t do that,” she says, apologetic. “But I have something else that might make you feel better.”

“Yeah?”

“I learned that song you told me about. The one your sister used to sing?”
Nyota can almost hear him perk up. “You did? No way!”

She laughs. “Yes way. Here, I’ll prove it to you.” She clears her throat and takes a breath.

“The skies are green and glowing
Where my heart is
Where my heart is
Where the scented lunar flower is growing
Somewhere beyond the stars
Beyond Antares.
I’ll be back, though it takes forever
Forever is just a day
Forever is just another journey
Tomorrow a stop along the way
Then let the years go fading
Where my heart is
Where my heart is
Where my love eternal is waiting
Somewhere beyond the stars
Beyond Antares.”

Her performance is met with—silence.

“So?” Nyota prompts. “What did you think?”

Nothing. Nyota is about to assume that the com has cut out, but then there’s a clatter from the other end of the line, and then something else, almost… a gasping noise…

“Riley?” she asks, starting to get concerned. And then—

“Help me,” Riley chokes out. “Please.”

The next sound is unmistakable—a body hitting the floor.

“...”

“And you’re sure he was poisoned?” Jim asks from the other end of the com, for the third time. “Intentionally?”

“No, he accidentally seasoned his food with bleach instead of salt! Of course it was intentional! And Jim, if you know anything about this attempted murder you’d better clue me in, or so help me—”

“Excuse me?”

Leonard turns to the medbay doors, where the head of that theatre troupe they’re ferrying—Karidian, his name was—is standing, looking out of place.

“One moment, please,” says McCoy, and turns back to his com, only to find that Jim has hung up on him again. “That little—”

“Excuse me,” says Karidian again. “I heard someone got hurt… a Lieutenant Kevin Riley? And I wanted to see how he was doing…”

“He’s alive,” says Leonard. “But he hasn’t woken up yet. The poison got his nervous system fried, dyed, and thrown to the side, so it’s anyone’s guess when, or if, he’ll be regaining consciousness. Do
“Well,” says Karidian, uncomfortably. “I…”

Suddenly a groan comes from Kevin’s biobed. “No…”

Leonard is by side the next moment, scanning him, checking his stats. “He’s waking up,” he mutters. “C’mon kid. Open your eyes.”

Riley doesn’t open his eyes, but he starts struggling—writhing, almost—like he’s in horrible pain.

“What’s happening to him?” Karidian asks, taken aback.

“No,” says Kevin feverishly. “No!” Len has to hold him down to keep him from hurting himself in the process of what looks like Kevin’s attempt to get away from something… and Bones doesn’t know what nightmares he’s trying to escape, but he does know the kid was on Tarsus (he doesn’t exactly keep it a secret—not that he goes around telling it to everyone, but he’ll share the information if it comes up), and that’s more than enough to want to get away from.

(Leonard can’t help but wonder why he and Jim never talked about it.)

“Help,” Kevin calls desperately, struggling against Leonard’s grip. “Help, Erika…JT…”

JT…? “You mean Jim?” he asks.

Kevin turns and vomits over the side of the biobed.

Finally the kid opens his eyes, still shaking like a leaf, and his gaze goes over McCoy’s shoulder to…

“No,” Kevin begs, “No…. Nonono, please, no—”

Leonard grits his teeth and pulls out a hypo and gives him a sedative, but the kid is so freaked out it doesn’t take effect right away.

“N-no… Have to….w-warn him…”

“I should… go,” Karidian says, a distinct note of…something—discomfort, maybe?—in his voice.

Leonard doesn’t even bother to turn around to the guy to confirm that, and he hears Karidian let himself out of the medical bay. Meanwhile, Kevin is still fighting to stay conscious, and still muttering nonsense.

“Different face,” he manages. “But—that voice… It’s him…”

“Who is it?” Bones asks, even though he knows it’s far too late for a coherent response. “Who is he?”

“It’s him, JT,” Kevin mumbles, and then the kid is out cold.

---

Jim answers his comline with an anxious, “He’s awake?” and Leonard almost wants to give him a sarcastic half-answer as usual, but the fact is, Jim had been worried sick over Riley, like he was his own kid. Jim had stumbled into mess hall that morning looking like he hadn’t slept a wink, had been distracted all day, barely cracking a smile; had been concerned about Kevin to a degree that Leonard
finds both kind of sweet and more than a little worrying.

“Well, he’s asleep right now,” he says. “But he was awake a while ago. And he was calling for you.”

There’s a pause and then, “What?” Jim’s voice sounds almost alarmed.

“Well, there was a lot of other nonsense in there too. But he definitely called for ‘JT,’ I just figured…”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

“Jim?”

“Where is he?”

Leonard scowls at the com. “He’s in medbay, in bed, recovering. Where the hell else would he be?”

“Check to make sure,” says Jim.

“Jim, he almost died yesterday—“

“Check to make sure, Bones.”

Leonard gets grumpily to his feet and leaves his office, heading toward Riley’s biobed. “I don’t know what you’re tryin’ to prove here, but he’s gonna be right where I—”

The bed is empty.

“Bones?”

“He’s gone, Jim.”

Jim curses. “Cupcake just informed me of a missing phaser. If Kevin’s got it…” There’s a pause, the sound of something shifting in the background. “I’m going after him.”

“What?” he demands. “Slow down, what?”

“Bones,” says Jim, urgent, desperate. “He’s going to kill Kodos.”

And then the call cuts out (it’s getting to be routine by now) and he’s left staring at the dead line, irritated, confused, and with a very, very bad feeling about this.

“…Kodos?”

---

Even before he reaches Karidian’s room he knows Kevin got there first. Jim can hear him over his own running footsteps, hear Lenore crying, hear Kevin’s voice shaking.

“Get away from him, I don’t want to hurt you…”

He turns the corner to the sight of Kevin pointing the stolen phaser, shaking from head to toe, at Lenore, standing protectively in front of her father, her arms outstretched, her eyes wide and terrified, even as Karidian tries to push her out of the way.

Slowly, Jim approaches. “Kevin.”
The only response he gets is a little muffled sob from the back of the kid’s throat. He doesn’t even look at Jim.

“Kevin,” he says again, softer this time, taking one more step forward. “Get back to medbay. I’ll take care of this.”

“My mom and dad, they…” he says, his voice strangled, tears running down his cheeks. “They tried to fight, and he—he—”

“I know,” Jim whispers. He takes another step forward.

“My sister—” His voice breaks. His body trembles like his whole body is about to shatter. “E-Erika—” And then he’s crying like a ten-year-old boy, sobbing, hiccuping, buckling in on himself. Only his phaser arm is steady. “W-why should he b-be alive when she isn’t? Give me one good reason, JT!”

“We’re not even sure he’s Kodos at all,” Jim murmurs. “Don’t throw your life away on a mistake. You kill someone, you can never come back from that.”

Kevin is already shaking his head before Jim finishes. “I’m not wrong. I know that v-voice, I know it, he can… He can change his face but he can’t change that. I remember it from when he sentenced us to death in the auditorium, I r-remember everything!”

Jim takes one more step forward, in front of Kevin. In front of the phaser. “Maybe so. But it’s still an order, Lieutenant Riley. Stand down.”

“Get out of the way, JT,” says Kevin. Even his phaser hand is trembling now. “I’m gonna kill him.”

“No, you’re not,” says Jim quietly.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because you’re a hero,” says Jim, looking right at him, truly seeing him perhaps for the first time in eleven years. “And heroes don’t kill unarmed actors in their bedrooms.”

“I—I’m not a h-hero, I—Erika was— God, she was—right in front of me, and I—and I couldn’t—”

“You lived through Tarsus. You lived past Tarsus. You let yourself remember.” He takes one more step forward and puts his hand over the barrel of the phaser. “If that isn’t heroism, I don’t know what is.”

And Kevin just crumbles, and Jim gently pulls the phaser out of the kid’s hand and puts his arms around him, his own eyes burning. “You’re not alone. Okay?”

He feels Kevin nod into his chest.

Jim pulls back, looks at the lieutenant’s tear-streaked face. “Now get back to medbay, all right? Go on.”

Finally, Kevin leaves, shooting one last look at Jim, Lenore, and Karidian.

“Captain,” Lenore gasps in relief. “I…don’t know how to thank you…”

And Jim turns, and for the first time his eyes meet Karidian’s, and and the world stops and
and that’s all it takes, he knows—he knows—

And Anton Karidian looks at him, his arm reaches forward, like a prayer.

Like a plea.

“James—”

And Jim is not a coward. He has never been a coward. He has always been the kind of person who runs toward things; the kind of person who jumps out at the kid playing It in his hide-and-seek games, the kind of person who looks the judge straight in the eye and says he doesn’t give a damn what the jury says, the kind of person who beams onto a Romulan ship right into enemy forces and rescues Pike regardless and probably breaks about eleventy different Starfleet regulations and doesn’t bat an eyelash.

Jim has never been the sort of person who runs away.

Jim turns and runs.

---

He has no idea how he gets to the bridge, is only vaguely aware of hallways and doors and people flying by, and then he’s on the bridge, stumbling to his chair, his mind an unintelligible, dizzying chaos of voices and memories and images and SamErikaTom—

“…Keptin?”

“You okay, Captain? You look like you’re about to throw up…”

—NatalieKevinBaby, SAM, and the shame and the helplessness and the hunger tearing at his insides, settling in his core, the smugness on Kodos’s face, whispering, “Now come for me, James”—

“You are not well,” says Spock. He’s on his feet, and somehow Jim still is too. “I will call Doctor McCoy—”

“No,” Jim says desperately, barely cognizant of the words coming out of his own mouth. “No—don’t call Bones. We need to c-call Pike…”

Spock is staring at him, confused (scared?), and Jim manages to sit in the Captain’s chair, dizzy and sick and coming apart at the seams.

“Call Pike, Spock.”

There is no response. But a moment later, Pike appears on the bridge viewscreen, and he’s already halfway to his usual teasing greeting, but then the admiral sees Jim’s face, and the smile drops right off.

“The fugitive known as Kodos the Executioner has been identified,” Jim hears himself saying. His voice is dull. Dead. “Since the events of Tarsus IV he has been in hiding under the pseudonym Anton Karidian. We currently have him onboard the Enterprise, and intend to follow the orders on his arrest warrant, stating that he should be brought to Earth immediately on capture in order to stand trial.”

Pike stares. “How do you know it’s him?”

“It’s him. It’s Kodos.”
“Yes, but how do you know?”

“I know because his identity has been confirmed by all three surviving eyewitnesses fit for testimony.” Jim closes his eyes and takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Including myself.”

The only response is an absolute, deafening silence.

Jim keeps his composure through sheer willpower, keeps his eyes straight ahead, focused on Pike, whose expression goes horrified, struck speechless for the first time since Jim has known him.

“Forget whatever else you were doing,” the admiral says finally. “Bring him in.”

“Yes, sir,” says Jim.

“And Jim…” Apparently Pike sees something in his face, because he stops himself and mutters, “We’ll talk later.”

The call ends.

No one says a word.

No one moves.

The bridge is utterly silent.

Jim gets to his feet, unable to look at his crew. Unable to look at Spock.

“The rest of the mission is up to you, Mister Spock. You heard our orders—we are to drop everything and return Kodos to Earth to stand trial.”

When Spock finally speaks, his voice is quiet. Almost lost. “Captain…?”

Finally Jim forces himself to look his First Officer in the eyes. “I can’t do this. I’m… emotionally compromised.”

And then he walks off the bridge, with eyes that can’t see straight and legs that can barely carry him.

---

Clarke has only just found out that Kodos the Executioner is onboard the Enterprise (what??) when the medbay explodes into shouting and movement and the frantic beeping of a failing heartbeat, and then three nurses are running a gurney over, a gurney holding a man with a mask over his mouth, feeding oxygen into his lungs, with several IVs in his body.

A man with extensive plastic surgery.

*Kodos,* he realizes, the shock kicking the air out of his lungs.

“He had a cyanide pill,” says Chapel through gritted teeth. “As soon as he saw he was being arrested, he took it—we might not be able to save him—”

Doctor McCoy appears, striding toward them, snapping his gloves on, silent and more furious than Clarke has ever seen him.

“We’ll save him,” he mutters. It sounds like a threat.
That’s when the heart monitor starts going crazy. They all look up.

“He’s flatlining!” Chapel shouts.

“No he damn well isn’t!” Dr. McCoy yells back. “Get me the crash cart!”

The rest is a blur of noise and lights, and that odd crystalline focus that comes over Clarke during an emergency, as Dr. McCoy shouts orders and works with more rage and ferocity than he’s ever seen.

“Do you care about Kodos, sir?” Clarke asks, as he injects 500 ml of methadone and monitors blood pressure and tries to stay out of Chapel’s way.

“Care about him??” McCoy repeats, incredulous. “I DESPISE him! That’s why I’m not lettin’ him get away so easy!” He rubs the defibrillator paddles together, turning to their patient. “You’re goin’ to answer for what you did to my best friend, you bastard – CLEAR!”

Electricity sparks and Kodos’s body arches off the biobed and for a moment his heart rate spikes back to life, before it plummets back down into non-existence.

“NO,” says Dr. McCoy furiously. “We can’t lose him! CLEAR!”

This time the shock does its job, and the patient’s heart rate returns in full force, the monitor beeping out a strong, steady pace.

Dr. McCoy finally takes a step back from the bed, breathing hard, staring at the man in the bed.

“We still have to pump the poison out of his system,” he mutters eventually, his voice hard, his expression inscrutable. “We’re gonna keep this bastard alive whether he likes it or not.”

“Dr. McCoy,” says Clarke, hesitant. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“As long as you can do it while you insert an IV,” the doctor grumbles.

“Yes, sir. I just thought… You’re Catholic, aren’t you? Don’t you believe that God will punish all evildoers?”

“Sure I do,” Dr. McCoy growls, snapping on a new pair of gloves. “But God can get the hell in line.”

---

Jim had always wondered what, exactly, one did when they were emotionally compromised. Beat up a punching bag? Cry into a pillow? Eat a lot of ice cream? As someone who spent his whole life keeping busy in order to avoid the inevitable breakdown, bringing his life to a complete halt seemed like a ridiculously counterintuitive way to deal with things. After all, what could he do about the problem if he couldn’t do anything?

In the end what he does about the problem is lie on his bed and stare sightlessly at the ceiling, devoting all of his focus on inhaling and exhaling and not losing his mind.

He doesn’t know how much time has passed when the intercom beeps and Spock’s voice says hesitantly, “Captain? It is Spock. May I enter?”

And some part of Jim knows he should find it amusing that his First keeps introducing himself before entering, even after more than six months together, but his regular self—his happy self—seems so fake now, and so far away…
“Open,” says Jim.

Spock comes in and Jim doesn’t turn from his ceiling-vigil, not wanting to see the look on his face. He hears what must be the Vulcan pulling Jim’s desk chair over to the bed, and then he’s sitting down next to him in an odd parody of when Jim had sat at Spock’s side when he was mourning his mother.

Or it would be an odd parody if Spock weren’t just sitting there, staring at him in silence.

Finally: “I do not have your skills of articulacy,” he says quietly, and Jim turns to look at him.

“You know what to say, for any occasion, under any circumstance. You know how to phrase your message so that it may be accepted. You knew what to say to me when I was…hurt.” He stops, and when he speaks again, there is an almost-painful intensity in his voice that Jim has never heard before. “I do not know how to help you.”

Jim manages to give him a pathetic smile. “No one does. Don’t worry too much about it.”

“I have already failed in that regard,” say Spock tightly. “I have known for several weeks now that you had been on Tarsus IV.”

Jim stares.

“I have known since the day of Lieutenant Riley’s promotion, when he shared his own past on the bridge.”

Of course he has. That’s what he gets for having a friggin’ genius as a First Officer.

“I knew that Kevin Riley and yourself shared some manner of trauma in your pasts, but the Lieutenant did not appear to recognize you from any time prior to Starfleet Academy. When he informed us that he had been on Tarsus and hardly remembered the event, that contradiction became perfectly logical.”

“Why didn’t you ask me about it, then? You never said a word…”

“I tried. For all of your desire that we share our respective personal lives, every time I attempted to broach the topic you avoided conversation. Instead I was forced to imagine what nature of memories might be plaguing you.”

Spock’s hands are fisted in his lap, his eyes young and lost and scared in his expressionless face.

“Problems are supposed to have solutions,” he says. “If something is wrong, there should be a logical method of fixing it. But with you…there is nothing I can do. Every approach seems to be wrong. With you I am helpless, unable to do anything but watch you in pain.” He takes a breath, looks at Jim with something akin to desperation. “Tell me how to help you. Please.”

Jim licks his lips, his heart pounding. He’s never wanted to talk about it before, and part of him still doesn’t want to, but maybe… Just maybe…

“Ask me questions,” he says, feeling reckless and stupid and alive, like he’s driving full speed to the edge, unsure whether he’ll pull back at the last minute. “Things with short answers. Direct questions with finite answers.”

Spock looks at him, long and hard. And then, “You knew Kodos personally?” he asks.
Jim pulls in a sharp breath. “Yes.”

“Did he—?”

“Don’t—” Jim says, as Tarsus returns, enveloping him, smothering him (…”one less mouth to feed”…) (…”you want this so bad, don’t you?”…) (don’t want die want die want to). “Not…not this line of questioning. I’m sorry… Anything but—”

“Perhaps this is a mistake,” says Spock, looking worried and kind of horrified. “I am not qualified —”

“No,” says Jim, the force in his own voice surprising him. “You’re doing fine, just… Think about it as a game. Like chess. Or… like Stratego. You told me your mother liked that game, right?”

Spock nods doubtfully.

“The challenge is figuring out where to approach the other person’s defenses to get to the flag. Easy.”

Spock frowns. “I have also told you that considering the fact that one can not know when will he or she will step on a bomb along the way, it is more logical to not play the game at all. Better to avoid both loss and gain than to lose everything.”

“Please,” says Jim. “Help me.”

It is fascinating, watching Spock’s defenses come apart in front of his eyes. “I will certainly try,” he says warily.

God. What did he do to deserve this kind of loyalty? He gives his First a weak smile. “Why are you still here, Spock?”

Spock looks at him, confused. “Where else would I be?”

Which, really, should not make his heart ache like it’s burning a hole in his skin, but the Vulcan’s tone and expression are completely sincere, as if by Jim’s side is the only place he could ever imagine being.

“There were nine survivors, correct?” Spock asks, watching his face carefully.

He can do this. He remembers Tom screaming, the sting of whips, the sound of gunfire, breathes through it. “Yes.”

“Four were from Kodos’s team, and five were members of the Children’s Rebellion.”

Breathe, breathe, breathe. “Yes.”

“Originally the Children’s Rebellion had seven people.”


“Who were the two that…?”

(Sam teaching him how to ride a bike, Sam and him hiding in the bathroom during the speech commemorating the tenth anniversary of Dad’s death (Jim’s tenth birthday), Erika smacking him gently on the head and saying “Don’t pretend to be stupider than you are. Someday you might believe your own lie.”)
Jim presses the heels of his palms into his eyes and chokes out, “Too much.”

“I,” says Spock, and Jim has never heard his voice like that, helpless and tight with emotion, almost distraught. “Enough. I should not be the one doing this. These procedures are meant to be administered by a professional.”

“No,” says Jim, desperate. “I want to—”

“My intention was to relieve your pain. However, my involvement is only causing you more pain. Therefore—”

“Spock, please.”

Silence.

When he speaks again, it is an obvious struggle. “Were you… a member of Kodos’s team or the Children Rebellion?”

Jim almost wants to smile. “You think that’s a simple, straightforward question, don’t you.” He lifts his hands off his eyes and looks at Spock, who stares back at him, wariness and concern in every line of his body.


The fact that Spock associates him so strongly with helping the underdog, fighting for survival against all odds—or maybe with any movement involving chaos; either way, really—warms something inside him. “You’re not wrong. But you’re not entirely right, either.”

Spock’s eyebrows furrow slightly. “What other option—“

“I was a member of both.”

Spock falls silent, surprised.

“Ask me,” says Jim.

“Kodos killed all the children below the age of twenty,” says Spock slowly. “In 2248 you would have been only fifteen.”

“He didn’t kill everyone. Three kids below twenty years old were part of his ‘selective’ group, because of their extraordinary aptitude tests.”

“Who?”

The words won’t come.

“What were their full names?” Spock asks instead, in an effort to make the question less personal, and Jim looks at him, at those dark eyes watching him, wanting so badly to help him, venturing unflinchingly into alien emotional territory only because Jim asked him to.
Maybe it’s that courage that gives Jim strength to go forward. “James Tiberius Kirk. Erika Riley.” Recognition flickers in Spock’s face as he makes the connection between Kevin and Erika.

Jim takes a deep breath. “George Samuel Kirk.”

Surprise flares in his expression. “Your—”

“Brother.”

Spock makes an aborted movement, like he wants to reach toward Jim, but he holds himself back.

“So these three…individuals,” he says instead, “were part of Kodos’s selective group. They were slated to live.”

“Yes.”

“Kodos trusted them.”

“Yes. Or, well. Each to a different degree.”

Spock looks at him. “He trusted you specifically.”

“Yes,” Jim manages.

“What was Kodos’s response to the Rebellion’s uprisings?” he asks eventually.

(…“they need to be punished”…)

“Jim?”

“He wanted to have them killed,” Jim says. “Punished.”

Spock doesn’t say anything this time, which is good because Jim is pretty sure that if he stopped now he wouldn’t be able to start again.

“Kodos was… is…” (God. Kodos is) “—very aware of economics. He wanted recompense for the trouble they put him through. Wanted recompense for the effort he’d put into keeping me and Sam and Erika alive too. We owed him a lot, and—and he said he was gonna take it from”—he has to stop, take in an unsteady breath—“f-from Sam, so I… I made him an offer, and…”

Jim trails off, and Spock repeats, his voice strangely flat, “An offer.”
“It was just basic economics,” says Jim, pleading, though he doesn’t know for what. “Something he wanted for something I wanted. I got the Children’s rebellion freedom. And… Sam’s happiness. And…” His voice cuts out, and that’s it. He knows he can’t go on.

“And what did he want?” Spock asks, his voice very low and very quiet.

Jim closes his eyes. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, “He…” But he can’t… He can’t. “I’m s-sorry…”

When he opens his eyes again, Spock is clutching the arms of the chair, his face white, his eyes flashing, his entire body trembling with visible restraint.

He looks like a feral animal, held back by a chain that may snap at any second.

When he speaks, every syllable is clipped, tense, as if exerting enormous effort to produce coherent sounds.

“You are sorry,” he repeats, his voice emotionless.

“I’m sorry for falling apart like this,” he says miserably. “I made my own decision, and…and I have to deal with the consequences of it. I shouldn’t be…”

“You did not make your own decision,” Spock snaps. Jim has never heard him like this—truly, openly angry. “Consent with a gun to your head is not consent.”

“It wasn’t rape, okay?” Jim shoots back, the path of the conversation almost familiar ground by this point. “I agreed to it! I went to him, every time, I…r-reacted to him, even knowing all the people he’d…”

“He was threatening the lives of your friends, and your brother,” Spock hisses, his fury a palpable force. “Your agreement was not consent. It does not mean you wanted what he did to you.”

“Maybe I did!” Jim yells back. “Maybe I loved it!”

Spock looks at him. “Did you?”

The odd question throws Jim’s indignation off-balance. “What?”

“You claim that maybe you wanted Kodos’s violations. ‘Maybe’, by definition, has variable meanings. It could mean yes or no. So I am asking which meaning you intended to apply in this scenario.” His dark, burning gaze seems to physically pin him in place. “Did you want it—yes or no?”

And of course, of course it would take Spock’s straightforward, black-and-white thinking to drag Jim out of his murky, amorphous sea of grays, to cut through the layers upon layers of logical, brilliant nonsense that he hides behind. To call Jim on a bluff he’s been pulling for eleven years.

When Jim finally answers, the word is mangled and wretched and beautiful: “No.”

And it’s… It’s as if an enormous weight has lifted from him, like freedom, like that one, magnificent word he could never say has been with him, in every cell of his body and every thought in his head, waiting to be set free, and now…

"Excuse me, Captain,” says Spock, getting to his feet. His face is terrifyingly blank. “I must attend to Governor Kodos's execution.”

"What?” says Jim, and, “What?”
"A swift execution is a merciful fate in comparison to the Vulcan punishment for rape."

"Wait. Wait wait wait… You can’t possibly be planning to just shoot him in the head."

"No," says Spock, very calmly. "I intend to snap his neck."

"You can’t do that!"

The Vulcan’s hand is already on the door, his fingers forging dents in the metal. “You cannot possibly hold any affection for this monster.”

"No… But it’s against regulation."

Something seems to shudder through Spock, something dark and merciless and deranged. “I have never before cared less about regulation.”

“Okay,” says Jim. “But if you kill him, regulation 318.D.4 will come into play, which says—”

“‘In the event that a member of the starship command staff commits murder for any reason other than self-defense, that officer will be confined to their quarters until their actions can be assessed via formal trial,’” he recites.

“Right. And you can’t be confined to your quarters. I need you to be on the conn, taking care of my ship. Our ship.”

“Lieutenant Sulu will make a fine Acting Captain while I am confined to my quarters,” says Spock, unmoved.

Jim takes the first two fingers of his left hand and brushes them against Spock’s right, remembering how comforting the simple action had been when he was upset. Then, because—screw it—he slides his hand down until their fingers are intertwined. “Please?”

Spock looks down at their joined hands with something almost like dawning horror.

“What’s wrong?” Jim asks, worried that he’s made his friend uncomfortable. But it’s not like Spock hasn’t done the same thing to him dozens of times before…

“I too have taken liberties with your body without gaining your knowing consent,” the Vulcan says, more to himself than to Jim, his voice thick with self-hatred. “I too have made you feel as though you are the initiator….”

“Huh? The initiator of what?”

Spock pulls away as if burned and puts both hands behind his back, his expression utterly blank and his back completely straight. “I will see to the ship. Please take all the time you need to rest, Captain.”

Jim watches him go, wondering why it feels like he’s done something wrong.

---

Bones shows up a while later, smelling of antiseptic and coffee and with that avenging-angel look in his eyes.

“He was the one who…?” he asks, because of course Bones already knows everything. Of course.
Between him and Spock, they own him, heart and soul.

“Yeah,” says Jim, and then Bones is pulling him into a hug that crushes his ribs but probably isn’t responsible for the wetness in his eyes.

“Filthy rotten bastard,” he mutters into Jim’s hair, and Jim laughs until his stomach hurts, his chest hurts, everything hurts, why is this his life, why did he have to give everything only for the world to fall apart around him…

This time he’s the one leaving a damp spot on Bones’s shoulder.

---

Gaila comes by later, and they sit side by side on his bed for a long time, not saying a word, not needing words to acknowledge what they share.

“You know,” she says finally, playing with the swath of purple cloth in her lap, “we lodubyaln had wanted to fight back for so long….dozens of years. Hundreds, even. We were angry. Angry and strong. But we were also afraid—we had been enslaved for so long, the idea of being anything else was terrifying.”

She’s still not looking at him, seeming lost in her own memories. “But then one day we heard a story that changed everything. It was the story of a handful of children who were told to die, and refused. They were told that others deserved to eat, not them, and they fought back. They wanted to live. And we thought, if seven children could lead a rebellion…if they could risk everything for the chance of freedom, then so could we.

“That’s why… This is yours,” she says, putting the swath of purple fabric into his hands.

He recognizes it immediately. It’s the Orion slave girl revolt flag, the background a deep amethyst like the Orion sky, with…

With seven stars.

Seven children.


And me.

He looks at Gaila, who is smiling back at him, her eyes bright with tears.

There’s nothing he could possibly say to her, that could describe what she’s given him.

“I think I’m gonna miss Chekov’s birthday tomorrow,” is what he says.

Gaila laughs, even as one tear escapes down her cheek. “We’ll save you cake and a confetti phaser.”

---

Bones comes back a few hours later, with food, and won’t stop pestering him until Jim ingests some kind of nourishment. And, well, Jim still has that little compulsion to always clean his plate no matter what, and so they sit on his bed in silence, Bones watching him eat and Jim just trying not to throw up.

“I don’t know what you did to Spock,” says Bones, his voice light and oddly gentle, “but he’s been
an actual ice statue since he got back to the conn. Only gives single-word commands. Keeps clenching his right hand like he’s trying to crush someone’s brain with it. Even Uhura is too scared to speak to him."

“Oh. Yeah. He kinda freaked out when I…uh…” Suddenly this sounds a lot gayer than it did in his head. “Held his hand?”

Bones stares at him.

“He does that to me all the time!” Jim protests. Then he sees Bones’s face and… “What? What am I missing?”

The doctor’s expression shifts and he mutters, “Look, I’ll… tell you later, all right? When this is all over.”

Well, that’s not suspicious at all. “Fine,” says Jim. “You’d better.”

---

Dr. McCoy had told him that the bridge is a lot less scary and a lot less official than you would think (Well, his actual words were, “it is, in fact, a high school disguised as a starship bridge, complete with horny teenagers and everything getting done at the last possible moment and the constant stream of that’s-what-she-said jokes”). But either he was lying, or Clarke just happened to choose a terrible day to see the area for the first time, because the bridge is so silent and so tense that he wants to be out of there the moment he steps in.

Not only that, but Captain Kirk isn’t even there.

“May I speak to the Captain?” he asks Commander Spock.

“No,” says the Commander shortly. He doesn’t even glance in Clarke’s direction.

“I need to deliver a message.”

Spock doesn’t even grace that with a response, except for the obvious unspoken one to Go Away Now.

“Mr. Karidian wishes to speak to him,” he says, and now the Commander does turn to look at him, and Clarke actually takes a terrified step back before he can stop himself. “H-he’s within his rights. The accused is allowed to speak to the party that lodges the accusation…”

“He may not speak to Captain Kirk,” the Commander snaps. “He may speak to Doctor Leighton over vidcom if he so desires.”

“He refuses to speak to anyone but the Captain,” Clarke says, praying his voice doesn’t sound as shaky to the others’ ears as it sounds to his own. “Sir.”

Spock doesn’t reply for a very long time.

“Very well,” he murmurs at last, rising from the captain’s chair. “Then he will see the captain.”

---

The Commander stalks off the bridge and Clarke hurries after him, assuming he’s going to get Captain Kirk, but instead he takes the turbolift down to medical and goes straight into the medbay, to where Karidian is strapped to a biobed, guarded by two enormous security officers.
Dr. McCoy has only just gone to sleep after staying awake more than forty-eight hours between the emergencies of Lieutenant Riley and Mr. Karidian, and so Clarke has to be the one to protest Commander Spock’s intrusion. “Sir, you can’t…”

But he isn’t even paying attention to Clarke. His eyes have found Karidian’s, and it’s as if no one else exists.

Karidian’s eyebrows furrow in confusion. “Where is James? I specifically said—”

“You requested audience with the Captain. As temporary Acting Captain, I fulfill your criteria. Speak.”

“I requested to speak with James. As a Federation citizen I am owed this courtesy.”

Spock turns away abruptly, and Clarke can see the hard line of his mouth, his white-knuckled fists.

“You are owed,” the Vulcan repeats flatly.

“Yes,” says Karidian. “He needs to understand—”

“I,” says Spock, and the utter lack of emotion in his voice is more blood-chilling than any shout, “would prefer to discuss the other things you are owed. For the four thousand murders you committed. And for the rape of a fifteen-year-old boy.”

“I have never—”

The Commander’s hand clenches around an IV pole next to him. It snaps in half.

Kodos falls silent as the metal pieces clatter to the floor, his face reddening.

“The only thing keeping you alive right now,” says the Commander, very, very quietly, “is the Captain’s explicit orders. Orders to which I comply because he is my commanding officer, and because his wishes have been ignored far too often. However, if you test my patience, I will not be accountable for my actions.”

Karidian, wisely, doesn’t respond. Clarke wants to run as fast as he can from the medical bay, and Spock’s fury isn’t even directed at him.

“Humans are far too compassionate,” the Commander continues, almost conversationally. “Their method of executing the death sentence is via lethal injection—exceedingly quick and almost entirely painless. But your crime was not only against Earth, was it? There were three hundred and twelve Vulcans on Tarsus IV. Therefore I intend to propose the sentence be administered according to Vulcan ritual. Vulcan punishments, you see, are far more satisfying, as they are tailored, with perfect logic, to match the crime. Rapists, for example, are forced to swallow a burning coal for every offense. It is a slow and rather hideous death—first the fire will destroy your mouth and throat, before it burns through your stomach, boiling every liquid in your body. And still you will not die. Your eyeballs will blister and your skin will blacken and pop, until eventually it sizzles and steams, while your lungs burst within you, and still you will not die. Your heart will continue pumping until finally, after several endless hours, it will have no more blood to circulate and you will mercifully be allowed to expire. And it will not be suffering enough, for what you did. Even if die a thousand excruciating deaths, it will not be enough. Still,” says Spock, deadly calm. “I will see to it that your suffering be as close as possible.”
Kodos has gone from red to white in the space of one speech.

“And if you hope to somehow escape punishment—if by some astronomically unlikely chance you are able to successfully victimize the victim once again and construe yourself as the innocent party… Well. The universe is a dangerous place. Storms. Accidental weapon discharges. Mechanical failures. Reactor explosions. The occasional unexplained missing person, perhaps. And if one small house on the outskirts of the city should burn down due to an unfortunate dilithium combustion—it would be such a very quiet tragedy.”

And Commander Spock nods to Kodos as if they had been having a friendly conversation, and sweeps out of the medbay without another word.

---

It’s a fluke that Jim finds out about it at all, just a run-of-the-mill com frequency miscall, that his com beeps and Uhura’s voice says, “Riley refuses to go to the medbay as long as Kodos is there, so I’ve had the medical team sent to his quarters.”

Jim’s first thought is, I’m emotionally compromised, I shouldn’t have to deal with this crap.

His second thought is, What? Why is Kodos in the medbay?

His third thought is—

He coms Uhura back. “I thought Kevin was just discharged from medbay, why’s he going back?”

There’s a pause, and then Uhura responds, “A malfunctioning phaser exploded right outside his room. He’s fine—just a bit bruised. He’ll be fine.”

A malfunctioning phaser. One more coincidence in a string of odd events that come together to form a picture that Jim hadn’t wanted to acknowledge.

Despite himself, he reaches for his com again and turns it to command frequency.

“…ve tried to explain that to him, but he doesn’t want to be anywhere near him,” Uhura is saying. “Even if Riley isn’t the one he wants to talk to.”

Jim immediately shuts the com off, but it’s too late—the words have lodged themselves in his head.

Even if Riley isn’t the one he wants to talk to.

There’s still someone out there, trying to silence all the Tarsus survivors, and right now with Tom and Baby on Planet Q, and Jim stuck in his room, Kevin is left in the line of fire.

And Kodos is the only person who might be able to stop it.

Riley isn’t the one he wants to talk to.

It’s funny, how the more things change, the more things stay the same. Eleven years have passed. Jim is a captain now. He’s a lot stronger than he was when he was fifteen.

And yet here he is again, with a gun to Kevin’s head and no other choice but to go to Kodos to save him. To at least try.

Riley isn’t the one he wants to talk to.
The medbay is quiet and dark when he arrives; almost everyone has gone to sleep. The only ones left are the security guys guarding Kodos, one of which approaches Jim as soon as he steps inside.

“I’m sorry, Captain. Doctor McCoy gave us strict instructions not to give you access to the prisoner.”

“I appreciate your dedication, but as Captain my orders override his.”

“Aren’t you on temporary leave, sir?” he asks.

“Well, I’m taking temporary leave from my temporary leave, okay?” Jim says impatiently. “I want to speak to him privately. The two of you can go.”

The officer stares at him, obviously unwilling to leave.

“Go,” Jim urges him. “He’s strapped to the biobed. He can’t possibly do anything to me.” Not physically anyway.

“Captain…”

“Ten minutes,” says Jim.

The officer hesitates. “Ten minutes,” he says at last.

He jerks his head at the other security guy and the two of them leave the medical bay, and Jim crosses the distance to Kodos’s bed, no further than a few yards, no less vast than infinity, and then he’s standing in front of him, and even though this isn’t an office and he isn’t fifteen and nothing is the same, he is just as helpless and just as young as he ever was.

Kodos looks at him with what might be a smile. “James,” he says, his voice gentle. Unsurprised. “I’m so glad you’ve come.”

Jim doesn’t respond. His heart is hammering in his chest and his head is spinning and he is struck with that same feeling he always had—the desire to go, to run, to escape to somewhere they’ll never be able to find him, even as his legs are locked into place.

“May I say you’ve grown into a beautiful young man?”

Jim can’t stop the disgust that shudders through him, the sense of being dirty, violated. “No you may not,” he says, in a voice far too weak to his own ears. “You wanted to talk to me. So talk.”

Kodos shakes his head like he’s disappointed in Jim’s misbehavior. “Always so restless. That was one the things I was never quite able to teach you, you know—patience.”

“Get. To. The. Point,” Jim grinds out.

The former governor sighs. “I wanted to tell you that I forgive you,” he says, and Jim’s brain goes white and fuzzy. The words don’t make any sense.

“You…forgive…me?”

“Did you think I would never put it all together? The robberies from the storage house, the Children’s Rebellion’s survival—even thriving… I only had the perspective to understand it after the fact, but it was you. Wasn’t it?”
He looks at Jim, so sad and so disappointed, and even if though he is the one arrested, restrained; *he’s* the criminal, Jim suddenly feels horribly ashamed, unbearably guilty.

“It could only have been you,” Kodos continues when Jim doesn’t respond. “When I figured it out at first, of course, I was terribly betrayed… But over time I have come to forgive you for your crimes against the Tarsus authorities. Of course, nothing can rid you of the guilt for indirectly causing the civil war—but for whatever comfort it may offer, you have my forgiveness.”

It takes to the end of Kodos’s little speech for Jim to realize that he’s trembling. With anger? Fear? Something else…? “This must be some kind of sick joke,” he manages through a shaking voice and a mind that refuses to comprehend.

“Of course not. This is hardly a joking matter.”

“After what you did to me…”

“What I did to you?” Kodos repeats, incredulous.

“You…” He can’t say the word *rape*. Not when it might get thrown back in his face, not when Kodos might deny it. “I—you forced me to…”

“I forced you to do nothing. You never said no.”

“I couldn’t say no!” Jim cries. “You told me I couldn’t, you…you were threatening my brother! You were—”

“I never did that,” says Kodos, offended. “What sort of revisionist nonsense—”

“I was fifteen!”

“You are aware that different cultures have different ages of consent,” says Kodos, calm as anything. “Correct?”

Jim has learned that lesson pretty well, actually. “Yeah,” he says slowly.

“That is because age is a relative measurement,” Kodos says, as if explaining something to a child. “There is no one age at which every person becomes mature enough to begin a sexual relationship. You were—and are—a genius; you were more than intellectually capable of making an informed decision of consent. More than some people twice your age and half your IQ.”

God. It makes sense. Just like always, Kodos’s logic is perfect, irrefutable, and all of Jim’s arguments seem so weak, so pitiful in comparison.

“Maybe you’ve forgotten—or made yourself forget,” Kodos adds quietly, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, “but I remember… how much you wanted it. And how you wanted it—even if you wish you didn’t. Even if you wish you weren’t my little slut, James, that is precisely what you—”

“Shut up!” Jim shouts, trying desperately to hold on to the clarity that had been so wonderful, so freeing, before. “I didn’t—I didn’t want any of it! You almost killed me…”

The former governor sighs again. “You’re angry with me,” he says sadly. “You blame me for what happened to the people of Tarsus IV. And I agree with you, it is a shame—all those sacrifices I made, for nothing. But you have to realize that you are looking for reasons to make me the villain. This is just the convenient reason you happened to jump on.”
“That’s not,” Jim says, but the questions, the doubts, are already flooding his mind, slow and insidious, and suddenly what was so clear when he was talking to Spock now seems distant and uncertain. “That’s not true…”

“I am no stranger to regret,” Kodos murmurs, almost to himself. “Blood thins. The body weakens. One is finally grateful for a failing memory. I no longer treasure life, James—not even my own. I am tired. And the past… The past is a nightmare unto itself.” He looks at Jim. “Did you get everything you wanted, Captain Kirk?”

“If I got everything I wanted,” Jim mutters, “you might not be alive right now.”

“Very well,” says Kodos, resigned. “I suppose it is your right. But understand this, James: We make our decisions only once, with only the information we know and no way of predicting what consequences may arise from our actions. My decisions, at the time, were noble and right and good—I knew I could only save half the people of Tarsus, so I gave them the best possible chance they could have. Now, of course, knowing what happened in the end, I am seen as a horrible, evil man because neither half survived, and Federation help came in time to have potentially saved all eight thousand people. But making my decision at the time, I had no idea that these events would occur! What if they hadn’t? What if the colony had descended into chaos and panic? If people killed one another for a few bites of food? If they had eaten their own children to survive? I did what I did to maintain order to the best of my ability, and that, I cannot regret.”

“No matter how noble your intentions,” says Jim, struggling to hold on to his own convictions, his own morality, but the more he tries to keep them the more they slip away, like water through fisted fingers, “You still murdered four thousand people in cold blood. You don’t regret that?”

“I try not to regret it,” says Kodos. “Because I know that I could not possibly have known the consequences my decisions brought about, though they seem clear in retrospect. I taught you to understand this, did I not? It is the same principle of Oedipus the King. You can’t hold a person to the moral standard of what his actions eventually bring about, of which he is unaware. It is ridiculous and brutal. Oedipus didn’t know what he had done, and neither did I.”

And what you did to me, Jim thinks, ashamed and confused and sick to his stomach. You didn’t know anything about that either?

---

When he returns to his quarters, dazed, manic, barely seeing straight, every bit of self-control focused on just keeping himself upright, there’s a tray of food on his desk. With a note.

Make sure you eat this. Dr. McCoy is worried about you.

—Yeoman Rand

Jim needs only to glance at it to knows it’s a fake. Rand would never call Bones Dr. McCoy in a note to him; she’d call him Len or Bones. She also wouldn’t sign it with her last name, and she definitely wouldn’t use her rank. Not to mention he knows for a fact that Bones is asleep and couldn’t possibly have sent him food.

Still, it was a good enough cover story to get Ross to put it here.

The realization is comforting in a way. Calming. It gives his mind something certain, something concrete to focus on.

It’s a simple meal—a sandwich, an apple, a glass of water. He picks up the apple, rotates it in his
hand, but there are no punctures, no signs of tampering. The poison isn’t there.

It’s unlikely to have been put into the sandwich, either. There are too many different textures involved, too many ways the additive could be detected; it would be difficult to make sure there was enough to kill him without tipping him off.

So it must be you. He picks up the glass of water, holds it to the light. Whatever it is, it’s clear and probably tasteless. He’d be dead before he even knew what hit him.

A few months ago the decision before had been to drink or to die. Now it’s the exact opposite.

It’s so easy, he thinks, his throat dry, his breath coming in fast. Easy as drinking a glass of water.

Just one gulp, something in him urges, whispers, pleads. Just one sip and it’ll be over. Everything, everything will be…

And he wants to, and he doesn’t want to, and he doesn’t know what he wants, hasn’t known what he wants for eleven years, hasn’t known anything, and whatever is raging inside him is too much for him and he throws the glass against the wall where it shatters into a thousand tiny glittering pieces, and then someone is screaming and screaming and screaming, and he can’t he CAN’T, don’twanttodiewanttodiewanttowanttowanttohelp, help me HELP ME and then Spock is there, kneeling on the floor beside him, looking so scared and so worried and he’s saying something, asking him something, and then Jim is holding on to him, clutching him like a lifeline, saying words that don’t make sense to his own ears, “I can’t, I can’t do it anymore, I can’t, I w-want to—”

Spock’s eyes widen in realization, or maybe dread. “You went to see him.” It’s not a question or an accusation. Just a fact.

“I w-wanted to help,” Jim says desperately, trying to make Spock understand, and he doesn’t know if he’s talking about going to Kodos this time, or last time, or the time before that, or the time before that, or… “I just wanted to…”

Spock helps him off the floor and into the chair beside his desk, his hands shaking slightly. His eyes flicker to the tray, to the note, where they linger for a moment before returning to Jim, something inscrutable in his expression.

“What did he say to you?”

And Jim tells him, the whole story falling out in a rush of words that may or may not be coherent, wanting Spock to understand, wanting Spock to stay, wanting—

“It’s always like this,” he’s saying, babbling really, “it always makes so much sense, and even if I know he’s wrong I can’t fight him, I can’t just say no because I want him to be wrong, it doesn’t work like that, his approach is perfectly logical and—”

“And just because something is logical does not make it right,” says Spock.

The comment is so unexpected and so uncharacteristic of him that it pulls Jim out of his whirling thoughts. “I can’t believe you of all people…”

“You said something similar to me when I told you of my remorse for the way I treated my mother,” says Spock. “You said I should not regret it because I could not have known what would happen to her. You said that because I did not know how little time I would have with her, I could not know how grievous my sin was. Therefore I could not judge my behavior based on later information.”
Jim senses a but coming, and he is not disappointed.

“But that is not strictly true, though it is logical. My refusing to tell my mother that I loved her was never right, even at the time. Even if she had not died early, my behavior still would have been cowardly and contemptible. I know that. And you know it as well.”

“But I told you…”

“You told me what I needed to hear at the time,” says Spock. “You acted in the manner that was desired and expected of you, as you always do. But it is not what you truly believe.”

“I don’t know what I believe,” says Jim, overwhelmed and wrecked and wanting to go to sleep and never wake up.

“Do you believe that if Ensign Chekov were to agree to sexual congress before he reached the legal age it would not, even with his genius-level intelligence, be true consent?”

“Of course.”

“Do you believe that the women known as the ‘Orion slave girls,’ including your own Chief of Information Technology, despite their own bodies’ reactions to the violations, did not give true consent?”

“Of course!” says Jim indignantly.

“Do you believe that if someone were to threaten Doctor McCoy’s life and tell his daughter that agreeing to intercourse was the only way to save him, her agreement—her begging for it, even—would not be true consent?”

His insides go cold at the very thought. If Jojo ever… “Of course. That’s sick. How could anyone —”

“Then why can you not acknowledge the same for yourself, Jim?”

He doesn’t know what to say to that.

It’s true.

“But,” he protests, “even if I know that… Kodos said he didn’t…”

“The fact that he attempted suicide proves that he was, in some way, aware of his guilt.”

“He tried to kill himself?” Jim asks, stunned.

“It is true that we live chronologically,” says Spock. “In that sense he is correct—we can only make our decisions once, with the information we are given and the circumstances in which we are put, although the significance of those actions can be understood only retrospect. However, we must also must accept that our decisions will be judged based on the consequences. It is illogical, perhaps. But it is also true.”

The urgency in Spock’s voice, in his eyes, so anxious for him to understand, quiets his mind. Slows his wildly-beating heart. Calms the panic and the shame and the million different doubts hurtling through him.

“We cannot rewind and change our decisions. We must make them only once, and that one moment remains with us forever. That is what makes each moment both impossibly precious and impossibly
dangerous.

“Jim, you made the best decision you could have at the time, and although they had negative consequences, those decisions have had positive consequences as well—they have allowed you to survive. They have created the person you have become.”

Jim tries to blink the burning from his eyes, and Spock says quietly, “Honor your decisions, Captain. Jim. Both the precious and the dangerous. They have made you who you are today—and for that I am grateful.”

Jim doesn’t respond—can’t respond—for a very long time.

“I have an idea,” he says at last. “But you have to trust me.”

“I do,” says Spock, without a moment of hesitation. “Unequivocally.”

Jim smiles at him, and despite the memories in his head and the itch in his palms and the knowledge of what he’s about to do, the fact that he’ll have Spock at his side makes everything seem a lot more bearable. “Then let’s do this.”

---

It isn’t being woken up at 0226 by a red alert that tells Leonard that something has gone horribly wrong.

It’s when he runs to the bridge, and Jim is there, sprawled out in his chair, relaxed and smiling and something predatory in his eyes.

“What’re you doing here, kid?” Leonard demands. “You’re still emotionally compromised, get back to your quarters.”

“I’m not emotionally compromised anymore,” he replies cheerfully. “I’ve had some time to think about things, and I know exactly what needs to be done.”

Bones doesn’t like the sound of that. He really does not like the sound of that.

He turns to Spock, who’s standing at Jim’s side, hands behind him, watching impassively. “You’re okay with this?”

“My opinion on the Captain’s orders have no significance,” says the Vulcan.

Before he can reply, the turbolift doors open and Uhura, Chekov, and Sulu emerge, looking tired and confused.

“Zhere does not seem to be a red alert,” says Chekov, looking around. “Why…?”

“Everyone’s here!” says Jim. “Well, almost everyone.” He claps his hands in the way he does before a stupid stunt. “It may interest you to know that we have entered Earth-owned space.”

Judging by the looks on everyone’s faces, this piece of information doesn’t interest them at all.

Jim grins lazily. It sets off every danger signal in Leonard’s body.

“You don’t remember our orders? We were supposed to bring our guest to trial as soon as we got back to Earth. And as far as I’m concerned, we’ve gotten back to Earth.”
“What…?” Bones starts, as the turbolift doors open once more, and to his shock, Kodos walks onto the bridge, pulled along by the two security guards flanking him.

Leonard immediately wants to move, to stand between Kodos and Jim, to protect him from the governor’s gaze, but Jim seems perfectly comfortable in Kodos’s company. Even amused.

“Now we’re all here,” he says.

“Here for what?” Uhura asks.

“For the trial of course! The trial for Kodos the Executioner, as ordered.”

A spike of unease runs through the sleep-hazy group.

“I don’t think this is what Admiral Pike meant, Captain,” says Sulu warily. “He wanted us to bring him to a real court on Earth. We don’t have the people or resources for a trial…”

“Awww, we have plenty!” Jim replies, smiling over his steepled fingers. “I can be the judge, the prosecution, and a key witness all in one. All we need is a defense attorney. Who wants to do that?”

Nobody says a word.

Jim laughs. “C’mon, someone has to do it! Everyone deserves to be defended. Uhura, this falls somewhere in the general area of your job description.”

“No,” says Uhura slowly. “It really doesn’t.”

“Regardless,” says Jim, waving that off. “You’ll be our defense attorney. And the rest of you guys will be the jury. See? We’re ready for our trial. Bring the defendant forward.”

The security officers bring Kodos to the middle of the bridge, right in front of the captain’s chair.

“Is this some kind of joke?” the former governor asks.

“How. Do. You. Plead,” says Jim, his voice low and dangerous. There is a pause.

“Guilty,” says Kodos, unwillingly. “But—”

“For the murder of George Samuel Kirk and Erika Riley. How do you plead?”

“Guilty,” says Kodos. “But—”

“For the attempted murder of the remaining five members of the Children’s Rebellion. How do you plead?”

“Guilty. James, you have to listen—”
“I don’t have to do anything,” says Jim sharply. “For your part in causing the civil war that killed almost all the remaining colonists. How do you plead?”

This time Kodos doesn’t reply right away.

“Guilty,” he mutters.

“And,” says Jim, and for the first time his voice shakes, “for the repeated rape of James Tiberius Kirk. How do you plead?”

It’s like a physical shockwave through the group. Chekov stares and stares and stares like he doesn’t understand, won’t understand. Sulu clutches the chair behind him for support. Uhura’s hand presses against her mouth.

“No,” says Kodos.

“It’s not a yes or no question. How do you plead?”

“I won’t—”

“You made me feel like there was no other option,” Jim says, his voice wobbling slightly. “Do you deny it?”

Kodos stares at him. “No,” he says finally.

“You made me feel like I deserved it. Like I wanted it. You raped every cell in my body and every thought in my head, do you deny it?”

The governor doesn’t respond.

“Answer me, Kodos.”

“No,” he whispers.

“Does anyone want to object?” says Jim, addressing the crowd now. “Uhura, would you like to say any words in his defense?”

All she can do is shake her head, the tears streaming down her face.

“Good, then we’re in agreement. Why prolong the punishment?” And he pulls something out of his belt—a phaser.

Leonard feels a thrill of fear course through him. “Jim…”

“On your knees,” the kid tells Kodos.

“James…”

“I said on your knees.”

Kodos sinks to his knees.

Jim looks at him kneeling there for a long moment, then turns away to walk back and forth in front of his prisoner, twirling the phaser on one finger.

“Well,” he says idly, a gleam in his eyes. “This is interesting. Isn’t it? Usually our positions were
Kodos stares up at Jim, the horrified realization dawning in his eyes. “Please James… you don’t want to do this…”

“See, that was always your problem,” says Jim sadly. “You were always trying to tell me what I wanted.”

“I…”

“Well, I’ve gotten a lot better since last we met. Aren’t you proud of me?” Kodos doesn’t answer, and Jim continues, unconcerned. “You know, I was always so eager for your approval. Funny how things work out, huh?”

“James…”

Jim ignores him. “Anyway, the point is, I’ve come pretty far. Since you screwed me over I’ve learned how to figure out what I really want.”

He stops in front of Kodos and puts the phaser under his chin, forcing his face up.

He smiles. “And right now what I really want is to put a bullet through your head.”

There is nothing but horrified silence.

“Unfortunately all I’ve got right now is a phaser,” Jim goes on brightly. “But you gotta make do with what you’ve got, right?”

“Please—have mercy—”

“Mercy?” the kid repeats, surprised. “Well, sure… I’m always up for mercy. I’m a nice guy. Just ask my crew.”

He looks up at them, and they stare back, terrified and frozen.

“They’re usually sharper than this, I swear,” he stage-whispers. “Let’s ask Spock. Spock, am I nice?”

“Yes, sir,” says Spock, emotionless.

“See?” says Jim. “I have plenty of mercy! I’ll even give you a choice. Do you want to die how you killed Erika…?” – he points the phaser at Kodos’s head — “or how you killed Sam?” — he points it at Kodos’s heart. “It doesn’t really matter to me, to be honest. And it’s all right if you bleed a bit, ‘cause the yeomen can’t blame me since I’m technically still emotionally compromised…”

“You’re insane,” Kodos breathes, his eyes wide.

“Insane?” Jim pouts. “Well now you’re just being mean. What do you think of that, Spock?”

“You are a paragon of mental health, Captain,” says Spock blandly.

Jim tips his head back and laughs. “See? I must be sane—everyone knows Vulcans don’t lie.”

And that’s it, Leonard can’t just stand here and watch anymore. “Jim, stop!” he says, moving forward, trying to take the weapon away, trying to hypo his friend back to normal, trying to—something.
But before he can get close, there’s a phaser being pointed at his chest.

Bones looks up into Jim’s smiling face.

“Ah-ah-ah,” the kid says cheerfully. “No closer or I’ll have to shoot you. And I really don’t want to have to do that, so.”

And Leonard has never been afraid of Jim. Jim is more than his best friend, more than his brother, he’s Len’s…whatever-the-hell-he-is. He knows Jim would never hurt him.

This man right now, this man with Jim’s eyes and Jim’s smile and Jim’s finger on the trigger of a phaser pointed at Bones…

This isn’t Jim.

“Put the phaser down, kid,” he says quietly, his chest aching.

Jim frowns. “Don’t want him dead?”

“No,” says Leonard. “I want him to stand trial—a proper trial, in front of everyone, so the whole universe knows exactly what he did, and how despicable he is. I want him to be so hated and so ashamed that he wants to die, but he can’t. I want him to live with what he’s done, not die for it! It’s not up to us to decide who lives and dies—that’s what my parents taught me.”

“Well, Governor Kodos here taught me that it’s up to the one with the gun to decide who lives and dies,” says Jim, amicably enough. “And his lesson has proven far more true, in my experience.”

Bones swallows hard. “Killing him won’t bring your brother back.”

“Maybe not,” Jim agrees. “But it’ll make me feel a hell of a lot better.”

He turns back to Kodos.

“By the power vested in me, I sentence you to death,” says Jim calmly, even as the older man stares back at him, his eyes bright with terrified tears. “Hey, don’t cry. That’s just silly. You must have known that this was it how it was going to end—that eventually I was going to find you, and I was going to kill you. After all… by running away and changing your identity you may have gotten yourself a bit of extra time. But your life was over the moment you made me angry.”

He points the phaser at Kodos and many things happen at once.

“Captain!” says Spock, and there’s a gunshot, and someone screaming… And then Spock is dragging a girl up from behind the back console as a gun clatters to the floor.

Spock pulls Lenore Karidian’s arms behind her and brings her, crying and struggling in the Vulcan’s grip, to the middle of the bridge.

“Let him go!” she yells. “He didn’t do anything!”

“Actually,” says Jim, and the arm with the phaser drops and suddenly… suddenly he seems almost like Jim again. “He really did. Haven’t you been paying attention?”

“He is not Governor Kodos anymore,” she says. “He is Anton Karidian! He is my father!”

Jim sighs, and his whole body seems to deflate, taking the mania, the madness that had possessed him, out with it.
“I’m not going to hurt him,” he says quietly.

She laughs hystericly. “Yeah, right! You’re pointing a gun at his head. You hate him! Why on earth would I believe you won’t hurt him!?”

“What, this?” says Jim. He points the phaser at Kodos and his finger tightens on the trigger—Bones closes his eyes, unable to watch—Lenore screams—

*Pop!*

…*Pop?*

Leonard opens his eyes. Kodos is still kneeling there, terrified but alive and unharmed, and there’s confetti falling slowly onto the floor, and hanging from the tip of the phaser is a little banner that says, “*Happy birthday, Chekov!*”

And slowly—very slowly—comprehension begins to dawn.

Leonard first thought is, *That little son of a—*

“You,” Kodos manages. “That was all…?"

“My biggest priority once Kodos was arrested was taking down the person trying to kill the Tarsus survivors,” Jim explains, throwing the phaser away like a used toy. Like the used toy *that it was.* “At first all I knew about the person was that they were protecting Kodos. But that could’ve been plenty of people, anyone in the Karidian Players that had become attached to him. That’s why I had to invite you all onboard. But you gave yourself away when you tried to kill Kevin the second time—you made a phaser malfunction outside his room, when I knew that the only phaser missing from the armory was the one Kevin himself had taken—the one he left in your room.

“Still, that’s only circumstantial evidence. I had to lure you out in the open. And the best way to do that is to threaten your father.”

But Kodos isn’t listening. Isn’t even looking at Jim. He’s staring at his daughter. “What have you done?”

“What had to be done,” says Lenore, lifting her chin. “They had to be silenced.”

“All five of them? Five of the only bright remnant of what I’d done? Five more souls on my head?”

“Five less mouths to feed,” says Jim grimly.

“No, Father,” says Lenore. “Their souls don’t have to be on your head, not anymore. I’m strong. I will take them for you. It’s nothing!”

Kodos just stares at her, aghast.

“Don’t you see?” she pleads. “All the ghosts are dead. I’ve buried them! There’s no more blood on your hands. And there will be no one who can harm you, as soon as I remove the final four.”

“Lenore,” Kodos says, almost sobs, “Oh, Lenore. You were the one thing I did right…”

“No, Father! Don’t you see? These unfortunate deaths, this cost I’ve paid, is all to maintain even greater benefits! They’re all for you! Now you can be at peace.”

Kodos hangs his head and doesn’t respond.
Spock gives the girl to one of the security officers. “Take both of them to the brig. Watch them until we land.”

They pull Kodos to his feet and drag them to the turbolift.

As soon as they’re gone, Leonard turns to Spock and hisses, “You knew! You were in on his damnfool plan.”

“I intuited most of it,” Spock confirms. “However, if I had known the Captain would use himself as the bait, I would have objected earlier.” The Vulcan punctuates this with a glare in the captain’s direction. “Perhaps that is why he did not inform me.”

Jim just shrugs back. “You gotta use what you’ve got.”

The familiar words send a shiver up Leonard’s spine.

“I still can’t believe,” Uhura murmurs, collapsing into a chair, “that was all a performance.”

“Well,” says Jim, and suddenly he looks unbearably exhausted. “I was taught by the best.”

---

The first thing Spock says when he enters Jim’s quarters is, “That was not an act.”

Jim turns his head slowly from where he’s sprawled back out on his bed. He needs to be unconscious, but sleep won’t come, and Bones won’t let him have alcohol.

“I never said it was an act,” he mutters.

“If you knew you were not going to kill him,” says Spock, “there would be no purpose in bringing the fake phaser. The fact that you arranged the circumstances so that you were unable to kill him… means you were uncertain that you would not kill him.”

Jim looks up at him, manages a tired half-smile. “Is there a point in trying to hide anything from you?”

“You are very similar to Kodos,” says Spock, and Jim’s heart clenches.

“Spock…”

“You are both strong leaders, both pragmatic, both stubborn, both brilliant. Both talented actors…”

Every word stabs into him a like a physical blow. “Stop—”

“But you,” says his First slowly, “you arm yourself with a weapon that leaves you powerless. Kodos arms himself only to kill. And that—that is what makes all the difference. That is the difference between a protector and a murderer.”

Jim stares at him.

“We have a proverb on Vulcan,” Spock murmurs. “One’s worth lies not in one’s impulses, but in his or her ability to control them.”

“That would be a Vulcan proverb.”

“Captain,” says Spock. “You would have made a fine Vulcan.”
And despite himself—despite everything—Jim smiles.
Natalie’s funeral is enormous and elaborate and befitting of a war hero (befitting of the war hero she was), but Jim can’t appreciate it. He’s somewhere else entirely.

He is, of course, *there* at the funeral. He’s in the front row, in fact, next to the newly-extended Leighton family on one side (Sam’s adoption papers just got confirmed that morning) and Spock on the other. But his mind is back on the Enterprise, back at the aftermath of the Kodos revelation…

The twenty-one hours it had taken to return to Starfleet, to give Kodos over to the authorities, had seemed like an eternity. Jim had stayed in his quarters the entire time, not doing anything, not talking to anyone. He’d heard secondhand about how the crew was coping—how Uhura was practically ready to stab someone’s eyes out with a stylus and Spock had gone semi-catatonic and Bones seemed to be trying to drink a liquor store.

The only one who he let into his quarters during that time was Gaila, and they didn’t even talk; all they did was sit and watch a holovid together.

But somehow… having her beside him, knowing what she’s gone through and how far she’s come… having Gaila there, who *knows* her history isn’t who she is, who *knows* that “raped” doesn’t mean “broken,” who is happy and successful and awesome…

It made it a lot easier to deal with it. With his own realizations, as well as everybody’s reactions.

The most unexpected reaction, strangely enough, had been from Cupcake, who had grabbed Jim as he was leaving the Enterprise for the funeral.

“*Why didn’t you tell me* you were bringing Kodos the Executioner onboard?!?” he demanded. “I’m not just here to look pretty, *sir*, I’m Chief of Security, and that was just about the biggest security breach you could have possibly made!”

Jim had just stood there, blinking at him, until he realized… “*Were you worried* about me?”

Cupcake scowled. “Just let me do my damn job, Kirk.”

“*Woah, I think I feel this, like, warmth in my heart…?*” He pounded his chest a couple of times. “*Ahh, never mind, it was just the potato salad from lunch.*”

“*Listen, Captain,*” said Cupcake, spitting the title like an insult, jabbing a big, meaty finger into Jim’s chest. “*Next time you want to invite the top of the Most Wanted list for dinner and boardgames, you’re sure as hell gonna let me know about it beforehand.*”

“No promises,” said Jim.

“*Crazy farmboy,*” Cupcake muttered, stalking off, but Jim knows he didn’t imagine the affection in his voice there.
Cupcake, unfortunately, was not the only one to catch Jim before the funeral.

There’s also the subpoena in his pocket, calling him to testify against Kodos in the Starfleet court of law.

And as they made sure to remind him, he is one of only three witnesses. Of only four survivors.

Only four…

He is brought back to Natalie’s funeral with a jolt, his hands clenching on his knees…

“Her death was not your fault,” Spock says quietly beside him. “There is nothing you could have done.”

But that’s not quite true, is it? If he had just admitted to himself that Kodos could be alive, maybe he would have noticed the murders before Lenore got to Natalie. At the very least he could have kept in touch with her…

“I think I’ve found the worst feeling,” he mutters.

“Helplessness,” says Spock promptly, like he’s thought about this before. “Being unable to do anything.”

“Yeah, helplessness is pretty bad. But for me,” he says, looking at the picture they’ve put up of her, of Natalie and Sam posing together in front of the zoo, holding hands and smiling like the sun, “it’s knowing you could have done something. And you didn’t.”

---

It’s kind of surreal, returning to Starfleet for the duration of the trial and being placed in the same dorms they had when they were at the Academy. It’s almost like they’ve gone back in time, like nothing’s changed at all, except it has. Everything has.

“I don’t mind switching rooms, you know,” Jim offers. “If you want to be with Rand.”

“Nah,” says Bones. “We’re not quite at the moving-in stage yet. And anyway, right now I have to be with you.”

Jim doesn’t really know what to say to that, so he doesn’t say anything at all, and it’s only when the two of them are in pajamas and getting into bed that the silence is broken again, when Bones lifts up one side of the blanket and says, “C’mon. You know there’s no way you’ll get to sleep otherwise.”

And Jim, unable to argue with that, climbs in next to him.

“Under one condition,” Bones adds, all gruff and growly, the way he gets when his snuggly side is forced out. “Nobody can know about this, all right? I really don’t wanna die.”

Jim grins against his collarbone. “Rand’s the jealous type, huh?”

“She’s really not the one I’m worried about,” Bones mutters under his breath.

They lapse into comfortable silence, the way they did all the time when they were students.

It’s all still the same. Still the same Bones, the same warm, familiar feeling of overwhelming safety, in the same bed they slept in on-and-off for over a year, the same bed Bones put Jim on when he was drunk and concussed and unconscious the first day they’d met…
The same bed they almost hooked up in.

He probably wouldn’t have even remembered Bones’s name the next day.

*Where would I be now, Jim wonders, if he hadn’t said no that night? What would I be?*

“Bones?”

He feels the vibrations of Bones’s response more than he hears it. “Mmnyeah, kid?”

There are so many things he wants to say—needs to say—but only one comes out.

“Thanks,” he says quietly.

“F’r wha’?” Bones mumbles.

It’s almost funny that he still doesn’t know what he’s done for Jim. Probably never will.

Jim still can’t believe people like Bones actually exist.

“Nothing,” he says. *Everything,* he thinks, and closes his eyes.

---

“Hey, it’s…uh. It’s me. Jim. I just… um. I guess you must have heard about the arrest, and everything? so… Uh…

“I know it’s been a while, and… I know you’re busy, but it would mean a lot to me if… I mean, you might want to… I just—I thought maybe it would be a good thing if you came to the trial. ‘Cause I never really…talked to you…about. You know. And you might want to….

“I mean, it’s okay if you don’t. Show up, that is. You can watch it just as well livestreamed on the holos, and… well… I only look *more* like him now. So. Probably best if we didn’t. I just…figured I’d put it out there.

“Well. I guess that’s it. …Bye, Mom.”

---

He’s startled out of *Faust* by Bones barging in to the dorm room holding a suit.

“Aww, you’re so sweet!” says Jim, putting aside his book. “Of course I’ll go with you to the prom.”

“Take those off,” says Bones, dropping the suit on the bed and gesturing vaguely at Jim’s civilian clothes, as ordered by the court. Too bad the only civvies Jim owns are jeans and t-shirts.

“Well, at least buy me dinner first.”

The doctor rolls his eyes. “Fine, I walked into that one. Put this on. Please.”

“*Please,* huh?” Jim raises his eyebrows. “Is this a personal favor? I didn’t know you had a suit fetish, Bones.”

“Just put it on,” he sighs.

For the first time, Jim actually looks at the thing, and feels his nose wrinkle in disgust. Suits would always remind him of all the ceremonies and memorial services and dedications made in the name of
his father he had to attend when he was a kid. “Do I have to?”

“You don’t have to do anything. But you’re right—this would be a personal favor.”

He looks up at Bones, who shrugs back and says, “The whole universe is gonna be watching this trial, including all the morons who wrote you off as a kid. I’m just lookin’ forward to showin’ off my whatever-the-hell-you-are.”

Jim laughs and picks up the suit.

---

Though waiting to escort him to the courthouse, Spock must admit he is unprepared for the sight of the Captain emerging from his dorm in human formalwear, the blue dress-shirt painting his eyes almost ethereal and the cut of the fabric highlighting the line of broad shoulders and thin hips, and Spock knows at a glance that he will most likely be returning to this sight in his dreams.

(He has been dreaming far more frequently lately—and far more…vividly—all of scenarios he had encountered in reality, with only a few small changes… His and the Captain’s sparring match from last week, for instance - Jim’s breath on his ear, the quiet noises of exertion he had made as he tried to extract himself from Spock’s grip, except in his dream there is no clothing between them.

Or that first day on the bridge, when he had been choking Jim over the console—only this time Kirk is breathless and bucking in pleasure, rather than pain…)

“Who,” he asks, only when he is certain he will be able to keep his voice even, “is responsible for the state of your tie? If I were prone to conjecture, I would hypothesize it was the work of a five-year-old boy.”

Jim grins. “It was Bones. He’s never tried to put a tie on someone else before, so he got kind of confused.”

“Then my hypothesis was not incorrect,” says Spock, and the Captain snorts.

“Can you fix it for me?” he asks, stepping forward.

Spock nods, and his steady, reliable Vulcan hands come up to work on adjusting the knot, even as his all-too-human mind struggles to maintain control of two very distinct desires.

First there is the logical part of him, that wishes to see Kodos brought to justice, and therefore desires to make the Captain look as presentable as possible in order to maximize his credibility as a key witness in the eyes of the jury.

Then there is the part of him that wants to pull off Jim’s tie, to rip off his jacket, to bite his neck, to claim him—to mark him so everyone in that courtroom knows to whom he belongs, to make him hard and gasping and pleading and unsuitable for any eyes but his own.

He finishes the adjustment and steps back, unable to keep his hands from flexing unconsciously from the loss of contact. A subtle flush has spread pink across the Captain’s cheeks, prompting a flash of lust that spikes down to Spock’s toes.

“How do I look?” he asks, almost nervously.

(In his mind it is almost a siren, a mantra: Want him want him want him—)
“Adequate,” Spock replies.

His brief response brings a smile to Jim’s face, at least, and they walk toward the courthouse together in companionable silence.

The strangely insistent thrum of need beneath his skin does not cease.

*Control,* Spock reminds himself. *I am in control of my emotions. Two plus two is four. Four plus two is six. Six times six is thirty-six…*

---

The reporters on the steps to the courthouse go absolutely *insane* the moment they catch sight of him.

*“Captain Kirk!”*

And then there are flashes of light and microphones in his face and people shouting, and he’s suddenly unbelievably grateful for Spock’s warm, solid presence beside him, telling people firmly that the Captain is not answering questions at *this time.*

*“Captain, do you believe that your career has been affected by the events of—”*

*“Captain, what precisely is your relationship with—”*

*“Captain, why have you never come forward about your past before—”*

Finally they get through the sea of paparazzi to the courthouse, and the door slides shut behind them, leaving only blissful silence.

Or. Blissful mainly-silence.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” says the officer at the front. “Only those involved with the case and their families may enter past this point.” He’s about to tell Spock to leave when he stops. “Unless you and the Commander are married?”

Jim and Spock look at each other, and all Jim can think is, *Yes please,* before he fling *that* particular thought into his mental closet and slam the door.

*“Negative,”* says Spock, eventually.

The security officer turns to Jim. “Then, you don’t have any family here?”

Jim has already opened his mouth to say no when he is interrupted by a familiar voice.

*“Yes,”* it says, coming up behind him. “He does.”

Jim turns. Stares.

*“Mom?”* he says weakly.

His mom is staring back at him (at Dad), but God, she *came.* She really came.

And yeah, maybe neither of them know what they’re doing, and maybe this is the worst idea Jim’s ever had (which is really, really saying something), and maybe… maybe they can give this whole family thing a shot.
“Hi, Jimmy,” she says with an attempt at a smile, and helplessly, Jim smiles back.

---

The last thing Leonard thought he would be doing as the CMO of a Starfleet flagship, as a self-respecting *adult,* is saving Spock a seat. A seat next to him.

And yet, here they are.

The entire crew of the Enterprise has gathered in Viewing Room 1, where they have set up a monitor to the livestream of the trial. The moment Spock comes back from bringing Jim to the courthouse, he waves the guy over.

Spock looks at the empty seat next to him like he’s afraid it might be butt-poisoned.

“I saved it for you,” Leonard explains. “I wanna sit next to the other guy who’s as on-edge about this trial as I am.”

Spock gives him a condescending look (as if the hobgoblin has any other kind of look). “Vulcans do not experience anxiety, Doctor.”

And then a moment later:

“Still… I am not particularly averse to this location,” Spock says, and sits down beside him.

---

“…We heard the doors lock.” Tom pauses to fight for the words. “That’s when the shooting started…”

---

“…The guard shot him right in the chest,” he says. He is not looking toward the other witnesses. Toward Jim. “He died within seconds…”

---

After what seems like hours, Kodos’s defense attorney, Mr. Lepht, rises for his cross-examination.

“Doctor Leighton, can you tell us how many people you reported as being Governor Kodos before accusing my client?”

The jury murmurs.

Tom sinks down into his seat, the visible half of his face flushing.

---

“…No, I wasn’t part of his advanced class,” says Kevin, during his own cross-examination.

“So you only really saw him the one time,” says Mr. Lepht.

Kevin frowns. “Well…yeah, I guess, but…”

---

“…I recognized his voice. I was barely conscious, but I recognized his voice. I could never forget the
speech he gave before sentencing us to death…”

---

“Mr. Riley, is it true that until several weeks ago, you did not remember the events of Tarsus at all?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Your diagnosis was ‘selective repression,’ is that correct?”

“Yes…”

“If your mind could decide to forget a very important part of your life, how do we know it isn’t forgetting something important now? Or even changing things entirely?”

“Objection!” says the prosecutor. “Conjecture.”

“Sustained.”

The defense attorney turns back to Kevin. “Have you spoken to the other witnesses since your memory returned?”

His eyes flicker to Jim and Tom in the audience. “Yes…”

“Is it possible that their reports of the events have influenced your own?”

“No,” says Kevin, his voice shaking. “It isn’t! I heard Kodos’s voice! I saw him—he shot my sister in front of me, and he—he… This man is a murderer!”

“Mr. Riley, do you need a twenty minute recess to compose yourself?”

---

“…Did you recognize him from his voice, Captain Kirk?”

“No. I just…knew.”

“Did he recognize you?”

“Yeah. Instantly.”

“How did you know?”

Jim closes his eyes. “He called me James.”

---

“You were the closest to Governor Kodos, then.”

A pause. “Yes.”

“Did you see him as a substitute father figure?”

“Objection! This line of questioning is irrelevant to the case.”

“I’m introducing our witness to the jury. Giving them an idea of where their information is coming from.”
When Jim finally manages to finish his story, manages to tell everything except for what he’s only recently been able to acknowledge to himself, the courtroom is pin-drop silent.

Until Mr. Lepht rises for his cross-examination.

“You bring some very compelling evidence against my client, Captain,” he says. “…If it happened, of course. Do you have any proof?”

Jim raises his eyebrows back at him. “Well, I’m pretty sure I didn’t *imagine* my brother’s murder.”

“No, no, of course not. But do you have any proof that the man in front of you, my client, is in fact Governor Kodos?”

“Aside from his own confession?”

“A confession he made at phaserpoint—”

“It was a *toy*—”

“—a fact of which he was not aware! Any confessions he may have made with your weapon pointing at his face were coerced!”

Jim lapses into silence, fuming.

“Are you certain that this man is Kodos?” asks Lepht, walking back and forth in front of the witness stand.

“Yes,” says Jim.

“And why is that?”

“Because I recognized him. I recognized his eyes. He recognized me. He called me by the name no *one but him* calls me. We had several conversations that wouldn’t have made *sense* unless he were Kodos!” Jim runs a hand through his hair. “This is the third time you’ve asked me the same exact questions. Why the hell would I make this up? I have nothing against Anton Karidian. Why would I try to ruin a random actor’s life?”

“For attention,” says the attorney.

“Attention?” Jim repeats, stunned.


“How do you have access to that?” Jim demands angrily, leaning forward. “My criminal record was sealed when—”

“I am entitled to any documents deemed relevant to the case, Captain Kirk,” the defense attorney replies.

Jim sits back, jaw tight, eyes tracking Lepht as the lawyer walks back and forth in front of him. “And how exactly is this—”

“Stardate 2249.103. Arrest warrant for James T. Kirk, underage substance use. Charges dropped,
bail paid, released next day.”

Jim flushes, and it’s not even because of the stuff on his rap sheet, really—it’s because of all the people who are hearing the stuff on his rap sheet. Who are going to know how far Jim fell before he managed to get his life together.

His crew.

Spock.

Kodos.


“Well yes,” says Jim, “but—”

“Stardate 2249.910. Hacking and embezzling a private Starfleet bank. The theft of hundreds of thousands of credits—”

“Theft is such a strong word…”

“—six months juvenile detention. Sentence extended for hostile behavior.”

“Hostile behavior?” Jim demands. “That’s what they called it?”


“Yeah, but…”

“He ran for Riverside mayor,” the attorney tells the jury, “when he was nineteen years old, won the election, and then resigned after a week.”

“There’s a long story and a really good reason behind that one—” Jim interjects.

Lepht turns to him, and for a long moment they just watch each other. “Would you like me to continue, Captain?”

And Jim…falls silent.

(He’s smart enough to know a threat when he sees one. They both know that there are plenty of things in Jim’s criminal record that he doesn’t want his crew—doesn’t want Kodos—to know about.)

“These are just excerpts of Captain Kirk’s…exceptional past,” Lepht continues. “Though of course I would never undermine the enormous debt we owe to him, or the contributions he has made to Starfleet, it is undeniable that his behavior has historically followed the pattern of a child desperate for attention. What makes us think he’s not just calling for attention now?”

And Jim wants to say, “You’re right. I was calling for attention back then. I had so much I wanted to forget, and I didn’t know how to ask for help, and I dealt with it the only way I knew how.”

And Jim wants to say, “But it’s not like that anymore. I’ve learned how to ask for help, and how to figure out what I want, and how to trust people again—because I’ve finally found people worth trusting. I found Admiral Pike, and Bones, and Gaila, and Spock… I found a family. I found people I could talk to.”
But looking around at this courtroom, at the unfamiliar faces, at the familiar faces that hurt far too much... These aren't the people he can talk to. These are people who are waiting for him to screw up, who are poised to jump on the slightest weakness. Who might blow him off as nothing more than a kid desperate for attention.

The very thought of telling them about the rape—being asked for every detail, being questioned and criticized and cross-examined, trying to plead his case to skeptical-looking strangers, being told all over again that maybe he wanted it after all, maybe it was his own fault...

“Captain Kirk,” says the judge. “Is there anything else you would like to bring to the jury’s attention?”

And Jim swallows hard. His hands are shaking. Jesus, his hands are shaking, when did they start doing that? He presses down on his knees to try and steady them, feeling Mr. Lephts’s eyes on him all the while.

“No,” he says quietly, unable to look at Kodos. “There’s nothing else.”

---

Only after all the evidence is submitted and all the witnesses have given the testimony and the jury is making their final decision about Kodos’s judgment are guests permitted to enter the courthouse.

When he arrives, however, it seems that Spock is not the only one hoping to visit the Captain.

“...willing to discuss a settlement,” a woman is saying to Jim. Spock recognizes her from Kodos’s defense team. “If you’ll sign here, please, Mr. Lepht will—”

“Excuse me,” says Spock, coming to parade rest behind her. The woman seems startled by his presence. “As his First Officer it is my duty to review any documents intended for the Captain.”

“Oh,” she says, surprised, and rather reluctant. Still, she eventually gives him the document. “Very well. Please get back to us as soon as possible.”

Then she is turning and leaving the area swiftly, her long, thin heels clacking on the linoleum.

A brief scan of the contract informs him that—“The defense would like to propose a settlement in exchange for your agreement to drop any further charges against Anton Karidian.” He glances toward where Jim is sitting, his eyes half-closed, his posture tired. “Why would they request a settlement if they are unaware of your other information against Kodos?” His opinion on what the Captain chooses to tell the jury is irrelevant, of course, but the idea that Karidian will not pay for his atrocities against Jim...

“They know about the other stuff,” says Jim wearily.

“They know?” Spock echoes, uncomprehending.

“We submitted the recording of Kodos’s confession on the bridge into evidence. The defense is saying it was coerced, which technically it was, but they know he was telling the truth. They want to keep me from ever bringing it up in the future.”

Spock had not held any affection for the defense attorney of the case before, but now his dislike seems to be blooming into what for a human might be categorized as hatred. “That,” he manages, “is unforgivable. He is not trying to find the truth. He is attempting to vindicate his own client by attacking the victims...”
“It’s okay,” says the Captain. “That’s his job. His only defense, really, is trying to discount the witnesses. And I get that, but… I can’t.” He takes a deep breath. “I can’t be told that I’m lying about—about the rape thing. Not yet. I only just started believing that it wasn’t my fault… I don’t think I could do it again.”

It is impossible to deny the emotional reaction he has to that; to his Captain admitting that he is scared.

He sits down in the chair beside Jim, attempting to formulate a response.

“Very well,” he says at last. “However, as your First Officer - and…as your friend - I must advise you to not relinquish your right to indict Governor Kodos at a later date, when you feel you are ready.”

That earns a faint smile. “Yeah… Thank you, Spock. I’m so lucky to have you.” Before he can respond to that, though, Jim's smile is fading, replaced by worry. “You know, I think this part, waiting for the judgment to be called, might be the worst part of this whole sucky month. I can’t believe after all that… I can’t believe we don’t even know if he’ll be convicted. What if he goes free?”

“Regardless of the jury’s decision, Kodos will be punished for his actions as is befitting his crimes,” Spock replies, completely certain.

Jim’s mouth curls into an expression he has learned to recognize as fondness. “How spiritual-minded of you, Mister Spock.”

The Captain seems to think he is referring to some manner of karmic retribution, when in fact he simply means that Kodos will be punished. Spock will see to it himself.

That is when Jim reaches out and takes his hand, sending a jolt of sensation through the Vulcan’s body, even as is grip tightens as if he is attempting to crush Spock’s fingers in his own.

“Sorry,” Jim mumbles, sheepish, ashamed. “You can tell me to piss off if you want.”

The logical thing to do—the right thing to do—would be to inform the Captain of what he is doing, and allow him to make his own informed decision. The right thing to do would be to pull away.

Spock looks down at the hand entwined in his. At the white knuckles clasping Spock’s fingers to his own.

“Tell me how to help you,” he says, instead.

“Math,” Jim replies, after a while. “Math sounds good.”

Spock tilts his head. “Two hundred and fifty-six squared.”

He can feel Jim’s breathing steady itself slightly as he thinks. And then, “65,536.”

“65,536 multiplied by forty-one,” says Spock, and this problem takes the Captain a small amount longer, and the next one slightly longer as they increase in difficulty, and the tension slowly bleeds out of Jim’s body, with the exception of his grip.

They sit there for over an hour, shoulder to shoulder, their joined hands between them, and Spock cannot help but think that this is how it should be.
Leonard is very, very, very drunk by the time Kodos’s judgment is ready to be called.

He’d bit through all of his fingernails and could well have kept right on biting straight down to his wrist, but he’d managed to control himself on the alcohol front as long as Spock had been sitting next to him, looking at him judgily.

Once Spock had left, it was all downhill.

The closer it got to the announcement, the more Bones gulped. So he’s…he’s pretty well sloshed.

Hasn’t been so drunk since Jim went missing.

He takes another long drag from his flask.

Leonard is wiping his mouth on the back of his hand when Sulu yells that they’re about to find out what happened. His head shoots up, and…

And the doors of the courthouse open, and the first person emerges…

Jim.

It is as if the entire room has held its breath at once. There is not a single sound. Leonard fights to keep his swimming vision on the viewscreen, fights to keep from throwing up, and…

And Jim pulls something out of his pocket—a piece of purple fabric, adorned with seven silver stars.

He looks straight at the camera… puts both fists in the air and cheers, “WE WON!”

And it’s like their strings have suddenly been cut, and suddenly the room goes from complete silence to deafening noise, as Leonard slumps forward, dizzy with the relief, and the entire crew jumps to their feet, cheering and clapping and going insane.

And then there’s Gaila and the two other Orion crewmembers, with tears in their eyes, cheering louder than all the rest.

---

Of course, it’s all happily ever after for the cameras.

Real life is a little more complicated.

“I’m resigning,” Jim mutters, sliding into the seat across from Bones in the mess hall, when they’re finally back in space. “I’m moving to Kentucky and becoming a nun.”

“I don’t even know what part to laugh at first.”

“I’m serious, Bones!” he says, in between aggressively eating his lunch. “Ever since the trial people have been looking at me weird!”

“On the bridge?” Bones asks.

“Everywhere! On the bridge, at meetings, at the mess hall…” Jim looks around pointedly and at least a dozen heads quickly turn back to their food.
Jim scowls. “Either they give me these tiny, awkward smiles or they don’t look at me at all! And don’t even get me started on the bridge. Everyone is way too eager to follow my orders. I think Chekov almost cried when I told him to plot a route to the Delarius system.

“Spock has gone right back into ice statue mode, and Uhura keeps looking at me understandably, and Sulu and Scotty don’t know how to talk to me anymore… And the nightmares are… they’re pretty bad.” He looks away and sighs. “I just want everything to go back to normal.”

“It will. Time will pass, and eventually it won’t seem as big a deal as it was.”

“How do you know?” Jim whines. “You’re the only one who’s still… you. What if they can never see past my…?” He trails off, gesturing vaguely.

“They love you, kid,” says Bones, like it should be obvious. “I knew about Tarsus—some of it, anyway—but for them… It’s not just your grief anymore. You have to give them time to heal, too.”

---

Bones is right (of course); time does pass, and eventually it isn’t as big a deal as it was, as routine starts to creep back up on them and everyone starts getting back to normal.

Everyone, that is, except Spock.

He brings it up that night at Alcohol and Feels with Bones.

“ Weird?” Bones repeats incredulously. “That hobgoblin’s always been weird, ‘specially when it came to you.”

“He is not weird,” says Jim, indignant. “He’s just… I don’t know what’s wrong with him. He seems distracted. Maybe he needs more protein.”

“That’s a good explanation, considerin’ he looks at you like he wants to eat you.”

Jim nods absentely, only half-processing that last part. He gets the feeling he was just insulted, but whatever. “Yeah but the problem is, these days he looks at me like wants to run away from me! We were in the turbolift together, right, that happens all the time, and the way he was standing there, it was—he was, just, all tense, and not looking at me… And when that door opened he was out of there like a shot!” Jim sighs. “I didn’t do anything horribly wrong over the past week, did I?”

“Maybe he had to piss,” says Bones.

“What good are you anyway?” Jim yells, throwing one of Bones’s pillows at him.

“I’m a doctor, not a marriage counselor! An’ either way I’m just about the last guy who’d be helpful in tryin’ to figure out what’s going on in that green, pointy head of his.”

Jim gives him the Puppy-Dog Eyes of Doom.

Bones deflates. Somehow he manages to do it while still glaring, which is very impressive. “Did you reek of toxic waste? Was the turbolift about to explode? Was there anything else goin’ on?”

“No!” says Jim. “Nothing! I was just… talking. I dunno. I think I was mentioning that it’s weird that the turbolift is the only really private part of the ship. You know? That’s pretty much the only place where you could turn off the video and lock the doors, and it’s completely soundproofed, so you could theoretically be in here for hours without anybody… What?” he demands, when he realizes
Bones is staring at him.

“Nothing.” Bones mutters, reaching for the brandy he keeps for special occasions.

“Oh come on, it’s not nothing, spit it out! What do you know about Spock’s—”

The doctor gets the drink poured, throws it back, and slams the glass down.

“Lord knows I’ve done my best,” he mumbles, to nobody in particular, as he pours the next one. “I pay my alimony. I try to be a good person. I go to church every Sunday. Or, I used to go, when I wasn’t on this plastic pony ride from hell…”

“And while we’re at it, when are you going to tell me why I can’t hold Spock’s hand?”

Bones downs the next drink in one shot.

---

The evening proceeds as it might any other evening—he accompanies the Captain to dinner (where, unfortunately, Doctor McCoy joined them), after which he and Jim return to their quarters. And, as he might any other evening, Jim asks him if he would like to play a game of chess before retiring.

Spock’s first thought is to agree. He will play against the Captain, and he will not allow the unpredictable playing style nor the conversation nor the man in front of him distract his strategizing, and he will win, and then he will dominate the Captain over the chessboard in another way entirely, and suddenly it is not merely a thought, not merely an image, but he is gripping Jim’s hips, pushing him into the chessboard, reminding him of his place as the Captain groans and his fingers scrabble for purchase and Spock ignores him, needs more, harder, now, and—

“Spock?” says Jim. They are still standing outside his quarters. The loss of that fevered heat sends a shiver through him. “Chess?”

To his own mortification, Spock finds himself breathless and fully aroused, from that…that… What had that been?

While it is true that he had been plagued with the occasional lewd image or fantasy (growing exponentially in frequency over his interactions with the Captain), they had never come close to this level of vividness, nor this degree of intensity, as if there were an animal inside him biding its time until the opportune moment to escape.

They had never made him fear what he may do if he were alone with the Captain.

“Perhaps it is best if we do not,” says Spock finally, and Jim looks surprised.

“Oh… right, you just submitted that big proposal today. You’re probably exhausted.”

They say their goodbyes and part ways, and it is true that Vulcans (generally) do not lie, but that does not mean he must correct the Captain’s misconception.

---

It doesn’t surprise Jim that the first mission they’re given after Kodos’s trial is a milk run. Less than a milk run, even—it’s a guest appearance.

Basically, it turns out the President-to-be of Altair VI (another planet successfully Federation-ified!) is having his inauguration in a couple of weeks, and he specifically requested Jim’s presence. Spock
had gotten super suspicious about the whole thing (which Jim couldn’t really blame him for, considering how often these missions end in kidnap and/or torture), even running a full criminal background check on the future President. But nothing bad came up, and Jim figures they have to get back in the swing of things somehow, and an easy, relaxed mission like this one—a mission he probably couldn’t screw up even if he tried—might be exactly what they need.

---

As is customary, Spock stays behind after the Altair VI mission briefing to discuss procedural specifics and identify potential dangers as well as potential benefits. His own strangely strong inclination against the entire mission is, of course, irrelevant—duty is duty, regardless of circumstances.

Less customary is Spock finding it extraordinarily difficult to follow what Jim is currently telling him, as his mind seems to be far more interested in counting the minimum number of steps required to divest the Captain of his uniform.

_You could do it now, _the animal inside him whispers. _You could bend him over the conference table and take him right here. Beta shift has only just ended—you could have him for approximately 2.38 hours before anyone even came looking._

Spock is distantly aware that Jim is still speaking, but it is only the movements of soft, pink lips that seem relevant, rather than the words they are producing.

_Jim might object at first, of course…but he would like it eventually. You would make him like it, and even if he doesn’t, his protests will feel so good around your fingers, around your…._

“So?” the Captain prompts, having apparently reached the end of his proposal. “What do you think?”

The realization of what had been thinking about—what he had been sincerely considering—leaves him frozen, terrified.

Sickened by himself.

_He had wanted to…_

No. That is not quite accurate.

He _still_ wants to.

Jim looks at him, concerned. “You okay? You’ve been kind of off this whole meeting. Maybe you should see a doctor.”

“Yes,” Spock manages through numb lips. “I should.”

---

“So,” say Dr. M’Benga, flipping his PADD shut after his physical is complete. “Why did you come to me?”

“You are my attending physician,” says Spock, rather confused by the question. “I wish to understand my symptoms.”

“You must have been keeping track of your seven-year cycle. We both know you’re going through _pon farr_. So why did you come to me?”
Spock stares. “How do you know of—”

“I did my residency on Vulcan; practiced medicine there for three years,” says M’Benga. “So I’ve seen—and healed the damage from—my fair share of pon farrs. One Vulcan even called me in after everything was over to fabricate his competitor’s cause of death.”

Illogical though it is, as the information is irrelevant, Spock finds himself curious as to whether the doctor agreed. It seems that the humans with which he interacts have, as it were, ‘rubbed off’ on him.

“You wouldn’t have come to me just so I could confirm your condition and tell you what you need to do to survive,” says Doctor M’Benga. “You already know all that. It must be something else.”

“Yes,” says Spock, numbly. “My…compliments on your insight. The pon farr is but a fraction of the troubling circumstances. Doctor, I believe my body to be…confused. Biologically, it is meant to call me to my bondmate, but it does not.”

M’Benga frowns. “Is that all? Well, that’s certainly unusual, but it doesn’t have to be a problem. Go to your bondmate anyway. Even if your body doesn’t want her, it’s best to stay on the safe side. Especially considering the worst-case scenario.”

“Yes,” says Spock. “However, the main dilemma is not the lack of desire for her. It is the presence of a desire for… for someone else.”

The doctor looks at him for a long time.

“And these ‘desires,’” he says slowly. “They’re strong.”


“And it’s just for this one person?”

The Vulcan feels his face heat. He looks straight ahead at the wall rather than at the M’Benga. “Affirmative.”

“I see,” says the doctor, watching him thoughtfully. “So you may have formed another bond—or at least a half bond—with… with this other person.”

“Affirmative,” says Spock again. “Doctor, you must tell me how I may stop these thoughts. How can I put an end to these feelings? It is of the utmost urgency.”

“I don’t know if you can.” M’Benga sighs. “I still think your best chance is to go to New Vulcan. To see if can satisfy the pon farr conventionally.”

Yes. That is logical. This other attraction—this potential other bond—is irrelevant. The procedure is clear; he must go to New Vulcan. To T’Pring.

He must control himself. He will control himself.

For his own sake, and Jim’s.

“And, Commander…” the doctor adds. Spock looks up. “His history might make things more complicated, but you aren’t evil for wanting him. It’s what you do with your feelings that matters.”

His throat is strangely tight. “I am sure I do not know what you mean by that, Doctor.”

“By what?” says M’Benga. “I don’t remember saying a word. All I see in your examination is an
advanced stage of exhaustion. Very typical. Very understandable, given the high-stress nature of your position. I prescribe you a week’s leave of absence on New Vulcan, as soon as possible.”

---

Rather than broach the topic of his leave at their private meeting in Jim’s quarters that night, Spock decides to approach him on the bridge—where the Captain is guaranteed to be fully dressed, and there is not a bed four meters away, and there are other witnesses present to keep Spock’s control in check.

“Captain,” he says, coming to parade rest beside Jim’s seat. According to the script he has mentally composed for this conversation, he will state his request and the Captain will agree to it, as it is logically sound. Then Spock will retreat to his own chair to attempt to purge his mind from the thoughts of pleasuring Jim with his mouth while on the bridge, in front of the crew; of the Captain giving orders—attempting to give orders—his voice ruined, rising and falling with the sensations, writhing as Spock—

Spock takes a steadying breath. “I should like to request a leave of absence on the Vulcan colony. On our present course we may be able to divert to the Vulcan colony with a loss of but two point eight light days.”

“Two point eight…” Jim repeats. He looks surprised. “Are you rounding to the nearest tenth?”

Of course Jim does not comply with the script. He was foolish to assume the Captain would comply with anything.

“I apologize for my lack of exactitude,” Spock says stiffly.

“I was kidding.” Jim frowns, clearly worried now. “You’re looking kind of…. Are you okay? Is there anything I can do to help?”

Immediately, several exceedingly graphic images flash into Spock’s mind of exactly what the Captain can do to “help.” He grits his teeth and tightens the grip on his wrist behind his back. “No.”

“But—”

“I have made my request, Captain. All I require from you is that you answer it. Yes or no.”

The words are hardly out of his mouth when he realizes that he has crossed a line.

Jim’s expression flattens into what humans refer to as a ‘pokerface.’ Spock is more familiar with it as the Captain’s first line of emotional defense. “Why don’t we discuss it privately in your quarters, Mister Spock.”

Yes, says the animal. You should talk discuss it privately with him in your quarters. On your bed. Over your desk. And of course you would be remiss to not investigate whether the Captain is always so verbally demonstrative in the shower, even when involved in a different activity…

I will not engage the Captain in intercourse against his will, he tells himself fiercely. I will die before I allow him to be hurt again in that manner.

It would not be against his will; he has already told you he is willing, the animal points out. You have only to give him the word and he will do whatever you say.

Willing is not the same as wanting.
He does not have to want. You have three times his strength—you can use him however you see fit.

“I would prefer to speak here,” Spock grates out.

“Apparently you would prefer to not speak at all,” says Jim, looking at him sharply. “But as your commanding officer, I would like to discuss your request further. Do you have any objections?”

Spock falls silent, his mind filled with objections he is unwilling—unable—to state.

“Good,” says Jim, rising from his chair. “Sulu, you have the conn.”

---

“All right, Spock,” says Jim when they reach his quarters. “Let’s have it.” The door slides shut and they are alone.

Completely alone.

*Code of Surak 18:30*, Spock reminds himself forcefully. *Immorality is controlled by one’s lusts. Morality keeps one’s passions in check.*

“I apologize for my behavior,” he says, his voice and posture stiff. “Is that sufficient?”

“No, it is not sufficient,” the Captain replies. “But I’m more interested in your request for shore leave.”

*Surak 23:16*. *Sexual passion is a blazing fire; it may bring momentary warmth, but if left uncontrolled it will destroy all it touches.*

“You have my request, Captain. Will you grant it or not?”

“You’ve never asked for a vacation of any sort. In fact, you’ve refused it. Why now—?”

“Captain,” says Spock, and he will refer to Jim only by his title, refer to it over and over until he has reminded himself of the myriad reasons he cannot allow himself to give in to these feelings. “Surely I have enough leave time accumulated.”

“Of course, but that wasn’t the question, was it?” Jim sits back on the desk, the position pulling the fabric of his pants tight, as he surveys Spock. Studying his expression. Attempting to understand. “Is there some kind of problem in your personal life… Is there something wrong with your dad…?”

He is concerned. He is concerned for Spock’s welfare. If Jim had any conception of the fantasies invading his mind… “No. Nothing of that nature, Captain.”

“Then since we’re already headed for Altair VI, and the shore facilities there are great….”

“No! I must—” He manages to catch himself, to moderate himself to a more neutral tone. “I wish to take my leave on New Vulcan.”

Jim’s expression softens with compassion. He pushes off the desk and takes several steps forward, sending a thrill of anticipation and alarm through the Vulcan.

“Spock, I’m asking you as your friend,” the Captain says, his voice soft and gentle. “What’s wrong? We’ve always worked things out together—why can’t we do it now?”

The animal inside him purrs.
We could do it now, Spock thinks helplessly. That is what worries me.

“I need rest,” he says instead. “I ask that you accept that answer.”

Jim stares back at him, hurt and confused, eliciting a pang that shoots down into Spock’s core. No matter what he does, it seems, he will inevitably cause his captain pain.

At last, the Captain pulls out his communicator. “Bridge,” he says. “Helm.”

“Yes, Captain?” comes Lieutenant Sulu’s response.

Kirk’s gaze does not leave Spock once. “Alter course to New Vulcan. Increase speed to warp four.”

“Aye, sir,” says Sulu, and Jim ends the exchange.

“Thank you, Captain,” Spock murmurs.

“Of course,” says Jim, with a small smile. “I’ll be hearing the whole story later, right?”

Spock imagines confessing this… This need to not only have Jim but to defile him; to own him. He imagines Jim’s reaction. He swallows. “I do not think so, Captain.”

“Come on, I told you about…” He trails off, gesturing vaguely, and Spock knows he is referring to Kodos. The man Spock loathes with a hatred more potent than he had thought possible. The man with whom he now shares one sickening similarity. “This couldn’t possibly be worse than that, right?”

However, Jim’s logic is fallacious; admitting to having been abused, while painful, does not indicate any weakness or depravity on the Jim’s part. In fact, it proves quite the opposite, considering what he has overcome in order to be what and where he is today.

Spock’s confession, on the other hand—what he thinks, what he imagines, what he wants—is despicable. He is terrified that Jim will look at him with disgust.

He is terrified that he won’t.

“Well,” says Jim, slapping Spock on the arm as he passes, and the Vulcan has to close his eyes and tighten his grip, rigidify his posture (it will destroy all it touches, it will destroy all it touches, want him want him want him, it will destroy—), to keep himself from seeking out that contact once more, demanding it, taking rightful possession of it… “I’m going back to the conn. You can take your time. Come whenever you’re ready, all right?”

Spock does not respond, does not turn. Does not dare to.

But the moments pass and the door to his quarters do not close, and finally Spock turns…

…to the sight of Jim, paused in the doorway, looking back at him with an expression of equal parts contemplation and concern.

“I guess we humans tend to overlook the fact that even Vulcans aren’t indestructible,” he says quietly.

And then, finally, finally, the Captain exits, the door sliding shut behind him. Only then does Spock release his hold on himself.

“No,” he murmurs, looking at his shaking hand. “We are not.”
But even as Spock struggles against his own biology, his pon farr continues, and progresses, his dreams becoming only more vivid and more violent, eclipsing his waking hours as well, assailing his every moment, leaving him tormented, obsessed with the possessive, brutal (terrifying) fantasies of Jim helpless beneath him, of ravishing him until he can’t breathe, can’t object, of letting all who have dared encroach upon Spock’s property know that he is accounted for, letting all those who lay eyes upon him see him flushed and spent and thoroughly debauched.

And all the while Jim remains oblivious, each of his attempts to “assist” him pushing Spock’s control closer and closer to his limit.

The condition is worsened further by the fact that distraction is near-impossible; he cannot eat, he cannot sleep, he cannot meditate to any satisfactory degree; he can only survive, trapped between all-too-fleeting periods of lucidity and the increasingly overwhelming desire to bend Jim over any given horizontal surface and take him hard enough to annihilate every thought that is not Spock’s name.

Thankfully it is during one of his relatively lucid periods that Jim enters his quarters unannounced, interrupting his meditation. And his short-lived peace.

The animal has many ideas as to how punishment may be exacted for this offense.

“Hey,” says Jim softly. He is carrying a mess hall tray and smiling slightly, in a manner that is meant to be reassuring.

Spock is not reassured.

“Captain,” he says flatly, not moving from his place. “I see you have once again disregarded my requests to knock before entering.”

“Well, yeah,” Jim replies, as if this should be obvious. “Bones told me you haven’t eaten a thing in three days. What was I supposed to do, just let you starve?”

“I will thank you to cease your poking and prying,” Spock snaps. “If I want anything from you, I will ask for it.”

He immediately regrets his outburst when Jim’s face falls.

“Okay. I was just…worried about you.” The Captain places the tray down on the meditation mat in front of him. “I guess I tend to overreact when people don’t eat.”

The comment sends a shock of realization through him, followed by helplessnesshorror, followed by…

His eyes narrow. “You are attempting to manipulate me.”

Jim does not react right away, apart from the gleam of definite amusement that enters his eyes. “You know me too well - it’s kind of scary.” Still, he nudges the tray forward. Spock notices that he has taken care to bring him only vegetarian nourishment: pasta with tomato sauce, a small house salad, and a mound of what the human crewmembers refer to as ‘mini-cucumbers’ (the phrase seems to be most often employed in the context of extol the various qualities of ‘cuteness’ in the vegetable). “But in all seriousness, you really should eat something.”

“I am not hungry, Captain.” Not for what is on those plates, at least.
Jim frowns and sits on the bed, across from the meditation mat.

Spock closes his eyes again and breathes out very, very slowly. *Control. I am in control.*

“Fine. But I’m not letting perfectly good food go to waste.”

Spock senses the Captain reaching down and taking something from the plate. Against his own will he opens his eyes to the sight of Jim on his bed, eating one of the mini-cucumbers.

Or, more accurately, attempting to swallow it whole. His lips are parted, the green shaft disappearing into his mouth, and—

“Remove yourself from my quarters,” Spock chokes out.

Jim pulls out the offending vegetable with a small *pop* (Spock tightens his hands into fists), looking confused. “What—”

“I will eat what you have brought me,” he manages, “but only if you remove yourself from my quarters immediately.”

The Captain’s eyebrows furrow, and he seems to be on the verge of objection, but after a moment he changes his mind and rises to his feet instead, and exits the room. Spock does not watch him go.

“Just…let me know if there’s anything I can do, okay?” Jim asks. His voice is…is *sad*.

Spock does not reply.

The door closes behind the Captain, and Spock hurls the tray across the room.

---

“To Captain, USS Enterprise from Starfleet Sector Nine,” says Uhura. “Priority and urgent, sir.”

“Put it on audio over here, Lieutenant,” Jim replies.

“Message complete, sir. Switching over.”

“To Captain, USS Enterprise from Starfleet Sector Nine,” the computerized voice of the Starfleet Priority Orders announces. “*Inauguration ceremonies, Altair VI, have been advanced seven solar days. You are ordered to alter your flight plan to accommodate, by order of Komack, Admiral, Starfleet Command. Acknowledge.*”

Jim frowns. They’ve pushed the President’s inauguration forward a whole week? That doesn’t give them a lot of time…

“Lieutenant Uhura, acknowledge that message,” he mutters distractedly.

“Yes, sir.”

“Mister Chekov, compute course and speed necessary for compliance, including our stop at New Vulcan.”

Chekov punches in the coordinates, then turns back to Jim. “We will have to head directly to Altair VI at warp six, Keptin. There is insufficient time to stop off at New Vulcan.”

Jim taps out an agitated rhythm on the armrest of his chair, trying to think of some way to accomplish
both. But Chekov's navigation skills are second to none—if he can't find a way to do it…

“I guess we have no choice,” he sighs. “Head directly for Altair VI, Mister Chekov. Mister Sulu.”

“Yes, sir,” they reply in unison.

“Sorry about this, Spock.” Jim turns to his First Officer who, strangely, has not turned around. In fact, he seems to be almost adamantly looking in the opposite direction. “Murphy’s Law strikes again.”

Spock doesn’t reply. Doesn’t move. It’s kind of eerie, actually.

“Don’t worry,” Jim adds, feeling unaccountably nervous from the lack of response. “I’ll make sure you get your leave as soon as we’re finished. All right?”

“I quite understand, Captain,” says Spock.

---

Jim wishes he could say that he’s currently lying awake at night, staring at the ceiling, thinking about Spock because of his First Officer’s weird behavior, but the truth is, he’s been doing this for months. Only now he has an actual question to mull over, an actual problem to solve, rather than just spending his nights replaying their workout in the gym earlier in vivid, porno-worthy detail.

Ahem. Anyway.

This is what he knows:

1) Spock has been acting weird. ( Weird how?) Weird like…angry? Tense? Impatient? All of the above?

2) Spock’s anger/tension/impatience— (Weirdness.) — weirdness, has been going on since just after Kodos’s trial, as far as Jim can tell (Correlation? Causation? Hell if Jim knows), though honestly if it had been going on before that, he would have been too out of it to notice.

3) He won’t talk to Jim about it. (Won’t?) Seems to feel like he can’t talk to Jim about it.

But why? What could Spock possibly be hiding that he thinks he can’t share with him?

(“Come on, I told you about…” Jim hadn’t been able to say Kodos’s name, but from Spock’s expression he knew he had been understood. “This couldn’t possibly be worse than that, right?”

Spock hadn’t replied.)

What did that mean? Is it possible that this secret—this thing consuming his First Officer—could be worse than Jim’s secret about Kodos?

He’s never known Spock to exaggerate.

And if Spock isn’t exaggerating… Then…

He rubs his forehead and reaches for the com on his bedside table, flipping it open. “Bridge.

Navigation.”

“Mister Chekov, how late will we arrive for the Altair VI inauguration ceremonies if we increase speed to maximum and divert to New Vulcan just long enough to drop off Mister Spock?”

There’s a pause. Then, “I do not understand, Keptin.”

Jim frowns. It’s not like Chekov to be slow on the uptake. Then again, everyone has their off days, and it is ungodly-o’clock. “How far behind schedule will diverting to New Vulcan put us?”

“We are already on course for New Wulcan, Keptin. Commander Spock relayed your order to do so about five hours ago.”

He stares at the com, baffled. He never gave an order to—

…Oh.

Five hours ago, but that means… That means Spock must have redirected them back to New Vulcan almost immediately after Jim left the bridge.

Spock’s mutiny rises in Jim’s throat, burns through his tongue, up into the roof of his mouth, sharp and hot with betrayal and…. and something else. Something that asked desperately what Jim did wrong, how he could make it better.

Spock could have at least talked to him about it.

“Thank you, Mr. Chekov,” he mutters. “Kirk out.”

He closes the com and falls back into bed, angry and confused and wanting to help Spock but not knowing how, and hurt…

It all comes back to the same question: what could possibly be so bad that Spock doesn’t think he can talk to Jim about it? The only thing he can think of that would be worse than being a victim of Kodos is… well. Being Kodos.

(“This couldn’t possibly be worse than that, right?”

Spock hadn’t replied.)

He doesn’t sleep very well that night.

---

The next day, Kirk arrives early to alpha shift—if Hikaru had to guess he’d say the Captain hadn’t gotten any sleep that night at all—and immediately orders them to plot their course to Altair, lock it in to warp six, Mister Sulu, no I do not want to discuss it with Mister Spock, no, seriously, don’t make me throw things at you.

“It’s like the Captain and the Commander got divorced, and now they have joint custody of the Enterprise,” Sulu mutters, low enough so Kirk won’t hear him. “First we’re going to New Vulcan, then we’re going to Altair, then we’re headed to New Vulcan again, and now we’re headed back to Altair.”

“I think I’m going to be space sick,” says Pavel dolefully.

---

“Mister Spock,” the Captain says, rising, when Spock enters the bridge. “Come with me, please.”
And Jim cannot know that Spock has not slept in four days. He cannot know that he has not eaten. He is unaware that his First Officer is more animal than either man or Vulcan, dazed and hungry and near-mad with want. And yet…

*Alone, Spock thinks. He wishes to speak to me alone.*

*I am duty-bound to agree, am I not?*

Wordlessly he follows his Captain to the little hallway behind the transporter room, where they can not be seen. Or heard.

“You changed our course for New Vulcan, Spock,” says Jim, turning to him. He notes the weariness in his Captain’s face with a strange sort of pleasure, as a predator would observe weakness in his prey. “More than that, you went behind my back. And I want to know why.”

“Changed our course?” Spock repeats, distracted by the way the light glints off the Captain’s hair. He would rather like to touch it. Or pull it, perhaps. Jim makes such beautiful noises when he is in pain…

“Do you deny it?”

“No,” Spock murmurs, still transfixed. “No, by no means, Captain. It is quite possible.”

Jim frowns. “Then why’d you do it?”

“Captain, I accept on your word that I did it, but I do not know why, nor do I remember doing it.”

“What do you mean you don’t *remember*?”

“I mean just that,” he says, tightening his grip behind his back. “Please do not ask me further. I cannot…”

“I’m trying to help you, Spock,” says Jim, in that damnably concerned voice. He tries to take a step closer, but Spock steps away from him in the same moment.

“*Stay back,*” he snaps.

“Spock… What’s going on?”

“Ask me no further questions. I will not answer.”

He sees irritation flash across the Captain’s face, and feels the most powerful, illogical urge to fan that spark into full-on fury. To coax out that cold, emotionless Kirk with the smile that does not reach his eyes; the sort of leader people would kill and die for, as impassive and as dangerous and as magnificent as the stars.

“Well, I’m not leaving you alone like this,” Jim is saying indignantly.

“I instructed you,” Spock grates out, “to stay *back.*” And then his fist is lashing out at Jim, trying to keep him from approaching, and Jim reacts instinctively, brings his arms up to defend himself even as his eyes widen in surprise. And somewhere between blows the line between offense and defense begin to fade and what was once a warning has become a sparring match, Spock launching blow after blow and Jim parrying each one.

Even as they fight, Spock does feel some satisfaction at how far his human has come. He had known since the first day they had met, when Spock had sincerely wanted to kill him, that the cadet
possessed excellent instincts, as well as remarkable agility for a human. Now after months of training together his skill has been refined that much further; as Jim matches him blow for blow despite the clear confusion and alarm in his expression. Spock is pleased.

However, the animal is impatient.

_Enough foreplay_, he thinks, and kicks Jim’s feet out from under him.

The Captain drops with a startled noise, and then Spock is on him, entwining their fingers, pinning them to the floor and forcing himself between Jim’s legs. His eyes widen in surprise, but still there is no comprehension. It seems he will require a more human claiming.

“Spock, what the ff...mmphh?”

And then Spock is forcing his tongue between lips parted in protest, kissing him, claiming him, tasting, taking, exploring this mouth that has incited revolution, that has stopped war and recited poetry and talked his way out of multiple arrests using only his own intelligence and sheer force of charisma.

_Mine_, he thinks ferociously, gripping the fingers between his tighter, too tight, drawing out a whimper from Kirk that might be pleasure or pain; he is beyond caring which. _This is mine and no one else may have it_. _Not Doctor McCoy, not anonymous aliens or foreign diplomats, not even the meddling alternate version of myself; he is my t’hy’la, he is mine, mine, mine_, and he is dizzy with Jim’s scent, intoxicated, engulfed in the heat of it, in the heat of the opportunity to sate himself on this body, this body that he has wanted since the moment that charming, infuriating, intriguing cadet walked in to the Kobayashi Maru.

And finally Jim is here, trapped underneath him, and he could take it now, here, take this body, this mind, this person that should by rights belong to _him_, that has been given to so many who don’t understand it, who don’t deserve it. This body that—

…This body that has been violated too many times before.

The thought sends ice through his veins, allowing him to push off from Jim’s hands. But he is still unable to stop entirely.

The gasp Jim makes when Spock bites down hard on his neck does not help.

He is vaguely aware of the Captain attempting to ask him something, but the words seems fuzzy and distant and unimportant. “Spock, what…? Whaa-a-ahhh, yeah, right there... _ah_—”

And then the Captain’s uniform shirts are ripping off in his hands and he has thrown the scraps away somewhere behind him, his mouth on Jim’s clavicle, trailing lower, and he is—

“Captain,” he manages, in the sparse moments when his body requires oxygen. “You have to say no. You must tell me to stop.”

At some point Jim’s hands have fisted in the front of Spock’s uniform—whether to push away or pull closer, it is impossible to tell. “What? But I…”

“Captain, I… need you… to tell me… to _stop_.”

Jim’s breath hitches.

“Stop,” he says weakly.
This skin is mine, these muscles, these joints, this pulse, minemineminemine...

“Spock, stop,” says Jim, and this time his voice is slightly stronger. “I don’t—I… No.”

It is that no that finally gives him the strength to gather every bit of his shattered self-control, to push away and let Jim sit up, unsteady, to lean back on his hands, both of them breathing hard and undeniably aroused.

And Jim’s legs are spread, his chest bare, his neck marked from the imprint of Spock’s mouth, his hair in chaos from Spock’s fingers, his lips wet and swollen, eyes wide and impossibly blue, and in that moment Spock wants him more than anything else, more than life, more than reason. And in that moment he feels his control snap, and he is reaching forward, mindlessly seeking, wanting, and Jim is here, he is here and the rest does not matter.

“What - the actual hell - are you doing?”

Spock recognizes Doctor McCoy’s voice without turning around.

Kill him, says the animal. He has come between you and what is yours for the last time.

“Bones,” says Jim slowly, “I think… I think there’s something wrong with Spock. Really wrong.”

Spock takes a deep, shuddering breath and turns. It is Doctor McCoy, of course, and he is staring at him.

Are you certain of that? Are you certain he is not staring at your t’hy’la? With Jim in this state, the doctor can hardly be blamed for—

Suddenly Spock realizes that something—someone—is growling, and it is coming from his own throat.

Doctor McCoy continues staring.

Spock swallows, attempting to breathe. Attempting to remember himself. Remember all the reasons he cannot…

“Doctor,” he gasps. “Lock me away. I do not wish to be seen. I cannot…”

“Yes,” says McCoy quietly. His voice - as well as the hands now pulling him off the floor, off the Captain - are strangely gentle. “I think that might be a good idea.”

“What?” says Jim.

The doctor braces Spock’s shoulder when he is fully upright, half support, half restraint. “Are your quarters okay, or do you need to—”

“The brig. It must be the brig.”

McCoy’s mouth flattens into a line. “Doctor M’Benga told me about this. But I didn’t think it was so far along…”

“What?” says Jim again. He sounds horribly confused. “What’s so far along?”

“M’Benga informed you of my condition?” Spock asks, feeling a flash of irrational irritation. “My right to confidentiality—”
“…Ends where the safety of your fellow crewmembers begins. He was right to tell me.”

“What’s going on?” Jim demands, getting to his feet. He still looks like an image out of one of Spock’s more recent dreams, and Spock must… He must…

“I must go,” he tells McCoy. “Now.”

“All right, we’re goin’…”

They turn, the doctor’s arm still behind his back.

“Wh—” Jim starts again, but McCoy cuts him off.

“You should probably go back to your quarters,” he calls over his shoulder, “an’ get another uniform shirt. Or take a shower. Or…something.”

“But—”

“He’ll be fine, Jim!”

That, oddly, puts an end to the Captain’s arguments, and he and McCoy walk the rest of the way to the brig in silence.

---

“What happened to Spock?” Jim demands, rushing into the medbay as soon as Bones gets back. “What’s going on?”

“Jim,” says Bones urgently, “you've got to get Spock to New Vulcan.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Bones, I will! As soon as we finish this mission! But in the meantime you have to tell me what—”

“No, it needs to be now! Right away! If we don't get him to New Vulcan within a week—eight days at the outside—he’ll die.” He grabs Jim’s arm as if trying to shake the urgency of the situation into him. “He’ll die, Jim.”

Jim’s heart stutters in his chest, then slams into a frantic rhythm. “He’s… dying?” He breathes, breathes, breathes, tries to stave off the dizziness, the panic breaking the surface. “A week—we only have a week? Why?”

Bones looks aside, his mouth flattening. “I can’t tell you.”

“He’s going to die!” Jim shouts. “I have to do something!”

“That’s what he’s worried about,” McCoy mutters.

“What?”

“Look, you can yell at me from here to Kingdom Come, but Spock still has his right to doctor-patient confidentiality. All I can tell you is that if it isn't stopped somehow, the physical and emotional pressures will simply kill him, probably within the week. More than that isn’t my secret to tell. And it’s… Well, it’s a big secret. Even I didn’t know what it was until Dr. M’Benga told me, and I have a doctorate in xenobiology!”

Jim frowns. “And Spock…does he know what it is?”
“He does, and good luck getting it out of him—he's as tightlipped about it as an Aldebaran Shellmouth.”

“Well,” says Jim grimly, turning to go. “I’ve always been up for a challenge.”

He’s nearly to the door when Bones calls, “Jim…”

He turns.

“I said I’d tell you about the… the holding hands bit.” Bones rubs his jaw, scowling in that way he does when he’s uncomfortable, and angry that he has to feel uncomfortable. “Hands are an erogenous zone for Vulcans. They, ah… they kiss with their fingers.”

“With their… You mean when I…” Jim can’t stop the mortified blush that slams onto his face.

God. He’s been unknowingly making out with his First Officer for months! Why didn’t Spock ever…

That thought trails off, segues into his memories, memories of all the times they’d brushed fingers. Including the times it hadn’t been Jim’s idea at all. The great many times it hadn’t been Jim’s idea at all, actually…

“Bones,” he says at last. “I’m an idiot.”

“You’re both idiots,” says the doctor crossly. “You deserve each other.”

Jim grins. “Does that mean Spock has your approval?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Bones grumbles, and shoos him out of medbay.

---

The sight of Spock, perfectly straight and composed as always behind the reinforced glass isn’t just strange—it grates on Jim, rankles something deep and instinctive inside him. Spock shouldn’t be locked up in the brig like a criminal, is the last person who should be in there. And Jim is going to get him out.

“Captain,” says Spock when he stops in front of him, closer to a death threat than a greeting.

“Commander,” says Jim. “Bones has given me his medical evaluation of your condition.”

Spock looks at him sharply. “He has told you—”

“All he’s said that is that you’re going to die unless something is done. What’s going on, Spock? Why do you have to get back to New Vulcan? Please, I want to—”

Spock turns away from the glass. “You are emotionally compromised by my peril. It is best if we do not converse.”

Jim grits his teeth. “Logically, you’re the best first officer in the fleet. That’s an enormous asset to me. If I have to lose that first officer, I want to know why.”

“It is a thing no out-worlder may know except those very few who have been involved,” says Spock reluctantly. “Even Vulcans do not speak of it among themselves. It is a deeply personal thing. Can you see that, Captain, and understand?”
“No, I don’t understand! You’re dying, Spock, and I want an explanation! Consider that an order.”

“Captain, there are some things which transcend even the discipline of the service.”

_Oh._ Right. He can say no. He _has_ to be able to say no, even to orders. At least with sex and with secrets.

“I guess,” Jim sighs, miserable, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s…it’s not because you don’t think I can keep a secret, right?”

“No,” says Spock shortly, still turned away.

He blows out a hard breath. “Okay,” he mutters again. “I guess I can’t…force you to…”

The Vulcan doesn’t reply.

Jim turns to go. “But, for what it’s worth,” he says quietly, knowing Spock will hear him, “I never once regretted telling you. You saved my life, and I just…wish I could do the same for you.”

He’s taken four steps toward the door when Spock’s voice stops him.

“It has to do with…” The rest is an unintelligible mumble.

“What?” says Jim, turning back around.

There’s a pause.

“Biology,” says Spock.

“What kind of…biology?”

_Vulcan_ biology,” Spock grits out.

“You mean…the biology of, uh. Vulcans?”

The back of Spock’s head nods.

“Biology as in reproduction?”

He nods again.

There is a long, incredibly awkward pause.

“Please tell me you’re not going through Vulcan puberty,” says Jim. “Because I am not giving you the sex talk. First of all, I’d suck at it, and also… Well, really I’d just suck at it.”

“How do Vulcans choose their mates?” Spock asks. “Haven’t you wondered?”

“Um,” says Jim, blinking at the non sequitur. “Logically?”

“No,” says Spock. “No, we do not. This time strips us of our morality, our logic, until we are nothing but mindless beasts. It brings a madness which rips away our veneer of civilization. It is the _pon farr_. The time of mating.”

“Mating? So…you need to get laid.” Jim frowns. “You’re literally dying of blue balls?”

The Vulcan doesn’t bother to correct Jim’s embarrassingly human translation. “There are precedents
in nature. The giant eelbirds of Regulus Five, once each eleven years they must return to the caverns where they hatched. On your Earth, the salmon. They must return to that one stream where they were born, to spawn or die in trying. I'd hoped I would be spared this, but the ancient drives are too strong.” He still won’t look at Jim. “Eventually, these drives must catch up with us, and we are driven by forces we cannot control—plak tow, the blood fever—it compels every Vulcan to take their bondmate. Or die.”

“Bondmate, huh… You mean that girl you’re betrothed to? Tee-pee or something?”


“Then you kissing me,” says Jim slowly. “Was that just a fluke, or does your body think that I’m your bondmate?”

Spock stiffens. “The incident behind the transporter room—”

“And the dozens of times before that,” says Jim. “Spock, Bones explained the finger-kissing thing… And, I mean, if you—”

“No.”

“But if I could—”

“No.” The Vulcan whirls back around, his teeth bared, and the ferocity in his voice actually makes Jim take a step away from the glass, before he can catch himself.

“Hear me out! I know I’m not your bondmate, but maybe the plak—the blood fever will be satisfied with me.”

Spock does not answer.

He licks his lips, unaccountably nervous. Spock’s eyes follow the motion. “I mean—it won’t make us bonded or anything, right? It could be whatever you want it to be—or, whatever your body wants it to be—and then we can carry on like normal. It doesn’t have to change anything. And if it’ll save your life…”

Spock still doesn’t answer.

Jim swallows. “Look, I know…” He stops, takes a breath. “I know I’m a mess, but I can do this. Please. I’ll behave, I promise, I’ll do whatever you want—”

“I,” says Spock through gritted teeth. Jim can’t tell who he’s talking to. “Will not. Take advantage. Of you. I will not use you. I will not be Kodos—”

“You aren’t Kodos! That was totally different! I… Spock, I love you.”

It’s probably the absolute worst time for those words to come tumbling out of his mouth, but there they are, and once he’s spoken them Jim can’t bring himself to regret them. Not when Spock is dying and he could save him if he just…

A shudder runs through Spock’s body. His eyes close as if in pain, his hands curling into fists.

“I love you,” Jim says again, reveling in the way it sends sparks through his body, the way it sounds right. “Not the way I love Sam or Gaila or even Bones. I’ve never loved someone the way I love you, and I never will again, I—”
“It does not matter,” says Spock, and

And it doesn’t even hurt; it’s just a cold weight in his stomach, a numbness in his chest. The words are strange and heavy on his tongue - “It…doesn’t…matter?”

“It does not matter because I cannot believe you.”

And that… that hurts. Cuts fire-hot pain through the numbness, into his core. “You don’t trust me?”

“I do trust you,” says Spock. “Unequivocally. That is why I know you would do anything in your power to save me.”

Jim stops, taken aback. “What do you…?”

“Jim,” says Spock, then corrects himself. “Captain. Over our months of service together I have learned that you are akin to the Earth-native chameleon. You fill whatever need is required of you in any given situation. You seem to fit yourself to these expectations unconsciously, often without truly intending it. That is what makes your persuasion so powerful—and so dangerous. You believe your own lie.”

“So, what,” Jim demands. “You think I’ve suddenly decided I’m in love with you because the situation calls for me to spread my legs?”

“That is precisely what I think. You told me yourself that you do not act. You become. You believed for eleven years that you wanted…” His voice cuts out, but Jim understands.

“Okay, yeah, but I’m not making it up this time! I really am—”

Spock’s eyes close. “I believe that you believe that you are in love with me. But it does not matter. You are simply doing what is necessary, as you have always done. You feel as though you have no choice; it is not saying yes if you cannot say no.”

“I have a choice!” Jim insists. “This is my choice!”

“For you, allowing me to die is not a viable option,” says Spock quietly. “There is only alternative available, and so you have decided that you want it. You do not truly know what you want.”

“Does anyone really know what they want?”

“Yes,” says Spock, and Jim shivers at the intensity in his voice, in the eyes staring at him, raking down his body. “I know exactly what I want.”

“Then take it for God’s sake!” Jim yells, pounding a fist on the glass between them. “You have my full consent, okay? I’m not saying no!”

“You cannot say no,” Spock bites out. “It is not the same thing. The absence of refusal is not consent!”

Jim cracks a humorless smile. “Well those are some pretty strict morals you’ve got there, but—”

“They are not strict,” Spock snarls, his fingers curling like claws against the glass. “They are fundamental. And the fact that you were trained to believe that your own feelings, your own consent does not matter, drives me to—to desire—to need to destroy any that may hurt you. Any that may look at you. These—emotions, they will drive me to madness, if I succumb to them.” He draws in a deep, unsteady breath. “I am not…accustomed to such… protectiveness.”
Jim’s throat is suddenly very dry; his eyes sting. “Well, it’s the same for me! I won’t—I can’t let you
die.” He looks at Spock, tries to smile. “It’ll be okay. I trust you. Unequivocally.”

“I know,” says Spock, quiet. Sincere. Like Cave Spock had been when they’d first met. “And if I
have to die to preserve that trust, I will consider it an honorable death.”

The resignation in his voice hits him like a slap to the face, knocks the wind out of him—

“No,” Jim snaps. “Don’t you DARE, Spock. Don’t you dare be noble and dead! I’ve had enough
people who cared enough about me to die…Care enough about me to live.”

“Jim…”

“I’ve had rough sex before, okay? No matter what the blood fever makes you do to me, I can take it!
I’ve had worse!”

Spock looks at him. “That is precisely why I cannot allow you to do this.”

“Well, I can’t allow you to die!” Jim makes his hand into the Vulcan salute, presses it against the
glass, desperate. “I need you to live long and prosper, dammit! I can’t lose you. I can’t.”

After a long moment, Spock presses his own hand back, his own wish.

Jim looks up into Spock’s eyes.

“I promise,” the Vulcan whispers, “I will do everything in my power to live. I predict a 87.3%
chance of survival, if I can return to New Vulcan within the week. I will require a vidcom and a
monitor.”

“Okay,” Jim breathes, the relief coursing through him. “Okay. You can count on me. We’ll get you
to New Vulcan somehow.”

---

“Lieutenant Uhura,” Sulu hears the Captain’s voice call, through the bridge com. “Patch me through
to the admiral who gave us the Altair VI orders, please.”

“That would be Admiral Komack at Starfleet Command, Sector Nine,” says Uhura. “Patching you
through now.”

Pavel turns to him. “Hikaru, you don't think…”

“Maybe you ought to plot a course back for New Vulcan,” says Sulu. “Just in case.”

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“Captain,” says Admiral Komack from the viewscreen in Bones’s office. The look on his face is so
patronizing Jim is already biting the inside of his mouth to keep from saying anything stupid and the
conversation hasn’t even really started yet. “You are making a most unusual request.”

“I’m aware of that, sir,” says Jim. “But it’s of the utmost importance. You must give me permission to
divert to New Vulcan.”

“But you refuse to explain why it is so important!”

“I can't, sir, but believe me, I wouldn't make such a request—”
“Altair VI is no ordinary matter,” the admiral interrupts. “That area is just putting itself together after a long interplanetary conflict. This inauguration will stabilize the entire Altair system….”

All Jim is hearing is *blah blah blah*. He looks over the viewscreen to Bones, who rolls his eyes back.

“Our appearance there,” Komack is saying, “is a demonstration of friendship and strength which will cause ripples clear to the Klingon Empire.”

“Sir, the delay would be, at most, a day. I find it hard to believe that—”

“Captain, I am aware that you have enjoyed certain leniencies under Pike’s command. But when it comes to *my* missions you will go by *my* rules. You will proceed to Altair Six as ordered. You have your orders. Starfleet out.”

The monitor goes dead.

“As Jesus once said,” Bones mutters. “Screw him.”

Jim runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know who Komack is trying to kid. I *know* the Altair situation—we would be one of three starships. Very impressive and diplomatic and all, but as far as ripple-causing demonstrations of friendship and strength go, we’re just not that vital.”

“Yeah, but you can’t just go off to New Vulcan against Starfleet orders. You’ll be busted before you can say Jack Robinson!”

He’s right, of course. Jim only got out of his last uncalled-for detour because Starfleet was too busy with the Kodos trial to write him up for it. But another one—especially one that would mean missing a big diplomatic ceremony, and now going against direct orders as well—would almost certainly cost him his career. He would never again captain the Enterprise. His home. His *life*.

But Spock….

Jim takes a long, slow breath. “I can't let Spock die,” he says.

Bones stares at him for a while.

“No,” he agrees at last, with his own, Bones-y brand of affectionate chagrin. “You can’t.”


“Mister Chekov, lay in a course for New Vulcan. Tell Engineering I want warp eight or better. Push her for all she’ll take.”

“Course already plotted, Keptin,” says Chekov. “Laying it in.”

“I see.” Jim can’t help but smile. He really does have the best crew. “Very well. Carry on, Mister Chekov. Kirk out.”

---

“You could have just called me,” says Jim mildly, when he comes to a stop in front of Spock, behind the glass. He’s been in here for almost twenty-four hours now, and it still doesn’t sit well. “You do have that com, and it would’ve been a lot easier than telling Ensign Roberts to tell Lieutenant Dereen
“Unfortunately I do not, in fact, have that com,” says Spock, and Jim’s gaze falls upon the vidcom and monitor, both of which have been pummeled into a heap of scrap metal and wires. He raises his eyebrows. Spock’s expression is carefully blank.

“It is best if you do not…linger,” he says, stiff and formal. “I merely wished to inform you that you need not reroute the Enterprise to New Vulcan. You may proceed to Altair VI as ordered.”

“What are you talking about?” Jim demands. “You said New Vulcan was your only chance to survive!”

“Yes, it was my only chance. A chance is not a certainty.”

“So, what, you’re just gonna roll over and die?” Jim says incredulously.

“Yes,” Spock replies, like that’s an answer. “There are some things worse than death; some things worth avoiding more than death.”

“No there aren’t,” Jim growls. “Everything is fixable except for death!”

“I promised to do everything in my power to survive, and I have done exactly that.”

Jim glares. “And what, exactly, is that?”

“Although my circumstances are somewhat…unusual in that my body responds to someone other than my betrothed, I hoped that the pon farr could be satisfied in the classical method. I contacted T’Pring. She refused. There is nothing more to be done.”

“What do you mean she refused?” Jim cries. “She can’t just—”

“Yes,” says Spock, “she can.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“I did not ask. Her reason is irrelevant.”

“But she already said yes!” says Jim furiously. “That’s what the betrothal thing is for!”

“She said yes twenty-one years ago,” says Spock. “She was seven years old.”

“Yeah, but,” Jim blusters, “but you’re going to die if she doesn’t, she can’t just say no! I mean, Jesus, it’s just sex!”

Spock is quiet behind the glass. Somehow it reminds Jim of the ominous silence just before a thunderstorm.

“I’m making it worse, aren’t I?”

“Affirmative,” says Spock tersely.

“Right,” says Jim. “I’m gonna stop doing the thing.” He glances at Spock hopefully. “I guess you’re still not willing to let me—”

“No.”
“But—”

“No.”

“Aaaghh,” Jim groans, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. “That cow.”

“It is her right. She is entitled to say no.”

“Yeah, but she said she would—” Jim starts, and a fist slams into the glass right next to his head, making him yell and stagger back in shock.

“I cannot listen to this,” Spock grates out, and storms off to the other end of the brig.

“That glass is supposed to be indestructible…” Jim mutters, staring at the constellation of cracks where Spock’s fist hit.

---

Still, Spock’s blood fever must really be messing with his head if he actually thought that Jim would just leave it at that.

“Ambassador,” he says, when the Vulcan appears in his viewscreen.

“Captain,” says Ambassador Sarek.

“The matter I’m calling about is extremely urgent, so I’ll get straight to the point. Spock intends to die rather than satisfy his pon farr.”

He sees the surprise on the Ambassador’s face—whether from Spock’s decision or Jim’s knowledge—even though his expression doesn’t change.

“Elaborate,” is all he says, and Jim promptly launches into a (brief and highly edited) explanation of the events of the last few days.

“Can’t you talk some sense into him?” he asks when he finishes.

“Negative,” says Sarek.

Jim’s heart drops. “But why not? You can’t possibly think he’s doing the right thing…”

“My opinion is irrelevant. As Spock has passed the age of majority, his decisions are his own to make.”

“But he’s going to die!” says Jim incredulously. “He’s your son! You can’t just let him…”

“Captain,” Sarek interrupts. “He would not heed my advice anyway. Once Spock has made up his mind it is near-impossible to change it; so it has been since he was a child. He has never submitted himself completely to the dictates of logic.”

Jim bristles. “In only six months of service at Starfleet, Spock has done more for Vulcan society than all of your ‘completely logical’ scientists—”

Sarek looks at him. “I did not intend that as an insult.”

Oh. Jim feels his face heat up.
“It is simply a fact. If Spock has made his decision, logical arguments will not sway him.” He pauses.
“T’Pring, however… She may be more receptive. I can provide you with her vidcom address.”

“Really?” says Jim, as hope flares once more in his chest. “But…isn’t that kind of against the rules?”

“The rules are important,” says Sarek. “But they are not my son.”

---

In classic Vulcan form, T’Pring answers almost immediately.

“Captain Kirk,” she says, when her face appears on the viewscreen, and Christ, either every Vulcan is drop-dead gorgeous or he’s developing a type.

It’s probably a little bit of both.

“You recognize me,” he says, surprised.

“Oh of course. I and the remainders of my species owe our existence to your actions and those of your colleagues. I am eternally grateful to thee.”

She sure doesn’t sound eternally grateful. She could be reading off an ingredients panel for all the emotion in his voice.

“Thank you, I guess,” says Jim. “But if I may ask, doesn’t that make you eternally grateful to Spock as well?”

“Affirmative.”

“And yet you refused to help him. You’re just going to let him die.”

“Affirmative.”

“But why?” Jim demands. “If it’s because of his mom…”

“Negative,” she replies. “The scarcity of the current Vulcan population renders such genetic exclusiveness illogical.”

Jim frowns. Was that xenophobia? It sounded like xenophobia. Maybe he’s kind of deadset on hating this chick, but that sounded a lot like xenophobia to him. “Then why? I see no logic in rejecting Spock.”

T’Pring looks at him. It is the same I-will-humor-you-if-I-must-human look that Spock gets sometimes. “My logic is twofold. Firstly, as I have stated, Spock—like yourself—has become much known and much venerated among our people. Almost a legend. As Spock’s fame grew, I came to know that I did not want to be known only as the wife of a legend. Secondly, there is Stonn, who wants very much to be my husband, as I want him. I was willing to undergo the kal-if-fee, the challenge, rather than be forced into a marriage which I do not desire. It is a fight to the death between a champion for the male and a champion for the female. The winner earns ownership of the woman.”

Jim thinks about that. “So this Stonn… You would’ve had him be your champion?”

“Of course not,” says T’Pring, her voice haughty. “I would have been my champion. It is right that I either own myself or die. I am no one’s property; not even my beloved’s.”
Even angry and worried sick for Spock, Jim has to admit that T’Pring is kind of awesome. Not to mention brilliant, and frankly stunning. If he is honest with himself (which he rarely is, because it tends to lead to icky stuff like pain and self-awareness), there is a small, horrible part of him that’s happy that Spock doesn’t want to marry her, because they’d probably be the most amazing, most terrifying power couple in existence.

“I considered it logical that Spock know of my decision before his arrival,” T’Pring continues. “Upon learning that the only new options available on New Vulcan would be to kill or be killed, he decided that he preferred honorable death, on his own terms. I respect that wish.”

“Well I don’t!” Jim shouts. “What’s wrong with you? How can you cause someone else’s death so coldheartedly? So maybe Stonn is The One for you, and that’s great, but are you really willing to build your own happiness on Spock’s blood?”

The Vulcan tilts her head. “You are curiously logical for a human. You do not believe my happiness or consent to be a factor?”

Guilt spikes through him at her dispassionate question. “No! No, that’s not it, obviously your consent is really important, I just… I…” He huffs out a hard breath. “God. I don’t know how to do this. I wish I could just…”

“There is nothing you can do,” says T’Pring. The words would be comforting if not for the matter-of-fact, almost bored, voice she says them in. “Pon farr can be quenched only with a bondmate. He will not desire any other.”

“But he does want me!” says Jim, knowing he must seem half-mad and unforgivably illogical to a Vulcan, but he doesn’t care. “Or at least his body does. And I want to help, but Spock won’t let me!”

This seems to take T’Pring by surprise (he’s gotten really good at reading Emotionally Constipated Vulcan), but she doesn’t say anything, and Jim continues, “And now he won’t even fight you on it, he’s just -gonna let himself die, because of me—because he thinks this is somehow comparable to…”

He drags a hand through his hair and closes his eyes, frustrated and on the razor-edge of hopelessness.

“Look,” he says at last. “I don’t… I don’t understand how this whole consent thing works. I don’t know what’s okay and what’s not, and I’m probably getting it all wrong right now, but I need— Spock needs to live. I need you to help him.” He looks at her, desperate. “You’re allowed to say no, and I can’t make you change your mind, but I’m allowed to ask, aren’t I?” Jim swallows. “Right?”

T’Pring doesn’t respond. He doesn’t know what to make of that.

“Just… please,” he begs. “Please. I’ll do anything, just—”

“Very well,” says T’Pring.

Jim stares.

She looks unimpressed. “What of my statement prompts you to enlarge your eyes in my direction, human?”

“I just… You just… Huh?” Jim manages, articulate as always.

“I have given my agreement,” she says, like it doesn’t really matter to her either way. “I will marry
“Really?” And there are too many emotions, too much swelling up inside him to identify any one. “What’s the catch?” he asks automatically, then shakes his head. “No, I don’t even care. We’ll be there in a couple of days… Thank you.”

“You are a strange human,” says T’Pring, and ends the call, just like that.

And Jim is left staring at a blank viewscreen and wondering what the hell he’s just gotten himself into.

---

“She changed her mind,” Spock repeats flatly from the other side of the glass.

“Yeah!” says Jim, trying to muster some enthusiasm. If it weren’t ripping him apart from inside he could almost laugh at the horrible irony that is his life. Of all the performances he’s done in his life, he never thought he’d be standing here trying to convince the person he loves to marry someone else. “You’re not going to die of blue balls! This is a good thing!”

Spock does not look enthused. “What did you offer her?”

“Would you believe I convinced her logically that she should agree?”

“No.”

“Yeah, just thought I’d ask.”

“What did you offer her,” Spock says again, low and strained and not sounding a whole lot like a question.


“You asked her…?”

“Yup. And she agreed.” Jim smiles at the skeptical look that gets from Spock. “Hey, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“I have lived among humans for 5.281 years and I still do not understand that euphemism.”

“It means don’t look at a good thing too closely.”

Spock’s eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“Please?” says Jim, before he can point out how ‘highly illogical’ that is. “Just…go with it for me? Please.”

Spock stares at him, which, between Spock’s hard-on and Jim’s puppy-dog eyes is probably a terrible idea.

“Very well,” he says reluctantly.


---
When they finally reach New Vulcan after two days of medical hell, dealing with Spock’s insane mood swings and trying not to get beaten to death by a horny hobgoblin and keeping Jim away from the brig, Leonard is the one to bring Spock to the transporter. He puts Spock in restraints when go in the turbolift (as per his own requests), which turns out to be a very good idea because just before they enter the turbolift Jim shows up and decides to accompany them.

The next few seconds are probably the most uncomfortable few seconds that Leonard has ever experienced in his long and uncomfortable lifetime.

*I used to want to make the universe a better place*, he thinks grimly, while Jim and Spock eye-sex each other up. *Now I’ll just settle for not being witness to them jumping each other in the turbolift.*

Which, of course, is when Jim decides that he’s going to New Vulcan with Spock come hell or high water.

“Captain, this...thing that happens to Vulcans at this time, it is... almost an insanity. You would no doubt find it distasteful.”

“Would I?” says Jim. “You've been patient with all my kinds of madness.”

Jesus, the sexual tension is so thick he could almost gag on it.

Spock smiles. It’s faint, and kind of pained, but it’s *there*, and it’s freaking Leonard out. “Then would you beam down to the planet’s surface and stand with me? By tradition, the male is accompanied by those closest to him.”

Jim looks touched. “Thank you, Spock.”

“Doctor McCoy may also accompany us,” Spock adds, almost as an afterthought.

“I’m honored,” Leonard mutters.

---

The sound of the gong echoes through the small, coliseum-like area.

“Gongs?” Bones mutters next to Jim’s ear. “Vulcans are one of the most advanced societies in the universe and they communicate via *gongs*?”

“Shhh,” says Jim, as Spock puts down the little mallet and heads toward them.

“The surviving Vulcans have worked hard to recreate a *kah-if-farr/kal-if-ee* ring as it was on the planet Vulcan,” he explains, his words obviously labored. “The gong, the fire pit, every detail down to the exact measurements of the area, were made to uphold these rituals of antiquity to the greatest possible degree.” He freezes, then suddenly straightens. “They are approaching. I can hear them.”

He walks back to the gong, and sure enough, Jim can hear something—almost a jingling sound—coming closer. Growing louder and louder.

Spock strikes the gong again.

Suddenly, two men enter the ring shaking these enormous, bizarre contraptions almost like giant tambourines, followed by an older Vulcan woman being carried on a chair. A small procession of others follow her. Jim recognizes T’Pring, and the guy behind her… That has to be Stonn.

“Bones,” Jim whispers. “You know who that is? T’Pau. The only person to ever turn down a seat on
the Federation Council.”

“T’Pau,” Bones murmurs, surprised. “Officiating at Spock’s wedding?”

The words are out of some horrible nightmare. His wedding. Spock’s wedding.

*This is going to save Spock’s life,* Jim reminds himself. *I should be happy.*

He tries to grin, with questionable success. “He never mentioned that his family was so important.”

T’Pau’s chair is placed on a dais, and Spock approaches her, bows in greeting. The old Vulcan places her fingers on his meld points and closes her eyes for a few moments.

When she removes her fingers, she immediately looks up and says, “Bring him forward.”

Spock looks at Jim, who throws a glance at Bones and comes to stand next to Spock.

“This is Kirk,” his First explains.

Jim bows his head respectfully. “Ma'am.”

T’Pau looks at Bones. “And thee are called?”

_Thee?_ Jim wonders sardonically. _Somebody has to update these people on their Standard._

“Leonard McCoy, ma'am,” says Bones.

“These names these outworlders friends,” T’Pau says, this time directed toward Spock. “How does thee pledge their behavior?”

“With my life, T’Pau,” he says, and Jim shifts uncomfortably. That’s a lot of pressure to behave…

“What they are about to see comes down from the time of the beginning, without change,” she says to Spock, though it seems to Jim that she’s saying it for him and Bones. “This is the Vulcan heart. This is the Vulcan soul. This is our way. *Kah-if-farr.*”

Spock turns, and for a long moment Jim meets his gaze.

And then finally the Vulcan tears himself away and walks back to the gong, and Jim realizes that this is it. After this, Spock is going to be married. He’s going to be married, and here Jim is, letting him.

For the first time he understands what his mom meant when she said that loving someone is being willing to let them go.

*I love you,* he thinks, for all it matters now. Spock picks up the mallet and is about to ring it for the third and final time. *Not the way I love Sam or Gaila or even Bones. I've never loved someone the way I love you, and I never will again, I—*

“No!” Stonn interrupts loudly. “I am to be the one! It was agreed….”

“Be silent,” says T’Pau.

“Hear me,” says Stonn. “I have made the ancient claim. I claim the right. The woman is—”

T’Pau rises to her feet. “*Kroykahl*”

A guard carrying a nasty-looking scythe comes forward, and Stonn falls silent.
“I ask forgiveness,” he mutters, stepping away.

“Yes,” says T’Pring, unruffled, like nothing happened. “This is my decision. We will be married, as per Captain Kirk’s request, and then Spock will leave. I will have his name and property, and Stonn will be here. I will have my consort”—her eyes drift to Jim and Spock—“and Spock will have his.”

Jim flushes, which T’Pring notices, of course, and immediately misreads. “Embarrassment is illogical, Captain; though the practice is unusual for humans, Vulcans often have consorts. And as you are highly pleasing to the eye—”

And suddenly Stonn is in front of her, as if trying to guard her from Jim’s view, and Spock is front of Jim, making this weird, low sound, almost like a…like a growl.

“Spock?” he tries hesitantly.

“Do not attempt to speak with him,” says T’Pau. “He is deep in the plak tow. He will not speak with thee again until he has passed through what is to come. If thee wishes to depart, thee may leave now.”

“No,” says T’Pring, coming forward. “He may not leave. He is required to supply me with my side of our bargain. He promised me anything I wished in return for my marrying Spock.”

This time Spock turns on him, growling, and Jim has to forcibly keep himself from backing away.

“I remember,” says Jim, hoping his sudden (irrational?) fear isn’t noticeable. “How can I repay you?”

T’Pring looks at him. “As a member of the Vulcan Science Academy, I am interested in the nature of this particular bond,” she tells him. “As you may be aware, the typical Vulcan bond is made up of two components: commitment and trust.”

“What about passion?” Jim asks.

“What about passion?”

“Doesn’t a marriage—a bond—need passion too?”

“Passion is the height of illogic, Captain,” she replies primly. “Every relationship, let alone the bond, would do better without it.”

“Oh,” says Jim, bemused. “Of course.”

T’Pring nods. “As I was saying: the Vulcan bond is made up of commitment and trust. However, in this case it seems Spock has developed two half-bonds. It is as though the two aspects of the bond have split, and I have been given one, while you are in possession of the other. This is a phenomenon never before seen in Vulcan history. Perhaps because of his hybrid nature—”

“Hey,” says Jim sharply.

“I did not intend the observation negatively,” says T’Pring, raising an eyebrow. “I am merely noting the existence of a possible explanation.”

“All right, so this is all really interesting for you, that’s cool. But I still don’t get what you want from me.”

“I am curious, Captain. Mindmelds have occurred between two bonded individuals, of course. As well as two unbonded. However, to my knowledge, never before have two individuals bonded to the
same person melded with one another. It is a unique opportunity.”

“Oh,” says Jim, practically sagging in relief. “You just want a mindmeld? Yeah. Yeah, of course…”

Spock stiffens beside him.

T’Pring moves forward, and Jim closes his eyes, and then there is the almost familiar pressure on his meld points, and then there is another mind in his.

Where Spock’s mind was warm, hers is smooth, and very controlled.

Fascinating, her voice echoes inside him. Your mind is remarkably dynamic.

Is that a good thing? he asks.

It is an interesting thing. Our minds are well-suited to one another. Perhaps it is due to the half-bond…

But before Jim can ask her more about that, her presence is suddenly gone, leaving Jim shivering and confused.

When he opens his eyes, he sees Spock on top of her, pinning her to the ground like he had done to Jim a few days ago behind the transporter room, and all he can do is stand there, watching Spock’s body move against hers, the jealousy and betrayal bitter in his mouth and burning in his chest.

“Remove yourself from her!” Stonn shouts.

“You will be silent, Stonn,” T’Pau warns. “They have begun the challenge.”

“The challenge?” Jim repeats.

That’s when he realizes—Spock isn’t trying to screw her.

He’s trying to kill her.

“Spock!” Jim yells. “Spock!”

His First Officer doesn’t even notice him, but T’Pau certainly does.

“Captain, you must not interfere—”

Jim turns to the old Vulcan. “If he kills her,” Jim says angrily, “he will never forgive himself. I don’t really care about your Vulcan rituals. I care about my friend.” He bends down and picks up one of a little rocks from the ground.

“Jim…” says Bones warningly, behind him.

“Hey, it got the Potak III razorcat mad,” he says, a lot more casually than he feels. “Why not Vulcans too?”

And Jim throws it at Spock, where it hits him dead-on in the back of his head.

Spock stops. Releases T’Pring, where she falls back to the ground, gasping.

Looks around at Jim.

There is no recognition in his eyes.
“Captain Kirk has chosen the challenge. As he has risen to defend T’Pring, he has become her champion. The challenge will only be complete when one of the champions is dead.”

“You idiot!” Bones hisses. “You absolute cornfed moron!”

“What?” Jim demands. “I’m trying to save her l—aagh! Jesus, Bones! Of all the times for a hypo—”

Bones puts the now-empty hypo back into his pack, still scowling. “It’s your own damn fault for having a death wish. This’ll at least give you a fighting chance.”

“What do you mean a fighting—whoa—!” Jim yells, as his feet are pulled out from under him. Jim scrambles to his feet, and Spock lunges toward him, aiming to kill.

Jim jumps away, but Spock is already turned back, ready for him, and his fist lashes out—

Jim barely manages to stop it, tries to get some leverage on his, pushes back with all his weight, and then Spock is lifting him, flipping him like he weighs nothing, and then he’s on his back on the ground, his head spinning, and there’s a foot coming toward his face, and

He manages to roll away at the last moment, and all he can do is run, all he can do is try to keep himself from getting splattered, and his stomach sinks. He had thought him and Spock were getting to be something like equals, after all their sparring together, but it looks like the Vulcan has just been holding his true strength back all this time, and once its been released—

Jim ducks, avoiding a blow to his head, and he hears Spock’s fist breaking straight through the metal gong. He backs up, but the only thing behind him is the odd ritual structure in the middle of the ring, the fire pit, and he hesitates for the briefest moment and then—

And Spock’s hands are on him, crushing his throat, and he tries desperately to pull him away but his grip is like steel, choking him, pushing him backwards, backwards into the fire…

And Jim manages to get his foot between them, to push Spock back and now they are away from the fire but his hands still on his throat, and he can’t move, he can’t breathe…

And Spock is on him, straddling him, choking the life out of him, and he’s struggling for air, his chest heaving desperately for nothing, he always knew he was going to die like this, helpless, gasping, unable to breathe.

Except this time, the pressure doesn’t let up at the last minute. His chest burns and his vision swims, which is… which is weird. Jim knows his own oxygen limits very well—he’s had a lot of practice, after all—he knows when he’ll black out, and this… this isn’t it.

But regardless of his confusion, his limbs are starting to feel numb and everything is starting to fade, and this time it’s his new family that flashes through his mind in the last moments.


Spock…

God, he thinks, as his vision darkens. This is going to kill Spock.

“Spock,” Jim chokes; tries to brush their fingers together, tries to say, Please don’t blame yourself. But he doesn’t know how much of it he manages before the darkness rises up to swallow him and he —
He stops struggling.

His enemy stops struggling, and the thrill of victory courses through Spock. He has killed his competitor. He has won his mate.

And slowly, like returning to consciousness, Spock comes back to himself, back to the present, where he is straddling someone, his hands around someone’s neck, around…

Jim.

Jim, his eyes closed.

His body still.

No—

It is like ice in his veins, and Spock pulls his hands away, revealing the mottled bruises on the Captain’s neck.

No…

Jim’s eyes do not open.

His chest does not move.

No no no…

Gradually, like flashes of a dream, the memories of the fight return to him. The memories of pursuing Jim, wanting to kill. The memories of wrapping his hands around Jim’s throat. Of his final words—

(“Spock…please…”)

He is trembling. Every cell in his body is trembling. His breath has been replaced by the frantic mantra of no no no no no.

He reaches forward, gripped by the desperate, irrational desire to wipe away the bruises on his Captain’s neck. To wipe away the actions that caused them.

He is not aware of Doctor McCoy running forward until the man is in front of him. “Get your hands off of him, Spock! The fight’s over. You’ve won.”

The words are incomprehensible static. They are not real.

(“You’ve won.”)

The doctor has gone to his knees beside Jim, has two fingers on his neck. His pulse. He turns, glaring at Spock. “See? He’s dead.”

And his chest has been split open, and the sky is shaking, the world is shaking, Vulcan is shaking, crumbling, his home once again being pulled into nothingness—

(“You’ve won.”)
The world has ended and all he can do is stare, as Doctor McCoy gathers up the body. Jim’s body.

Spock has never known the Captain to be still. He is always moving, always dynamic, all loudness and lights and kinetic energy, never very long in one spot. He is not content to simply stand—he is more likely to pace, or bounce on his heels, his gestures wide and elaborate, his eyes bright and eager. Even when he slept, he would murmur unconsciously, would shift in his sleep, would furrow his brow…

Jim’s head lolls in McCoy’s arms, his hands limp at his sides, and for the first time he is completely still.

Completely lifeless.

(“You’ve won.”)

Spock curls in on himself.

He wants to scream.

When he finally looks up again, Jim is gone, as well as McCoy. They must have beamed up to the ship…

“I grieve with thee,” says T’Pau softly, behind him.

T’Pring says nothing.

There is no Vulcan phrase to comfort one who has lost his t’hy’la.

“Kirk’s stepping in to protect T’Pring gave him the distinction of her champion,” says T’Pau.

“Through your defeating him, you have won the woman.”

It is logical. And utterly repellant. The very idea of taking her when Jim is still and silent and cold…

Spock gets to his feet, unsteady.

“Stonn,” he says, without looking at him. “She is yours. You would do well to cherish her—for you do not know how long you will have.” He takes a deep breath. It is painful. Speaking is painful.

“Sometimes wanting is the enemy of having. It is not logical, but it is true.”

He takes out his com, flips it open. “Spock here. Stand by to beam up,” he says, and closes it, putting his hand up to his grandmother in the ta’al. “Live long, T’Pau, and prosper.”

She raises her own ta’al in response. “Live long and prosper, Spock.”

“I shall do neither,” says Spock softly, his hand dropping back to his side. “I have killed my captain. And my t’hy’la.”

---

“I will be restricted to my quarters immediately,” Spock says, when he returns to the bridge, “in accordance with regulation 318.D.4, which states that in the event that a member of the starship command staff commits murder for any reason other than self-defense, that officer will be confined to their quarters until their actions can be assessed via formal trial.”

Uhura opens her mouth, clearly wishing to speak, but Spock turns to the navigation console. “Ensign Chekov, plot a course for the nearest Starbase, where I may surrender myself to the authorities. I
shall be resigning my commission immediately, of course.”

“No!” Uhura cries. “You didn’t…”

“Lieutenant Uhura,” Spock snaps. “You will behave as is befitting a lieutenant toward her Acting Captain.”

Before Nyota can respond, the doors of the turbolift slide open and Doctor McCoy emerges.

Spock turns to him. “Doctor, it falls to you to make the arrangements for the Captain’s—” It is here that his tight, meticulous control fails him.

He cannot say the word funeral.

“No, Spock, I—”

“Doctor, please, let me finish. There can be no excuse for the crime of which I am guilty. I intend to offer no defense.”

“Spock,” says Doctor McCoy, more urgently now. “You have to—”

Spock turns and slams the doctor against the wall, pinning him there by his neck.

“You will cease your attempts to pry into my personal matters,” he hisses. “One more word and I will break your neck.”

McCoy stares back at him, his eyes widened in fear…

…For only a moment, before his mouth is opening and he is attempting despite everything, despite the threat to his own life, to speak.

Spock releases the doctor, who slides down the wall to the floor, coughing, and stalks to the turbolift.

He was a fool to ever think he could protect these humans.

---

His quarters are their own kind of hell.

He cannot bring himself to look at the door to the Captain’s room, and yet it is all he can think about. It is so close, as it’s always been. As if Jim could come through at any moment, laughing, explaining that it was all just a prank.

It could happen. At any moment…

Of course, it doesn’t.

Instead he finds himself fixated by the ancient weapons hanging on his wall. The ahn. The s’harien. The anu wunu. Any one of them could—

No. He does not have the right to escape his fate, to find relief in death. This is nothing more than he deserves.

Yes. He will live. He will live and stand trial for the murder of Captain James T. Kirk and describe Jim’s death in perfect, vivid detail to the jury, and pray they sentence him to death immediately.
He will beg for it if he must.

He finds his gaze being drawn unwillingly to the door to the Captain’s room.

It is so close… He is so close, and Spock is gripped by an overwhelming, irrational desire to open it to see if, perhaps, Jim is there…

But he will not. He will not open the door.

He will not because when he sees Jim’s room, dark and empty, his clothes still in a haphazard pile on the floor, his half-finished paperwork still on his desk, his beloved book collection, with the well-worn copy of The Great Gatsby with the cryptic dedication written on the inside cover to “Jay” that Spock never asked him about… Their last chess game, still unfinished, set up on the board… Jim’s scent, distinctive and intoxicating, soon to go stale and eventually fade away forever…

“I am in control of my emotions,” Spock whispers. There is a strange burning wetness in his eyes, a tightness in his throat, like something clawing at him from the inside. “Con-control of my emotions —”

But he is not. He is not in control of his emotions; has not been since the day he met Kirk.

“Two plus two is four,” he chokes out. “Four plus two is six. Six times six is thirty—” but he cannot —he cannot go on.

Even math, his one oasis of comforting, unadulterated logic, is no longer a respite. Now he can think only of Jim’s hand in his as they awaited Kodos’s judgment together, of Jim trusting him, needing him, holding on to him as if afraid of being pulled away in some invisible current, of white-knuckled fingers around—

(—white-knuckled fingers around Jim’s throat—)

Something else. Think of something else.

He thinks of Jim pressing the ta’al to the glass—

(“I need you to live long and prosper, dammit! I can’t lose you. I can’t.”)

—and almost physically recoils from the memory. Something else, please, something else…

He remembers the Kobayashi Maru, all three times Jim had taken it, and every time he had been intrigued, curious what the cadet was thinking when he—

He remembers Jim emerging from the turbolift shaft, covered in grease, his hair standing on end, an enormous smile on his face, reporting the turbolift back in working order, no need to bother Scotty—

He remembers eating lunch with Jim the day Lieutenant Riley had come to thank him for the promotion. The day he had deduced Jim’s history on Tarsus.

He had never noticed how single-mindedly the Captain ate.

(“You appear to be exceptionally hungry,” Spock had noted.

“Not really,” Jim had said, not pausing in his meal, instead devoting his full attention to quickly and consistently clearing his plate.

He didn’t properly focus on Spock until he had finished it to the very last crumb.
“What’s wrong?” he had asked, seeing Spock’s stare...

He remembers how Jim had loved the stars, hated paperwork, how his eyes had lit up with suppressed amusement as he explained humans’ strange custom of claiming a “favorite color.” Jim’s own was green, supposedly, despite the fact that he owned almost nothing in it. Highly illogical as the man is.

Was.

Why did he own nothing in green? Spock wonders. The question is so absurdly irrelevant now, but it digs its claws painfully into his mind nonetheless and refuses to let go. I should have bought him something green — I should have —

(“Spock... please...”)

I should have told him that I thought of him as home. He would have been happy...

I should have stayed away.

He would have been alive.

And now...

And now he will never again share thoughts with Jim over a chessboard, will never again watch him laugh, will never again hear his voice...

(“That’s why I love new experiences—they turn the scary into the familiar. And if you can turn the scary into the familiar, you can deal with anything.”)

And still his mind—his hatefully perfect Vulcan memory—remembers. Recalls every word Jim ever said, every expression he made, the brightness in his eyes as he shared something he had most likely never spoke aloud before.

(“...I've explored strange new worlds, sought out new life and new civilizations, I've gone boldly where no man has gone before...and every time it's turned out okay.”)

Spock cannot breathe. He cannot breathe.

(“...I can look down at my hands and remember...”)

Spock looks down at his own hands and remembers, remembers Jim’s weakening fingers struggling to pull them away, remembers the frantic pulse of his blood under these fingers, remembers the gasp of his final, desperate breath.

Remembers with horrible clarity every detail of how he murdered his t’hy’la.

(“...and even when I'm dying, I won't be afraid to go into the final strange new world...”)

Had Jim been afraid, in his last moments? He’d had contact with his bare skin, but in that moment Spock been so lost to the plak tow that he hadn’t noticed; hadn’t cared what his Captain’s final thoughts were.

And his final words...

(“Spock... please...”)
He wants to tear his way out of his own skin, he wants to die, he wants to die, he cannot—he cannot live any longer like this, this tormented existence to which he has been condemned, this fate toward which he was encouraged.

Encouraged…

And then he is pressing numbers into his vidcom, his fingers trembling with what may be grief or fury, barely aware of his own actions, and —

And the face appears on his viewscreen, and he is manic beyond reason, breathing hard, his whole body vibrating with rage, unknowing and uncaring whether he is speaking standard or high Vulcan or some deranged combination of the two.

“Damn you,” he snarls. “Damn you to the depths of the seven hells.”

His alternate self looks only mildly surprised. “Excuse me?”

“This is your fault! You knew—you must have known…”

“Known what, may I ask?”

“You coveted him since the beginning!” Spock accuses, low and broken and furious. “You couldn’t have yours, so you took away mine—”

“ Took away?” he repeats. Then realization seems to dawn in his expression. “Your pon farr—”

Spock turns away, unable to hear his other self’s responses. His excuses.

He should never have allowed himself to feel this way in the first place.

Impossible. His only hope would have been to never have joined the Enterprise crew.

He should never have listened to his alternate self’s advice. The moment he had noticed his unusual reaction to Kirk he should have run in the opposite direction.

As he had planned to. As he had wanted to.

“If not for Jim, you would have died,” his other self murmurs, and Spock realizes he must have been speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Then I should have died!” he shouts, whirling on the viewscreen. “It would be preferable to die than to live like this!”

“Spock, listen to me…”

“No! I will not listen to you again!” And then he is bringing his hand down on his desk, smashing it in half without effort, but it is not enough, nothing will ever be enough - “I should never” - and he is overturning the bed, ripping off the frame, throwing it across the room - “have listened” - and he is pulling off the metal-work screen, bending it beyond recognition, throwing it aside - “to you!”

“Spock…”

Spock picks up his PADD, hurls it against the wall, where it smashes into thousands of tiny pieces. It is not enough.

“I know how you feel,” his other self is saying. Placating. “I too thought I had lost him. I too felt—”
"You," he grates out, "have no idea – how I feel!"

He picks up the durasteel chair behind his desk, bends it easily in half. It is a detached sort of satisfaction, finally allowing himself to use his full strength against this ship, this environment, this home, not made for Vulcans but for humans—weak, emotional humans. Dazzling, breathtaking humans. Openly loving humans, fragile, easy to kill humans…

He throws the chair across the room, where it smashes into the wall, those damnably thin walls through which he used to hear Jim singing in the shower, through which Jim heard him mourning his mother and had come to stay by his side. Jim had come even though were barely friends then, to help him. Had been there to mourn the loss of his mother.

Who would be there to mourn the loss of Jim?

"He did this to me," he mutters, bent over, panting. "He stripped me of all logic, all sense, all reason. He made me into a madman, a barbarian—" His voice turns strangled, choked with that strange burning in his eyes, the clawing in his throat. "He made me better."

He looks up at the viewscreen, at his own face.

"Why would you do this to me?" he demands, his voice ruined, wretched. "Why would you promise me a friendship that would define me only to take him away? Why would you give me my heart only to rip out of me again?" The older Vulcan does not reply and Spock’s breath hitches. "I wish I had never stayed. I wish I had never met him at all."

"You cannot mean that…"

"I do. This is hell, this is—this is worse than hell." There is something wet on his face, but he cannot be bothered to wipe it away. "It would be preferable not feel at all. It would be preferable to go back to how I was—lost and lonely and rejected by everyone—than – than this. It would be preferable to go back to believing that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, than know that I would watch the galaxy burn if it meant I could save him."

"That," says a voice in the doorway, "is the sexiest thing I have ever heard."

But—it could not—

He turns.

But it is, and he is standing there, beautiful and breathing and alive.

"J-Jim…"

Jim smiles at him crookedly, his eyes soft and he is alive—God, he is alive—

And for the first time he realizes that his quarters are completely destroyed. That he is standing in the middle of a sea of wreckage. That it is an abhorrent loss of control.

And he does not care in the slightest.

He walks to Jim as if in a dream, and Jim comes toward him, the door shutting behind him.

There are still bruises on his neck in the shape of Spock’s fingers.

"How…?" he manages.
"That was no tri-ox compound Bones shot me with," Jim explains, touching his arm gently. Apologetically. "He slipped a neural paralyzer into that hypo. It didn’t just knock me out—it slowed my heart rate and my breathing…simulated death so the challenge would be over."

He is warm and breathing and *alive alive alive…*

"Indeed," he murmurs, pulling Jim in close, breathing in his scent, his heartbeat, *alive alive alive…* "Perhaps McCoy is a somewhat adequate doctor after all."

The reverberations of the Captain’s chuckle move through both of them as Jim’s arms come up to hold Spock tighter. "Does that mean he has your approval?"

"I would not go that far."

For some reason that makes him laugh, before it fades into something more serious. "You know, I’m still mad at you for being willing to die just so you wouldn’t make me uncomfortable."

"The effects it would have had on you would be far beyond *discomfort*…"

"Yeah," says Jim. "I know." And then his lips are on Spock’s, soft and chaste and—

And Spock pulls back from him. "You still want to—after what I—Captain, I almost *killed* you…"

"First of all," says Jim sternly, "no Captain-ing me, you know I hate it. And also, your *body* almost killed me. Just because your body wants something doesn’t mean you do."

"Maybe it was not only my body. Maybe I could have stopped it. Maybe part of me wanted to…”

"*Maybe* is ambiguous," says Jim. "Did you want to kill me? Yes or no."

"No," Spock whispers.

"All right then," says Jim, and then they are kissing again, and Jim’s hand is at the nape of his neck and he is alive and warm and there is so much heat—

Jim’s com beeps.

They pause, looking at it.

Jim looks at him pleadingly. "Can’t I just—"

"It would be best to answer that, Captain," says Spock, though he somehow cannot manage to untangle his fingers from Jim’s uniform.

Jim sighs and opens his com. "Kirk here."

It is Uhura. "Captain Kirk. Message from Starfleet Command, top priority."

"Relay it, Lieutenant."

"Response to T’Pau's request for diversion of Enterprise to planet Vulcan, hereby approved. Any reasonable delay granted. Komack, Admiral, Starfleet Command."

Jim laughs. "Well, a little late, but I'm glad they're seeing it our way. If there’s anybody Starfleet can’t turn down, it’s T’Pau. Chekov, lay in a course for Altair VI. Leave orbit when ready. Kirk out."
He flips the com shut and leans back toward Spock.

Spock stops him. “The plak tow has abated,” he reminds him carefully.

Jim looks confused. “I know.”

“I am no longer any danger. You are no longer required to—”

“Spock, I’m not doing this because you want me to. I’m doing it because I love you. And contrary to popular belief, I know exactly what I want, too.” Suddenly his eyes widen with something akin to dread. “What about you, this isn’t… I mean, you don’t feel pressured, right? I’m your superior officer….”

“You are my superior officer. You are also my friend.” He presses his index and middle finger against Jim’s, and Jim presses back. It is like the sun coming out. “I have been, and always shall be, yours.”

“I’m yours, too, Spock. For as long as you’ll have me.”

“Forever, then,” says Spock. “For I do not intend to relinquish you. My t’hy’la….”

Jim looks at him curiously. “What’s that?”

“It is the ultimate relationship. Brother, friend, lover. Our souls are forever connected.”

Jim’s breath hitches. “Like The One?”

Spock tilts his head, looks at him thoughtfully. “That is a reasonably accurate translation into human terms.”

Jim’s eyes are strangely bright, almost as if he is…

Spock pulls back from him, aghast. “Jim, why are you crying? What have I—”

“No!” Jim assures him, smiling, although the tears do not stop. “I’m happy. Humans cry when they’re really happy, too.”

“Most illogical,” Spock murmurs.

Jim laughs, though it sounds almost like a sob. “Spock, I… God, I don’t wanna mess this up. I’m… reckless, and screwed up, and I say the worst things, and… And I don’t even know if I’m capable of a relationship like this, but… I want to try.”

“We are neither of us perfect people. I can be cold, and rather possessive, and I do not understand many jokes and social cues…” He stops. “Captain—Jim—are you certain this is want you want?”

“Yes,” says Jim, and he is laughing and crying at the same time, and Spock is still weak with the relief, with the awe, can only stare at him, at his beautiful, illogical t’hy’la… “God—Spock, yes.”

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**End Notes**

ETA: You can also find the gorgeous title graphic [here](#) by the wonderful [SilentBridge](#)!
while you're there, check out their other edits, because it's all lovely~

ETA 2.0: This fic is now available to read in Russian, thanks to the hard work and talent of Di Grange and Daria_T, who are amazing and obviously, just, eons more educated than I am, because speaking several languages? Taking on this monster of a fic?? How do they even???

ETA 3.0: Also, I just got a tumblr, and I'm super excited about it, so go follow me there and ask me questions and send me stuff, okay? Okay!

ETA 4.0: Oh. My. God. Okay, everybody, stop what you're doing and check out my crazy-talented friend Gracie and this beautiful YDHT poster! I am so lucky to have readers like y'all <3

ETA 5.0:

The fabulous Kdin made an awe-freakin-some playlist for YDHT that you can find right here. Every single song is perfect, I literally could not have done it better myself. Go check it out nownownow!

Works inspired by this one: Ты не обязан (...говорить да) by Daria_T, DiGrange, Signed and Sealed for good or bad., by 3DBABE1999, How Nyota Uhura Learned That, Yes, Jim Kirk Is An Asshole by myotpruinedmylife, [Podfic] You Don't Have To (Say Yes) by RsCreighton, Willow by Confessions_of_a_Closet_Bibliophile

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