**Atlas**

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**Atlas**

by distractedKat

**Summary**

Between what was and what will be stands James Tiberius Kirk, in all his fractured patchwork glory. Because saving the Federation was only the beginning.

A novel-length continuation of the 2009 movie told in four parts. Cross-posted from FFN.

**Notes**

This is the official cross-posting of Atlas, done by the original author, who has a much better name now that she isn't, like, 14. Edited for grammar and typos and otherwise left alone. Enjoy!
Discovering Atlas

From the very beginning, James Kirk had the illogical habit of not matching Spock's expectations. A cadet of his academic standing had no reason to draw negative attention to himself for the sake of something so trivial as beating a simulation. Beyond that, he refused to be properly chastised for the event, responding to Spock's allegations of misconduct with anger and self-righteousness rather than the remorse that would have cleared his name within minutes. Yet he did not lash out when Spock mentioned his father, did not lose that odd blend of furious calm that let him stand before the Admiralty without admitting any degree of culpability. It was, Kirk protested, the program itself that prompted his response.

When Vulcan sent out its distress call, Kirk should have relented. He should have either admitted his fault and requested flight clearance or resigned himself to waiting for the fleet's return. Instead, he coerced his friend into sneaking him aboard the Enterprise. When he was caught, Spock expected him to yield to Captain Pike's command, since Pike was one of the few authority figures with whom the cadet seemed to share a positive rapport. Instead, Kirk stood his ground, turning the whole situation on its head and continuing to do so for the remainder of the mission.

He leapt off drilling platforms when logic dictated he stay put. He fought security officers when he should have submitted, but submitted to physical abuse to the point of strangulation when he should have fought. When the situation was his in control, he accepted with ease the input of those around him despite a long and well-documented Starfleet history of willfully standing alone. He was a dichotomy unto himself, a walking contradiction that seemed governed by a set of rules so convoluted even Dr. McCoy was often blindsided by them. Spock could not have been more amazed when his older alternate self proclaimed Jim Kirk to be the truest friend of his lifetime. Kirk was one infuriating contradiction after another, and they were to be friends? Such an eventuality was almost inconceivable. It positively boggled the mind.

So now Spock was in the unfortunate position of being inappropriately fascinated by the enigma that called itself James T. Kirk. There had to be some sort of explanation for why the cadet behaved the way he did, some rationale for his reactions. With enough study, Spock might even be able to devise a manner of predicting Kirk's insanity before it drove the galaxy further into chaos. True, Kirk's methods had saved Earth and probably the majority of the Federation, but similar anomalies occurred every day. Spock was hesitant to believe Kirk's next display of rule-breaking would end quite so favorably. Luck, as Humans called it, could only carry a man so far.

Before Spock got the chance to establish his research method for covert James Kirk observation, the Vulcan's next mission arrived. This was a surprise, since most of Starfleet had standing orders to keep close to Earth until the survivors of the senior cadet class could be graduated and put to work filling the staggering gap left by Nero. There weren't enough of them, not by half, but they were strong and determined. Starfleet hadn't seen a similarly dedicated class in many a year.

Spock's unusual mission had to be important: His orders came by private courier rather than the usual comm, and the details were absent. Instead, his presence was requested in Admiral Barnett's office at Spock's earliest convenience.

Curious.

Spock abandoned his early lunch, going immediately to Admiral Barnett's office. The admiral's assistant indicated that he was currently speaking with a cadet, but Spock would be announced regardless. Spock inclined his head a fraction of a degree in acknowledgement, crossing the hallway to stand before the admiral's door in wait. A large satchel bag filled to capacity rested heavily against
the wall on the other side of the doorway. Spock eyed it thoughtfully but refrained from mentioning it to the admiral's assistant.

When Spock decided to wait by the door for his appointment, it had not been his intention to eavesdrop. However, the cadet inside rendered Spock's intentions irrelevant when he said, quite clearly, "Sir, my scores in advanced programming and database construction are unparalleled since the inception of the Academy, to say nothing of my performance in the tactics curriculum. Furthermore, I can provide reference letters from the entire Computer Languages and Programming division, including the chairs, that support my ability to not only redesign but improve—"

The cadet fell silent, presumably interrupted by the admiral for either his tone or the announcement of Spock's arrival. Perhaps both.

"Commander Spock," Admiral Barnett called as the door signaled its status change from Meeting in Progress to Proceed. "Just in time."

Spock stepped inside with both hands locked behind his back. A brief visual sweep of the office revealed the admiral seated at his desk, a slightly exasperated expression on his face as he weathered the undivided attention of—

Ah.

"I believe you know Cadet Kirk." The admiral's mouth quirked in recognition of the ironic understatement as he indicated Kirk, impeccably dressed in Academy red, with a weary flicker of one hand.

"Indeed, Admiral," Spock agreed mildly. "Am I interrupting?"

"He's been here for an hour already," Barnett said with resigned irritation. "I'd say our appointment's about over."

Kirk, who had been peering at Spock with open curiosity, snapped his attention back to Barnett, expression going hard and determined in a microsecond. "Sir, I—"

"Listen," Barnett said, pointing one stern finger at the cadet, "you're not telling me anything I don't know already, and with the recent death of twenty percent of the teaching staff of this Academy, I've got a lot on my to-do list lately. Let's save ourselves the time here."

The cadet took an unconscious step forward, hands curling into frustrated fists at his sides. "But sir—"

Barnett held up a hand. "Don't jump to conclusions, Cadet. Not everyone in authority is out to get you." Kirk's expression closed, his posture shifting back to regulation parade rest. Barnett sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Alright, Kirk," he said, lifting his eyes to the brilliant blue of one of the Academy's brightest and most troublesome students, "you can have your little…project." Kirk's eyes widened in shock, his hands falling slack as his shoulders tensed. "But," the admiral added firmly, "if you spread yourself too thin and collapse again like you did last week—"

"No sir," Kirk interrupted immediately, shooting Spock a sidelong glance. "That was, uh…medical, sir. I kind of escaped from the recovery unit. But I'm better now and it won't happen again."

"Just see that it doesn't. That doctor friend of yours is a menace."

Kirk grinned. "Yes sir. He is. I'll tell him you said so."
"Very well." Barnett eyed Kirk suspiciously, as though he knew he'd been hoodwinked but wasn't quite sure how yet. "Dismissed, Cadet. Get back to your classes."

"Sir!" Kirk snapped a smart salute, tossing first the admiral, and then a bemused Spock, his best grin before striding away with undisguised enthusiasm. He slung the abandoned satchel in the hallway over one shoulder, digging out a PADD that he began typing on furiously before the door even closed behind him.

"That kid," Barnett sighed, rubbing his forehead again.

Spock glanced briefly at the office door. "Forgive me for asking, Admiral, but has Cadet Kirk been behaving in a manner unbecoming since his release from the recovery unit?"

Barnett frowned at the phrasing. "What exactly do you mean by that, Commander Spock?"

The Vulcan arched an eyebrow. "I meant to inquire after the cadet's behavior since his recent trauma, Admiral."

The admiral's unexpectedly defensive expression turned thoughtful as he studied Spock. "Why the interest? Most of the Admiralty doesn't think you and Kirk can even stand each other."

Spock's face and posture were without any hint of emotion when he replied, "It was a simple query, sir. I admit to no interest in Cadet Kirk beyond that which I extend to all surviving members of the senior class."

"No," Barnett mused, still thoughtful, "I don't suppose you would. Well." He brushed a hand through the air as though to dismiss the topic. "To answer your question, his actions since his return have been well above what even the Academy might consider becoming."

After a slight hesitation, Spock clarified, "Then it is not his behavior that has caused you frustration."

"I'm not frustrated," Barnett agreed, shuffling the papers on his desk before returning each item to its previous location. "I'm exasperated. How that boy can even think about taking on additional projects with his current workload—" The admiral cut himself off, shaking his head. When he looked back at Spock, his eyes were dark with a delicate mix of admiration and concern. "You are aware, of course, of how desperate the situation at the Academy is."

"The loss of both instructors and student aids has rendered several sections incapable of maintaining daily functions," Spock agreed readily. Officers throughout the fleet had been assigned to temporary teaching positions for which they were woefully unprepared as they waited for the students that would round out their compliments. No one, so far, was pleased by the results of this solution, and a new one would have to be devised before infighting broke out between resentful Starfleet officers and frustrated Academy cadets.

"Then you also know that we began asking the cadets to volunteer for extra duty within any and all of their specializations beyond their usual course requirements."

Spock inclined his head: The science division was filled with the clumsy, if determined, efforts of cadets who had the arduous task of absorbing the responsibilities of the seasoned officers who would never be returning to their stations.

Barnett shrugged a little helplessly. "When Kirk signed up for the volunteer program, he gave a blanket request to be used by every and any division that needed him. I believe his exact phrasing was 'Use me like a cheap whore, sir.' Then he submitted a list of his abilities and aptitudes that have not been previously known to the Academy, and damned if he hasn't lived up to every one of his
claims."

So here was James Kirk, again behaving in a manner that was quite outside the parameters Spock had set for him. The Vulcan turned this new angle over in his mind for a quiet moment, trying to understand how the puzzle looked with the addition of an unexpected piece. "Does Starfleet intend to make use of Cadet Kirk as requested?" he wondered aloud.

"Spock." Barnett laid both hands palms-up on his desk in an expression of exasperation. "You probably don't know this, since your interest in him is admittedly limited, but he was in the top three percent of his class before the mess with Nero. And now he's taking it seriously," the admiral gave a disbelieving sort of laugh, incredulous and admiring and vexed. "In order to maintain a normal grading curve, Kirk's instructors have to exempt his scores. Of course we're going to use him, Commander Spock. We wouldn't know what to do with him otherwise."

"...Fascinating."

"Anyway." Barnett took out a PADD, examining it a moment before passing it to Spock. "Let's try to focus on why you're here. This is your new mission."

Spock accepted the PADD, flipping through the information for a cursory examination. What he read caused both eyebrows to lift in interest.

"We've located three planets so far that might work for a new Vulcan colony," the admiral explained, leaning against his desk. "A team is going to survey them for habitability. It isn't a long-term mission; we aren't projecting anything more than a few months. We want to send the team out tomorrow, but civilians can't be cleared that quickly. So if there's going to be a Vulcan on the mission, it has to be you."

"Mission accepted, Admiral," Spock said immediately, looking up from the PADD's data. "I shall procure the necessary equipment and be prepared by 0700 tomorrow." He hesitated, glancing back at the PADD before adding, "Also, I wish to extend my gratitude that Starfleet would permit me to leave the area with our forces so diminished."

Barnett smiled, his expression warm and understanding to a degree that Spock couldn't look at for more than a moment. "Who better than a Vulcan to pick the best place for Vulcans?"

"Indeed," Spock agreed.

"Well then." Barnett nodded. "Dismissed, Commander Spock."

Filled with the challenges and problems presented by the opportunity to aid in the selection of a new Vulcan homeworld, Spock's mind tucked the lingering question of Cadet Kirk into a small box and put it aside.

But not for long.

"We're going to give Jim Kirk the Enterprise."

For a moment, Spock thought his hearing must have become faulty during the last three months in space. He shook his head to clear it, a nearly imperceptible motion, and said, "Pardon?"

Barnett looked up from Spock's mission report, a grin in his eyes even if it wasn't reflected in the calm of his face. "At his graduation ceremony a week from Friday, the Admiralty intends to uphold Cadet James Kirk's field promotion and give him the flagship Enterprise. She'll be ready for a
shakedown mission by then, which is as good a way to start as any."

Vulcans didn't gape, which was the only reason Spock managed to maintain his well-honed expressionless demeanor. "...Sir, if I may make a query."

Now Barnett did grin, sitting back in his chair with his elbows propped on the arms. "By all means, Commander Spock. We drew straws to decide who got to break the news to you. I've been looking forward to fielding your response for weeks."

"Sir," Spock began, ignoring the odd non-sequitur about straw and fields, "while I can appreciate the need Starfleet must have for qualified captains, it is highly illogical to base a promotion as...unprecedented as this upon one successful mission that was, in itself, unprecedented."

The admiral's expression then was odd, amused and compassionate by turns, as though Spock were the victim of a cosmic joke that Barnett himself had suffered through on a previous occasion. He seemed to relate to Spock's befuddled confusion every bit as sincerely as he derived hilarity from it. "I know you just got back," he said eventually, "but let me make a suggestion. Find Jim Kirk and follow him around for a while. We can draw up an excuse if you need one, but I really don't think you will. Kirk hasn't been notified of where he'll be serving after his graduation, much less in what capacity. If you still think we're wrong about this promotion after walking his path for a few days, we'll take your concerns into account."

Spock struggled with the idea of Captain James T. Kirk for a heartbeat before releasing the turmoil as illogical.

Barnett saw his fleeting concern and offered him a small, understanding smile. "We were badly wounded when you left," he said softly, lacing his fingers together so he could observe the tangle they made. "Nero took our cadets, and in doing so effectively gutted the fleet. We had to heal quickly, and in any way we could, before the hurt became a weakness."

"Understandable," Spock agreed. "However, giving a cadet his own flagship might highlight our current difficulties more than alleviate them."

"Situations like ours become something of a baptism by fire for everyone involved," Barnett continued, nodding once in acknowledgement of Spock's assessment but ignoring it otherwise. "You get to stress people, test their limits, see what they're really made of. Sometimes people just can't stand up under it. We've lost some good recruits recently. But sometimes," he murmured, meeting Spock's dark eyes with firm conviction, "you find a man who takes everything you throw at him and more, and doesn't give up so much as dig down. Jim Kirk dug his heels deep on this one, and he hasn't let anyone around him surrender so much as an inch to the losses that should have crippled us. We need him and his ilk badly, Commander Spock."

"Using that logic," Spock replied smoothly, "his ilk, as you call them, should be similarly rewarded. What of the others who served with him on the Enterprise? Will each be given his or her own ship in the fleet?"

Barnett laughed, which was strangely annoying. "Not quite," he admitted, digging through one of the drawers on his desk. He produced a small pile of hardcopy assignment requests that he passed to Spock with a grin.

Each request ticked Spock's eyebrow a notch higher. "...This is the entire surviving crew of the Enterprise as it existed during the final stages of the Nero mission."

The admiral nodded, looking rather like a small boy given his first interactive 3-D puzzle. "Each and
every one, from every department, cadet and otherwise, with the notable exceptions of you and Kirk."

Spock looked up, eyebrows nearly hidden in his fringe. "They all requested to be posted to the Enterprise?"

Barnett shook his head. "Read a little more carefully. All of them, save Mr. Scott, requested to serve either with or under Kirk, wherever he was posted, in whatever capacity they could. Even Chekov, who is in demand by pretty much everyone, just wants the opportunity to work with Kirk again."

"And Mr. Scott?" Spock hazarded after a moment's contemplation, sifting through the stack for the relevant form.

"He requested to serve on the Enterprise specifically," Barnett admitted, "but the rumor mill says Kirk made him promise to look after her, which is the only reason he differs from the others."

"What has Kirk requested?" the Vulcan asked, unable to locate the exasperating cadet's form.

"When we asked him," Barnett explained, shaking his head in amazement again, "he said that his previous blanket statement stood. He requested to work wherever he was most needed. Everyone knows he wants to captain the Enterprise again," the admiral added, "wants it like he wants to take his next breath, but he didn't ask for it. Which is, actually, one of the reasons we're giving it to him. Toward the end of this week, we're sending a courier with Kirk's orders and a camera. The look on his face should be pretty unique when he reads that letter."

This was not going at all the way Spock had expected his debriefing would.

(We have located an appropriate planet, Admiral.

Good.

There is one slight issue.

We'll fix it.

Thank you, sir.

You're dismissed, Commander. Take a few days off.)

Instead, his mission statement was barely a side note, and James Kirk was being given the Enterprise.

James Kirk. With his own flagship.

Spock thought an appropriate Human response to a situation such as this one might be: What the hell?

Barnett laughed again, but it had the strangest note of hysteria tickling its last note. "Believe me," the admiral said fervently, leaning forward to stress his point, "I know how crazy this sounds, how unbelievable and illogical. You haven't even been gone three months, after all. Your confusion is both understandable and expected. That's why we drew straws to tell you. But, Spock, the data you're using to draw your conclusions about this is three months old, and I can't tell you in coherent words how much has changed in just three months."

"…Yes sir," Spock acknowledged blandly. He set the request forms back on Barnett's desk and
locked his hands at the small of his back.

The admiral sat back with a slightly defeated air. He rested his elbows on the chair's arms once more, twisting one wrist to check his watch. "It's nearly nine," he observed. "Go find Kirk and watch him for a while. Bring yourself up to speed. Let us know your findings." He drummed the fingers of his right hand on the PADD Spock had given him. "In the meantime, I'll go over your mission report with the rest of the Admiralty and determine the best course of action for the difficulties your people are likely to face."

"Yes sir."

Though he looked as though he wished to sigh again, Barnett only nodded. "Good. Dismissed, Commander."

Spock left without another word, striding thoughtlessly from the building. Sunlight washed over him, completely unimpeded by clouds or other obstructions, causing his pace to slow as he subconsciously tilted his face up to absorb more of its warmth.

So. James Kirk, captain of the Enterprise again. At least this time he would be able to accept the title properly instead of simply taking it.

Ah, but that was anger again, and no small amount of frustration, steering his thoughts from logic. Spock took a deep breath, locking his hands behind his back. He measured his steps carefully, setting them on the path to the only garden at the Academy dedicated to desert flora. It was quiet there, and secluded. A good place for thought. He selected a bench in the furthest corner, settling himself with another deep breath.

So. James Kirk, considered by the Admiralty to be competent enough for captaincy, to be ready for the Enterprise. But then, it wasn't Kirk alone who would make the ship unusual. Most of the flagship's compliment and her entire command crew, save possibly whoever became her first officer, would be freshly-graduated cadets. It certainly made a statement about the direction Starfleet intended to take having survived Nero's blow.

Did the Federation mean to make such a statement, or was it incidental?

Three months ago, Admiral Barnett had all but admitted that the Academy teaching staff had its collective hands full just trying to keep Kirk challenged. Around the same time, Kirk had volunteered to be "used like a cheap whore" by whatever department had need of him. Three months later, Kirk had either charmed or worked his way into such good graces that Starfleet was giving him command of their most coveted ship, skipping over an uncounted number of better qualified captains who had proven themselves through years of service.

Kirk must have done something, then, that made a better case for his promotion than all those others. But what?

Admiral Barnett had seemed convinced that Kirk's assignment would make sense if Spock observed him. Walk his path, he'd said.

Well, alright then.

It was, of course, more difficult than Spock expected it to be. A search of the housing assignment database listed Kirk's apartment as one that quite clearly had not been inhabited for an extended period of time. Queries made to residents suggested Kirk had never lived there. So Spock began to search for Kirk's friends, assuming they would possess the cadet's address. Unfortunately, the only
friend of Jim Kirk that Spock knew of was one Leonard McCoy, who had been nearly hostile to the Vulcan since Kirk's...regrettable experience on Delta Vega.

Apparently, Dr. McCoy understood the necessity of marooning a mutinying crewmember only to the point of his closest friend nearly being eaten by local wildlife. At or after that, his understanding turned into what Humans called a "grudge." He was quite skilled at maintaining this grudge and tended to snarl whenever he came into contact with certain half-Vulcans.

This tendency was not the sort that diminished with time.

"What do you want?" McCoy snarled when his door opened to reveal Spock. The doctor was bleary-eyed and rumpled, as though he'd been sleeping or only recently woken.

"I wish to ascertain the location of Cadet Kirk," Spock replied, hands behind his back as he resisted the urge to peer around McCoy's shoulder to see if Kirk was visiting.

The doctor's lip curled. "What, you want to bring him up before the Admiralty personally this time? Spare him the effort of calling you out?"

One of Spock's eyebrows quirked. "I withdrew my charge of academic dishonesty before the Enterprise returned to Earth, Dr. McCoy. As I left the planet shortly thereafter and have only this day returned, I find it highly unlikely that Cadet Kirk could have done anything to merit such action on my part. Furthermore, as I have already stated, I am here to locate him, and logically cannot have been previously—"

"Alright!" McCoy interrupted, scowling in the doorway without any indication that he would either step out or allow Spock entrance. It was a breach of social custom Spock accredited to the "grudge."

"Then why do you want to see him?"

"Admiral Barnett requested it."

"Yeah?" The doctor eyed him warily. "Why?"

"I, unlike some others, do not make it a habit to interrogate superior officers."

For a moment, Spock thought McCoy would attempt to do him physical harm. He released his obvious fury with a barked "Fine!" instead, ducking back into his apartment to snatch a PADD off a long, narrow table in the entryway. He scrolled through the data quickly, scowling. "What time is it?" he demanded without looking up.

"0927."

McCoy shut his eyes for a moment, shaking his head slightly. "Vulcans can't round up and just say nine-thirty?"

"Vulcans prize accuracy above simplicity, Doctor."

"Sure they do." The doctor sighed deeply, shaking his head again as he scanned the PADD. "We'll placate the Human and say it's nine-thirty. If Jim's keeping his schedule—and wouldn't my life be easier if he ever did—he's got the programming seminar right now. But it's over soon, and there's a gap afterwards until two. That's 1400 hours, for you. And good luck finding him if he gets away after the seminar. My responsibilities," he added with a snarl, "don't start for another six hours, since I was up until dawn doing rounds in recovery. So if you'll excuse me, Commander, I'm goin' back to bed." He stabbed an accusatory finger at Spock's face. "Do your job and go away. That kid has enough on his plate without you adding your crap to it. You leave him alone, you hear me?"

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Before Spock could respond, the door slid shut.

…All in all, a successful encounter.

Then the Kirk factor crept into his expectations, because the cadet was not at all where McCoy had predicted he would be. The programming seminar was just letting out when Spock arrived, but Kirk was not among its chattering throng of students. Eventually he stopped a pair of passing cadets to ask about the man's absence, and the looks he got could only be described as baffled.

The girls glanced at each other, then Spock, then back at each other, as confused as if Spock had asked them the particulars of warp core mechanics.

"Well sir," one offered hesitantly, "Mr. Kirk's pretty busy. He's usually the first to leave, so you've got to come a little early if you want to catch him. I mean, he doesn't even hang around to answer questions."

"To ask questions," Spock corrected her absently, already planning the best method of locating the cadet.

"…No sir," the second girl corrected, shy but firm. "To answer questions."

Spock's attention turned to her fully for the first time. Large gray eyes behind even larger glasses, she was pretty but did not strike the Vulcan as someone with whom a man like Kirk would likely dally. "It would be the responsibility of your instructor to answer any questions you might have," he explained as simply as he could. Both girls scowled, though he wasn't sure why. "If Cadet Kirk has been taking advantage of—"

"No," they both snapped. A exchanged glance of embarrassed humor allowed their emotions to settle. Then the first, slightly taller and without glasses to hide her brown eyes, said again. "No. Sir," she added hastily. "Mr. Kirk wouldn't ever take advantage of his students in any capacity."

Both Spock's eyebrows shot toward his hairline.

"His students," the second girl emphasized. "We're the junior class, sir. Our instructor was killed during that big mess a few months back. Mr. Kirk started as an interim instructor until someone else could be found, but he ended up being so good at it that the Academy didn't bother."

"Our class test scores have been up an average of six percent," the first said defensively, "so if you're here to suggest he isn't doing his job—"

"He is still a cadet," Spock pointed out. "Teaching an upper division elective seminar reserved for students with a programming specialty is not, in fact, his job."

The girls scowled again, shifting their books and assorted PADDs in a jumble of motion than was more frustrated than it was necessary. "It is his job," the first insisted. "We've all had to step into roles not meant for us. I've been programming alongside senior analysts for nearly two weeks now. That shouldn't technically be my job either, but as a surviving Starfleet cadet, it is, and it will be until our numbers can support our efforts again. So excuse me for arguing with you, Commander. But it is his job. And he'd doing it brilliantly."

"Come on," the second girl urged, tugging her friend's elbow. "We'll never figure out Mr. Kirk's assignment if we don't start working on it now."

"Yeah," she agreed, turning her back on Spock with deliberate intent. "Let's get out of here."
Well. Not quite as successful an encounter, but productive nonetheless. Kirk had developed responsibilities to and supporters in the junior class over the last three months, which Spock had not expected.

Ah. That Kirk factor again. There was a definite pattern emerging.

Spock spent the next several hours combing through the Academy for anyone who knew where Kirk was. Most of his encounters resulted in people who knew where the cadet had been, but not where he would be.

("Kirk? Oh, yeah, he was here. He instructs most of the beginner-level combat tactics courses. Kind of a think-or-sink situation with him. But he left, like, fifteen minutes ago."

"You just missed him! He usually volunteers to assist with the flight simulations for another hour or so, but I guess he's busy with something else today. You know that one, always go-go-go!"

"His study group just let out. The man's a walking library, I swear. If you'd been here a minute ago —"

"Oh, no, he had to skip this week's meeting. Chess can't be a priority in these times, after all!"

"No, man, he doesn't attend this class anymore. Are you nuts? Sir. He and the division chair have lunch once or twice a week in the cafeteria. He explodes her brain with all the stuff he knows that no one ever expected him to and she clears him to volunteer in engineering. It's been tradition for months. We all eavesdrop, 'cause sometime he can trick her into telling what's on the next test. You've never seen so many engineering students in the caf for vegan day.")

It should have been frustrating. Somewhat contrarily, Spock was fascinated. Every fruitless conversation left him feeling as though he'd been given another clue, and by lunchtime his metaphorical hands were filled with the unexpected trove of a dozen interactions. After one last inquiry (a young man who flushed brightly and stammered, "Mr. Kirk? Oh I don't, uh… I don't really talk to him. He's, er…well, he's Kirk, y'know. But it's awesome when he fills in for my database reconstruction class. Those are the best days."), Spock abandoned the chase and took his lunch in the quiet desert garden that remained a haven to him.

Who would have expected such growth in only three months? Who could believe it? Was this well-respected pillar of Starfleet Academy really the same man who had once mocked and desecrated one of its simulations? Had this Kirk been in that angry cadet the entire time? And if so, which Kirk was the truest representation of who he would become?

How had such a puzzle existed for so long without Spock noticing it?

"Commander Spock! When did you get back?"

Something in Spock almost wanted to smile, because here was that Kirk factor again. "Cadet Kirk," he greet placidly as the object of his search wound his way along the delicate garden paths to stand grinning before him with that enormous satchel slung across his shoulders. "I returned only today."

"It's good to see you," the cadet observed, taking in the Vulcan's health with a brief glance. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Indeed. Of the several sights surveyed, two would be appropriate, though one is preferable to the other." Spock collected details of Kirk's physical self as more clues for later deconstruction: His wounds from the Nero mission were healed, though the way the fabric of his Academy shirt rested over his left elbow suggested a layer of bandages. Interesting. Other than that, the cadet appeared as
bright and bold as ever, eyes wide and blue and clear.

If Starfleet had to have a face to give the media, they could have done much worse than James Kirk.

"What makes it preferable?" Kirk asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Spock glanced away from him. "The planet's surface temperature and humidity are nearly a ninety-three percent match to what Vulcan's were."

"Oh. So why don't you all just settle there then?"

"That is classified," the Vulcan admitted carefully. "But it is an issue with which the Admiralty is well equipped to deal."

Kirk grinned again. "Man, the way you talk is amazing." When Spock's bearing became a degree colder, Kirk laughed. "No, it's a compliment. I've been learning a lot about Vulcans lately, so I'll probably give a warning before I start messing with you."

"...Indeed."

"So!" Kirk clapped his hands once, rubbing them together in an excited fashion. "Enough with these pleasantries. What's up? The gossip mill's working overtime today," he clarified when Spock ticked an eyebrow. "Apparently you've been looking for me?"

Spock's expression blanked even more than usual before his dark eyes dropped to the last remnants of his afternoon meal. "Yes," he confirmed at length. "Admiral Barnett asked that I find you."

"Oh?" Kirk appeared to puzzle through a mental list of why, exactly, Barnett would want that. "I'm stumped," he decided. "Barnett doesn't usually like talking to me if he can avoid it. I think I give him headaches or heartburn or something. Bones says I'll kill him eventually, but I'm betting I'll grow on him before that."

"The admiral did not send me after you for his sake," the Vulcan said, lifting his eyes again. "He sent me after you for my own sake. In order to reacquaint myself with the daily activities of the Academy, which he professed to be greatly altered since my absence, he suggested I observe your routine."

Kirk visibly startled. "He what?"

"I expressed a similar disbelief," Spock admitted.

"Why'd he do that?"

"I could not reasonably attempt an answer. His methods are quite illogical."

For some reason, that made Kirk grin again. "Well, whatever. Here we are then. He crossed his arms, looking thoughtful. "So do you want me to make something up for Barnett when he asks, or are you actually okay with tagging along?"

Spock hesitated. "While I am unclear as to what or why we would be tagging—" He paused to let Kirk laugh. "I would not be...opposed...to following Barnett's order. Providing, of course, I will not be in the way."

"Course not," Kirk agreed pleasantly. "It'd probably be better to start fresh tomorrow, but my schedule's pretty crazy of a Wednesday, so be warned."

"Mr. Kirk!"
Kirk lifted his eyes skyward for a moment before turning a grin on the trio of first year cadets who trampled the garden to reach him. "Hey, respect the foliage, kids."

The three looked sheepish for a moment before remembering themselves. "Mr. Kirk!" the only boy began in a pleading tone. "We've been working on that engineering problem Mr. Scott gave us all day, and we're completely stuck! He won't teach us to swear in Gaelic if we don't figure this out by dinner! Can you help us?"

"Here's a bribe!" one of the girls added, holding out a large cup of coffee.

"Let me finish with Commander Spock and I'll see what I can do," Kirk said, accepting the coffee with a grin. He drew a deep, appreciative lung-full of the heady aroma. "But Scotty's a lot smarter than I am," he warned the cadets, "so no promises."

…Scotty?

The cadets grinned to each other, trading covert hand gestures of success when Kirk turned his back on them.

Ah. Apparently Kirk had made more of an impression on the lower years than previously anticipated.

"I have assorted nonsense to cater to for the rest of the day," Kirk said with a motion to the giggling trio, "so I've gotta head out. How about we meet here tomorrow at 0700?"

The cadets stilled, looking between Kirk and Spock with wide eyes. Kirk rounded on them immediately. "None of that!" he ordered. "You leave Commander Spock alone, alright? He never did anything to the rumor mill to deserve that kind of gossip. Okay?"

The cadets visibly struggled to contain themselves. "Yes sir," they managed at last.

Kirk looked skeptical but nodded. "So," he repeated to Spock. "0700?"

"Agreed," the Vulcan replied immediately. It was only after Kirk and his entourage had gone that Spock began to wonder if crazy of a Wednesday might not be a poor way to start his observations.

It was even later when he considered that perhaps he was not the only one who possessed curious speech patterns.
When Spock arrived at the garden at exactly 0700, Kirk was already waiting for him, the sling bag across his shoulders, a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a PADD in the other. He manipulated the touch-screen using his thumb for a few seconds before noticing Spock's presence, at which point he looked up with a large grin.

"Good morning," the cadet greeted, shoving the PADD into a side pocket of the bulging satchel. "Ready to get started?"

"Indeed," Spock agreed placidly, hands resting at the small of his back. "What is the first order of business?"

"Well, see," Kirk admitted, motioning vaguely with his coffee, "that's why Wednesdays are so crazy. I've only got two standing appointments, and they're hours apart."

"May I inquire after the nature of these appointments?"

"Admiral Archer takes a block of my morning." Kirk pulled a different PADD from the zippered pocket that ran the length of the bag's back, scrolling through a few pages before handing it to Spock. "It's kind of a brunch timeframe, from 1000 to 1145. What I do then isn't..." He motioned again, with his free hand this time, as though to pull the appropriate phrase from thin air. "The appointment isn't exactly essential to Starfleet's operation, so if you have somewhere else to be around then, I completely understand. In fact, I encourage it."

Spock studied Kirk for a quiet moment before glancing down at the PADD. It was the day's schedule, huge blocks of empty space broken by a section marked ARCHER and another at the end of the day, 2100 to 2300, designated CREW. "To what does this second appointment refer?" he asked, relinquishing the PADD. His hands gravitated to their usual resting place as he catalogued vague embarrassment on the cadet's face.

"That's...not exactly Academy business either," he hedged.

Spock waited him out.

"Alright," Kirk sighed after only a small handful of seconds. "So every Wednesday, a bunch of the cadets who served on the Nero mission get together and try to drink Scotty under the table. We can't, by the way."

"You attend this meeting every Wednesday?" the Vulcan wondered, trying to understand Kirk's logic. Did he know all those cadets had requested to serve with him? Was it an attempt to ingratiate himself?

"When I can," Kirk agreed. "Apparently Chekov pouts when I have to miss, and Uhura bugs me about it for days afterwards because he's got a really effective pout, so it's easier in the long run to just be there and avoid the fallout."

Faced with a statement like that, Spock hardly knew where to begin. Pouting Russian geniuses and Uhura willingly and routinely sharing a meal with Kirk? "If I may," he attempted at last.

Just then, the distinctive buzz of a communicator wailed from Kirk's bag. The cadet stuffed his PADD back in its pocket, rummaging for the source of the noise. "Kirk here," he called, flipping the unit open.
"Mr. Kirk!" an older female voice crowed in a chipper British accent. "Prompt as usual!"

Kirk grinned. "I do my best, Commander Pearson."

"Quite right! Listen, spot of bother here in the AV labs with a new program we got from one of those trial-basis civilian contracts. Wondered if you couldn't pop by for a tick, have a quick peek at the code before our communications cadets take a crack at it. I know it isn't your specialization, but you've been such help lately I thought I might at least ask."

"I'll head over right now," the cadet promised.

"Good man! Pearson out, then."

"So it begins," Kirk laughed with a grin for Spock.

It took him less than an hour to locate and correct the coding error leading to Commander Pearson's program malfunction, during which time Kirk received and scheduled an additional three service calls.

("The engine's kind of making a put-put-put when it should go just, like…vrrr. I called the engineering department, but you know how backed up they get these days. Do you have a minute?"

"Since the tech aids are booked solid for the next three lifetimes, we tried to troubleshoot it ourselves. Now there's just this blue screen. Do you have some time later?"

"Then the whole unit burst into flame. I don't suppose you could give it a once-over?"

"And that," Kirk said succinctly as he ended the most recent comm for help, "is why Wednesdays are crazy."

"Have the actual repair and service departments collapsed in my absence?" Spock wondered as they made their way toward the simulations hanger. What sounded like a cascade failure in the cooling systems had caused the inoperability of several entry level simulations the freshmen class needed to prepare for exams. Instructors and students alike were panic stricken as finals loomed close.

"Most of the really good techs have been reassigned to Starships until cadets can be graduated into their positions," Kirk explained, filling another slot in his previously loose schedule. "This Wednesday thing is my own fault, anyway."

"In what capacity?"

Kirk grinned at the phrasing. "Well, right before you left, when personnel was kind of thin on the ground, a bunch of us started to just fix things when they went haywire instead of putting in work orders. We're all regretting that now, of course, since it snowballed into shit like Wednesday." He shrugged a little sheepishly. "The Academy's gotten shameless about squeezing every last drop out of anyone stupid enough to volunteer services. It's kind of horrifying and amazing at the same time. I mean…damn. Talk about utilizing resources." He nudged his elbow into Spock's as they walked, grinning when the Vulcan glanced at him. "I wouldn't be surprised if even you got sucked into the cross-departmental helping game before long, you poor unsuspecting untapped resource."

Before Spock could do more than quirk an eyebrow, the communicator chirped again.

Kirk rolled his eyes and answered with a brief, "Kirk here."

"Kirk, my boy! I've heard you've got an extra shadow today."
The cadet smirked at Spock. *Told you so.* "I do, sir. Commander Spock is with me by Admiral Barnett's order."

"Very good. I don't suppose you would loan him to the senior chemistry lab...? Temporarily, of course. One of the instructors is running late today and we could use a proctor for her exams. I wouldn't normally bother Commander Spock, but our division's a bit rundown with the flu today. It's just for a moment, an hour at the most."

Kirk looked questioningly at Spock, who inclined his head a degree in agreement. "I wouldn't exactly call it loaning," the cadet relayed, "but Commander Spock is on his way now."

"Wonderful! We'll return him in perfect working order before you even notice he's gone. We won't even need to mention it to Admiral Barnett, hmm? Very good! Stevens out."

"I guess time's up for now," Kirk observed, shifting his bag. "Good luck escaping the chem lab."

"I am quite familiar with the specific requirements of proctoring a fellow instructor's exam," Spock said mildly. "My presence should not be required beyond the timeframe of a single class period, at which point I will endeavor to continue my observations of your Wednesday. Unless," he qualified with a slightly challenging glance, "you have nothing further to show me?"

"Oh no," Kirk laughed, "Wednesdays get much worse than this."

"Then after my appointment," Spock promised, "I shall find you."

"Feel free to try." The cadet glanced at his watch. "If you get loose anywhere between 1000 and 1145—which, by the way, I wouldn't put money on—I'll be at Admiral Archer's residence."

"For the appointment that is not essential to Starfleet's operation," the Vulcan recalled.

"Yeah." Kirk sighed. "And let me say right now how absolutely thrilled I am that you, of all people, might bear witness to it." He shook his head to dismiss the topic. "Anyway, Archer's place is your best bet for catching me. If we miss each other after that, well..." He arched an ironic brow, lifting his busy communications unit to wiggle it slightly. "You could always comm me."

"I doubt very much I will be required to resort to such measures," Spock observed, "but I will nevertheless bear it in mind."

Kirk opened his mouth to respond, rolling his eyes skyward instead when his comm unit chirped again. "Later," he reiterated, grinning at Spock one last time. He flicked the buzzing device open with practiced ease as he jogged away. "Kirk here."

At barely half past eight in the morning, with the majority of the campus only now rousing for the day, *crazy of a Wednesday* seemed an unusually prolific sort of understatement.

Admiral Archer's residence sat on a plot of land reserved for high-ranking Starfleet officials. The house itself was rather smaller than many of the other nearby accommodations, resulting in more undisturbed land. As most of Starfleet knew, Archer used the additional free acres to breed dogs. He'd gone so far as to build an entire kennel in his backyard for the sole purpose of whelping beagles, which Spock knew intellectually but could not understand.

Another thing Spock did not understand was why, exactly, Cadet Kirk spent one and three-quarters hours with Admiral Archer on a day as busy as his Wednesday appeared to be. Especially since Kirk himself admitted the appointment was non-essential to Starfleet operations. What could possibly
The answer was puppies.

At 1120, Spock found Kirk in the yard behind Archer's kennel, surrounded by half a dozen young, wriggling beagles, all vying for his attention. He stuck his hand in a pocket, producing a selection of treats he used to coerce the pups into a series of commands that they obeyed readily, if sloppily.

"Not what you were expecting, I'll bet."

Spock turned to discover Admiral Archer standing at his side, eyes on Kirk and the young dogs. "Owing to a lack of established situational parameters," the Vulcan corrected blankly, "I had no expectations upon my arrival, sir."

"Still," the admiral insisted, smiling faintly as one of the dogs squirmed onto its back by Kirk's leg, demanding a belly rub. When he knelt to comply, the others rushed him in a tumble of ecstatic yelps. "Puppies."

"...Indeed."

For a long moment, they watched in silence as Kirk regained control of the beagles through a masterful blend of firm commands and the offering of treats. "He's repaying a favor," Archer explained at last.

Spock glanced at him but didn't reply.

The admiral never took his eyes from his dogs. "The engineer Kirk picked up on Delta Vega was there because I put him there. Scott lost me my prized dog." Archer's mouth ticked in annoyance. "I'd have let that Scottish bastard freeze until doomsday if Kirk didn't want him so badly. 'Don't think of it as losing a beagle,' he tells me." Archer shook his head in exasperation as he recalled the memory. "Think of it as Starfleet gaining a Scotty. 'Ballsy son of a bitch. It's a wonder to me no one's killed him yet. I don't even like terriers,' he added to Spock with something like indignation.

...What did any of this have to do with James Kirk training beagle puppies?

Archer sighed, shaking his head again. "Kirk's got some kind of background in dogs, and I don't have the time lately to properly train the litter. So he suggested a trade. He'd train them to consistently obey basic commands, and I'd clear Scott for duty as chief engineer on the Enterprise. It's a good trade," he admitted, "if not quite as satisfying as the thought of Scott on Delta Vega."

After a few beats of silence, Spock settled his hands at the small of his back. "If I may make an observation, sir," he requested mildly. Archer inclined his head. "Regardless of any personal arrangements made between you and the cadet, the potential negative impact of this situation upon Starfleet likely outweighs any perceived benefits. The Academy has demonstrated a need for Cadet Kirk's skills that precludes his use as a dog trainer. Furthermore, Mr. Scott's own aptitude for engineering is much better utilized here than on Delta Vega, which logically demands his release from any punitive detail he might have previously been serving."

Archer faced Spock, his expression reflecting mild annoyance. "You've missed the point."

Surprised, the Vulcan met Archer's gaze. "Sir, I assure you that my observations in this matter are based upon the facts as you presented them and are therefore quite logical."

"Spock. I cleared Scott for duty aboard the Enterprise the day Kirk requested it."
"...Then it would appear, as you said, I have indeed 'missed the point'," Spock replied. "Perhaps you might enlighten me. Why is Cadet Kirk training canines when the Academy has need of him?"

Archer turned back to Kirk. "The problem with that boy," he said in a low voice, "is that he's something of a rare breed these days. He's very good at a lot of things we desperately need people to be good at right now. We're demanding more of him than any of his contemporaries, which isn't fair to him, and we know that the same way we know we can't afford to stop doing it. We also know that even though he's besting every challenge we throw at him, he's going to collapse if he doesn't get some space to breathe. The stubborn cuss just never schedules any. So when his psychotic doctor friend started complaining to the Admiralty about Kirk's workload, we took matters into our own hands." Archer glanced sidelong at Spock to see if the Vulcan could connect the dots on his own.

It wasn't strictly a logical situation, so the admiral wasn't quite surprised by Spock's continued lack of understanding.

"I make Kirk come here," Archer explained succinctly, "because dogs are therapeutic and calming. He has twice-weekly 'advisory' meetings with Pike for nearly the same reason. A person has to vent somehow. If pups and Pike are what it takes to keep that boy functioning at full strength, well... I don't mind his being here."

"I see." Though clearly Spock didn't, not quite. "Is the cadet aware of your underlying intentions? Or those of Admiral Pike?"

Archer shrugged. "Who knows? If he does, he hasn't said as much. Although I'd bet not. He hasn't protested coming here or seeing Pike, and if he ever got it into his head that we were 'wasting him time' with useless meetings, you can be sure he'd make noise about it."

"...I see," the Vulcan murmured, eyes trained on Kirk.

This time, Archer thought he just might.

Later, when the appointment was over and Spock walked with Kirk to the cadet's next distress call, the Vulcan had to restrain himself from a litany of questions regarding Kirk's interpretation of the situation with Archer. Kirk seemed aware of Spock's self-imposed reticence but couldn't appear to decide whether he wanted to break the silence or let it stand.

His struggle, somewhat predictably, didn't last long. "Alright," he sighed, adjusting the strap of his heavy bag. "I can hardly stand your suspense. What do you want to know?"

Which was all the permission Spock required.

"How did Admiral Archer come to know you had, as he put it, 'a background in dogs'?

The cadet hitched one shoulder in a careless shrug. "My first year, one of his dogs escaped. Malcolm," he specified with a curious half-smile, "his prized beagle. I found him and ended up keeping him a whole weekend before seeing the missing dog announcements. He learned some new tricks while I had him, and I guess it stuck with Archer. He let me visit the dogs starting then, but I only got a hand in training them over the past few months. Breeders tend to be finicky about stuff like that."

"Where did you acquire your proficiency at canine obedience programming?"

Kirk glanced away, mouth drawn into a thin, unhappy line. "It's something I picked up when I was younger."
Spock considered that response, turning it over thoughtfully. "From a breeder local to your place of birth?" he asked for clarification.

"No." Kirk's shoulders tensed as he seemed to draw in on himself. "There weren't any breeders in my hometown, and I wasn't born there. I just picked it up around. Anything else you wanna know?" he added in an obvious attempt to redirect the conversation.

Fascinating. Why would the cadet find such a mundane topic discomforting? Spock studied him through a covert sidelong glance for a long moment before replying. "...Is Mr. Scott aware that you procured his freedom from exile by agreeing to train a litter of beagles?"

Kirk shuddered. "No," he said immediately, glancing around to see if anyone on the commons had overheard. Spock's eyebrows migrated toward his hairline. "And you aren't gonna tell him, either."

"What would be the logic behind withholding the information from Mr. Scott? Human emotional bonds are often strengthened by such examples of devotion."

"I'd never live it down, that's why!" He motioned firmly with one hand, cutting through the sharing-is-caring idea with a decisive swipe. "Scotty and I can bond over something else. Like booze. That seems to be working so far."

Spock catalogued the cadet's expressions for later study as they moved across the campus at an increasingly brisk pace. "You are...quite emphatic about this."

Kirk frowned thoughtfully at the sidewalk, wondering which tactic would be most effective in making the Vulcan keep Archer's dogs under wraps. "Obedience training isn't exactly in keeping with the notorious badass angle I'm working here. In fact," he added with a winning smile as the perfect argument presented itself, "such conflicting reports regarding my behavioral patterns would probably just confuse people, and there's so much of that going on around me naturally that it'd be positively illogical to toss baby beagle training into the mix too. So let's just never speak of it again."

Spock lifted one eyebrow, leveling a doubtful sidelong glance on the cadet.

Kirk stubbornly maintained his charming smile.

They might have continued on that way indefinitely had a small gaggle of second year cadets not noticed them and called, "Mr. Kirk!" with obvious relief.

"Ha!" Kirk crowed, grinning at Spock as though he'd won something. Then he turned his dazzling expression on the cadets, who faltered to a man under the undivided attention of those blue eyes. "Hey kids. What's up?"

"Uh..." The ringleader glanced his friends, obviously struggling to remember his initial problem. He blinked with a thoughtful frown, then started in recollection. "Oh yeah!" His expression turned pleading and desperate. "We have a Theories of Command Structure final on Friday and the last three chapters of the text might as well be written in Greek. Can you help us?"

"We'll buy you lunch!" one of his friends added frantically.

Kirk turned to Spock, who was distracted by an incoming distress call from the science department. "Welcome to Wednesday," the cadet said with a grin when Spock glanced up. "Now that they know you'll respond, they'll probably keep you hopping. Tell you what," he offered, shifting the weight of his bag from one shoulder to the other, "why don't I comm you the location of tonight's dinner? You were part of the crew, after all. That way you can catch up with Uhura and everyone and I don't have to feel like I'm dragging you all over campus for no reason."
Spock visibly hesitated. It would be nice to speak with Uhura again, especially under relaxed conditions. But Dr. McCoy had also been part of the crew…

"Think about it," Kirk prompted, clapping a hand against Spock's shoulder in farewell. "Come on, kiddies," he continued to the cadets, corralling them toward the nearest eatery. "Let's go work out the best way to cheat the hell out of that final."

Though the younger cadets all snickered, Spock was shocked by the statement. Surely Kirk wouldn't discuss such a matter in front of one who had in recent memory triggered a formal investigation into his academic conduct!

Kirk glanced back at Spock only once, registering his vague alarm with a triumphant laugh. Spock realized he was being, as Humans might say, "messed with".

…So much for Kirk's promise of a warning.

After parting ways with Kirk, Spock's day descended into madness the likes of which he had never experienced. His presence, once established as fact, was demanded by a vast majority of the Academy's departments almost simultaneously. When Kirk's formal invitation to dinner arrived, Spock began to use it as a kind of shield to save him from further hours of endless multitasking.

"My presence is required elsewhere during that time period. Apologies."

"I must decline your request to assist in fungi cultivation. I have a previous engagement."

"A long-standing invitation prevents me from tutoring your entire class on the finer points of basic mathematics, but perhaps you might turn your attention to the textbook that has been in your possession for the entirety of your tenure at this academy."

Due in whole to the Kirk factor, the dinner was neither where nor what Spock had expected. The directions led him to a hanger deep in the heart of the engineering department's territory. Inside, graduating cadets and a smaller selection of regular Starfleet officers were clustered around several metal picnic benches, food and drink spread in pockets where the population density was greatest. The once-crew of the Enterprise had broken itself along division lines, though several individuals floated group-to-group with haphazard ease.

One of these individuals was, of course, James Kirk. Even as Spock watched, Kirk wandered from a table made of security personnel to sit between Chekov and Sulu at a table that was heavily layered with large sheets of paper. He bent his head to listen to Chekov, nodding periodically as his bearing became gradually more excited. When Chekov fell silent, Kirk grinned broadly at Sulu, who matched his expression exactly. Then they all three leaned over the papers spread across the table, plotting in eager whispers.

It was…not an entirely settling scene.

Dr. McCoy, who was sitting with Uhura at an otherwise empty table, seemed to reach a similar conclusion. His eyes narrowed as he studied Kirk, and he set down his bottled drink with something alarming like malicious intent. Uhura glanced between McCoy and the trio of unsuspecting conspirators for a moment before covering her mouth with a single slender hand.

If she thought it would hide her amusement, she was badly misinformed.

McCoy, standing in a single irritated motion, either didn't see her or chose to ignore the enjoyment she was clearly deriving from the situation. He strode over to Kirk, looming behind him with both
hands planted on his hips, fury dark on his face.

Spock stepped to Uhura's side, nodding once to acknowledge her smiled greeting. When her smile melted into a smirk, they both turned their attention to the predicament building one table over behind Kirk's back.

"This is going to be great," Uhura murmured to him, low enough that only Vulcan ears would catch it. "Sulu and Chekov have been able to avoid getting on McCoy's bad side so far, but it was really only a matter of time."

Spock lifted an eyebrow and waited.

After a minute of eavesdropping, McCoy's expression had gone thunderous. It was Sulu who noticed him, pulling out of his intense discussion with Kirk and Chekov mid-word. His slack-jawed horror alerted the others, who turned immediately to locate the source. Kirk only shut his eyes on a long sigh, but Chekov threw his torso over the papers, using his crossed arms as an additional barrier, eyes wide and panicked in a pale face.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Kirk laughed brightly, giving Chekov's shoulder a fond shake. "Next week," he said, "we work on subtlety, okay? Relax. When we're in real trouble, you'll know it."

Chekov didn't look convinced, but he moved willingly enough when McCoy shoved him off the papers.

"Oh no," the doctor insisted as he studied whatever scheme now lay bare before him. He jammed a forefinger into Kirk's shoulder. "No, Jim. I don't know what you're planning, but no." Kirk grinned winningly at Chekov. "And, see, here's today's final lesson. Take notes," he suggested, "because this is what real trouble looks like."

"You don't get to have cohorts!" McCoy snarled, ignoring Kirk's aside completely. Chekov, meanwhile, was obediently taking notes while Sulu attempted to covertly roll up the evidence of their plan. McCoy swatted his hands away with a scowl, turning his head slightly to better inspect the document. "Why do you have maps of— Where is this? Is this topographical?" he demanded of Kirk. "Are you dabbling in topography now?"

Kirk made a dismissive motion. "Don't be silly, Bones. I have no interest in boring old topography."

"Oh." McCoy looked suspicious but relieved. "Good, 'cause I can't take—"

"This is ocean topography," the blue-eyed cadet clarified, sweeping an arm over the whole mess in illustration, "and Chekov looked it up when he was running weather reports. That's these printouts here, in case you were wondering."

"God damn it, Jim!"

"But it's such a great idea!" Kirk insisted, swinging one leg over the bench so he could spread his hands imploringly. "And Sulu's really excited about it, aren't you, Sulu?" Sulu grinned. It did nothing to assuage the doctor's ire. "Not to mention all the research Chekov's done. We couldn't just waste all that effort, could we?"

"This man is a walking disaster!" McCoy informed the other two cadets in furious accusation. "He nearly got himself killed crossing the commons in fair weather armed with nothing but a cup of coffee while surrounded by med students! A flea vaccine could do the job! He doesn't need your
Sulu and Chekov traded an uncomfortable glance, obviously reluctant to call the doctor's fury down upon themselves but equally unwilling to abandon their plan. "...You know, actually, Doctor," Chekov offered carefully, gathering up several printouts to offer them to Bones, "the research supports a fairly reasonable probability of success without injury."

Bones stared at the teen in outraged accusation. *Et tu, Chekov?* "You're enablers," he hissed threateningly, "and I won't have it!"

Kirk rose fluidly from his seat, wrapping an arm around his friend's shoulders to steer him away from his cringing "enablers." "You're just sore 'cause you didn't get an invite," he teased gently.

McCoy allowed Kirk to tow him back toward his original table but didn't relax so much as a single muscle.

"Come on, Bones," Kirk cajoled softly, squeezing him once before releasing him with a comforting thump on the back, "it'll be fun."

"It'll be *dangerous."

"You can bring your med bag," Kirk promised. He looked up, presumably with the intent of grinning at Uhura, but noticed Spock first. His expression lit in delight, blue eyes bright with a smile. "Spock!" he greeted, pulling McCoy onto the bench next to him as he sat.

Spock mirrored the action, taking his place by Uhura. "Good evening, Cadet Kirk."

"It's Jim here," Kirk insisted, grin shifting over to Uhura, who rolled her eyes.

But she was smiling, too, and Spock wondered where her animosity had gone.

Some of it, apparently, had migrated to McCoy, who scowled openly at Spock. "What's he doing here?"

Kirk looked at Bones askance. "Well," he said slowly, "you see, a couple of months back, Spock was part of this ridiculously dangerous Federation-saving mission wherein he served aboard the *Enterprise* with—"

"I know that!" McCoy growled. "But what's he doing here?"

Kirk frowned, projecting a general air of confusion. "This is a crew reunion, Bones. Spock is crew. I don't see the problem."

McCoy looked positively incredulous.

"Yes, and I must thank you for the invitation, Jim," Spock added before anyone could comment further. McCoy's incredulity turned into shock with the Vulcan's casual form of address. Uhura had to turn away to disguise her laughter. "On that topic, I would like to extend my gratitude that you would allow me to accompany you throughout your day. It was of great benefit to my understanding of the Academy's changes, though you experienced no similar advantage."

Kirk brushed the sentiment off with an easy wave of his hand. "Not everything has to be about benefit. Who knows?" He grinned, leaning his forearms against the table. "Maybe I just wanted someone to suffer through Wednesday with me."
"…You are aware, of course," Spock observed after a moment, "that the satisfied desire for companionship is, in itself, a benefit.

Kirk laughed. "See, that right there, that's exactly what I'm talking about. You're a riot."

McCoy frowned thoughtfully at his friend. "Just how much did you have to drink before I got here?"

"I'm surrounded by comedians," Jim remarked sagely to Uhura, who started to laugh again. He stood before anyone else could be antagonized. "I'm gonna get some food. Requests?" he offered.

When he was gone, Spock turned his attention to Uhura, ignoring the doctor as he muttered to himself crossly and rolled a cold bottle of beer between his hands. "I had not anticipated your opinion of Cadet Kirk undergoing substantial change while I was away," he said, the real question lurking quietly in his observation.

Uhura made a thoughtful sound, her gaze tracking slowly to where Kirk stood, arms loaded with food as he leaned over Scotty's shoulder, already deeply engaged in another schematics debate. He shifted his haul to point at a particular modification, hardly noticing when some of the food tumbled out of his hold.

"He isn't what I expected," she admitted abruptly. "When we got back to Starfleet Command after the Nero incident, I thought he'd trade on his role as the Federation's savior." She rolled her eyes at the memory of a thousand reporters from a dozen worlds all clamoring for an exclusive. "It wouldn't have exactly been difficult."

"No," Spock agreed mildly. Any of those who had served upon the Enterprise could have made a small fortune in personal appearances in the aftermath of Nero.

Not one of them had.

"And then, just after you left, we all started to realize how much trouble the Academy was in." Uhura's expression washed with pain. Her eyes dropped from Kirk, settling on the dented tabletop beneath her fingertips. "Most of our class died. A bunch of the student teachers and instructors, too. At first, no one really knew what to do, how to keep going with so much of the support structure gone, or how to just…get from day to day. Then," she recalled, a faint smile bowing her mouth, "in one of the command classes, the projector broke. Instead of calling for someone else to fix it, Kirk stood on his desk and did it himself. And instead of waiting for a substitute instructor who didn't quite know the subject material, Kirk moved through the lecture notes and taught it on his own. So his classmates started to do the same kind of thing all over campus." Uhura shrugged, lacing her fingers together as she lifted eyes dark with pride to Spock's. "It turned viral within a week. Every surviving senior cadet began standing up, stepping forward. I'm teaching most of the introductory xenolinguistics courses now."

"Admirable," Spock noted, looking over the senior cadets in the room. They were happy and boisterous as the cadets of his own class had been so close to graduation, but there was a gravity, of sorts, that lingered in their faces. They sat straighter, speaking to commissioned officers with self-assurance that usually took years to develop.

The results, no doubt, of Admiral Barnett's "baptism by fire." Spock wondered, with a deep sense of fascination, what kind of officers these cadets would become.

"It hasn't been easy," Uhura concluded with a slight shrug, "but it was…simple, in a way. There was a need, and it was one we could fill, so we did. I expected Kirk to start a rebellion when I realized how few instructors had survived." She laughed, shaking her head, and settled her eyes on the
grinning profile of James Kirk. "He started a revolution instead, and dragged us all in after him."

"Not like you didn't go willingly," McCoy snarked, pointing the mouth of his beer bottle toward her in a weary motion. "Not like we all didn't." He shook his head, taking a long pull off the bottle. When he set it down, it was empty.

Uhura tipped her head in acknowledgement. "So I wanted to know who this Kirk guy was," she added to Spock, referencing back to his original unspoken question, "that we would follow him so willing. The more I found out, the more curious I became, and then he started these crew reunion dinners…"

"And what," Spock posed delicately, "are your observations?"

McCoy scowled at him, but Uhura just made another thoughtful sound, cradling her chin in one delicate hand that she propped on the table. "Have you noticed anything…odd about him? Particularly in the way he moves?"

The doctor threw his hands in the air. "Oh not this again!"

Uhura flushed slightly, rolling her eyes and spreading her hands in a helpless gesture. "Come on, McCoy, you can't honestly expect me to believe him. There has to be another explanation. A rational explanation."

Spock's eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. "I presume we are speaking of Cadet Kirk?"

"Jim," McCoy stressed. "If you're going to be here, you have to at least call him Jim."

"Jim," Spock amended accordingly. He wondered why McCoy didn't make the same demand of Uhura but didn't press the matter. "What explanation has Jim given that does not meet your standard of rationality?"

"He speaks Russian," Uhura said, the words an accusation. "I overhead him talking to Chekov about a month ago, and he's completely fluent."

"Was he unwilling to relate the circumstances of his developing such a proficiency?"

"That's the problem!" Uhura spread her arms, expression incredulous. "He says he learned it in the circus!"

"There are circuses in Russia," McCoy pointed out, though he was smirking as he said it, making it seem like he was goading her more than anything else.

Uhura wrinkled her nose. "James Kirk did not run away and join the Russian circus. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"What is Cadet Chekov's opinion on the matter?" Spock asked politely. When they both stared at him, he lifted one eyebrow. "Surely a native Russian would be able to pinpoint the general region from which Cadet Kirk—Jim's instructor hailed."

"That doesn't help," Uhura sighed, swiping the beer McCoy dug out of a cooling unit by his feet. He scowled but fetched himself another. "I can break down the regional quirks myself. He's got bits and pieces of nearly everywhere he tosses in just when I think I've got it nailed. Frustrating." She took a long drink, making a soft sound of appreciation. "I'd ask Chekov straight out where he thought Kirk picked it up, but it wouldn't help."
"Is Cadet Chekov untrustworthy?" Spock asked.

Uhura laughed warmly. "No, he's a good kid. Kind of a sweetheart. But he'd say the sky was green if Kirk told him to."

"Jim would never ask Chekov to lie for him," McCoy insisted, frowning at his beer.

"How can you be sure of that?" Uhura wondered.

McCoy smirked, tipping his bottle in a tiny salute. "Because Chekov would say the sky was green if Jim told him to."

"So we can't ask Chekov," Uhura repeated, lifting her bottle in acknowledgement of McCoy's point, "which is why I thought I'd see if you noticed anything, Spock. Because he wasn't part of a Russian circus. He wasn't," she insisted when McCoy opened his mouth.

"Let's ask him," the doctor suggested, smirking again.

Uhura rolled her eyes. "He isn't going to say anything new, and what he usually says isn't convincing me."

"Yeah," McCoy agreed, twisting in his seat to scan for his wayward friend, "but your face when he's going off in Russian is just— " He cut himself off with a long and impressive string of expletives.

Uhura followed his gaze and winced. "Damn," she sighed. "Them again. Isn't he off duty for the night?"

"With them," McCoy snarled, such genuine hatred on his face that Spock was almost startled, "he's never off duty." He shoved himself away from the table, stalking across the room.

James Kirk stood by the farthest doorway of the hanger, arms still filled with food, face blank as he read a PADD given to him by a black-clothed courier. When he was finished, he nodded once, and the messenger snapped a quick salute before leaving.

McCoy cornered Kirk moments later, arms crossed to contain his fury as he scowled. Jim shrugged somewhat helplessly. They returned to Spock and Uhura, McCoy radiating impotent rage while Kirk merely looked resigned.

"Sorry, guys," he said, dumping his food and drink on the table. "Looks like I gotta go. Duty calls. Sulu," he added in a louder voice, "Chekov!" When they glanced over, he grinned, a cocky expression. "Tomorrow, 0600?"

They returned the grin, more excited than anything else, and Chekov offered a thumbs-up.

Jim gripped McCoy's shoulder, giving it one firm shake. "Think positive, man. Sometimes I just sit around."

McCoy scowled, shrugging off the comfort. "And sometimes you tear ligaments. Or get concussions. Or lose half your weight in blood."

Kirk offered a cockeyed smile. "That's why you think positive." Before anyone could retort, Jim was gone, jogging from the building with his expression hidden by shadows.

The doctor swore again, in several languages, some of which even Spock didn't recognize. Uhura winced twice.
"He'll be okay," she murmured when McCoy wound down.

The doctor glared at her for a beat. "He's gonna get himself killed," he snarled. "He'd just better not come crawling to me what it happens!" Then he stood from the table in a jerky motion. "I'm gonna get my kit ready." When he stomped away, the cloud of fury around him was so obvious that cadets tripped over each other getting out of his way.

After a thoughtful pause, Spock regarded Uhura. "May I inquire after the nature of Jim's apparent predicament?"

Uhura bit her lip, picking at the label on her beer. "He's helping out." She wrinkled her nose as though smelling something foul. "Filling a need. We're not really sure with what because it's so classified he can't even hint about it, but... Sometimes," she explained with a frustrated shrug, "when he comes back from helping them, he's injured. Not all the time, but enough. Whoever or whatever they are, they're dangerous."

"If the requests are known to be potentially detrimental to his health," Spock asked, "why does Jim not simply refuse them?"

For a long moment, Uhura was silent, face pinched with worry as she tore the label from its bottle. "Because at the beginning," she whispered, "he promised to help everyone who needed it. Anyone who asked. And these people...they keep asking. So he won't refuse them." She looked up at Spock, shrugging with a painful expression. "He can't. Because he promised."

Occasionally, that Kirk factor was...quite a terrible phenomenon.
Thursday dawned gray and windy. Nyota, who had been an early riser all her life, sheltered from the threatening rain in a small café that opened only a few minutes before she arrived. Armed with a strong latte, a warm pastry, and a large stack of student papers, she settled in for a quiet morning of mindless grading. A few minutes shy of six o'clock, an unexpected figure sat gracefully across the table from her. For anyone else, it might have been startling.

But Nyota knew this figure, knew him better than almost anyone else alive, and smiled gently. She finished the assignment under her pen before lifting her eyes to his. "Good morning, Spock."

He inclined his head. "Good morning, Nyota."

"How did you find me?"

A sideways tilt of his head drew her attention to the café, slowly filling with the bleary-eyed cadets who intended to combat sleep deprivation by consuming inadvisable quantities of caffeine. "This is the only establishment on the Academy's grounds that keeps hours as early as yours."

Nyota laughed, so pretty a sound that many surrounding cadets turned to find its source. "I thought it might be something like that. They have an excellent selection for vegetarians here. Why don't you join me for breakfast?"

"A most logical suggestion," Spock agreed. His general air of competence in a building populated by half-brain-dead students meant he returned with food well before most anyone else could even decide what the menu said. Nyota used her coffee to hide her smile.

They spent several minutes in companionable silence before Nyota set her empty mug down with a decisive, "So!" Spock met her expectant look with a lifted brow. "How did your mission go?"

"The results were satisfactory."

"Mmm." Nyota smiled at the busboy when he hustled by with a replacement drink for her. He flushed violently and tripped back to his post, her empty mug cradled reverently in his palms. "He'll do that all morning if I let him," she observed fondly. "And these don't usually come with free refills."

Clever Nyota. It was one of the reasons Spock enjoyed her company so much.

"'Satisfactory' isn't exactly the Vulcan stamp of approval," the Communications cadet pointed out, nudging him further along her chosen topic of conversation. "Did something go wrong?"

Spock hesitated a moment, glancing out the window at darkening skies. "There is a point of contention regarding the world best-suited to support the Vulcan colony," he admitted at length, expression blank.

But Nyota was a prodigiously talented Communications cadet and read his reaction in every line of his body. She made a neutral sound, lifting her mug so it would hide most of her expression as she studied him.

"I cannot speak of it," the Vulcan added firmly. "It is classified."

"I see."
It was entirely possible that she did see, and far more than she should, so Spock moved the conversation onto safer ground by asking, "How have you been, Nyota?"

To anyone else, it would have sounded almost cold. Nyota heard the faint note of concern underscoring his words, picked up hesitance in the elegant line of his shoulders, and slight agitation in the way he manipulated his plastic café utensils. She set her mug down. Because she didn't want to press him when he was so worked up, she satisfied her human need for contact by cradling her cheek in one hand propped on the table. "I'm fine, Spock. Really," she added when his dark eyes lifted to hers.

Something vaguely guilty crept into Spock's gaze before he glanced away.

Nyota smiled, charmed by his reluctance to cause her pain. She brushed just the fingertips of one hand against the back of his wrist to give him a taste of her unyielding fondness for him. Her emotions startled and comforted him in equal measure. "I've been studying interpersonal relationships since before I can remember," she reminded him gently, withdrawing her hand. "Which is not, you'll forgive me for mentioning, your strongest suit. I knew well before you did that we didn't fit each other on a romantic level. Sometimes things work out that way. It honestly doesn't bother me."

"…I see."

"You don't," she countered easily, sitting back with another smile. She lifted her mug to her lips, keeping it close by propping her elbows on the arms of her chair. "But you will."

"How are your classes?" he asked, so deliberately apropos of nothing that she had to laugh softly. "If you mean my actual classes, I'm done. Most of the senior cadets were tested out of their programs early," she explained with a slight shrug. "To free us up for more volunteering. The only set still studying is the Command track. Their last oral is today. I hear it's a monstrous thing," she added, lowering her eyelashes to shield her observation of his reactions. "Comprehensive to a degree that makes most of us queasy just thinking about it. They have to go in one at a time, like an execution. There aren't a lot of Command cadets left, but the few I've seen are complete wrecks. Apparently, one wrote a will."

"Cadet Kirk seemed undisturbed at dinner last night," Spock observed.

Nyota suppressed a smirk. So Spock did notice Kirk, in passing at the very least. And Kirk had appeared genuinely please by Spock's presence at the reunion… Maybe that mutual awareness she'd observed on the Enterprise wasn't wholly a fluke after all. "Kirk's pretty good at bullshitting his way around genuine emotional reactions, so I wouldn't base my conclusions on anything he actually says or does. What's important with him is what isn't said or done. You haven't had a lot of time to observe him," she allowed with a generous salute of her mug, "but he was too relaxed last night. Sulu and McCoy noticed it too, which explains not only Sulu's sudden desire to do something stupid but McCoy's willingness to go along with it."

Nyota could be positively baffling with her observations, sometimes. "Dr. McCoy was quite vocally distressed by whatever plan Cadets Sulu and Chekov created for Cadet Kirk," the Vulcan pointed out.

"But he didn't stop them," Nyota replied, tilting her head to a most becoming angle. The same busboy appeared by her shoulder with another latte, which she accepted with a grateful laugh. "If McCoy was really against the idea," she persisted, "he would have made sure it failed. Instead, he grumbled and whined—as was expected of him—and allowed Sulu and Chekov to continue with their planning. His permission was given in his silence." She shrugged with a pleasant smile when he
frowned at her convoluted reasoning. "Sometimes the body speaks louder than words, which is why you have to pay such close attention to both."

Spock finished his breakfast, setting his fork across the plate with a carefully precise motion. "I must defer to your expertise in this matter," he commented blandly, eyes still on the plate. "I detected nothing save the creation and subsequent admonishment of an unspecified but dangerous plan."

"Those three have been a coalition of unspecified but dangerous plans since they met," Nyota sighed, shaking her head. "Without McCoy, they would have killed themselves months ago. I hope they get assigned to the same location. They make something of an unstoppable force."

"They have not received their first assignments yet?" Spock asked, startled.

Nyota cocked a curious half-smile. "None of us have," she admitted.

"Training for your specified posts should begin next week," the Vulcan pressed, brow furrowing slightly in thought. "Has Starfleet given a reason for this unusual delay?"

"Not that I've heard." She shrugged when he turned his attention back to her. "For all we know, they plan to keep us on for a few months to help with more projects throughout the Academy."

"A most illogical use of resources."

Nyota shrugged again, a little helplessly. "We're all trying our best not to let it freak us out. But there's still tomorrow. I mean, who knows?" She lifted her mug, studying the foamy surface as though it contained her much longed-for assignment. "Maybe they'll come today."

It was a weary statement, spoken as though it were a personal mantra. Spock wondered how deeply the lack of a clear future would affect the cadets who fought so hard to stand under Nero's blow. It seemed cruel of Starfleet to demand so much of them and yet refuse them so small a prize. His thoughts moved to James Kirk's particular efforts to help Starfleet stride boldly into the uncertain future, and he experienced an odd pang of something alarming like resentment on the cadet's behalf. Would Starfleet deny even Kirk?

Then he remembered Admiral Archer's strange comments about couriers with cameras and wondered if maybe these cadets weren't all waiting for the same orders.

Nyota watched the trace evidence of Spock's thought process, her mouth curving into a smug little smile as she pinpointed the moment his examination of facts most likely turned to a certain Command cadet. She wasn't wrong about them; it wasn't possible. "I don't suppose I could trouble you for a favor?" she asked casually, waiting for his attention to jump back to her. "It shouldn't take more than half an hour."

"That should not be a problem," he consented. "I have no duties to demand my attention until 1100 hours, provided I am not called upon as I was yesterday."

"Oh!" She laughed. "Kirk pulled you into that ridiculous Wednesday mess, did he?"

Spock's eyebrows gravitated toward his hairline. "The cadet did not, as you suggest, 'pull me into' anything. The requests for aid I received were quite outside his field of knowledge and came directly to me. I responded as any responsible Starfleet officer would, and without the suggestions or input of Cadet Kirk."

"Spock," she said fondly, "all you have to do to prevent Wednesday is refuse the calls when they come in. That's what most of us did, because we can accept the fact that our schedules are crazy and
sometimes it isn't reasonable to run half way across campus to fix other people's mistakes. You got sucked in by his example. Annoying, isn't it?" She turned to dig through a large messenger tote on the ground next to her before he could respond. "Here," she said, holding out a small white envelope. "This is for Dr. McCoy. It's my half of the drinks I stole last night. He didn't request it," she added when Spock's eyes darkened, "but I can cover myself. Would you deliver it to him? I have to head for my first class soon, and by the time that lets out he'll be doing rounds."

The Vulcan accepted her task wordlessly, tucking the envelope into a hidden pocket in his tunic.

Nyota smiled warmly. "You're the best." She turned that smile on the busboy when he appeared again. "I'm not done with this one yet," she laughed, tipping her mug at him.

He flushed darkly. "This one's, uh…fuller. And hot. …I'll just leave it here for you."

Spock took his leave before the situation became any more ridiculous.

Because McCoy was trained on the level of a senior medical officer, the Academy kept constant tabs on his location in case his skills were needed in a hurry. That was the only reason Spock was eventually able to locate him. The grouchy doctor sat, wrapped in a blanket to protect himself from the chill of storm winds with a full medical kit by his side, on a craggy stretch of beach that cupped the ocean in a secluded bay. Spock had never seen the area before, and from McCoy's disposition, it was unlikely to be a favorite spot of the doctor's either.

So why…?

Spock stepped up to the doctor's side, waiting to be noticed.

McCoy registered the Vulcan's presence almost immediately, then set about ignoring him with a scowl and hunched shoulders. His gaze was locked on the ocean, tracking something with manic intensity. Spock looked up with the intention of locating the source of McCoy's distraction.

And was thoroughly distracted himself.

Pavel Chekov stood in the shallows, pants rolled up to his knees with charts tucked under one arm and towels trapped in the opposite elbow, curls tumbling wildly around a pair of binoculars pressed to his eyes. The wind and a particular alignment of tides and natural reefs had combined to form a bay filled with large, swelling waves. These waves, that crashed and curled in an elegant display of nature's underlying violence, were being manipulated in a fashion Humans called "surfing".

By Kirk and Sulu.

Their boards were of a special and fairly modern design that made them exponentially more dangerous. With a particular foot motion, a sail was deployed along a small, flexible mast that allowed for a variation of the original sport, referred to most commonly as "wind surfing". Another foot motion retracted sail and mast, and the rider was free to "surf" a wave without the interference of the wind.

It was, objectively, a dexterous display of both athletic ability and split-second reasoning skills. The boards hurdled through the air when the sails were deployed, flipping and tumbling in an aerial ballet. When they touched the water again, they streamlined, sliding and curving, zipping through deadly tunnels of water that collapsed around them. All the while, the two men maneuvered their boards around each other as easily as any natural water mammal might, like a pair of otters playing together in the grip of a force they had known all their lives. On one hand, this made sense. After all, Sulu had been born in California and must surely have learned this skill over time.
On the other hand, Kirk was from Iowa.

Chekov was clearly entranced by the entire spectacle, given the way he hopped around and shouted whenever Kirk or Sulu displayed a particularly complicated skill. His papers were being stolen by the wind, one-by-one, and lost to the sea. He never noticed.

McCoy, meanwhile, was scowling darkly enough that Spock almost hesitated to draw that attention to himself.

In the end, though, he had a duty to Nyota. He discharged this duty by removing the envelope from its pocket, holding it out wordlessly just in front of McCoy's eyes.

The doctor's scowl deepened impossibly, and he snatched the scrap of white paper out of his line-of-sight with a disturbing amount of violence. "What is it?" he rumbled low in his chest.

"Cadet Uhura requested I deliver that as payment for the drinks she consumed last night."

McCoy snorted, stuffing the envelope—unopened—into a side pocket of his medical kit. "I told her a thousand times I don't need her credits, but she doesn't listen."

"No," Spock agreed mildly, hands tucked at the small of his back as he lifted his eyes to the brightly colored flashes of humanity among the waves, "she rarely does."

McCoy's mouth twisted bitterly. "Sort of like that idiot out there."

"If there is a legitimate danger to his health, would it not be wise to prevent him from participating in such an activity?"

"...You really don't know that kid at all, do you?" McCoy sighed, dragging a weary hand down his face. He hitched the blanket higher around his shoulders before replying. "Not that you care, but he's got the granddaddy of all oral exams today."

"I was aware."

McCoy glanced at him but didn't respond to the unexpected admission. "He's been stressed about it for weeks. Like anyone could tell with that damned grin. If he doesn't get a relatively healthy outlet to cope, he'll develop an ulcer before he's my age. So I let him pull stunts like this one, and he tries not to become my patient again. Stupid kid." He scowled again, pursing his lips. "At least he's good at this shit, even if it's way too dangerous for a man allergic to half the stuff we would normally prescribe to fix the inevitable clusterfuck."

"It is a most unusual talent," Spock observed.

The doctor's eyes flickered to him again. "Yeah, well. Jim's fulla those."

"So it would seem."

"Hell if I know where he gets 'em though. He's from Iowa. For now I just hope to God someone calls for his help before this ends in blood and tears and body bags."

Spock's eyebrows lifted. "That seems an overly dire prediction, Doctor. Especially as Cadet Kirk does appear quite adept at this...particular sport."

McCoy scowled up at him. "You're seriously gonna stand there when none of us are even on duty and call him Cadet Kirk? You call him Jim or you make yourself scarce. He doesn't need any more
"You did not express a similar opinion to Uhura," Spock pointed out, "though she consistently refers to him as Kirk."

"That's friendly banter and an inside joke. Not something you'd understand," he added with a miserable sneer as he settled more deeply in his blanket. "You don't call him Kirk because you're friendly. You say it because it's regulations." He motioned around the area vaguely. "It's the ass crack of dawn and we're on a beach watching Jim and Sulu attempt to kill themselves in new and interesting combinations while Chekov sends himself into a grand mal seizure of joy. This is a no-regulations zone."

Spock could form no reasonable retort. So, eyebrows lifted high, he turned his gaze back to the trio in question.

They watched the cadets surf without appearing to tire for nearly an hour before Jim's comm unit shrilled. McCoy dove for his bag, blanket billowing around him as he dug it out of its pocket. He leapt to his feet, waving the unit high above his head with something like triumph. Almost immediately, Jim and Sulu altered their courses, riding one last wave almost to the shoreline before paddling the rest of the way back in.

Chekov descended upon them the moment they were close enough, passing a towel to each as he babbled in an excited cross-breed of Russian and broken Standard. Jim responded to him earnestly, board under one arm, motioning freely with the towel clutched in the opposite hand. Sulu looked amused and wild, still riding high on the wave of adrenaline.

McCoy greeted the trio with a rapid-fire round of hyposprays designed to prevent their falling ill. Sulu and Chekov barely flinched. Jim flailed and cursed, fighting the doctor when he tugged at the collar of his wetsuit. For that, he got three hypos in addition to the original.

"Bones," he whined, rubbing his neck as he reached for his comm. "You do that on purpose!" Then he smiled at Spock, bright and warm against the backdrop of a stormy morning. "Hi, Spock! What brings you all the way out here?"

"A personal errand."

Jim waited for a minute, flipping his towel over one shoulder with a grin when Spock's only reaction to Jim's expectant stare was complete stillness. "Alright, whatever. Let's see who needs me today. Ah damn!" he cursed almost immediately, scanning the message. Sulu took Kirk's board without the other cadet's full attention ever turning to him. Both hands free, he shifted through the message's attached data files, a scowl darkening on his face. "Man, I told them not to mess with the program yet. It isn't ready!"

"Jim," McCoy warned him, "I have to change your dressings."

"What?" Kirk looked at his friend incomprenhensively for a moment before quirking half an impatient frown. "Bones, I don't have time for—"

"Make time," the doctor insisted flatly.

They engaged in a contest of wills. Jim conceded with a sigh, scrubbing both hands through his soaked hair. "Alright," he relented. "But can you at least wait until after I've showered?"

"Fine," McCoy responded immediately.
Kirk turned an apologetic smile on Sulu and Chekov. "Sorry, guys," he started.

Sulu, a board tucked under each arm with a towel slung haphazardly across his shoulders, grinned. "Don't bother. We get it. Right, Chekov?"

But Chekov was answering his own call to duty, chatting briskly in a language made mostly of complex mathematical equations.

"See?" Sulu added to Jim, who laughed softly.

"I'll see you guys later. Let me know when you get your assignments, okay? I'm curious as hell where they'll put you."

"Same to you," the pilot agreed. "Good luck on that oral!"

Kirk made a face and was gone, typing furiously on a PADD with McCoy grumbling alongside him.

"It's the best way to start a morning," Sulu observed to Spock.

Which was, interestingly enough, an accurate observation. It certainly wasn't boring, and it provided singular insight into the character makeup of not only James Kirk but also those few who seemed closest to his sphere of influence. All in all, a fascinating experience.

Clever Nyota.

James Kirk missed his test. Spock discovered this quite accidentally as he passed through the examination building on his way to a meeting with Admiral Barnett. The whole division was positively abuzz with such a juicy piece of gossip: Starfleet Academy's cornerstone, so overworked he couldn't make his own examination!

The truth was rather less thrilling. Jim's advisor, Admiral Pike, had suffered a slight medical complication that prevented his making the appointment. Per Starfleet regulations on the matter, Kirk's oral examination was postponed until 1400, when Pike would be able to attend.

Regardless of this rational excuse, something about the situation seemed…slightly disingenuous to Spock. So the Vulcan did the only logical thing and went to hunt down the cadet in question. Surely Jim would know the truth. Unfortunately, the last person seen with Jim was McCoy, forcing Spock to return to the doctor's apartment for directions to Kirk's current location.

McCoy's scowl when he opened the door was distracted, more thoughtful than irritated. He barely glanced at Spock before rolling his eyes and turning back into the housing unit. "They would send you. You came for that thing Jim's been working on, right?" he added over his shoulder, so obviously expecting Spock to follow that the Vulcan thought it only polite to comply. "Well you'll either have to come back later or wait, 'cause I don't know where Jim keeps it stashed when he isn't tinkering away and I'm certainly not bothering him for you."

"Where is Cadet Kirk?" Spock asked, trailing after the doctor with a placid expression that did nothing to communicate his curiosity. What was Kirk doing that McCoy would be reluctant to interrupt him? McCoy glared over his shoulder at Spock, prompting the Vulcan to amend his question: "Where is Jim?"

The doctor motioned to the sitting room with a jerk of his hand as he passed it to stalk into the kitchen. Spock glanced through the doorway, intending to follow McCoy to press him for further information. What he saw caused him to still, hands at the small of his back, only the direction of his
gaze giving any indication that his attention had been sidetracked.

Jim Kirk, wearing only loose gray sweatpants synched low on his hips, lay on a long couch in the middle of the room, stretched on his stomach with his right arm wrapped around the cushion pillowed under his cheek. His left arm hung off the edge of the sofa, hand curled limply on the hardwood flooring. A data PADD lay untouched just shy of his fingertips. The face that was usually so bright and full of challenge had softened to a degree Spock hadn't considered possible, free of the minute signs of stress that were so customary they went ignored. Large swaths of sterile cloth, wet with some kind of medicinal liquid, were spread over the entirety of his otherwise bare back.

He was asleep.

"If you wake him up, you'd better make damn sure they never send you to me for treatment."

Spock looked at McCoy, unable at first to process the threat. "I was under the impression Cadet Kirk—Jim had several important engagements today. Have they been canceled?"

McCoy scowled, pushing past Spock to approach Jim. He crouched by the couch, checking the bandages and what they covered with an inordinate amount of care. "Of course he has stuff to do," the doctor replied quietly. "He's Jim, after all. But the Admiralty and I have a working agreement about his workload, and they understand when I occasionally have to step in and save Jim from himself."

For a moment, Spock kept his silence, studying McCoy as he turned the particulars of that response over in his mind. "Admiral Pike is not the one who delayed the oral exam," he clarified at last.

The doctor stilled, an almost imperceptible hesitation. Then he ran his hand over the back of Jim's head, smoothing his hair gently. Sadly. "No." He stood, brushing his pants off with brisk agitation. "The all-purpose antibacterial that works best on him mixes well with a mild sedative. If he isn't tired, it barely registers. If he's worked himself up, it knocks him out. I sent a message to Pike as soon as Jim shut his eyes. He took care of the rest."

"A curious arrangement," Spock observed neutrally.

McCoy refused to turn his eyes from Jim. "Yeah, well. We all do what we have to, I guess. For Jim, that's shouldering the weight of an entire class of dead cadets. For the Admiralty, that's driving Jim until he can't run anymore, then turning a blind eye and shuffling his appointments when he's drugged to the gills."

Spock set aside the odd colloquialism, asking, "And for you?"

"For me," McCoy huffed, striding over to a medical kit sitting on a low coffee table, "that's beating this guy into submission as often as I can—which isn't often enough—and bullying the Admiralty into seeing reason when it comes to their expectations—which is like pushing rope and herding cats and nailing jello to a wall, all at once."

Sometimes, it was like McCoy wasn't even speaking Standard. "…I see."

The doctor snorted, producing from the bag a Tricorder that he used on Jim almost immediately. He looked both relieved and annoyed by the readings. "I doubt that very much, Mr. Spock."

Obnoxious medical professional. "Is Cadet Kirk even aware that he has missed his original testing time slot?"

Kirk answered that question by jerking out of his slumber, blue eyes brilliant as the dilated pupils
shrunk to pinpricks of black in the light of morning. He tried to push himself up, maybe to get his feet under him, or perhaps just to sit. His back injuries rendered such movement inadvisable. "What time is it?" he demanded without so much as a flinch, forearms propping his torso up even as his bandages began to take on a distinct pink tinge. Spock thought he was astonishingly alert for someone who had been oblivious to the world only moments previous.

McCoy looked furious as he stormed over. "Damn it, Jim, I just got the bleeding stopped! I told you surfing with unhealed wounds was a bad idea!"

The younger cadet ignored him, eyes swinging over to Spock. "I'm not late, am I? Do I still have time to make it?"

"You do," Spock acknowledged, since the doctor was thoroughly distracted shoving Jim down to check his injuries. Three long, slim gashes ran the length of his back, left shoulder to right hip, clean but a shade too deep for comfort. Whatever caused these marks had very nearly paralyzed or killed Jim. The doctor's agitation become suddenly more reasonable. "Your examination has been postponed to 1400 hours, owing to an unforeseen medical issue related to Admiral Pike."

Jim's eyes lifted to Spock's, a flare of concern rising underneath discomfort as McCoy poked and prodded his injuries. "Medical issue? Is he alright?"

"The admiral is well. It is likely administrative. Or perhaps," Spock added with an ironically thoughtful tilt of his head, "Admiral Pike attempted too many responsibilities without concern for his own wellbeing and was overwhelmed. He may have been subjected to an unplanned period of rest that conflicted with the original testing slot."

Kirk blinked, first at Spock and then at McCoy. "...Did he just scold me?"

McCoy subjected Jim to a hypo just to hear him yelp. "If he did, he has a damn good point. You can't just run yourself into the ground like this, Jim! There are consequences."

"Yeah." Jim twisted his arm to an odd angle to rub his neck where McCoy had administered the hypospray. "I'm beginning to see that." The doctor swatted the back of his head, and Kirk settled obediently into the couch cushions. He was bored within seconds. His eyes drifted about the room, lingering on an oddly located chest of draws shoved into one corner before landing on the Vulcan visitor again. He quirked a half smile. "Having a slow day so far, Spock?" His eyebrows curved suggestively. "Or maybe you're here for the show? Ow, Bones! Stop that!"

"He's here for your project," McCoy relayed after setting down his latest hypo. He began the last phase of patching Jim's injuries, layering self-adhesive bandages that were highly resistant to hard use and the elements. Spock kept his attention on Kirk's expression, studying his reaction to McCoy's comment.

Jim's brow furrowed thoughtfully. He pillowed his cheek on one folded arm to get a better line of sight on his friend. "No he's not," he said eventually.

McCoy scowled, stepping away. He shoved Jim's shoulder back down when the younger man attempted to sit up. "Stay," he ordered. "I'll take a few minutes for them to stick. And what do you mean, no he's not?"

"He can't be here for the project," Jim explained easily, head still resting on his arm as his sharp gaze moved between McCoy and Spock, "because I'm delivering it myself later today. Depending on the time, it might be near the top of my to-do list."
"You tricked me!" McCoy hissed to Spock, scowl black on his face.

Spock lifted one eyebrow. "You made your own assumptions, Doctor," he pointed out. "I merely refrained from correcting you."

"Hobgoblin," he snarled, shoving his equipment back in the med bag before hauling the entire mess from the room.

"I see you've made a good impression on Bones," Kirk commented at length.

"We do not appear to have complementary worldviews," Spock admitted.

Jim chuckled. "There you go with those speech patterns again. You must keep your division in stitches."

Stitches? "It is statistically improbable that I would ever cause physical trauma to the extent that—"

"It's just a saying." After another moment of silence, Jim wedged his arms under his torso, levering himself up a cautious degree at a time. His unusually extreme level of care in his movements seemed to indicate a reluctance to invoke Dr. McCoy's wrath by tearing bandages, which was understandable. Once he was nearly vertical, he shifted his feet to the floor and sat up, stretching one muscle group at a time. Then he peered curiously at Spock. "Why are you here, anyway?"

Spock glanced away.

He was spared formulating an answer by the timely return of McCoy. The doctor bore a tray laden with several sandwiches, a selection of vegetables, milk, water, and assorted nutrient supplements.

Jim quirked a crooked grin at the food. "Kind of slim pickings, Bones. You sure there's enough to go around?"

McCoy scoffed, dragging a small end table over by hooking one foot around its closest leg and tugging. He set the table and tray in front of Jim before crossing his arms with a demanding frown. "I've already eaten, and I'm sure the commander has somewhere else to be right now. This is for you."

Jim looked alarmed. "Bones, you can't possibly expect me to—!"

"All of it."

Spock quietly excused himself in the ensuing fallout.

"I would like to submit my official support for the decision to uphold Cadet James T. Kirk's field promotion to captain of the Starfleet flagship Enterprise."

Barnett grinned. "Got to you too, did he?"

Spock ignored the implication. "The cadet has shown remarkable and unprecedented growth in the past three months. Indeed, he has far surpassed what even the strictest instructors might have required of him, and in doing so has more than demonstrated his readiness to command a starship. Any assignment less demanding of his skills in such a time of need would be negligent on behalf of the Academy as a whole and the Admiralty in particular."

The admiral's initial response was a descending note whistled to express his amazement. "Wow. That's the best job he's done yet." Spock narrowed his eyes, which caused Barnett to smirk in
something like triumph. "You know he'll ask for you, right?"

Before Spock could formulate a response slightly more appropriate than What?, someone began to knock impatiently at the door. Surprised by the unexpected sound, Spock turned just in time to see James Kirk stride confidently into the room, PADD in hand with a wide grin stretched beneath bright blue eyes. The familiar bulging tote was slung across his shoulders, and Spock wondered briefly how Jim had convinced McCoy to let him carry it despite his injuries.

"Hello, sir!" Jim began cheerfully before noticing Spock. Then he startled, a reaction so minute Spock almost missed it, and his grin disappeared. "Sorry, sir," he said with obvious curiosity. "Miriam didn't say you were busy."

Barnett settled a patiently disbelieving look on the young man. "And did you actually ask my assistant if I was busy, or did you just barge in like you usually do?"

Kirk finally moved his gaze from Spock so he could flash the admiral another grin. "I knocked."

"Yes, because it isn't at all customary to wait to be called in after knocking."

"You didn't set your door to reflect Commander Spock's presence," the cadet pointed out, casually tapping the PADD against his thigh. "In fact, sir, it might even be argued that—"

Barnett held up one hand to concede defeat. "Enough!" He spread the hand across his forehead, pinching his temples in a show of suppressing a headache. From his particular viewpoint, Spock could see the helpless grin Barnett used his "headache" to conceal from Kirk, who looked pleased and guilty by turns.

"Sorry sir."

When Barnett had his levity well in hand, he lifted his eyes to Jim's, expression serious as it ever was around the cadet. "Why are you here, Kirk?"

Jim glanced sidelong at Spock for only an instant before stepping forward, leaning over Barnett's desk to hand him the PADD. "I finished this morning, sir. It needs further tests and debugging, of course, but it's still on track for implementation in the early fall."

Spock felt a tickle of pure curiosity, wondering if this was some type of exam or another one of Kirk's "volunteering" endeavors.

Barnett scrolled through the PADD's data, still stern and foreboding. Then he lifted his eyes, something thoughtful glimmering there, and looked from Jim to Spock and back. "Cadet," he began, "I don't suppose you'd mind if I had Commander Spock take a look at this? Since he's here anyway."

For the first time in Spock's memory, Jim squirmed. He glanced at Spock again, face tight with a complicated mix of emotions the Vulcan couldn't quite distinguish. "...No sir," he said at last, turning back to Barnett, the slightest line of resignation in his shoulders. It vanished in an instant, erased by confidence and a bold smile. "In fact, since he's here, I'd recommend it. I'm sure the commander will catch all my mistakes with very little trouble."

Barnett made a neutral sound, studying Kirk carefully.

The cadet's grin never so much as wavered. "Well, I've got an oral to obliterate, so I'll just take my leave." He saluted first Barnett and then Spock, regulation perfect in Academy red. With one last half-smile for Spock, laced with something faintly like regret, he was gone.
"...Huh," Barnett said after a moment of silence. "That went better than I thought it would."

"May I enquire after the contents of the cadet's data PADD?" Spock asked, hands locked behind his back to prevent them from reaching for the cadet's work.

Instead of complying, Barnett considered Spock for a long, quiet moment. "He thinks you won't take it well," the admiral observed, lifting the PADD to specify what he meant. "He might even think it'll make you angry. I'm not sure I agree."

"Perhaps I could offer my own opinion," Spock said, none of his irritation slipping through, "if I were allowed to view the contents myself."

"It's the Kobayashi Maru program."

Spock stilled.

Barnett sighed, rubbing his forehead again, likely in response to a genuine headache this time. "When the cadets got back from that Nero mess," he explained wearily, "the first thing Kirk did was submit an official request to be allowed to reprogram the Kobayashi simulation. We refused, based on the fact that Kirk, as a cadet, had no business changing the curriculum. But he insisted, formulating all sorts of arguments. When you came in for the Vulcan colony mission and Kirk was here, what you saw was him finally getting permission to go ahead with the project. All conditional, of course. If it disrupted his studies or was in any way inferior to the current program, we'd discard it, regardless of the effort he put in. But he wouldn't be Kirk if he didn't take that as a challenge, and all the preliminarily reports indicate his version is actually superior to its predecessor." He shot Spock a rueful smile. "Sorry, Commander. We've got to go with his."

There were dozens of questions Spock wanted to ask, countless points of clarification, but the most pressing was why, in all its manifold interpretations. Why was his superior? Why would they allow a cadet freshly returned from tragedy to take on such a massive project? Why would he have made such a request? Why was this cadet never what he should be?

Why had he hesitated when Barnett asked him if Spock could review the program? Why had he seemed, for that one small moment, so fatalistically resigned?

Though Spock retained his silence, Barnett sighed again, sitting back. "The one argument he never made," the admiral said softly, "was, I think, the one that drove him hardest."

"What argument was that?" Spock asked, equally quiet, his eyes lingering on the PADD sitting so harmlessly on Barnett's desk.

"He didn't want the cadets who had survived Nero to sit in a simulation meant to make them better leaders and wonder, as the Klingons destroyed their ship in the inevitable conclusion, if that was what their murdered classmates felt in their final moments. In that light," Barnett pointed out with a bitter smile, "the Kobayashi becomes less a learning opportunity and more like psychological torture."

"...May I see it?" Spock asked at length. Barnett passed the PADD over wordlessly.

It was brilliant, of course.

Designed along similar lines to Spock's own program, it was nearly undefeatable. The cadets in the simulation would have to use an intense blend of regulation commands and bold, fearless determination to find one of the three particular subroutines that had to be activated in order to complete retrieval of the Kobayashi Maru with any modicum of success. It was not a no-win
situation, but it was just close enough to demand the best of anyone who sat in the simulation's command chair. Searching for the key to the program would undoubtedly drive the Command track cadets to distraction, forcing them to try harder, work together, plan and adapt and refuse to admit defeat.

Essential traits in every Starfleet captain.

"A courier and a camera," Spock mused after a moment. He lifted his eyes to Barnett's, calm but for the light of epiphany. "When and where did you intend to send them?"

Barnett laughed for nearly ten minutes.
Discovering Atlas IV

On Friday, with the majority of all tests and projects submitted for final grades, the cadets of Starfleet Academy were released for an afternoon of relaxation and revelry. A good portion of them immediately fled to beaches or bars or home, to come down from the stress of another intense battery of tests. Senior cadets usually began preparing for the next step of their journey within Starfleet. Orders in hand, they readied themselves for graduation and location-specific training, both of which traditionally took place the week after finals.

Most of this class, though, had yet to receive any orders. The stress of their exams was easily overshadowed by the pervasive nausea of having to face their peers and superiors at graduation with no particular purpose waiting for them at the end. So they did what they had learned to do in times of great emotional strain: They volunteered their services to the Academy. Uhura monitored subspace transmissions. Sulu flew test patterns with pilots preparing to ship out. Chekov was consumed nearly whole by the mathematics department for no reason anyone could clearly establish. McCoy became entrenched in the Academy's medical unit, patching up cadets who never learned the less-is-more approach to celebrating another successful semester.

Jim Kirk was a little more difficult to find. The other Command track seniors had joined in coalition with their instructors to pick apart and improve their curriculum to account for the issues Kirk's *Kobayashi* simulation highlighted. Nero survivors were a new breed of cadet, after all; their schooling had to reflect that.

Still, as remarkable as Kirk's cohorts were, their activities did nothing to explain his absence from their ranks. He wasn't with curriculum restructuring committee; he wasn't in the Computer Sciences division, or the Computer Languages and Programming labs, or with any of the numerous chairs who often monopolized his time. He wasn’t in the desert garden or training Archer's puppies. He wasn't with McCoy or Sulu or Chekov or even Uhura. Who did that leave? Where could he be?

At this rate, the camera-bearing courier would find Jim before Spock did.

Uhura understood the mission behind his impromptu investigation of the Communications lab better than she should have and hid a smile by turning to tune one of her monitoring instruments. "Have you been to see Mr. Scott lately?" she asked as she worked, casual and friendly enough that no one around her heard the hint in her phrasing. "He's been working on repairs for some of the equipment that’s supposed to be sent up to *Enterprise* soon. His upgrades are ingenious; you should go see them. He's heading up operations in that old hanger where some of us occasionally get together to have dinner. You know the one?"

As a matter of fact, he did.

Jim was covered in dirt and grease when Spock found him, twisted in and around a massive piece of equipment with a wrench in his hand and determination on his face. He was nearly twenty feet from the ground, sporting no safety gear beyond the bare minimum of coveralls, work gloves, and eye protection. All around him, dedicated engineers chattered and bickered and worked, altering printouts and filling the hanger with the charged roar of power tools. They were all, to a man, filthy. And they were all, to a man, suffused with the joy they derived from every gritty detail of their work.

"Commander Spock! Dinnae expect to ever see you here!" Spock turned at the thick brogue to find Mr. Scott striding toward him with an enormous smile on his grease-smudged face. He looked vaguely like a small child given free reign of a confectionary. "You certainly picked a good day to
visit! Gettin' to look just beautiful, isn't it?" He turned his grin up to the precarious rigging where Jim Kirk risked life and limb by changing his grip on the tool in his hand. "We'll have the old girl ready for shakedown by the end 'o next week, if they let me keep mah current staff. Ah, excusin' Jim there, a' course. We never get him more than a few hours at a time. Very useful sort, our Jimmy is! Cannae keep him all to ourselves!"

Spock's eyes flickered to Jim in time to see him hook his knees over a pipe, dangling backwards and upside-down with no other support to reach an awkwardly placed bolt. "...The cadet does not appear to be following Starfleet safety protocol, Mr. Scott."

Scott rubbed his chin thoughtfully, smearing more grime in long, dark lines. "The lad's a mite precocious, I'll give yah that," he admitted, tipping his head back to watch Jim scale the side of his project as though he were mountain climbing. Rather than alarmed, Scott seemed pleased. "Highly efficient, though. None of that mucking about with harnesses and ropes and ladders and the like. Gets the job done. I could use a dozen more like him, to be honest."

"Safety protocol is standardized for a reason, Lieutenant. Most often, the intended purpose is to save lives."

The Scotsman made a dismissive motion, pulling a dirty rag from his back pocket to wipe his equally dirty hands. When he was done, Spock detected no noticeable difference. "He'll no' come to harm here, sir," Scott said firmly, slinging the cloth over his shoulder. "He's knows the equipment too well. It's when we try to enforce the regulations that things start to get dangerous. Joint pads and helmets gettin' caught on all and sundry. Usually it's best to just step back and let him work."

Before Spock could reiterate the viewpoint that safety protocols prevented cadets from falling to their deaths, Jim spotted him. His dirt-streaked face lit with a grin. Moments later, he twisted and shimmied and repelled back to solid ground, wiping his hands on his coveralls as he approached the Vulcan and Scott. "Spock," he called in friendly greeting, "what brings you here?"

Spock inclined his head a fraction in acknowledgement of the welcome. "Cadet Uhura recommended I make a personal observation of Lieutenant Scott's equipment upgrades. She indicated they were quite satisfactory."

Scott made an incredulous sound. "Satisfactory?"

"Quite," Spock agreed.

"Why I— Never— I'll show her satisfactory—"

"Scotty." Jim reached out to grip the incoherent engineer's shoulder, giving it a reassuring shake. "Spock's paraphrasing. Vulcans tend to strip stuff like compliments down to basics. Whatever Uhura actually said was probably a lot more flattering, since she was pretty amazed the last time she toured the building."

Scotty simmered for a moment, glancing between Spock and Jim as though trying to decide whether or not to nurture his offence.

Jim chose for him by clapping his hands once, rubbing them together in a show of enthusiasm. "Speaking of tours!" He grinned toothily, jerking his head toward a large component propped on the floor half a building behind them. "Wanna wow Spock with your kickass upgrades?"

Marginally insane engineers being what they were, Scott immediately began an excited explanation of the minutia behind every small change or alteration made, detailing efficiency rates and power
increases and what Kirk referred to as "six degrees of awesome."

"This is impressive, Lieutenant," Spock conceded when the tour wound to its frantic close. "Will your next assignment offer you equal challenges?"

Scott froze, expression colored with panic and worry as he glanced at Kirk nervously. "Oh, ah…mah next assignment. Yes. Tha' should be…pretty interesting."

Jim's distracted investigation of a deconstructed replicator ground to a halt as his eyes snapped to the Scotsman. He turned to lean back against a low railing, tucking his hands under his arms and crossing his legs at the ankle. "Scotty," he said in mild accusation, one eyebrow curved challengingly. "Didn't we swear over shots of ten-year-old whisky that you'd tell me when you got your new assignment?"

"Ah, y'see…that is, Jimmy-lad, that I had meant to— You're quite a busy man, y'know! I couldnae always—"

"Where, Scott?"

The Scotsman sighed, defeated and fond and filled with regret. "Right where yah wanted. They gave me the Enterprise."

Jim's expression didn't change. "As Chief Engineer?"

"Aye, lad. They did at that."

Then Jim grinned, bright and pleased. "Good! At least someone on board will make sure she doesn't fall to pieces."

Everything but the regret faded from Scott's face. "It should be you, Jim."

The cadet made a dismissive gesture. "Nah. I never wanted to be Chief Engineer."

Scott frowned. "Yah know that's no' what I—"

"I'll be okay, Scotty," Jim promised, smile crooked. "Everyone starts somewhere, and I don't even technically graduate until next week. Give me a few years to catch up, alright?"

"It's no' right—"

"Are you James T. Kirk?"

Even with all the years he'd spent studying it, life continued to amaze Spock.

Jim turned to the courier, arms and legs still crossed, expression automatically defensive. "Yeah?"

"Damn, man." The teenage boy Starfleet had employed shoved a signature pad toward Kirk, a thin package tucked under one arm. "You're almost impossible to find. I've been looking for, like, an hour now. Sign please," he prompted when Jim just stared at him in mounting bewilderment.

"But I didn't order anything."

"Like I care, dude. Just sign."

Curious now, Kirk untangled himself enough to comply. He took the package when the boy held it out, stalling a moment so he could leave, since his job was done.
But, as Spock well knew, it was only half done. So the boy crossed his arms and waited.

Eventually Kirk shrugged, tearing the official envelope open to reach for the paper inside. "They went old school with this. Must be an evic—"

He froze, every drop of blood leechled from his skin as shock tore through him like a bolt of lightning. His face then was unlike any Spock had seen before, disbelieving and vulnerable and filled with burgeoning joy so powerful it was shadowed almost immediately by fear.

A unique expression indeed. When the courier lifted his small digital camera to snap a picture, Spock relieved him of the device. This was not the part of the inevitable reaction a Starfleet captain would want immortalized.

To Cadet James T Kirk

Jim swayed on his feet, prompting Scott to reach out, alarmed, and catch his arm. "Steady on there, lad!"

Upon graduation from Starfleet Academy, you are hereby requested and required—

"Jim!"

All four looked over at the sound of McCoy's familiar call. The doctor, still dressed in medical scrubs, a letter crumpled in one hand, raced through the hanger. When he reached his friend, he gripped both his shoulders, steering him over to a worktable he was forced to sit on. McCoy's own letter fluttered to the ground, almost completely unnoticed. Spock retrieved it, scanning the contents.

Orders to report for duty as Chief Medical Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

Ah. No doubt the doctor had gotten his assignment and immediately understood what that would mean for Kirk. So he did possess the ability to think logically.

"Put your head down," McCoy ordered, firm but gentle as he pressed at the back of Jim's neck. "Breathe, kid!"

Jim gasped, a starved sound, and continued gasping as he lifted bright blue eyes to McCoy's. He fisted his free hand in the front of his friend's scrubs, shaking with adrenalin as he pressed the other fist, clenched around his orders, into McCoy's chest. "Bones," he panted. "Bones, they—" He shook his head, unable to continue, and leaned heavily on his doctor's strength.

Bones pried the letter from Jim's hand, pushing it off on Scott, who snatched it from him in a dead panic. He read it in a glance, then read it again. And a third time.

His shout of disbelief drew the attention of his entire division.

Before anyone could question it, a whirlwind of energy slammed into Kirk, babbling incoherently. Chekov was shaking harder than Jim, both hands gripping his dirty sleeve as he stumbled almost hysterically in Russian.

Jim laughed, a nearly hysterical sound in itself, and cupped the teenager's face in his hands. He cut Chekov's stammering short by breaking in with some Russian of his own. Chekov's expression went from frantic to dazed in a heartbeat. Jim laughed again, more amazed and wondering than before, and kissed each of Chekov's cheeks in a rapid sign of familial congratulations. Then, on another laugh, he hooked an arm around the boy's shoulders, tugging him close to plant a louder kiss among his curls.
Chekov continued to be dazed.

"Jim!" Everyone looked over to where Sulu was sprinting into the building. He faltered when faced by Chekov's alarming expression, asking, "Is he alright?" reflexively.

"He's fine." Jim laughed helplessly, squeezing the young Russian genius. "He's Navigator on the Enterprise!"

Sulu lifted his orders with a massive grin. "Helmsman!"

Jim looked at Bones, blue eyes nearly wild. "And you?"

McCoy sighed. "CMO," he admitted.

"Chief Engineer!" Scotty crowed, waving Jim's orders as he climbed atop the worktable. "Attention, all of yeh! And listen to this: To Cadet James T. Kirk. Upon graduation from Starfleet Academy, you are hereby requested and required to take command of the U.S.S. Enterprise—"

Howls of victory and excitement and indescribable emotion drown him out, rising from the throats of Jim's future crew scattered all throughout the building. Jim himself started laughing again, golden head thrown back, Chekov still caught under one arm. The Russian came back to himself with a shout of pure triumph, whole body vibrating as he threw his arms around Sulu and Kirk.

Surrounded by the roar of a crew reunited, Spock looked down to find Uhura standing at his side, dark eyes glowing with her own triumph.

"I knew they couldn't hold him back," she murmured, low enough so only a Vulcan would hear.

Spock glanced to her hand, where a piece of paper was gripped carefully by one corner. "No more than they could you," he observed, equally soft.

She smiled at him only a moment before Jim noticed her.

"Uhura!" he called, his question so obvious on his face that the soon-to-be officers around him stilled, adding their hope to his as they all held their breath and waited.

Uhura rolled her eyes with a blush, lifting her orders so they could all see. "Communications Officer aboard Enterprise."

The shouting redoubled as the rest of the bridge crew swarmed Uhura, dragging her laughing into their midst. Kirk, bright and bold and triumphant, dirty but unspoiled by the work he shouldered to rebuild the Academy, was surrounded by the young, determined, joyous Starfleet officers who had once stood with him against the end of the world.

Spock returned the camera to its owner, who snapped the shot with a grin.

Admiral Barnett shuffled the papers on his desk, looking more frazzled than usual, which was odd, considering how close he was to finally graduating his surviving senior cadets to their posts throughout the Federation.

Perhaps it was not so odd after all.

"He's asking for you," the admiral said, sounding harassed. His eyes lifted to Spock's in exasperation as he spread his hands. "In fact, he's all but demanding you. There are six individual personnel
requests clogging up my office alone, one sent every day since he got his orders, each just unique enough to slip through the redundancy filters. When we try to make him give a backup choice, he submits another request for you. Notarized, to make sure we know he's being serious. We're going to have to tell him something."

Spock felt vaguely puzzled. Assuming he was Kirk, what need could he possibly have of Spock? "I must admit to some confusion, sir. To what do these requests refer?"

Barnett stared at Spock disbelievingly. "You can't honestly expect me to believe you don't know."

"I assure you I am quite sincere in this matter."

"Spock." Barnett pushed a sheaf of papers toward the Vulcan. "He's requesting you as First Officer aboard the Enterprise. He wants you for his second. And he doesn't appear to be willing to take no for an answer." The admiral shook his head in bewilderment. "How did you not know this?"

How indeed. Spock looked through the papers, cataloguing each one's differences and similarities. A campaign such as this must have taken a great deal of Jim's limited free time. How had Spock never noticed? "Why have you not simply granted the cadet's request?" he asked finally, turning his attention back to Barnett. He did not relinquish his hold on the personnel request forms.

Barnett shrugged, studying Spock speculatively. "It's a big decision. Whoever becomes First Officer of the Enterprise isn't likely to have an easy time of things. Kirk's already geared up to be unlike any captain in recent memory, and we're gearing up to exploit the hell out of that. He'll be running more missions than any other two ships combined, to say nothing of distress calls that will demand the presence of Starfleet's flagship. We think you'd be good for him," the admiral admitted, "but we're not going to force you to take a position this demanding just because someone requested it, even if that someone is James Kirk."

So Jim meant enough to the Admiralty that they were already in the habit of leaning in his favor. Interesting.

"Besides," Barnett added with a faint smirk, "that kid usually figures out what we have planned for him well in advance of our taking any actions. It's nice to be able to keep him guessing every now and then."

Spock looked at the papers in his hand, the physical proof of Jim's desire to work together as they once had. Then he looked at Barnett. And back down at the papers. "...I would like to request time to think on this matter."

"Granted," the admiral replied instantly. "But I'd recommend keeping it brief. The Enterprise ships out for her shakedown mission first thing Monday."

The Vulcan's eyes darted back up to Barnett's. "So soon, sir?"

Barnett's expression went blank and distant. "Starfleet has need of our flagship, Commander. That is all I can tell you." A slight grin tugged one corner of his mouth. "For now."

Spock left Barnett's office, crossing the commons until he was in the familiar sanctuary of the desert garden. He sat on his usual bench, spreading his hands carefully on his knees. What he did then was nearly meditation, a form of thought beyond the concept of time. Hours slipped by like minutes, grains of sand freed from an irrelevant hourglass.

So. James Kirk, captain of the Enterprise, wanted Spock as his second-in-command. Their first few attempts to work as a unit had not gone well. Then again, the final attempt, with Kirk in control and
open to the voices around him, had been successful beyond measure, to the point of saving the Federation from almost certain doom where anyone else would have failed.

They had vastly different outlooks on life. Their thought patterns were divergent, so much so that they might almost qualify as exact opposites. Spock, as a Vulcan, used logic and reason as cornerstones. James Kirk was chaos theory personified. The idea of them working as a cohesive team was nearly ludicrous.

Except for the undeniable fact that the team they made was astonishingly effective. Their differences complimented more than conflicted, each driving the other to greater heights of achievement and proficiency. Jim, with his wild ideas, would need a strong force to keep him grounded in reason and feasibility, to prevent him from getting himself and those around him killed in a supernova of unpredictability gone horribly awry.

Something, some small Human part of Spock that had nothing to do with logic, wanted to work with Jim again almost desperately. He had never felt as alive, as thrillingly engaged, as powerfully aware, as that hour when he and Jim worked together toward a common goal against a common enemy. And Jim was as endlessly fascinating now as he had been all those months ago in the *Kobayashi* simulation. The more Spock learned about him, the more he realized there was to learn. The scientist in him was captivated.

And his other self, the older Spock from another timeline where Vulcan still existed, had seemed so fond of Jim, so protective, with such an unfathomable depth of faith in him. Why?

*Why?*

"Commander Spock!"

The Vulcan lifted his head, thoughts moving out of the almost-meditation at the first syllable spoken by that voice. "Captain Kirk," he acknowledged with a small nod, watching as the newly minted Starfleet officer grinned.

Kirk, wearing his Academy red dress uniform for the last time, strode toward Spock with a small box clutched in his left hand. His special commendation, most likely. "You missed the graduation."

"Indeed." Spock stood, tugging his blacks briskly into place. "I was detained."

"Lucky," Jim mused, studying Spock thoughtfully. The Vulcan saw an inclination to question further rise in the captain, then fall again as he apparently thought better of it. Instead he grinned once more, motioning back toward the housing division with a tilt of his golden head. "I have to drop this thing off at Bones' place. Will you walk with me? We can go to the graduation bash Starfleet's throwing afterwards, and you can make it up to Uhura for missing her big moment."

Spock lifted one doubtful eyebrow. "Nyota is unlikely to begrudge my absence from a ceremony she has on numerous occasions referred to as 'a lot of useless pomp and circumstance.' But I will accompany you despite that," he concluded firmly before Jim could launch into any of the countless arguments the new captain had likely formulated.

Jim smirked but didn't comment as they turned together and walked toward the small apartment registered to Dr. McCoy.

"Should you not store the item at your own residence?" Spock asked, testing a theory.

"Nah." Jim shrugged. "I haven't lived there in ages. Usually I just split a place with Bones, but they issued him a single when we got back from that Nero thing." He frowned, tossing the velvet-lined
box into the air and catching it thoughtfully. "Actually, they issued all the survivors singles. Kind of stupid of them." He shrugged again, flashing Spock a bright grin. "I ended up spending so much time at Bones' place for treatment and aftercare and fucking hypos that he eventually just told me to live on the couch. So I dragged in a set of drawers and did. It's cramped, " he admitted, "but it works out. Bones doesn't worry as much if I'm within hypo-range, and his couch is surprisingly comfortable."

"...I see."

They reached McCoy's apartment moments later. Jim keyed the appropriate code, and the door slid open obediently.

An unexpected hand caught Jim in a full-bodied slap across the left side of his face, knocking him sideways into the doorframe in an explosion of sharp pain and surprise. Spock caught his shoulder automatically, using the same motion to set him firmly on his feet and draw him away from the hysterical woman attacking him from the doorway of McCoy's house.

Jim shook his head, dazed, and tried to make sense of the woman and her shrieking. She was a few decades older than the Starfleet officers, in such an unkempt state that her exact age was difficult to estimate. Her dirty blond hair was a rat's nest of tangles, hanging too long and limply in her dark eyes. The shadow of a beautiful woman lingered in her cheekbones and the delicate line of her furious mouth.

Whatever appeal she may once have held for Jim was obviously long past.

"Give him back you took him you monster give him back to me—"

The new captain's eyes widened in recognition. He stepped around Spock, reaching for the woman with pain dark on his face. She clawed and hit at him, her arms flailing against his attempt to subdue her even as she broke into frantic sobs. Jim's only response to her increased delirium was soft, soothing noises and gentle entreaties to calm down.

Spock was baffled.

"His eyes!" the woman shrieked unexpectedly, fingers striking for Jim's face in claws meant for gouging. "You took him to keep his eyes give him back give me back his eyes!"

And that was enough. Spock reached out, long fingers closing firmly over the woman's neck. She stiffened, shuddered, and collapsed. Jim caught her, drawing her close with an inexplicably tragic expression twisting his face. He turned away from his Vulcan audience, tugging the woman into his arms before carrying her into the house.

When he was gone, Spock bent to retrieve his commendation.

By the time he found Jim, the captain had his attacker stretched out on McCoy's bed. He refused to meet Spock's gaze as he hunted out a communicator. "Kirk to McCoy."

"What?" a grumbling voice barked in reply.

"Bones. Where are you?"

"Where do you think I am? You're the one who said to go on without you!"

"Bones," Kirk repeated, almost helplessly, and the oddly lost quality to his voice had rapid footfalls echoing down the comm unit.
"I'm on my way. Where are you?"

"At your place."

"Are you alone? What happened?"

Jim glanced briefly at his silent guest. "Spock's here. I'm fine."

"Damn it, Jim! If you're fine, I'm a fucking cat! You stay put, you hear me? I'll be there in a minute."

It was Spock who met the doctor at the door.

"How is he?" McCoy demanded, charging toward his bedroom with Spock at his heels. "What happened?"

"He was attacked by a woman who was waiting in your apartment. She accused Jim of taking an unspecified male, expressing the belief that Jim's eyes belong to the same unspecified male. When she attempted to gouge out the captain's eyes, I took steps to subdue her."

McCoy froze, turning a horrified gaze on the Vulcan. "What?" he whispered.

Female shouting in the bedroom prevented Spock from repeating himself. They hurried toward the sound, finding Jim bent over the bed with one hand wrapped around each of the woman's wrists as she bucked and screeched and kicked, always fighting to do him further harm. McCoy tore through a med kit he kept on his nightstand, diving into the fray with a sedative intended to knock the woman unconscious for a long stretch of time. She fell into sleep on a sob.

Jim backed away quickly, so eager to put distance between himself and the woman that he caught his hip on the corner of the nightstand, rattling its contents. Both hands darted out to steady the small table before he rubbed his forearms roughly, as though he could erase the sensation of the woman clawing at the material that shielded his skin from her.

McCoy advanced on his friend, both hands spread in a sign of harmlessness. Jim shied away, eyes lowered, hunched in on himself as he pressed back into the wall. McCoy stilled, mouth twisted in an unhappy line. "What can I do, Jim?" he asked softly.

The captain's gaze darted over to the woman. "Keep her sedated," he replied in a disturbingly blank voice. "I'll call someone to come get her."

"Starfleet regulations are quite clear about the proper action to take when a captain is attacked," Spock pointed out, knowing from the interaction that there was something here, some major puzzle piece, he was missing.

Kirk left without comment, shoulders tight.

McCoy, stormy with anger and empathy, sighed deeply, head tilted back and eyes screwed closed. "Spock," he said. Then he shook his head, as though unable to continue. At last he looked at Spock, motioning to the woman helplessly. "He can't treat her like some random attacker, because she isn't."

"This is his mother, Spock."

There were no internal directives to help Spock navigate the situation he had stumbled into by virtue of walking with Jim. The new captain had removed himself to the living room, where he was pacing like a caged animal without ever attempting to cross the threshold. McCoy made rounds of his own
apartment, checking on Winona Kirk before watching her son's viciously silent movements only to return to the woman again.

Spock stationed himself in a corner of the living room by the window that allowed him an undisrupted view of the whole room, Jim's path, and the front door. If anyone else cared to attempt bodily harm against an elite member of Starfleet, Spock was in the perfect location to object, whether or not Jim thought the action necessary.

Occasionally, when McCoy stopped in to check on his friend, he would attempt to solicit any kind of meaningful response from him. How was he doing? Did he feel alright? Would he like some food or a drink? Perhaps something a bit stronger?

Jim glanced at him but never answered, never paused in his pacing, hands fisting and flexing at his sides in a subconscious display of furious internal energy. His demeanor clearly worried McCoy, more and more as it persisted, but the doctor apparently had no working plans for a situation like this. So he pressed his lips together in a thin, frustrated line and returned to the cause of so much tension.

Spock stood silent in the corner, hands folded at the small of his back, observing it all.

Nearly an hour into the debacle, McCoy's buzzer sounded. The doctor strode to the door, admitting a man who shared several physical characteristics with Jim. When the captain saw him, he froze, body tight as piano wire. They stared at each other for a heartbeat before McCoy imposed himself between them, ushering the man to the bedroom where Winona Kirk slept. Jim immediately paced over to the couch, collapsing onto it with such a bone-weary sigh that Spock nearly crossed to his side in order to offer support.

It was a most illogical impulse, but it was something his own mother had done for him on multiple occasions in his youth. The small part of Spock that was Human wondered if anyone had offered similar comfort to a young Jim, or if today's display was just another demonstration of a problem that stretched back through the years.

The man who had come for Winona was George Samuel Kirk, Jim's older brother. After seeing his mother and listening to McCoy's assurances that she was fine and would wake with another hypospray, Sam sought out Jim, who had dropped his head into hands supported by elbows braced on his knees.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy," Sam whispered, standing just in front of Jim without making any move to actually touch him. "She saw you on the news when you got back from that big mission. We thought she'd be okay, but then she just disappeared a few weeks later. It took her this long to find you, and we've been one step behind her the whole way. I know I should have warned you, but—"

"Nah." Jim lifted his head to smile understandingly at his older brother. Stationed by the window to observe the interaction, Spock's hands, still hidden from view behind back, clenched into fists. "It was stressful enough for you guys just trying to find her, I bet. And at least you came quickly when I called."

Sam looked relieved to be so absolved. "I really thought she was better. She hasn't had an episode in years."

Jim laughed softly, eyes dropping to the hands hanging between his knees. "I guess this answers the question about whether or not it's okay if I come by for a visit."

"Fuck, Jim." Sam's hand twitched toward his little brother, as though he would finally offer some comfort. But the gesture was abortive as the inclination withered. "I'll get her out of here. Aurelan's
"Waiting with transport."

"Yeah." Jim scrubbed both hands over his face, not meeting his brother's eyes again. "Bye, Sam."

"Take care, Jim."

With that, he collected Winona and was gone.

The entire episode left Spock with a sense of deep dissatisfaction.

After a moment, McCoy came in with a glass of whiskey that he pushed into Jim's hand. The captain contemplated the liquid longer than he should have. "Drink, Jim," his doctor ordered.

Jim did, tipping his head back to take it like a shot. He sighed afterwards, slumping against the couch cushions, eyes shut. "So, Spock," he said in a nearly jovial tone that was at odds with his demeanor. "Any questions about the floor show?"

McCoy inhaled sharply, almost a gasp.

Spock considered the offer. "A few points of clarification," he admitted.

"Fire away."

"Your mother suffers from mental illness resulting in delusions, though she has not 'had an episode' in several years."

Jim nodded, head still tilted back against the couch, eyes still shut.

"I presume, from your brother's wording, that these 'episodes' are in some way related to you."

"Good God, man!" McCoy grabbed Spock's arm, wrenching it once. "Don't you have a heart?"

"It's okay, Bones." Jim sat up, a strange smile bowing his lips as his blue eyes glinted dangerously. "If he has to sit through crazy, I can at least help him logic his way back to normal."

Spock removed his person from McCoy's grip. "The 'episodes' are related to you, Jim?"

"Yeah." Jim spread his arms with a disturbingly charming smile. "I look a lot like my dad. The older I get, the worse it is. Mom never really got over losing him the way she did. I mean, she was pretty okay in the beginning." He shrugged. "So they say. But then she started to see him in me, until I became nothing but the loss of him. It drove her crazy. We eventually figured out that I'm the trigger for her delusions, so I just...stayed away."

"How old were you?" McCoy asked, soft and gentle, as though Jim were a spooked animal on the brink of lashing out.

Judging by the tick of muscle at Jim's jaw, it wasn't an inappropriate precaution for the doctor to take. "I don't remember," he said between clenched teeth.

They dropped the question.

"Your brother cares for her?" Spock clarified.

"Him and Aurelan, his wife, and Frank, our stepdad. It's pretty great of them, although she's just about normal other than the episodes. Got a job in agriculture and everything. It's a private company," he explained with a bitter smile that touched only one corner of his mouth, "so they don't
care that she's batshit as long as she keeps doing great things for botany." His expression grew cold again. "At least she's got something to keep her distracted."

"Speaking of distractions," McCoy interrupted, glaring at Spock before the Vulcan could ask any more questions. (It was going to be, *Then who took care of you?*) "We're already late for that stupid party you made me get a ticket for," he continued to Jim. "If the bar closes before we get there, I'm giving you a booster of something. Maybe vitamin B," he mused thoughtfully. "Your reaction to that one's pretty priceless."

Jim's bright blue eyes tracked over to Spock, studying him for a long heartbeat. "Walk with me?" he requested, words light enough for him to be teasing. But his expression was alarmingly blank, his cheek still red from the force of his mother's blow.

So instead of formulating an excuse, Spock merely inclined his head.

McCoy kicked Jim's foot. "You're a mess. Clean up a little before we go or people will talk, and I'm tired of everyone thinking I abuse you."

Jim rolled his eyes but stood obediently. The weight of the whisky glass in his hand caught his attention unexpectedly, and he stared at it for a long moment. His jaw clenched, fingers tightening around the smooth object until Spock was sure it would crack. Blue eyes looked thoughtfully between the glass and the nearest wall, measuring the distance. He hefted the glass, muscles tensing in his arm.

"Better not," Bones said mildly, leaning one shoulder against the wall with his arms crossed. "It was my great-grandfather's. I only have the one." When Jim glanced at him, McCoy smirked.

Jim scowled and stalked from the room, shoving the glass into McCoy's chest as he passed.

"A dangerous gamble," Spock observed. "Considering the volatile nature of the untapped energy Jim is displaying, you might well have lost your great-grandfather's keepsake."

McCoy shrugged, setting the glass on the coffee table. "Jim only destroys things if he thinks he can repair or replace them. When he's pissed like this and repressing, I don't let him handle anything but heirlooms." He frowned. "I had to go to a storage facility in Georgia to get that stupid thing, but it's saved me a lot of headaches cleaning up glass."

"Fascinating."

The doctor huffed. "Sure. You go on believing that. But listen," he added, thrusting a menacing finger toward the Vulcan, who lifted an eyebrow. "Whatever you think about whatever you saw here tonight is not to be shared with anyone else, even your little girlfriend Uhura. This is Jim's private business, and it's gonna stay that way. I wish to God you hadn't been here."

Spock experienced a flicker of annoyance. "You would have preferred the captain face such a situation on his own?" he asked neutrally.

"Of course not! What do you take me for?"

"You appear to be laboring under several misconceptions," Spock continued, ignoring the doctor's brief response. "Allow me to attempt to clarify in a manner you might understand." McCoy scowled furiously. "Vulcans do not, as you might say, gossip. Therefore, my thoughts, on this and all matters, are my own unless logic dictates I communicate them to a secondary source. The odds of a situation requiring I divulge any of these events at a future date are infinitesimal. Furthermore, Vulcans are highly adept at displaying restraint and decorum with regard to personal or otherwise taboo subjects.
It would be illogical and demeaning to alienate Captain Kirk by discussing his private matters with anyone. Including Lieutenant Uhura," he concluded with absolute calm, "who is not, as you erroneously speculate, my 'girlfriend', other than that she is a close friend who happens to be female. It might also be argued, Doctor," he added with just a drop of condescension, "that your use of the colloquial expression 'girlfriend' in reference to my relationship with Lieutenant Uhura makes you guilty of the fault from which you attempted to dissuade me. Some might call that hypocrisy."

Jim returned in time to prevent McCoy from actually attacking Spock, but it was a near thing.

At the party, none of what Jim had suffered escaped his perfect demeanor of joviality. He danced and joked and laughed and drank, surrounded by classmates and teachers and crew. The smile buckled only once, when a group of six older Humans, civilians Spock had never seen before, approached Jim to offer their congratulations. For a moment, shock pierced the armor of grins and flirtation. The shock turned to incredulity, which shifted with mercurial speed from alarm to amazement to genuine warmth and excitement. Those unknown six hugged and congratulated Jim, petting his hair and patting his back and drawing him from a façade back into a real person.

After they left, Jim danced and joked and laughed and drank, filled with triumph. The flush of his own victory wiped the handprint from his cheek and the haunted look from his eyes. He noticed Spock watching him and grinned, fierce and challenging, Jim through-and-through.

Spock couldn't help the relief that touched his otherwise utter calm.

When Admiral Barnett eventually found Spock among the assorted partygoers, the Vulcan turned to him with a thoughtful nod. "I accept Captain Kirk's offer for the position of First Officer aboard the Enterprise," he said, projecting serene professionalism. Barnett, drink in hand, blinked at him. "I also request to fill the position of Science Officer. Despite my formal acceptance, you may continue to 'keep him guessing,' if you like." As a grin blossomed on Barnett's face, Spock turned his attention back to Jim.

Someone was going to have to keep him from getting himself killed.
Kirk looked from the orders in his hands to Admiral Barnett and back several times, suspicion bright in his eyes. "...This is a joke, right? I don't even have a First Officer yet." He shot a meaningful glance at Spock, who was the only other person in the meeting.

Hands tucked at the small of his back, expression placid, Spock didn't react to Jim's obvious hint.

"Commander Spock is here to share his views on the situation," Barnett explained, tapping one finger on his copy of the mission parameters. "And no, Captain. It isn't a joke."

"You're sending me to Erix Prime."

"We're sending the Enterprise to the preferred sight of the new Vulcan colony, yes."

"To help the Vulcans talk out their differences with the Erixians."

"They're also colonists, and they're mostly based in space stations, but they've been there longer, which is why we have a problem in the first place. And you aren't so much helping with the talks as demonstrating Federation support. You're the flagship, Kirk."

"So we're just gonna fly out there and sit on our hands while the Vulcans argue for their right to colonize a planet that isn't really in use anyway."

"It's a shakedown mission," Barnett said through gritted teeth, "to make sure your ship doesn't fall down around your ears."

The new captain frowned darkly, setting his PADD down with just a bit too much force. "This is a joke!"

Barnett sighed, covering his face with one hand. "Did you have to learn to be so annoying or were you just born this way?"

"There's nothing we can do?"

"Kirk." The admiral spread his hands, a silent entreaty for the younger man to accept what he was saying. "We need you out there mingling pleasantly with both peoples to show that the Federation is committed to making this situation work for everyone involved. What you can do is be calm and charming and generally positive that Vulcans and Erixians can share the planet without either group having to sacrifice their basic principles or standard of living. We need you to maintain peace and not get into any trouble. Isn't that enough?"

"Perhaps you would prefer a more important mission," Spock suggested, watching Jim's reaction carefully.

His blue eyes went cold as sleet, posture and bearing adjusting in minute degrees to fit the perfect Starfleet standard. "On the contrary, Mr. Spock," he replied calmly. "At the moment, there could be no mission more important than ensuring the safety and continued wellbeing of the Vulcan survivors."

Exactly as Spock had predicted. "Then what prompts your reluctance in this matter, Captain?"

Jim glanced down at the PADD, mouth drawing into a thin, unhappy line. "With everything your
people have had to suffer," he said quietly, "the best we can offer is a thumbs-up from the flagship? There aren't orders or treaties or even good old fashioned supplies we can bring along with us?"

When he met Barnett's thoughtful gaze, his expression was challenging. "The *Enterprise* should be more than a glorified poster child. I *have* had diplomatic training, you know," he pointed out reasonably. "Like, seven different classes. It almost qualified as a secondary specialization. And the two or three times I got tricked into hanging out with those weird debate kids, I *always* managed to—"

"We are well aware of your unprecedented ability to sling bullshit," Barnett assured him with a dry smirk.

Jim spread his arms as though emphasizing a final point. "So then why not let me fertilize the congress? I promise I'll try *really hard* not to piss anyone off. …Well not anybody important. Unless they deserve it, which, come on, sometimes they do—"

"Go to Erix," Barnett interrupted in firm conclusion. "Play nice with the other children. Foster understanding and good will. And *don't* get into any trouble." Kirk frowned and opened his mouth. "You ship out in forty-eight hours," the admiral said. "Make good use of that time. Dismissed, Captain."

So Kirk sighed, retrieving the PADD and shoving it in the satchel he still carried. After a smart salute, he strode from Barnett's office. Spock followed him shortly. When they were under sunlight again, walking together toward the cafeteria and lunch, Jim poked Spock's shoulder demandingly. "You knew we'd get this mission, didn't you?"

Spock considered briefly. "I am familiar enough with the situation surrounding Erix to have surmised the Admiralty would send Starfleet's flagship," he agreed.

"You might have mentioned—"

"Though of course," the Vulcan continued without pause, "at the time of my reasoning, you had not yet been assigned to the *Enterprise*. Had I attempted to impart my knowledge to anyone outside the Admiralty at that point, I would have been guilty of a criminal offence."

"…Still." Jim donned his closest approximation to the Chekov pout, holding it until Spock glanced at him. The pout shifted seamlessly into a wide grin when Spock huffed a quiet breath, returned his gaze forward without comment. Strange, how even so small a reaction felt like victory. "Now that I'm officially assigned to the mission and it isn't a criminal offence any longer, what else can you tell me about the situation on Erix?"

"My official observations are all—"

"Unofficially, then," Jim prompted, flashing his Vulcan companion a winning smile. When Spock's expression remained stoically skeptical, Jim spread his arms, eyes widened slightly in a caricature of childlike innocence. "You were a scientist before you became a Starfleet officer, Mr. Spock. Surely you, as a scientist, noticed *something* that you, as an officer, had no logical need to report. Tell me about that."

"Fascinating," Spock noted. Jim looked at him quizzically, tucking his hands in his pockets. "You suggest a dichotomy of thought, a strict division of interests that would prevent me from making a full report. According to your observations, am I similarly lax in all my duties to Starfleet, or does the submission of willfully fraudulent and incomplete records satisfy me?"

Instead of backpedaling in the light of an inferred and unintended insult as most Humans would,
Kirk laughed. "I wondered if you understood emotions enough to actively attempt to manipulate them in others. That was a good effort, but don't quit your day job. Besides," he added with another grin, shifting the strap of his heavy bag, "I never suggested you submitted 'fraudulent and incomplete' anything. That was your own interpretation of my observation of a logical reaction to receiving a great deal of information in a relatively short period of time. Compartmentalizing," he explained. "Since you're an intimidatingly thorough scientist—and I've read some of your work, so don't try to fake your way down to amazing or awe-inspiring or something—you doubtlessly gathered far more information than the Admiralty needed or requested in order to make their decision regarding Erix. Since you're also an intimidatingly succinct officer, I can only conclude you omitted the information the Admiralty might consider superfluous—yes, big word, I know, we're all very shocked. What I asked for were the details that the Admiralty didn't need because, as the captain of the starship actually going to Erix, what is irrelevant to them is very relevant to me.

"Furthermore," Jim added, shifting gears so swiftly that Spock blinked, "it's of note that you are the one who brought procedural incorrectness and the concept of fraud into the conversation. One might consider that sort of thing telling, don't you think?"

Spock blinked again. "...This is why Admiral Barnett hardly ever allows you to complete an argument," he realized.

Jim laughed.

"Are you familiar with chess, Captain?" the Vulcan added thoughtfully. "I believe you would play a singularly perplexing and ruthless game."

"See, the Chess Club thought the same thing." Jim sighed mournfully. "Which is why they only ever let me visit and never actually join. Apparently, one or two games a month was motivating, but more than that and I started to break psyches or something." He scoffed. "Wimps."

Spock studied the captain from the corner of his eye for a moment. "May I make an inquiry?" he asked eventually.

"Shoot," Jim agreed. When Spock's eyebrows jumped toward his hairline, the Human clarified, "I mean go on. Ask away. Feel free."

"...Indeed. How long have you played chess?"

Jim shrugged. "Years. I don't remember exactly how long. I learned at school, when I was pretty little, because what they were teaching was really boring and just about every other game on the consoles had already been locked to prevent distracted kids from being even more distracted. So it was chess or card games, and I've always hated Solitaire."

"Did you continue your study of the game individually?" he asked, curious beyond the simple question he allowed himself. (Approximately how young were you when began playing? What were they teaching that you found so disinteresting? What about chess was appealing enough that you would continue your pursuit of it to this day?

Was the presentation of yourself as an ordinary sex-driven male of average-at-best intelligence an accident, or an extension of your aptitude for strategy? Why?

Why?)

"I messed around with some other kids," Jim said, responding to the only question Spock had voiced aloud. "But it wasn't hard to beat them, so it got too boring to bother after a while. I entered an adult
virtual tournament when I was a teenager, though."

"How did you fare?"

Jim wrinkled his nose in an offended expression. "They banned me from entering the next year 'cause they thought I cheated. It was a total pain. Not that I was even around the next—" He cut himself off abruptly, eyes darting from Spock's.

But not before Spock saw a flare of alarm at too much information given thoughtlessly.

Interesting.

"You're deceptively easy to talk to," Jim observed, still not looking at Spock, voice light and almost teasing despite the tense set of his shoulders. His knuckles were white where one hand gripped the strap of his bag. "I'll have to remember that."

"You would be the first to think so," Spock admitted.

Jim glanced sidelong at him, turning away again almost immediately, but his tension eased fractionally. That minute relaxation resonated with Spock like an accomplishment.

Very odd.

"Hello, James."

Jim stiffened, face blank and hands dropping loosely to his sides as he turned to face a man who approached the new captain with a condescending leer. The newcomer was enormous, taller even than Spock and heavily muscled. Dark eyes and short brown hair were set against an olive complexion in a manner than would have been striking except for something vaguely threatening in his smile, something menacing in the lines of his body as he came to a halt just inside Kirk's personal space.

The smile Jim gave the man was cold and dangerous. "There's no need to be formal, Alfie," he said, tilting his chin slightly to meet the other's eyes without giving so much as an inch of ground. "You can call me Kirk."

The man's mouth curled into a snarl. "I told you, it's not Alfie—"

"Oh? So what is it? Feel free to tell Commander Spock, too, since he's here anyway. " Jim spread his arms to indicate the commons where their confrontation was taking place. "And maybe I can flag down some of the other seventeen Starfleet personnel hanging out in the general vicinity. Who knows? I'm pretty popular in certain crowds. Maybe everyone within earshot will join the fun. So be sure to speak up, Alfie. Project, you know, from the diaphragm." He cupped a hand around one ear. "What was that name again?"

"You'll get yours, Kirk," the man hissed, leaning close with his hands clenched into fists. "One day, when the Admiralty's fascination with you has finally worn itself out—"

Spock imposed himself between Jim and the stranger, using one hand to force the bodybuilder to step back. "You are addressing a Starfleet captain," he said neutrally. "You will do so with the proper respect, or I will report you for insubordination."

The man barked an ugly laugh. "Oh sure. Right. Captain." He sneered again, pulling a piece of paper from one pocket to shove it violently into Jim's chest. "You're being called again, sir."
Jim snatched the paper from him, glancing at it briefly. Eyes and expression cool, he met the stranger's gaze. "Is this a joke, Alfie? From you?"

"Don't we all wish," the other spat.

"I have official orders now." The captain smirked, waving the paper in "Alfie's" face. "I can't just drop everything to dick around with you guys anymore."

"You'll report as ordered," Alfie said, eyes cutting over to Spock's in blatant challenge, "or I'll report you for insubordination, Captain."

Kirk looked between Alfie and Spock with a blank expression before waving the other Human away in a bored motion. "I'll report as ordered by the admiral," he said with a yawn, "but it'll be on her ass if Starfleet's flagship is delayed because she didn't have enough competent people of her own to fill her quotas."

"Whatever," Alfie snarled. He stalked away with fury bunching his shoulders.

"Asshole," Jim observed casually. Then he turned to Spock with a crooked, remorseful smile. "Sorry, looks like I have to cut out for now."

"That man represents the same group who called you from the reunion dinner," Spock guessed, studying Jim's reaction. "The same group that resulted in your back injuries."

Jim scowled faintly, glancing away. When he looked back, he just seemed resigned. "Yeah. I thought they'd stop asking now that I've got an assignment, but I guess not." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I'd still like to pick your brain later about the Erix problem. Which wouldn't be hard," he added, eyes bright with a new idea, "if you'd just agree to be my First Officer. We could discuss it at length on the way there."

"Have a successful mission," Spock replied dryly, hands locked behind his back. Jim sighed and waved and was gone.

The encounter sat poorly with Spock, who began to wonder, for the first time, if the missions that had so concerned Dr. McCoy and Uhura weren't more dangerous than even they had suspected. He hoped the admiral, whoever she was, would stop requesting Kirk after it became apparent how lengthily and involved the flagship's missions were, and therefore how difficult it would be to acquire Jim's particular talents.

Somehow, it didn't seem likely.

Three hours before the U.S.S. Enterprise left space dock for her shakedown mission, Spock stepped aboard, personal effects packed neatly in a single duffle at his side. Within ten minutes, rumors of his presence had suffused every division. Doubtlessly Jim would arrive while Spock was arranging his quarters, demanding to know why he hadn't been informed of the Vulcan's orders as soon as they went through.

The Kirk factor being what it was, Spock wasn't terribly surprised when Jim didn't so much as send a welcome message. In the end, it was up to the First Officer to hunt down his captain in order to formally request a place on the ship. His initial stop was to sickbay, where he intended to press McCoy for Jim's location and submit to the mandatory physical at the same time.

"I had hoped," the doctor huffed in greeting, shooing Spock in with an irritated jerk of one hand, "that the rumors were just more wild speculation."
"Indeed not," Spock said neutrally as McCoy built his baseline charts for the voyage.

McCoy grunted but didn't reply. When the scans were complete, he marched into his personal office without glancing at Spock, though he did bark over his shoulder, "Come on. And for the love of God, keep it down. I figure I can get at least one more pester-free hour out of this if everyone just shuts up in here."

Spock thought perhaps incoherency was not the best way for a Chief Medical Officer to begin his tenure. Then he stepped into the office. As he glanced around in a habitual scan of new territory, his eyes landed on a couch shoved against the far wall, and he understood.

Jim Kirk, dressed in captain's gold, was stretched to nearly his full length on that couch, back to the room with his arms wrapped around a cushion that hid his face. He was asleep.

"Did he sustain any further injuries?" Spock inquired softly, never removing his gaze from the steady rise and fall of Jim's back.

"No," McCoy assured him just as softly. "For once, he got away clean. But he was so exhausted during his physical that I didn't even have to drug him. I told him to sit while I filed his results, and five minutes later he was out cold." When Spock finally glanced at him, McCoy shrugged. "He'd already completed his major duties by then. I'll wake him up in enough time for final checks." The doctor hesitated, then sighed. "If you make yourself scarce," he said reluctantly, "you could probably get away with meeting him on the bridge. I don't know why you and the Admiralty made him sweat it out this long, but it was funny as hell toward the end, and I guess I owe you some help with the punch line."

Spock inclined his head, thinking of a Human saying about gift horses. "I am sure, Doctor," he replied, calculating the likelihood that this man would one day hold Spock's life in his hands, and how much improved his odds of survival would be if mutual dislike was not all that existed between them, "that you could devise a purpose for being on the bridge for the launch as well. Perhaps you might play to Jim's sentimentality concerning the Enterprise."

McCoy rolled his eyes and grumbled, but a tiny smirk played along the corner of his mouth as he glanced at Jim and plotted.

Progress.

"You know, one of you could have told me."

The newly-graduated senior officers of the Enterprise grinned without looking at each other, paying close attention to their stations while their captain sat in his chair and sulked.

"I mean, I'm sure you all knew way before I did. Right? So you could have told me and didn't. There's a code violation in there somewhere." He glanced sidelong at the Vulcan standing by the science station. "Any recommendations, First Officer Spock?"

"Yes, Captain." Spock folded his hands behind his back before facing Jim. "My best recommendation in this situation would be to brief the bridge on the specifics of the mission on which we find ourselves, including, of course, an exploration of the dossier pertaining to the populous currently dwelling on and around Erix Prime." He lifted an eyebrow at Jim. "That is the matter on which you desired my input. Correct, sir?"

Jim heaved a put-upon sigh. "Yeah, sure." He sat up in his chair, his expression and demeanor shifting to something more professional. "Lieutenant Uhura, pull up the mission parameters on the
"Yes sir," she said immediately, retrieving the relevant file. The facts that appeared before them had been part of Chekov's general announcement upon departure and were, as Jim had once pointed out, a little vague on details.

"Mr. Spock," the captain informed his bridge crew, "was part of the initial team that established Erix Prime as the best place for the Vulcan colony. As such, he's had contact with not only the planet but also the Erixian colonists who already live there." Jim grinned at his First Officer. "Anything you'd like to add to the official report on our way to the site, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan didn't react to his captain's teasing turn of phrase other than to incline his head slightly. "Yes sir." Long fingers danced over his consol briefly as he imposed a secondary file over the information currently occupying the main display. Images of the desert planet's surface were interspersed with schematics of nine different space stations. "The colonists now known as Erixians originated on Earth," the Science Officer began in a tone that his fellow officers recognized from various lectures he'd given during his tenure at the Academy. "Historical records indicate they left the planet approximately one century ago in an effort to form a new society devoted to a branch of study often referred to as 'the Arts.'"

"They're artists?" Sulu asked, startled. He glanced at Chekov, then Jim. "Sorry, sir, but you don't tend to get a lot of artists in space. Most of the people I went through Starfleet Academy with were scientists of some nature. The artists I knew thought I was crazy to join and told me so on multiple occasions. It just seems sort of unusual."

Chekov nodded. "It was similar in my home town. Why would they choose to leave Earth?"

"Mr. Spock?" Jim asked, a challenging smile lifting one corner of his mouth.

"As I mentioned," Spock continued without addressing any of the comments, "their stated goal was to form a society devoted to the Arts. According to propaganda accredited to their organization around the time of their voyage, Terran society had been consumed by the quest for scientific knowledge and technological development to the point of turning its back on the development of the Arts and was therefore irredeemable."

"Harsh," Jim observed.

Chekov frowned. "A society that used science and technology to escape the advancement of science and technology?"

"Highly illogical," Spock agreed."Nevertheless, they acquired official documentation granting them permission to colonize Erix Prime and left the Earth to have little contact with any outside societies in the years since. To be specific," he added for good measure, "they departed from a region known as France."

Jim startled. "They're French? As in…like, French?" He shook his head, slightly incredulous. "How French are we talking here, exactly?"

"What I think the captain means," Uhura said with a tiny eye roll, "is do they speak Standard or was their divorce from modern society more complete than that?"

"They have dual language efficiency," Spock assured her.

She nodded thoughtfully. "So they speak French too. Did you notice a preference for either language?"
"They displayed comparable ease with both tongues." Spock considered for a moment. "Though," he admitted, "I did not have opportunity to interact with any of their children, who would, of course, be the best measure in such instances."

Jim made a thoughtful sound. "You were there a while to not have met any of their kids."

"I found it irregular as well," Spock agreed. "Inquiries into the anomaly produced no satisfactory explanation, though it was theorized that the children were kept on a separate space station or else on the planet itself to prevent them being tainted or in any way swayed by the presence of outside forces."

"Elitists." The captain propped his chin in one hand. "Wonderful."

"It was conjecture on our part," Spock reminded him. "It is equally possible that the children were detained with lessons, or else their elders thought to shield them from communicable diseases."

"Uptight paranoid elitists. Even better."

"Do we know why the Erixians are being difficult about sharing the planet?" Uhura asked, filing Spock's trace reactions to Jim's teasing away for later review.

Spock shook his head. "They have filed no official complaints."

"How about unofficially?" Jim asked. He offered another crooked smile when Spock glanced at him.

"Historically," the Vulcan said calmly, "the Erixians have been disinterested in and even opposed to science and technology. Vulcans, of course, have never attempted to hide their propensity for scientific advancement. The Vulcan Science Academy was highly lauded for the scientists trained there, and it is doubtless that the Academy will be rebuilt as part of any colonization process. It might be speculated that the Erixians are hesitant to allow what they consider to be their plant to be populated by a people whose study focus could not be more divergent from their own."


"…Indeed."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Sulu asked, voicing the question shared by most of the crew. "When we get to Erix, I mean. How are we supposed to help?"

"Our orders are to support the congress between Erixian leaders and the Vulcan Council representatives in whatever way we can," Spock said.

"We'll smile and nod," Jim clarified, eyes distant as he studied the pictures of Erix without really seeing them, his mind occupied with new information. "If anyone asks, we're sure all the problems will get sorted out to everyone's benefit. We support completely the idea that Vulcans and Erixians can coexist in harmony. And in the mean time, we keep our eyes open."

"Keep them open for what, Captain?" Chekov asked after an expectant silence.

Jim smiled at him, calculations bright in his eyes. "For signs about what's really going on, of course."

Sulu frowned. "Sir?"

"Every artist I've ever known has had a respect for life bordering on reverence," he explained with a
shrug, leaning back in his chair. "It seems unlikely to me that a whole civilization of people devoted to the Arts would suddenly decide their property rights to a planet outweigh the surviving Vulcans' basic need for a place to live. Either these nine space stations are filled with the biggest dicks in the universe, or something else is going on here. In either case, we're going to find out everything we can about it."

"How?" Uhura asked. "Our orders specified that we weren't to get in any trouble or cause undue stress to anyone. Kind of a pointed addition to otherwise standard phrasing, sir."

Kirk made an elegant, if dismissive, gesture with one hand. "Where's your sense of adventure, Lieutenant?"

"I traded it in for a commission, sir."

"Oh, come on, Uhura! Don't worry so much. We're just gonna be observing. What could possibly go wrong?"

"They took the children!"

Jim froze, hand still extended to shake with the Erixian's representative. Everyone in the space station's transporter room turned to face the hysterical woman who had just burst through the door.

"What?"

"The children!" She ran to the representative, a stately man with gray streaked through dark hair, and collapsed in a weeping heap at his feet. "They were separated from their study group and stranded on the surface. We sent a shuttle for them, one of the goods transporters, and the pirates took them with the cargo!" The representative paled, swaying with shock.

Jim caught his shoulders to steady him, eyes narrowed with furious suspicion. "Pirates?"

The representative shut his eyes. "The Vulcans cannot settle here," he said in defeat, "because we have been preyed upon by thieves and mercenaries since—"

"More on that later," the captain snapped. "When did they take the children?"

"Not ten minutes ago," the woman whimpered.

"Kirk to Scott," Jim called to his communicator.

"Scott here, Captain. Go ahead."

"Three to beam back."

A small, confused pause was followed by, "Aye, sir."

Jim pointed an accusatory finger at the representative as transportation energy gathered and hummed. "You'd better be ready to explain this when we get back with those kids."

As soon as they were aboard the Enterprise, Jim and his away team—Spock and Uhura, for their assorted necessary talents and experience—raced to the bridge. Jim began issuing orders before the turbolift closed behind him.

"Mr. Chekov, review all scan records. There should be an unregistered ship in the area within the last twenty minutes. Find its entry and exit points. Mr. Sulu, assist Mr. Chekov in setting a pursuit course."
We need to follow quietly, since they can't have known we were in the area. I want to preserve our element of surprise as long as possible. As soon as you have a course, set it and go. Lieutenant Uhura, monitor all frequencies for any chatter to, from or around the pirate vessel. If they have any backup in range, I want to know about it. If they're planning another raid, I want to know about it. If they're gloating about what they intend to do with their captives, I want to know about it. Mr. Spock, assist the lieutenant."

For a heartbeat, the bridge crew could only stare at their captain in shock.

Jim's expression went hard. "Did I stutter?" he asked in a voice like ice.

Activity exploded at every station but one. Spock approached the captain carefully. "If I might have a word, Captain?" he requested in a low tone.

Jim, stone faced, barely glanced at him.

Spock took it as permission. "Our orders in this mission, sir, are explicit."

Blue eyes cut to black, colder than Spock had ever seen them. "What are you suggesting, Mr. Spock?" Jim asked in a low, dangerous voice. "That we allow a ship of dangerous criminals to get away with kidnapping children because we were ordered not to interfere with peace talks?"

"Not at all," the Vulcan replied calmly. "However—"

"We have a course, Captain!" Chekov called. "They appear to have stopped by one of the neighboring gas giant's inner moons. The planet's field would interfere with many systems on an older ship, including the one we are following. They must think they can hide there without fear of detection. But the Enterprise should continue to function normally."

"Lay in the course," Jim ordered. "Mr. Sulu," he added, "we need to catch that ship. We need to do it now. And we need to do it silently."

Sulu answered that challenge as Jim had expected: with a determined set to his shoulders and a stubborn quirk to his mouth. The Enterprise jumped quickly into warp. "Twenty minutes, sir, and we'll be there. I'll hide us in Mr. Chekov's planetary field."

"Good work, both of you." Jim stood, striding toward the turbolift. "Lieutenant Uhura, gag all communications onboard short of absolute emergencies. Continue to monitor external frequencies."

"Aye, Captain."

Spock calculated the odds of Jim leaving the bridge for anything less than a rescue mission and stepped directly in his path. "Captain," he said, firmly but quietly, "Starfleet regulations concerning the pursuit and boarding of a pirate vessel are quite clear. You must report the incident and allow—"

"Starfleet regulations concerning the protection of Federation citizens are also quite clear," Jim snapped in hushed rejoinder. "We have a sworn duty and obligation to retrieve and defend—"

"Trained professionals would have exponentially better odds of—"

"The trained professionals are so overworked lately we'd be lucky if they got here in a week. And what have we been doing at the Academy all this time if not training for—"

"Covert operations aboard hostile vessels with no data indicating numbers or weapons systems or even species would be tantamount to a suicide run—"
"Numbers and weapons systems and species won't matter if we get on and off before they even realize we're there—"

"Then what of the reaction? We will be unable to issue formal charges against the pirate crew without documented evidence of their offence, none of which will be permissible if we continue—"

"We'll find some other way to document their crimes, but not by allowing them to—"

"Setting aside even the decision to attempt a rescue without any valid information or support, it would be illogical for the captain of the ship to—"

"Bullshit, being captain has nothing to do with this. I have more experience—"

"Barring the Narada mission, your record is utterly devoid of anything that might qualify as 'experience'—"

"You hacked my—"

"—rendering your argument unsound and irrelevant."

"Look, just because you—"

"I cannot in good conscious allow you to compromise yourself when we could simply use our superior weapons systems to demand their compliance—"

"Putting their hostages at risk—"

"A small chance of violence against the captives hardly defends—"

"I will not let them hurt a child."

Spock froze, chilled by the expression on Jim's face, cold and calm and deadly.

"Sulu," Jim called into the ensuing silence, "you're with me. Mr. Spock, you have the conn." When Sulu slipped past Jim into the turbolift, the captain lifted his eyes to Spock's. "Put in the request for backup as soon as we secure the kids. If these pirates are in the habit of preying on a Federation planet, we will make them regret it."

"Aye, sir," Spock murmured, stepping away with his hands clenched at the small of his back.

The turbolift closed. Less than ten minutes later, they dropped out of warp, hidden from the starship they had hunted from Erix Prime. Their own systems, meanwhile, were filled with an influx of data, all revolving around the small outdated vessel. There was no one else within range of the Enterprise's scanners.

"I'm monitoring their frequencies," Uhura announced without preamble, putting the two-man away team's vitals on the main display. She patched their communication line to play through the bridge sound system. For a minute, nothing happened. Then:

"Kirk to Sulu."

"I hear you, Captain."

"Good, at least these things work. You ready to steal shit from pirates?"

"Without a doubt, sir."
"Alright then! Scotty: energize."

They were gone.
Aboard the pirate vessel, the away team materialized in the cargo hold. *Score one for Scotty,* Jim thought absently. He and Sulu both had their phasers out and set to stun. Mostly, though, Jim hoped they wouldn't have to use them.

Confronting pirates wasn't part of the plan yet.

"We're going to split up," the captain murmured to Sulu, voice pitched low and soft.

Sulu hesitated only a moment before nodding.

"You go find the children. As soon as you can, get Scotty to beam them out."

"Yes sir." The helmsman glanced around the dank, dilapidated and cluttered hold. "Should I wait for you to beam back or find you to assist?"

Kirk slinked over to the nearest doorway, peering around the corner with his phaser held at the ready. "Neither. Go with the last of the children. I'm gonna find the engine room and sabotage it as covertly as possible."

"Won't that be a dead giveaway we were here, sir?"

"Nah." He used his weapon to motion vaguely at the surrounding architecture. "Look around you. This rust heap is held together with duct tape and happy thoughts. There have got to be at least half a dozen major systems failures waiting in the wings. I'll just exploit the hell out of those for my own personal gain. No harm in that, right?"

Sulu grinned. When the captain slipped away moments later, his helmsmen began the painstaking task of locating an unspecified number of children held in an undisclosed location.

If might have taken hours if not for the singing.

Music Sulu didn't recognize drifted faintly from a small side hallway toward the back of the hold. He shut his eyes for a moment, focusing on the gentle, solemn melody. It sounded like a folk song, a complicated harmony carried in a dozen bell-toned voices.

Not anything like what pirates might sing.

He followed the sound to a set of three small cages, chest-high metal boxes with bars on the front, packing crates for dangerous animals. They were situated along the back wall of a filthy, unkempt supply closet. The sight of those crates, combined with the knowledge of what was in them, filled Sulu with sudden fury. He clicked his phaser to a slightly higher setting, not enough to kill but enough to communicate a message, and moved silently forward.

When he knelt by the cages, all singing stopped. Sulu glanced around, doing a final sweep to assure himself that he was alone with the children, and ducked his head to glance inside. Four children in each cage, too many for one trip. Scotty would have to beam them out in sets. Not ideal, but also not impossible.

"Hi," Sulu whispered, trying to smile encouragingly. The children, ranging in age from about twelve all the way down to a tiny toddler girl, shrank away. Sulu tried not to take it personally. "My name's Hikaru. I'm the pilot aboard the Federation flagship *Enterprise.* I'm here to rescue you."
"Hikaru," the oldest child, a blue-eyed little girl, echoed faintly. She hugged the toddler close to her side. "Shine, glitter. To stand out. Such a bright name. How do we know you aren't another pirate?"

"He isn't dressed like one," the eldest boy, around eight, pointed out softly. His accent, like the girl's, carried the soft traces of their French ancestry. Sulu wondered what Jim would make of that. The boy scooted forward until he was close enough to wrap his hands around the bars. His eyes, when they peered up, were tawny. "He doesn't speak like them, either. Have you really come to save us? We guessed it would take hours longer, if anyone came at all."

Sulu began the delicate process of overloading the cage's locking mechanisms. "We arrived at the space station about ten minutes after you'd been captured. As soon as my captain heard what happened, he ordered a pursuit course."

"How do the pirates not know you are here?"

"They're hiding in a planetary field that blocks all sensors on older model starships. Our ship is new, so they're blind but we can still see everything." The first lock clicked open. Sulu immediately applied the code to the other two units, freeing all the children in moments. He hit his comm unit as the dozen captives stepped free. "Sulu to Enterprise."

"Scott here. Go ahead, Mr. Sulu."

"I've got all the children with me. Thirteen to beam aboard."

"Aye, Mr. Sulu. Stand by."

Sulu passed a considering eye over his new flock as it clustered around him, pressing close for comfort. "I'd also recommend having Dr. McCoy on hand."

"He's already here, pacin' about. It's quite distractin', y'know."

Transportation energy cut off any response Sulu may have made.

McCoy descended upon them the second they materialized, scanning each child with gruff, professional care. This was made more difficult as the children, realizing at last that they were safe, began to cry. Nurse Chapel and her subordinates comforted them as best they could, escorting clusters of weeping children to sickbay where there were biobeds and food waiting.

When he was done with the initial checks, McCoy turned a frown on Sulu. "Counting you, that's thirteen. Where's Jim?"

Sulu tried not to fidget. "Well, sir, he's…sabotaging the engine room…?"

The doctor made a furious sound.

"I'll just go check on him," Sulu blurted, turning on his heel. "They should be monitoring him on the bridge." He all but ran for the turbolift and was still not quite fast enough to prevent McCoy from stepping in behind him.

"I'll just come with you, since you seem to have trouble keeping an eye on Jim by yourself."

"Great idea," Sulu sighed resignedly.

On the bridge, all of the usual activity was frozen as the crew watched Jim's life-signs on the main screen.
"What have I missed?" Sulu asked Chekov in a low murmur as he slid into his usual seat.

Chekov glanced at him with a nervous expression. "Not much, I am afraid to say. We know that the captain is doing something terrible to their systems, judging by the sounds, but we cannot tell what, exactly. Commander Spock has calculated his odds as being very poor for returning without serious injury."

Sulu considered that a moment. "Better or worse than his odds of surfing in a thunderstorm without serious injury?"

"Oh!" Chekov blinked, probability ratios bright in his eyes, and then smiled with obvious relief. "Much better. Thank you, Sulu, that is very comforting to me."

"Any time."

Uhura swung around to face them, expression dark. "Shh!" she hissed. "You'll make us miss something!"

They shrunk closer to their equipment, heads ducked, muttering apologies.

The bridge fell silent again, so tense that the odd snap or bang from Kirk's audio frequency made them jump. Just when Sulu was beginning to think maybe this was a stressful waste of time, Jim made a considering sound.

"Now that's odd..." he murmured to himself, unaware that Uhura had hacked his feed and was projecting it across the bridge. After a few more heartbeats of quiet, Jim cursed softly. "Hello," he whispered. "I'm Jim. What's your name?"

"Is he making friends with pirates?" McCoy demanded in a whispered shriek.

Everyone but Spock hissed at him to be quiet.

"Ophelia? That's a pretty name. How old are you? Thirteen? Oh, hey, that's practically a grown up."

"One of the children got separated!" Uhura gasped, a single slender hand flying to her throat. She turned to the science station. "Spock—!"

He was already reacting. "Spock to Scott."

"Scott here, go ahead."

"Be prepared for another multiple person transport. The captain will not be returning alone."

"Aye, sir. D'yeh ken how many will be with him?"

"At least one other, but ready yourself for more."

"Aye, sir!"

"I'm gonna get this door open for you, okay? Stand back a second." The disturbingly loud snap of a high-grade lock being expertly picked rang across the bridge. After a moment of tense silence, Kirk said, "There. That wasn't so bad, huh? It's kind of like an adventure. Scary part's over now, though. The rest should just be fun." A moment's quiet ticked by. "Don't be scared," their captain murmured, gentle and understanding to such a degree that McCoy shifted unhappily, wishing he could prevent the veritable strangers of Jim's command crew from eavesdropping.
There was nothing for it, though. A glance around the bridge proved that they were riveted. Chekov's hero worship looked about ready to manifest a physical form.

"Come on, you don't want to stay here with pirates, do you? Pirates suck. My crew's way cooler. Take my hand; I'll get you someplace safe. My ship's the biggest and baddest in the whole galaxy," he coaxed patiently, never displaying any of the stress that streaked its way through his vital signs. "Now that we know what's going on, we'll protect you. Okay? So take my hand and let me get you outta here, because I'm not leaving without you."

"Take his hand and go," Sulu chanted to himself. "Take his hand and go."

"Come on, Ophelia," Uhura urged, knuckles white where her hands were clamped on the edge of her station.

"Good job!" Jim crowed suddenly. His unit beeped, signaling an open link to the ship. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here. Go ahead, Captain."

"Three to beam back."

Everyone but Spock startled. "Three?"

McCoy raced for the turbolift. When it slid shut behind him, Uhura traded amazed stares with Sulu and Chekov. "Three?" they asked each other.

"Upon returning to the bridge," Spock said over their incredulity, "the captain will want accurate status reports concerning the tasks he assigned prior to departing. All stations will be prepared to issue such reports immediately upon request. Am I understood?"

"Yes sir," all three officers chorused, turning immediately back to their tasks.

Less than five minutes later, Kirk strode onto the bridge, calm and confident, his appearance unchanged but for one thing. Attached to his hand was the third, utterly unexpected member of the final transport. The child's presence forced a collective intake of shock from every member of the bridge, including Spock.

It was a young Vulcan boy, calm demeanor belied by the fierce grip he had on Jim's hand.

"This is the bridge," Jim told the boy, smiling brightly. "Bridge," he added to his officers, "this is Valt'ik. He's twelve. Today sucks for him because he was on the wrong field trip at the wrong time. His partner-in-captivity, Ophelia, is with her friends in sickbay. Valt'ik opted to hang out with us for a while, since this is where all the wild and crazy stuff happens."

"Why were they separated?" Sulu asked, staring at the boy with the same level of alarm as just about everyone else.

Spock was having trouble organizing his thoughts beyond Vulcan. They took a Vulcan. One of the precious few survivors. That they would dare—

"Ophelia's the daughter of what amounts to the king and queen of the Erixian colonists," Jim explained, still smiling, though now there was a distinct and dangerous edge to it. "I suppose they thought it would be better to keep the VIPs separate from the rest of their cargo. Valt'ik's value spoke for itself."
"Captain," Spock began, tone carefully modulated. Kirk glanced at him and read the rest of his statement in the deliberately relaxed set of his shoulders.

*They must pay for this. Dearly.*

"Yes," Jim mused, more to himself than anyone else. Then he smiled down at Valt'ik, brilliant and warm, squeezing his hand gently. "You wanna see stupid pirates get their asses handed to them without us ever having to fire a single shot?"

Valt'ik's eyes were solemn when they lifted to Jim's, his expression calm. Though he said nothing, he inclined his head in what was almost a nod.

"Great!" Jim chirped. He began stripping off his uniform shirt. "Mr. Spock, what's the status of our official backup?"

Spock sent a map of the immediate area to the main display. It showed the pirate vessel, surrounded by four Federation ships in addition to the *Enterprise.* "They are standing by for further orders on how to assist with the capture of the mercenary ship and crew."

"Hold on to this for me, will you?" Jim handed his golden over shirt to Valt'ik, who clutched it to his chest in lieu of holding the captain's hand. "Before they can be captured," Kirk said, as much to Valt'ik as anyone else, "we have to establish that they've done something wrong. We can't use the kids anymore, first because they're here with us, and second because we boarded their vessel without documented and formally established cause. In terms of bureaucracy and what'll hold up in court, we jumped the gun, rendering a whole lot of important shit inadmissible." He glanced at Spock. "Correct?"

Spock nodded almost reluctantly, sure he saw a plan building in those blue eyes but unable to guess what it was.

"Well, let's see if we can't convince these bastards to do the hard work for us."

"…Sir?" the First Officer prompted uncertainly.

"We'll give them some rope," Jim explained to Valt'ik, something mercenary passing between them in the form of an otherwise pleasant smile, "and watch them hang themselves."

"…Quite satisfactory," Valt'ik murmured into the fabric of Jim's shirt.

"Uhura," the captain added to his Communications officer, "could you make an outgoing message from the *Enterprise* look as though it was being screwed with by the planetary field?"

Uhura frowned in thought. "In what capacity, sir?"

"I want a fuzzy picture, so bad that they can't make out details, but clean enough that they can see my face, that I'm human and with the Federation. Distorted, but not destroyed. One small ship is somewhere just inside their scanners, with barely enough power to get a message through. Doable?"

"Yes sir," Uhura agreed, turning to her station to rig the systems to Jim's specifications. "Which ship am I hailing, sir?"

Jim's grin was wild, more than half pure madness. "Why, the pirate vessel, of course."

The weak, broken hail that eventually reached the communications terminal of the pirate
vessel Moxy was, at first, a surprise. Who could possibly have located them in such a fucking mess of conflicting waves?

"Evasive maneuvers," the first mate, Wallace, ordered lazily.

Dobson, the only other crew member serving the shift with her, glanced at his instruments with a sour expression. "Warp drive's on the fritz again. I'll have one of the boys get to it in the morning. Ack, and the main communication lines are down. This shit always happens in bunches. We can't call the captain. Or anyone else, for that matter. We'll be running notes by hand until it's fixed."

"I wouldn't bother anyone even if we could. Not for something as simple as this. They earned their revelry with today's haul."

"Do we answer it?" Dobson asked hesitantly.

Wallace punched his arm. "D'you think we're all mad here, Dobson?" she demanded, shoving him out of the way. "Of course we answer! If the captain wakes to find us all in shackles 'cause your frightful ass made our ship seem suspicious in the eyes of the Federation, he'll kill you 'imself. 'Specially seein' as this is likely a routine scan we can easily outwit."

Dobson bowed her into his seat, a sneer on his face. "Oh, surely, madam, answer the call! Don't pay any mind to those of us what see tricks and traps in your 'routine' scans."

"You shut your mouth," Wallace hissed. "I'll have you in chains before this shift is out!" The consol beeped again, and Wallace hit a command to patch the message through.

Beyond the static and broken image, Wallace saw a young man—more a boy, really—of unreasonably good looks dressed in what appeared to be the generic blacks of a young Starfleet nobody. "—spond," he was saying in a bored tone. He hid a yawn behind one hand. "Hailing unknown vessel. Unknown vessel, please respond. Stupid," he muttered to himself, "coming all the way out here for nothing, fucking stupid trader ships, fuck these fucking demerit hours—"

Easy win, Wallace thought to herself, putting on her best smoky eyes. "Merchant ship Reliant, responding on hailing frequency," she said in a throaty purr. Dobson rolled his eyes. "Identify yourself, hailing vessel."

The boy straightened from his slump, too-blue eyes bright with interest at the first sound of Wallace's voice. "Well hello, merchant ship Reliant," he said with a smirk. "Fancy meeting you out here."

Wallace tittered into her hand, rolling her eyes mentally. Little boys were so easy it was almost insulting. "Identify yourself," she teased, "hailing vessel."

He appeared to sulk for a moment, glancing down at what she assumed was fairly standard paperwork. "Federation patrolling vessel Fierté, checking this area for ships operating without proper clearance. Please transmit zone authorization codes and cargo lists for inspection."

"Why, Fierté, ye naughty boy." Wallace smirked. "Are you gonna have t'board me?"

Dobson gagged silently in the corner.

The boy smirked in return, sending a flutter through Wallace's jaded heart. "Only if you don't play nice, Reliant."

"Your signal isn't very clear, lad. Perhaps you'll have to come over anyway."
"Ah, if only." He sulked again, ever the petulant Starfleet nobody. "I'm sure the captain wouldn't like to wake up and find me gone from my post though. For now, I'll have to just get your transmission instead."

Wallace started the appropriate feed of heavily doctored documentation. "Things have a tendency to be a bit corrupt in this region, so I'm not sure how clear they'll be, but here you are anyway."

"Yeah," the boy mused, studying the files as they arrived at his station, "I had noticed that corruption thing."

The pirate suppressed her urge to smirk. Boy, you have no idea. "Do you have what you need, then?"

"Sure," he agreed, taking a dip toward boredom again as he scanned her information. "Can you clarify a few things for me? Stupid paperwork," he muttered to himself, "never the same in any two locations."

The extended link to a Federation ship was beginning to make Dobson nervous, but Wallace was used to ignoring him after serving together for so long. "Fire away, lad."

"'Necessities' is a bit vague. What is it you're transporting, exactly?"

A cruel smirk twisted Wallace's pretty mouth. "Livestock."

The boy quirked an eyebrow, glancing through the data files again. "Huh. That's gotta be fun in space. Your ship's pretty old, too, no offence. Where do you keep them?"

"The cargo hold."

"How do you keep them warm down there?"

She shrugged. "There isn't much use to keepin' them warm. They'll huddle together if they need to."

"What about food and water? Isn't that a drain on your replicators?"

"They don't need much."

"What's your destination? What's their purpose?"

"Market." Her smirk darkened. "They'll go to the highest bidder, for whatever use. They're highly versatile animals, after all."

"So." The boy pulled slightly away from the monitor, drumming the fingers of one hand on his console. "You're transporting livestock, without proper containment or concern for their basic needs. Your permits don't include trade in animals of any sort, since you're a merchant vessel. Those permits, by the way, expired a decade ago under the name of a ship that was destroyed five years before that. Your documentation claims affiliation with a merchant guild that has never sponsored livestock trade. Furthermore, when we contacted them just a moment ago, they made it quite clear to us that you aren't one of theirs."

Wallace's heart froze, dropping clear to her toes. "Dobson!" she cried, wrenching around in her seat. "Emergency escape route—"

"I tol' ye, Wallace, the warp drive's—"

"Mr. Spock," the boy called calmly, "make sure our guests don't go anywhere."
"It has already been done, Captain," came the distant response.

Wallace shut her eyes.

"Huh," the boy captain mused thoughtfully, "and now an escape attempt. They say the innocent don't run, you know." He tilted his golden head to one side, blue eyes cold with calculation. "To me, merchant ship Reliant," he said in a voice soft and deadly as winter, "this all sounds like cause to search your hold." His attention cut sideways to an unseen associate. "What do you think, Lieutenant Uhura?"

Their transmission cleared, showing the grand, intimidating bridge of a constitution-class Starfleet vessel. The boy stood in basic blacks behind a pair of gold-clad officers whose expressions were too angry and dark for such young faces. A woman of exotic beauty sat at the communications station, mouth twisted in a triumphant smirk. Behind her was a Vulcan in the blue of a Starfleet scientist.

Worst of all, though, was the small Vulcan boy standing at the captain's elbow, gold shirt held carefully in his arms. Their captive, released. If they had him, the others would be gone too, along with any bargaining power Wallace might have had. All their efforts, wasted. Years of planning, ruined in a single hour.

Who the fuck was this guy?

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Uhura replied firmly. "It should be more than enough to catch this filth. I'll send copies of the transmission to all relevant personnel."

"Aw, don't be stingy," the captain teased with a sharp edge to his smile. "We just made a bunch of hardened pirates fuck themselves. Go ahead and send the transmission to everyone. It should be good for a laugh."

"You're a boy," Wallace said, the words an accusation.

"I'm James Tiberius Kirk," the boy corrected her. "And you're under arrest on suspicion of committing at least a dozen felonies in Federation manned space, against a Federation planet, and to children of a Federation people. You're fucked, merchant ship Reliant. Go peacefully, or one of the four policing vessels hidden around you will blast your kidnapping asses to dust." For a long, silent moment, he and Wallace studied each other. "You shouldn't have taken the children," he said at last.

"No," she admitted with a tired smile, "I can see now it was a bad idea. We offer our unconditional surrender. Well played, Captain Kirk."

"Die in a fire, pirate scum," he replied cheerfully. The transmission ended.

An invasion began.

"Do you see why that worked?" Jim asked Valt'ik, tugging his uniform shirt back over his head.

"Not at all," Valt'ik admitted calmly, extending his hand when the captain was situated.

Jim took the hand gamely, nodding to his crew. "I'm taking Valt'ik down to see Bones now that the worst is over. Mr. Chekov, set a course for Erix Prime. Mr. Spock, you have the conn."

"Yes sir," the officers chorused, though Spock's unreadable eyes dropped briefly to the small fingers locked in Jim's before he turned away.
"It worked," Jim explained as he and Valt'ik entered the turbolift, "because stupid people love to brag. Give them an opening, and they just go on and on, especially if they think they're smarter than you. So what we've learned today is: if you're gonna do something big like this, shut your mouth about it afterwards."

"...Are you promoting willful acts of evil, Captain Kirk?"

"Call me Jim," the captain insisted. "And no, of course I'm not. What I'm promoting is the willful suppression of stupid."

"If the pirates had not been, as you say, 'stupid'," Valt'ik pointed out, "they might not have fallen for your ploy."

"If those pirates hadn't been stupid," Jim replied, "they wouldn't have taken you guys in the first place."

For a moment, Valt'ik was silent. His fingers tightened on Jim's. "Then you would have had no need to rescue us," he said in a low, soft voice. "And I would not have met you."

They stepped out of the turbolift, heading toward sickbay and Bones. "We were coming to Erix anyway," Jim said. "I would've seen you there, except without all the pirate nonsense and terror."

Valt'ik shook his head. "No. It would not have been permitted."

The captain frowned down at the dark, solemn head. "What do you mean by—" He was cut off by the determined *swoosh!* of the sickbay doors opening.

"Damn it, Jim! You can't just go running off on pirate ships! Do you have any idea what kind of hideously painful diseases might have been floating around that cesspool? No? Well I do! Now I have to update your vaccinations again!"

Jim winced, surrendering to his fate with such bad grace that the children scattered throughout the room couldn't help but watch and giggle.

It all went rather downhill from there.

A short while later, Chekov looked up from his station, blinking when he didn't immediately locate the captain. "Commander," he said instead, waiting for the Vulcan to turn to him. "We will reach Erix Prime in just under five minutes."

Spock nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. "Thank you, Ensign. Lieutenant Uhura, alert sickbay of our arrival."

"Yes sir." Uhura called up the communications unit in sickbay, frowning after a moment's observation. "Oh, for God's sake!" she huffed. "You've got to be kidding me."

"What?" Chekov asked curiously, twisting in his seat. He sunk down when Spock leveled a raised eyebrow at him but didn't turn away completely.

"It's that ridiculous—! Here," she said, patching the feed through to the main screen, "I'll show you."

In sickbay, Captain Kirk was sitting on the floor surrounded by children, telling them a story that had their undivided attention. McCoy was frowning in the background but didn't seem any surlier than usual. Valt'ik, the only child showing any disinterest in Jim's tale, was tucked against the captain's
side, head pillowed on his shoulder, thoroughly asleep.

"...Is there a problem with him being good with kids?" Sulu asked hesitantly.

Uhura rolled her eyes and cued the sound. Kirk's voice filled the bridge, rising and falling with the story, expressive as it ever was.

He was speaking flawless French.

"Standard, Russian, French," Uhura counted off on her fingers. She looked up, clearly exasperated. "Anyone have anything else to add? Does he secretly speak Swahili as well? Is any of this even in his file?" she asked Spock.

The Vulcan eyebrows lifted. "I do not admit to being privy to the captain's personal file, though I am sure you could ask him."

"And find out he joined the French ballet corps when his stint with the Russian circus fell through?" She spun back to her station. "No thank you, sir. I prefer my brains unscrambled."

"Indeed. Perhaps now, with your discoveries made, you might inform Captain Kirk that we are nearing our destination."

"Yes sir."

Jim nodded when he received her message. "Let me finish up with these guys, then I'll herd them to the transporter room personally. It's been a hell of a day for small people around here."

The children giggled at his phrasing, pressing closer. Jim allowed it with a smile, though he was careful to prevent any of them from bumping into Valt'ik. "Even touch telepaths need their sleep," he explained when the children questioned him on it.

They giggled again. The toddler climbed boldly into his lap, settling there with pudgy arms wrapped around his neck. She planted a wet, sloppy kiss on his cheek.

"...On second thought, I might need some help with the herding."

McCoy rolled his eyes, walking over to the communications unit. "I'll make sure Jim's new fanclub is ready to beam down when we get to the space station."

"Even when he's not trying," Uhura sighed with a smile, "he leaves a trail of broken hearts."

"I'm not sure about that, Lieutenant," the doctor said, glancing at the bright faces of more than a dozen rescued children. "They don't seem all that broken to me."

He closed the link before she could reply.
After all the children were safely back home, the diplomatic away team—once again comprised of Jim, Spock and Uhura, though Sulu was added for his part in the rescue mission—beamed aboard the space station. They were instantly inundated with the wails and weeping of more than a dozen sets of frantic, overjoyed parents and assorted relatives, all crowded close together in the transporter room as they searched the throng for their reclaimed children. Spock nearly flinched when the first wave of joyous relief broke over his senses.

"Let's give them some room," Jim suggested, corralling his officers back a few paces without ever coming in direct contact with the Vulcan First Officer. Once they were safely tucked in one corner, Jim stationed himself between Spock and the Erixians, studying the proceedings like the student he had so recently been.

Something about the absentminded consideration of Jim's actions was telling, but Spock's head was too full of other people's happiness to contemplate it for long.

Valt'ik, who had no family left to claim him, attached himself to the captain, tucking close to his side to use Jim as a shield from the Erixians pressing in around them.

Jim wrapped one protective arm around the boy's shoulders, offering him a bracing smile. "You'll be alright," he said firmly. "They'll calm down in a—"

"Ophelia!" a woman shrieked.

"Maman!" one of the girls cried, arms extended, so light and graceful on her feet that each long stride she took was a dance. She was a strikingly beautiful child, long blonde hair bleached by the same sun that gave her skin a golden glow. Her eyes, like several of the other colonists', were tiger yellow.

The gathered crowd of spectators and dignitaries parted automatically for the girl as she swept through their midst. A woman clothed in rich materials and rare gems threw her arms out, wailing, "Ophelia! Ma belle, ma précieuse! Ma chérie Ophelia! Ah, mon bébé!" She dropped to her knees before the girl, skirts pooled around her as she cupped Ophelia's face in her hands. The mother's dark blue eyes searched her daughter for signs of injury. "Laissez-moi te regarder, ma fillette. Ah, tu es si pâle! Vous devez avoir été si effrayés.Êtes-vous bien?"

"Elle n'est pas blessée," Kirk said reassuringly, stepping away from his group to rest a comforting hand on the woman's shoulder. "Les enfants sont tous bien."

She gripped his hand almost desperately, Ophelia clutched against her breast, tears dripping down her face when she lifted it to look up at him. "Qui êtes-vous?" she asked in a trembling voice.

Jim smiled. "Captain Kirk, of the Enterprise." He offered a salute with his free hand. "At your service, ma'am. These are some of my officers who helped with the—"

"Tu es un ange!" she cried before he could continue, yanking him close so unexpectedly that he stumbled. The mother dragged him to her side, rocking Starfleet captain and daughter in the same motion as she sobbed. "Un ange, envoyé pour sauver nos enfants. Merci, merci!"

"Uh," Kirk managed, looking highly embarrassed.
Spock cloaked himself in grim resolve, striding over to delicately remove his captain from the hysterical woman's clutches. "Your gratitude is noted but unnecessary, madam." Jim wobbled a little when set back on his feet, prompting Spock to steady him with a brief touch at the small of his back. Spock didn't react to the grateful smile flashed in his direction. "The captain's actions were taken in defense of Federation citizens, not for the illogical and dubious honor of being wept upon."

Rather than finding offence in Spock's scathing assessment, the woman laughed wetly. "Les Vulcans sont tellement drôles."

Jim grinned. "Je dis souvent le même! Although," he added with a nod to the Vulcans and crewmembers who were looking more confused by the moment, "we should probably continue in Standard. Language barrier, you know."

"Oh, forgive me." The woman wiped her eyes with an intricately embroidered handkerchief, rising gracefully with Ophelia still tucked close by her side. Once standing, she swept her full skirts into an elegant curtsy. "I am Sophia, First Lady of Erix, la Grande Dame de la Colonie, by our system of government. You had no way of knowing, but by rescuing dear Ophelia and the children, you have rescued la Petite Dame, the next heir to the ruling house, and her entire court. Oh, Captain!" She seized his hands again. "How could we ever being to thank you?"

Bright blue eyes grew chill. "We would have done the same, Lady Sophia," he murmured with a flat smile, "for the lowest of your servants."

The Erixians close enough to eavesdrop startled, looking alarmed.

Ophelia began to laugh.

"Oh, no, we have mislead you again!" Sophia pressed a hand to her mouth, seeming genuinely distressed. "It comes of having almost no outside contact. Well," she decided firmly, "no more!" She turned to the three Vulcan elders who had quietly sheltered Valt'ik among them in Kirk's absence, dropping into an even lower curtsy than before. "Forgive us our transgressions, and of course we will happily share Erix with you. There could be no question of such a thing, now that the pirates are gone and cannot hurt you!"

Jim looked from the colonists to the Vulcans and back thoughtfully. "Maybe we all got off on the wrong foot here," he said. Spock watched the beginnings of a plan blossom in the shadows of his captain's eyes and felt only a twinge of concern. After all, his track record so far was impeccable. "How about we start fresh? We can get to know each other's cultures and find some common ground, and then talk about the details of a new Vulcan colony."

"A marvelous idea," Sophia agreed immediately, rising from her curtsy with a whisper of skirts. She smiled warmly at Spock. "And perhaps afterwards, if you are interested, we will show you the heights of our study, which we hid during your last visit in the fear that you might find us as interesting as we found you and insist on living here. I am so pleased such measures are no longer needed!"

It occurred to Spock, as he clasped his hands behind his back, that the Erixians had caused an excess of unnecessary confusion by seeking to hide the truth of their situation from Starfleet. If they had simply requested Federation aid for their pirate infestation instead of attempting to disguise it, this whole debacle might have been avoided. The Vulcan colonists could have been settled weeks ago, their initial structures and foundations already laid. Instead, they were all trapped in a convoluted mess that persisted in getting more and more complicated with each new revelation of fact.

Jim turned slightly at Spock's side, shifting until he had a clear view of Valt'ik. The boy, cold and
silent among his people, felt the captain's attention and looked up. His dark eyes warmed in the slightest degree, a faint and wholly inappropriate smile tugging one corner of his stern young mouth. Jim, unfamiliar with the implications of such an obvious breach of emotional restraint in one old enough to know better, returned the smile with a broad grin that drew a deeper hint of green to Valt'ik's ears and cheeks.

More and more complicated.

"Let's play hooky today."

Spock straightened from his partial crouch over the science station, studying Jim in a sidelong glance. "Hooky, sir?"

Leaning on the rail behind him, Jim shrugged, crossing his arm with a full grin. "Sure! Why not?"

"...Your colloquialism is unknown to me, Captain."

"It means let's ditch the next tour. Skip it. Do something else." He motioned vaguely with one hand, the other still crossed against his torso. "I mean, despite how fascinating those eleven unique art galleries were yesterday, I feel like we're missing out. So let's just go wander around a bit. I'm sure Uhura and Sulu can keep the Erixian tour hosts sufficiently distracted for a few hours." The officers in question, checking their stations before another beam over to the colony, shot their captain matching sour looks at being so casually sacrificed. Jim ignored them. "C'mon," he added to Spock, "they won't even notice we're gone."

Spock turned fully, taking in the glint of mischief in his captain's eye and wondering briefly if maybe he should accompany Jim just to keep him out of the trouble he seemed set on finding. Logically, how much could even Jim possibly get into on a space station filled with people who adored him? …Though if anyone could manage such a feat, it was this man.

Unfortunately, duty was not negated by the impish whims of a Starfleet captain. "I must regrettably decline, Captain," Spock replied neutrally. "The representatives of the Vulcan High Council have requested a meeting, which I cannot easily reschedule. My apologies."

Jim's eager anticipation faded, a nearly visible drain from his eyes and the line of his shoulders. His grin, somewhat oddly, did not so much as waver. "Maybe next time," he allowed graciously, glancing toward the turbolift. "Do you mind if I ask where the rest of the Council is, if there are only representatives here right now?"

"Not at all," Spock said, settling his hands at the small of his back. "They are watching over the Vulcan survivors, who are at Starfleet Command pending word of a formal agreement between the Erixian representatives and those of Vulcan. Once the colonization request is approved and submitted, the survivors will be transported here to begin construction, at which time the Council will be reunited."

"I see." The captain's thoughtful gaze remained on the lift. When Spock followed his line of sight, he noted nothing remarkable. "If the majority of the Vulcan survivors are still at Command," Kirk mused at length, "why is Valt'ik here?"

Spock hesitated. "I could only speculate, sir."

Jim turned to him with a calculating smile. "Well, if you're going to be meeting with the Council anyway, would you mind finding out for me? For curiosity's sake," he added when Spock seemed
"Yes sir," the Vulcan agreed with the barest trace of reluctance.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." He motioned to the turbolift casually. "If you need to prepare for your meeting, you're free to leave."

Spock inclined his head with a vague, ominous sense of having missed something important that he would later regret. He pushed the illogical feeling down, striding from his station.

Before he stepped on the lift, Spock heard Uhura call, "Captain, you have an incoming message from Starfleet. Should I put it through?"

"By all means, Lieutenant." Jim walked over to her station with an easy smile. "It's so much more fun getting chewed out here on the bridge where everyone can see. Makes for a bonding moment, don't you think?"

Though Spock couldn't see her face as he stepped on the lift, he suspected Uhura rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, sir."

The captain leaned over Uhura's shoulder. "Hello, Admiral Pike! You're looking well."

"Pirates, Jim?"

"Hey, in my defense, they started it."

The lift doors closed on the profile of Jim's smile.

The Vulcan elders hadn't changed much since Spock politely declined a position at their academy. Their people were teetering on the edge of extinction, one small handful all that separated them from relegation to history books, and still they spoke to Spock as though he were a lesser form of life just because he had once had a mother who loved him openly. They used a similar tone when referring to the Erixian people, which was...not wholly logical, considering how much the continuation of the Vulcan race depended upon sustained Erixian hospitality.

It could not be denied that Vulcans and Erixians seemed to have little in common. Vulcans were scientists, devoted to knowledge and understanding and the simple premise of logical above all else. The colonists were artists and craftspeople. Their system of government was almost useless in the face of their basic disinterest in anything not centered around creativity. Ophelia's parents were the ruling party because they were responsible for negotiating with outsiders. Their "court" was special because of the additional lessons in mathematics and science they had to take in order to run the colony, not because of some archaic and oppressive class system based upon heritage and maintained by force. The privilege of leadership was viewed as an unfortunate burden that deserved the consolation of elevated status. No one else took control because no one else wanted it.

Quite simply, if citizens were not born into power, key leadership roles would never be filled. Their contemporaries would rather paint or sculpt or compose than balance an account or order grain. Their few doctors were medical professionals by only the loosest of definitions, and practiced more as a hobby than a calling. The pirates had preyed upon Erix because the people there had never learned to defend themselves, had never bothered to install shields or weapons. They literally had no idea how to stop the raiders, and so had simply planned to keep other innocents away.

It was a wonder to the Vulcans that their soon-to-be neighbors had survived this long on their own, and the elders were not gracious with their estimation of Erixian intelligence. If Erix Prime had not
been so perfect, the Council might have refused it based on the current tenants alone. Spock wondered what the colonists would think if they discovered that the people to whom they had given their world thought them willfully ill-educated and idiotic.

While Vulcans often thought the cultures they encountered were ill-educated and idiotic, this was the first time they made such assertions from beyond the safety of their homeworld. Certainly they had never before been so deeply indebted to the people they ridiculed. It occurred to Spock that such insular reasoning was a luxury of the past. To cling to it now was illogical and potentially damaging to future generations, who would have to weather the consequences of their ancestors' intolerance. The Council rebuked his efforts to explain his reasoning on the topic and dismissed him shortly afterwards. Were Vulcans prone to emotions, Spock might have been annoyed. Instead, he bowed and excused himself, feeling nothing beyond his usual serene calm.

Then he discovered that his captain was missing. Valt'ik found Spock at the beginning of his search and requested the privilege of assisting. And while there was a definite flare of unvoiced irritation in response to the audacity of such a request, it was illogical enough that Spock permitted the boy's company.

Valt'ik smiled faintly, not at Spock but in response to the thought of Spock's captain, and the Starfleet officer had to force himself to look away, to resume his search and lock down the emotions he had long ago deemed more liability than asset.

Jim was supposed to be on a tour of the assorted galleries. Failing that, he should have been speaking with the Erixian court, or back aboard the Enterprise, seeing to his duties and the stack of forms and reports he had been ignoring for going on three full shift rotations.

They found him in a small music room tucked in a nondescript section of the station, dressed in Starfleet gold and clustered loosely with a group of four colonists ranging in age from about twelve to late teens. Each person was seated on what looked like a tall bar stool, armed with an instrument of some nature. The twelve-year-old was behind a large drum set, twirling a set of sticks between her dexterous fingers.

"Let's try a half-step key change after the bridge," the teenage boy who appeared to be ringleader suggested, shifting his hold on the guitar settled on his knee. "Just to see how it sounds. C still okay with you to start out?"

Jim, armed with a guitar of his own, nodded absently, changing the press of his fingers along the fret board.

The percussionist hit her sticks together to count off a beat. For the first few bars, she played alone, establishing a rhythm. Then the teenager joined her with his guitar, adding a slow, sultry blues melody. The rest of the group, Jim included, let the two dance for a while, heads bobbing minutely to the pull of the song. A pianist joined in next, followed by a bass guitarist until only Jim was silent, eyes shut, listening with the whole of his body as his fingers ghosted over the guitar strings, always moving, never satisfied.

A distracted smile tugged the teenager's mouth. He began calling for Jim with his instrument, building to a gentle, if demanding, crescendo and letting it fall again almost abruptly. Until, at last, with an answering smile on his lips, Jim picked up the note where the boy dropped it, fingers dancing as he played with startling and unexpected skill.

Spock had never heard such music. The guitars seemed almost to be conversing, each coaxing the other to greater shows of proficiency, twined seamlessly with the piano and bass, all of it
underscored by the twelve-year-old's percussion. Love of the music radiated from their every expression, from eyes that brightened with a complicated harmony, or thoughtless smiles offered to the room at large when one of them added a new trick. Joy at finding compatible others to play with showed in the way they subconsciously swayed toward each other when their concentration was deepest.

It was a kind of communication with which Spock was utterly unfamiliar. He could feel the music itself brushing against his mind, a constant hum of delight/excitement/discovery/wonder in his otherwise stable thoughts. He settled his hands at the small of his back, glancing at Valt'ik to be sure the boy, with his weaker and already compromised shields, had not been adversely influenced. Which, in fact, he most obviously had.

But not adversely.

Valt'ik looked awed, eyes locked on Jim as though the sun had risen for the first time.

…More and more complicated.

"Ah," Jim murmured suddenly, with a twitch in his concentration not unlike a small-scale wince. "Sorry."

The teenager shook his head, focus unwavering. "No, that was good." He mimicked the alteration Jim had given the melody. Then he nodded, a pleased smile bowing his mouth. "A happy accident. Keep playing."

He did, and so did they all, for nearly ten minutes. The song ended as each player dropped out with a final graceful flare until only the two guitars were talking. They twisted and twined for another minute, tiger kittens curling up together for a long rest, and held onto a lingering note until it faded into silence. The musicians clapped and whistled, expressing their pride in each other, their pleasure at a well-done performance, and the satisfaction of a masterpiece completed.

"You guys are amazing," Jim said with an incredulous laugh, rocking back on his stool to shake out his hands while wearing the biggest grin Spock had ever seen. "Damn, I could barely keep up!"

"You play quite beautifully," the teenager argued, thoughtlessly stroking his hand down the neck of his guitar, his touch as reverent and casual as a lover's. "The passion you have for the music would be obvious to a deaf man. How fortunate your crew is, to have such art at their disposal! Your own guitar must be quite worn in by now."

"Nah." Jim picked a fond chord. "I don't have one. It's been years since I got to play, actually."

The Erixians gasped as one, shocked to the point of horror. "Mon dieu, c'est un travestissement! You must take this one then, take it and play, or we will all die! We will die here," the teenager cried, pushing the guitar back at Kirk when he tried, with mounting alarm, to give it back. "We will drop down dead on this very ground, at this very moment, before your disbelieving eyes, if you do not take it!"

The others moaned and wailed and threaten tears until Jim exclaimed, "Alright! Alright, I'll take it!" He sat back down, affecting a disgruntled expression, though Spock noticed his grip on the instrument was tender. "God, it's good to know a flare for the dramatic is still a universal constant among performers."

A brief, happy drum solo and four pleased grins was the official Erixian response.

"This was not a bad morning's work," the teenaged ringleader mused, plucking an absent folk
melody. His drummer picked up the rhythm in a heartbeat, beating out a soft accompaniment. "We can go through later, clean up the automatic recordings and send you a copy if you would like, Captain Kirk. The program is quite clever, developed by a highly annoyed string quartette that was tired of losing their best improvisations. If only you could stay longer!" he lamented, shaking his head on a sigh. "Perhaps we might have the chance for more free composition."

"May I have a copy as well?" Valt'ik requested, stepping further into the room before Spock could stop him. All traces of music vanished in surprise as the players turned to see who was talking. "Your arrangement was quite appealing, though unfamiliar. What is it called?"

"C'est un petit Vulcan!" the pianist laughed merrily, tickling her fingers across the keys. "Ils ne viennent jamais aux studios. Il y a plus de joie que logique. Pourquoi est il ici?"

"If you can't say something universally intelligible, don't say anything at all," Jim scolded mildly, giving the Vulcans a crooked smile. "Pardon," she chirped impishly, batting her eyelashes at Jim in mock remorse until he was forced to laugh softly.

"The arrangement does not have a name," the teenage boy admitted with an easy shrug, hands resting on his guitar. "We have not given one to it yet. What do you think, Captain? ‘Réunion d’âmes’? Or perhaps ‘Le fils découvre la famille’? ‘Attachez-nous avec la musique’?"

Jim made a face that accurately expressed his distaste. "How about: Si vous n’êtes pas un auteur, écrivez seulement la musique?"

The Erixians all laughed. "He certainly has you there, Henri!" the drummer giggled, adding a rim shot for effect that only made her contemporaries laugh harder.

Henri wrinkled his nose at his friends, grinning without a trace of embarrassment. "Whatever the name, you may have a copy, of course," he told Valt'ik. "Why, with practice, you might even play it yourself one day!"

Spock expected the other Erixian children, who appeared to be neither stupid nor ignorant of the general Vulcan dislike of their culture, to complain or protest. Instead they cheered, expressing delight at the opportunity to teach another. Their only argument was a friendly debate over which instrument Valt'ik would prefer.

("Look at his fingers! So slender and long, he is born for the piano!"

"Ah, non, Emily! Non! Vous êtes aveugles? His arms are strong, his reach is perfect, he must take up the drums!"

"Emily, Cecile, stop this nonsense at once! He will learn guitar, electric and acoustic."

"Oui, Henri, you are clever as always, but of course he will learn bass guitar first."

"Christophe! Traître, why must you wound me so?"

"Because it is easy!")

"There you are! Ah, look, it is a party!" Everyone turned to the doorway where a new spectator stood with a smile of pure delight.

"Ophelia!" the Erixians cheered. "Have you come to dance with us?"
The heiress stepped into the room, completing a single graceful pirouette that flared her long skirt and pale hair. "No," she said with an easy laugh. "I am here for Captain Kirk, who has a message from Starfleet! My maman sent me as quickly as my feet could fly. Will you come?" she asked the captain.

Jim was already standing, ducking out from the guitar strap and turning as though to place the instrument on his vacated seat.

"Non!" his fellow players chorused desperately, such an unexpected burst of noise that even Spock jolted.

"As you want us to live, take it!" Henri pleaded. "You promised!"

The captain looked to Spock almost helplessly.

"We cannot in good conscience be responsible for the death of Erixian colonists," Spock pointed out reasonably.

Jim grinned, as complete in his delight as he had been in his unspoken desire to keep the guitar. The pianist, Emily, fetched a case, where the instrument was carefully—lovingly—stowed. "Thank you," Jim said with a small, sincere smile.

"I cannot resist it another minute," Ophelia announced. She stepped lightly to Jim's side, going up on the toes of one foot to kiss his cheek. "You are such a darling man!"

The captain laughed, pressing a return kiss to her forehead. "You'd be the first to think so."

Then Spock noticed something interesting. While Ophelia was watching Jim with a fond smile, Valt'ik's eyes were locked on Ophelia, dark with some ugly unnamed emotion. And the other four Erixians, rather than falling back into their music, were watching Valt'ik in turn, studying him as though they could read his every thought and impulse, like the knotted layers of uncontrolled emotions bleeding into his actions in ever greater quantities were no more mysterious than the layers of a rotting onion. They saw him for only a moment and understood him, perhaps better than his own people.

There was knowledge here, as unexpected and complex as the language of their music, and it confirmed Spock's initial theory that the Erixian people were far more advanced than the Vulcan High Council could begin to understand.

Fascinating.

The message from Starfleet was a slight change to their standing orders: Instead of remaining in orbit around Erix Prime until a formal agreement was reached, they were now to stay until the Vulcan colonists and assorted supplies arrived, to aid the delivery in whatever way they could.

Jim looked mildly smug when Chekov ended the shipboard announcement regarding the new orders. "It must be all those pirates lingering around," he observed to Uhura.

"Or all the flagship captains practically begging to have the mission extended."

"Hey," Jim protested, resting his weight on the arm of his captain's chair, "all I did was point out that maybe we could hang around and offer additional support. That's hardly begging."

"I'd call it begging, sir," Sulu said from his position. Chekov nodded beside him.
"Well fine." Jim rose from his seat with great dignity. "I'll just go back over to the station, where I'm wanted. Mr. Spock, you have the conn."

"Have fun, sir," Uhura said without turning. The other two didn't react. Jim huffed away, the smallest curl of amusement hiding at one corner of his mouth. When he was gone, the bridge officers burst into laughter.

"I must admit to some confusion," Spock told Uhura.

She grinned brightly, spinning her chair to face him. "We're just teasing him, Commander. He knows we're kidding."

"Perhaps I was too vague. I understood the byplay of your interaction with the captain perfectly well. What I intended to reference was the alleged 'begging' of Captain Kirk to remain near Erix Prime despite the obvious success of our mission as originally stated."

"Oh!" Uhura laughed again. "I forgot, you'd already left by then. During the message with Admiral Pike yesterday," she explained, "the captain officially requested to remain in orbit. He tried to feed everyone the line about pirates, but we could all tell it's only an excuse, and a thin one at that. There's something on the station that's got him plotting like crazy." She nodded toward his chair. "He sits there during gamma shift sometimes, just thinking away for hours. He wants to stay to see it through."

"It's an ill wind, sir," Sulu commented darkly.

Curious. This was possibly the same subplot Spock had detected yesterday on the bridge when Jim asked him to play "hooky." But what was he planning? And how were any of them to prevent it from making an already complicated situation that much worse?

"There hasn't been any activity in the transporter room," Uhura added with a sly smile. "If you wanted to accompany the captain on today's tours, sir, you could beam over with him."

Clever Nyota.

Spock stood with a slight nod, hands tucked at the small of his back. "A most logical suggestion, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu, you have the conn."

"Yes sir."

Before Spock reached the transporter room, he got another clue regarding Jim's personal secondary "mission" in the form of an argument between the captain and his CMO. Spock politely waited just outside the door so they could finish their conversation.

"I already told you, Jim," the doctor growled, "he's getting ready to—"

"I know, Bones," Jim interrupted in low, firm tones. "And I get it. I really do. But believe it or not, I kind of know where he's coming from, and I won't leave him to suffer alone."

"For once would you listen to me? He's a Vulcan!"

"He's a kid—"

A Vulcan child? What did any of this have to do with Valt'ik? Surely Jim remained ignorant of the boy's troubles. How could he have come to know them?
"No," McCoy insisted firmly. "I don't give a rat's ass about Vulcan suppression philosophies. It's Vulcan physiology that's the problem. If he gets it in his head to start wailing on you because you're close and aggravating, it won't matter that he's a kid. He's three times stronger than you are, Jim, and his control is almost gone. If it comes to a fight, things could get real ugly real fast."

"Ugly's kind of what I'm counting on, Bones."

Spock's eyebrows lifted toward his hairline.

"Damn it, Jim!"

"I know what I'm doing, okay?" A shuffle of fabric indicated that Jim had reached out to McCoy, likely resting his hand on one shoulder. "There are risks involved," he admitted, "but when isn't that true? The kid needs some serious help other than old people telling him to meditate or he's going to go postal, and at least I know how to defend myself."

…Postal?

"What if it's one of the Erixians who finally push him over the edge?" Jim demanded of his friend. "What if it's Ophelia? He'll kill her without ever meaning to, and that's the end of the Vulcan colony on Erix Prime."

"Well then why can't Spock be the one to help Valt'ik? Or one of the other Vulcans? He's supposed to be their problem."

Jim gave a frustrated sigh and stepped back, fabric rustling as he crossed his arms. "Come on, Bones, you know as well as I do that Valt'ik's breaking all the rules when it comes to the logical Vulcan response to this situation. Spock says that's why he got separated out, right? Because he was a disruptive influence. So whatever it is they're doing to or for or with the others, it isn't working on him. What I plan to do will."

"How do you know?"

"It'll work."

"But how—"

"Trust me on this one, Bones."

Spock announced his presence by striding into the room. "Captain," he said in greeting. He eyed McCoy. "…Doctor."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "Commander," he huffed. Then he poked Jim's shoulder demandingly. "You'd better not get into any trouble. You hear me?"


"It's not hearing that's the problem," the doctor gritted to himself. "I'll send the tech back in." He left before Jim could annoy him further.

Spock studied his captain for a quiet moment. "…Did I interrupt your conversation?"

Kirk laughed. "No, eavesdropping never bothered me much. You're lucky Bones didn't hear you out there, though. He's got privacy issues."

The transportation operator's return prevented Spock from commenting.
"Energize," Jim called with a grin.

When they were back aboard the station, Spock immediately turned to Jim. "What were your plans for this visit?"

Jim blinked. "Uh, I dunno. I guess I figured I'd wander around, see if there was anything interesting to do." He glanced away. "Maybe I'll check on the kids we rescued, or see Lady Sophia about how the Vulcan/Erixian charter's coming along. Are the other Vulcans on their way out yet?"

"Yes," Spock admitted. "The official documentation was processed yesterday, which was all that prevented their travel. They should arrive within the next twenty-four hours."

"Not a lot of time," Jim mused. He grinned at Spock. "The ball's really rolling now."

Spock frowned. "...Which ball, sir?"

Jim laughed, shaking his head. "No, never mind. It isn't important. You want to come with me?" he asked abruptly. "I think I'd like to see what Valt'ik's up to. He's kind of odd man out, and he could probably use a friendly face."

"I will accompany you," the Vulcan said, careful not to agree with any of the other statements.

But he was careful not to discard it.

They found Valt'ik in a dance studio, all but backed into the mirror with an expression of great discomfort on his face as three sets of dancers, all around his age, waltzed across the floor to a sweeping melody played by a string quartette in the corner. Ophelia stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the young Vulcan, head tilted toward him as she watched the dancers and explained their movement.

"Ha," Jim crowed softly to Spock, trying to keep from distracting anyone. "The intercultural exchange begins."

Despite the low tenor of his voice and its proximity to Spock's ear, Valt'ik zeroed in on the sound immediately. His positive reaction alerted Ophelia, whose laugh of delight drew the attention of dancers and musicians both. The Erixian children cheered to have an audience. Within a single measure, swelling violins turned their simple lesson into an all-out exhibition. The couples danced in and around each other in complicated patterns accented by lifts and dips and spins that made Jim dizzy just watching it. They ended on a single flourish, girls dropping into low curtsies with their partners bent over their hands, offering a kiss.

"Ten out of ten!" Jim decided, clapping enthusiastically. "God, you guys are more amazing every day. Why haven't I heard of you before? You could be the reigning champs of pretty much everything if you wanted."

"But why would we want it?" one of the dancers asked, helping his partner up off the floor with a tug and embellished twirl. The others followed his example in a pretty chain reaction. "Possessing a trophy or medal would not help us develop new steps. It does not make us better students or teachers. What use do we have of competition?"

"Art for art's sake," the captain quipped with a grin.
"Indeed!"

Valt'ik crossed the room to take Jim's hand, drawing his attention at the same time. "I did not expect to see you today, Captain. It is quite a pleasant surprise."

"It's Jim," he insisted, grin gentling to a smile that drew blood to Valt'ik's cheeks.

"Jim," the boy agreed softly, dropping his eyes.

The Erixian children grew very still as they watched the interaction. That same odd, almost preternatural understanding witnessed previously in their peers manifested now in otherwise blank expressions. Spock grew more sure of his original conclusion: The Erixian people, by cultivating art instead of science, had developed their emotional competency to a degree unmatched by any species or culture Spock had ever studied or seen.

"Let's go exploring," Jim suggested, tugging Valt'ik from the room with one last wave to the dancers.

As soon as they were gone, one of the girls whirled into a pirouette with a frighteningly—if beautifully—tragic expression in every line of her body. She rose onto the points of her toes, strings adding a slow, mournful melody as she crossed her arms over her chest and fell backwards, head turned as though she were dead. A boy, not her original partner, stepped forward in a quick, graceful motion, catching her in a heartbroken embrace. He lowered her nearly to the ground before clutching her close again. Her arms dropped limply, fingers brushing the hardwood flooring of the dance hall. The boy rested her on the ground and turned away, shielding his face from the loss of her.

These children saw a new audience and danced joy. They saw Valt'ik with Kirk and danced tragedy.

Fascinating.

And a little concerning, for Erixians seemed to be disturbingly adept at the greatest weakness known to Vulcans. What would be the long-term effect of housing two such opposite peoples together? Of giving them the forced commonality of a planet? Furthermore, if Vulcans looked at Erixians and thought them foolish, what did the Erixians think when faced with the foreign and unyielding tenants of all Vulcan philosophies?

Down the corridor, nearly to the bend already, Kirk paused to call for Spock.

"Coming, Captain," Spock replied.

He left before bearing witness to the tragic dance's ultimate conclusion: A second boy swept over to the fallen girl, lifting her into a strong, glorious hold above his head as she spread her arms in flight, eyes bright and face glowing with the force of her joy.

All around them, the other children knelt in reverence.

Chapter End Notes

French translation courtesy of my darling beta, mdevile.
Jim's plan snowballed to its ultimate conclusion in the span of only a few hours. Looking back, Spock would never be fully certain how much of it was cleverly orchestrated and how much simply fell into place by "happy accident".

The end started when Spock pulled Valt'ik aside just after the captain beamed back to Enterprise for the night. "I must speak with you," he told the child, drawing him aside so the transporter technician could not overhear what was sure to be a delicate conversation.

Valt'ik, who was not a stupid boy, became immediately sullen, dropping his eyes away from Spock. "I have not made this request before because I believed you capable of correcting your actions on your own," Spock explained. "Since it has become clear that you have no such intentions, I will now instruct you in the etiquette you have thus far ignored as it concerns a man for whom you appear to show a great deal of positive regard."

Valt'ik set his jaw stubbornly. "It has not hurt him."

"You do him a disservice," Spock insisted firmly, hands at the small of his back, shoulders straight under the line of his Starfleet uniform. "You have deceived him."

"When?" the boy demanded, dark eyes snapping to Spock's. They filled with the fire of rage just as quickly as the emotion then disappeared.

Such swings were not an encouraging sign.

"At what point did I deceive him?" Valt'ik asked calmly.

"You lie through your silence, as you abuse him by manipulating his ignorance. He cannot know what you steal from him by taking his hand," the half-Vulcan said flatly when Valt'ik appeared ready to argue. "It is a much simpler gesture between Humans, a fact you have preyed upon since first meeting him. Do you withhold the truth of Vulcan hands from him because you truly think it does not matter, or because you know—as I do—that a man as honorable as the captain would never take such advantage of a child?"

"I am not a child," Valt'ik hissed, glaring up at Spock. "And the captain is a compassionate man, he would not deny me so small a—" The boy cut himself off, jerking away from Kirk's First Officer.

"Comfort though it may be to you," Spock said softly, "you still take something from him with neither his knowledge nor his consent. It is not something he would give a child—any child of any race—even in the name of comfort."

"He does not mind."

"He does not know."

For a long moment, Valt'ik was silent. "Will you tell him?" he asked in a whisper, turning his head to hide the expression he couldn't quite suppress.

Spock considered. "Not if you desist in the practice," he allowed eventually. "If you continue to take advantage of him, I will have no recourse other than to approach him with the truth. This was poorly done of you, Valt'ik. Do you understand how compromised you are?"
Val't'ik glared at him in sullen fury. "Do you?" He fled the room without waiting for an answer.

Suppressing a sigh of frustration, Spock stepped onto the transporter pad. "Energize."

Scant hours before the Vulcan survivors arrived to their new home, Spock lost his captain again. He was not aboard the Enterprise, nor was he checking through the final details of the Erixians' plan for getting in excess of twenty thousand individuals from space to the planet's surface.

("We only go down to tend the night blooming gardens," Sophia fretted, looking through a schematic of what their transporters looked like and comparing it, with a sense of alarm, to Mr. Scott's schematic for what it should look like. "And then only in small groups. For larger gatherings, we take a shuttle. I am…hesitant, Mr. Scott. Are you sure this plan will work?"

"Should work like a charm, ma'am! Ah, assumin' nothing goes wrong, a'course. But then," he added quickly, a wrench in either hand and already streaked with grime, "accordin' to the plan, nothing will.")

Failing that, he might have been with the Vulcan Council, listening to an ever-growing list of strongly suggested defense upgrades to be made to the assorted space stations. Somewhat predictably, he wasn't.

Instead, Spock found him lingering outside the doorway to a classroom, listening to the occupants argue. When the First Officer approached, Jim put a finger against his own lips, signaling for quiet.

Curious, Spock obeyed, standing close beside him and tilting his head to focus his attention on covert auditory observation. Within moments, the identity of the bickering pair was obvious: Val't'ik and Ophelia. From the sound of it, they had been having this little tête-à-tête for a while.

"Your people feel emotion," Ophelia accused boldly. "I have seen it, even in your Vulcan elders! Perhaps you feel more deeply even than we do, and long ago it frightened you into pushing it away, but you do feel. It is no trouble of mine if you do not understand your emotions, nor that you have no training to deal with them, so do not blame me for your torment! Grow up, little boy, and accept your own shortcomings!"

"What do you know of torment?" Val't'ik spat, so venomous that Spock made an instinctive motion to intervene before Ophelia suffered physical injury. Jim stopped him with an arm across his chest, lifting a finger to his mouth again. His eyes never drifted from the doorway. "You and your people hide here in this wretched place, too stupid to even remember that there is a whole galaxy beyond your walls, passing you by as you sleep. There is real tragedy, real horror, real discovery and advancement, and you bury your heads in art, contenting yourself with useless, pretty things."

"Better a useless, pretty thing that can bring true peace to a troubled mind than a warped and soulless people so devoted to logic that they talk themselves out of real life! My people have no need for that kind of usefulness, Monsieur Val't'ik. We need only the space and time to pursue art for art's sake. That is why, after all, we came out to this dark place in the beginning."

"My people made no such choice," Val't'ik growled, his steps hushed as he paced in the adjoining room. "We are here because we must be, because we are a pitiable orphaned race with no other land to hold us. Do you see, Lady Ophelia? We are here because there is nothing else. Your lauded home is my people's last option, the mighty Vulcan race reduced to this, trapped with backwards infantile Humans who cannot even protect themselves."

Ophelia made a soft sound of pity. "What a cruel child you are. But I am not hurt," she insisted
bravely, "for I know it is anger that makes you speak to me in such a manner. I know this because, unlike you, emotions are not foreign to me. My people have long embraced them, using them as sustenance for our great mastery of useless, pretty things. In this way, I can suffer injury to my very soul and carry on. But what of you, Vulcan? How will you survive the rage, the hate, the agony of having lost all that you hold dear? Where will you turn now that your cornerstone is destroyed?"

Jim stepped into the doorway. "Ophelia," he called, voice a low warning.

The girl stilled, turning away from Valt'ik with a toss of her golden head. "...I will not apologize."

"I'm not saying you have to," Jim replied, eyes on Valt'ik, who stood in the corner, his young hands fist ing and flexing in rage that made his body tremble. "Just be careful you don't start saying things you don't mean."

"Why do you come to her aid?" Valt'ik demanded in a raspy whisper. His lungs worked harshly, flushing his pale skin a dark shade of green as he fought the violence building in bones. "Why her? It was my hand you took aboard the pirate vessel!" he cried. "Now you prefer her to me? Am I to be so simply discarded? Do I matter so little?"

"Valt'ik," Jim soothed, stepping forward with both hands extended.

Valt'ik looked from the hands to Jim's face to Spock, jaw clenched. "I will not be tricked!" he snarled. In a sudden rush of activity that startled all those present, he took off in a sprint, ducking down a corridor before anyone could stop him.

Once he was gone, Ophelia gave a tiny sob. "I will be alright," she insisted when the Starfleet officers turned to her. "I am so sorry for him!" She wiped at the tears dripping down her cheeks. They persisted despite her efforts. "I am sorry for all of them. Poor broken souls! You must help him," she implored Jim.

He nodded, stone-faced. "We will, Ophelia. Thank you."

She shook her head. "I require nothing for my part in this. Find him! He is closer to healing now, though not quite prepared for it. So find him! Go!"

They obeyed her, running down the hall in search of the young Vulcan. Eventually they reached a fork, where Jim split their forces. Hours later, Spock began to wonder if Jim was having any better luck than his First Officer, who hadn't seen another person, much less Valt'ik, since splitting up.

The Kirk factor being what it was, it shouldn't have surprised Spock to run into himself while searching for a lost and potentially dangerous child.

It did, though. Quite a bit.

"Ambassador," he observed, displaying none of his underlying shock.

Of course, hiding such a thing from this particular half-Vulcan was very much like hiding things from himself, and Spock had never been particularly adept at that skill.

"Spock," the Ambassador greeted, fond and amused. "I was looking for Jim. May I enquire after your current... activity?"

For a moment, Spock considered the myriad ways he might respond: The captain and I are hunting a lost child. I have come this way in search of a small boy who is hiding from me. The Erixian heiress got into a debate with a Vulcan youth that she won by virtue of picking at his vulnerable and
unstable emotions, at which point he retaliated by yelling at the captain and running away.

Then he imagined what Jim would say: I lost a kid. You seen one around here?

In the end, he temporized with, "The child Valt'ik, who has been in residence with the Council, has been missing for some hours. Captain Kirk and I are searching for him."

"I see." The Ambassador glanced around. "I have not come across any young Vulcans, so I do believe it is safe to establish that he is not here. Shall we find Jim under the assumption that his particular brand of luck has yielded more favorable results?"

That sounded like a great idea to Spock, who walked beside the Ambassador with his hands folded at the small of his back.

Of course, Jim had found Valt'ik. Their situation was much the same as Valt'ik and Ophelia's had been, though Jim was not so much arguing as simply allowing the youth to work himself into a fine frenzy.

"You did not ever care for me! I am just another of the many children you rescued!"

"Valt'ik, you're not being reasonable."

"Reasonable?" Spock and the Ambassador shared a mildly concerned glance before stepping silently forward until they could see around the doorway to the chaos inside. Valt'ik and Jim were facing each other, one calm and the other inches away from an outright killing rage. Whatever slim control Valt'ik had had over his emotions was rapidly unraveling. "Reasonable! Is it reasonable that you abandon me for some Human wretch of less than average intelligence? Is it reasonable that I even be made to compete with her? There should be no challenge in it! I am smarter and stronger—"

"Valt'ik," Jim soothed, stepping forward with his hands out in a comforting gesture. "You aren't in competition with—"

"Then why compare us!" the child wailed, whole body shaking with the force of emotion he was poorly equipped to handle. "What makes me different? Why keep her—"

"Valt'ik, I'm not—"

"—and send me away? You all send me away eventually! You and the elders and the other survivors and my own—my own parents—" His rant stuttered on a gasp. One hand flew up, and he pressed the heel into his eye, looked bewildered and lost and absolutely stricken with sudden grief. "They sent me away and stayed there to die, they would rather diethan— And all my aunts and uncles, my proud brother finally in the Science Academy—None of them stayed with me, they all sent me away to— And now you will send me away too! For her!" Valt'ik's anguish turned in on itself, as Jim had always known it would, becoming something dark and purely destructive, driven to inflict as much pain as possible on anyone within range. The captain barely had time to set his feet before Valt'ik snarled "Well I won't let you" and charged.

Once again, Spock tried to intervene. And once again, he was stopped, by his alternate self this time. He looked at the Ambassador, furious question in his eyes, and received a head shake. "Watch," he warned himself.

So he clenched his jaw, settled his hands, and watched.

Jim avoided Valt'ik's blows through a combination of his own training and the boy's utter lack of anything resembling discipline. Valt'ik lashed out like a wild thing, a whirlwind of hate and anger
and pervasive sorrow, a growl in his throat and tears on his cheeks. For a long while, Jim dodged and redirected Valt'ik's blows, letting the child expend most of his energy in useless rage. Valt'ik destroyed the room attempting to get any kind of hold on Jim, throwing chairs and overturning tables, shattering whatever item his fingers touched by lobbing them at walls and windows and Jim, who always ducked at the last possible moment. When the boy's cries grew hoarse, his motions slow, his body weak, Jim moved quickly within striking distance, using a gentle combination to drop him to the floor.

Once Valt'ik was flat on his back, pinned with Jim's arm across his chest and most of the captain's weight bearing down, he continued to struggle, screaming his rage. His flailing limbs caught a shoulder, both hips, and a knee, but the retraining adult never so much as flinched. Valt'ik's struggles decreased with exhaustion until all he could do was scrabble feebly at Jim's collar bones and shirtfront, gasping helplessly. At that point, Jim spread the fingers of his free hand along the side of the boy's face, mimicking the pose of a mind-meld, and it was such an unexpected move that it startled the young Vulcan out of the dregs of his rage.

Leaving only his grief in its path.

"You aren't alone here," Jim murmured, voice gentle as Valt'ik expression cracked and bled tears. He stroked the child's hair from his face. "I haven't left you for anyone. But, Valt'ik, neither has anyone else. Your parents and aunts and uncles and brother sent you to safety because they loved you, because they wanted you to live even if they couldn't."

"They're gone," the child wept. Jim pulled him up, crushing him in a hug that Valt'ik returned to the point of bruising ribs. He buried his face in Jim's neck, shuddering with the force of his tears, and cried for a long time. Throughout Valt'ik's outpouring of grief, Jim's voice was a low, soothing constant, murmuring words of comfort to him in flawless Vulcan.

Valt'ik hardly registered the linguistic switch. Spock could hardly distract himself from it.

"They're all gone," Valt'ik echoed eventually, voice rough with spent tears as he reverted to Standard. "Everything is ruined now."

"No." Jim held Valt'ik at arm's length. "They aren't gone. Do you hear me? As long as you're alive, then so are they." He shook the boy gently. "You have to live, Valt'ik. Choose to live for all of them."

Valt'ik sniffled and hiccupped, rubbing his eyes harshly. His chin wobbled as he fought to restore his Vulcan composer. "It's hard," he whispered. "It is so much harder than my teachers said it would be when they explained the power of personal loss."

"If it helps," Jim sighed, offering the boy a weak smile, "they probably weren't thinking near destruction of everything you know when they were giving that particular lesson."

He bit his lip, eyes dropping to the floor. "I have behaved…very badly. My actions will reflect poorly upon…upon my entire house." His chin wobbled again, but he controlled it with a deep breath. "Which is just me now."

"Everyone deals with grief differently, kid. Hey, listen to me." Jim lifted Valt'ik's head, encouraging the boy to look at him again. "If you think this has been an easy time for any Vulcan, you're crazy. Just because you're more visible doesn't mean they're less affected. What you're doing is probably a marginally healthier way of coping than just ignoring everything. And if you ask nicely," he said with a full smile, "I bet Ophelia and her friends could teach you some neat tricks about not just suppressing but actually dealing with your emotions, which, you will be surprised to note, usually
helps them to go away faster. It's great for that."

"Art of that nature is not within the Vulcan philosophies," Valt'ik pointed out with a faint smile of his own.

For a long moment, Jim hesitated, debating with himself. "If there was ever a time for Vulcans to adjust their philosophies," he said carefully, "now would be it."

Instead of offended, Valt'ik began to look thoughtful. "Adjusted philosophies," he mused, stepping back to allow Jim room to stand.

The captain brushed off his uniform, noting a small tear in the uniform shirt with a grimace. Then he spotted two generations of Spock watching him from the doorway and flushed a bright red. "Oh, uh…hi there, Spock. …Spocks. Er, Ambassador." He glanced around nervously. "How long have you…?"

"Your kindness, at least," the Ambassador observed gently, "is a universal constant. I am quite honored to have discovered it in such a manner. Thank you, Jim."

"That long? Really?"

"You will need to visit Dr. McCoy," Spock observed stiffly, hands locked behind his back.

Jim looked down at himself, arms spread slightly. "Oh, come on, it's not that bad."

Valt'ik's eyes darkened with concern, though his placid Vulcan expression remained firm. "Did I injure you, Captain?"

"Nah." Kirk grinned. "You were a worthy opponent, but I hate to say that I've faced worse."

The shadow of a smile eased tension from Valt'ik's face. "I see."

"There we go, stock Vulcan phrases." Jim nodded, pleased. "You'll be right as rain in no time."

Two of the three Vulcans looked confused at the expression. The Ambassador, meanwhile, felt a rush of fondness, The universal constant of James Kirk. How would any of them have survived without it?

The Enterprise stayed in orbit over Erix Prime for nearly a month, helping the new Vulcan colonists in whatever capacity they could. Jim's command crew, prodigies all, split themselves among the work crews based on talents and experience, which they put to use almost constantly. It was exhausting, mostly thankless work, but immensely gratifying as the first shelters came online.

Valt'ik, meanwhile, worked hard to maintain his reputation as a troublemaker with the Council. He gathered to his side other Vulcan youths on the brink of emotional collapse, assisting their purge of the hate and rage born from loss that festered in their broken hearts. His cohorts, once freed of that burden, bounced back from their turmoil with vigor and tenacity found only in children. Following Valt'ik's lead, the children developed a rapport with the Erixians absent any trace of prejudice, which caused the original colonists to dote fondly upon them. This anomalous popularity set them apart from their peers and elders, making them something of a benchmark regarding interactions with the Erixians, who endured condescension by appearing to view it as a tragic Vulcan shortfall.

Vulcans did not appreciate having shortcomings of any nature attributed to their race. Their efforts to
correct such a gross misconception drew many more to Valt’ik's side. With greater acceptance came greater understanding, and the more Vulcans came to understand Erixians, the more curious they became about them. This curiosity was entirely reciprocal.

"This is all working out ridiculously well," Jim observed sagely to Spock one day as they were installing delivery platforms for mass cargo transportation units. Behind them, a mixed group of Erixian and Vulcan adolescents were planning an irrigation system based on Vulcan technology to support the expansion of a traditional Erixian desert garden. Their theorized alterations, like most other advancements on the planet's surface, would have to be completely new, since the Erixians had never lingered on-world long enough to need them.

"The two cultures do seem to supplement each other in an unexpectedly complementary manner," Spock allowed neutrally, "given the correct impetus."

"I wonder what this place will look like a hundred years from now," Jim mused, watching a group of mothers approach their children. While Vulcan females set out food and water, Erixians called to the working youths, opening their arms to greet them all. And all of them, Vulcan and Erixian alike, hurried forward to be praised for their plans, though the Erixians were notably more generous in their expressions of delight. They ate their meal side-by-side, cousins now of the same world, divergent peoples given into each other's care.

"It may not be so different from today," Lady Sophia said, drawing near the Starfleet officers with a small bundle of refreshments and a smile. "Though I do hope we will continue to learn from each other. It is a shame," she murmured, eyes dropping as she sobered.

"How's that?" Jim prompted, wiping sweat from his brow. Despite the early hour, it was growing hot enough on the surface that the Humans would be forced back to the space stations soon. Vulcans, however, would continue to work.

For them, the oppressive heat was another small degree of home.

Sophia turned to Spock, empathy and sorrow dark in her eyes. "It seems," she murmured, "that the greatest tragedy your people have ever experienced with become the greatest gift mine are likely to ever receive. Would that we had met under better terms, Commander Spock."

"It might well be, Lady Sophia," the Vulcan replied softly, taking the bundle from her, "that our cultures would never have met at all, absent the current circumstances. In any case, it is not something that can be undone, and it would be illogical to dwell on it. We are here," he said succinctly.

"You are welcome here," Sophia said with a grateful smile. "It seems to some of us that we have spent our entire history waiting for you."

Spock looked out over the mingled children, cataloging the million tiny ways their interactions had improved in only a few weeks, how this wildly adaptive first generation seemed almost predisposed to drawing strength from each other, and thought perhaps, in a hundred years, history might say the same thing of his own people.

Sophia followed his attention. "They are so good at their task that the land is already changing," she remarked gently, and Spock knew as well as she that she wasn't restricting her comments to the garden blossoming with unprecedented abundance under the care of children.

"It is," he agreed. When he glanced briefly at Jim, he found the captain watching him with an inscrutable expression, blue eyes searching for something Spock didn't quite understand.
"I'll leave you to your work," Sophia murmured, leaving with a speculative smile.

"...You're taking this whole thing a lot better than I thought you would," Jim said, accepting a bottle of chilled water when Spock handed it to him from Sophia's delivery.

"There would be no other logical way to behave," Spock replied, setting his own water aside. "The situation is what it is. Resisting the facts could only serve to needlessly aggravate those around me."

Jim took a long pull from his drink. "I guess I just thought you'd be...more distant. Or else less receptive to Erixian help. No offense, but Vulcans don't exactly have the greatest track record when it comes to positive interspecies relationships."

"I am aware of that," Spock admitted. He hesitated a moment, glancing sidelong at Jim before saying calmly, "In my youth, I often ran afoul of my people's opinions on races that differ from their own. It is only now, with distance and perspective, that I am able to view their actions in light of what they truly were."

"Stupid?" Jim suggested.

"Illogical in the highest degree," the Vulcan temporized blandly, "and derived from a sense of superiority we have developed over the entire course of our race. Perhaps now we will be forced to break with such habits."

"You're a stronger man than I am." Jim shook his head wonderingly, swirling the water that remained in his bottle. "I'm not sure what I'd do if someone just up and destroyed everything I'd ever known, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be as disciplined and logical as picking up the pieces and moving forward."

"You have proved yourself to be a highly adaptable individual," Spock said, returning his attention to the children as they concluded the meal and scampere back to their garden. "I am sure you would devise a method of continuing on despite adversity, just as we have."

"Yeah, well, surviving and living aren't quite the same thing, Mr. Spock." The dark tone used to impart those words startled Spock. He looked sharply at his captain, who was smiling brightly. "You ready to get back to work?"

"Yes, Captain," the Vulcan murmured, searching for any lingering trace of that darkness.

It had vanished utterly behind the bold, unyielding grin that seemed to be Jim's default setting. Spock had no grounds upon which to demand an explanation, so he kept his silence, working beside Jim without comment.

But he did not forget.

A few weeks later, Jim collected his crew from their scattered locations across the planet and assorted space stations, readying his ship to once again go boldly. Before he left, he checked in on the Ambassador and Valt'ik one last time, pleased to discover that the older, alternate-reality Spock was developing a fondness for the plucky orphaned boy that seemed to deepen every day. Despite the depth of the losses suffered by both Vulcans, Jim thought there was some hope still that the child would grow up knowing genuine kindness.

It didn't hurt that the Ambassador was one of only a small handful in the eldest generation who listened to Valt'ik with anything other than contempt.
"In my own timeline," he explained to Jim when questioned about his receptiveness to Valt'ik's efforts at developing a new Vulcan philosophy, "Vulcans and Erixians never came into contact at all, much less in so intimate a capacity. Vulcans are too slow-moving a people to change overnight, even with the loss of our home. But in a generation or two, who can say? Valt'ik is a very clever boy with a great deal of sway over his contemporaries already, and there has never been an opportunity for change on so great a scale as this." He considered his aged hands quietly for a moment. "I put myself and my Jim through great trials attempting to hold fast to principles that never served me even half so well as Jim himself," he admitted quietly. "Why would I discourage Valt'ik from developing a philosophy that might have prevented all that?"

Jim had no answer.

When he said his final goodbyes to Valt'ik, the boy surprised him by stepping forward to give him a brief hug. He was darkly flushed when he moved back, though he met Jim's eyes firmly. "I will learn what I can from Ophelia," he said, nearly in a whisper. "And I will attempt to create a new Vulcan where we do not deny our emotions so much as use them for the tools they are. I will not be so crippled again for the whole of my life. Watch me closely, Captain Kirk. For I will change the world."

"You will," Jim agreed. "Take care." The captain touched Valt'ik's cheek lightly, only once, and was gone.

Spock, the last of the Enterprise crew still aboard the space station, was caught by Valt'ik moments prior to his departure.

"Commander Spock!" the boy called, crossing the transporter room to gaze up into dark eyes. "I have been speaking with Ophelia," he explained simply, "and we have a question for you, if you will permit me to ask it."

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "You have every right to ask it, though I may choose to withhold the answer."

"I am not afraid of that," Valt'ik admitted with a shrug, "since Ophelia and I are relatively certain you do not know the answer. Captain Kirk was quite practiced in the art of soothing a badly wounded child," he continued before Spock could protest the unintended slight against his knowledge base. "He was familiar enough with reactions to great loss that he was adequately prepared to anticipate and confront them. As we have already taken the liberty of establishing that he has no children of his own, it made us wonder: Where did he acquire such skills? And who was it who comforted the child Jim Kirk when he was in pain?"

As the children had expected, Spock had no answer. And as they had probably hoped, he intended to find one.

"Thank you," Valt'ik said, spreading his fingers in the traditional Vulcan salute.

"Live long and prosper," Spock murmured, returning the gesture. Then he brushed his fingers over Valt'ik's psi-points, much the way an older male relative would to communicate pride and comfort. Valt'ik closed his eyes to savor the feeling.

Spock stepped onto the transportation pad.

"Energize," Valt'ik murmured, eyes still shut.

Once onboard the Enterprise, Spock immediately made his way to the bridge, where the command
crew was preparing to exit orbit.

"We should come back for a visit sometime," Jim mused to the bridge at large, already seated with right arm propped again its rest.

"It should be beautiful when their primary construction is completed," Chekov agreed.

Jim nodded. "Make a note, Mr. Spock."

"Yes, Captain." After obeying, Spock turned back to Jim, studying him for a thoughtful moment. "...Captain," he added contemplatively, "if I might pose a question regarding past events."

"Go for it," Jim encouraged, distracted by a stack of PADDs handed to him by a waiting yeoman.

Spock paused, trying to organize his query in the least accusatory manner. "When you were... assisting Valt'ik in his expression of grief," he began, "the Ambassador and I believed we overheard you... address him in an unexpected way."

Bright blue eyes studied the Vulcan First Officer, regarding him carefully, as though searching for hints of disapproval. He smiled when Spock's interest reflected only his inborn curiosity. "I learned Vulcan," he said mildly, ignoring Uhura when she started and whirled to face him, "for the same reason I learned French. Bones' ex-wife's family is French," Jim explained, expression almost pleasantly mercenary, "and I wanted to know what they were saying when they thought no one else could understand them."

"...An unusual, if effective, plan, Captain."

"I'm glad you think so, Mr. Spock."

"Wait," Uhura demanded, looking between Spock and Jim suspiciously, "you speak Vulcan too? Since when?"

Jim relaxed into his seat with a bright laugh. "Punch it, Sulu!" he called.

A grin spread across Sulu's mouth. "Aye, sir."

In a flash of light and sound, they were gone.
Admiral Barnett made good his predictions when the *Enterprise* returned to Starfleet Command. Despite the length of their shakedown mission, Kirk spent less than an hour in debrief before returning with a new assignment: attending a diplomatic congress between two warring factions that had decided to negotiate peace agreements only if the Federation's flagship oversaw the endeavor. It took three days, during which time Jim smiled and shook hands with assorted dignitaries, Spock at his side while the rest of the crew sat idle in orbit.

From there, a string of increasingly tedious missions were interspersed with both individual and ship-wide training drills ordered and orchestrated by the Admiralty. A month vanished under the tide of that ridiculous schedule as the crew become ever more agitated.

"They're starting to suffer," Nyota confided in Spock during a rare lull between drills. They sat in Nyota's café, watching the afternoon fade into evening with the comfort of warm drinks. "Not their performance, of course," she added with a sigh, stirring her latte. "But you can see the stress in what they do on their free time. Sulu cleans his gear or runs flight simulations. Chekov spends all his time studying—*Chekov*, for God's sake. He's probably memorized those books by now. And if McCoy gets any meaner, people are going to start bleeding to death just to avoid having to see him."

Spock considered her complaint, weighing it against what he knew of Human psychology. "What of Lieutenant Scott?" he asked politely, wanting a full list before approaching Jim.

Nyota was forced to laugh, sitting back slightly with a fond smile. "He started working on another round of upgrades almost as soon as we docked. I'm not sure he even knows what we're doing anymore, but the *Enterprise* is running better than perfect, so he's pretty happy. The engineering department might be the only one *not* feeling the strain of this situation, and that's because they're all nearly as crazy as Scotty, who would probably work them like this even if we weren't doing the job of three ships."

"I will speak with the captain," Spock decided at length, "and see what his opinions are on the matter. It is likely he is already aware of the problem."

For a long moment, Nyota studied Spock, her expression quiet. "The only person in this I can't quite figure out," she said carefully, watching his reaction, "is Captain Kirk."

"…Please clarify."

"He should have started fussing at the Admiralty about this weeks ago," she insisted, leaning forward intently. "He's manically protective of his people, and this mess is doing terrible things to morale, so why hasn't he complained? It isn't like him. It's making me nervous."

"Perhaps the captain sees some merit in the Admiralty's use of the *Enterprise*."

"You don't believe that," Nyota pointed out.

"…No," Spock agreed.

"And that's what makes me so nervous." Nyota shook her head, frustration drawing faint lines on her brow. "Pretty much everyone agrees that Kirk has the habit of taking advantage of or otherwise manipulating every situation he lands himself in, twisting it to his benefit. I mean, when has he ever been passive about *anything?* It's a good skill when he applies it to *Enterprise*," she admitted, "but it's concerning in a situation like this, when we're clearly not benefiting."
"Why?" Spock challenged mildly. "The captain's lack of response in this has disturbed you beyond what even I would have predicted, beyond what might be considered logical. Why?"

Worry shown dark in her eyes the moment before she lowered them to study her mug. "Because if he isn't here," she whispered, "and he isn't bugging the Admiralty, what's he doing? He has the night off too, but I haven't seen him at all, and I went looking for him specifically before coming here. No one's seen him since we were released, not Sulu or Chekov or even Scotty, and apparently it's so common for him to disappear like this during off nights that no one questions it. McCoy spends every waking moment at Starfleet Medical and probably hasn't noticed, but I have. And I want to know where Kirk is. I want to know what's so important around here that it's distracting him from fighting for his crew."

Valid points all, each touching on concerns Spock himself had been nurturing for nearly two weeks. "I will seek out the captain," the Vulcan assured her, watching relief blossom in Nyota's smile. "I will make sure he is not...causing undue harm to himself in the pursuit of an unknown and questionable goal."

"Thank you," Nyota said sincerely.

Spock inclined his head and turned the conversation to a discussion on subspace transmission frequencies. Nyota allowed the change, content in her belief that Spock would handle the captain. After all, what else were First Officers for?

Having grown somewhat accustomed to hunting for Jim, Spock began in the most unlikely place he could logically excuse, intending to work his way to "obvious" locations when and if those failed. His first stop, therefore, was Admiral Archer's kennel.

It saved him a lot of time.

"...He's not here," Archer said once he understood Spock's self-imposed mission. He knelt to check the ears of one of his adolescent dogs, hands moving with familiar ease over the soft fur. "Officially," he added, "I can't even speculate about where he is. This is his free time, after all. He could be passed out behind a bar and I wouldn't have a say in it. But if he's mixed up with who I think he's mixed up with, finding him won't be easy." Archer scowled, patting the beagle's chest to produce a hollow thump.

The beagle, overjoyed by this attention, wagged its tail enthusiastically without attempting to break the initial commands of sit/stay. Kirk had trained his litter well.

"Don't waste your time hunting for him," Archer said abruptly. "Not even my dogs could track where he's gone. As it happens, he's got a meeting with Admiral Pike." The admiral regarded Spock with an arched brow. "Tomorrow at 1000. Now, I can't officially advise you to be at that meeting. But I can tell you that Pike doesn't have an appointment before it. If you have anything you'd like to discuss with the admiral, 0950 would be the time to do it."

The next day, at 0950 precisely, Spock knocked on Admiral Pike's door, admitting himself when permission was granted. He had anticipated Pike's surprise.

He had not expected Pike to smile faintly, motioning the Vulcan toward one of two plush, empty seats before his desk. "I was expecting you, Commander Spock."

"...I apologize, Admiral." Spock took the indicated seat, sitting on the edge at perfect attention. "Have I neglected an appointment?"
"Not yours," Pike assured him, lifting one hand to point at the door. "His."

Captain James Kirk strode into the room, grinning brightly as the door shut behind him. "Admiral Pike! Oh don't get up," he added solicitously, a wicked smirk curling his mouth as he came to a halt just in front of the desk. "I'm not big on formality anyway."

Pike, who was still confined to a wheelchair, retuned the smirk with a pleasant smile. "I get the last laugh today, Jim." He gestured toward the occupied chair Jim hadn't yet noticed. "I believe you know Commander Spock?"

Jim started, a full-body jerk of surprise as Spock stood gracefully from his seat.

"Captain," the Vulcan greeted.

"Mr. Spock," Jim returned, glancing between Spock and Pike with open suspicion, his body curved away from them. "...How much trouble am I in, exactly?"

Pike barked a laugh. "Unless you got into some between last night and this morning, you aren't in any at all. Mr. Spock and I were just having a friendly discussion before your appointment."

Jim continued to look suspicious. "...Okay," he said slowly.

"But since he's here anyway," the admiral added with casual ease, "he might as well stay. Unless you'd rather I dismiss your First Officer?"

The expected response to that was so obvious that Jim didn't bother to say anything, satisfying himself instead with rolling his eyes.

"Why don't you both have a seat?" Pike offered.

"I'll stand," Jim said stubbornly. Spock followed his captain's lead, folding his hands at the small of his back as Pike huffed a fond sigh.

"Of course you will. Jim," he added, so much gravity in the word that the young captain subconsciously shied further away. Pike didn't comment on the telling reaction. "Before we being, I need you to know that none of this is going in your record. Whatever we discuss here is in the strictest confidence."

Jim made a disbelieving sound. "Until and unless it starts interfering with my command, right?"

"I don't think you'd let it get to that," Pike pointed out.

"Sometimes these little things get away from us," Jim responded pleasantly, congenial to such a degree that Spock had the brief, illogical impulse to seek cover.

Pike shut his eyes for a moment. "Jim," he said firmly, leaning forward and catching the young man's gaze. "I know it's bad. I know it's dangerous. I know you're doing it for some noble reason that probably wouldn't make sense to just about anyone else until a week after you're done. What I don't know is what, exactly, it is. And I want you to tell me so I and the other admirals can help. Because whatever it is, you probably have the right of it."

Jim's expression was unreadable, his body language still and cold. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Bullshit," Pike dismissed, scowling darkly. "You're in deep, son, and you're going to need help"
before the end. Believe it or not, you've got some waiting, and we're not interested in playing with kid gloves. So let's skip the Jim Kirk evasion tactics and get to the bottom line. Who are they, what are they doing wrong, and how can we help you fix the problem before you get yourself killed?"

Jim visibly hesitated, bright blue gaze darting from Pike to Spock and back. Spock had an uncomfortable realization: If he had not been in the room, Jim would have already begun explaining.

It was...not a pleasant thought. Spock's hands clenched behind his back, though his expression remained placid as ever.

Admiral Pike, who had not come into his position by chance, gentled slightly. "There comes a time in every captain's command, Jim," he said softly, expression reflecting only a deep sense of understanding when Jim looked at him, "when he has to decide how much he trusts his First Officer, and how much he's willing to depend on him. Knowing that, do you want me to ask Commander Spock to take his leave?"

For a brief, jarring moment, Spock almost wanted Jim to try and send him away, just to see the expression on his face when Spock refused to go.

"...No," Jim said instead, his posture relaxing even as Spock unclenched his fists. The captain shook his golden head ruefully. "No, he can stay. He should stay. He'll probably put it all together soon anyway." He offered Spock a wry, lopsided smile. "Frustrating nosey Vulcan."

Spock inclined his head. "Illogical impulsive captain," he murmured in response, dark eyes sharp as they studied Jim. His unexpected rejoinder surprised a laugh out of the captain, who shook his head again as he fell into one of the seats before Pike's desk. Spock took the second, sitting tall and composed next to Jim's exhausted slouch.

"Alright," Jim sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Fuck, where to even begin?"

"I'd suggest the beginning," Pike said, singularly unhelpful.

Jim rolled his eyes. "Yeah, thanks for that. Okay." He sat up, serious and composed in a microsecond, looking between Spock and Pick with solemn blue eyes. "What do you know," he asked carefully, "about a group that calls itself the Hounds?"

"Black ops," Pike responded immediately, mouth twisting with distaste. Which was good, since Spock had never heard of such an organization. "Unofficially known as the Dogs of War. Archer hates them, says they get all the best spec-ops volunteers and then waste the specialties by sending the whole team on every mission. 'Rottweilers racing gray hounds,' is how I think he put it. Why?" Pike eyed Kirk cautiously. "You didn't stir up that hornet's nest, did you?"

The flagship captain squirmed. "You, uh...might say that."

"Jim." Pike drew a bracing breath. "What did you do?"

An override code chimed at the door before Jim could respond. The captain and his First Officer jumped to their feet when Admiral Barnett stepped inside, PADD in hand, expression grave. He looked over those gathered, gaze lingering on Jim before settling on Spock.

"You can go, Commander Spock," Barnett ordered.

The Vulcan blinked. "Sir, I—"

"Dismissed."
With no other option, Spock issued a salute. "Sir."

He glanced back in time to see Jim steady himself with a hand on Pike's desk. "Jesus," his captain said in a tight voice. "I'm gonna hate this, aren't I?"

The door shut before Spock heard the answer.

He guessed it was some variant of yes.

The James Kirk who stepped onto the bridge more than two hours later was not one Spock recognized. He stood regulation perfect behind his command chair, posture straight and impeccable. His expression was blank, blue eyes cold.

Whatever news Barnett had given was worse than Spock had expected.

Kirk looked around the bridge, cataloguing the expressions of shock or concern present on his entire command crew. "Lieutenant Uhura," he ordered with none of his usual good humor or friendly teasing.

"Aye, sir," she responded, popping out of her seat in automatic reaction to a tone of such authority.

He barely glanced at her. "Cancel shore leave and recall the crew. We ship out as soon as all personnel are back aboard."

Uhura made an abortive move forward, lurching a step toward Jim as though compelled, delicate hands stretching helplessly toward him. Her expression twisted in compassion for an unknown and obvious wound. Kirk's blue eyes lifted to her, bitter cold without an ounce of personal recognition, as though Uhura might be any one of a hundred Communications specialists. It froze her in place, forcing her to tamp down her instinctual need to comfort. He would neither appreciate nor accept it in this state. "Yes Captain," she whispered, turning back to her station.

"Mr. Chekov," the captain continued.

The young navigator flinched in surprise. "A-aye, Captain?"

"Familiarize yourself with the mission parameters in preparation for a shipwide brief."

"…Aye, Captain."

"When you are through, lay in the specified course."

"Aye, Captain." Chekov glanced at Sulu, nervous and uncertain. Sulu, who had been staring at Jim in shock, turned to the Russian with a brief shake of his head. He called up the mission file, scanning it with Chekov to offer what assistance he could.

Disturbed by the dark atmosphere building on the bridge, Spock moved to Kirk's side. "Captain," he began softly.

"I have no need for you at this time, Commander Spock," Kirk said flatly, never moving his gaze from the forward display. "Return to your station."

Spock took a single step backward, expression calm despite the lingering sensation of having been delivered a solid blow.

What was going on here?
Chekov gasped suddenly, turning in his seat to regard Kirk with wide, horrified eyes. "Captain—"

A muscle ticked in Kirk's jaw as he grit his teeth. His hands, resting on the back of his chair, clenched with such violence that the knuckles grew pale with blood loss. "Lieutenant Uhura," he said in a voice as cold and calm and deadly as winter, "call Dr. McCoy to the bridge. I'm not explaining this twice."

McCoy strode onto the bridge within minutes, breaking into a tense, heavy silence. "Damn it, Jim, just what is so important that—" He froze mid-step when Kirk turned to level those glacial eyes on him. "God damn," the doctor whispered hoarsely, swallowing. He glanced to Spock. "What the fuck happened?"

"The captain is preparing to brief us on the mission parameters recently handed down by the Admiralty," Spock explained calmly. "He received them in a private meeting, and intends to relay an edited version to the general crew. Your presence was requested for the full brief."

"Yeah," McCoy replied, eyes darting back to Kirk. "But what happened?"

"Lieutenant Uhura," the captain ordered, all but ignoring his friend as he turned back to the front. "Put the mission file on the main screen."

"Aye, Captain."

When the file and all its contents were displayed, Jim took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "Three days ago," he began, his preternatural calm still firmly in place, "a man was arrested on a minor mining colony for disorderly conduct." For a moment, he seemed to struggle, unsure how to continue. Leaning over his chair, he pulled up the arrest photo of the man in question.

Middle aged and just beginning to lose the color in his hair, he seemed no different from any other human male. Certainly nothing about his baring explained Jim's intense adverse reaction.

The captain took another deep breath, eyes burning and jaw clenched. "He's been going by the name Anton Karidian, but he blew that cover pretty efficiently when he started ranting about how their unnatural deaths condemned him to damnation. A recorded confession is available in the mission file if any of you want to hear it. You'll have to do it on your own time, though. I'm not interested in anything he has to say."

"Jim," McCoy attempted to interject.

"This man," Jim continued in a slightly louder, angrier tone, "is Governor Kodos. The Executioner," he spat.

No one on the bridge reacted. The name meant something to only one man, and he appeared to be having difficulty expressing the importance of this "Governor Kodos."

"…Perhaps you might divulge further information?" Spock requested delicately. "The name is unfamiliar to me."

A tremble of rage moved down Jim's spine. Alarmed, Spock took a step forward. McCoy stopped him, shaking his head once when the First Officer glanced at him.

Jim shut his eyes for a long, silent moment. When he opened them, all traces of that killing anger were gone. He straightened, folding his arms across his chest and setting his jaw. "There used to be a planet called Tarsus IV," he explained, too light and casual, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "The colonists there had some trouble with their crops, mostly because nearly all of their stored provisions
were destroyed by a fast-acting fungus. Instead of waiting for Federation aid, this asshole decided that if there was only gonna be enough supplies to sustain about half the colony, then he was gonna pick which half that was."

Uhura drew a sharp breath, one hand flying to her throat. "No," she whispered.

"Yes," he said in reply, pulling up the images of six smiling Humans. "Of the four thousand he selected for death, these poor bastards were the only ones who survived. And three days ago," he snarled, replacing those happy images with a single press photo of a store front blown out by high explosives, "this happened. It was one of the first times they'd ever been in the same place since Tarsus. Now, because they decided to have a reunion, there aren't any survivors left at all. And somewhere out in bumblefuck nowhere, fucking Kodos gets word of their assassination and loses his God damned mind. Apparently, knowing survivors still existed was all that prevented him from going off the deep end completely. That's guilt for you," he observed to McCoy with a winning smile.

The doctor, pale with shock, could do no more than stare.

"What are our orders regarding this criminal?" Spock asked, filing the six familiar faces away for a later confrontation.

Jim sighed, rubbing one hand over his face. "Kodos wasn't anywhere near the survivors," he said at length. "He can't have been the one to kill them."


"Yeah." Jim nodded wearily. "We're to pick Kodos up and deliver him to Starfleet Command pending his formal trial, assuming he doesn't just take some fucking personal responsibility and plead guilty. We're going specifically because we're the God damn flagship and nobody's gonna mess with us for one crazy murdering psychopath. Probably."

"Probably?" McCoy echoed skeptically.

Kirk shrugged. "Well, who knows? Crazy tends to move in herds, and whoever did assassinate the survivors clearly isn't playing with a full deck. Oh yeah," he added to McCoy before Spock could question the colloquialism, "we're not holding Governor Crazy in the brig, Bones. He's staying with you, on a cocktail of antipsychotics whipped up by the penal colony holding him for us. So be prepared for that."

"God damn it," McCoy muttered, scowling to himself as he mentally reorganized his sickbay to accommodate an insane mass murderer.

"Chekov," Jim said to the stricken Russian youth, his tone expressing an apology that would likely never fight its way beyond the pervasive rage that burned in his blood. "Your announcement to the crew will be that the Admiralty is sending Starfleet's flagship to pick up and transport a criminal. Nothing else. Okay?"

"Aye, Captain," the teen replied softly, turning back to his station.

Sulu caught Jim's gaze, jerking his head toward Chekov and nodding once in a silent promise to keep an eye out for him.

Half a smile fought its way onto one corner of Jim's mouth, but it didn't survive long. He pushed himself away from the command chair, face blank as he gazed at the photos still spread across the main display. Uhura closed the file, but it did nothing to break her captain's troublingly empty gaze.
"Call me when we're ready to go," he announced abruptly, tuning on his heel. "Mr. Spock, you have the conn."

"Yes, Captain."

McCoy caught his friend just before the turbolift, speaking to him quickly and nearly desperately. Jim never quite met his searching gaze, faking a grin before he stepped onto the lift. McCoy hurried in after him, concern knitting his brow.

Spock wondered if McCoy remembered the six survivors from his Starfleet graduation party, when they had reunited for the first time since Tarsus IV to gather around James Kirk and whisper their congratulations. He turned back to his station, collected enough that not even Nyota would be able to detect the turmoil buzzing under his skin. One question burned in his thoughts:

What are you hiding, James Kirk?

Less than a day later and without any incident, they collected Kodos. Jim remained on the bridge for the duration, refusing to see his captive even in passing. His strict standing orders for the crew were that he didn't want to hear anything about the governor unless he was dead or escaping. It would have been a typical Kirkian quirk, one of a thousand other oddities, if not for the dangerous anger that seemed always to lurk just below Jim's every word or deed.

After that, there was no rest for Jim. Before his next shift began, he prowled his ship, silent and unnerving. When his rotation finally arrived, he inflicted his restless pacing on the command crew, failing entirely to notice the added stress this placed upon his officers. He was cold and distant, a caged and feral creature waiting for the slightest provocation to attack. If Jim maintained his current behavioral pattern, the hours before they delivered Kodos to Starfleet would be nothing short of torturous for everyone aboard.

Spock wasn't sure what measures Jim intended to take to prevent himself from committing violence on the first hapless crewmember to cross him. There was too much fury contained too tightly; like the situation with young Valt'ik, it had to go somewhere. The odds were good that the *somewhere* would be a fairly innocent bystander unless Jim actively sought a diversion. It was only logical, therefore, that Spock went looking for Jim when he disappeared after his shift. As a preventative measure. After all, it wouldn't do for the captain to fall prey to his own anger because his First had been remiss in his duties.

The Vulcan found him in one of the *Enterprise* workout rooms, exhausting himself by destroying the equipment. One of the punching bags was already hemorrhaging sand when the Vulcan stepped into the room. Jim's attention had diverted to a second, which he attacked with lethal grace and malicious intent. His knuckles, barely wrapped in thin strips of sterile cloth, left bloody imprints with each vicious hit.

It was not a productive use of his energies. But since Jim took his job as captain quite seriously, the First Officer knew it was unlikely he would allow himself to engage in physical exertions of any kind with his subordinates, not even the relatively healthy outlet of sparring, while he was in such a destructive mood. Jim would be afraid to inflict lasting damage. In most cases, he would be right in that fear.

Spock stripped out of his uniform shirt, setting it neatly aside before approaching Jim. "It does not appear the fitness equipment is designed to survive you, Captain," he observed neutrally.

Jim delivered a crushing blow to his rapidly failing bag before turning to Spock, hands fisted at his
side, lungs working hard and face flushed with exertion. "Are you gonna try to make me stop?" he challenged.

"Quite the contrary," Spock replied, stepping onto a large practice mat on the far side of the room. "I find the effort to release your anger in such a fashion to be thoroughly logical. However," he added with a thoughtful nod to the slaughtered punching bag, "it would benefit the crew if the exercise facilities were left intact when you are through."

Jim spread his arms with a demanding frown. "I should take it easy, then?"

"I do not appear to be communicating in a clear manner," the Vulcan noted. "What I am suggesting, sir, is that you vent your energy on a target that is far more durable."

The captain looked around skeptically. "…Such as?"

Spock fell into a classic Vulcan defensive stance. "Vulcans are, on average, three times stronger than Humans, Captain. I do believe I am up to the task."

For a long moment, Jim didn't react. He walked over only slowly, skepticism still plain. His first blows were hesitant, testing the water, as it were, and Spock reacted to them accordingly.

He batted the attacks away, so thoughtless a motion that the anger under Jim's skin immediately set to boiling. Within moments, they were exchanging rapid kicks and punches, Spock textbook perfect, Jim with a bastardized hybrid of a hundred different disciplines. He was unpredictable and violent, seeking his opponent's end with ruthless determination. Spock met him blow-for-blow with responses calculated to the millimeter, careful even now with the full extent of his strength.

Jim lashed out at Spock's chest with a blindingly fast kick. Spock dodged and deflected, catching his ankle in both hands and twisting firmly. Jim spun with the motion, using his momentum to snap the opposite foot up toward Spock's head. The Vulcan lowered his center of gravity, retaining his hold on Jim even as he ducked his attack. Jim caught himself in a handstand, wrenching his legs around to free them. When he was crouched on the ground, he kicked out at Spock's feet. Spock stepped out of range, giving Jim a moment to regroup.

"If you don't come off defense," the captain panted, still crouched and waiting, "I'll break your arm."

"I would like to see the attempt," Spock said calmly.

Jim smirked, eyes bright with adrenaline the second before he launched himself at Spock with a rapid-fire flurry of kicks and punches. He was much improved since the last time Spock had seen him fight, many months ago at an Academy demonstration. Even then he had been impressive, but now there was an edge of experience, as though Jim had tested these moves against some accomplished other, learning their strengths and weaknesses.

…It was an annoying thought.

When Jim finally got an opening nearly twenty minutes later, he snapped the heel of one hand at Spock's extended elbow. The Vulcan twisted their arms together and tugged, catching Jim off balance and dropping him on the mat. In an unexpected show of flexibility, Jim folded himself nearly in half to scissor his legs at Spock's knees, dumping him onto the mat beside his captain.

They panted at each other for a while, lying side-by-side and taking personal inventory of their collected bruises. "Well," Jim said, breathing still rough, "at least you came off defense. That's an achievement." He ticked one finger through the air. "Point to me."
"I shall endeavor," Spock replied as evenly as he could, "to make you regret that goal."

A grin broke over Jim's face. He flopped onto his back, head tipped against the mat, and laughed, as bright and true and golden a sound as Spock had ever heard.

An achievement. Point to Spock.

When his laughter began to fade into something altogether less benign, Jim folded the crook of one elbow across his eyes, hiding his expression. "Damn," he whispered hoarsely. "This is a shitty mission."

Spock studied Jim's obscured profile for a lingering moment before sitting up. "Why did they send us after Kodos, Jim?" he asked softly, supporting his weight on one arm to look down on his captain's reaction. With a small, covert motion, he twisted his supporting hand to touch the tips of two fingers to the exposed skin of Jim's shoulder. It wasn't a lot of contact, but it was enough.

Jim's breathing became slightly harsh as dark, twisted emotions seeped through Spock's tentative connection with him. Anger was something the Vulcan had anticipated. Underneath that, though, was a chasm of loss so vast it was nearly staggering. Something vaguely desperate stirred in Spock's chest, unfamiliar and unsettling, trembling through his veins with restless frustration.

"Jim," Spock murmured again, curling his fingers away before the constant near-violent hum of whywhywhy began to affect him. "Why did the Admiralty send us, specifically, to retrieve Kodos? What are you concealing so intently?"

What are you hiding from me?

The captain drew a shuttering breath. He shifted slightly, planting his feet and moving his arm to press the heels of both hands into his eyes. Spock watched his throat bob as he swallowed. He filled his lungs again. "When I was…ten, I—"

"Captain, we—"

Spock and Jim started, torn away from Jim's almost-admission by the unexpected arrival of Uhura, who stood just inside the facility's door looking surprised. Her bewilderment turned swiftly to understanding, which morphed almost immediately into dismay as she realized what she had disrupted.

"Oh," she stammered, "sorry, sir, please don't let me interrupt! I can come back—"

Jim sat up, distancing himself from Spock in every way possible as his cocksure composure dropped into place. "No, go ahead, Lieutenant." He motioned broadly. "You've got the floor."

She shot Spock an apologetic glance before obeying her captain. "Sir, I don't…" She bit her lip, glancing away.

"Shit. Another one of those, huh?" Jim sighed deeply, shutting his eyes and shaking his head before climbing gracefully to his feet. Spock rose beside him, silent in his observations. "It's alright, Uhura, I don't shoot messengers. Just tell me."

"Kodos is asking for you," she said, lifting her eyes to his with deep regret. "I'm sorry to bring this up, especially considering how much you don't want to have anything to do with him, but it isn't a matter of him asking for the captain. He's asking for you, James T. Kirk, specifically. The more we refuse him, the more insistent he becomes. It's starting to affect the team assigned to him, sir." She shrugged, helpless and distressed. "I thought you'd want to know."
"Why is he asking for me?" Jim asked, too soft and thoughtful.

Uhura hesitated, his tone making her uneasy, and shot Spock another concerned glance. "Well," she admitted slowly, dark eyes turning back to chillingly pleasant blue, "sir, it doesn't make much sense to us, but he seems to be…requesting absolution. From you. Maybe because you're so well known for the Nero incident."

Spock grew very still as several small pieces of data, collected over the entirety of his interactions with Jim, fit together with a nearly audible click.

Of course he hated Kodos. Of course.

"Well!" Jim smiled, bright and dangerous, stuffing his hands in his pockets to hide their trembling. "If all he wants from me is absolution, let's not keep him waiting."

Uhura was prodigiously gifted at communication, and she read Jim's intent in every hostile line of his deliberately congenial demeanor.

Whatever he meant to give Kodos, it wouldn't be anything like absolution. And now that he'd decided to act, there was nothing they could do to stop him.
The Birth of Atlas II

Kodos was kept in sickbay under constant surveillance. A detail of six security officers rotated so he was never alone, despite the fact that he was both sedated and strapped to his biobed. The restraints weren't strictly necessary, but McCoy had taken an instant dislike to the mass murderer and insisted on them.

The security officers didn't object.

When Jim strode into Kodos' quarantine, Spock and Uhura at his heels, McCoy immediately stepped between them and his patient, alarmed by the odd, manic light in his friend's blue eyes.

"Now Jim," he began firmly.

Kirk dismissed the security personnel before shifting his attention to McCoy only long enough to favor him with a razor-edged smile. "Now Bones," he parroted. "He did ask for me, didn't he?"

McCoy hesitated for a long moment. "…Yes," he admitted at length, reluctant and annoyed at having to give such an opening. "But Jim, you don't have to—"

"James Tiberius Kirk," a muzzy voice called softly.

Jim stepped around his doctor, eyes still fever-bright, terrifying smile twisting his mouth, and planted himself by the biobed. "Governor Kodos," he murmured, fingers brushing lightly over one wrist restraint before he settled his gaze on the prisoner's. "You remember me."

"I could never forget eyes like yours," the heavily medicated man slurred, head lolling weakly. "Though they're somehow bluer than I recall. Maybe it's…the anger…"

The captain's expression sharpened like shards of glass. "You're looking even more like a psychopathic asshole than usual. But you know what they say," he allowed generously, smile growing into a crocodilian line of teeth. "The truth will out."

"You haven't changed much," the governor observed. "That same…mouth."

"You haven't changed at all," Kirk rejoined, but he didn't elaborate. From the way Kodos' eyes darkened, he didn't need to."They say you've been harassing my crew. I'll have you put in a coma for the rest of the voyage if you don't knock that shit off."

"Since…you're here anyway. Would you at least hear my request?"

Jim sneered, a dark and terrible expression. "If you're lucky, they might let you request which penal colony you're sent to. Other than that, you don't get any more generosity. From anyone."

"Please," the broken man whispered, twisting his wrists in their restraints. "Please. Grant me this…one thing, and I'll do whatever you ask of me."

"You can't give me what I would ask of you," Jim replied, voice pitched to match Kodos' even as his expression blanked. "You killed what I might have asked of you a long time ago."

Kodos shut his eyes. "Who did…I take?"

Jim paced around the biobed, one side to the other and back, furious energy buzzing under his skin. "Who didn't you take?" he asked bitterly, leaning over the ruined governor again.
"Please. Please."

"Jim," Uhura gasped, taking an involuntary step forward, empathy in high gear. McCoy caught her arms, tugging her aside almost gently. When he offered her a hypo to calm her nerves, she shook her head, fighting to regain her control. Jim was still studying her when she looked back, his eyes blank, anger leashed. She swallowed hard before whispering, "Sorry."

"What do you want?" he asked Kodos, gaze drifting from Uhura to Bones to Spock before dropping to Kodos again. He smiled, congenial and understanding, somehow more frightening in his amiability than his rage. "I suppose I can at least hear you out."

"Forgive me." Kodos pulled against his bindings, eyes wild at the chance for redemption. "Forgive me."

Jim tilted his head thoughtfully. "Kind of a broad request. Forgive you for what?"

"For thinking I could live a free man despite my crimes. For allowing my redemption to depend on the continued lives of those who survived my rule only by Starfleet's intervention. I would have killed them, too. Forgive me for ordering the deaths of my people."

"You thought you were doing the right thing."

"Yes."

"Better that some die so others can live than all die together."

Kodos sobbed, only once. "Yes."

"And if some have to die anyway, better that it's quick, better that the ones who live have a predisposed advantage in their survivability."

"Yes! Yes, exactly, it made so much sense." Kodos twisted and fussed, pulling against the restraints as his head turned restlessly. "Forgive me for letting genetics guide my decision, for thinking I could use figures to cull the weak, forgive me—"

"Okay," the captain agreed cheerfully, shocking his trio of observers. Spock, the only one who had guessed Jim's history with this man, prepared himself for whatever came next. "I mean, it must have been tough, living with that all these years. With the guilt of having issued holocaust orders. But you owe me something first, right?" He leaned close, ghosting his fingers over Kodos' throat. "Before I absolve you, there's something you have to do for me."

"Anything," Kodos agreed immediately.

Jim smiled, a dark expression that shadowed his eyes with heavy lids. "Fair enough. You remember the orders you had to live with for so long?" Kodos blinked, unsure what Jim meant to do with such information, but inclined his head anyway. "Think about them. Recall their exact wording. Focus. When they're clear, I want you to do what you made four thousand innocents on Tarsus do," he murmured, "and die with those orders as well.

"After you do that, hey." He straightened, friendly and bright, hands loose at his side. "All's forgiven."

A communications unit on the wall chirped before anyone could speak. "Bridge to sickbay."

McCoy strode over, slamming his hand on the consol to establish a connection. "McCoy here, go
"Dr. McCoy, this is Lieutenant Sulu. Have you seen the captain or Commander Spock?"

Jim crowded McCoy out of the way. "Kirk here. What seems to be the problem, Mr. Sulu?"

"We're receiving a distress signal, sir."

"I'm on my way. Ready the signal for analysis."

"Yes sir."

"Kirk out. Well!" He turned to address the room with another too-friendly smile, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of hard work. "Looks like I have to cut this short, Governor. I'm sure you understand. Duty, and all that."

Kodos, a picture of defeat with eyes shut and tears dripping down his cheeks, didn't respond.

So Jim turned to Spock and Uhura. "Ready?"

"Aye, sir," Uhura whispered. The duo followed Kirk to the bridge, where they spilt to their respective stations.

"What've we got?" Jim asked, relaxed and easy in his command chair.

Uhura, a receiver already cupped to her ear, tilted her head in a subconscious expression of deep concentration. "It's a distress call from the Federation transport shuttle *Scorpio*."

"Usually crewed by about five people," Sulu informed the bridge, scanning the data he and Chekov had collected. "All the codes check for authenticity. They haven't been on assignment for two or so weeks."

"Even if they're on leave," Uhura murmured, "this is way too deep for them." Brown eyes lifted to Jim's, bright with concern. "What are they doing so far from a planet?"

"I guess we'll have to ask them," the captain decided. "Mr. Sulu, adjust course to rendezvous with the stranded vessel. Mr. Chekov, see if you can calculate where they came from based on their current flight path. Lieutenant Uhura, communicate our delay to Command; we need to keep all activity above board while Kodos is with us. Mr. Spock, as soon as we're in range, begin scanning the ship for unknown or dangerous anomalies."

"Aye sir," the bridge chorused.

The ship was small, limping through space at less than thirty percent power. Rather than the expected five life-signs, there was one, steady but unmoving in what was probably the holding bay. Spock's readings detected no unusual signs, no explanation for the single crew member on a ship meant for ferrying goods and passengers through an atmosphere and not much further. Despite his unparalleled skills, Chekov was unable to back-trace the ship's path.

"It is too slow, Captain," he explained, lifting his shoulders in a frustrated shrug as he motioned to his station with one hand. "Too slow and drifting, I'm afraid. It would be impossible to calculate its exact point of origin from this data. I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize for doing good work," Jim told him with half a quirked smile.

Chekov's answering smile was as relieved as the curved line of his young shoulders when he
slumped. "Yes, Captain."

"Uhura," he added, turning to face her station. "Hail the ship."

"Aye, Captain."

When they were patched through to a fuzzy image of a damaged control room, Jim leaned forward, every inch of him the serious captain. "Scorpio, this is Captain Kirk of the USS Enterprise, responding to a distress signal emitted by your vessel." He waited for a beat, listening carefully, before repeating, "Scorpio, this is Enterprise, hailing on all Federation frequencies. Can you reply, Scorpio?"

The picture flickered, cycling rapidly through several terminals before settling in the cargo hold. Scorpio's lone crewmember struggled to pull her torso onscreen. "Enterprise," she gasped, head bowed weakly on her neck. "Please. The crew is... Help me." She collapsed moments before the image cut out.

"You didn't detect any pathogens or other assorted nastiness that might result in untimely and agonizing death, did you, Mr. Spock?"

Spock glanced at his captain. "...No sir."

"Good!" Jim rose fluidly from his seat. "In that case, have Bones meet me in the transporter room. We'll collect the surviving crewmember and return here for medical aid pending further investigation. Mr. Spock, you have the—"

"It is only logical, of course," the Vulcan interrupted smoothly, standing from his station and folding his hands at the small of his back, "that I go with you. As the Science Officer, it is my duty to investigate anomalies such as this one, and my research requires a personal examination of the compromised facilities."

Jim blinked. "You don't have scans for that?"

"None that will satisfactorily simulate an exploratory expedition, no. Furthermore, should there be an undetected threat in the ship's systems, xenobiological diversity will substantially reduce the probability of a universally debilitated away team."

"...Okay." Jim eyed his First Officer suspiciously. "If that's your best recommendation."

"It is, sir."

Jim met Sulu's amused gaze with a shrug. "Then I guess you have the conn, Mr. Sulu. Lieutenant Uhura, please tell Dr. McCoy that we'll meet him in the transporter room."

"Aye, Captain," they replied.

"This has got to be your stupidest idea ever, Jim. And you've had some bad ones."

Jim checked his phaser, setting it to stun before glancing around the eerily silent hold where the away team had materialized. "Not exactly a vote of confidence, Bones," he whispered.

McCoy shot him an incredulous glare, his own phaser out even as he maintained medical protocol by remaining between the protective forces of Jim and Spock. "Confidence? Jim, we don't have the first clue what—"
"Until we are able to establish the security of this situation," Spock said, voice low and eyes always scanning, always searching, "it is in our best interest to refrain from drawing attention to ourselves with idle chatter."

"Now kids," Jim murmured when McCoy issued a quiet snarl, "if you can't play nice—"

He cut himself off abruptly, peeling away from the group with swift, silent steps picked through the uneven terrain of a cluttered holding bay. The other two followed him, McCoy with a curse, but by the time they reached his side, he was already kneeling over the prone form of the only Scorpio crewmember who registered on their scans. She wore standard Starfleet blacks with no rank designation. Bright blond hair hung loose across her shoulders and face, obscuring her features but doing nothing to disguise her age. She was young, perhaps younger than even Chekov.

And what were the odds of Starfleet having two wunderkind in this sector?

Jim shifted his weight onto his heels, drawing away from the girl as he turned to alert the others to the unlikely coincidence. He got as far as "Spock—" before the girl lashed out, twisting into a half-sitting position on one hip as she brought her furthest hand up in an arc with the entire force of her heaving body behind it. She used the large ball bearing previously concealed in her hand to bash the captain just below his left ear. He reeled, collapsing backwards in a dazed, graceless heap.

"Jim!" McCoy shouted.

Spock made an aggressive move forward, but was forced to still when the girl produced a highly illegal, extremely dangerous black market weapon and leveled it on Jim.

"If you try anything funny," she threatened, "I'll kill him."

"Some distress call," Jim said fuzzily, trying to push himself up. His arms trembled and buckled. He shook his head, frowning in bewilderment.

McCoy stepped toward him automatically, freezing with his hands lifted in a sign of harmlessness when the girl's weapon whined in obvious power-up. "For God's sake, I'm a doctor, not a threat. Let me check his injury."

"I don't care if he's hurt," the girl informed him bluntly, leaning sideways to dig in a discarded duffle bag. She produced a vial of silver liquid, showing it off like a prize. "The only thing I'm after is a confession."

The doctor glanced from the girl to Jim and back. "Then you'll need him coherent—"

"The drug will take coherency from him anyway. I'll sort through a recoding later if I need it to make sense."

"He won't be able to give a confession if he's unconscious from bleeding into his brain," McCoy snarled.

"Fine," the girl dismissed with a shrug. "Whatever. But I'm watching you. First sign of transportation energy, I shoot him in the head. Good luck fixing that."

McCoy ignored the taunt, kneeling to tug Jim close. "What the hell have you landed us in this time?" he wondered under his breath, digging a tricorder from his satchel to check the captain's pupils and vital-signs. "Shit. Concussion. You stay awake, Jim, you hear me? I'm gonna patch this so it stops bleeding. Damn it, I hate head wounds."
"Who is this bitch?" Jim wondered aloud, blue gaze drifting to Spock, who stood calm and steady over McCoy and his patient.

"She is unknown to me, Captain."

"You know," the girl mused, sitting back with a thoughtful tilt of her head, "I thought it was gonna be hell actually getting at you, James Tiberius Kirk. So I stole this ship and made an elaborate plan to get aboard Enterprise, where I would appeal to either your protective instincts or your sexual appetite."

"Jailbait," the captain groaned. "Mean jailbait, too. I don't do bitches."

The girl ignored him. "Instead, you came right to me, just asking to be caught. I mean, you're a starship captain. What are you doing leaving your ship?"

"Stretching my legs?" Jim offered vaguely. "Getting away from Kodos. Man I hate that guy. He's an asshole."

"Shut up," the girl snapped, lashing out with one foot in an attack on Jim's unprotected side.

Spock stepped over Jim to block her with his own foot at the last moment, responding to her petulant scowl with absolute tranquility. "You will refrain from attempting physical harm against my captain, or I shall render you incapable of such actions."

She steadied her aim on Jim. "Let's see who's faster."

A head wound patch-job and two hypos later, Jim was steady enough to sit up with McCoy's assistance. He gingerly touched a hand to his new bandages. "What the hell did I do to you?" he asked the girl, more curious than offended.

"To me?" She shrugged. "Nothing. Yet. I'm here to stop you from doing something later."

"Time traveler?" Jim clarified with a sigh.

"What? No." She frowned. "Why would you even think that?"

Jim pointed to himself. "Starship captain. You wouldn't believe the shit I've seen."

"Funny you would mention shit you'd seen." She held the vial out. "You're going to take this and answer some questions for me."

The captain looked around, as though searching for her reinforcements. "Uh, no. I'm really not." She swung her weapon up to Spock. Jim sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Kid, I'm not that exciting. What is it you think I know?"

"The truth of what happened on Tarsus IV."

All three Starfleet officers stilled. Jim's expression went distant and cold. "Not exactly bedtime material."

She huffed. "Do I look like I'm here for bedtime material? I need to know so I can clear my father's name."

Jim shut his eyes.

"My name is Lenore Karidian. Anton Karidian is my father." She tossed her bright blonde hair,
expression stubborn. "Once, a long time ago, they called him Kodos the Executioner. James Tiberius Kirk, whether you like it or not, you're going to talk to me about Tarsus IV until I can prove that my father acted in the best interest of the colonists in his care."

"You ever try selling that one to the colonists he condemned to death?"

Lenore shook her head, frustrated with him. "They would have died anyway. I was young when the famine happened, but I remember the hunger and the fear. The weakest would have fallen first. Father's work with eugenics located the bottom fifty percent of the population, and he granted them noble, painless death rather than the agony of starvation."

Jim's expression was incredulous. "Kid, you don't have a clue—"

"Wait," McCoy interrupted, "what's Jim got to do with this grand fantasy of moral high ground? He's only had access to the Tarsus file for a day. He can't tell you anything you don't already know."

Neither Lenore nor Jim responded, though the girl looked amused. It was Spock who said, "Have you not realized, Doctor? This girl hopes to confirm her theories using the captain's personal memories of the event, because he was there for the duration. James Tiberius Kirk is the last witness to the Tarsus IV genocide."

"It wasn't genocide," Lenore hissed, drowning out McCoy's indrawn breath of shock.

"No," Jim agreed pleasantly. "It was a fucking slaughterhouse. I'm not telling you anything otherwise, either. You'll have to shoot me dead if you're expecting me to lie for that murdering son of a bitch."

"Your anger is distorting your memories of the famine," Kodos' daughter insisted, holding out the vial again. "Drink this. It's a formula that will make you remember everything in exact detail as long as I ask the right questions. There are side effects, but they don't matter. You won't be able to lie or redirect or misinterpret. You'll have to see how important Father's decision was, how it saved everyone."

"Not the four thousand he killed, it didn't."

"Stop being so stubborn!" Lenore cried. "Can't you accept that you might be wrong about Tarsus?"

Jim smiled, not a pleasant expression. "Can't you? Besides," he added immediately, "don't you think your family's in deep enough shit without kidnapping people too?"

"That is an inaccurate summation," Spock pointed out. "Kidnapping is among the least of her offences. She will also face charges for falsified emergency signal transmission, stealing a Federation vessel, aggravated battery of a Starfleet captain, aggravated assault of a Starfleet captain, obstructing the duty of Starfleet officers, conspiracy to commit the murder of a Starfleet captain, conspiracy to assist in the escape of—"

"Enough!" Lenore shouted.

"Listen," Jim said gently, "you're young. You have your whole life ahead of you, and you can't beat the Enterprise, even if you have a few of her officers. Don't throw your life away on a suicide mission. If you surrender peacefully, I can talk to—"

Lenore stood abruptly, thrusting the vial at Jim. "Take it. I'll move you to a sealed room until it starts working, and then you're answering my questions."
"Why is this so important?" McCoy demanded, mouth twisted in a snarl. "There isn't any point to it!"

"My father is a brilliant man," she said calmly. "He's going to start a theater troupe soon, and it won't be long until we're famous, known throughout the entire Federation. We'll play for dignitaries and admirals and royalty. Everyone in the galaxy will know our faces. It's inevitable that one of the Tarsus survivors would recognize him from that old life, and I couldn't let that happen. He's too brilliant for a prison sentence he doesn't even deserve. At first I thought maybe, if you were all dead…"

"You killed them," Jim realized, fury burning in his eyes. He surged forward, halted only by the firm press of a Vulcan hand on his shoulder. "You killed them for some stupid acting club that doesn't even exist!"

"Theater troupe," Lenore corrected.

Jim sneered. "Why not kill me and tie up all your loose ends?"

"I had thought of that," she admitted with a little shrug. "Unfortunately, you're too well known to just die and have the investigation left incomplete. So I thought, maybe I can use that. Maybe I could get a statement from you proving my father did what was right—"

"Man, the apple really doesn't fall far from the crazy tree." Jim scoffed. "He wants absolution, you want a press statement. Can't you both just accept your parts in this and move on?"

"I can't." She shrugged again, helplessly this time. "Neither of us can. Not without that statement. So you're going to take the serum and give me what I need, or I'll kill all of you and ram this ship into the Enterprise as fast as it can go. From all accounts," she pointed out, extending the vial once more, "you're a good captain. So what's it going to be, James Tiberius Kirk? Your story?" She leveled her weapon at Spock. "Or their lives?"

"I feel funny."

"That's the serum, Jim. With your luck, you're allergic to it. What's your symptoms?"

The captain made an unhappy face, shifting in the small space available to him in the confines of a storage closet. "Ranging from nausea to dry-mouth to decreased blood flow in the extremities resulting in an unpleasant tingle and loss of muscle coordination, complete with a headache almost as bad as that time I was nine and my—" He cut himself off with a strong expletive, scowling darkly. "Running at the mouth," he said, enunciating each word deliberately. "An inability to shut the fuck up."

"So, business as usual, huh?" McCoy frowned when Jim kicked at him. "I don't know what to tell you, kid. The stuff she gave you is powerful shit. I'd be able to synthesize an antidote on the Enterprise, but I'm not sure how to get back there to do it."

"They have to know something's wrong by now," Jim murmured, resting his head against the wall. Spock sat to his left, legs stretched out alongside his captain's, silent and thoughtful. Planning. McCoy crouched by Jim's other side, running constant scans to map the serum's spreading influence. "There are thirty-seven official responses to loss of communication with a shipboard away team. Sulu probably knows about thirteen of them. Chekov might know them all. I don't know that Sulu will think to ask Chekov, and there's no way it would occur to Chekov to offer the information to Sulu, considering Chekov's pretty sure Sulu is the original inventor of kickass. None of the responses cover this exact situation, especially since the away team is made entirely of high ranking officers,
which is exceedingly atypical. Our most creative mind is in engineering, so there's no guarantee he even knows what's going on. We need to get a message to the crew somehow, to appraise them of the situation, and I really want to stop talking now."

Spock shifted, a small motion as he wrapped the whole of his right hand around Jim's wrist. For a jarring moment of absolute confusion, Spock experienced the stream of consciousness spinning directly from Jim's head to his mouth, and the wave of helpless fury every time he made an admission he hadn't meant to.

Jim gasped and jerked his wrist away, turning wild blue eyes on his First Officer. "Like I need Vulcan mind tricks on top of everything else!"

"What did you do?" McCoy demanded of Spock. "His brainwaves stopped spiking for a second. What'd you do to him?"

"It occurred to me as the girl explained her poison," Spock said carefully, "that there might be a way to avoid giving her exactly what she intends to receive."

"How?"

"Vulcan hands are not like those of Humans," he replied. "They are connected directly to our minds, allowing for a great deal of psychic sensitivity whenever our hands come into physical contact with another being."

"Touch telepaths," Jim said.

Spock inclined his head. "Precisely. I theorized that I might be able to use that connection to covertly act as a sieve for the captain's thoughts. In a way," he explained, "I could use a small, discreet amount of physical contact—such as holding your wrist, Jim—to take the place of your compromised mental barriers. You would still answer her questions. There is no way to prevent that without arousing her suspicion. But your responses would be concise and impersonal."

"That might work," McCoy realized, blinking.

Jim scowled down at his hands. "Maybe she wouldn't get the full answer," he grit between clenched teeth before lifting his gaze to Spock's, "but you would."

The Vulcan inclined his head again. "That is inevitable, as I would be in your thoughts, filtering for the simplest answer."

"I don't want you in my thoughts."

"Jim," McCoy said intently, leaning forward, "she'll be back soon, and I'm not seeing a better option than this. When the drug hits bottom, you're gonna be a mess of chills and fever, not counting whatever shit your crappy immune system kicks back, and I'm not going to be able to do anything to help you concentrate through that. It's Spock or that bitch at this point."

The captain's jaw set stubbornly. "I don't want to."

"Due to the drug," Spock informed him in a low, almost gentle voice, "you will have to answer her questions honestly and to the fullest extent possible. You can relay those truths to me and have faith that I will safeguard your responses, or you can be forced to relate your experiences to her. Please keep in mind that she will most likely patch the transmission of your interrogation through to the Enterprise when she is finished with you, as proof of her father's supposed innocence."
"I don't…" Jim shook his head, then took a deep breath. "I never wanted anyone to know. Anyone."

"Regardless of that, someone is going to know. Your choice is who that someone will be."

"It isn't fair."

"No, Jim. I agree most emphatically that it is not." The Vulcan watched Jim struggle for a long moment before adding in a murmur, "There comes a time in every captain's command when he must decide how much he will trust his First Officer. What is your response?"

Words were his enemy now, so Jim ignored the press of them at the back of his throat. Instead, he slumped bonelessly against the wall, eyes shut, and allowed his head to tip the slightest degree sideways, resting briefly on Spock's strength.

Warm fingers touched the pulse point in his wrist. I am here, Captain, he heard in voiceless promise.

Yes, he thought in return, the last piece of coherency he would have. I know.

When Lenore stepped into the already crowded closet, she saw only that the other two had James Kirk sheltered between them, supporting him through the first flush of fever. "Sweet," she mocked, ignoring the doctor's hold on Kirk's shoulder, the Vulcan's on his wrist. She set out a recording device. "Time to get this show on the road, as the saying goes. You ready, Kirk?"

Something flickered in the too-bright, unfocused blue eyes. "Yes," he whispered at length.

Lenore made a note of the lag, setting it as a baseline. "For you, Father," she murmured. Then she lifted her eyes, focusing on Kirk's slack expression. "Let's begin."
Once Jim acquiesced to Spock's plan, the Vulcan turned every ounce of his focus to learning how to navigate the drugged mind of his captain. Their captor's poison separated Jim's thoughts into distinct and unnatural layers of consciousness, drawing distant memory and long-buried emotional reactions to the fore where they did not belong. It was confusing and dizzying, made worse when Jim resisted Spock's presence. His struggle against a foreign mind directing his thoughts was reflexive, if rather unhelpful, but he learned quickly. He adapted to filtering his responses through Spock with a mental dexterity Spock had not expected.

That Kirk factor was still thriving, at least.

"We must test the process," Spock murmured to McCoy.

He heard the doctor shift. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

"Pose a trivial question to Jim. Something specific, if at all possible."

"Jim, pay attention. What's your favorite color?"

His answer slammed through Spock, a kaleidoscope of images and memories crowding to be uttered. Spock gathered them in a mental cocoon, sifting for the simplest answer.

sky in the morning deep/shallow/anywhere ocean flying high swimming low surfing on wind on waves endless ceaseless adventure and comfort the dress of a beloved woman long dead the color of eyes that have always been his brand

"...Blue," Jim said after a noticeable pause. With luck, this would be her first attempt at using the drug, and the delay would seem unremarkable.

"Not bad," McCoy observed before glancing at Spock, who had closed his eyes at the first influx of Jim. "You okay, Spock?"

"Yes," the Vulcan admitted at length, adjusting his hold on Jim's wrist. "It was a greater flood than I had anticipated, but I am better equipped to direct it now that I have experienced it."

McCoy hesitated before pointing out, "It's gonna be worse when that bitch asks a personal question. And I'm not sure it can get any more personal than being forced to relive genocide."

Spock drew a deep breath to center himself, grounding his strength in the steady, though rapid, thrum of Jim's heartbeat beneath his fingers. "Ideally we would test it further," he murmured in acknowledgement. "It seems, though, that we are out of time."

Lenore keyed the door open, taking a moment to assess their arrangement. She noted Spock's grip on his captain and made no comment beyond a slightly disdainful, "Sweet."
Success.

She produced a recording device, setting it to receive both audio and visual input. "Time to get this show on the road, as the saying goes. You ready, Kirk?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"fear loathing resentment resignation later bitch you threatened my crew there will be a later just get this over with let it be done"

After an obligatory statement of purpose, she announced her intention to begin and focused on Jim. She leaned against the wall with her black market weapon held loosely in one hand. "First question: Why were you on Tarsus IV?"

Spock had assumed a question relating to personal experience would evoke a reaction similar to a question relating to personal preference.

He was wrong.

Memories hit him, a tsunami of thoughts and emotions all tangled together, dragging him under. He did not act as filter so much as recipient: the drug satisfied its purpose by relating Jim's answers directly to Spock. It was not something he had anticipated. It was not something he could resist or end prematurely.

It was not something Jim wanted.

"Why were you on Tarsus IV?" she asked.

Because

//--

he is ten, and his mother has finally gone crazy. She's been breaking a little more every day of his life, so he kind of expects it when she starts screaming at him and doesn't stop until Sam has to pull her off, stepping in only to keep her from killing him. Frank takes her to a hospital, Sam riding along, as Jim sits in the living room and thinks goodbye, Mom.

He knows, even then, that this is a kind of end, an ultimate conclusion that cannot be undone. Mom would have killed him in the name of a dead man, and there's no coming back from that. Sam and Frank leave him without a word, and there's no forgiveness big enough to cover the betrayal.

You drove her crazy, they don't say.

You left me alone, he doesn't reply.

They are all gone, and Jim is alone in the house with no one, nothing, just bruises chest back heart where they can't be seen, injuries that belong only to him.

At first, he thinks to make himself useful. Useful things can't be ignored, useful children are not discarded. He cleans the house, repairs knickknacks, increases their generator's efficiency by twenty percent using ground wires and floss. When they come home without her without mom you broke her, they will see his use.

They don't come.
Days later, he is in the garage, staring at Frank's car. He built it with Sam, one of the thousand million countless father/son moments Jim will never have. Jim hates those father/son moments almost more than he hates the family bonding moments he can only witness through a crack in the door, because whenever he tries to join he brings not-George dead-George bad memories in his wake. He hates their private happiness. He hates their fake family. He hates how much he wishes why not me what can I do who can I be please someone just tell me and I will he were anyone but himself.

He hates this car.

Why won't they love me as much as even a car?

He's never driven before, but it isn't hard. Frank calls, alerted to the theft by the security system Sam installed last month, but he doesn't care. There's a cop and a quarry stop or you'll die, but it doesn't matter.

Go, he thinks. For once, just go.

For a moment, he'll fly like his father. For a moment, his mother might remember him as j Jim oh god j Jim no come back his own person. For a moment, they might regret.

He doesn't think that way for long. Something integral, something strong, some inherent Kirk gene stands up and rages against a defeat as permanent as this one, because this must be what they wanted in the first place. Hurting toward the cliff edge, it's all he can hear, a thousand voices screaming and all of them his own.

live live live

don't give her/him/them the satisfaction

livelivelive

I will live.

He doesn't go over the cliff. The officer arrests him, and he's held in a juvenile detention facility pending trial. His parent or guardian could sign him out, could have him released into their custody, could take him home to wait for frank could drop the charges why doesn't he drop them why does he love that car so much more than me his day in court.

The trial date comes and goes. No one so much as calls. He pleads guilty in a manner designed to piss somebody off.

When it's time for the sentencing, a woman who is not involved with the case but has watched the entire proceeding steps forward, requesting a moment of the court's time. They send Jim out into the hallway, where he sits on a bench and doesn't think what now what now what now about much of anything.

The woman comes out and sits next to him. She's beautiful: skin like milk chocolate, warm dark eyes and the tall, slim body of an endurance runner, hair tied up in a million tiny braids. Jim wants so badly to hate her. "I'm Ntombi," she says, voice low and smooth as honey. "The judge thinks the best place for you is juvenile hall."

He grits his teeth and doesn't respond, doesn't even she'll go away too same as everyone same as
always look at her.

She doesn't seem to mind. "Now, me, I think you're something special. Takes skill to drive a car like that. Your little confession speech was rather inspired, too. No one's ever had the guts to imply those sorts of things about the judge's wife, and most of the really great insults will take a few days to work out. I don't want you lost to the system just because somebody somewhere hurt you so badly you felt like the only thing left to do was put a car in a quarry. It isn't fair to you."

'Not fair' doesn't even scratch the surface. "Go away."

"I want you to come with me," she says, and he looks at her blankly.

Go with her? Where? The zoo? He makes up his mind: She's a drug addict here for her own trial and she slipped her guard. Maybe she'll give him something like mom whatever she takes must be good she spends so much time smiling when she isn't broken fun before she goes.

His hands curl together and fist in his lap. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

"And who taught you that?"

Text books and a teacher. He doesn't answer.

"I run a small community," she tells him, honey-sweet and sincere, folding her hands to match his. "It's me and two other adults and a bunch of kids. Mostly like you, who need somewhere to stretch and learn and not be forgotten. A lot of our food comes from crops we grow on our own, so there's honest work for a boy your age. It's right by the ocean, too, so there's plenty to do when you have free time. We're just at capacity right now, but there's room for you, James Kirk. We've made room for you. Come with me."

"How long would I be there?" he asks after a long time.

"You would have gone to juvie until you turned thirteen, so that's the official length, but we'll keep you until you're an adult or you want to leave. We do that for all our children."

He's never really been someone's burden baggage bad dream child before. "Where is it?"

"That's the best part." She smiles and bumps her shoulder to his, a friendly gesture that requires a reaction he's never learned. "It's in space, on a new colony planet called Tarsus IV. I'm sure you'll have a great time there." When he maintains his contemplative silence for more than a minute, she pets a gentle hand over the crown of his head.

Against his most determined efforts, tears sting his eyes. He ducks his head to hide them.

"Come with me, James," she begs in a murmur, wanting him and his past and his future more than mom sam frank anyone ever has. "Come to Tarsus."

"I will," he whispers.

//

"My mother needed to get rid of me for a while. There were people there who would take me."

It didn't cover even the first bit of what Spock had witnessed, giving no hint to the depth of a small boy's pain and desperation. That Jim could even twist such an experience into a trivial, innocuous statement so easily would boggle Spock's mind if he had time to contemplate it.
But Lenore began her inquisition in earnest then, asking the rest of her questions in rapid-fire succession, unwittingly denying Spock any chance to recover or regroup or think of a better plan.

"What was the colony like before the famine?" she asked.

//

He is ten and angry, ten and frightened, ten and living on an alien world far from the loss pain despair family that doesn't want him. Tarsus is too good, too warm, too perfect. It can only end terribly. There are children here who want to be his friend, guardians who pick folk melodies on guitar and sing forgotten songs in forgotten languages when the world is dark but for the light of a campfire. This place cannot be for him for the boy who broke his mother real.

"It is," Annabelle says when he questions her on their strange utopia. She is one of the other two adults, skin bronzed and tough from sun and hard work. Her hair is like the campfire, too red, too hot, all curls and tangles. The last full adult is Markl, the pale tall skinny man who plays guitar and says he will teach Jim, too, if he wants. "No one believes it at first. Just give it time, my Jim."

No one mom sam frank has ever claimed him by name before. He decides to wait and see if she is right.

. 

He is eleven and tired, eleven and trying, eleven and loved. They make him angry, that first year, breaking through childish rage to heal the hurt festering below. He isn't better yet, but he's begun to learn guitar, to swim, to smile. He has his own friends, Jason and Amy, who listen to him and play with him and sit with him, sometimes, in silence. They want to know why he came to Tarsus but don't ask. He wants to know why they were here first but doesn't hack their records to find out.

Tomorrow he will redesign the camp's firewalls. They shouldn't be so easy to breach.

. 

He is twelve and proud, twelve and growing, twelve and strong. He harvests his own food that he grows with his own hands. Soon he will start bugging one of the youth staff—teenagers who used to be who he is becoming—to teach him to surf, because he loves the ocean. Annabelle's golden retriever has had another litter, and Jim will be allowed to help train them this time. He is the gadget expert in Camp and doesn't mind teaching the older generations how not to suck with technology. Markl is stringing a new guitar just for Jim, though it is supposed to be a secret and he will act surprised at his birthday party, which is also a secret. He wonders if there is anyone in all of Camp who knows as much as he does about what happens here.

He wonders if there is anyone who loves this place as much as he does. He cannot imagine it.

. 

He is thirteen and free, thirteen and thoughtful, thirteen and staying.

This is home.

. 

He is fourteen and the world is ending, but he doesn't know that yet.

//
"It was a good place to live."

"For everyone?"

They cannot grow everything on their own; they don't have the space or the resources or the knowledge. Some of their diet is supplemented from a Federation allowance granted to "rescued youth" programs. They get their food from the governor, who sends them to a supply station guarded most often by a man named Mikhail. He is friendly the first time he meets Jim, speaking to him in Russian, a language he promises to teach Jim if he continues to come along on resupply days. For nearly a year, Jim does. He learns quickly. Mikhail is always pleased.

One day, he is no longer allowed to travel to the supply station. He asks why and gets a bullshit non-answer. He eavesdrops on Markl explaining to the two women why Jim must never hear Russian again.

"I saw the way Mikhail looked at him, Belle. I was there. He sat too close and praised too much, and I know what that shit looks like, okay? Jim can't ever go back there."

At first, this explanation makes even less sense than the bullshit.

But he learns quickly.

"For the most part, yeah."

"What happened when you learned about the famine?"

"Mikhail."

"Where is your guardian? He has been so protective lately, I thought I would never see you again."

"I came alone."

"Ah. The boy lives dangerously. Why are you here, Jim?"

"There's something you want from me. That sort of works out, because now there's something I want from you."

"Let's trade."

"We tried to prepare for it."

"And Governor Kodos' orders? How did you learn about those?"

There is a bag of food in his hand, more precious than any gem or trinket. He has given the unthinkable for it.
It is useless.

He finds Glory first, the six-month-old golden retriever meant to be his if he trains her correctly. Her body is cold and still, and she will not wake up no matter how much he shakes her. Annabelle will know what to do, so he takes his dog and the food and runs to Camp.

It is useless.

Markl and Annabelle and Ntombi fell together, as tangled in each other in death as they had been in life. The youth staff is lined up along the barn wall, eleven crumpled bodies. His fellow campers are less organized. It is likely the adults and their staff gave their lives calmly so whatever killed them would be distracted and the children could escape into the nearby woods. Noble.

Useless.

He walks around Camp with the food and Glory still in his arms, counting. Thirty-nine.

That's all of them.

If he hadn't been getting food, there would have been god why aren't there forty.

An old man finds him wandering the woods, bag of food in his hand. Glory was dead dead dead too heavy. She will rot with their family the Camp.

"What are you doing here?" the old man asks him angrily. "They're killing all the people who don't fit Governor Kodos' idea of 'perfect'. If you're one of the trouble kids, you'd better hide. They'll get you too! Hey what's that? Is that food? Give me that I need it more!" The old man hits him, a backhanded blow that knocks him to the ground, and steals the food.

He doesn't want to leave. If he waits here long enough, they will find him and send him after the others. But he is still James Kirk and

live live live
don't give him/them/anyone the satisfaction
livelivelive

I will live.

he made a promise to his Camp family many years ago to never give up. He runs instead of falling. Whoever they are, they will regret taking his everything from him.

He is fourteen and the world is ending. And now he knows it.

//

"I just kind of stumbled on them."

"What happened next?"

//

Anger finds him before grief. Instead of grief. He rages at Kodos and the orders that killed his entire world. He turns what he knows of technology on the forces that stand against him, sabotaging
whatever he can, making discarded guns into bombs that send a few more ahead of him to the only family that has ever loved him.

He runs. When there is food, he steals it. When there are other colonists, he avoids them. When there are agents of Kodos, he does what he can to wreak havoc.

A mother with three surviving children tries to care for him when a close call with an executioner leaves him wounded. "It's your eyes," she whispers, looking over her three brown-eyed offspring. "They're a dead giveaway. I had a fourth injection, for...my poor Saul... Take it." She holds out two needles. "If they aren't blue, no one will notice you as much."

He looks from the offering to the woman and back. Over the last month, he has collected what now would be considered a grand feast. He gives it all to her and leaves.

His eyes are his father's still, a brand. The blue of Tarsus skies after a storm.

He is captured and escapes three more times. On the fourth, he is celled with eight other survivors. They are the last.

They will die at dawn, so that others might live.

//

"I was on the kill list, so I ran. Eventually they caught me."

"And then?"

//

They are marched into an amphitheater and lined up on stage together, hands bound behind their backs. Some of the women are crying. Some of the men are too.

Jim stands in the middle, fourteen and living. Fourteen and defiant. Fourteen and condemned. His cheeks are dry. His eyes are blue. His head is up.

Kodos himself stands before the stage, looking over each of them. "It's better this way," he says firmly. "It's a mercy."

"When you die and go to hell," Jim says, voice like glass, like fire, like lightning storms in space, "it won't be merciful, what they do to you."

"He can go last," Kodos instructs his soldiers.

They start at the ends, picking off survivors one at a time, each shot echoing through the confined space. All the others are falling apart now, hysterical with fear.

He steps forward. All eyes turn to him, riveted, even the murders silenced. His blue gaze cut into Kodos, reading deep, seeing all, and the governor, convinced of the purity of his cause, falters.

The remaining six survivors grow silent and still, watching their youngest, looking to him for their cues.

"My name is James Tiberius Kirk," he says, strong and fearless, driven by hate. "And you will remember me."

The doors to the amphitheater burst open, flooding the hall with Starfleet officers.
Too late.

In the chaos that follows, Kodos vanishes.

//

"Then Starfleet arrived and saved us."

"There's no way Kodos could have anticipated how quickly Starfleet would respond. Don't you think he did the best he could based on the information he had?"

//

The Starfleet officers clear the building, leaving the bound survivors for last.

Jim stands still and tall, watching them with emotionless eyes.

When the survivors are told to step off the stage, the other six obey.

Jim doesn't move.

They order him, bribe him, offer him promises of medical aid and safety even as they bag and tag the two who died moments before salvation. Eventually one of the officers climbs up after him, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Kodos isn't dead," he says.

The officer nods. "I know. We're looking for him now."

"He said we had to die so others could survive. That we were worth less. The bottom fifty percent. He killed everyone."

"I know. It's pure evil, what he's done here. But kid, you can't—"

"Was he right?" Jim demands, tilting his head but not turning, eyes still locked on the space where Kodos had once stood. "Killing us so he could live. Was he right?"

The officer thinks for a moment. "There were food stores," he says softly, "all throughout his mansion. Even with Starfleet's initial projected time of arrival, you could have made it, if he'd rationed properly. He wasn't right. He's crazy. Don't let him win," the officer whispers, grip tightening on Jim's shoulder. "Don't you dare let him kill you."

live. live. live.

Jim shuts his eyes.

I will live.

When he collapses, the officer catches his thin, unbreakable body.

//

"No."

"How can you say that!" Lenore cried, pushing away from the wall in her fury. "What else could he possibly have done?"
They remain on Tarsus nearly a week, stabilizing the seven, who are all in terrible condition. Starved and dehydrated and stressed beyond any reasonable limit, beaten and terrified and nearly killed.

Those lucky four thousand who weren't on the kill list are counted and interviewed, their food stores inventoried, each made to account for their actions. Their inaction. Their compliance with genocide. Their silence in the face of evil.

"I did what I could," some say. "I had to look out for me and mine!"

They haven't lost so much as a pound in the famine. Kodos kept his favored well supplied while the bottom fifty did not die but were murdered, cut down like the youth staff against the wall of a barn.

Jim has been hungry so long he cannot hold down solid food. The medical staff has confined him to his bed. He can see, through the sickbay window, a fat man. He has been on the same colony as Jim this whole time and weeps now over the imagined horror of a holocaust that did not touch him. His emotional agony is so forceful it make his chins jiggle. Someone brings him comfort food, which he eats with gusto, drowning his sorrow.

When the doctor comes, Jim will not speak to her until the fat man is escorted from the wing.

"If he wanted the weak to die in order to save food for the worthy, he should have set an example by shooting himself in the head."

Lenore paced and snarled, enraged by Jim's forcibly truthful response. His statements thus far would do nothing for her campaign.

"You're just angry!" she accused. "Someone you cared about was unworthy, and you're mad that they had to die!"

The drug made its final drop through Jim's hyper-sensitive system, gripping his whole body in a spine-arching spasm. He gasped when it faded, head sagging onto Spock's shoulder again as silver flecks of poison bubbled in blue eyes. "No," he panted.

Lenore frowned. "What?"

"I wasn't mad they died."

He is fifteen and homeless. Fifteen and broken. Fifteen and right back where he started.

In the best Starfleet hospital on Earth, he remains in recovery for more than two months. He enters, wins, and is banned from an online chess tournament. He locates and plays Markl's guitar. He escapes the unit and sets the guitar on fire, gathering the ashes in a jar to release them into an ocean any ocean when he's free from this place.

Markl always did love the sea.
During his confinement, he receives no visitors, no mail, no calls. Careful hacking research reveals that Mom was released from the mental institution quite a few years ago. She has a job now, working as a botanist for a civilian company that sometimes does work for Starfleet. Sam is dating someone semi-seriously. Frank built another car. The hospital has put in several messages to each member of his family. Sam is the only one who ever returns them. He has promised he will be there for Jim when he's released.

He is released on a Tuesday. He stands at the gate for hours, waiting but resigned.

No one comes for him. He isn't surprised.

//

"I was mad I couldn't die with them."

Lenore's eyes went hard, her demeanor void of any trace of sympathy for Jim's suffering. "Even so, you shouldn't let what happened all those years ago stop you from helping me now. Condemning my father to prison won't change anything. They're still dead."

Jim's expression twisted in what McCoy assumed, incorrectly, to be pain. Then the young captain gasped again, a sound of shock and agony as his pupils shrunk to pinpricks of black in a blossom of silver that consumed every trace of blue. When his irises were the color of Lenore's poison, eyes open wide and gazing at nothing, the earlier spasm turned into a jolt that twisted his fit body in the macabre dance of a seizure, tearing Spock's hand from his wrist.

McCoy swore violently, fighting to pin Jim's shoulders to the wall. "Help me keep him steady," he growled. Spock, expression distant, gaze unfocused, didn't respond. So McCoy shouted, "Damn you, Commander Spock, are you going to help me save your captain or not! He's dying!"

Such a threat was enough to snap Spock back to awareness. He blinked and took stock of the situation in an instant, categorizing Lenore as ambient noise, even with her weapon. The main problem was Jim's writhing body, and stabilizing it to prevent self-injury while simultaneously allowing Dr. McCoy access to his patient.

Not, after all, mutually exclusive goals.

Spock reached out, pinning Jim's arms carefully to his sides and drawing him close. He folded the captain's form against his own body, Jim's back to Spock's chest, head tucked against Spock's shoulder, knees sandwiched tight to contain their flailing. A hand on his stomach stilled his body. A hand along his face calmed his mind. Wrapped around Jim, Spock lifted his eyes to McCoy's. "How shall I help you save him?"

McCoy, grim-faced, dug through his ever-present med bag. "I have to figure out what's reacting so badly with his system. You," he added gruffly, gaze never straying from the tricorder leveled on Jim, "girl, what was in that shit you fed him?"

Lenore, pressed against the wall with wide, shocked eyes, mouthed wordlessly for a minute. "I've never seen anyone do that," she gasped, face pale. "He was just— What's wrong with him?"

The Starfleet doctor stared at her incredulously. "What's wrong with him is you made him drink an unknown neurotoxin that's doing God only knows what to his brain! What did you think would happen, you self-centered bitch? Tell me what was in it!"

"I don't know," she admitted shakily. "It was just supposed to make him remember."
McCoy made a disgusted sound, using his initial readings to put together a cocktail of assorted hypos with clipped, furious efficiency. They would treat the symptoms, not flush the cause, but he'd need access to his sickbay and labs for a job of that scale. "Let me make one thing very clear to you," he growled, pushing the hypos against Jim's neck when Spock tipped the captain's head to bare skin flushed with mounting fever.

Fuck, that would need an entirely different injection. How much of this could he get away with introducing to Jim's system before the ironically delicate thing started kicking up a fuss?

"If he dies," McCoy informed her in quiet promise, "you and your father won't ever see Starfleet Command to stand trial. You have no idea what I can do without anyone noticing." Cold brown eyes dark with vengeance lifted to Lenore's. "So you'd better pray I figure this out."

Lenore swallowed, clearly intimidated, and tightened her trembling grip on the black market weapon. "I am going," she whispered, watching McCoy work frantically to calm the heart that raced in Jim's heaving chest, "to clear my father. So...so you'd better just do whatever you can to stabilize him, and get ready for round two."

"What?" McCoy turn on her, expression feral in rage, so threatening that the girl shied away from him before remembering that she was the only armed party aboard the hijacked vessel. "What do you mean round two? Look, you bitch." He motioned to the captain, whose eyelids fluttered as his head turned restlessly, hands groping for something to hold with none of their usual grace. "Look what you've done to him! You're giving him more of that shit over my rotting carcass."

She leveled her weapon on him. "That can be arranged, Doctor."

"We outnumber you," Spock reminded her in a soft, deadly voice, cheek tipped against Jim's temple to hold his head somewhat steady. "You are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with that weapon, indicating heavily that your aim is poor. Even if you somehow manage to eliminate one of us in what is known colloquially as a 'lucky shot', the other will kill you where you stand. You will feed him no more of your poison."

"I will!" she cried, swinging the weapon around to Spock and Jim. "I'll do anything I have to!"

"Why?" McCoy demanded, readying another hypo. "We all heard his confession, just the way you planned, and what he 'revealed' is that your father is a murdering psychopath who needs to pay for his crimes and, actually, we knew that before you fed a Starfleet captain poison." He administered a strong sedative, soothing the sting he knew Jim hated by gently stroking the pad of one thumb over the injection site. Jim's utter lack of response sent a hot wave of fury through him. "This was a giant clusterfuck of a mistake," he snarled, "and the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can lock you away forever and get on with our God damn lives!"

"No." Her shoulders bunched as she raised a hand to support her aim. "My father isn't crazy. This wasn't a mistake. And I can still see him freed."

The doctor sneered, digging through his emergency kit again. "All you're gonna see in the inside of a padded cell, you crazy bitch."

"I have to save him!" she wailed, tears rolling down her cheeks as the weapon sagged heavily. "I'll do whatever I have to, sacrifice whatever I must. Even if I have to go to prison, he will be free. He's my family!"

McCoy threw a used hypo at her, otherwise impotent in his expression of rage. "Your family isn't more important than mine!"
Lenore shuddered. Then she tensed with a gasp, eyes wide before she toppled to the floor, unconscious.

Sulu, Chekov, and a small fleet of Enterprise security officers stood in the emptied doorway, grim and angry. "We came as soon as we could," Sulu said, toeing Lenore aside none too gently. Less than half of the security detail hauled her away, dragging her along the uneven, cluttered floor as they barked into their comms. They disappeared with her in a flare of transportation energy.

"We would have been here much sooner," Chekov added, fretting nervously by the doorway as Sulu, Spock and McCoy readied Jim for transport. "But Lieutenant Uhura was, ah…monitoring the captain's frequency."

McCoy shut his eyes briefly. Great. The whole bridge, at the very least, had been privy to Lenore's interrogation. They all knew.

Jim was just gonna love that when he woke up.

…Assuming, of course…

"So we knew the madwoman had rigged her shuttle to alert if anyone else beamed aboard. We could not offer assistance without posing a genuine threat. We did not know what to do." He hesitated, looking torn. "It was quite terrible," he whispered at last.

Sulu glanced up at him with a quick, reassuring quirk of his mouth before turning his attention back to the captain, who looked as though he were dying. But this was a man who had survived the impossible, and looks could be deceiving. "It was Lieutenant Scott who figured it out," Sulu said with an admiring shake of his head. "He did something to the transporters, altered their frequency in some way, so we could slip through a weakness he found in her system. The second he finished with it, we started beaming over. What can we do?"

"Jack shit here," McCoy snapped, touching his fingers to the pulse in Jim's wrist and frowning darkly. Too fast. Too warm.

Damn it, Jim.

"We need to get him to sickbay. There are going to be repercussions to this," he warned everyone around him. "He'll be recovering for a while."

"As long as the captain recovers," Chekov said firmly, "I do not care for the time it takes."

McCoy nodded. "Good."

"Scott," Sulu called into his comm unit. "Five to beam back. The security team's staying here to see what else they can get on this bitch. Have a medical response unit—"

"Already done, Sulu."

"Good."

Spock hefted Jim carefully into his arms, standing in the light of transportation energy. "You will be alright, Jim," he murmured into the ear closest to his mouth. "We have you now."

Jim, boneless and blank-eyed in his First Officer's hold, didn't respond.
The Birth of Atlas IV

After Kodos and his insane offspring were confined in medical isolation where no one would have to put up with their irrationality, Spock sought out Dr. McCoy for a briefing on the captain's status.

The results were less than favorable.

"I don't know if it was just the drug or some combination of drugs and concussions and Jim's crappy immune system," Dr. McCoy said gruffly, looking over a PADD of continuously updated readings from Jim's biobed, "but it's bad, Spock."

Spock stepped fully into McCoy's office, letting the door shut behind him. A few nurses in the main sickbay were quietly explaining the futility of a visit with the captain to Ensign Chekov, who appeared to understand their reasoning but not agree with it. Whether or not the ensign lingered, the First Officer thought it best to shield him from the truth of Jim's condition as long as possible.

Seventeen was quite young, after all, and they did not need hysteria added to their current list of problems.

"Can you elaborate on your official diagnosis of 'bad' at all, Doctor?"

McCoy scowled darkly, though he never lifted his eyes from Jim's medical records. "His motor coordination's shot. We've monitored brain activity that mirrors what you'd see if he were trying to sit up or shift his legs, but nothing happens. He's managed to twitch his fingers a few times, and he can communicate very simple words and concepts, but other than that…" The doctor shook his head, frustrated and weary. "He's totally fine except for the tiny little detail that his brain isn't communicating with his body almost at all. Hell if I know why. I've already tried everything I can think of," he admitted, holding the PADD out to Spock. "Other than setting him up for years of extensive physical therapy to help him redevelop the neural pathways necessary for movement, I don't know how to help him. But until he gets his body to take orders again, he's bedridden."

For a long, quiet moment, Spock studied Jim's readouts, trying to connect the idea of *bedridden* with *James Tiberius Kirk* and meeting limited success.

Jim, immobile? Jim, motionless? Jim, fully dependant on those around him?

Jim *Kirk*?

Such a thing could not be true. It was utterly illogical.

"He will be unable to see to his duties in this condition," the Vulcan observed neutrally.

"You think I don't know that?" McCoy snarled, pacing his small office with furious inefficiency. He pulled both hands through his hair. "Why do you think I'm keeping such a tight lid on this? If Starfleet finds out, they'll order us back to Earth and stick Jim in some roach-infested, backwater, underfunded hospice, where he'll rot with a hundred other forgotten patients."

"Perhaps the situation would not be quite so dire for Starfleet's hero and savior," Spock corrected mildly, still pursuing the data in hand.

"Whatever the case," McCoy insisted firmly, kicking his desk in a childish display of temper, "I'm not gonna let the brass find out about this until we've exhausted all other options. My end's come up blank; let's see what you science geeks can do."
"Does he react to external stimulus?"

McCoy shifted with a lopsided frown, crossing his arms tightly. "We tried a few very simple tests, like asking him to squeeze hands or drawing a stylus down the sole of his foot, and he didn't react. That's all in my report."

Spock phrased his next question carefully. "Did you attempt to introduce any…less pleasant stimuli?"

The doctor scowled. "If you mean did we try to see if he pulled away from pain, no. He's been through enough for now, don't you think?"

For a long moment, Spock didn't respond. "What are your plans for the captain while I conduct the tests that occur to me?" he asked.

The doctor shrugged, expression stubborn. "I'm keeping him close. He'll stay in the private recovery suite with a little bit of PT and lots of good old fashioned peace and quiet. That means limiting crew access to him and monitoring what few visits we do permit, so if you hear anyone making noise like they want to stop by for a chat, try to discourage them, okay? Your usual Vulcan hobgoblinry should be great for that."

Spock looked up from Jim's PADD, one eyebrow ticked thoughtfully. "You are of course aware," he said, "that Ensign Chekov has been in with the captain for the entirety of this conversation?"

With a flurry of curses and unnecessary motion, McCoy fled his office, sprinting the few feet to Jim's recovery suite. Spock followed in a somewhat more composed manner. The doctor clearly anticipated an unfortunate emotional scene with Ensign Chekov or the captain or both, and so was stopped cold by the sight that actually met his eyes.

Captain Kirk sat propped amid a throne of pillows so skillfully arranged that he expended no effort to remain vertical. Ensign Chekov sat in a chair to his right, elbows propped on the edge of the biobed. They each had a handful of cards. A neat stack and several messy piles were strewn across the top of a tray over Jim's lap, completing the deck. Jim's wrists rested on the edge of the tray so all he had to do in order to play was keep the cards tilted up so he could see them.

"Do you have," Jim said, careful and precise and too slow as his eyes lifted to Chekov's, "any fours?"

"No, Captain," the teenager replied, sitting back with a grin. "Go fish."

To McCoy's astonishment, Jim did, reaching out with faltering, awkward fingers to draw a card from the tidy stack. He tucked it slowly into his hand, spending nearly a full minute rearranging the cards until he was able to grasp a pair of threes and lay them on the table. He blinked thoughtfully at the result, tilting his head a fraction, blue eyes bright with wild calculations.

Throughout it all, youthful and distracting, Chekov spoke in eager Russian, regaling his captain with some tale or another. The boy didn't rush. He wasn't frustrated. He didn't acknowledge Jim's diminished motor-coordination in the smallest degree, not even to "help" by handing him a card or setting out a pair. Jim did it all on his own, and each time he did, he was slightly less clumsy, less hesitant, less divorced from his usual physical proficiency.

"Any sevens, sir?"

Jim passed him a card. It took thought and effort, but the motion of retracting his hand was noticeably more graceful than the extension had been. His fingers settled themselves around his
portion of the deck with fluid efficiency. He shifted his shoulders under the line of his clean cotton shirt experimentally, as though testing the muscles, and made a considering sound. "Mr. Chekov," he said, still slow but not as stilted, "please surrender your ace of spades."

Chekov wrinkled his nose as he obeyed. "Counting the cards is cheating, yes?"

"Counting the cards is cheating," Jim echoed, accepting the ace with deliberate care, "no. We didn't…establish," he said, forming each syllable, "any rules." He blinked, studying the pair of aces sitting atop his pile. "Two cards more than half the deck," he observed, one corner of his mouth lifting in the barest ghost of a smile.

"You win," Chekov agreed, a bright smile under wayward curls making him appear even more of a youth than usual. He motioned to the tray, laying down the remainder of his cards. "It is your turn to shuffle."

The captain's fingers moved over the scattered cards, gathering them into a single pile with continuously improving dexterity. When they were collected, he held the deck for a moment, body still but thoughts bright in his eyes. He split the cards, shuffling them slowly, awkwardly, a sloppy effort that forced him to the straighten the deck after the first few attempts.

Then, with a blink like the flash of light made by circuits connecting in utter darkness, his hands began to fly. He twisted and manipulated the cards, using well-practiced skills and unexpected slights-of-hand to delight Chekov until a thoroughly shuffled deck was settled back on the tray. The teenager reached out, cutting it eagerly. Jim reunited the deck, using a particular wrist flick to send a single card skimming across the tray to settle by Chekov's fingertips.

"Was that your card?" he teased mildly.

Chekov laughed, handing the ace of spades back. "I did not know you were a magician, sir."

"Card shark," the captain corrected. "I spent a winter in some casinos, picked up a few tricks. Let's play blackjack, and I'll teach you some useful stuff for your next shore leave." Blue eyes lifted to McCoy, lingering on him briefly before settling on Spock. "Deal you in?" he offered, that faint smile on his mouth again.

"What the hell?" McCoy demanded, fists planted on his hips. "An hour ago you couldn't even lift your pinky! Now you're teaching the kid street magic?"

"You aren't," Jim replied carefully, "glad? 's pretty cold of you, Bones."

"Damn it, Jim, you know that's not what I mean! What did you do?"

"It's coming back," the captain said, gaze distant and considering. He flexed the cards, bending them in an arch that burst in a controlled flow from one hand to the other. "At first, it's hard. Like lifting my pinky when nothing would move. But if I kind of…force it long enough, it—" He blinked again, another flash of connected circuits, and offered a wide grin. "It all comes back, like a computer going back online." His words formed as easily as they had before the poisoning, smooth and confident and oddly compelling.

"…Brains don't work that way, Jim."

"Apparently mine does."

McCoy motioned vaguely with one hand, torn between frustration and relief. "Maybe because you're crazy?"
"Nah. It's probably my awesome floccinaucinihilipilification of unfavorable odds." McCoy stared at him until he shrugged unrepentantly. "It's the longest non-medical word I know. I like being able to say it again without tripping over my own tongue or pausing eight times. Proof of recovery," he added to Chekov with a full, charming smile.

Chekov's response was a long, rapid string of Russian.

Jim snickered.

"It is the longest non-medical word I know," the young genius explained to Dr. McCoy, clearly pleased with himself for being the cause of Jim's first expression of mirth.

McCoy rolled his eyes.

Spock crossed the room, standing behind the ensign's chair to draw it firmly away from Jim's bed. "We will not take up any more of your time," he informed the room coolly, ignoring the looks of surprise from McCoy and Chekov. Jim, rather than surprised, appeared thoughtful again. "Dr. McCoy has much work to do now that Captain Kirk has discovered the method of his own recovery." McCoy scowled. "You are dismissed, Ensign," he added pointedly to Chekov.

The teenager rose, blinking in confusion first at Spock, then at Jim, who offered him a smile along with the deck of cards. "You can come by again later," Jim promised. "Bring Sulu, too. We'll have a poker game."

"Yes sir," Chekov agreed, accepting the cards before issuing a quick salute to the trio of superior officers. "Have a swift recovery, sir," he added. "The bridge is not the same without you."

"I'll do my best," Jim promised with another smile.

When Chekov was gone, Spock pushed his unoccupied chair completely out of the way.

"What are your orders, sir?" he asked of Jim.

For a long moment, Jim was silent. "Contact Admiral Pike and update him on the situation," he said at last, studying the splay of his fingers over the empty tray. "He knows the basics about Tarsus already, but none of us guessed Kodos had a daughter. They need to know she's the one who killed the others." He made an unhappy face. "Feel free to downplay the interrogation and all that stuff at the end when I wasn't any help. Make sure he knows how well everyone performed, and extend my regret at not being in a position to send a message myself." He indicated his body and its unusual stillness. "I'll get back to him when, y'know. I can stand."

McCoy frowned, patting the blankets until he located one of Jim's feet. He flexed and manipulated it through the material. "Still nothing?"

Jim shook his head. "It'll come. See if the security team was able to save Lenore's recording," he added to Spock, who had clasped his hands at the small of his back at the mention of his captain's continued physical ordeal. "Gather whatever evidence you can against both Kodos and Lenore and transmit a copy to Admiral Pike for safekeeping. What have we done regarding the Scorpio?"

"The stolen vessel has been secured in one of the lower holding bays for transport back to Starfleet Command pending return to its assigned location."

Jim nodded. "Good thinking."

"What are your orders," Spock asked softly, "concerning the prisoners themselves?"
The captain shut his eyes, folding his hands over his stomach. "They're under our protection until we deliver them to the proper authorities," he said, calm and detached. "We don't know who else onboard had family or friends related to anyone on Tarsus, so make sure the security detail assigned to them is able and willing to provide unbiased supervision. I'd like to keep them sedated." He turned blue eyes on McCoy, who had pushed Jim's blankets out of the way to examine his feet and lower legs. "If it won't harm them?"

"Hmm?" The CMO looked up only briefly, processing the request in an obviously distracted manner. When he understood, he scowled. "Not that it matters," he snarled, rotating Jim's left foot with gentle hands that were at odds with his furious tone, "but no, it won't hurt them. They've been out cold since Lenore beamed over."

"It does matter," Jim murmured, watching his friend work. "After we're sure they're contained and can't hurt or be hurt by anyone else," he told his First Officer in conclusion, "I don't want to hear about them again until I'm signing the paperwork to approve their transfer to another vessel. Not from you or the crew or even in a passing rumor. No one is to speak of them within my hearing. I want it to be like they were never here."

"Jim," McCoy said, gripping his foot with an expression of deep sadness. "They were here. We can't just ignore—"

"Watch me." He turned his attention to Spock, expression disturbingly blank before a smile curved his mouth. It didn't come close to touching his eyes. "That should be it, as far as orders go. You have the conn, Mr. Spock. Just get us back to Starfleet in one piece."

The Vulcan inclined his head. "I shall endeavor to do so, Captain."

He left with the image of Jim's empty smile burned into his mind.

Montgomery Scott came up with a plan.

"We cannae just expose the captain to all and sundry in such a state," he told the bridge crew, arms folded across his chest. "Pike and Archer might no' care as such, but others could see it as a weakness."

"The events that resulted in the captain's current difficulties were far beyond his control and admirably handled," Spock said, turning from his place at the Science Station to regard Scott coolly. "Interpreting his reaction to an unknown neurotoxin as weakness is highly illogical. Captain Kirk is injured, not debilitated. Dr. McCoy expects him to make a full recovery."

"I'm no' sayin' I agree, Mr. Spock," the Chief Engineer pointed out with a shrug. "But whatever the outcome, Jim'd no' set us out for ridicule, if the positions were reversed. It's in my mind to prevent our captain from becomin' just another piece of Starfleet gossip."

"What can we do?" Uhura asked, folding her hands carefully in her lap. "We've already laid in a course for the Antok penal colony and reported our estimated arrival time. We can't change that without reason, and there's no way Captain Kirk will be even close to healed by the time we get there. It's just seven hours," she said with a helpless shrug.

"Well, now, that's where my idea comes in." Scott glanced at Spock for any sign of a negative reaction. Kirk's First Officer looked blank, as usual, so the engineer took that as a good sign and pressed on. "There's some basic engine maintenance that needs to be done," he began, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.
Uhura smiled. "Starfleet basic or Montgomery Scott basic?"

"Am I t' be held responsible if Starfleet doesn't require the best level of care for a lady as grand as Enterprise?" Scott demanded, spreading his arms. "No, I dinnae think so."

"The captain would probably approve," Sulu said, shooting Chekov a sidelong glance.

The Russian genius nodded enthusiastically. "Da, he is very insistent when it comes to upkeep of his ship. He would thank you, Lieutenant Scott!"

"It is against Starfleet protocol," Spock said.

When the rest of the bridge crew deflated, Scott made a soothing motion with both hands. "Now, now, I dinnae say the idea was maintenance in the middle of a prison run, did I? I put in the request for time to work on the old girl a few weeks back," he explained. "The captain approved, pending a break in missions long enough to get the work done properly, so it's all official. Seems to me what we need right now is a slight technical malfunction t' slow us down a wee bit, just until Jim's back on his feet. Shouldna take more than a day or three. And the maintenance does need to be done."

The command crew began to grin, save Spock, who made a contemplative sound.

"Well, Mr. Scott," he observed, "it would indeed be unfortunate if the potential mechanical issue you have previously noted became a problem within the next ten minutes. However, such events are not unexpected on a starship, especially a vessel as relatively untested as the Enterprise. Should you discover any such malfunctions, it would only be logical for you to report them in a timely manner."

"Aye, sir," Scott agreed, mild tone not reflecting the wide grin stretching his mouth. "That it would. I'll take care of the delay, then," he added to the rest of the officers. "It'll be up to you to make sure the captain's back in fighting shape by the time repairs are done. Don't take too long," he warned them. "I cannae stop time as easily as an engine. From the moment we notice a problem, you'll have a window of about seventy-three hours."

Chekov frowned. "Seventy-three?"

"Factoring in time for my crew to eat and sleep," the engineer agreed with a mournful sigh. "It's nearly shameful for such a wee thing to take so long, but it's all for the greater good."

"...Indeed," Spock replied neutrally.

"I'm off!" Scott said in parting.

Seven minutes later, he reported a cascade failure in several small cooling systems that would require full disassembly before the problem could be addressed. At Starfleet Command, a department of engineers would require several weeks to even begin such an undertaking.

"It'll be about three days," Scott reported, another sigh hidden under the words.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott," Spock replied. "I will inform the captain."

But when he got to sickbay, the captain was gone.

McCoy popped his head out of his office, where he had been analyzing Jim's most recent scans. "What do you mean, where's the captain? Last I checked he couldn't walk, so if he knows what's good for him he's still in his God damn bed!"
Apparently, the captain did not actually know 'what was good for him'. Despite McCoy's thorough search of every improbable corner, Jim was nowhere to be found. They launched a quiet recovery mission that involved Spock looking for the captain while McCoy remained in sickbay, pacing and ranting and preparing hypos until Jim either returned on his own or, more likely, was returned by his First Officer.

Spock found him in the smallest, least-used corner of the observation deck, sitting on the ground with his back to the wall and his legs stretched out in front of him, head tipped back to study the stars. He had in his possession a small rubber ball usually utilized as a tool to strengthen hands. Instead of squeezing it, he was throwing it, bouncing it off assorted walls and objects at differing angles, though it always returned to his hand. It was a fascinating application of advanced geometry.

The Vulcan crossed to his captain's side, standing silent and unobtrusive just within Jim's peripheral vision.

"Scotty did something to the engines," Jim observed at length, eyes still turned to the pinpricks of light in endless dark. He threw, bounced, and caught the ball. When it was settled in his palm again, he squeezed it thoughtfully. "We dropped out of warp about twenty minutes ago."

"There was a malfunction," Spock replied dryly.

Jim shook his head on a sigh. "Exploiting a maintenance issue to stall for time is cheating." He began to throw the ball against one wall, establishing a rhythm—bounce/catch, bounce/catch—that resonated like a heartbeat.

"I am attempting to understand the skill, sir," the Vulcan replied, settling his hands at the small of his back. "Though I admit the idea was not my own."

"I'm sure." After the ball counted off three more beats of silence, Jim twitched his feet, a swaying wiggle that rocked his legs gently. "I got them working again. Took a bit of doing, though, especially with Bones right there."

"An accomplishment," Spock noted.

Jim caught the ball, holding it in his palm as he ticked a weary finger in the air. "Point to me." He twisted until he could peer up at Spock, blue eyes pale and mildly curious. "How much time do we have?"

"Seventy-two point two-five hours. Approximately."

One shoulder lifted in a shrug. "Eh, that should be plenty of time, if I hit the gym right away. So whose idea was it, if not yours? The delay," he clarified, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Lieutenant Scott is the one who discovered and subsequently reported the mechanical failure."

Jim nodded. "Sounds about right. I figured it'd be him or Sulu." He hesitated, glancing away from Spock. A muscled tightened in his jaw. His fingers curled tightly around the ball. "How much do they know?"

Spock considered all the ways that statement could be misconstrued. Then he considered the white knuckles of his captain's clenched fist and said, "Lieutenant Uhura was monitoring our frequencies, including the audio feed from our communicators. The primary command crew was privy to Lenore's interrogation and knows of your unfortunate reaction to the drug. They have since made every effort to prevent any dissemination of facts, though your poisoning and its effects are, through necessity and observation, common knowledge."
"Not enough information to understand the situation, but more than enough to feed the gossip mills for months. Great." He shook his head on a sigh, lowering his eyes in obvious exhaustion. "How am I going to face all those questions?" he wondered to himself, rolling the ball between his palms.

"I suspect," Spock mused quietly, studying the crown of that golden head, "you will face them as you have faced the rest of your trials. Boldly," he said when Jim looked up at him again. "With great courage. And as a source of ceaseless irritation to all those around you."

One corner of Jim's mouth tugged upward for only a moment. Blue eyes turned back to the stars, leaving Spock nothing to study but a quiet profile. "It's harder than I remember," Jim admitted roughly. "Smiling, I mean. It didn't use to be so hard. Not since Tarsus. Fucking Kodos. God, he takes everything." Jim threw his exercise ball with great force. It slammed against the observation window, careening away from the pair of Starfleet officers to vanish with a distant clatter.

For a moment, Spock's chest felt strangely constricted. "They have taken nothing from you that cannot be regained," he murmured. The fingers of one hand stretched out, ghosting over Jim's hair as Ntombi's once had in the hall of a courthouse, the motion almost too faint to register. When Jim looked up at him, Spock's hands were again settled placidly at the small of his back. "You have not lost your ship or your integrity or the regard of your crew," he explained neutrally.

"I've lost my strength," Jim pointed out. "I've lost my control. I've lost my balance."

"They are not lost," the Vulcan insisted. "Merely misplaced. Your demonstration with Ensign Chekov's deck of cards proves as much, to say nothing of your ill-advised escape from Dr. McCoy's sickbay." They studied each other in silence for a long, quiet moment. The blue eyes that were usually so bright with wicked ideas and tight-leashed energy were pale, solemn. Muted. Spock resettled his hands behind his back, fighting a strange disquiet that shifted in blood. "You are not alone in this, Jim. Your crew stands beside you. We will help you regain your competencies. Allow us the—" He searched for a strong enough word, settling at last for, "Privilege. Of helping you regain the ease of your smile."

Jim looked around, an absent gesture as he gathered his thoughts. "I need to get back to sickbay before Bones explodes," he said at last. Blue eyes lifted to black. "Walk with me?"

Spock inclined his head, waiting with the patience of a seventeen-year-old Russian while Jim carefully, deliberately, levered himself off the ground.

"I'm pretty slow right now," the captain warned his First once he was standing.

"You may set any pace," Spock told him, stepping aside so Jim could lead the way. "I will follow."

So Jim walked, shadowed by his Vulcan First Officer, all the way to sickbay, where McCoy pitched an epic fit. The captain, exhausted by even so short an excursion, was bundled into bed and threatened with a hypo until he shut his eyes and went to sleep. Before Spock returned to his duties on the bridge, he stopped by the observation deck.

When Jim woke, he found his exercise ball sitting on the bedside table and was utterly helpless against the grin that lifted both corners of his mouth.
The Birth of Atlas V

McCoy devised a highly technical training regimen that had the projected conclusion of Jim regaining ninety-percent of his usual physical prowess by the time they arrived at the penal colony. It involved stretching, endurance exercises, and carefully monitored use of a few select weight machines. The captain was meant to complete each segment of his doctor's plan while attached to most of the monitoring equipment available in sickbay.

Of course, Jim being Jim, nothing went quite the way McCoy planned.

"Let's start with hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills," the doctor said, producing a number of small puzzles that he dumped on a tray over Jim's lap.

"Can I have more of these?" Jim asked, squeezing his exercise ball as he studied the assorted tests.

McCoy eyed him suspiciously. "…Why?"


With a huff and an eye-roll, McCoy went to search out a few more.

Lieutenant Uhura found him digging through a large storage container amid a diatribe of foul language and hesitated a moment. "How's the captain?" she asked at last.

McCoy jerked, surprised, and hit his head on the lid of the container. "What?" he barked, scowling as he rubbed the tender injury.

Nyota told herself firmly not to laugh. "The captain," she repeated. "I haven't had a chance to visit yet. How is he?"

McCoy's scowl darkened. He dug through the container briefly, surfacing with a handful of rubber balls. "He's peachy."

"That bad?" the Communications specialist wondered sympathetically. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not now, Lieutenant." He hefted his prize with an ironic quirk of one shoulder. "He's working on regaining full use and dexterity of his hands. But thanks."

Nyota trailed behind him when he headed back toward the captain's private recovery suite. "Would it be alright if I sat with him for a while? I could test his language skills," she offered when McCoy looked ready to refuse.

The doctor hesitated just outside Jim's door. "Alright," he relented. "But if he starts to get tired—"

"I'll leave," Nyota promised with a smile. She keyed to door open, letting McCoy through first. "What is he doing to work on his fine motor coordination?"

"Well I have a few puzzles that—" He froze, expression incredulous. Nyota leaned around him to see what Jim had done this time and felt her jaw drop.

He had solved and dismantled the puzzles to their smallest component parts and, along with the original rubber ball, was juggling them. "Hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills," he said, focus
on the items he whirled through the air even as he addressed his unwitting audience. He caught each piece deftly, setting them one-by-one onto his tray as his show wound to a close. When his hands were empty, he spread them with a smug, devious expression. "Check."

For a moment, there was silence.

Then, "No," Nyota said firmly, one hand on a cocked hip as she pointed at Jim. "No, you were not in the Russian circus, James Kirk!"

Jim smirked.

McCoy threw a ball at him.

"Oh!" a young voice exclaimed in surprise. They turned to find Chekov in the doorway, Sulu at his shoulder, with a deck of cards in his hand. His surprise turned quickly to delight. "You are here for Texas Hold Them lessons, too? You see, Sulu," he added to his companion, "I am not the only one who does not know the game!"

Sulu had to cover his mouth to disguise his amusement.

McCoy threw a ball at him.

After an impromptu but highly entertaining poker tournament during which Uhura cleaned everyone out, McCoy tried to get Jim to work on his physical endurance.

"Can I go to the bathroom first?" the captain asked, balking at the sight of all McCoy's wires and machines and safety protocols.

"Be quick about it," McCoy warned him.

Twenty minutes later, he was gone. The doctor was seen combing the halls with a murderous expression and a hypo. "Where is he?" McCoy demanded of anyone who stopped long enough to be cornered.

A group of security officers, including a reluctantly admiring man who Jim sometimes referred to as Cupcake (though now he was more likely to call him C.C. than anything else. This name was catching on with alarming speed, and though C.C. would never admit it, he became slightly more boastful of receiving a nickname from the Captain Kirk with each successful stunt or mission) had discovered him in one of the rec rooms. What began as a hesitant but firm suggestion that he return to sickbay degenerated into a three-on-three basketball game that had personnel from every walk of life placing bets and cheering on the sidelines.

For the most part, Jim kept up with his security officers, matching them in speed and skill. Once in a great while, he would hesitate or stumble with a strangely curious expression. His officers on either team continued to play around these odd neurological blips, steadying him with thoughtless grips on his elbow or shoulder as the ball sailed from crewmate to crewmate. The longer Jim played, the fewer problems he had, until he stopped dead in the middle of the court, shivered like a dog shedding water, and stole the ball as it zipped over his head.

He went from keeping up to what several observers called "an old-fashioned schooling" of his opponents. C.C., who had been on the captain's team, preened for days.

"We're checking your flexibility tomorrow," McCoy warned him as the captain settled in for the night. He shook a sedative in Jim's face: a clear warning to behave or suffer wrath. "You'd better not run off to do yoga with the yeomen or something, alright?"
"No yoga," Jim agreed around a yawn. McCoy looked suspicious at such an easy agreement, but dimmed the lights and brushed the hair from Jim's face before leaving him to his sleep.

Locking the door behind himself was a necessary precaution at that point.

Not that it mattered. The next morning, right after breakfast, Jim vanished again. The crew was growing used to the sight of McCoy moving through the Enterprise like a particularly pissed off thunderstorm and began to use the gossip mill as a method of keeping track of their captain when he was discovered in unlikely locations.

"I heard he was in engineering, sir," a passing science officer told him nervously, skittering back to her job when McCoy turned a furious expression on her.

By the time McCoy found him, Jim was covered in grime, twisted in and around some of Scott's dismantled equipment, face open and inquisitive as he poked about. Despite the lack of anything resembling safety gear, it was an impressive display of flexibility.

"Of course," Scott was saying, easily as dirty as Jim and equally wrapped around his work, "'t get a proper distillery running, yeh have to know—"

"God damn it, Jim!"

"Oops," the captain observed to his Chief Engineer.

Once he was clean and properly chastised, McCoy sequestered Jim in recovery with lunch and a small book of puzzles to keep him entertained.

A few minutes later, Spock arrived, a 3-D chessboard balanced carefully in his hands.

Jim's eyes lit with excitement. He cleared a space for the game, setting the half-finished puzzle book aside for later. "Bones let you in?"

Spock pulled up a chair while Jim arranged the pieces, forming his reply carefully. "The doctor appeared to be distracted when I passed his office. I thought it impolite to interrupt."

The captain grinned, an easier expression than it had been even just the day before. "Taking your lessons on cheating seriously, I see."

"It is only logical to apply myself fully to every undertaking, sir," the Vulcan replied mildly, turning the board so the black pieces were on his side.

They played in silence for nearly twenty minutes.

"Do you have any questions?" Jim asked suddenly, reaching out to move his rook. Blue eyes darted up to black before shifting quickly back to the board. "It can't have been...easy. Seeing that. I'm not even sure how much you got. But...if you have...questions, I—" He shook his head almost helplessly. "If you need some closure or something, I can try to give you that."

This was becoming a noble, if somewhat irritating, habit of Jim's: to resist the offer of support but stand unflinching, unyielding, and resolute in his determination to help those he viewed as being under his protection, even when the attempt would cause himself harm. Spock neither wanted nor required closure, especially if such a thing came at the expense of Jim's wellbeing.

However, several publications related to Terran mental health indicated that speaking of trauma often aided in the victim's recovery. So, "Yes," he said at length, protecting his queen with a knight.
"There are a few points I would like clarified, if it is not too difficult for you."

Jim squared his shoulders, eyes nearly challenging when they lifted to Spock's. "It isn't difficult."

It was. But Spock wouldn't point that out if Jim didn't wish it. "When you were released from the Starfleet recovery unit," the Vulcan asked neutrally, "you were not collected by…relatives. Yet you were still a minor. Where did you go?"

The captain startled, clearly not expecting a question regarding anything that happened after Tarsus. For a long moment, Jim was silent, studying his First with more intensity than he used when regarding their chess game. "You know," he said slowly, "Bones still isn't sure my brain's back to normal. He wants to try some more sensitive scans." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "And you want to know what happened after Tarsus."

The smile that curved Jim's mouth made Spock somewhat nervous.

"You could always take care of Bones' exam and see what happened for yourself at the same time." Jim moved one of his two remaining pawns. "Check."

Oh.

A challenge.

Spock regarded the chessboard, studying his captain's unorthodox plan. It involved a great deal of sacrifice, of trapping his opponent's pieces, and—if successful—would result in the king and a single bishop remaining at the end. Spock formulated his response to both challenges in utter silence. "If I must choose between ignorance," he said quietly, "and breaching the sanctity of your mind for a second time so soon after you were subjected to the inexcusable horror of having your thoughts stripped from you …" Dark eyes lifted to blue, firm and understanding and impossibly gentle. "I will choose ignorance, Jim."

The captain shut his eyes, expression vulnerable and lost.

Spock moved his knight.

Checkmate.

"When I got out," Jim murmured, opening his eyes to study his own fingers as they laced together to hide their fine tremble, "and no one was there, I… Well, at first I didn't know what to do. I started walking. I got all the way to Riverside on public transit and hitchhiking before I even stopped to think about it. But then I saw them—" When he looked up at Spock, he seemed vaguely puzzled. "They were happy. Laughing and—" He shrugged helplessly. "I didn't exist for them. Maybe I never had. At first I was angry. I wanted to destroy their happiness. I wanted to make them see me. I wanted them to know some small part of what I'd been through. It wouldn't have been hard, after all. Just seeing me would probably have broken my mother all over again. And I wanted that." He shook his head, toying with his king. It toppled with a soft clatter, rolling off the board. "I almost did it."

Spock collect the king, curling his fingers around its ridges and bumps. "Why did you not?" he wondered.

Jim shrugged. "It turned out I was more tired of…just shit than I was angry at them. It wasn't worth the effort. They weren't worth it. So I left." He sighed, relaxing bonelessly against his pillows, and shut his eyes. "I ran away. And I never went back."

"At fifteen?" the Vulcan clarified.
"At fifteen."

"How did you survive?"

A smile quirked Jim's mouth. "I learned a lot of little things at Camp." His breath hitched for a moment. He clenched his jaw, shaking his head once. When he opened his eyes, they were bleak. "Haven't called it by name since Kodos killed it." He shook his head again. "Anyway. I knew enough about engines and electronics that I was able to talk my way into helping this long distance trucker I found broken down on the side of one of the transport highways. Once I fixed her rig, she let me ride with her for a few days, doing odd jobs to earn my keep. Then she had this friend who needed some help, and he had a friend, and before I knew it, I was the best kept mechanical secret in their fleet." He felt silent, contemplating his fingernails. "I was really lucky," he admitted. "Betty and her crew, they were good people. I guess they could tell I was pretty messed up, 'cause even though I barely said two words to them, they didn't call me on it."

"You remained with the transportation fleet?" Spock asked.

Jim shook his head. "Only for a few months. Just after I turned sixteen, I'd earned enough money, and a good enough rep, to get passage to Europe. By then I'd learned the trick of being good enough at a lot of things, so I just kind of...toured the world." He offered Spock an almost sheepish expression. "I've done pretty much every odd job you could think of and been on every continent and most of the major island chains. I didn't go back to the continental U.S., much less Iowa, until the night before I joined Starfleet."

The Vulcan phrased his next question with extreme delicacy. "When you say you have done 'every odd job', what were the limits of your experience?"

At first, Spock thought he had been either too tactless or too vague. Jim looked away, mouth thinning into an unhappy line. "That trade I did for food?" the captain said in a low, tight voice. "I never did that again. Even when I got the food, it didn't matter, so what was the point? It was a giant waste. All of it. So I fixed things or did street magic or counted cards or played guitar in the park or won Australian surfing championships, but I didn't trade anything."

"...Australian surfing championships?"

"Great prize money," Jim agreed. He held his hands a good distance apart. "I've got a huge trophy in Bones' storage facility in Georgia."

"Takes up damn near half the unit," McCoy grumbled, bustling in to check Jim's vitals.

"Am I cleared for duty yet?" Jim asked, swatting at his friend when McCoy attempted to examine his eyes.

McCoy frowned thoughtfully. "I want one last test," he decided. "A combination of the skills that were compromised by the poison." He narrowed his eyes. "You seem to be back to normal, but I want something to prove it."

Jim made a thoughtful sound that boded trouble. "Something to prove it, huh? And then I'm good to go?"

The doctor jabbed a finger in his captain's face. "Not today. Tomorrow. Today you rest. Running all over the ship," he grumbled, wheeling the meal tray aside, "no regard for your medical staff."

"I regard my medical staff," Jim protested, watching Spock collect the chess set. "I regard them as I leave, I regard them as I hide, I regard them in passing..."
McCoy huffed. "You're nearly back to your usual obnoxious self, I see." He slanted an assessing glance at his captain. "Starting to feel better, are you?"

Jim shrugged. "I guess." He met Spock's considering gaze. "It's not as bad as it was yesterday. It'll be better still tomorrow."

"Logical words," the Vulcan observed, "for living despite tragedy."

Jim offered him an easy smile. "They've served me well for a while now."

McCoy rapped a knuckle softly against Jim's temple. "I've got to update your readings."

The captain rolled his eyes. "Have I mentioned lately how tired I am of your tricorder?"

"Have I mentioned lately how much I don't care?"

Spock took his leave to the sound of their bickering, the image of Jim's smile bright in his mind.

"The repairs are complete, sir. We'll be arriving at the colony in less than three hours."

Spock inclined his head. "Thank you, Ensign Chekov. I shall inform the captain."

No one on the bridge was surprised by the First Officer's announcement, nor were they confused when he left instead of simply sending Jim a message. Rumor mongers directed him to a large, highly specialized workout room that was designed with sensors in the floor and all the walls. The intent of the room was to help crewmembers practice specific routines that required precise control of the body. Most often used by practitioners of martial arts or gymnasts, the room was programmed to take external input from its sensors and compare them against a pattern previously designated in the computer. For instance, a gymnast would download a copy of how his or her routine should register on the sensors and then perform that routine. The computer would compare the two sets of data, pointing out minute flaws or mistakes.

Spock didn't know what use Jim would have for such a room, but he would admit that he was curious. Perhaps he had a particular martial arts practice form he intended to use to demonstrate his restored physical control? It would certainly make sense, given his obvious aptitude for different styles of fighting.

Of course, the Kirk factor being what it was, Jim wasn't doing anything like a martial arts demonstration. McCoy stood in one corner of the room, looking exasperated and grudgingly impressed, filling out what was probably Jim's duty clearance with a towel slung over one shoulder.

Jim, dressed in loose gray sweatpants and a sleeveless formfitting black top, was utilizing every inch of the large room for an extraordinary, if slightly alarming, tumbling routine. He twisted and flipped and all but took flight, moving from cartwheels to handsprings with fluid grace. His expression was focused and calm but for small flickers of genuine enjoyment when he completed a particularly difficult combination. He ended his show with an aerial twist, landing on both feet facing McCoy, arms thrown out and a wide grin lighting his face.

"Ta da," he panted.

McCoy rolled his eyes, tossing the towel at Jim's head before tucking his PADD under one arm to clap sarcastically. "You realize you can't ever let Uhura see you do that nonsense, right?"

"Eh, she'd think it was hot," he said into the material of the towel as he scrubbed it over his face.
"In this case, Captain," Spock interjected, stepping fully into the room, "I must reluctantly agree with Dr. McCoy."

Jim hooked the towel around his neck with a concerned glance at the ceiling. "Is the sky falling?"

McCoy punched his arm, holding out the PADD. "You're cleared for duty. Sign here."

The captain obeyed, rubbing his shoulder and pouting.

"Still not as effective as Chekov," the doctor noted without even glancing at the forlorn expression.

Jim rolled his eyes. "What can I do for you, Mr. Spock?" he asked, deliberately turning his attention from McCoy, who made a point of ignoring Jim.

"Sir," Spock said, hands folded at the small of his back, "we will be arriving at the penal colony in approximately two-point-five hours. The transfer forms have been completed and require only your signature."

McCoy and Spock both studied Jim's expression. He hummed thoughtfully, using one corner of the towel to clear a bead of moisture that rolled from his cheek down his jaw toward the long line of his throat.

Spock lifted his eyes from the path of that droplet with a sense of mild confusion. Jim, distracted by his study of far wall, didn't notice.

McCoy, who had the sharp eyes of a doctor, felt a headache coming on.

"I'll assist with the transfer," Jim decided at length. He flashed his officers a grin. "They have been model prisoners, after all. Very quiet."

"Very drugged," McCoy snipped, crossing his arms.

Jim shrugged. "Whatever."

"...You sure you want to be there?" the doctor asked carefully.

"I am," Jim agreed, expression firm. "They don't get to take anything else from me, and that includes my normal duties as captain. I'm done with them." He shook his head with a rueful expression. "They aren't worth the effort it would take to ignore them."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

"Then you'd better take a shower or something first. You stink."

"Hey, this is rugged and manly sweat, I'll have you know."

"Sure it is."

"Spock doesn't think I stink, do you, Spock?"

The Vulcan lifted an eyebrow but otherwise didn't respond.

Jim huffed. "Fine, I'm going. But I'll have you know it was my plan all along." He strode toward the door, strong and bold and light on his feet with his officers flanking either side.
"I have one last question regarding this situation," Spock admitted as they exited the room. "It concerns how some of your current physical capabilities relate to activities or jobs in which you may have participated as a youth, so you may of course choose not to answer."

Jim glanced at him, curious.

"Were you ever a member of the Russian circus?"

His captain's laughter, bright and golden, echoed down the hall, drawing the relieved attention of every crewmember within hearing distance. Kodos would soon be gone, erased from their ship and their lives, and Jim Kirk had emerged laughing and unbroken despite his daughter's efforts to destroy him. It was an achievement of the greatest importance.

Point to Spock.
"Listen," Jim said as he walked backwards toward the turbolift on the bridge, a PADD in his hand and two more tucked under his arm, "how about a rematch?"

Spock looked up from his station to regard Jim thoughtfully. "A rematch, sir?"

"Yeah." Jim glanced at him with a distracted smile. "You know, in chess. I think I could probably beat you this time." He stuck a foot in the open turbolift, preventing its doors from closing. "I've got to take care of the debriefing and everything with the Admiralty, but that shouldn't take all day. The most important details were in the transmission we sent after dropping off the crazies. We could meet up after dinner." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Maybe in my quarters, so there isn't as much distraction?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Spock saw Uhura turn her chair away, but not before she hid a knowing, triumphant grin with her hand. Jim, attention still more than half on his PADD, didn't notice. "That would be agreeable, Captain," Spock said neutrally. "Though I do not admit to possessing your optimism concerning the result."

Jim looked up, expression blank as he processed the statement. Then he grinned, amused by his First Officer's implied insult. "I'll look forward to finding out which one of us has the right of it, then. You have the conn, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan inclined his head. "Aye, sir."

While Jim was gone, his crew busied themselves with all the odd tasks necessary to prepare for whatever their next mission would entail. In most cases, this involved department heads going over their subordinates' progress reports, discussing what had been done correctly and what needed to be improved for the future. McCoy set his people to compiling a complete inventory of their medical supplies in order to form a list of requests from Starfleet Medical. For engineering, any time in space dock triggered a dozen upgrades and a long queue of project that couldn't be completed while the engines were being actively used. No one entered Scott's territory absent strictest need for fear of contracting his insanity.

Spock busied himself in the science department, monitoring the progress of the assorted experiments and receiving countless updates on theories and data spreads. When his officers had submitted their reports in full, he retired to his quarters to study their documentation in solitude. He took his evening meal alone, completing his paperwork with all due diligence. Afterwards, he collected his chess set and carried it to the captain's quarters, where he set it up in preparation of their game. Settled calmly behind the black pieces, a thousand strategies ordered neatly in his mind, he waited. Two hours passed in that fashion.

Jim never came.

When he could no longer defend the purposeless waste of his time, Spock retired to his quarters. It had been illogical to arrange such a meeting anyway. Starship captains were notoriously busy, and Jim seemed always to be in high demand whenever the Enterprise was near Starfleet Command. No doubt he had a dozen appointments that took precedence over a simple game of chess. He had likely forgotten all about it. Spock resolved, as he placed the set back in its proper location, not to trouble the captain with a similar arrangement in the future.

Alpha shift began without incident. Spock, the first to arrive, relieved his subordinate, taking his
place at the science station. He began the process of submitting his reports to Starfleet with neutral efficiency.

"So who won?" Uhura asked as she slid into her own station.

Spock maintained his focus on the task at hand. "The captain was unavailable."

The Communications Officer frowned thoughtfully. "He had to reschedule? Strange. He usually keeps his appointments, doesn't he? What happened?"

"As I am unaware of the circumstances surrounding his absence, I would be unable to speculate, Lieutenant."

Uhura's eyes widened in shock. "He stood you up?"

The turbolift opened before the Vulcan could reply. Chekov and Sulu stepped onto the bridge, engaged in some conversation that seemed far more important to the Russian than his highly amused friend.

"And it was, of course," Chekov said gravely, "invented in Russia."

Sulu laughed, shaking his head as they took their seats."Good morning, sir," he said to Spock, adding a nod to Uhura. "Lieutenant. Did your win your rematch, sir?"

Spock's posture grew slightly more rigid. "I have no comment on the matter."

Uhura's terminal beeped, preventing any additional speculation about the captain's whereabouts. She retrieved the message with the intention of ignoring it for the few minutes it would take to pry additional gossip from the helm and her Vulcan superior officer. Instead of the written communiqué message she expected, it was live video feed, flagged with the highest levels of both clearance and importance. It might as well have been labeled urgent. "Sir," she called to Spock, "we have incoming from Starfleet Command. Should I put it on the main display?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Spock strode to the command chair as Uhura's fingers flew over the appropriate commands. By the time the image of Admiral Archer appeared on the screen, the Vulcan was standing before his captain's chair, hands settled at the small of his back. "Greetings, Admiral," he began neutrally.

"Commander Spock, prepare the crew for immediate launch. You have a mission."

Three of the officers on deck started, glancing at each other. Spock felt his brow furrow in mild uncertainty. "Captain Kirk has not returned from his debriefing. He is not onboard, and his location is unknown to—"

"You won't get him back in time," the admiral interrupted impatiently. "You'll have to lead this one, Commander."

"Sir," the Vulcan insisted, disapproval in the line of his shoulders and the slant of his mouth, "it is highly irregular and strictly against Starfleet protocol—"

"This is a support and rescue mission," Archer interrupted sharply, "and since any delay might result in the death of an entire team of covert operatives who possess invaluable training and experience, your situation supersedes protocol. Furthermore, I don't appreciate being questioned, Commander. I've already sent the mission parameters to Lieutenant Uhura's station. Prepare your officers. You ship out immediately."
"...Yes sir."

"Archer out."

After a brief but tense silence, Chekov asked hesitantly, "What do we do, sir?"

At first, Spock didn't respond. He stood blank-faced, tall and immobile, eyes on the empty screen. Then he turned in a fluid, if abrupt, motion, taking the command chair. "We have our orders, Mr. Chekov."

The teenager glanced uncertainly at Sulu. "But sir," he protested softly, "the captain—"

"Whether or not we approve of the mission or its method of execution," Spock said firmly, "what is cannot be changed."

Uhura tilted her head as she studied Kirk's First Officer, no doubt reading far more in the tense line of his shoulders than he would wish. He saw her set her jaw, much as she had when faced with a particularly difficult test or question that caused her to become stubborn with determination. "What do we do, sir?" she asked, her tone establishing the question as one coming from a subordinate seeking orders rather than a youth seeking comfort.

Spock glanced at her. "Relay the message parameters to the other stations on the bridge and ensure the engineering department is prepared for travel." She obeyed without comment, setting an atmosphere of brisk efficiency. "Ensign Chekov," he continued, settling more firmly into the command chair. "Prepare a briefing for the general crew and lay in the coordinates. Lieutenant Sulu, disengage from space dock and ready the ship for warp."

"Aye sir," they chorused, no less competent in their tasks despite their obvious discomfort at leaving their captain behind.

"Scott isn't happy," Uhura informed Spock a few minutes later, "but he says we're ready to fly. Apparently they hadn't yet gotten much beyond making plans and stripping panels."

"Most fortunate," Spock noted.

"We have a course, sir," the Navigator added. "It would take barely sixteen hours at maximum warp to reach our destination."

"Thank you, Ensign. Lieutenant Sulu, maximum warp." The Vulcan lowered his eyes briefly, contemplating the tentative brush of his own fingers over the arm of Jim's chair. "Make all possible haste," he said, "that we may complete the mission quickly and return to Starfleet."

"Aye sir," the pilot agreed.

When they were underway, Chekov summarized their situation to the bewildered crew:

The Enterprise was on route to a planet called Rilum. The native people, the Rilla, had achieved a weak type of warp technology within the last decade, though they had so far not made much use of the advancement. Other than a small handful of excursions to only one nearby system, they remained sequestered on their own world, closed to the cultures around them. What the operatives wanted on Rilum was anyone's guess, since the Rilla had refused admission to the Federation on several occasions.

They were to orbit Rilum at the maximum safe distance, maintaining total radio silence, until the five operatives somehow communicated their location. Once they were safely aboard, the Enterprise was to return to Starfleet Command to deliver the rescued spec-ops team to their superiors. Crew contact
with the operatives was to be kept to a minimum.

"When we find the captain," Chekov concluded to the bridge once his announcement was completed, "we must tell him what an exciting mission he missed!"

"While I do not believe the captain's absence was entirely voluntary," Spock observed dryly, "it might be appropriate to make note of the instances he might have considered…interesting. Such knowledge is often beneficial to captains."

Sulu and Chekov shared a grin.

The doors to the turbolift swished open unexpectedly. "Where's Jim?" McCoy demanded, striding onto the bridge.

Perhaps not so unexpected after all.

Spock stood to face the furious doctor. "I am unaware of the captain's location, Dr. McCoy, other than to observe that he is not aboard the Enterprise."

"Then why the hell aren't we at Starfleet?"

The Vulcan lifted one eyebrow, hands at the small of his back. "Did you not understand Ensign Chekov's shipwide announcement, Doctor?"

McCoy flicked one hand violently through the air, brushing the explanation aside. "It's a sixteen hour trip, bullshit they couldn't spend ten minutes getting the captain of the vessel aboard. Where'd he say he was going when he left? Mars?"

Spock glanced away. "When we parted on the bridge yesterday, he gave the impression of having to see to his debriefing and little else. As I have not seen him since then, I cannot offer a reasonable alternative location, though it is doubtful he has gone so far as Mars."

The doctor crossed his arms with a thoughtful scowl. "But he had a chess game with you last night."

"The captain was unable to keep that appointment."

"So where is he?"

"As I have stated, I cannot speculate."

"God damn it, Spock," McCoy snarled. "You can't, or you won't? Where the hell is our captain, Commander?"

Spock's eyes dropped. "I cannot speculate," he said again, calm despite the telling clench of his unseen hands, "because I do not know, Doctor. I have neither seen nor heard from him since he departed yesterday. I do not know why the Admiralty would neglect to ensure his presence on his own ship, nor do I condone it. However," he added, dark eyes lifting to hazel, "they are our superiors, and they have issued commands. We must obey."

McCoy's jaw clenched tightly. "I don't like it," he said flatly.

"Nevertheless," the Vulcan insisted, turning back to the command chair. "What is cannot be changed. We must handle this mission as we would any other, despite the absence of the captain."

"I'm goin' back to sickbay," McCoy snapped. "If any of those…operatives need help, we have to have everything ready."
"A logical conclusion," Spock agreed, not allowing his gaze to drift from the main screen.

The turbolift activated, and McCoy removed himself from the bridge.

Less than sixteen hours later, they reached the planet, a sphere shrouded in pale green clouds that obscured the surface quite effectively.

"How long will we have to wait for them?" Chekov wondered in a whisper.

"How will they tell us where they are?" Sulu asked in return.

Uhura made a soft sound of frustration. "Before all that, how will they even know we're here?"

The comm unit at Uhura's stations beeped. "Transporter room to Lieutenant Uhura."

"This is Uhura. Go ahead."

"Hey, Lieutenant, it's Ensign Jameson. Listen, we have this weird...beeping thing that we're picking up from the planet. It read like an old style transit request when it first came in, but now it's just the beeping. We thought it might mean something. You want me to send it through?"

Uhura glanced at Spock, who inclined his head. "Thank you, Ensign. Please send it right away."

Upon its arrival moments later, she set it to repeat, pressing a headphone against her ear to listen intently. She shook her head almost immediately, surprised, and patched the sound through to the main speakers. A methodical chain of tones and silence filled the bridge, going on for nearly half a minute before repeating. "It's Morse Code!"

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Fascinating. Can you decipher it?"

The Communications Officer nodded absently, head tilted as she translated the message. "'Requesting emergency aid. Five to beam up. One wounded. Any Federation ships, respond.' And then it repeats." She turned to Spock. "Can we locate them based on this?"

His attention drifted to the helm as he thought. "It would require a complicated and covert set of calculations in order to retrieve them without alerting the Rilla."

"I can do that!" Chekov proclaimed, already working furiously at his station. "It is a matter of theoretical triangulation based upon unstable points of origin, yes? Very simple!" He grinned back at Spock, arms spread. "I am finished, sir! If my calculations are correct, we can beam them aboard immediately."

"Very well." Spock rose from his seat. "Send the calculations to the transporter room. Lieutenant Uhura, inform Dr. McCoy that his presence will be required for the sake of the injured operative. I will see to our passengers." He offered Chekov a very subtle bow. "Your efforts were unexpectedly helpful, Ensign. Lieutenant Sulu, take the conn."

As the turbolift closed behind him, Spock heard Chekov ask uncertainly, "That was a complement, yes?"

McCoy was waiting by the lift when it opened. He stepped in scowling darkly, arms crossed over his medkit. "I can only cover the basics with my kit, but I have sickbay on alert in case the operative's bleeding out or leaking brains or hacking up a lung or something equally pleasant and difficult to treat."

"…Indeed."
As they strode toward the transporter, the staccato rhythm of their footfalls was the only sound in the hall. Rather abruptly, a male voice shouted, "—and I'll piss on all your fucking 'rules' if that's what it takes to save his life!"

 McCoy startled, eyes wide with surprise, and raced toward the voice with a violent curse.

Though he did not quite run, Spock's own pace did increase somewhat noticeably. He took in the situation with a brief sweep of dark eyes, cataloguing each person. The transporter technician stood by the door, hands and back pressed flat against the wall, her eyes huge as she watched the scene unfold. Spock dismissed her quickly, both to spare her the situation and because crew interaction with the special operations team was to be kept to a minimum. Three of the five operatives, dressed in black bodysuits that covered them from head to toe, were separated from the rest of the room, clustered by the control panels. The suits were made of some material that was not familiar to Spock, sitting close against their skin but carrying a faint sheen in direct light. Gloves, boots and helmets hid any discerning features. Additional material, which Spock assumed to be armor, was placed strategically over the weak points of Human physiology: a cage around the ribs, pads over the major joints, and a standing collar, open at the front, that protected their throats and the back of their necks. If there was any technology integrated into the suits, it was not visible.

The final two operatives were still on the transportation pads, one stretched out and bleeding, the other kneeling over his fallen comrade, back to the room with his helmet at his side. He picked knowingly under the injured man's chin until his helmet released with a soft click.

The injured man's labored wheezing filled the room. His head lolled weakly side-to-side, as though he sought something beyond his reach. "The mission?" he asked.

His accomplice took one of his hands. "We'll get back to it. Right now we're taking a time-out until you stop bleeding all over everything and leaving a trail."

As the man laughed wetly, McCoy dropped to his side, checking his eyes and other reflexes. "What happened?" he asked.

"Classified," the wounded man rasped.

"You tell me what's happening right now, you—" He looked up at the healthy operative and froze, jaw slack and expression filled with disbelief.

"Shrapnel," the uninjured operative explained, voice oddly soft. "Close to his spine. His legs aren't working right." McCoy snapped out of his shock, calling for reinforcements and a stretcher.

The abandoned helmets crackled, sounding remarkably like audio transmissions scrambled in space. The uninjured operative picked his up in a violent motion, hurling it at the wall beside the trio who appeared unconcerned with the wounds sustained by their teammate. It impacted with such force its surface accrued a dent and several spiderweb fractures. "I'm not putting that thing back on, so if you wanna talk to me, you do it face-to-face!"

His act of aggression presented his profile to Spock for the first time. The Vulcan felt oddly as though his lungs had frozen, because he knew that profile. He recognized the anger as easily as the golden hair and electric blue eyes.

"Captain," he breathed.

Captain James Kirk, clothed like an operative, rescued from a ruined black ops mission, turned to his First Officer with an expression made hard by anger. When his eyes touched Spock's, they softened
slightly. "Didn't think they'd send you," he admitted. "Especially without me there."

"Admiral Archer did not allow us to protest," Spock replied automatically, giving the words no thought whatsoever as they passed his lips.

A smile quirked one corner of Jim's mouth. "That sounds about right, for Archer."

An emergency response medical unit bustled into the room, working with rapid efficiency to load their wounded patient. "The suit's plugged into all his major systems," Jim informed them. He drew a finger along the inside of his own forearm. "Tons of needles and stuff along all the seams, even the minor ones. It's delicate, time-consuming work to get it on and off. Be very careful."

McCoy, who had been preparing to just tear the whole thing off, paused, glancing up with a darkly considering expression that Spock thought he understood.

If the suits were "plugged" into this man's systems, were they similarly attached to Jim's?

When the medical unit was gone, Jim turned to the trio of operatives, hard and cold as flawless diamonds. "Looks like your command's up," he said to the tall, broad figure who was flanked by the other two, a man and a woman. "We'll get you set up in a room, but you don't leave there at all, for any reason. Understand?" The figure made an obscure but demanding hand gesture that Jim responded to by sweeping his whole arm through the air in a sharp, decisive motion. "No. This is my ship, my command, and the mission you led failed. I will not submit, I will not yield, and I will not obey. We're done. Mr. Spock," he added to his second, "do we have a secure location for the team yet?"

"Aye sir," he agreed immediately.

"Good. Have a full security detail escort our guests there. They are to set up a rotation so that room is always monitored by a full detail. For your safety," he added to the operatives, flashing them a brilliant smile. "To make sure no one peeks in on you. Secrecy, and all that."

The lead figure made another set of hand motions.

Jim ignored him in a pointed, condescending manner.

Spock wondered if his intention was to enrage the operative into attacking. He could think of no rational for such an action, which, concerning Jim's history, somewhat increased the odds of his interpretation of the events being true.

The security team, led by Ensign Giotto, whom Jim often referred to as C.C., arrived promptly. They displayed uncommon proficiency at their jobs by adjusting to the circumstances with rapid efficiency. Without asking any questions, they were able to establish both who they were protecting and what they were protecting him from. While they did not antagonize the operatives, their dislike was abundantly clear.

Spock found he quite approved of their brisk demeanor. It meant the operatives were separated from Jim in only moments, leaving the captain to rest his hands on the transporter terminal and hang his head in what appeared to be deep exhaustion.

"Sir," Spock asked carefully, "are you injured?"

The captain shook his head. "Just tired."

"Were you unable to attain the appropriate amount of sleep during your…mission?"
Jim laughed, a sound more weary and resigned than happy. "I was unable to sleep, period. We don't even get catnaps until the job's either done or fucked to hell. God, I'd kill for a cup of coffee."

"Perhaps that will not be necessary," Spock observed dryly. "There is a replicator in your quarters, where you will also be able to sleep, now that your mission has been, as you say, 'fucked to hell'."

The captain laughed again, warm with amusement, and straightened. "Good point. Except there's no sleeping in this thing." He spread and flexed his hands, palms up, studying the faint shimmer. "You should see this shit in shadows. We're practically invisible."

Spock stepped forward, curious despite himself, and touched just the edge of Jim's left wrist. "I am unfamiliar with this material."

Jim nodded, holding his arm still to allow Spock's investigation. "Yeah, black ops teams get all the best gear. Free field testing, plus it keeps them from getting killed. Sometimes. Suits like this will be available to Starfleet in general in five or so years. By then, the teams will have even better stuff, things that make this look like wearing a towel in a firefight. By then they might even have worked out that invisibility thing," he teased, crossing his arms when Spock released him.

"Are you capable of removing the suit yourself?" the Vulcan asked, folding his hands at the small of his back.

"Nah, there's too many needles and sensors and tracking equipment and stuff. I wasn't exaggerating when I was warning Bones to be very careful with Flank."

Spock's eyebrows rose. "Flank?"

"Ah, damn." Jim shook his head again, pinching the bridge of his nose with one arm still wrapped across his stomach. "I shouldn't have said that. It's not his name," he explained wearily, looking back at his First Officer. "None of the full operatives have names, just positions, to protect their identities. He runs rear guard and flank, so… Yeah. Mostly it's just to give us something to call over the intercom." He nodded to Flank's abandoned helmet. "They're equipped with internal communication units. Totally insulated. You can't hear a damn thing from the outside, but inside it's like everyone's talking right in your ear. Kind of obnoxious sometimes."

"What is your position within the team?" Spock wondered, not quite looking at Jim. "What do they call you on missions, to protect your identity?"

"Kirk." He half-grinned when Spock met his eyes with a slight curious tilt of his head. "I'm not a full operative," he explained, motioning broadly, "just a part-time volunteer to plug in the gaps." He made a face. "I wasn't even supposed to be that anymore, but they're kind of stubborn in this outfit. No means no, right?"

Spock blinked. "Perhaps you are more tired than you had previously anticipated, Captain. Your coherency appears to be suffering slightly. May I suggest retiring to your quarters?"

Jim laughed brightly, arms crossed and head tipped back. "Man, what I wouldn't pay to have you on these crappy missions. You're amazing."

The comm beeped before Spock could form a response. (Which was fortunate, as he didn't have one.) "McCoy to Spock. You guys still there?"

Spock strode over to the unit. "This is Spock. Captain Kirk is with me. What do you need, Doctor?"

"Listen, Spock, don't let Jim try to get that suit off on his own. This kid's outfit is a mess. It's taking
all of us to peel it back an inch at a time, and I don't know what kind of pain he'd be in if we hadn't put him under. I hate whatever this shit is made of; we can't cut it. Take Jim to his quarters and keep him occupied for a while, will you? No sleeping, no stripping, no unnecessary movement. We should be able to work on him in about an hour. Okay?"

"Affirmative," Spock confirmed.

"Good. McCoy out."

Jim was grinning faintly when Spock turned to him, face a little too pale, expression a little too drawn. He needed nothing more than the sleep he could not pursue, and the necessity of denying Jim so basic a comfort stirred something uncomfortable in Spock's chest.

He put the sensation aside, settling his hands at the small of his back again. "Shall we, Captain?"

"Yeah." Instead of moving toward the door, Jim continued to study his First Officer for a long, solemn moment. "I'm sorry," he said at last, voice rough with exhaustion. "About missing our game." He motioned a little helplessly. "I was kind of delayed."

Spock inclined his head. "It was an understandable delay, sir. Your missions with this team are a great deal more important than a simple chess game. I understand."

"No," Jim insisted, "you don't. And it wasn't more important. I told the admiral I couldn't do any more missions, Spock. They're volunteer based, even for the fulltime operatives, and when she extended the invitation for this one, I declined it. My place is here, on the Enterprise. Besides which, I would never have left without letting you know about it under normal circumstances."

"If you declined the invitation," Spock phrased carefully, searching Jim's quiet expression for some indefinable characteristic or sign that he could not pinpoint even in his own mind, "why did you go?"

"I didn't go. I was taken." He pressed one thumb into his temple, shutting his eyes on a sigh. "They picked me up right after the debriefing. After we left orbit, it was suit up or get dropped onto an unknown world wearing the Starfleet command tunic, and while it's a nice shirt, it kind of tends to stand out. But it wasn't my intention to go, and I told the Alph—" His forehead wrinkled, and he shook his head minutely. "...Well, I lodged a formal complaint."

Spock considered what he knew of the situation: A special operations unit desired Jim's participation badly enough to breach protocol by effectively kidnapping a Starfleet captain from his post. Jim had evidently been "running" with this team for a while, and appeared to be quite familiar with them. The aborted name or title "the Alph" could likely be completed as "the Alpha," a title used in dog and wolf packs to indicate the top animal. This information, combined with Jim's recent conversation with Admiral Pike and a confrontation from before Spock was Jim's First Officer was beginning to paint an unfortunately complicated picture.

"These operatives are the Hounds," Spock said quietly, watching Jim's expression. "They are led by the unpleasant man you once referred to as 'Alfie', who is, in fact, the Alpha or lead operative in the unit."

"God damn." Jim scrubbed both hands over his face. "I was hoping you wouldn't do that. Man, you're gonna get me court martialed."

"High unlikely," Spock assured him absently, passing his eyes over his captain's weary form. "Now, sir, we must acquiesce to your Chief Medical Officer's orders. I will wait with you until he can see to your suit." When Jim began to trudge toward the door, the Vulcan added hesitantly, "We can…"
Perhaps we might engage in the 'rematch' to which you referred upon leaving *Enterprise* for your debriefing, sir. Jim. The chess set is still in my quarters and quite accessible."

Jim's grin then was worth the effort it took to dig the set from its high, remote shelf.
Somewhat predictably, Jim's playing was not at its optimal. His body stretched in a graceful sprawl across from Spock, left leg extended with the right tucked partially under his seat. He propped his cheek on the knuckles of his right fist, blue eyes focused intently, but not on the chess board. If he had so chosen, Spock could have delivered him a resounding defeat in under ten minutes.

Nearly half an hour into their silent, absentminded game, Spock finally asked, "Is there a matter you would like to discuss, Captain? Perhaps I might be of assistance in devising a solution to whatever problem is distracting you."

Jim's eyes flickered to Spock's, searching briefly before dropping back to their game. His lips thinned. He made no other response.

So Spock moved his rook into a position that threatened Jim's queen. "It has been observed to me in the past that the duties of a First Officer include assisting the captain in…delicate matters. I can be quite discreet, sir, if the issue is a sensitive one."

After another long, heavy silence, Jim sat forward, moving his last remaining bishop to not only protect his queen but also challenge Spock's king. "Check," he said, the first word from his mouth since they settled in his quarters. He remained as he was, torso bent toward the table, hands linked and elbows settled on the arms of his chair. His blue eyes were cold as winter when he said, "Let's talk about chess."

Spock waited.

"I've been involved in a particular match for a while now. It takes a long time to get anywhere, and I'm kind of frustrated by it. See, the king's so remote in this game it's more of an ideal than anything else. An abstract. Whatever you'd call it, it wouldn't normally be a problem. But the queen…" He reached out to touch the molded crown of his most powerful piece, brushing the delicate craftsmanship in a fleeting kiss of fingertips. "I've been going after the queen since almost the first moment I knew about her. She dangerous, mostly because she uses the other pieces like they're all pawns. Like they're expendable. And they just let her—"

He drew back with a shake of his head, passing his hand briefly over his face. "Other than pawns," he said, cradling his cheek in his hand, "she's got a single rook. He does whatever she asks without question, which is the only reason he isn't a pawn himself. In order to get at the king, I've got to disable the queen, and in order to do that—"

"The rook must be removed," Spock observed. He studied his captain. "What is your part in this? What position do you play?"

Jim flicked one of his captured pawns, knocking it over with a sigh. "I was brought in to be another pawn."

"Presumably the queen realized her error without excessive prompting."

"Yeah." Jim's mouth curved in amusement for only a moment before fading back to its previous cold, calculating line. "Despite all the talent she's got at her disposal, she acted like it was the first time she'd ever had two rooks on the board. It kind of pisses me off, but whatever. It's a weakness I can exploit, once I figure out how, and I've got to do that before she finally realizes that I'm not ever going to be part of her set. When she looks up from the board to see me playing opposite, she's gonna be pissed. I have to have her in checkmate before that happens."
"What will be the result if she recognizes you as an opponent before you have her cornered?" Spock asked cautiously.

Jim lifted his own king from the board, studying its graceful lines before setting it amid a graveyard of his previously claimed pieces. "It'll still be checkmate, just not one I'm likely to survive."

Spock grew very still. "What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Let's put the obvious metaphor aside for a moment," he suggested with a smile that did almost nothing to disguise his anger, "and move on to numbers. There's a sixty-three percent mortality rate in a single year of service under her. Despite those statistics being nearly triple what the other units report, no one has ever been able to call her up on charges. She's really good at having people die in really legitimate ways on her watch, so it's endgame if she gets her hands on me while I'm her enemy." The captain shrugged, eyes calm and expression remote. "She's already proved she can take me from Starfleet Command without raising a single alarm. Taking me from anywhere else would be child's play."

The Vulcan shifted, something hot and uncomfortable rushing through his veins. "If you remained aboard the Enterprise—"

Jim cut him off with a vague motion. "We're in the process of transporting her team, which makes us fair game to do it again in the future. They could get aboard without official permission, too. These guys are the best, after all. Besides, I like away missions and shore leave and antagonizing the Admiralty in person. There's no way I'd quarantine myself for the sake of that bitch. Oops," he amended mildly. "I mean the queen, of course."

Spock laced his fingers, setting his joined hands carefully on the tabletop as he considered the problem from several angles. "Must the rook be physically neutralized?"

"Man, I wish it was that easy. If it were a matter of just taking him down, I've kicked his ass months ago. He's strong," Jim admitted with a shrug of one shoulder. "If he pins me, I'm done. Luckily he's not usually that quick. Not very bright either." He cut a gloved hand vertically through the air. "Kind of a one-track sort of guy. No, if I want them gone, I have to do it by pushing them into the public eye with enough evidence—hell, even enough suspicion—to trigger a formal investigation." He looked around his room curiously. "With my luck," he said dryly, "they've already bugged these quarters." His gaze dropped to the black suit he wore. One glove stroked absently from clavicle to sternum, inadvertently drawing Spock's attention to an expanse of musculature thrown into sharp detail by shadow and the sleek fit of faintly iridescent material.

For a bewildering moment, despite both his impeccable control and the severity of the situation, Spock found himself utterly incapable of lifting his eyes from a catalogue of the individual lines of his captain's body, the composite grace of his form, the sheer brilliance of his existence.

Was there anything, in any galaxy, equal to this?

"Of course," Jim mused, too consumed by his own thoughts to notice Spock's wholly uncharacteristic distraction, "I always suspected this thing was wired in some ultra paranoid fashion to keep tabs on everything we said or did or thought." He sat back, resting the heel of his right foot on his left knee, and spread his arms. "If they swarm my quarters to arrest me for breaking their super secret code of silence, you have my permission to not get involved."

"Highly illogical, Captain," Spock replied, his attention snapping back to the problem at hand without a single hint that it had ever wandered. "I would, at the very least, be required to submit the proper forms to document your absence from the Enterprise."
Jim rolled his eyes with a grin. "Sure, keep everything official."

"Such things are standardized for a reason," the First Officer pointed out.

"Yeah," his captain scoffed, a playful smile curving his mouth, "so when everything goes to hell you have regulations to cover your— Jesus!" Jim jolted as though he'd experienced a high-voltage shock, feet flat on the ground as he gripped his arm rests with both hands, blue eyes wide with epiphany. "That's it!" He surged out of his seat, leaning over the table so suddenly he scattered the chess pieces. In an instinctual expression of the intensity of his gratitude, Jim caught Spock's face between his hands, framing slender ears with the curve of forefinger and thumb, as firm and thoughtless a gesture as he might use on anyone who shared a solid bond of friendship with him. Between two Humans, it meant little.

But Spock was not a Human, and nothing save the presence of Jim's gloves spared the Vulcan an influx of chaotic emotion and fragmented thought. Nothing save Spock's utter shock spared Jim a Vulcan's instinctual reaction to such a gesture. If Jim were better rested, or perhaps less consumed with breaking the queen and her rook, he would never have touched his First in such a casual, intrusive manner. Yet he did, without noticing how wide Spock's eyes became, or the slight hitch in carefully regulated breathing.

"You're a genius," Jim said, fierce in his triumph as he released Spock to bolt from the room.

It took Spock nearly a full fifteen seconds to recover himself from the shock of that brief interaction. He carefully stilled the trembling of his hands, eyes shut to regain his equilibrium and steady his thoughts.

Jim was a tactile creature, even by Human standards. He meant nothing by the contact, and would probably regret it later, if he even remembered it after whatever extended rest McCoy was likely to prescribe to combat such a breach of his usual behavioral patterns. Best to set the entire episode aside as an unfortunate Kirkian quirk, the result of too much stress coupled with far too little sleep. What mattered was Jim, who was running through his ship clothed in a suit that might be causing him increasingly detrimental physical trauma with every step he took. He would focus on that, disregarding the phantom sensation of cool fingers in his hair, warm breath feathered across his face, eyes bright and close and so impossibly blue—

McCoy would devise a way to inflict great bodily harm if Jim came to trouble while supposedly in Spock's care.

Using that thought as a shield against the memory of Jim existing well within Spock's personal space, the Vulcan exited his captain's quarters, settling his hands at the small of his back as he strode toward his errant charge's most likely destination: the bridge.

When he got there, Jim was standing before his command chair, halfway through an explanation that made very little sense to his First Officer. "Whatever standard of professionalism you usually use as a benchmark," he told his unusually serious bridge crew, "double it. If you don't think you can keep a blank face—and I don't care if that's the case, just own it now rather than later—keep your eyes on your station. I won't let her speak directly to any of you, even if she tries, which she probably won't, so don't worry about that. But if she calls on you, ignore her. I'll take care of it. Just remember: No signs of nervousness or discomfort, no squirming or flinching, no soft underbellies, nothing." He crossed his arms with a dark frown. "This is the last thing I ever wanted to expose you to, but it's too good an opportunity to pass up. Besides, it might not even work. Status?" he asked Uhura, who was the only member of the bridge actively working.

"I've submitted the request for a conference, sir. Admiral Archer is queued to begin; we're just
"She never takes too long." Jim looked around the bridge again, meeting each person's eyes in turn. "Skeleton crew time," he said.

All but the most necessary members of the bridge rose from their positions, filing solemnly into the turbolift.

Jim glanced at Spock. "At your station for professionalism, or behind the command chair for solidarity," he said cryptically, eyes unreadable in a dark expression. "Take your pick."

Spock was standing at his captain's back when Uhura finally patched Jim's requested conference through. Instead of Archer, the screen filled with the cold face of a female admiral Spock had never met before. Her dirty blond hair was pulled into a severe bun at the back of her head, letting none down to soften the sharp lines of her cheeks and chin. The eyes that bored into Jim's were pale gray, menacing even through a transmission. She was slimly built, though Spock did not mistake a lack of overt physical threat for harmlessness. This was a woman who willfully allowed the deaths of her subordinates, who would kill Jim without remorse if she discovered his plans to destroy her.

This was the queen.

First move to Jim.

"Admiral Peters," the captain greeted in a hard, impersonal tone utterly unlike anything his crew had ever heard him use. "Gratitude should be expressed that you'd make time in your busy schedule to speak with me personally."

Despite making such a statement, Jim made no effort to communicate his thanks.

"Insubordinate as ever," she observed callously. "What do you want, Kirk?"

Jim motioned with one hand, a brief, violent flick of his fingers. "I'm following protocol, ma'am. This message is to inform you that your unit has been retrieved and sequestered, all injuries addressed and logged in temporary medical files to be integrated into the sealed personnel files pending return to Starfleet Command."

Admiral Peters narrowed her eyes, ramrod posture radiating suspicion. "How uncharacteristically thorough of you."

"Furthermore," Jim added with a dark smile, "in accordance with Starfleet order 173 subparagraph four relating to incomplete specialized operations requiring the assistance of regular Starfleet personnel, we have begun the process of reassigning the failed mission to the nearest starship containing crew with requisite clearance to access the mission file."

The admiral's expression closed.

"As luck would have it," the captain said coldly, "I happen to have that clearance. And as captain of the Starfleet flagship Enterprise, I accept responsibility for completion of the mission as outlined by the original parameters."

"The original parameters require a five-operative team," Peters informed him with a curled lip. "You'll need a special operations unit leader to clear four of your people, and I won't grant that clearance."

Jim's, mouth curved in a small, vicious smirk. "Whatever will I do without your support? I suppose
the mission's just a bust after all."

"Incoming from Starfleet Command," Uhura said.

"Patch it through," Jim ordered. The screen split to allow a three-way conference between Jim, Peters, and Admiral Archer, whose expression was professional other than the slightest hint of a snarl. "Well, what d'you know?" the captain mused. "Another special operations unit leader. Sir, I'd like to petition for temporary clearance to be granted to four of my crew so we can absorb the mission on Rilum."

"Granted," Archer replied immediately.

"Lucky he was calling to check on the status of the rescue mission he ordered," Jim observed to Peters with another wicked smirk, "isn't it?"

Peters closed her connection to Enterprise without replying.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Archer warned his captain.

Jim snapped a regulation salute. "The mission will be completed to the letter of its parameters, sir."

"…Not really what I meant, Kirk." When he ended his transmission, he was still shaking his head.

"Well!" Jim looked around his bridge, grinning wildly at the crew. "Hopefully that's as close to meeting the boogieman as any of you will ever be again. You were all perfect. Uhura, have the security department send four of their best-qualified volunteers to the ready room. Make sure they know this is likely to be very dangerous. Volunteers only."

"Aye sir."

"Mr. Sulu, turn us around. Alert me when we're in orbit, remembering keep the farthest safe distance possible."

"Aye sir."

"Mr. Spock, you have the—"

"May I speak with you, sir?"

"…Mr. Sulu. You have the conn."

Sulu grinned. "Aye sir."

Jim strode to the turbolift, beckoning Spock after him. "What did you need?"

Spock settled his hands at the small of his back, stepping onto the lift alongside Jim. "I would like to request clarification regarding to the number of volunteer security personnel you required."

"Peters was right," Jim admitted. "If I'm going to follow the letter of the law, I'll need the same compliment the Alpha had. Four volunteers plus me makes five, and the security department has the people best trained for an operation like this. It's not like I'll need a physicist or something."

"In that case, sir, I would like to submit myself as a volunteer. Vulcan strength is three times that of a Human," he pointed out unnecessarily, "to say nothing of the value of a mind meld in uncertain circumstances. It is only logical I accompany you."
The captain stopped the lift, studying his First Officer for a long, silent moment. "Who'll watch the ship?"

"As the Rilla have neglected to develop sufficient technology to pose any serious threat to the Enterprise in orbit, Lieutenant Sulu should suffer no hardship if he retains command."

"...Okay." After having spent what seemed like the entire day an eternal half-step behind Jim, it was somewhat gratifying to finally see him at least mildly bewildered. "It's not gonna be like the Nero mission. You know that, right?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "As we are beginning this mission with both a detailed plan and the support of the Admiralty, I was able to deduce the inherent differences, yes."

Jim restarted the lift with a grin. "As long as we're on the same page."

The Vulcan tilted his head thoughtfully. "The same page of what, Captain?"

"Never mind. Listen," he continued before Spock could reply, "I'm gonna go get the mission file from the Alpha. Since they're in a secure environment, they'll probably all have their helmets off, so you should probably either head over to the briefing room or—"

"I will wait for you by the door, sir. In case you find yourself in need of your First Officer," he explained, radiating professionalism.

Jim rolled his eyes, stepping off the lift when it finally opened. "Yeah, sure. It has nothing to do with the fact that you don't trust these guys as far as you can throw them, of course."

"The likelihood of my having to throw one of them is almost infinitesimal, though I could, in theory, achieve a considerable distance in the proper environment."

"See," the captain said delightedly, "I knew you'd be great to have along on these missions." They reached the area designated for use of the operatives: a set of conference rooms divided by a partition. "Report," Jim requested of the security officers, who appeared to be taking their duty rather more seriously than Spock had expected.

Apparently, some word of Jim's mistreatment at the hands of these operatives had already spread through their department. Interesting.

"The one who seems to be the leader is in the east hall, sir. The other two are still in the west." The lieutenant shrugged, giving the appearance of frustration. "He moved to that side and shut the partition about ten minutes ago. We don't know why. Sorry, sir."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for," Jim replied, eyes on the door to the east hall as he distracted himself with thought. He glance at Spock, who collected his captain's resolved expression like a puzzle piece for later examination.

Doubtlessly the queen had somehow established communication with her rook to inform him of Jim's decision to undertake the mission himself. Such forewarning could do nothing to stop the Enterprise's captain from completing his new mission. It also wasn't a good indicator for whether or not the queen understood Jim's true motivation for usurping her rook's assignment. It did, however, provide ample opportunity for the Alpha to sabotage Jim's efforts, which would be... unfortunate.

Jim flashed Spock a tight grin. "I'll be right back."
Despite his own misgivings, Spock nodded, hands folded at the small of his back as his captain strode confidently—almost defiantly—through the left door. It locked behind him, chiming to indicate a shift in status from general lock orders to a level of security that would require the captain's override. The red-clad officers shifted in a display of mild agitation; Spock remained still, though his hands did clench where they could not be seen.

Jim emerged barely three minutes and seventeen seconds later, expression blank. He carried his anger in the slope of his shoulders, the stride of his long legs, the hands hanging loose and ready at his sides. "Mr. Spock," he said to his First Officer, "the mission parameters have been transferred. We'll meet the rest of the team in the ready room."

"Yes sir," Spock agreed promptly, following Jim to the turbolift. Once inside, Jim drew a deep breath, releasing it in a hiss as he leaned briefly against the doors. "Are you well, sir?"

Jim shook his head, more to clear it than assess his state of being. "I'm fine. I just..." He motioned vaguely with one hand, pressing the opposite thumb into his temple. "I hate that guy. He's like every small-minded bully in existence rolled into one self-righteous bag of shit and pretentiousness. Someone should have kicked his ass years ago and saved us all the trouble of having to deal with his ego. Kind of an ironic statement coming from me," he teased with a lopsided smile.

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "When your ego exceeds your ability, Captain," he replied dryly, "trust that I will be the first to inform you of it."

His captain startled, surprised by such an unexpected (and underhanded) compliment. Something like curiosity dawned in his blue eyes, glinting like the first light of sunrise after winter. The golden head tilted; Jim opened his mouth.

The lift chimed to announce their destination. Jim was forced to step away from the doors so they could open, though his eyes lingered thoughtfully on Spock for a long moment before he exited.

Spock trailed after him, feeling oddly as though he'd narrowly avoided an extremely uncomfortable encounter.

When they stepped into the ready room, only three volunteer security personnel were waiting for them, Ensign "C.C." Giotto among them.

"...Huh," Jim said, crossing his arms as he inspected the trio. "Shouldn't there be four of you?"

Giotto traded an uncertain glance with his fellows. "More than half the security department met the physical standard required to volunteer, sir, but Lieutenant Uhura said you only needed three. Should we call someone else down? The ones who didn't make the cut were pretty pissed about it, so there might be a few fights about who gets to fill a fourth slot, but that shouldn't take too much time to sort out."

"...Infighting, C.C.? I'm shocked." The ensign grinned. "Three is actually perfect," Jim admitted, looking to Spock for an explanation why his order had been incorrectly communicated by the best communications officer in the fleet.

The Vulcan tipped his head slightly, faint amusement lingering deep in his eyes. "Lieutenant Uhura no doubt anticipated my presence on the mission, sir," he observed, "and made the appropriate adjustment to your orders as they related to the remaining volunteers."

Jim grinned. "She's scary-smart sometimes, isn't she?" He stepped further into the room, accessing the main display with a few deft keystrokes. Instead of inserting any form of portable storage devise,

The sheen that often slid across Jim's suit in direct light moved now with a purpose, a single pale band of illumination that bled from the left side of his chest up to his shoulder before pulsing down to his fingertips. Though he had not touched any other part of the terminal, it whirred quietly to life. Data files filled with schematics covered the main display in neatly organized clusters.

Giotto whistled, clearly impressed. "That's handy, sir."

Jim laughed. "Not quite worth the price of admission, C.C."

"How did you transfer the file?"

The captain lifted his hand from the terminal and wiggled his fingers. "It's all in the suit. I can't go into detail," he said firmly, cutting off any further questions. "It's classified, and I'm not supposed to know anything about it." His security officers exchanged speculative looks, communicating *I bet we could reverse engineer that* without having to utter a word. "Let's get to business," Jim continued. He looked at each of his officers in turn. "None of what we discuss can ever leave this room. Even when the mission is completed, you can never talk to anyone about anything that's said here. Not each other, not even me. If you break this code, you will be in violation of your temporary security clearance, and we won't ever see you again. I like you guys," he admitted, shrugging one shoulder. "You're the best at what you do, and I really don't want to have to replace you when the brass ships you off to some tiny colony because you decided to chat about the shit that's gonna go down later. If you don't think you can keep it to yourself, you need to leave now. There won't be any reprisal, and I won't think less of you, but I need you to be honest. This is your last chance to opt out."

The trio of security officers settled into standard parade rest; Spock placed his hands at the small of his back. None of them acknowledged the offer to leave.

So Jim pulled up an image of Rilum. "This is where the Rilla live."

"We received a briefing on Rilum and the Rilla on our way to the planet, sir, since it applied to our retrieval of the operatives."

Jim glanced at his First. "Thank you, Mr. Spock. I'll just skip to the good part." He shifted the display to show to a smaller planet one system over, a world of swirling blues and greens coated in white clouds like a veil of lace. "This is An'ti, named after its people. They figured out how to warp about thirty years ago, and, unlike the Rilla, the An'ti are actively working to become full members of the Federation. They like us; so far we don't know a lot about them, but they seem pretty okay." He placed the two planets side-by-side. "Here's where it gets tricky."

"The An'ti have..." Jim tilted his head thoughtfully. "I suppose you could call it a talisman. We don't really know what it is or what it looks like, just what they think it does. It's their goddess. According to the An'ti, it controls everything from the seasons to the weather. It makes them prosper. About twenty years ago, the Rilla dropped into orbit around An'ti and took the talisman before the An'ti could stop them. Now, back then, the An'ti weren't interested in outsiders. They wouldn't accept help from us. But they've been struggling since the Rilla took their goddess, and they let us lend a hand when the situation finally got dire enough."

"What happened, sir?" Giotto asked.

Jim shrugged. "Hell if I know. The details are really vague, just lots of stuff about failed crops and
bad weather and either no rain at all or floods that leveled entire cities. What probably happened was really bad timing: An'ti suffered a global climate change around the same time the Rilla took their talisman, so the An'ti blamed the Rilla instead of focusing their efforts on trying to adapt to the circumstances. Starfleet sent dozens of ships to see what could be done. They couldn't help with the weather, of course, but they taught the An'ti how to survive in their new environment. From what I understand, they're kind of a lot more subdued than they used to be, but at least they aren't dying in droves anymore."

Spock considered the facts at hand. "Are we retrieving the talisman, sir?"

The captain pointed to his First with a brief nod. "Got it in one."

"May I enquire after the reasoning, assuming there is any?"

"The An'ti want to join the Federation," Jim explained. "The Federation wants to have them, and not just because they're a cool group of people. An'ti is ridiculously rich in dilithium ore, and the natives don't have much use for it because the An'ti aren't all that interested in off-world exploration. So the An'ti charter includes an article giving dilithium mining rights to the Federation, but they won't sign the charter without a good faith token, which is apparently a cultural tradition dating back countless generations. What we want more than anything is to have An'ti, and its dilithium, in the Federation. What they want more than anything is to have their talisman back. The Hounds' mission was to make that happen."

"But they failed," Giotto pointed out.

"They did," Jim agreed, expression going hard. "And they suffered the injury of a vital member of their team."

"Why?" one of the other ensigns—Harrison—asked.

"Because the Alpha, who leads the missions, is a cocky son of a bitch who wants the glory of being top dog more than he wants the successful completion of his mission." The security officers traded frowns. "The reason I took this mission," Jim added, voice low and cold, "is because the Alpha has a history of letting his team take a hit for him. Until now, all complaints regarding his actions were fielded through his direct supervisor, Admiral Peters. The problem is that she likes the way he operates, so of course she never corrected his little getting-people-killed problem. No one who knew what was going on could come up with a reasonable excuse to drag him out from behind her to face his actions on his own. So that's what we're doing."

"How?" Giotto asked.

Jim motioned to the screen behind him. "We're gonna walk in his shoes." He pulled up a set of mission parameters, enlarging them until all his officers could easily read them. "We're doing everything the way it was outlined to the Alpha, down to the letter, and we'll have a harder time because they probably tightened security after the first attempt failed. If we can pull this off without serious injury, then there are only two rational explanations: either we're just that damn good, even though we lack the extensive training of a black ops team, or the Alpha fucked up. Peters will never let us tarnish the reputation of her Hounds by being better than them, so when I bring her best operative up on charges of negligent leadership in the course of a high risk mission, she won't be able to dispute them. The Alpha will be investigated, and she'll have to sever her connections with him to prevent the investigation from turning on her."

"The rook will be removed," Spock observed, both eyebrows lifting toward his hairline, "leaving the queen vulnerable to attack."
"That's the good news," Jim agreed, ignoring the brief confusion of his security officers. "The bad news is she *definitely* knows I'm coming after her now. I wasn't exactly subtle when I demanded this mission."

"Indeed not," Spock said mildly.

"So basically," the captain summarized, "we're going into an unexplored location against largely unknown opponents looking for an unspecified object that will probably be heavily guarded, all under the pretence of securing an alliance with a dilithium-rich planet that wants their goddess back so she can fix the weather, when in reality we're just using this high risk black ops mission to stick it to a dog and make his commanding officer stop killing her operatives." He crossed his arms with a shit-eating grin. "Any questions?"

"Just one, sir," C.C. said as matching wild grins curved the mouths of all three security officers. "When do we start?"

Spock experienced the sensation of being the only sane individual in a madhouse. Then he willfully dismissed the observation, took his place at Jim's side, and began to plan the impossible.
"And then we jump off the cliff." Spock quirked an eyebrow at Jim, who grinned sheepishly when he noticed his second-in-command's faint skepticism. "Well," he amended accordingly, "maybe we won't jump off the cliff. Whichever way that works out, it should be pretty much the end of the mission. Everyone clear?"

"Aye sir," the makeshift black ops team chorused.

"Alright then!" Jim cleared the computer's memory of all classified data before shutting it off, unusually serious. "Let's get this over with." The security officers all saluted sharply. Jim winced. "Uh, before that, could you guys maybe leave your uniform shirts here?"

Giotto traded puzzled frowns with his teammates. "Sir?"

"Your blacks are fine for this." The captain huffed when his officers continued to hesitate, crossing his arms with a faint frown. "Look, it's gonna be dangerous anyway. I'd rather not make it worse by having you guys parade around in bright red shirts." He glanced at Spock. "Or blue. Or gold, for God's sake." He scowled to himself as his team obediently divested themselves of all bright colors. "It's like no one on the Starfleet design team ever went on a covert mission before. Next they'll put us in neon or something. Maybe with a big target on the back, just for fun."

Spock refrained from listing the odds of such a design schema ever becoming standardized and focused instead on setting his neatly folded science blues next to a pile of red shirts on the ready room's long conference table. He flanked his captain as Jim left the room, close on his heels as they strode toward the transporter.

McCoy ambushed Jim just shy of the transporter pad, forcing a bottle of water, a small cup of pills, and a thin sleeve filled with something lumpy into his captain's startled hands. "The medicine's for your crappy immune system, which is going to give you hell for going so long without sleep if you don't take something for it now."

Jim arched an eyebrow. "What, no hypo?" He tossed the pills back like a shot of alcohol, chasing them with a few long swallows of water.

The doctor crossed his arms with a scowl. "I couldn't get one passed that stupid suit."

A red-clad security officer Spock recognized from the detail watching the Hounds stepped into the transporter room before the smartass remark growing behind Jim's smirk could be voiced. He hesitated only a moment before stepping forward, a bulky package held carefully in both hands. "Sir," he said, offering the package to Jim, "the female operative said I should give this to you. Well, wrote that I should," he admitted, falling to parade rest when Jim relieved him of the item, which he hefted thoughtfully.

"Did she say what it was?"

"No sir. Her message just implied that you'd need it on Rilum."

"Thank you, Ensign." The package contained a large, sleek black belt covered in what appeared to be dozens of barely visible compartments. "Handy," Jim observed, fastening it around his waist. It hung low and heavy on his hips, settling in place with natural ease born of much practice. "Now we're set."
"Eat that," McCoy instructed. Jim blinked at him in apparent confusion, so McCoy reached out to flick the small unmarked sleeve still in his right hand. "High-protein snack food. You're not beaming down until you've finished it, fancy utility belt or not, so you might as well get started."

"…When did I stop being in charge here?" the captain asked his First Officer as he obediently tore the pack open. He up-ended a small handful into his left palm before making a face at the assorted nuts and pieces of dehydrated fruit scattered across his glove. "Trail mix, Bones? Seriously? You picked out all the candy, too!"

"Protein, salt, natural sugars," the doctor listed, ticking points off on his fingers. "Basic ingredients for tricking your body into not collapsing for another hour or so. And you'd just better be grateful I gave you medical clearance for this stunt instead of locking you in sickbay for the next week, which I probably should have, by the way."

Jim rolled his eyes, tossing back the food as he had the pills. "Whatever you say, Doctor."

"Damn straight."

When the captain was done guzzling water and consuming snacks, his team gathered on the transporter pad. "We'll be back soon," he said.

McCoy crossed his arms, apparently dissatisfied with the mission, despite his understanding of its necessity. "I'll have a team ready."

Jim smirked. "If everything goes according to plan, we won't need a—"

"Shut up," the doctor snarled. "You'll jinx it."

Spock opened his mouth to point out the flaw in McCoy's logic—mostly because superstitious reasoning precluded logic of any sort, and the captain's statement had no statistical probability of affecting the mission's outcome before its onset anyway.

Jim, who may have sensed his intent, turned to the transporter's technician. "Energize," he ordered. They dissolved in a flare of light and energy.

For the most part, the mission progressed according to Jim's ultimate plan. They materialized under cover of night in the shadow of a fortified wall that surrounded the heavily guarded palace in the heart of Rilum's capitol city. The three security officers, clad in black and led by Giotto, separated from their commanding officers, sneaking along the wall to locate the best means of creating a distraction that could not be ignored. Spock and Jim scaled the wall by means of a small but powerful grappling hook and length of rope hidden in separate compartments in Jim's belt.

"Phase One: storm the castle," the captain murmured, coiling the rope around his fingers as they hid in the lee of a guard tower. "Complete."

"Perhaps storming is not quite an accurate description, sir."

Jim smirked back at his Vulcan companion. "Semantics, Mr. Spock." They monitored three rotations of the guard's fixed patrol, waiting for the opportune moment to slip inside his post. Schematics of the building indicated each of the eight guard towers contained a well-hidden escape tunnel leading to the main courtyard, which would be largely empty throughout the night. From there, it should be a simple matter of a swift, quiet sprint from the tunnel's exit to a servant's entrance on the west wall.

They took turns running point through the convoluted maze of interior halls that spread throughout the palace, careful to keep to the shadows, constantly on alert for the sound of approaching natives.
The stone used to build the elaborate dwelling was perfect for monitoring the echoing clop of approaching footwear. It would have caused a similar problem for Spock had he not anticipated such a difficulty by shifting his weight to the balls of his feet.

The boots of Jim's suit offered not even a whisper of sound as he moved, though whether that was due to the material or Jim's own skill or some combination of the two was unclear.

Their first obstacle took the form of a section of flooring that literally fell out from under Jim as he was running point toward the end of their race. Spock rushed forward when his captain vanished, crouching to peer down into what appeared to be an abyss.

Jim was hanging from the three-inch ledge that was all that remained of the floor by the fingers of his left hand. The right was busy with a pocket on his belt situated close to the small of his back. He glanced up only briefly when Spock leavened forward to gauge the distance between them. After offering a quick half-smile, he produced a small tube, which he placed in his teeth before biting down firmly. The faint tink of broken glass preceded a faint chemical glow emanating from the tube. Jim shook it briskly, increasing the glow, then dropped it into the pit. It fell for what Spock estimated to be two hundred feet before jolting to a halt at the end of a thin string looped around Jim's fingers. The depths of the pit loomed far beyond its meager light.

"Huh," Jim mused thoughtfully, retracting the tube by twisting his wrist so the string wrapped around his fingers. "Too far to fall."

"Shall I help you out of the floor now, sir?"

"Give me another moment, Mr. Spock." He palmed the tube, shining its light around his immediate area as though searching for something. "So if they don't come up from the bottom then they probably... Ah-ha!" Spock watched in mounting curiosity as Jim stuck the tube back in his mouth to free both hands before carefully inching his way toward the wall on his left. Once he was close enough, he planted one foot against the wall for balance and pried open a nearly invisible panel, exposing wires and fairly outdated circuitry. "Jackpot," he said around the tube. He fiddled with the rudimentary machinery for nearly thirty seconds before shutting the panel and turning his face up to Spock. "Ready," he announced softly, stretching one hand up toward his First Officer.

Spock lowered his center of gravity, settling firmly on his knees before dipping into the darkness to reel Jim out like a fish. When they were both on solid ground, the trap sealed itself. Spock posed a question through the subtle lift of an eyebrow.

"Everyone in the pack has a specialty that we hone," the part-time operative admitted with a shrug, stuffing the tube and its wire back into its appropriate pocket. "One of mine was gadgetry of all shapes and sizes. This culture has developed far enough to have traps programmed to respond to unexpected visitors, like our sneaky selves, but it didn't trigger a central alarm or we'd be surrounded by now. So the sensors and stuff were likely built into the devise itself, and since it didn't have a bottom we could see—"

"The master controls had to be in the walls."

"Exactly." Jim rose fluidly, slinking close by the wall. "We got lucky, too: they've put all the traps on a grid. I crossed a few wires, so now if we trigger one it'll respond by sending out the close command instead of open."

"You are quite adept at this, Captain."

"Yeah, well." Jim glanced around the next corner, motioning for Spock. "I've had a lot of practice."
Instead of replying ("A regrettable, if unavoidable, fact, sir, soon to never again be repeated."). Spock darted smoothly into the hallway, Jim at his heels, a shadow more dangerous than any others that lingered within the palace.

Twice more Spock had to assist Jim with rerouting trap grids, once by boosting him into a rig of blades and electrified bars that his captain navigated like a child in a jungle gym. The second involved Jim talking Spock through the process, as it had been the Vulcan who activated and subsequently dropped into a literal web of razor-sharp wires that would have torn through his skin had he not possessed the necessary body control to exert only the most precise amount of pressure against the treads.

"Well that sucked," Jim observed when Spock was once again free by his side. He pulled at a thin cut in Spock's shirt, peering at the pale, unblemished skin underneath. His lips thinned on a dark expression. "Isn't this where your heart is?"

Spock inclined his head.

Though a muscle bunched in Jim's jaw, he didn't comment, expressing his opinion of the close call by taking point again.

Interesting.

They found the room at the heart of the palace where the talisman was likely kept and then paused. Jim twisted his right arm to expose his inner wrist, where a set of digital numbers materialized in a countdown.

3…2…1…

A thunderous explosion rumbled through the building, rattling windows and shaking the very walls. The guards standing at the door they needed to enter shouted to each other in alarms, racing from their posts with weapons at the ready.

Perfect.

Spock crept forward, acting as watch while Jim produced a set of lock picks and set about gaining access to the room. "The things you learn in spy school," he muttered to himself as he worked.

Less than a minute later, the bolt popped open, and they stepped quickly inside. At that point, they met their greatest obstacle.

"…Hey Spock."

"Yes, Captain?"

"The talisman's a girl."

"It would appear so, sir."

Instead of a small statue or pendant or naturally occurring geode, what lay before them was indeed a girl, humanoid in appearance except for the extreme pallor of her skin and bright green color of long hair that spilled from the dais where she slept in a bed of silk and pillows. The heavily embroidered shift she wore did little to conceal the gentle curves of her young body. Her hands were folded neatly over her stomach, extravagant butterfly sleeves spread along almost the entire length of the dais. A delicate golden diadem swept from her forehead into the curly mass of green hair. She was utterly still where she lay, not even breath giving testament to her life.
Jim, who had conducted this mission with the utmost confidence and professionalism, appeared badly confused. "Didn't the dossier say the An'ti lost their goddess, like... twenty years ago? This kid can't be more than fourteen!" He turned to Spock with an incredulous expression, hands spread helplessly. "What the hell?"

Spock stepped toward the dais, studying it for evidence of more traps. "A xenobiological scan would likely answer many of your questions. The best place to conduct such examination would be the Enterprise."

The captain sighed, rubbing one hand over his face. "Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

"No apologies necessary, Captain."

"Still. Now's not exactly the most opportune time to lose my shit." Jim strode forward, sharp eyes going over every inch of the dais. He glanced at Spock. "I don't see anything."

"Nor I," the Vulcan agreed.

"Well, Mr. Spock. Let's see if she's heavy before our friends in security start to miss us."

Spock gathered the girl into his arms, lifting her from her nest with slow, cautious movements.

"You're clear," Jim announced once Spock was nearly straight. The Human tucked all the loose ends of the girl's costume under her limp arms, ensuring they wouldn't fall and get in the way in case of an emergency. "Let's go."

Their exit was theoretically perfect. Jim erased the evidence of his break-in by quickly locking the door, which should grant them a few extra minutes to escape before anyone realized the girl was gone. Their earlier exploits spared them the difficulty of traps, and they made it back into the courtyard without so much as seeing another soul.

Then one of the guards in the watch tower turned to throw away the pit of some local fruit, and he saw them sneaking over the wall with the stolen prize of his people. He shrieked in the local dialect, calling for back-up even as he lifted a bow and fired. His first arrow missed entirely. The second would have buried itself in Jim's shoulder had he not turned to check behind him at the last moment. He hissed as it cut through the material of his suit, leaving a jagged wound in its path.

"Shit," he cursed, yanking Spock closer to the ground even as he urged him to run faster. "What're those arrows made of? I'm not exactly wearing tissue here!"

"Are you hurt?"

Jim shook his head, leading them to a small trench that should dump them into the wilderness just beyond the city walls. They climbed in carefully, using it as a barrier as they raced from what sounded like an entire army of furious locals. "Just a graze. We would've been in trouble if they'd gotten in a direct hit, though."

"We must endeavor to avoid such an occurrence then."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. I'll take that into consideration."

They managed to stay ahead of their pursuers, going so far as to lose a good majority of them in the sparsely forested woodlands that surrounded the city, and would have gotten away clean had it not been for the campsite of sleeping border guards.
"Shit!" Jim snarled, doing a sharp about-face as the night watch called an alarm. He physically turned Spock around, shoving him roughing away from the clearing. Absent Vulcan grace, Spock might have stumbled. As it stood, Jim only raced past him to take point again, calling "Wrong way!" over his shoulder.

Their flight came to a head at a cliff edge that fell off into a dizzingly vast chasm. There was nowhere else to go; they had only found the dead end by following a small path that cut through towering canyon walls. Natives prevented them from going back; gravity and sudden death barred them from continuing forward. With no other choice, Jim left Spock on the cliff, returning to the bottleneck created by the canyon walls to face their enemies in combat.

At first, Spock thought Jim would be forced to enter the fight empty handed. But his captain produced a knife for each hand from mysterious and previously unnoticed sheaths concealed somewhere on his body. He used those weapons with startling dexterity, managing to establish and maintain control of a mêlée that almost certainly should have resulted in his immediate death.

What exactly had they taught him in "spy school"?

Regardless of his skill, Jim had been awake for a minimum of two days. No one operating with any kind of rational sense could expect him to brawl for an extended period of time and survive. He lost one of his knives to the hoard.

The first wound was glancing, a small cut on his bicep. The second, a quick jab from a spear, tore into the muscle of his left thigh. Jim grit his teeth on a snarl, grabbing the spear and jerking it away from its comparatively inept wielder. He spun it in a quick, deadly series of attacks, forcing his enemies back. They rewarded his skill by throwing his stolen dagger at him. It cut deep into his side, so ruthlessly that he faltered at last. They surged around his quickly hidden weakness, waiting for just one more opening to consume him at last. Spock looked around for somewhere safe to set the girl so he could help his captain.

And where the hell was Giotto?

An engine roared in the canyon, answering Spock's nearly frantic question. One of the Rilla's own simple hovercrafts loomed up behind Spock, where it stilled, opening its rear cargo hold. The excessively strong gusts of wind put off by its engine forced the Rilla to take a step back even as Spock moved quickly onto the craft, pushing the girl into one of the security officer's arms. He turned, intending to go to Jim's aid.

One of the Rilla threw a spear, managing to strike the engine compartment in a blow that was so unlikely it hadn't even been worth calculating. A "lucky shot", as Humans might say.

Not lucky for Jim, though, as it damaged the craft's ability to maintain a proper hover. They jolted away from the cliff edge and their captain, unable to get close again without risk to the entire vessel. Jim looked at his crew, at the ever-growing distance between the haven of their craft and the cliff, blue eyes darkening with the realization that he was trapped with two knives, a spear, and an entire civilization of angry Rilla. Spock saw the certainty of death creep into those eyes, and something in him snapped.

Fuck no.

He surged toward the wide open cargo bay doors, hooking his left hand on the outermost protruding edge. The right reached for Jim, every finger straining for his captain, whose eyes widened in realization. He dropped spear and knives in a heartbeat, sprinting for the cliff edge. At the last possible moment, he jumped, flinging himself into the abyss while every inch of him strained for his
For a horrified moment, Spock wasn't sure he'd make it.

Then their hands touched, a slide of fingers, of hot skin and gloves. Spock's hand locked around Jim's, firm and unyielding even when Jim fell, pulled down and away by gravity with such force that Spock felt the sick slide of Jim's shoulder dislocating as he jolted to a halt at the end of his Vulcan tether. Spock grunted with effort, dragging Jim along the craft with single-minded intent. Giotto scrambled over, screaming for the pilot to get them out of there even as his hands sought a purchase on Jim's suit. He found one in the tear along Jim's shoulder and bloodied his hands by latching on and pulling with all his might. Together they got their captain to safety, their final combined tug so powerful it tumbled Jim straight into Spock, who curled protectively around him as he tuck them both against the craft's wall. Giotto closed the bay doors, calling orders into his communicator.

Jim shook in Spock's lap, right arm cradled tight against his stomach as he panted from a combination of shock and fatigue. "Shit," he whispered. "Ow."

Which might have been an understatement.

Spock kept Jim hidden in the shelter of his own body, one hand resting mindlessly in his hair, tucking his head down and close. The other slid over the worst of his wounds, cataloging the disgusting set of the dislocated shoulder, the slow pulse of blood from his thigh, the countless bruises that made his captain groan and shift away.

"Commander Scott says they're ready to beam us up, sir."

Spock looked up, face blank but for the feral light in his eyes.

"They can't know it's bad." All but the pilot and unconscious girl stared at Jim's pronouncement. He lifted his head, eyes clearer as he worked to think through a hideous haze of pain. "If they know I got hurt, it'll be harder to question the Alpha, and this was all useless. They can't know, Spock." Blue eyes locked with black, fever-bright with desperation and resolve. "You can't let them know."

Spock rose carefully, Jim tucked against the length of his body, standing but supported. "The suit is dark enough that they might not notice the copious amount of blood you are losing into its fabric, but your shoulder—"

"Can you set it?"

Spock looped Jim's good arm around his own shoulders, supporting the extra weight with a hand at the Human's waist. Jim shot him a shaky grin before adding, "It might give us a few extra hours to clear the area before they attempt to find who would dare to kidnap their stolen goddess."

"Aye, sir."
Just before the light of transportation snatched them away, Jim allowed himself a final moment of weakness by leaning heavily on Spock's strength, sagging against him until their bodies shared a single line from hip to shoulder. "I knew you'd be great to have with me," he whispered in a weary, broken voice.

Spock shut his eyes against a surge of unfamiliar emotions, focusing instead on the sensation of dematerializing, the importance of the as-of-yet unfinished mission, the issue of getting his captain's injuries treated without alerting anyone to their true extent.

If he was never quite able to ignore the warmth of Jim's breath as it feathered against the hollow of his throat, he kept that fact to himself.

Back aboard the Enterprise, Spock's primary mission became one of redirection. He allowed the security team to draw the waiting crowd's attention to the unconscious adolescent girl they carried between them. Jim stood straight and tall, none of his pain leaking through his triumphant grin.

McCoy, distracted by the girl, ordered Jim to his quarters, where he was to wait until someone could come and get him out of "that God damned suit".

This served Spock's purposes well. He discreetly helped Jim to the sanctuary of his dark, quiet rooms, depositing him in the most comfortable chair available.

"I have to report," he said, voice strained and expression pinched now that it was just Spock who would see. "You should probably not be in frame for that."

The Vulcan inclined his head, hands settled at the small of his back. "I, too, have a matter I must… settle. It will require a short period of absence, if that is permissible."

Jim made a vague shooing motion with his left hand, the right still kept close against his stomach. "It's fine. I mean, if you have something to do other than babysit—"

"I will return momentarily."

A smile quirked one corner of Jim's mouth. "I'll be here."

It didn't occur to Spock that his captain might still be in danger until he stepped out of sickbay with a portable med-kit slung across his shoulders. He looked down the hall and felt a jolt of pure adrenalin.

The female operative stood at the corner, facing him straight on. She turned, disappearing down the corridor in the direction of Jim's quarters.

Spock ran.

He reached his destination in record time, still moving with all reasonable haste despite having not seen the operative again since that initial glimpse. He keyed opened Jim's door, slipping in before it was fully open. What he saw was not what he had expected, an unfortunate manifestation of the Kirk factor that made his blood burn with fury.

Instead of the female, it was the Alpha who had broken into Jim's sanctuary. He had the captain trapped against the wall, pinned there with superior height and strength, his chest to Jim's back. His right hand was wrapped around Jim's right wrist, stretching the injured limb to its full extension above Jim's head. Jim panted against the wall, face drained of all color in a wash of pain that made his knees so weak they could barely support his weight. The Alpha solved this problem by shoving one of his legs between Jim's, his face twisted in a sick leer.
Spock slammed his hand against an emergency call button by the door with such force that it cracked. While it was wailing a code red in the security department, the Vulcan took his own measures to rectify the situation. He tore Alfie's body away from Jim's, hurling him across the room with such violence that he crashed against the opposite wall with a dull thud. Spock set Jim carefully back in his chair before striding over to the reeling monster, studying his prone figure for a moment. Then he shifted his weight to draw back his foot.

No one would treat Jim in such a fashion and live to speak of it.

"Spock," Jim panted, curled in on himself with ashen features and trembling limbs. "Spock," he said again, unable to phrase a thought more coherent than that. His eyes retained some small measure of their usual eloquence, though, and begged him not to take an action he would later regret.

This wouldn't fall in that category, but the expression on Jim's face was one he wished to eliminate. So instead of kicking the Alpha, he pinched the nerve cluster in his neck, nearly snapping his collar bone in the process. Security flooded the captain's quarters, taking Spock's statement with a look of rage that blackened with every carefully phrased description of what the Vulcan had interrupted.

The only detail he neglected to add was the appearance of the female operative, who had come to Spock to make him run, in warning for what might have happened.

Once the Alpha was trussed in chains and dragged off by security, Spock returned to Jim's side, gently helping him out of the chair. He escorted his captain to his own quarters, which he promptly sealed against any kind of intrusion. Jim sat on the bed, his mission accomplished, exhausted beyond the point of reason, beaten and bloody and still victorious.

"Hell of a day," he observed with a wry smile.

Spock inclined his head. "I spoke with Dr. McCoy," he said, finally removing the med-kit and setting it on his desk. "We arrived at a solution to the issue surrounding the need to remove you from that suit."

Jim chucked hoarsely. "Yeah?"

"Indeed."

"What's that?"

The First Officer settled his hands at the small of his back. "Vulcan hands are uniquely sensitive, due to our particular type of telepathy."

"Touch telepaths." Jim's head bobbed in a weak simulation of a nod. "I remember."

"It stands to reason that I might be able to use the sensitivity of my hands to facilitate the delicate process of removing your suit."

Jim shut his eyes. "You want to use touch telepathy to get me out of my clothes. Pretty forward of you, Mr. Spock. I don't usually allow that kind of shit before a first date."

Spock felt the tips of his ears heat, but set such a reaction aside as illogical. The captain was exhausted, after all, and could not be held responsible for diminished self-control. "I suggest only using very light surface telepathy to judge when my attempt to remove the suit causes you pain. Beyond that, I might be able to gain insight into the proper method to employ, based on the memories you have of previous procedures. Dr. McCoy has lent me the use of a field medical kit, with which I have sufficient training to see to your injuries. In this way, others need not be informed
of them."

For a moment, Jim didn't reply. Then he signed, long and wearily, and looked at his First Officer. "Fine," he agreed heavily. He looked around, slightly bewildered. "Where should I stand?"

"...I do not believe it would be wise for you to stand anywhere, Captain. You are likely to fall over."

Jim attempted a scowl but lacked the energy for anything more than an offended wrinkling of his nose. "How do you want to do this, then?"

"How is the process usually started?"

The captain motioned toward his back with his left hand. "The primary seam's along the spine. There's a zipper or something hidden under a flap. After that, it's should be pretty common sense. I dunno, though." He shrugged. "Never had to do it."

"I shall endeavor to apply common sense, then." Spock indicated his bed with a slight inclination of his head. "Perhaps you would be best served on your stomach?"

Jim visibly struggled against making a comment. At length he sighed, careful of his arm as he obeyed. "This is so wrong," he muttered into Spock's duvet, so muffled it was likely he didn't intend his First Officer to hear.

And though Spock did, he declined to comment. Instead he examined the suit's back, running his fingers over the myriad delicate seams to familiarize himself with the layout and guess where the connections might be. He located and exposed the zipper, drawing it down in a slow, steady tug. Beneath the suit, Jim wore a thin mesh shirt, presumably to help his skin breathe. Needles underpinned the entire outfit; Spock removed them carefully, fingertips settled on thin strips of exposed skin to track the ebb and flow of Jim's pain. When it spiked, he froze, listening with his hands for the clues offered by Jim's body.

Better to draw the needles at an angle. Safer to start at the bottom. Less painful to pull the strange material back one panel at a time, alternating sides to allow for brief periods of recovery. At the ribs, go extra slowly. There's a needle hidden in the crook of his right elbow, but not the left. The gloves aren't attached, but wait until his arms are free to peel them off. Take the boots first, the collar around his throat last.

Piece by piece, Vulcan hands learned the secrets tortured into Human skin. He had worn the suit for more than thirty missions. Sometimes the technicians were new, and their shaking hands nicked blood vessels, planting fields of purple bruises in golden plains. And Jim would laugh with them, ease their apologies with wicked grins and quicksilver humor, despite the disapproval that radiated from the Alpha, who treated his techs so badly they flinched from him.

The leader of a team built of the best operatives in Starfleet, and he used that power to frighten techs. Something would have to be done about him.

Spock learned, through the sensitivity of his hands, just how good Jim had been in his part-time volunteer position. They had sought him out for training the summer of his first year, and he had excelled to such an unexpected degree that he had very nearly never shared a bridge with Spock: If the Nero mission had not drawn Jim out of that world when it did, he would have graduated the Academy and immediately been initiated into the ranks as a full operative, likely killed within the year, and added to a mass of useless unseen statistics.

For the first time, Spock thought of his people's tragedy with a sense of profound relief. His
homeworld was gone, millennia of history lost forever, but Jim was here. Jim lived. Beneath his hands, Human skin was warm and vibrant.

…Illogical.

Within an hour, Jim was free of the suit, his wounds cleaned and bandaged. Somewhere in that hour he had fallen asleep, which he needed so badly Spock was loath to wake him.

So he didn't.

Instead he decided to meditate. He cleared his supplies, putting everything in its proper place (except for the suit, which he left crumpled in a corner of the room). Once he was sure all the locks were properly engaged, he settled on the floor in a classic meditative pose.

Before he started in earnest, Jim's breathing hitched. His golden head lifted from the bed, expression muzzily confused. "Spock?" he whispered, blue eyes roaming the room. "Spock?"

"Here, Jim," the Vulcan called softly, not rising from his position.

Jim's attention zeroed in on his voice, every scrap of the concentration left to him turned on his First Officer. "The mission?"

Spock inclined his head. "Successful, to the letter of its parameters, save your injuries, which we have successfully concealed."

"The girl?"

"Dr. McCoy is seeing to her."

"Oh." He frowned faintly. "You're okay?"

The Vulcan nodded again. "I am."

"Giotto? The others?"

"You were the only one to sustain injuries, sir."

"Oh."

"Perhaps you should rest now," Spock suggested gently.

Jim tried to nod, shutting his eyes on a fresh wave of pain. "Okay," he whispered. His left hand reached vaguely for Spock, fingers brushing the air. "You have the, uh…" He yawned, hiding the sound in Spock's mattress. "You have the conn…"

Utterly unable to help himself, Spock extended his own hand, allowing just the tips of his fingers to brush Jim's for a fleeting moment. "Aye, sir."

Jim's uninjured arm retracted, tucking under his torso as he made a soft, pleased sound.

Any hope Spock had for maintaining a strictly professional—or, failing that, platonic—regard for his captain vanished in the echo of that thoroughly satisfied hum. So instead of fighting, he shut his eyes on a sigh, resigned to the depth of his affection, and began the careful process of organizing his thoughts to include a new parameter.
Dressed in Command gold, with traces of exhaustion lingering in his eyes and the set of his shoulders despite nearly thirteen uninterrupted hours of sleep, Captain James T. Kirk sat before the terminal in his quarters, staring at it with stark incredulity. "...Come again, sir?"

Admiral Archer shook his head on a wince. "It's not exactly my favorite option either, Kirk."

"You want the Hounds to stay? Here? On the Enterprise?"

"Just until you can get to Starbase Theta. Peters has a transport in that area she can use to get her people back to Starfleet."

Jim twisted in his seat to face Spock, who was stationed behind his captain in order to observe the exchange with his usual Vulcan reserve. "Are we even anywhere near Starbase Theta?"

Spock settled his hands at the small of his back. "From the planet An'ti, it would take the Enterprise anywhere from two to five days to cover such distance, sir."

"See?" the captain said, pointing over his shoulder at Spock as he addressed the admiral. "What are we supposed to do with a bunch of operatives—one of whom is currently in the brig for assault, by the way—for two to five days on top of however long it takes to tie things up on An'ti?" He spread his hands in a frustrated gesture. "You know these people, sir. You know what they're trained for, you know what they're capable of. How can you expect us to keep them here?"

"What do you want me to say, Captain?" Archer demanded, leaning toward the screen with an unhappy scowl as he ticked points off on his fingers. "The ship that delivered your team—"

"It's not my team."

"—the team to Rilum is long gone. You can't knowingly abandon them among hostile forces, so you can't drop them off where you found them. You can't leave them with An'ti, because they lack the necessary medical advancements to adequately care for the wounded Hound and it's against protocol to willfully separate the unit absent exigent circumstances. There isn't anyone else with the appropriate clearance to transport them in the whole quadrant." Archer shook his head, easily as frustrated as Jim. "I don't like it either, but we're stuck, Kirk."

Jim covered his eyes with his left hand, deflating as he sunk back in his seat. "We won't be able to contain them," he observed, voice soft with weary resolve.

Archer shrugged. "You're the most adaptable operative I ever trained. I'm sure you'll figure something out."

"I kind of have to," the captain agreed. He sat up, expression serious. "What are our orders concerning An'ti and the girl, sir?"

"What was your initial plan?"

Jim glanced back at Spock, who took that as a cue to recite their original orders verbatim: "Once it has been established that the Rilla have given up pursuit of the talisman, return the artifact and secure An'ti as a Federation planet."

Archer nodded. "Carry on, then."
Jim hesitated before saying carefully, "Sir…we didn't exactly expect the talisman to be a child—"

The admiral held up one hand. "And we're still not sure that's what it is. Looks can be deceiving, Kirk, especially on alien worlds. We don't know much about this culture, so there's no use getting up in arms to protect something that might not be truly alive. Your orders haven't changed."

Jim's mouth thinned in disapproval, though all he said was, "Yes sir."

"Good. Keep me updated, Captain. Archer out."

When the link was closed, Jim sat back with another sigh, absently cradling his tender right arm across his stomach. "Damn. Just when I thought a mission couldn't suck more than that mess with Kodos, we get this." He spun to face Spock with an expression of distaste. "Our track record for shitty jobs just keeps getting worse."

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "I fail to see how this mission is in any way as 'shitty' as the ordeal surrounding the Kodos affair, sir."

His phrasing teased a large grin from Jim, as he had suspected it would. "You say that now, but just wait until we've got operatives popping up in all sorts of uncomfortable places."

The Vulcan's head canted inquisitively. "This is the second mention you have made regarding the inevitability of the operatives escaping their confinement. Do you distrust the ability of the security team?"

"Not at all," Jim said with a shrug. "But I know these people." He turned his attention back to the terminal, typing swiftly until the screen filled with an image of the room where the remaining two operatives were being kept. They sat in utter stillness, one in either of the two furthest corners, their backs protected and hands resting close to their belts. "Now watch," he instructed, typing again. The image flickered twice, losing and gaining focus before cutting out entirely. When it returned, the operatives were gone. Spock regarded Jim with faint alarm, both eyebrows lifting toward his hairline. "Feedback loop." Jim touched his fingers briefly to his temple in an aborted and futile effort to rub out the headache building there. "They probably set it up while we were on Rilum, which means the Alpha was loose before then. I bet he escaped right after I got the parameters from him. Damn. Our only hope for containing them was to foist them off on some other ship," he summarized with a shrug. "And that's kind of not an option anymore." A final set of keystrokes replaced the image of an empty room with the previous falsified feedback loop.

"…Shall I apprise security of the situation, sir?"

Jim shook his head, absently swiveling his seat as he thought. "There isn't any point. Even if they somehow managed to find and capture two members of not just a black ops team but an elite black ops team, the Hounds would escape again. It's sort of what they do. Plus, the Alpha's the only one who would intentionally cause trouble, and he's pretty much on lockdown. He's facing formal charges now, which the others probably knew roughly a second after it happened. They'll provide a better guard for him than anyone I could assign, so we'll ignore them as long as they don't draw attention to themselves."

Spock wondered, for the first time, if perhaps the female operative's decision to seek help rather than intervene herself might have been an attempt to assist Jim's mission to get the Alpha removed to a penal colony.

"You know what the worst part about this whole mess is?" the captain demanded of his First Officer,
scowling faintly.

"The inherent danger of challenging a ruthless admiral at her own game while her most loyal operative dwells on your ship?" Spock suggested mildly. "Or perhaps the potential moral dilemma of turning a sentient being over as a 'good faith token' to a people who have already proven themselves incapable of offering her adequate protection."

"...Yeah, those suck too. But mostly it's that I have to go to sickbay now to check on Flank and the girl, and no way I'm getting out of there without Bones going hypo-happy on me first. He's gonna be pissed that I didn't tell him about the stab wound and dislocated shoulder and everything." He shook his head wearily, holding his injured arm close against his stomach in a subconscious bid to protect it from the coming storm. "It's way too early for this level of nonsense. I haven't even had coffee yet."

Spock offered Jim wordless assistance in rising from his seat, then walked with him to sickbay, where he was immediately set upon by Dr. McCoy and his tricorder.

The doctor snarled low in his throat at the readings. "You said you weren't hurt!" he accused his captain.

Jim held up his left index finger in a point of contention. "Now, what I actually said was—"

McCoy turned his fury on Spock before Jim could finish. "And you said he didn't need medical attention! You said the kit was to help you remove the freaking suit!"

"I spoke truthfully, Doctor. Your kit was most useful in addressing the physical discomfort inflicted by the suit, though it had, by then, been somewhat depleted by the tending of Jim's combat wounds."

"That's intentional," Jim realized, sounding vaguely awed. When Spock glanced at him, Jim motioned to McCoy, who was mute with rage as he tore through his supplies. "You needle him on purpose!"

"I admit to no such objective," Spock said neutrally, though one eyebrow ticked upward as he returned his gaze forward.

Jim leaned against the nearest biobed, laughing brightly and shaking his head.

"That's intentional," McCoy muttered as he brushed past Spock, low and soft so only the Vulcan would hear.

Spock settled his hands at the small of his back and didn't reply.

"This can't be how you meant to spend your day off," Jim commented to Spock, flinching at the tray of hypos the doctor was arranging with something approaching manic glee. "I appreciate the sign of solidarity, but you don't have to hang around if you've got something you'd rather do."

Before the Vulcan could reply, a yeoman bustled into the room, looking generally harassed as she held a PADD out to Jim. "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir, but you've got a message—Actually," she amended with a pretty scowl, "you've got about fifteen messages from an admiral named Peters. She says it's urgent. All of them are urgent. She says if I don't give them to you directly, I'll face punitive measures."

Jim stared at the yeoman. "Are you serious?"

She ticked one shoulder in a brief shrug. "That's what she keeps telling me, sir. I said I couldn't get a
direct link to you before you start duty on alpha shift, but she said I'd better get a response to her written messages or I was in trouble."

"She can't do anything to you," Jim said firmly, taking the yeoman's PADD with a dark expression. "You haven't done anything wrong, so just ignore her threats."

The yeoman looked relieved. "Yes sir."

Jim's head tilted as a wicked smirk twisted his mouth. "In fact, just go ahead and ignore her altogether. Route all incoming communication from her to me directly. My shift starts in twenty minutes; I'll deal with it then. Consider it an order," he added when the yeoman opened her mouth on a panicked expression. "I'll take sole responsibility for the fallout."

"Yes sir," the yeoman whispered, saluting quickly before scurrying away.

Jim tossed the PADD aside without glancing at it. "Who's up for visiting hours?" he asked gamely.

McCoy scowled, jabbing a hypo in Jim's neck and ignoring the resulting yelp. His hands were deceptively gentle as he checked Jim's wounded arm. "You're not doing yourself any favors by pissing Peters off, you know."

"I know," the captain agreed with a bright smile, the barest flicker of discomfort darkening his eyes as McCoy carefully flexed the healing limb. "But if she's going to hate me, I wanna give her something concrete to hate rather than just a bunch of little irritating stuff she's blown out of proportion. Otherwise it's boring."

"Crazy," the doctor muttered, shaking his head. "Normally I'd have you in a sling for a few days—"

"No thanks."

McCoy struck out with another hypo. "—but since you've already told me you have to keep your injuries hidden, I'll skip that. For now." Jim scowled and rubbed his neck. The doctor ignored him, turning to Spock instead. "Try to make him remember to go easy on that arm for a while, alright?"

"I shall endeavor to fulfill my obligation as First Officer in this matter, Doctor."

McCoy nodded. "Good."

Jim rolled his eyes, pushing away from the biobed. "If you're done talking about me like I'm not here, I'm gonna go see how Flank's doing."

The doctor frowned. "Flank?"

"The operative's code name," Spock informed him, following Jim through to the isolated recovery room where an injured Hound lay.

"Wait, they have code names? How did you know? What was Jim's? Hey, I wasn't done with my examination!"

When McCoy bustled into the recovery room with hypos in both hands, Spock extended one arm, preventing him from approaching Jim. McCoy glared at him before turning to his friend. Whatever argument the doctor had ready died on his lips.

Their captain stood beside his fallen comrade with a faint, sad smile bowing his mouth. He clasped the bed-ridden operative's hand, bending close to speak with him. "Hey," he said gently. "I didn't
wake you up, did I?"

The operative shook his head, eyes shut. "The doctor is so loud in everything he does that I could sight him in the dark." He blinked, revealing stormy gray eyes that sought Jim's out before he smiled weakly. "You'd better hope he never gets tagged for removal."

"Eh, I've got him covered."

Spock noted Flank's fingers tighten briefly around Jim's as the operative's eyes warmed with admiration. "You always were the best of us."

Jim snorted, shaking his head. "If I'm remembering right, you're the one who pulled Morse Code out of your ass despite that little nick on your back."

"And you're the one who kept us from getting killed when Alpha fucked up. Again." Flank's expression hardened. "Something has to be done about him. Any thoughts?"

A strange smile transformed Jim's face into something feral and dangerous, matching the glint of dark intent in pale blue eyes. "I might have an idea or two."

Flank's smirk matched Jim's exactly. "You're going after her."

Spock stepped forward, crossing to Jim's side to look down at the operative. "These facilities are not secure. It would be illogical to continue your conversation."

"Good point," Jim agreed, flashing Spock a warm smile before turning his attention back to Flank. "I've got everything covered on that front. You just stay here and get better, okay? They'll need you in top shape to help train up new blood to round out the pack."

Something like regret colored the operative's expression. "Kirk, I—" Flank shook his head slightly. "I won't be training any more recruits."

Jim's eyebrows drew together in a mixture of confusion and dread. "Why not? It's not like they can retire you for getting injured." Blue eyes flickered up to McCoy's. "He's gonna be fine, isn't he?"

McCoy crossed his arms, expression alarmingly gentle. "Jim…" He sighed, going to the biobed's monitoring equipment. Once he accessed the appropriate information, he turned the screen to face his captain. "The injury he sustained is going to heal. But it was deep, Jim. Bone deep. It compromised his spine."

"What are you saying, Bones?"

"Jim—"

"I'll walk." Flank squeezed Jim's hand, drawing those blue eyes back. "Listen to me, Kirk: I'll walk. But I probably won't run, never mind all that fancy circus shit you pull. I barely kept up with the pack before—don't shake your head, you know that's why Alpha always put me on flank. I'd just be a liability now. An operative out of peak health's pretty useless."

"Shut up." Jim leaned over Flank, close and furious. "You aren't a liability, and Alpha's assignments were always full of shit. Even if you can't go on missions anymore, I can think of three black ops leaders who would kill to have you on their planning teams. So just shut up about being useless, alright?"

Flank quirked a lopsided smile. "I did like planning the missions better than running them."
Jim nodded with a satisfied expression as he stepped back. "I'll talk to Archer."

A speculative light filled the fallen operative's eyes. "That's who you've picked, huh?"

"Well." The captain shrugged. "He already has a thing for dogs."

Flank laughed.

Spock drew closer to his captain. "If you still intend to examine the talisman before your shift, sir, you must do so soon."

Jim grinned at his First in disbelief. "This is really how you want to spend your day off? Really?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow and drew a quiet breath in preparation to reply.

"No," McCoy interrupted firmly, jabbing his captain with another hypo. Jim yelped and swatted at him, which surprised another laugh out of Flank. "I'm not going to stand here while you two add a new topic to your list of stupid things to argue about. Visit the talisman or clear out of my sickbay, but either way I'm done with you both."

Jim rolled his eyes, releasing Flank's hand to rub at his wounded neck. "Your bedside manner's the best in the fleet, Bones. I'll have to write up a commendation for it."

McCoy waved a hypo at him in clear threat, so Jim expressed sentiments of goodwill to his once-teammate and allowed himself to be escorted into the room where the talisman was being closely monitored. She lay on the biobed in complete stillness, without a breath or heartbeat to prove she lived, hair carefully gathered and tied out of the way by one of the nurses. Instead of trailing finery, she wore Starfleet issued sleepwear, and looked no less regal, no less like the deity the An'ti thought she was.

"She isn't responsive," the doctor said when Jim opened his mouth. He crossed his arms with a frown. "Technically, she isn't alive." One hand motioned to the monitors. "I'm not getting any readings from her at all, as you can see. Not even anything ambient, like what she's made of or if she ever was alive. According to our readings, she's just not here." He scowled. "It's getting to the nurses. A lot of them won't come in here now. Chapel's trying to sort them out, but they're being stubborn about it. Superstitious idiots, the lots of them."

Spock refrained from pointing out the inherent hypocrisy, though he did note Jim rolling his eyes. "Is there any information regarding the talisman you believe the captain will need to know prior to meeting with the An'ti, Doctor, or have your pessimistic musings exhausted the topic?"

Jim let out a bark of laughter before covering his mouth with a hand, humor bright in his eyes. "Sorry, Bones," he said insincerely when his friend leveled a glare on him.

"You think I've run out of shots for you," the doctor hissed. "But you're wrong."

"On that note, I'd better head to the bridge. Don't wanna be late," he explained to Spock with a winning smile as he edged out of the room. "Message me with any breakthroughs, alright, Bones? Enjoy your day off, Spock. See you guys later!" He vanished before either of his officers could comment.

McCoy jabbed a finger in Spock's direction. "You're cluttering my sickbay. Out!"

Spock left. He had more important things to do than subject himself to McCoy's insanity, anyway.
When the room was once again empty, the talisman smiled and opened her eyes.

What fun she would have with these men and their world.

On the bridge, Jim was falling victim to a terrible headache.

"Admiral Peters, do me the professional courtesy of pretending you don't think I'm an idiot." He motioned to the officers station on the bridge with him, his mouth twisted into a frown as he addressed the view screen from his command chair. "At least in front of my crew."

The admiral's cold expression cracked enough for a faint sneer to slip through. "When you've earned professional courtesy from me, Kirk, I'll be sure to do that."

All officers of the Enterprise within earshot bristled.

"Listen," Jim grit between clenched teeth, "I've filled out your forms. I've logged your demands. I've listed the reasons we can't drop everything to deliver your unit for immediate transport back to Earth in as many different ways as I can. What more do you want from me?"

"I want you to follow protocol regarding the unplanned and unprepared acquisition of a special operations unit by unregistered Starfleet personnel and make their safety your top priority."

Jim tried to take a calming breath. "Their safety is a priority, however—"

"Your top priority, Kirk, as outlined in—"

"With any due respect, ma'am, we're kind of in the middle of a mission that your team—"

"Regardless, you must deliver them."

"As soon as we can—"

"Now, or I'll bring you up on charges for dereliction of duty."

Jim threw his hands in the air. "Let me just turn the whole ship around, ma'am! It's not like the Federation will care if we lose a dilithium-rich addition to the ranks so long as your team gets back for afternoon tea!"

"What's this?" Peters smirked. "Insubordination, too?"

Before Jim's snarl could be fully formed, the picture cut out.

"Oh no," Uhura said calmly. "What's this? Something—"

"An ion field," Chekov chirped, eyes bright with mischief.

"An ion field seems to have disrupted the signal, sir. I'm so sorry and remorseful."

Jim blinked at her in amazement. A slow grin spread across his mouth. "Well good," he laughed. "You should be. Losing an important admiral like that, mid-rant and everything."

Uhura shot her captain a conspiratorial smile before returning to her work.

The captain stood and stretched, pacing over to the navigation consol to give Chekov's shoulder a friendly bump with his fist. "Good cover-up, man. Thanks."
Chekov beamed.

"Captain!" Uhura called, voice tight with confusion and concern. Jim strode to station while she typed furiously. "I'm getting— Sir, it's a distress signal. From the botany labs. But their communications terminal must be malfunctioning or something, all I'm getting is the code for distress and static—"

The command chair beeped. "Jim," came the frazzled sound of McCoy's voice. "Damn it, where are you?"

"Bring that over here," the captain ordered. Uhura was done almost before the words left his mouth. "Bones, what's wrong?"

"The talisman's missing, that's what's wrong!"

Jim frowned. "What do you mean, missing? How can she be missing? Did someone take her? Who's been in sickbay?"

"Missing as in gone, I have no idea, not unless they're invisible, and no one. She's just gone!"

"Captain," Uhura murmured, calling up a secondary transmission, "the botany lab—"

"Alright," Jim declared firmly. "Bones, thank you for alerting me to the situation. I've got it covered. You can get back to your patients now; I'll find the girl."

"Yeah, good luck with that. McCoy out."

"Lieutenant," he added to Uhura, "contact Mr. Spock. Have him meet me in the distressed labs. He knows way more about the experiments than I do and I'll probably need his help sorting the whole mess out."

"Aye sir."

"I know Mr. Sulu just finished his shift, but be ready to call him as backup in case we need additional assistance. He's got his fingers in most of the experiments in the botany labs anyway."

"Aye sir."

"Mr. Chekov," the captain called in parting as he strode toward the turbolift, "you have the conn."

"Aye sir!"

When Spock arrived at Botany Lab 2, he was able to immediately grasp the problem, if not the cause.

The plants had gone wild. Vines and shrubs, small cuttings and large trays of moss, new specimens and old, they all had at least tripled their size, growing far beyond their containers and turning the lab into a veritable jungle of incompatible species.

"Nearly half a year's work," one of the lab techs said with a shaky sigh, scrubbing his hands through his short hair. "Gone. We'll never be able to repeat this kind of growth; there isn't any validity in these results. It's all ruined." He stood with a cluster of his academic fellows in the hallway outside the quarantined room, radiating defeat.

"I appreciate the magnitude of your loss," their captain said with what appeared to be fraying
patience. "Right now, though, our priority has to be discovering and isolating whatever it is that made your plants go crazy. Okay?"

The scientists barely acknowledged him in their devastation.

So Spock stepped forward, hands clasped at the small of his back. "Lieutenant Foster," he said, calm but firm, "report on the events that lead to this…unexpected result."

Jim looked so relieved to have Spock at his side that the Vulcan nearly missed the first part of Foster's report. He mastered his distraction quickly, trying to understand how the lab had come to such chaos.

"We were working on the fungal replication experiment—you know, sir, the one with molecular sequencing—"

"I am aware, Lieutenant."

"Well, sir, we didn't do anything that hadn't been done before." The lieutenant shrugged in lost bewilderment. "Really, we were just recording data. Then this girl I've never seen before stopped by and it made me suspicious because—well, I mean, she wasn't in uniform, but she can't have been with the science department because I've never seen her before, so I tried to get some kind of explanation or I.D. or something, but the plants just went nuts—"

"What color was her hair?" Jim asked, the question tight and serious.

Foster blinked. "I don't know, sir—green?" The scientist thought for a moment before nodding. "Yes, I'm sure. It was green. And really long."

"How is that possible?" Jim wondered to Spock.

The Vulcan's mouth thinned into a hard line. "I cannot speculate, sir. Though it would probably behoove us to treat this situation very carefully."

Jim looked around until he spotted a woman in security reds watching the situation from a cautious distance, as though she wished to be available in case of an emergency without drawing attention away from the immediate problem. The captain's eyebrows jumped toward his hairline. He glanced at the bars on her sleeves before calling, "Lieutenant."

She met his gaze firmly, stepping forward. "Aye, sir?"

"Lend me your phaser for a moment."

Though she obeyed immediately, she asked, "Are you sure it's wise to go in there alone, Captain? It could be dangerous, and there are others you could send instead."

Jim cocked his head as he set the phaser to stun, studying the woman out of the corner of his eye.

Spock tried to view her as he presumed Jim did: long, straight black hair with dark eyes and lightly bronzed skin, she was not wholly unappealing. Her build was slender, obviously fit beneath her uniform, though she was by no means voluptuous. Frankly, Spock wasn't sure he understood what it was about her that so held his captain's attention.

"I'd be a pretty sad excuse for a captain if I sent my people into situations I'm not willing to handle on my own," he said lightly. "And I won't be alone." A diamond-bright smile flickered at the Vulcan First Officer. "Coming, Mr. Spock?"
He took his place by Jim without comment, trying very hard not to dwell on a momentary surge of what felt like smug victory.

The lab was covered, walls and ceiling alike, with all manner of climbing plants. Jim and Spock moved through the surprisingly dense foliage quickly and quietly, as formidable a team on the Enterprise as they had been on Rilum. They crept ever onward, attuned to every unusual sound or movement, prepared for anything.

Or, rather, for almost anything.

What they had not expected to find was the talisman, sitting on a desk in the middle of the lab clad in standard Starfleet sleepwear, petting a tendril of ivy as a Human might stroke a favored pet. Her long hair curled in waves around her, fading seamlessly into the assorted shades of green carpeting the room until not even Spock could tell where the girl ended and plants began. When her eyes jumped to Jim's, Spock registered their particular shade of green as unusual: like a chameleon's skin, they seemed to shift color to match exactly the hue behind her.

Jim held his phaser carefully, though he didn't quite raise it. "You're aboard the Starfleet flagship Enterprise," he said firmly, eyes locked on hers, "in a botany lab. I'm Captain Kirk, and this is First Officer Spock. I know you probably didn't expect to be on a starship when you woke up, and I don't mean to come across as callous, but you need to come with me now because you've accidentally wrecked a lot of research, and I can't let that spread to any of the other labs, even though I assume it wasn't intentional."

"Kirk," she echoed, voice and tone older than body as a strange sort of knowledge lit her eyes. She lifted her right hand, stroking long fingers through the air as though to caress the span of nothingness between her and the captain. Jim blinked and shook his head, forehead creasing in mild confusion. "Hmm, interesting. So many opportunities for change; so many paths to walk; so many, many threads to break or cherish. Already, you have received and sacrificed so much."

Spock stepped forward, intent on protecting his captain by shielding him from the child's scrutiny. "Cease your musings. The captain of this vessel has ordered you to evacuate this laboratory, and you will comply."

"Ah," the child whispered, a smile curving the corners of her young mouth, "here is the boy of a million broken threads. Interesting for later observation. Now, though, my curiosity is for his captain."

"Here is the boy of a million broken threads. Interesting for later observation. Now, though, my curiosity is for his captain."

Her outstretched hand curled, like she was drawing her fingers across the strings of a harp. Spock heard Jim draw a shaky breath as the girl said, "What a lovely resonance. Yours is a special existence, Captain—or so it would seem."

Spock turned to check on Jim, concerned by the ominous statement, and was startled again by something he had not expected.

Jim's left hand was pressed to his forehead, which was furrowed in a frown, as though he were experiencing a headache. This was not unusual, if the girl was manipulating or examining him by means of some kind of psychic touch. What Spock hadn't anticipated, the detail that shot fear like a rush of fire through his nervous system, became apparent only when Jim met his First Officer's concerned glance.

His eyes were silver.

Spock felt his own eyes widen in shock. He reacted without thinking, closing the distance between them to take Jim's chin in one hand, the other latched onto his arm with barely-contained panic as he tilted the Human's head this way and that to make sure the blue had really become silver, to convince
himself it wasn't a trick of the light.

"Spock," Jim demanded, startled and concerned, "what's wrong?" Even as he spoke, the silver drained from his eyes.

But Spock had seen it, had witnessed irises dyed the color of Lenore's poison, and could neither explain nor ignore it. So he gripped Jim's good arm, intent on dragging back to sickbay, to McCoy and tricorders and medical explanations.

"Spock!" his captain hissed. "We can't just leave the girl— Hey," he added to the talisman when Spock didn't appear to agree with him. Jim dug his heels in a little, just long enough to beckon the girl forward. "You need to come with me. I'll take you to sickbay, after we go to…" He shot his First a sidelong glance. "Wherever."

The girl stood gracefully, extending one hand to Jim as the plants all around her released their hold and withered. "Of course," she agreed.

When her hand touched Jim's, his eyes once again bled silver.

Spock pushed her away with something just shy of a snarl.

Even as Jim's eyes return to normal, he scowled at the Vulcan. "Look, I don't know what's going on here, but you can't just—"

"Allow him his defense of you," the girl instructed calmly. She smiled when Jim turned to her. "You don't see the world as he does. I will accompany you."

Jim passed his eye over Spock, then the girl, before glancing at the lab. He frowned. "You killed all the plants."

She touched a brown leaf with obvious fondness. "Such is the way of these things. Shall we?" she added to Spock.

With or without her, Spock's goal was sickbay. Tugging a bewildered but mildly amused Jim the entire way, he arrived in nearly record time, the talisman shadowing their steps.

When they stepped into the room, McCoy was already scowling. "What, exactly, is going on here?" He frowned at the girl. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"As you can see." She spread her arms. "I am not."

Spock pushed Jim forward. "There is something wrong with the captain."

McCoy's frown turn into a glare. "Care to be more specific?" Despite his tone, he began scanning Jim, who rolled his eyes but submitted.

"I'm supposed to be the captain," he observed to the girl, who smiled enigmatically.

"You are supposed to be many thinks, James Tiberius Kirk."

Jim's expression filled with distrust. "How did you know——"

"Holy shit!" McCoy exclaimed, nearly dropping the tricorder. "His eyes are silver!"

Jim started, attention snapping back to his friend. "What?"
The doctor crowded Jim to a biobed, peeling back his eyelids to examine the problem. "How long as this been happening?" he demanded. "Damn, it's fading. What is going on here, Spock?"

"I second the question," Jim said mildly, more irritated than frightened as he crossed his arms impatiently.

Spock settled his hands behind his back. "I can offer no explanation, Doctor. I only became aware of the phenomenon when the talisman—" An uncomfortable thought occurred to the Vulcan. He hesitated a moment before stepping forward. "However, I can offer a theory." He extended one hand, settling the fingers along Jim's psi-points. "If I may?"

Still looking annoyed, Jim nodded. When Spock initiated the lightest of melds, his captain's eyes flared silver.

"What are you suggesting?" McCoy asked when Spock broke the connection and all traces of silver vanished.

Spock settled his hands in their usual place, shoulders perfectly straight. "I suspect the neurotoxin initially administered by Lenore was compromised by the captain's immune system and then further altered by the introduction of telepathy as a mental barrier. Its initial function, to force the transmission of unaltered fact, was twisted by the situation's extenuating circumstances, producing a response to psychic activity not unlike a presumably benign allergic reaction."

Dead silence met this pronouncement. "He's allergic to psychics," McCoy said at length, voice flat.

"To psychic activity. It might be a highly sensitive, depending on the strength of the talisman's unspecified psychic ability."

"So my eyes go silver when someone's being psychic around me?" Jim asked thoughtfully.

Spock glanced at him. "Theoretically."

"I'm a psychic activity early detection system." He grinned at his First. "Cool. I wonder what my range is."

McCoy delivered a sharp blow to the back of Jim's head. "Not cool, you moron, we don't know if it's bad yet! The silver eye thing might be just the first symptom! We'll have to run tests and samples and experiments—"

"Hold on." Jim held up one hand, uncharacteristically serious. "We don't have time for that. It seems benign, so we're not gonna mess with it right now."

"But—"

"Doctor," the captain said sharply, "I don't have time." McCoy deflated, glancing away with a scowl that Jim knew he would pay for in hypos later. He fought a sigh and motioned to the talisman. "She isn't dead. Or asleep. Apparently she's some type of psychic. And she did crazy shit to the botany lab. Thoughts?"

McCoy narrowed his eyes, something stubborn burning just under the surface for less than a heartbeat. Then he pursed his lips, shook his head, and turned to the girl.

In the end, he didn't really have anything to add to her current medical file. She still didn't register on his scans, didn't put off any readings of any nature, and was maddeningly silent when questioned.
"Okay forget it," Jim sighed at length, rubbing a hand over his face. "Look," he asked the girl, "you like plants, right?"

She inclined her head.

"Good. That's great." He turned to Spock. "I'll set her up on Observation Deck C. There's a garden there. You go back to the botany lab and see if anything can be salvaged. Okay?" he asked the room at large. When no one complained, he nodded. "Okay." He extended a hand to the talisman, settling into his best Starfleet manners on the assumption that a being thought of as a goddess should probably be treated at least as well as a dignitary. "Will you please accompany me, Your Grace?"

The talisman smiled faintly, taking his hand.

When his eyes turned silver, McCoy took a host of quick readings but didn't comment. He waited until Jim was gone to address Spock. "We have to find out if it's dangerous."

Spock inclined his head, taking more from the statement than the doctor probably intended. The silver of Lenore's lingering poison wasn't the only undefined variable, after all. There was also the talisman and the unspecified psychic ability she wielded so calmly against Spock's captain. The Vulcan would discover whether or not she was dangerous.

And then he would act accordingly.
Spock found Jim hiding in the furthest corner of the least-used observation deck, slouched nearly sideways in a large padded seat, head bowed and expression distant. He picked an absent melody on the guitar gifted to him by Erixian children, fingers nimble and sure despite his obvious distraction. Spock stood just within his line of sigh, still and patient, hands folded behind his back, waiting to be noticed.

It took nearly ten minutes for Jim to come far enough out of his thoughts to register his audience. When blue eyes finally glanced up to meet dark brown, the music stopped. Jim rested his right hand flat on the guitar's strings, tipping his head back with a long sigh. "Hi."

Spock inclined his head but maintained his silence.

"Uhura sent you, didn't she?"

"The lieutenant mentioned the difficulty you experienced since our parting in sickbay. Your conspicuous absence after the conclusion of your shift prompted my investigation. I wish to ascertain whether I can be of service."

Jim laughed softly, shutting his eyes as he shook his head. "You would've been great to have when Peters' transmissions started coming in." He began fingering another absentminded, graceful melody. "I think she managed to get in three face-to-face confrontations and nearly a dozen 'urgent' messages. God, I hate having to play nice with her, but if I call her out she'll have me up on insubordination charges faster than Bones can load a hypo. I can't lose that kind of ground to her right now."

Spock considered Jim's quiet, tired form for a long moment. "Was Peters the only force that drove you here?"

The captain didn't respond directly. "It might not have been so bad," he admitted at length with a wry twist of his mouth, "except when I wasn't fielding her bullshit, I was explaining to Starfleet why we hadn't concluded the An'ti negotiations yet, why we had to wait to be sure we weren't being followed, why our botany lab was reporting catastrophic failure of the vast majority of its experiments. Or I was calming the An'ti down, promising them that we had what we'd promised them, that we were on our way. Or I was arranging security for the talisman's quarantine, which is harder than it sounds, considering I need someone in there with her but she's freaking everyone out with whatever that psychic trick of hers is. C.C.'s pretty much leading the effort, but he can't stay in there forever, and the officers who outrank him keep sticking their noses in and then calling me to explain how weird she is instead of just letting C.C. do his thing." He looked at Spock, frustration bright in weary blue eyes. "Please remind me that I want to get Giotto on the fast-track to heading up security."

"Noted," Spock agreed. "He would make an admirable addition to your command staff."

Jim nodded. "Yeah, and then I can stop wondering why all my ranking security officers are such sissies."

"...Indeed, sir."

The captain's frustration mounted as his picking became more staccato. "And if it wasn't security whining about how much this situation sucks, it was the botany labs, calling me on the bridge to cry over a detailed list of everything they've lost and how much time it's gonna take it get it all back on
track. I can't even catch a break from Bones, who keeps trying to get me back into sickbay."

Spock's mouth thinned. "I will speak to the personnel responsible for the botany labs. Their behavior is most unbecoming of Starfleet officers."

Jim shook his head, releasing his irritation with another sigh. "No, don't bother. They're good at what they do, and it's a devastating loss for them. Maybe if they'd expected it... Anyway, they need a little while to come to terms with it. If they haven't gotten their shit together in a day or so, you can tear them a new one."

The Vulcan's head tilted minutely. "Tear them a new what, sir?"

Jim grinned, not an intended goal but somewhat satisfying nonetheless. "It's an expression, Mr. Spock. Don't worry about it."

"...Yes sir."

"Anyway." Jim stilled his hands on the guitar, looking out on the vast darkness of space with its countless pinpricks of light. "By the end of shift, I was pretty done with everyone's bullshit." He shrugged, turning back to Spock. "So I gave myself a time-out. I kind of figured you'd find me if anyone needed me."

"I did not seek you out for their benefit," Spock murmured, dark eyes locked with blue, "but for yours. How may I assist you, Jim?"

His captain huffed in aggravation. "It's your day off—"

"Indeed," Spock interrupted firmly. "As such, it is mine to do with as I please. What pleases me is being of assistance to my captain and friend."

Jim blinked, an open, astonished expression eclipsing even his exhaustion. "Seriously?"

Spock inclined his head. "Seriously."

His formal tone echoing such an informal expression surprised a laugh out of Jim. He straightened out of his slouch, blue eyes bright as his smile when he indicated the seat beside his. "Well, pull up a chair, then. Let's think-tank this mess of a mission." He watched Spock accept his invitation, warmth and curiosity plain on his face. "Thank you," he said at last. When Spock turned to him, Jim shrugged a little helplessly. "You always seem to show up right when I need you. It's kind of a neat trick."

Spock lifted one eyebrow. "I assure you, sir, it takes far too much effort to be something so simple as a 'trick'."

Jim grinned again. "I didn't say it was an easy trick."

"Indeed."

"So!" The captain draped his arms over his guitar, expression focused. "What're your thoughts on our current predicament?"

They began a rambling discourse that addressed each of Jim's headaches, producing a number of plans adaptable to any given number of variables. Professional interest gave way to the personal as Spock allowed Jim's thoughts to wander over myriad unrelated topics spanning from favored chess strategies to most interesting books and personal taste on music. Spock discovered that Jim hands
were restless when he spoke, a manifestation of his boundless energy. His fingers fiddled with the
guitar, dancing over the instrument in thoughtless tunes when not occupied with making gestures to
emphasize his points.

It was strangely endearing, nearly as captivating as the intensity of blue eyes, almost as satisfying as
the visible drain of tension from the lines of his captain's body as they continued their quiet,
companionable conversation.

When Jim was a sprawled length of easy grins and bright humor, Spock drew his attention to the
time by inviting him, quite casually, to share dinner in the Officers' Mess.

Startled, Jim sat up, looking around for a timepiece. "Is it that late already?"

Spock inclined his head. "If you have other matters to attend—"

"No, of course not." Jim stood with a stretch, groaning as his muscles protested so much time in a
single position. He held the guitar by its neck and offered Spock another smile. "Dinner sounds
great, especially if you're there. People usually think twice about bothering me if you're in the
vicinity to pick at their logic."

"It is my duty, as ever, to be of service," the Vulcan replied dryly.

Jim laughed. "I like that, too, of course."

"…My service, sir?"

His captain's smile then was strangely knowing. "Your humor, Mr. Spock," he corrected in low,
warm tones that made something in Spock's stomach squirm. "Your phrasing. Your wit."

Spock glanced away, hands folded behind his back almost the moment he stood, unable to meet the
unfamiliar emotion in blue eyes.

Jim shifted, moving the slightest degree back, as though he sensed Spock's discomfort. His smile
spread into a more recognizable grin. "Maybe after dinner we can try chess again. I haven't gotten to
trounce you yet," he pointed out reasonably.

Spock favored him with a ticked eyebrow, settling back into their easy banter. "Your optimism
seems without limit."

"You just haven't gotten to play me when I'm really on my game," Jim insisted, leading the way out.

"I fail to understand how any amount of additional 'game', as you say, would increase your chances
of performing any better than you have in the past. Which, I must observe, has not been well enough
to do anything other than what you might call 'keeping up'."

Jim unlocked the door, pointing at Spock as it slid open. "I'll make you regret that comment."

Spock inclined his head. "You are welcome to attempt it, Jim."

The hallway was empty when they stepped out, save a single male security officer walking toward
them from the direction of the turbolift.

As they passed the officer, Jim handed his guitar to Spock with a bright smile. "Hold that for me,
would you?"

No sooner had Spock's hand closed around the instrument than Jim snapped his left elbow back with
crushing force, meeting the open palm of the security officer, who had been in the process of aiming an open-handed blow at his captain's spine. The unknown officer jumped back as Jim lashed out with his left leg, pivoting to face his attacker. They each fell into defensive stances, though the officer's expression was tense and furious compared to the calm ease of Jim's patient waiting. Spock hesitated, arms filled with guitar as he struggled to understand why one of Jim's officers would—

Oh.

The third Hound.

Spock stepped back to allow Jim additional room, committing the Hound's features to memory: black hair and green eyes, tanned skin, taller than Jim but far less physically developed. He was young, perhaps even junior to Ensign Chekov. What was such a child doing among the ranks of a special operations unit?

"Well?" Jim challenged at length, voice hard but somehow bored.

The Hound snarled, young face twisted in rage, and attacked. For a heartbeat, Spock was concerned that the boy's additional height and anger would prove a challenging combination. Then they began to fight in earnest, and Spock understood Jim's projected boredom.

He was undisciplined, poorly trained, exposing glimmers of talent that were useless without the experience to properly wield them. Jim didn't beat him so much as twist the Hound's attack into an impromptu training session.

The Hound struck out for Jim's side, so Jim twisted out of his way, twining a leg between the boy's shins, and slapped a flat palm over his unprotected kidneys as he stumbled. "You were aiming too high," Jim commented thoughtfully. "The tender underbelly starts low and further back; you would've just tickled my ribs. Pay more attention to anatomy."

So the boy twisted around, leg snapping high toward Jim's face. Jim's caught him easily, one hand around his ankle and the other at his knee, before throwing him off balance by pushing him away. "Don't project your intention so obviously. Lower your center of gravity. Try to remember your training."

"Like you've got room to speak!" the boy spat. "You don't do anything other than run!"

Jim rolled his eyes. "Do something other than be a general pain in my ass, and I'll think about taking you seriously."

"You bastard!" the operative cried, surging forward again. Jim allowed his attack, indulging him with hand-to-hand blows as they circled each other. "You think you're so special on this stupid ship, but you're nothing but a traitor!"

All traces of tolerance melted from the captain's eyes, replaced by a chill so deep it made his opponent falter. Jim caught the boy's arms, locking him in place long enough to plant a foot in his stomach and shove him away. The boy stumbled back, and Jim pressed his advantage, pinning him against the wall. "How am I a traitor?"

The Hound struggled uselessly. "You took our mission and ran it with civilians! You turned on the admiral—you put the Alpha in the brig!"

"Where do I even start?" Jim muttered, shaking his head.

Spock stepped forward to assist him. "The command team of Starfleet's flagship can hardly be
considered 'civilians,'" he said, voice blank and strong. "Furthermore, the mission was reassigned to the Enterprise when its originally assigned team failed in its execution, which is, as you might know had you undergone any kind of thorough education, in keeping with protocol. To address your illogical claim that Captain Kirk has 'turned on' anyone, it should be clarified that he would have been remiss in his duties to Starfleet and the Federation had he been witness to command negligence and refrained from altering the proper authorities to such shortcomings. Finally, the Alpha was incarcerated due to his own actions, not the captain's. It is standard to arrest any individual who commits assault, regardless of rank or profession. It was the Alpha's own stupidity to attempt such violence against the captain of a starship while aboard that captain's vessel, and he will pay for his stupidity with years of incarceration."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Jim said with a hard smile. "You cleared the matter up quite efficiently."

"Think nothing of it, sir."

"Listen," the captain added to his captive, "I don't know what the hell you were thinking, attacking me in the open like this—I mean, you're a tracker. You're a tracker-in-training. You don't have the skills to go up again Flank, never mind someone who fills in as combat specialist. What the hell, Hunter?" The boy maintained a stubborn silence, so Jim slammed him against the wall again. "Once I'm done here, the Alpha's finished. So's the admiral. They've been killing their operatives, damn good people who didn't deserve to be thrown away like that, especially now that Starfleet needs them so badly. It's a long list of talented people, and you'll be just one more of them if don't get your head on right. Stay out of my way on this. Do you hear me?"

The boy glared but didn't respond.

Jim returned the glare, sharp and deadly. "I'm kind of serious about this."

"Lock me up, if you're so serious." Hunter struggled uselessly. "I'll just get out again. So will the Alpha. He's a hundred times the operative you were! The admiral will save him, you'll see!"

"This kid's delusional," Jim sighed to his First.

"He does appear to be unusually prepared to sacrifice his life," Spock agreed mildly.

"May I help here, sir?"

All three males turned to find the female security officer from the botany labs standing at their side, eyes quiet and unreadable as they passed over the situation. When they lingered with mild irritation on Hunter, who shifted uncomfortably under the disapproving scrutiny, before settling on Jim, Spock had a moment of unexpected insight.

This was the female operative.

Jim rolled his eyes, peeling Hunter off the wall to shove him at the woman. "He's all your, Lieutenant."

Hunter frowned. "Lieutenant?" he echoed in confusion, glancing at the woman. "But Beta—"

The woman took his arm in a firm grip, digging her nails into the material just above his arm until he winced. "I will handle my subordinate, sir. I apologize for his stupidity."

"Hey—!

"Boys will be boys," Jim interrupted firmly. He shot Hunter one last scowl. "I'd suggest stepping up
his training regimen. He's gonna get somebody killed."

"Yes sir," the woman agreed, though her eyes, when they cut to Hunter, seemed to communicate not if I kill him first more than any intent to improve the boy's skills.

"Proof," Jim observed to Spock when the operatives were gone, "that not all seventeen-year-olds are geniuses. And proof that we're really, really lucky Chekov's so awesome." "Indeed," Spock agreed, offering Jim his guitar. "Will you need to alter our plan regarding dinner in order to address the boy or his keeper?"

"Nah." The captain shrugged. Then he seemed to reconsider, tilting his head thoughtfully. "Well, maybe a little. If I'm gonna be attacked in hallways and stuff, the Officers' Mess doesn't seem quite so safe anymore. Would you mind eating in my quarters instead?"

"Not at all."

"Good!" He motioned with his guitar. "Let's escape while we can."

They managed to make it through a pleasant dinner and half a thoroughly engaging chess match before duty called for them again. Jim fielded nearly simultaneous calls for aid from the botany lab and the talisman's quarantine, the personnel at both locations so desperate for assistance that their captain agreed to be in both places at once.

When the second call ended, Jim stared at Spock in resigned amazement. "Is it Wednesday or something? I was winning, too!"

His First considered the chess board, which did not yet support such a claim for either side. "It is not Wednesday," he admitted, moving a bishop, "though I might be able to relieve some of your burden by seeing to the botany lab myself."

Jim frowned. "But it's your—"

"I am the Science Officer aboard this vessel," Spock said firmly. "If anyone should oversee the reconstruction of a destroyed laboratory, it should be me, regardless of my schedule. Would you not have released me from the bridge for just such a duty were I working instead?"

"...Yes," the captain admitted reluctantly.

"Then, as I am not on the bridge, I will save you the formality and simply go to the botany labs on my own."

"All right," Jim sighed, moving his queen. "I'll go see what's up with the talisman. Check, by the way."

He left before Spock could reply, though the Vulcan shifted a pawn to remove his king from danger prior to taking his own leave.

The scientists working busily around the affected laboratory were less in need of actual help than they simply desired to have a ranking officer close at hand to sign forms and generally oversee their efforts. While it was logical, from a certain perspective, it was also tedious. The emotional displays made by some of his officers as they came to understand the sheer amount of data they'd lost were also somewhat distasteful. Still, in less than three hours, Spock's duty was fulfilled as it concerned his department. He left to seek news of Jim, to learn if the captain's "emergency" had been anything like his own.
As it turned out, Jim's obligation to the resident dignitary wasn't yet complete.

"He's been in there for hours," Ensign Giotto informed him, mouth turned in a displeased frown where he stood guard before the door to the observation deck. "I tried to go in and check on them, but the captain set his code and I can't override it."

"Thank you, Ensign," Spock replied, entering his own code with brisk efficiency.

Inside, Spock found a jungle. The moderate greenery maintained on the deck for the purpose of aesthetics had grown well beyond their simple pots and gardens, filling what had once been massive open space with vines and shrubs and assorted flowering plants in full bloom. The Vulcan picked his way through the dense underbrush carefully, wondering if there was any logic at that point in attempting a covert approach of the figure responsible for such a situation. Surely she was somehow connected to the plants. Surely she must already know of his advance. Surely she could stop him if she so chose.

Perhaps, then, she didn't care. Spock pressed forward without any resistance. In fact, it almost seemed the plants drew away from him as he moved, creating a small path for his journey. Rather than questioning it, Spock merely increased his pace.

As expected, the talisman had stationed herself in the center of the room, long hair trailing into the greenery that cushioned her in a relaxed lounge. She had formed a wide clearing before her, and Jim stood in that clearing, presenting his profile to Spock as he spoke quietly with his host.

The talisman extended her hand unexpectedly, fingers spread and palm up, as though offering Jim an invisible token.

Jim took a startled half-step back, eyes wide and silver. He looked around the clearing in amazement, seeing something there that Spock didn't.

Or couldn't.

"What are they?" the captain asked, sounding vaguely awed. He reached out tentatively, running his hand down an invisible obstruction. "How did you get them here?"

"These eyes can do more than see," she murmured, green eyes landing on Spock without a trace of surprise. She smiled faintly, tilting her head. "It's a part of life, after all—these countless threads of choice. Or destiny. You bind yourselves thoughtlessly, are bound by others with similar ease, and the bindings are mine to explore." She turned her attention back to Jim, beckoning him closer. When he was within reach, she touched the side of his right hand, fingers whispering over his pinky. "This one's important." Her eyes and Jim's followed whatever trail they saw, leading all the way to—

Jim startled, eyes fading back to blue as his surprise broke the talisman's spell. "Spock! When did you get here?"

Spock settled his hands at the small of his back. "Recently, sir. The botany labs have been sufficiently tended."

"Good. How're the scientists?"

"...They are well, sir."

"Good!" Jim grinned before looking around in a distracted fashion. "Hey, when you came in, did you see..." He motioned vaguely, drawing his expressive hands through the air in an imprecise demonstration. "Strings."
One Vulcan eyebrow ticked up. "Strings, sir?"

Jim nodded, hands settling at his sides. "Like a million multicolored spider webs." He inclined his head to indicate the talisman, who was watching their interaction with a faint, knowing smile. "She was showing them to me. I don't know how, or what they are, or where they went, but it was—" He regarded the talisman with sidelong glance. "Interesting."

She appeared pleased by the admission. "It's a simple trick, if the recipient has an open mind." Her gaze traced over to Spock. "You might consider, Vulcan, how your captain's mind became so open, and what it means for his future. And yours."

This gave Spock a startling thought: if Lenore's poison had made Jim sensitive to psychic activity, had it made him vulnerable to it as well? Was the talisman exploiting this vulnerability? Could any psychic do so?

How was Spock supposed to protect him from that?

"What are you?" Jim wondered, oblivious to the new dilemma.

The talisman reclined further into her nest of leaves and branches. "There is no name for what I am."

Jim's head tipped in curiosity. "The An'ti think you're a goddess. So do the Rilla."

"Yes."

"Are you?"

"What is a goddess?" she wondered instead of answering. "I began long before I arrived on the world they now call An'ti; I lived in root and rock and cloud many ages before the An'ti knew enough to want to name themselves. I will continue long after you and all your worlds crumble back into dust." She tilted her head to mimic Jim. "What would you call me?"

The captain grinned. "There are lots of things in the universe I don't know enough about to name. You'd be one of those things."

"Do you think I'm a goddess?"

Jim's expression became quiet, still with careful thought. "Do you?" he asked at last.

She laughed, a sound that resonated through all the plants around her until their leaves shook with her amusement. "No," she admitted. "But I am probably as close as you shall come in all your years of travel. I could teach you," she offered with another smile. "At my side, you would learn of a great many secrets more valuable than those simple threads." Green eyes moved to brown. She met and held a Vulcan's disapproving stare with complete aplomb. "May I keep him?"

Jim blinked as both of Spock's eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. "No," the First Officer said simply.

"I don't get a say in this?" Jim wondered.

Spock glanced at him but didn't reply.

"No," the talisman informed him warmly. "Soon we will reach An'ti," she continued before Jim could protest. "Would you like to see me wake the world?"

"Yes," Jim agreed immediately. "Can I get a team together? It'd probably make the ship's
"It is an invitation for one," she said, expression calm.

Jim frowned, glancing at Spock. "…That doesn't sound like much fun for me. Can I at least bring Spock? I don’t really go anywhere without him these days," the flagship captain wheedled with his most charming smile.

The talisman smiled as though Jim had made a joke. "Of course he may accompany you. As I said, the invitation is for one."

Although he seemed confused, Jim accepted the invitation gracefully, excusing himself back to the bridge for the final arrival.

Before Spock could make a similar excuse, the talisman caught him in her gaze.

"You begin to understand," she murmured, "what faces you at his side. It would be simpler for you if you allowed him to remain with me. I have not had such a one as he in many, many lifetimes."

Spock's posture straightened as his hands clenched behind his back. "You must find your toys elsewhere," he replied coldly. "Captain Kirk is devoted to his command."

"And to the first of his crew," she added, nodding once.

"Your statement is inaccurate. The captain is devoted to all of his crew."

"But among them," she whispered, the words echoing through her fabricated forest, "he has a first. Listen to me, Vulcan," she said when Spock turned sharply away from her knowing gaze. "There is darkness around your captain. It binds him. If you don't watch it closely, if you aren't ready for the blows it will deliver, you will lose him to it. Just like all the others."

"I am done, for now," she announced, her attention drifting from Spock as though she hadn't just given him what amounted to prophetic warnings about Jim's ultimate doom. "Soon I will be returned to An'ti. Until then, you may take your leave, First Officer Spock."

With few other options, and desperately in need of meditation, Spock obeyed.

They reached the planet within an hour. Jim received no further communications from either Starfleet or Peters, and the only thing the An'ti had to say amounted to rapturous praise. Spock and Jim beamed down with the talisman sheltered between them, keeping fanfare to a minimum on the highly unlikely chance the Rilla had somehow managed to track them.

The landscape that stretched before them was a barren, desolate wasteland of cracked soil and dry winds. Dirty gray sky stretched above them, oppressive and endlessly bleak. A small gathering of An'ti officials huddled in protective cloaks just beyond the landing party.

The talisman's expression washed with sadness. "So much is gone," she murmured. "Such a weathered, weary land!" She knelt, stretching both hands over the dust. "Wake up," she commanded softly, fingers breaking through topsoil. "Mine is the voice that speaks through thunder." Her eyes lifted to the sky, green dilating to consume every trace of white. Wind tore across the plane, rising up from nowhere to tease her hair in a halo around her slim body as cloud rumbled far above her head.

"Mine is the blood that feeds the fields." She stood, hands spread by her sides, radiant with her own power as long vines of new growth shot through dead soil to rise with her. "The twist of my hair in a
flower, the length of my body in stem and trunk, the depth of my will in root." Her Starfleet issued sleepwear was consumed by a cloak of new growth that she caught and drew around her shoulders. It settled over her like the finest gown, sleeves trailing a garden across the ground as she stepped forward.

"My laughter," she said, arms lifted again, held open to embrace the world, "in every brook and ocean." Water rushed through the cracks in topsoil, gathering speed and depth as it poured back into empty riverbeds. She began a slow dance, flaring her skirt and sleeves and hair as the wind became her partner. "My music in the leaves." Everywhere she stepped, plants unfurled like morning-glories at sunrise, following her progress across the land like sunflowers drawn helplessly to her light.

A smile broke through the façade she wore of a little girl. She shed pale skin with a gentle shake, the way trees dropped leaves in autumn to make way for new life in spring. Her skin was green as the world at her feet, her limbs long and trailing, her body light so the wind could take her higher. "Wake up, An'ti!" she laughed, the sound like chimes in a thunderstorm as she danced a new path through the sky, leaving rain and meadows and life in her path. "Wake up and know me!"

She dove into sunlight, vanishing with a flash of power and the rise of a forest.

Utter silence descended in her wake. Rain began to fall in warm sheets, soaking Starfleet officers and An'ti officials and new growth alike.

"...So," Jim called over its pouring, a dazzling smile bowing his mouth. "Turns out you were right about all that bad weather, huh? How vindicated do you feel?"

The An'ti stared at him.

"I don't know about you," he added to Spock, smile never wavering, "but I could sure go for a treaty signing right about now."

When the diplomats began laughing, their joy was so close to hysterics that Jim decided to call it a day.

"We'll be back tomorrow," he promised, accepting handshakes and hugs and great slobbering kisses pressed into his throat so that Spock wouldn't have to. "Looks like they enjoyed our good faith token," he observed to his First when they materialized, soaked and dripping, on the transporter pad. "And, hey, there isn't even the underlying moral dilemma of handing over a child, since she kind of isn't."

"...Indeed."

Scott, who had elected to oversee the captain's travel, blinked at his commanding officers. "Should I find yeh a towel, sir?" he asked in utter bewilderment.

"Yes thank you, Scotty," Jim replied with utmost dignity. "Preferably soon, so we can stop dripping all over your equipment."

"Aye sir!"

McCoy wandered into the room as Scott departed to seek towels. He studied Jim for only a moment before a wide, somewhat disconcerting smirk split his face. "Oh no, Jim," he said dryly. "You're positively soaked. And we don't know what kind of viruses you may have picked up down on An'ti—you do have a medically documented weakness in your immune system. That's just not something I'm willing to mess around with. Now you'll have to come to sickbay for vaccinations."
"You can have my stuff," Jim told Spock. "I don't have a lot, but what there is I bequeath to you. I bet the surfing trophy'd look great in your quarters."

"Perhaps your estimation is a little overly dramatic, sir."

Jim sneezed.

McCoy began laughing.

Scott returned with an armful of towels and a bottle of whisky to "help warm them up."

Spock shut his eyes. "Then again," he reflected, "perhaps not."
The least likely place for Jim to be was sickbay, which was, accordingly, where Spock began his search.

When the Vulcan was done posing his question, McCoy frowned. He slid the PADD he had been working on across his desk, forcing Spock to catch it or let it fall. "You know what this is?" he asked while Spock studied the small screen.

"It appears to be Captain Kirk's medical log." Dark eyes lifted to hazel, another question asked through the subtle lift of one eyebrow.

McCoy huffed as he crossed his arms. "Specifically, it's the list of all the major injuries Jim picked up on Rilla—and afterwards—and their treatment plans. He dislocated his shoulder, Spock."

When he allowed himself to dwell on it, the First Officer could still feel the sick jolt of ball popping from socket. "I was aware."

The doctor all but exploded. "Damn it, man! That isn't the sort of injury a person just shakes off, not even Jim!" McCoy reclaimed the PADD in an angry motion, scrolling through for an appropriate file before shoving it back at Spock. "That whole shoulder's a mess of tearing and strains. You should never have let him talk you into setting it. What if you'd pinched a nerve? He could have suffered permanent damage! You should have brought him to me immediately!"

Spock set the PADD on McCoy's desk, placing his hands at the small of his back. "The captain's orders were issued with a particular goal in mind, Dr. McCoy. Had I willfully denied his request for covert medical attention—"

"Is that what we're calling it now—"

"—it is likely that I would have placed his life in greater danger than I caused by obfuscating the truth of his injuries while speaking with you later. Between his life and your pride as a doctor, I chose him."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "Well there's the surprise of the century, you choosing Jim. I'd never have guessed that outcome on my own. So glad you could clear it up, Commander."

"…I believe you are utilizing the Human tactic known as 'sarcasm', Doctor."

For a moment, Spock thought McCoy would toss him bodily from sickbay. Instead, the doctor deflated with a sigh, scrubbing one hand over his face. "Look," he said at length. "I know Jim's got himself in a fine mess with this whole Hounds thing. And I know the pair of you have some sort of master plan in the works that's too great for the likes of us poor mortals in sickbay. But what I need you to remember, Spock, is that my primary job aboard this vessel is to ensure the captain's continued health. That means you leave the covert medical attention to me whenever possible. I don't give a rat's ass what some bitch of an admiral back on Earth wants, and I don't care about your fancy, complicated scheme that's gonna get us all blown up. I'm his doctor. And thanks to untrained covert medical attention, it's gonna take weeks of PT to get Jim's shoulder back to normal. Do you understand what I'm asking here, Commander?"

Spock studied McCoy's angry visage, the shadows developing under his eyes and the tension in his shoulders and the helpless fury in his jaw. "I believe I do, Doctor."
"Next time," McCoy summarized unnecessarily, "come and get me."

"I do not intend to allow a next time to occur," the First Officer pointed out, hands clenched behind his back.

"...Next time," the doctor repeated in weary resignation, "just come and get me, Spock."

"Where is Jim?" Spock asked again.

McCoy rolled his eyes. "In one of the exercise rooms. I set him up to work on what I guess you'd call covert physical therapy. Officially, he's giving a martial arts demonstration to few of the security ensigns, including that kid he's started eyeing as heir apparent to the department."

"Ensign Giotto." Good: C.C. was nearly as manic about protecting Jim as Spock.

"Yeah, him." McCoy eyed Spock thoughtfully. "He's got those other two with him, too. The officers without medical files who sometimes stop by to visit with sickbay's special guest. I gotta say, it's not very stealthy of them." He shook his head with a huff, turning back to his work. "You'd think they'd know better than to walk into a Starfleet medical facility without falsified baseline charts, at the least. Best of the best—ha!"

"...Perhaps they are unaware that you took the liberty of having silent proximity alarms installed to inform you whenever someone enters sickbay. It might be further postulated that few, if any, would anticipate a specialized alert for personnel not registered aboard Enterprise."

McCoy narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You're the one who fed me all those statistics about how often Jim's probably gonna get himself landed here over the course of his captaincy. And I'm the one at the Academy who had to use creative application of immunization boosters to break him of the unfortunate habit of stealing my supplies to patch himself up because one of his idiotic schemes backfired and he was too much of an infant to face me afterwards. We both know what kind of a knack he has for making enemies. So if you think I'm gonna let him waltz in here and try to fix himself, or let someone else sneak in unannounced and threaten my patients, you're out of your Vulcan mind."

Spock's choice at that point was a long reply or none at all. So he thanked the doctor for his assistance and took his leave.

The sickbay door hissed closed over the sound of McCoy grumbling to himself.

Covert physical therapy looked, to Spock, a lot like a lesson on group fighting techniques.

Jim stood in the center of a large practice mat, watching Giotto and another ensign—Kim, if the Vulcan's memory served—attempt to fight Beta, who expended very little energy deflecting their uncoordinated attack. Hunter lingered in the furthest corner, observing in a manner usually referred to as sulking. Three other security officers clustered at the edge of the mat, watching with rapt attention.

"Okay, stop," Jim called. The trio of fighters immediately froze. Giotto and Kim were panting; Beta, who had Kim trapped with one hand wrapped around the back of his neck and the other occupied with wrenching his left arm back to a most unnatural angle, had not even worked up a sweat. "Where's her weak spot?" the captain asked.

In the corner, Hunter rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.
At the edge of the mat, Ensign Becker said, "C.C.'s coming up on her blind side. If she's distracted by getting Kim down, he might be able to ambush her."

"Will it work?" Jim pressed.

After a momentary hesitation, Becker admitted, "No." He shot the other ensign an apologetic look, which Giotto responded to by grinning and spreading his hands in a helpless gesture of agreement: the end of this match wasn't a surprise to anyone.

"Why not?"

"She's a lot better than he is at fighting, so she won't get distracted."

Jim turned to Giotto. "Show us how it'd go."

Giotto stepped close to Beta, motioning toward her leg. "She'll kick me. In the middle of an attack of my own, I wouldn't even expect it. If she goes high, she could knock me out." Beta shifted her weight accordingly, lifting her leg until her foot was level with Giotto's throat. The angle pressed her forward on Kim, who was forced to bend. Giotto glanced at her foot before indicating Kim's new position. "But it gives Kim extra leverage, and it might throw off her balance enough for him to break the hold or toss her. If she goes low, she could break my knee." Beta repositioned her attack, pulling Kim straight again. Her leg snapped out in a swift kick that ended with a light tap of her foot against the side of Giotto's knee. She offered him half a smirk when he blinked at her. "A broken knee wouldn't stop me from falling on you," he warned her with an answering smirk of his own. "And Kim could use that as an opening to break the hold or toss you."

"Good," Jim declared. He glanced around to see if anyone else had something to add and noticed Spock by the doorway. A bright grin lifted one corner of his mouth. "We'll finish this exercise and call it a day," he decided. "Back to your positions. And—go!"

Instead of kicking, Beta ducked and pivoted, shoving Kim at his partner. Giotto, who'd pulled back his arm for an attack, faltered in surprise, barely catching the stumbling Kim before they both fell to the ground in an uncoordinated pile of limbs and curses.

"So!" Jim crouched next to the pile of his security officers. "What'd we learn?"

"Both scenarios ended with me possibly getting free," Kim observed, trying to extract himself from the tangle. "By using me as a method of taking Giotto down, she beats us both at once."

"What did you forget?" he asked Giotto.

The ensign groaned, shoving Kim off his stomach. "Falling on a padded mat still hurts."

Jim rolled his eyes. "When making your predictions, C.C."

"I thought she'd prioritize her opponents," he admitted. "But she doesn't. We weren't two separate threats, we were one problem, even when she had a good hold on Kim. I'm still thinking about it like a series of one-on-one fights." He shook his head, clearly disgusted with himself. "I'm gonna get someone killed, sir."

"Eh, don't be so hard on yourself. You'll get better."

Giotto accepted a hand up when Kirk offered it. "How?"

Jim looked at each of the security officers in the room, seeing matching expressions of determination.
"We'll call this a class in Fighting When Normal People Would Run," he decided at last, turning back to Giotto. "Not exactly an Academy course, but probably handy in the long run. I'll hook you all up with some tactics manuals, and we can keep having periodical demonstrations like this one to see how you're coming along. When you get proficient, you can start teaching others."

"Sounds like a plan, sir," Kim said with a wide grin. "I'm excited!"

"Just wait until you get the manual," Jim laughed. He glanced at Spock again. "I guess that's all for today. Class dismissed!" When the ensigns were gone, Jim turned to Spock with a smile. "What's up?"

Spock glanced briefly at the ceiling but otherwise didn't address the odd question. "Dr. McCoy was under the impression that you would be engaged with physical therapy, sir."

Jim waved one hand as though to brush the thought away. "That didn't take any time at all. Beta helped me."

Spock's gaze tracked sideways to her slim form for a moment before returning to Jim. "...Indeed."

"So what can I do for you, Spock?"

The Vulcan settled his hands at the small of his back. "I wished to ascertain appropriate rationale for your demeanor since leaving An'ti, sir."

Jim's expression stilled. "What do you mean?"

Spock's head cocked thoughtfully. "The An'ti mission was a complete success," he pointed out. "Their goddess is returned to them, their world once more fertile. We acquired a treaty that includes exclusive dilithium mining rights. Your actions as both captain and diplomat were exemplary to such a degree that the Admiralty are in the process of granting you another commendation."

The captain winced a little at that. "I didn't do it for a medal."

"I never thought so, sir."

"Then why are you telling me things I already know?"

"In less than one standard day," Spock continued, ignoring the question, "we will reach Starbase Theta and complete our mission as it concerns the Hounds." He glanced briefly at Beta to find her watching him inquisitively. "Beta and Hunter," he said, half to Jim and half to her, "will accompany Flank to the medical unit, where they will wait for transport back to Earth for debriefing. Alpha, whose investigation is already underway, will be transferred directly to a high-security holding cell."

Jim frowned, clearly frustrated as tension gathered in his shoulders. "What are you getting at, Mr. Spock?"

"Enterprise is in nearly the same condition now as before this mission began," he pressed on doggedly. "The botany labs recently discovered a fascinating—and potentially revolutionary—growth hormone in the remains of their ruined experiments. Though the observation deck will never quite return to its previous state," the Vulcan admitted, "but the crew seems to appreciate its increased similarity to a jungle."

"Spock," the captain demanded, "is there a point—"

"Everything broken was fixed. Every injured person is healed. Every sub- or side-mission has been
completed, bar delivery of the Hounds, which is on track. Your projected reaction to a veritable checklist of success should have ranged somewhere between relief and boastfulness. Instead you have demonstrated a stress increase of nearly thirteen-point-oh-three-nine percent." Jim glanced away, tension running high in every line of his body, jaw clenched and shoulders bunched. Spock's fingers tightened around each other. "It is obvious that I have missed something, sir," he concluded logically. "There is a variable or parameter that must explain the error in my calculations. I sought you out to discover what it is so I might prepare for its inevitable—and, presumably, devastating—conclusion."

Jim glared at the wall but remained silent.

It was Beta who said, "He showed his hand too early."

Spock considered the phrasing. "I presume you are making a reference to the card game poker."

She inclined her head. "Ideally, he should have waited until long after we were on Starbase Theta to offer Peters an open challenge. But the situation lined up too perfectly."

"I got impatient," Jim admitted in a tight voice. "So now she knows I'm after her."

Ah. That would certainly explain the stress. Spock met Beta's gaze firmly. "She will seek to destroy you, and her Hounds are still within striking distance. A dangerous situation, sir."

Jim nodded, expression dark, and crossed his arms in an absentminded fashion, so the left cradled the right. "Alpha made a big mistake by attacking me, especially since I was technically his subordinate at the time. In the course of a full investigation, a tribunal will check to make sure he hasn't tried anything like that in the past."

"They'll discover the others," Beta added, her own expression washing with sadness. "With a whole list of unusually dead operatives on their hands, the tribunal's investigation will have to turn on Peters."

"And she won't be able to explain away that kind of loss," Jim agreed. The grip on his injured arm tightened in a subconscious display of rising tension. "That puts her in a corner in a big way. If she can't shut me up or get rid of me, she's done. And she knows it. I should never have allowed it to get this far with the Hounds still aboard."

"The Alpha is under full guard," Spock pointed out. He indicated the teenager sulking in the corner. "He is the only other operative who showed any animosity toward you, and Beta—somewhat consequently—will not permit his absence from her immediate sphere of control. Even if the admiral did manage to communicate a plan of vengeance against you, who would carry out the orders?"

For a long moment, Jim didn't respond, choosing instead to study the lines and angles of Spock's face. "If she gives Alpha a kill order," he said, voice low and dark with certainty, "he'll complete it or die in the attempt. And there's almost no way she hasn't already done just that. I'm stressed because I'm trying to anticipate when he'll move. But there are too many variables." The captain shook his head, mouth set in a frustrated line. "I don't know if he'll go along with the transfer to Starbase Theta and then try something, or if he plans on doing his thing first. He could wait 'til I'm alone, or take me out in front of others to make a point." He indicated Beta with a flick his left hand. "For all I know, he'll take out Beta and Flank while he's at it."

"Would such a blatant assassination not expedite the investigation against Peters?" Spock demanded, deeply dissatisfied by Jim's callous discussion of his own death.
"It might not be as simple as an assassination," Beta said quietly, eyes locked on Jim.

"Clarify," Spock all but demanded.

Jim shrugged his good shoulder. "Sometimes Peters makes her statement by taking her mark's most valuable possession before killing them. But I don't own anything," he added to Beta, as though continuing a long-standing debate, "and even shewouldn't be stupid enough to go after the Enterprise. What's she gonna do, set Bones' storage locker on fire to get at my cache of trinkets? And if Alpha does manage to off me," he said, shoulders bunched tight when he turned back to Spock, "the investigation won't matter."

"Peters will order the Alpha underground," Beta explained, taking the captain's healing shoulder in both hands and carefully rotating it through a series of stretches that forced him to relax the muscles. Spock took careful note of her efforts, committing them to memory so she would never be required to undertake the task again.

"That actually makes him more dangerous," Jim agreed with a wince, "because he won't have any reason to pretend he follows the rules anymore. Peters can use him behind the scenes for some of her nastier projects, until she's forced underground with him." Jim rolled his shoulder when Beta released it, shaking out the arm and making an unhappy face. "That's sort of always where she's been headed anyway. She's too bloodthirsty for Starfleet, but she's got some goals on her agenda that would make certifiably insane dictators squirm. The end, when it comes for them, will be…messy." He smirked at Beta. "Bet you anything it's one of Archer's teams that does it. He was pissed when she started recruiting his operatives and getting them killed."

While Beta rolled her eyes, Spock considered the statement. "It is understandable that he would mourn the loss of the emotional connections he built with—"

Jim waved him off with a short laugh. "'Emotional connections' nothing. He worked damn hard training those kids up, and it's a breach of professional courtesy to recruit from other units anyway. Which she never mentioned, by the way," he griped to Beta, "or I sure as hell never would have switched."

"As I was recruited directly into the Hounds," she replied primly, "it wouldn't have mattered to me."

"Yeah, yeah. Snob."

Curiosity blossomed quietly in the Vulcan's dark eyes. "You worked with Admiral Archer?"

"Sure." Jim motioned vaguely toward the door. "How about we talk and walk? There's a replicator in the mess hall with my name on it. It's a saying," he informed Spock when the First Officer frowned thoughtfully. "Let's go, Hunter!" he added to the petulant youth. "I started out volunteering with Archer," the captain finally replied as they made their way toward the mess hall. "He did all my training. The unit he runs is better overall—don't make that face, Beta, you know I'm right—but he's picky about his people, so he doesn't get as many recruits."

"He gets plenty of recruits," Beta argued. "He just demands too much of them in training and they transfer out."

"That's what I mean about being picky," Jim said, shooting Spock a conspiratorial smirk that had quite an unexpected effect on the Vulcan's heartbeat. "Anyway, I did well enough with him that Peters noticed me, and after that the Hounds started asking for my help with stuff. My mistake was accepting their first invitation, because once you get tagged as a Hound, that's pretty much it for the other spec-ops units. They won't touch you."
"No one wants to pull down Peters' wrath," the female operative sighed.

"Mostly because she's a hell of a scary bitch," Jim pointed out. Beta snickered. When Spock and Jim collected dinner and settled at a free table, Beta touched the captain's elbow. He looked up at her, acknowledging an unasked question with a deep sigh. She beckoned Hunter close, and the operatives left with as little fanfare and they'd arrived. Jim cradled his chin in one hand. "I don't envy them the next hour or so," he mused.

Spock ticked an eyebrow at him.

"They arrived on this ship in full mission gear," he pointed out, curving an eyebrow in response. "According to the security footage, they haven't moved a muscle in days, which only makes sense if you convince yourself the suits take care of all their bodily needs."

"...Do they?"

"No. But the security team doesn't know that, and I didn't say anything about it either way." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Although, it's possible they do know what's going on and decided to concentrate their efforts on containing Alpha." The captain shrugged. "Whatever, it all works out. What were we talking about?"

"Peters' ability to appropriate and then monopolize special operatives by virtue of being a 'scary bitch'," Spock replied.

Jim straightened with a laugh. "Yeah, well, Archer would have challenged her eventually just to prove he could get one of his people back," the captain added to his First, "but the others were either unwilling to return or dead, and my schedule was crazy enough that he didn't want to make it worse. Plus, y'know. Beagle puppies. The man has his priorities, after all."

"How many special operations units are currently operating within Starfleet?" Spock wondered, ignoring Jim's reference to his time spent training Archer's dogs.

Jim's response was a wry look. "What makes you think I'd know?"

It occurred to Spock that even if Jim did know—which was likely—he would be unable to admit as much. On the heels of this revelation came another: Jim had secrets. Some of them were his to share; others not. Spock, as a scientist, wanted to know the outer limit of what Jim would tell him, given the correct environment. So, "When did Archer first contact you with the intent of initiating specialized training?" he asked, and watched Jim decide whether or not to respond.

"The summer of my first year at the Academy," the Human said eventually, drawing absent mashed potato pictures with the tines of his fork. "Or just before that, really, since summer's when the training started."

"So young?" Spock murmured thoughtfully.

Jim shrugged. "I was reckless and athletic. Everything they look for in potential operatives. I'd also just aced my first year, which indicated some measure of intelligence, so I was probably programmable. And it was summer." He spread his hands briefly. "I had no one waiting for me and nowhere to go. I figured, hell, it might be entertaining."

"Was it?"

The captain nodded, stabbing a steamed carrot that was part of the "healthy diet" that was Bones' favorite soapbox. "I picked up a lot of interesting skills during summer. And at least I wasn't bored."
"Did you require only a single session of training?" Spock asked, still testing for the edge of Jim's candor.

Jim shook his head, chewing absently. "I trained with Archer and his team every summer since I joined the Academy. Well," he amended, "actually, I spent half of the last summer camping with Bones. God that was fun. You should come next time," he suggested, a wide grin lighting his face. "You'd love camping."

Spock hesitated. "…Perhaps not at this time."

"Well, yeah, we're kind of in space at this time. But we'll have shore leave near Earth eventually. We should totally go." When Spock continued to exude general reluctance, Jim rolled his eyes. "Come on, it's not like all we do is sit around camp fires singing *Row Row Row Your Boat.*" He considered his own statement before pulling a disgusted face. "I mean, that'd be irredeemably lame. We could go on to win a pissing contest with God and all anyone would talk about would be the shitty singing. Anyway." He brushed the thought away with a brisk motion. "We use our fires strictly for food cooking and ghost stories. You'd like it."

A yeoman approached to inform them that the *Enterprise* was nearing Starbase Theta. Spock seized her information as an excuse to ignore Jim's invitation to sleep in a primitive bag in a cold forest and immediately set off for the bridge.

Jim walked at his side, laughing the whole way.

By the time they were docked at Starbase Theta, the tension had returned to Jim's shoulders. Spock came to the startling realization that understanding the cause of his captain's stress did not make witnessing it any more bearable. Quite the opposite, in fact: now, instead of a desire to know what was wrong, he desired to solve the problem immediately. Failing that, he wished to ease Jim's suffering. With that thought in mind (as well as the ongoing calculation regarding the likelihood of Alpha attacking sometime before Jim reached the transporter room), Spock sent a message down to sickbay requesting Dr. McCoy's presence for the transfer of passengers.

The doctor agreed with only minimal fuss, indicating his own awareness of Jim's current mental state. Good.

Spock followed his captain into the turbolift when the time came to bid the Hounds a long overdue farewell.

"…You ever get one of those feelings that everything's about to go straight to hell?" Jim wondered absently, every muscle in his body coiled tight in anticipation of a fight.

"Statistically," Spock observed calmly, "your ability to adapt to and overcome odds that might defeat a lesser individual supports the probability of this situation terminating in your favor. In fact, I can think of no one else with whom I would choose to face the coming likelihood of violence."

Jim stared at his First with his mouth slightly agape. "…Spock," he said at last, quite firmly, "if you don't stop accidentally hitting on me, I'm gonna have to accidentally take you seriously. And then what would we do?"

Before Spock could form a reasonable response, the turbolift opened to admit Dr. McCoy. He took in the expressions on his fellow officers' faces and immediately made a disgusted sound. "Can I wait for the next lift? *Please?*

Jim rolled his eyes. "No one asked you to be here, Bones."
McCoy shot Spock a thoughtful scowl as he stepped onto the turbolift. They shot toward their goal with only a background hum of working technology. "Sure, Jim. But you're so good at being at the center of a total clusterfuck that I wouldn't want to miss the fun when this all goes pear-shaped. And you're involved, so that's absolutely what's about to happen."

Instead of offering a witty retort, Jim's mouth thinned. "It's probably better you're here anyway."

The doctor straightened. "Jim, what—"

"Here we are!" the captain announced, striding off the lift as soon as the doors opened. He beckoned to his officers. "Let's get this over with."

Every step they took down the hallway ratcheted Jim's anxiety up another notch. His sharp gaze swept over every inch of their path, cataloguing threats and good places to launch an ambush. His steps grew light as a fighter's in the heat of battle, ever ready to slip quickly out of the line of fire. Small noises that would usually have gone unnoticed made him twitch. Tension danced almost visibly just under his skin.

McCoy felt himself developing an ulcer just watching Jim's adrenaline levels skyrocket.

Jim thought he was ready for anything. He was ready for Alpha to jump out from any door, any corner, even an air vent. He was ready to turn and face an attack launched from behind. He was even ready to find Alpha waiting for him in the transporter room.

He was not ready for the whine of a phaser set far higher than stun. He was not ready for the burning heat of a laser beam to fire **past** him. He was utterly unprepared for the eventuality of Spock stiffening with a gasp of shock, for the spray of green blood on white walls, for a hole to be shot through a Vulcan's chest spreading lifeblood across Science blues, for the slow collapse of his First Officer.

She'll destroy what you treasure most before coming after you. Are you ready for that?

No.

"Spock!" McCoy dropped to his knees by the wounded Vulcan, tearing off his medkit even as he pressed exploratory fingers around the injury.

No.

He looked up, numb and disbelieving. Alpha stood at the opposite end of the hallway, face twisted in a triumphant sneer. He darted into the transporter room.

Nonono-

**Spock.**

Something thin and frail in Jim snapped. He pelted after Alpha, arriving in the room just as the operative dematerialized.

Hunter was at the controls, a technician unconscious at this feet, dressed in Peters' suit with his helmet set aside and rebellion on his face.

Jim closed the space between them in three strides. His hand closed around Hunter's thin young throat, driving him into the wall with enough force to rattle his head. "Where is Alpha."
The boy trembled, eyes wide and terrified. He'd never seen Kirk so angry, never heard a question asked with the threat of death underscoring every syllable. Despite his fear, Hunter tried to muster a Hound's proper response: "He's safe. Out of your hands. He'll be back with the admiral soon."

With blue eyes cold and sharp as diamonds, Jim studied the boy. "You will tell me where you sent him," the volunteer operative said softly, "or I will crush your throat." He tightened his grip to demonstrate his sincerity.

"N-never—!"

"Kirk."

Jim turned toward the voice. Beta was framed in the doorway, back in Hounds regalia with her helmet held lightly in one hand. "He knows where Alpha is."

"There are more important things for you to worry about right now than hunting Alpha," Beta insisted firmly. "Your doctor needs to get First Officer Spock to—"

"God," Jim choked, face washed with self-loathing. "I just left him there!" He dropped Hunter without a second glance, racing from the room.

Hunter gasped and coughed where he sat crumpled on the ground, rubbing his abused throat. "I guess you're wondering what I did."

"I know what you did," Beta replied flatly. "What I'm wondering is whether or not you do."

The teenager glared at her. "I saved my Alpha, which is what you should have been doing if you weren't—Hey!"

Beta ignored her traitorous subordinate's protests, hauling him roughly to his feet by digging her nails into his upper arm and yanking. She used her hold to tow him to the doorway before shoving him into the hall.

"What the hell are you—" Hunter's mouth dropped open as he laid eyes upon the scene before him. A distinct wash of shock raced over his skin.

Kirk knelt over the prone body of his First Officer, hands and forearms coated in dark green as he fought alongside the Chief Medical Officer to stem an unending flow of new blood that poured from a phaser wound in his chest. It was a kill-shot, located specifically to take out the victim's heart. The Vulcan's skin was leached pale, his breathing labored, dying but not yet dead.

"What," Hunter gasped, "what happened to—"

"Alpha shot him."

The teenager shuddered, watching with a helpless feeling of dread as Kirk pulled the Vulcan into his arms and stood, strengthened by adrenaline and fear. He ran with the doctor to the turbolift and vanished behind its doors. A trail of green marked their path.

"No. Alpha wouldn't." Hunter shook his head firmly, ignoring the shaking that tried to manifest in every inch of his body. "He said he wouldn't hurt anyone. He said you were just making stuff up about him to get me away from Admiral Peters. He's the Alpha, and he told me I was helping!" The operative-in-training turned to Beta, desperate and terrified. "Why did he—"

"Because he's a liar, Hunter. And you're a fool." Beta's reply was so unemotional in its delivery that
it almost had to be true. But how could that be possible? "Feel lucky he didn't clean you up on his way out, since now you've outlived your usefulness."

"Alpha wouldn't," Hunter whispered. The shaking got too strong to ignore. He wrapped his arms across his stomach, hunching forward as the blood drained from his face. "He wouldn't do something like this!"

Beta grabbed Hunter's chin, forcing him to look up at the carnage of the hallway. "Alpha shot the Vulcan here so Kirk would be forced to see him die. This is the blood of an innocent, and Alpha spilt it as an attack on one who would dare challenge Peters. Of course Alpha would do this. He's done it again and again and again."

"But why?" Hunter wailed, hands fistng in his hair. "He was our leader! Why would he do this?"

"Because Peters asked him to."

"Why!"

Beta studied Hunter's anguished confusion for a long, silent moment. "There's a lot you don't know about this unit," she said at last, stepping back into the transporter room.

He followed close on her heels. "Tell me why Alpha would do this!"

"Kirk was tired of going to the funerals of operatives who got on Peters' nerves," she replied, entering in the coordinates to the hidden room that waited for them on Starbase Theta. "So he decided to stand up, to make her stop killing our comrades. And Peters didn't like that when she found out, so she gave Alpha kill orders intended to make him suffer first." She finished her calculations and jerked one hand toward the hallway now filling with security officers before towing Hunter onto the transporter pad beside her. "This is phase one. It'll only get worse for him."

"Can't I help him?" the teenager begged. "I have to make this right somehow!"

"We're going to get out of here before we're caught. Then we'll report to Starfleet and do whatever they tell us. The rest is up to Kirk."

"What will happen to him?"

"Nothing, for a little while. Eventually Alpha will push his mission forward again, and Kirk will either stay here and die or hunt them down and die. If we're lucky, he'll at least take them down too."

The boy grabbed his leader's arm, searching her face for some compassion beyond the steady gaze of an operative. "Tell me there's some way I can make this better. Tell me I can help him. Tell me how to make it so he doesn't have to die because I was a gullible fucking moron!"

Beta turned her eyes from his. ". . .Get ready for transport."

"God," Hunter whispered. "My God." He shut his eyes against the light of transportation energy, filled with sorrow and the broken edges of regret, hands tangled deep in his hair.

"What have I done?"

The agony of his question lingered in the room long after they were gone.

When the situation onboard was mostly under control, and Beta had Hunter on the starbase pending orders from the tribunal assigned to Alpha's case, and Jim's quarters were as quiet and still as the
desolate landscape of his mind, the captain made his way to sickbay. Bones was there, checking Spock's monitors and telling Jim how sure he was that the Vulcan would make a full, quick recovery.

"He's gonna be okay, Jim," the doctor said, gentle but intent as he laid a hand briefly on Jim's shoulder. "You don't have to worry about it. He's gonna be just fine, up and driving us all batty with that annoying Vulcan logic of his in no time. You just wait and see."

"Why isn't he awake?" Jim asked. His voice was like his face, disturbingly blank, reflecting nothing but a terrible coldness in his eyes as he studied the unmoving form of his First Officer.

Bones thinned his lips. "...Best as I can figure, he's in a Vulcan healing trance. But that's good, Jim, it means he'll heal nearly twice as fast. This time tomorrow, he'll be up and insisting he's fit for duty. I won't agree, of course, but since he's unconscious right now I'll admit that he'll probably be pretty close to right about it." McCoy touched Spock's side gently. "I think the Alpha was aiming for his heart without realizing that Vulcan biology's a little different from ours. His heart's here; the shot didn't hit anything major." When the captain didn't react, Bones scrubbed a frustrated hand through his hair. "Jesus Christ, Jim. For once in your life, could you just...trust someone else's word? I've never lied to you, and I promise he's gonna be okay. So can you please stop looking like someone kicked your favorite puppy?"

Instead of replying, Jim stretched out one hand, as though he meant to examine Spock's heartbeat by laying his palm over the steady thrum in the Vulcan's side. At the last moment, he snatched his hand back, stepping away quickly. The retreat turned into a brief, furious pace around the private recovery suite reserved for special circumstances.

When it became apparent that Jim wasn't going to say anything, Bones sighed, long and deep. "Listen," he said wearily, "I've got to start processing some of his paperwork, but if you want to stay and keep him company, you're welcome to. ...Please listen," he murmured, hazel eyes tracking Kirk as he continued his agitated stalking. "He's really okay. Can't you believe me?"

Blue eyes leapt to Bones' for only a moment. "Thank you," the captain said abruptly. "For everything."

It was an ominous statement, one that drove a spike of anxiety straight through the doctor's chest. But Jim returned to ignoring him, and there really were forms to submit, so despite a pervasive feeling of dread, McCoy strode from the room.

The suite was directly within sight of his office. If Jim did anything crazy, Bones would be there to see him and put a stop to it.

...Stop a highly trained black-ops veteran. Right.

Jesus Christ. Was there enough whiskey in the whole universe to deal with this sort of shit?

In the suite, Jim's eyes were riveted on the bandages wrapped snugly around Spock's chest. His attention tracked slowly up the long line of Spock's throat, the curve of his jaw, to dark eyes hidden by pale lids.

"Peters' investigation should start soon," the captain said suddenly, nearly startling himself. He shook his head to try and dislodge the fog that had settled over him since watching Spock fall in a shower of dark green blood. "The Alpha's gone, just like we predicted. We might not have had enough on Peters, but Hunter made a deal with the tribunal. He's telling them everything he knows about her
and Alpha and their plan. And Beta's got a whole list of suspicious deaths… Peters will go down for this. Eventually." Blue eyes locked sightlessly on the far wall behind Spock's bed. A muscle clenched in his jaw. "Except it won't happen fast enough, and she'll get away. That stupid—

"Did I tell you?" he wondered softly, cutting himself off as eyes and hands turned back to the elegant face so still in—

God, he was so still.

"Peters lost the Hounds." Golden fingers traced lightly down pale skin, investigating the tip of an ear with a touch like a butterfly's wing-beat. "The tribunal gave them to Archer. He's gonna change the name. It was a stupid name anyway. Not that it matters, at this point." His hand curled into a fist that he held resolutely by his side. "Peters is going to get away. She and Alpha will just… get away with this—

"I used to be able to do stuff by myself," the Human said, nearly an accusation as hot fury set to boiling in the pit of his stomach. "All sorts of stuff. I used to— Once upon a time, I could play my cards close to the cuff. Somehow you took that from me. I want to— Damn it, I can't even make a decision anymore without wanting to hear your opinion on it first! It's always there, at the back of my head or just on the edge of everything. You're everywhere, you fucking son of a bitch, and I can't—"

He shook his head, filling his trembling hands with Spock again, helpless against the need to feel the heat of Spock's skin, the rise and fall of his chest, the steady thrum of life in his side. "You were supposed to be like Bones," he whispered, voice tight with the foreign emotion that always seemed to choke him in Spock's presence. Usually it was warm, a fizz like champagne under every inch of skin. Now it was hard and cold and terrible, the loss of gravity and direction. "I thought— I mean, I knew we'd be friends, maybe even good friends, like me and Bones. But—"

Both hands cupped the Vulcan's face, shaking so hard now that contact was the only way to hide their motion. "You aren't like Bones at all," he confessed with a wretched stoke of thumbs over cheekbones. "More than a friend. Different than a brother. I think… it could've been something amazing. This. Us. Whatever we are. Were. In another life, we could have—" The golden head shook again, bowed low in rising despair. "…I'm sorry, Spock."

He bent over his fallen First, stealing a brief, trembling kiss.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered against Spock's unmoving mouth, eyes shut tight. "I do this to everyone eventually, and I'm sorry. But I can't— I won't survive if she does to you what Kodos did to Camp. I can't I wake up one day and find all these people, all of you, dead in a pile, and I know how many of you there are so I'd have to count but I can't find you in that pile I can't—I wouldn't survive it again," he gasped desperately, curled tight over Spock, clutching at him like the last lifeline in existence. "I can't— I'm just so—

"But I'll make this right," he swore, pulling back to stroke a soothing hand over sterile bandages. His free hand ran through Spock's hair almost compulsively, petting every strand into perfect order. "You'll see. Or— Well, maybe you won't. But… I didn't… God damn it!"

He stepped back, tearing himself from Spock's side with hands curled in tight fists by his side, shaking now in rage, which was so much better than despair, so much more useful, a familiar rush of wild, impulsive determination.

Goodbye.

His short nails cut bloody crescents into his palms, and he let the wounds seep for only a moment
before turning on his heel to pace from sickbay with such quiet, deadly intent that McCoy didn’t so much as glance up from his paperwork as he passed.

*Goodbye, Spock.*

Peters would pay for this. Alpha would pay. With their blood and tears, with the realization of all they’d ruined, with their regret and helplessness, with the last breath of air in their lungs. They would regret the day they’d met James T. Kirk.

*I’m so sorry.*

No matter what it took.

When McCoy stepped back into Spock’s room to check his progress and found Jim vanished, he understood what that meant almost immediately. His eyes ran over every inch of the room, every hidden cubby and corner, desperate to believe that his captain wouldn’t be that stupid.

But he was. A gold command tunic was folded neatly at the base of Spock’s bed. A comm unit had been nestled carefully in the crook of the Vulcan’s left arm. Both of these items had entered the room firmly attached to Starfleet’s youngest captain.

"Jim?" McCoy called. "You’d better get out here right now and take your stuff back before I start to get pissed!"

There was no answer.

"…Shit."
The first thing Spock became aware of upon regaining full consciousness was a repeating string of profanity that expressed so many contradictory sentiments of fear and anger that it could have only one source. Dr. McCoy, he tried to say. No sound emanated from his throat. A slight line of concentration furrowed between his eyes as he prepared himself for a second attempt, which was what alerted the doctor to Spock's waking.

"It's about God damn time!"

Yes. Definitely Dr. McCoy.

"Get up, you damn hobgoblin! I've been trying to break through that freaky Vulcan healing voodoo thing for nearly twenty minutes, and we don't have time for that! Jim's gone!"

What Spock recognized as a rush of pure adrenaline spread through every fiber of his healing psyche. *Jim is what?* His eyes snapped open, presenting the world in unfocused blurs for only a moment. By the time his vision cleared, the Vulcan was already pushing himself into a sitting position, hesitating minutely when the shift pulled at the still-healing wound in his chest. He drew a deep breath, suppressing his pain on the exhale, and threw his legs over the side of his biobed. Head lowered as he searched for his center, hands braced on either side of his legs, Spock drew in the sterile, crisp air of sickbay. "Where is Jim?" he asked, voice low and calm and far steadier than he felt.

McCoy hustled over with a tricorder and a scowl. He checked Spock's readings, as displeased by the results as he seemed resigned to them, tension obvious in the bunched muscles of his jaw. "I shouldn't have woken you. You almost died, and you need time to heal. But—"

Spock pushed the tricorder aside, meeting McCoy's troubled gaze with a quiet, demanding expression. "My inquiry was not rhetorical. Where is our captain?"

The doctor's hands fell to his sides. "I don't know," he admitted hoarsely. "I've looked everywhere. When you were shot, he carried you down here, and he stayed close until you were stable. Then he—I left to do some paperwork, and that was dumb, I know, because I could see how upset he was, but I though he wanted— Damn it!" McCoy scrubbed one hand through his hair in a rough, angry gesture. "I didn't think he'd be this God damn stupid!"

"Why have you not ascertained his whereabouts by tracking his communications unit?"

McCoy stalked over to a cabinet, wrenching one of its doors open. He withdrew the contents, all but shoving them at Spock. "You think I don't wish it were that easy?"

Spock studied the command tunic and communications unit in his hands quietly, knowing to whom they belonged even without the familiar scent that lingered in the fibers. Kirk's First Officer had to employ all of his Vulcan training to resist the urge to hold the shirt closer, to fill his lungs with the soothing, fading memory of Jim. Instead, he tangled his fingers in the fabric, eyes locked on the fall of shadows over command gold, and felt his jaw clench. "I didn't think he'd be this God damn stupid!"

"I think that's likely, yeah. And probably Peters afterwards. Spock, listen, we can't let him do it." McCoy gripped Spock's shoulder, desperate enough to initiate contact without pausing to interject biting commentary. "We have to stop him!"

The Vulcan studied McCoy for a long moment. "How do you propose I find him, Doctor?" he asked
quietly. "He appears to have made his choice as it concerns the Enterprise. If he wishes to replace the Alpha, then we—"

"You fucking green blooded hobgoblin," McCoy hissed, pushed so far beyond his usual rage that his voice had fallen soft. "I don't have time for you both to play the denial game, and Jim's fucking MIA right now, so you listen to me. I saw Jim's face when he thought you were dying. I saw him decide to do something permanent about the Alpha, and it isn't gonna be replacing him. Jim's gone off to kill the Alpha, and then Peters, in cold blood. He's gonna plan it, every step of it, and once he gets started there's not gonna be a force in this universe that stops him." The doctor planted himself in front of Spock, grabbing both shoulders to issue a firm—if gentle—shake. "Are you hearing me now, Commander Spock? That's fucking murder. And no matter how much they deserve it, not even Jim Kirk can get away with murder. He left to kill them for you, so you had better get off your sulking Vulcan ass and find him before it's too late!"

McCoy watched resolve harden in Spock's too-Human eyes. The First Officer rose carefully from his biobed as he took internal stock of himself. Not optimal conditions, surely, but good enough to persuade Jim from his current goal. Probably. He passed Jim's effects back to McCoy's care. "The captain will doubtlessly require those upon his return. I will endeavor to escort him back to sickbay before he retires to his quarters so that you may ascertain whether or not he requires updated inoculations against whatever he may have encountered while off ship."

A smirk twisted McCoy's mouth. "That's a very sensible plan, Commander."

"It is gratifying to have a medical professional's approval, Doctor. Where was Jim last seen?"

The CMO scowled. "He went to most of the departments, checking status reports and filing some overdue forms. From what I hear, he even got that Giotto kid started on some 'special project'. He set his affairs in order, and it's pissing me off. The last place anyone saw him was near the transporter room; big guess where he went after that. He did something crazy to the controls, though, and the techs can't figure out where he sent himself."

"I see." Spock rested his hands at the small of his back, setting aside the urge to curve his shoulders in order to ease the pull of bandages across his wound. "Have Ensign Chekov meet me in the transporter room immediately." Then, without waiting to see if McCoy would fuss about receiving orders from someone other than Jim, Spock strode from sickbay.

Whatever Jim had done to conceal his trail was quite likely a trick that originated in his training as an operative. Given enough time, Spock could probably have corrected the matter himself. However, crisis situations being what they were, he resigned himself to splitting the math with Chekov, who undertook his task with gravity unsuited to his age.

When they had a probable destination, Spock stepped onto the transporter pad. "Energize."

Chekov hesitated. He glanced between the terminal and Spock several times before asking quietly, "Sir, you will...let us know, yes? If there is anything we can do for the captain. I am sure we all wish to help him, if we can."

"...When the captain returns, Mr. Chekov," Spock replied with conviction laced heavily under soft intonation, "you may extend that offer to him yourself. I am sure he will be as receptive to the support of his crew as ever."

The teenager all but sagged in relief. "Yes sir. Energizing."

Spock materialized in what appeared to be standard guest quarters aboard Starbase Theta. The room
boasted a waist-high chest of drawers set below a long mirror, an end table boasting a single lamp, and a small bed. Across the mattress lay the proof of Jim's foolhardy plan: one of the Hounds' mission suits and all the accompanying gear, waiting only for an operative to don them. Jim would wear this suit in place of his captain's uniform, in order to commit murder.

But not until he confronted Spock.

Wherever Jim was, he would have to return to this room before undertaking his mission. When that happened, he would find his First, seated on the bed beside Peter's combat suit, living and whole and desirous of an explanation. So, after preparing for a few "worst case" scenarios, Spock crossed the room and took his place, drawing inward to meditate, to prepare for the conflict that was sure to come.

And he waited.

In accordance with the Kirk factor, Jim's expression upon entering the guestroom to find Spock waiting for him was nothing like the Vulcan had expected. Instead of running or becoming angry, he sighed, pulling one hand roughly through his hair. He stepped fully into the room, setting the items he'd left to collect on the dresser: a long, thin coil of rope and several small wrapped bars that Spock assumed were field rations. Then he sighed again, turning to lean back against the wall, arms crossed loosely across his chest.

When he finally looked up at Spock, seated still and quiet on the bed, his blue eyes were cool, distant, revealing nothing of the thoughts swarming behind them. "Hey," he greeted with a casual half-smile that didn't warm his expression by so much as a single degree. "Didn't expect to see you here. Feeling better?"

Spock kept his silence, studying the man who had become his linchpin, taking in the blankness of Jim's eyes, the thrum of tightly control energy vibrating beneath his skin, the mask of his expression and the easy line of his body. It was nothing but deception and bravado, a cornered animal doing whatever it could to make a threat of itself.

And Spock found he lacked the patience for it.

He used one hand to indicate the uniform by his side. "Is this the totality of your plan?" he asked calmly. "To die in her colors, seeking revenge for a life that was not taken?"

Jim's faux smile faded. "No," he admitted, lifting one shoulder in what might once have been a shrug. "I probably won't die."

"If you kill her and survive, you will have to face justice before a Starfleet tribunal. They will find you guilty of murder and lock you in a cell forever. Your name will be ruined, your future destroyed. If you pursue this course, you will never return to Enterprise."

For a long moment, Jim was silent, eyes locked on the suit rather than the Vulcan beside it. "When I kill that woman," he said, soft and sincere, the determination in his voice more frightening for the utter lack of accompanying anger, "no one will ever hear about it. Not even you. The black ops unit leaders are powerful and secretive, and they'll keep the investigation—and my trial—in house. When they find out what she's been doing, they'll condone the actions but not the timing. In essence, they'll say I jumped the gun on a removal that would have been ordered anyway." He spread his arms with a faint smirk. "They'll blame it on bad leadership." His hands curled into telling fists before disappearing into the small gap between his back and the wall. "Archer or one of the others will absorb me," he said calmly, eyes lowered to the floor. "So even though I won't be able to ever go
back to…what I was, I won't be ruined, either. I'll disappear." A smile tried to tick the corner of his mouth but was largely unsuccessful at distracting from the resigned slump of Kirk's shoulders. "It's likely I'll only be allowed to run solo ops, since I'll have a black mark on my record. But I won't go to prison, and I won't be executed."

"I assume your life expectancy will shorten in such a role," Spock observed, still neutral, still watching Jim's body for any trace of weakness in the armor he'd constructed to hide himself.

"Three to five years. Maybe a bit more, if I'm very lucky."

Spock's head tilted thoughtfully. "And you do not see that as an execution?"

Jim shrugged. "They'll be busy years."

"What of the Enterprise?" the First Officer asked, mounting anger manifested in fists clenched on his lap. "What of her crew? What of us, Jim?"

"The Admiralty will give you the flagship," he replied flatly. "Other than that, nothing should change."

"You would surrender your captaincy," Spock murmured, running the fingers of one hand over the suit, "strip from yourself all you have fought to gain, and discard the loyalty of your entire crew." His hand knotted in the material; dark eyes made black with anger lifted to blue. "All for the sake of Peters and her dog."

A muscled jumped in Kirk's jaw. "Alpha nearly killed you, Spock," he said, low and furious. "If he'd studied Vulcan biology like he was supposed to, you'd be dead right now. If it had been any of the others, anyone trained like him but without that shot of pure arrogance that made him fuck up, you would have died in that hallway. He won't stop hunting you—or Bones and the others, once you're gone, one by one down the list until I have no one left. I have to face her. I have to take her down. Don't you see?" Jim took a step forward, expression earnest, hands spread in supplication, begging with every line of his body for Spock to understand. "I'm a liability. I have to take her out before she gets to the crew. I mean, hell, I would have lost them eventually anyway. At least if I kill that bitch first everyone will still be alive. You're Acting Captain now," he pointed out in what sounded like a last-ditch effort. "You have to make the ship a priority."

"As you have done by abandoning Enterprise and her entire crew without a single thought for what will happen in your absence."

Jim threw his hands in the air. "Fuck, Spock, of course I'm thinking about the crew. What else would I be thinking about?"

"Kodos," Spock replied promptly, watching shock spread through Jim's expression with a grim sense of satisfaction. "The loss of Camp. The negligence of your brother. The madness of your mother. And every year you spent between leaving the hospital and enlisting in Starfleet."

"Shut up," Jim whispered roughly, taking a shaky step back, shoulders hunched defensively. "Just shut up. You don't even know what you're talking about."

"You have been running from this since Tarsus IV."

"No. There's nothing— What is there to even run from?"

"That would be the pivotal question," Spock agreed.
"You're grasping at straws," Jim hissed, shifting his weight like a caged predator getting ready to pace, pupils blown wide with adrenalin as he searched for an opening. "You can't stand the thought that someone might have more important things to do than dick around the galaxy with you. But we can't all be science geeks, huh? Some of us get to go out and actually do important work." He grinned ruthlessly, a dark, threatening expression as he curved his back against the wall, fingertips braced close by his hips. "Too bad you never got recruited to play with the big boys, but that's the way it goes when you don't have what it takes."

"I cannot be angered with such an attack, Captain Kirk," Spock said calmly. "Vulcans deal in truth and logic, neither of which is represented in your statements."

Jim smirked. "Guess it works out for me that I'm only dealing with a half-breed, huh?"

After a heartbeat of shock, Spock's eyes narrowed. "That you would use my heritage as an insult does nothing but betray the depth of your desperation to be free of this argument. Absent such tricks, you know you cannot hope to win it."

"Hey." The Human shrugged. "Whatever you have to believe to get by, man. Are we about done here? I've got, y'know. Important spy stuff to do. And you've got to toddle back to your ship."

"You would willfully—willing—destroy everything we have built, everything you…care for—"

"Who says I cared for any of it?"

Spock surged off the bed, mouth twisted in a snarl, and heaved the Hound's suit into the mirror above the chest of draws, shattering it into a sea of countless fragments. "All this for her?" In two long strides, he crossed to Jim, crowding him against the wall and trapping him there with superior strength. Some part of him expected Jim to fight back, or at least resist or try to run. Instead, blue eyes darted down, glancing at the spot on Spock's chest where a Human's heart would beat, where bandages were swathed under Starfleet colors, checking to be sure the wound hadn't reopened. His expression pinched with soul-deep worry for only a moment.

Jim betrayed himself in that moment, helplessly revealing the secret he fought so ruthlessly to protect: he was afraid, still, as afraid as he had been to see Spock fall in the sanctity of the Enterprise. The fear hummed from every point of contact between them, from forearms and hips and the tangle of their legs to every gasp of air they shared, a terrible, wild force that couldn't be fought. His plan, then, was to run, to push away what he held dear before it could once more be stolen.

What he had not counted on was Spock, who would suffer the loss of nothing else that mattered to him. Not after Vulcan. Not after his mother. Never again.

"I will not permit you to run from me," he said directly into Jim's ear, low and firm with an undercurrent of tenuously controlled anger. He pressed close, aligning their bodies so Jim was utterly incapable of escape, locking him in with hands at Jim's wrists and a leg braced against the wall between Jim's thighs. "I will not allow you to sacrifice a chance at finding your home for no reason more substantial than the theory that it may one day vanish." Spock caught only a glimpse of the desperate, defiant fury in blue eyes before a possessive snarl crackled in the air between them. "You cannot leave," the Vulcan growled. "She cannot have you."

Spock sealed their mouths together in a violent clash of wills. Jim's whole body made a single abortive bid for freedom, bucking against Spock in a motion that did nothing but bring them into further glorious contact. Jim shuddered, breath trembling from his lungs to make room for a helpless gasp that opened the kiss. Spock took full advantage, tilting his head a degree to find the optimum fit of his mouth against Jim's. He dragged Jim's wrists above his head, collecting them in a single palm.
His newly freed hand trailed down to cup his captain's jaw, fingers curled into golden hair, pulling him close even as he pressed him firmly into the wall.

Jim gasped again, squirming against the blatantly possessive hold, infuriated anew by Spock's remorseless control. He snarled into Spock's mouth, writhing against his body in a manner designed to elicit a response, hips rocking into Spock's even as he swept his tongue into a hot Vulcan mouth. Spock froze at a sharp spike of arousal, thrilled enough by the realization that Jim wanted him too that Jim was able to rip one hand free of the Vulcan's suddenly brittle hold.

Despite the difference in their physical strengths, Jim had no intention of just yielding to Spock's explorations. This was Jim's playing field, after all. He proved it by weaseling his hand under Spock's shirts to splay his fingers over the tense abdomen he found there. Fingernails scratched a faint green pattern into pale skin as he hitched a leg over Spock's hip, grinding mercilessly down on the length of heat he found that matched his own. He smirked into the tremble of air that slid from Spock as the kiss took on a distinctly desperate edge, offering a low moan to sensitive Vulcan ears. Spock tore his mouth from Jim's with a wet gasp, forehead dropping to Jim's shoulder under the wave of pure, helpless need that found its birth in the decay of their anger. The flavor of Jim's smug pleasure rose from the skin of his throat. Spock moved to taste it, running a rough Vulcan tongue over the rapid hammering of a Human pulse point. Shudders worked through Jim's whole body as it moved rhythmically against Spock's; his head tipped to offer more skin to the Vulcan's feast. The hand on Spock's belly shifted, drawing complicated pictures higher and higher on a determined path upward.

Seeking fingers reached the bottom edge of Spock's bandages. Jim stilled, eyes locked on the ceiling; Spock's mouth was warm and unmoving on his neck, both of them waiting. The Human swallowed, grief welling black and strong from some unnamed corner of his heart. He settled his hand over Spock's ribcage, where his heart would be if he were Human. When Spock, still buried in the skin of his throat, released his other hand, it moved to the thrum of the Vulcan heart in his side, resting there like the tentative kiss of butterfly wings.

"He meant to kill you," Jim whispered, sharing the horror of it with another thick swallow. "He wanted you to die in front of me."

"Yes," Spock murmured. He filled both hands with Jim, one in his hair and the other on his hip, a warm, possessive brand.

"He'll keep trying. She won't let him stop until you're dead."

The hand in Jim's hair tightened. "Yes."

"I have to—"

"No," Spock pulled back just enough to glare into blue eyes. The Vulcan released his captain's hair, setting his fingers against the array of points that would allow him access to the one mind he wanted most to know. "You cannot leave now, t'hy'la. Not anymore. Not for anyone. You belong here."

"T'hy'la," Jim echoed softly, searching Spock's eyes. "What does it mean?"

Spock pressed his mouth to Jim's again, a promise more binding than any either had made in all the time before their meeting. "More than a friend," he said against that pliant mouth. "Different than a brother. Far surpassing anything that might normally exist between people. The only, perfect fit."

"T'hy'la," Jim said again, and Spock shuddered to hear it.
"Let me show you," he said, nearly but not quite demanding. Jim's acceptance filtered through the touch of Spock's fingers at his psi-points, and Spock watched, with a rising sense of possession, as his mind painted silver through Jim's eyes.

Then Jim was warm and golden and everywhere in Spock, touching all the small places no one ever saw just to delight in them. Spock explored his mind with something akin to awe, besotted and curious and thrilled as each new level of inquiry found only another new type of compatibility. The fullest love Jim had ever known moved from one mind to the other and back in an endless feedback loop that grew in infinite, exponential joy.

Spock felt Jim's fear then, his bone-deep certainty that something so beautiful could only end in bodies piled against the wall of a barn, in families happier without him, in green blood on white walls. Not even the Enterprise was safe; if Spock was to live, Peters would have to die. So Jim would hunt her even to his own death and—

No, Spock told him firmly, the thought spearing through Jim's despair like sunlight through stained-glass windows. Warmth spilled over Jim in waves that left him limp and trembling in Spock's arms. No, he insisted again. If you leave, I will follow. You are t'hy'la; you are mine. Where you go, there also shall I be. You cannot escape me, Jim. Not now or ever. Stay with me.

"I can't," Jim whispered, silver eyes shut, both hands locked around Spock's where they cradled his face, his terror a thing alive between them. "I can't, Spock. It'll end. Badly. Bloody. It always does."

Spock pressed his forehead to Jim's, determined to triumph over the tragedy of his past. "If every inch of what we build is to burn to the ground around us," he argued gently, "at least allow me the privilege of standing beside you in the blaze." Something like a sob broke from Jim. "I cannot take my eyes from you," Spock admitted, voiced strained under the force of his longing. "I never could. Do not ask it of me now."

"She'll take you," Jim gasped, panic filling his mind with chaos. "I have to kill her before she takes you from me."

"No one will remove me from your side," Spock swore, gathering the frayed ends of Jim's belief and weaving them carefully into his own, soothing fear and loneliness with the balm of his devotion. "Can you not understand, t'hy'la?" he asked, stroking his thumbs over cheekbones, such an unexpectedly tender gesture that Jim was nearly broken by it. "It has long been your custom to…see to yourself, to handle matters such as these on your own, even when it is inadvisable or only serves to make the situation…more difficult. You have the tendency of shouldering the burdens of those around you even while refusing what help they might wish to give in return. You have stood alone, and admirably so, almost the entirety of your life. But, t'hy'la, there is no need for you to carry on that way. I am here with you. Allow me some share of your load. Let me walk with you."

Jim drew a long, broken breath. "Fuck, Spock." He swallowed, lost under the ceaseless onslaught of Spock's positive regard. The Vulcan pressed a kiss to his mouth, lingering until they were both slightly breathless. "How am I supposed to say no to that?" Jim demanded.

"You are not," Spock admitted easily. "You must not. Do not send me back to your ship alone. Do not put that woman and her dogs ahead of us. You were mine long before she knew you existed."

"She hurt you." Jim's fingers shook as they stroked Science blue above stark bandages. "She's threatened to do worse. I can't just walk away from that."

"I would not require it of you. However," Spock added quickly, stepping back to draw Jim away from the wall. "I might point out that three of the most influential admirals in Starfleet are waiting for
any excuse to band against that woman. The information you have collected would be devastating weapons in their hands." He continued his retreat until he sensed the mattress at his back. "For once in your life, Jim," he murmured against his Human's lips, wrapping a firm arm around his waist, "let someone fight for you." Then, in a single quick, powerful shift, he dumped Jim into the bed, pushing the rest of the Hounds' equipment to the floor before draping himself over his captain, as much to prevent his escape as to soak in the cool silk of his skin.

"...This is cheating," Jim grumbled, submitting to the tangle of their legs and arms and minds with huffy grace as the exhaustion that had lingered since his debriefing at Starfleet Command drained the last of the fight from his blood. "And it isn't right."

Spock hid a smile in the curve of Jim's neck, nudging his vibrant mind closer toward rest. "Strange that you would think so," he observed neutrally. "I learnt this method from a most beloved friend." Jim heart ached again, yearning for the promise of a future built around Spock even as he feared its destruction. Please, the Vulcan whispered to every broken corner of his mind, put your faith in me. I will not leave you to suffer.

Stay with me, came the quiet echo of Jim's deepest wish.

I have. I shall. A hand stroked over the crown of Jim's head. If only you would let me...

T'hy'la. Jim curled into Spock's warmth, every inch of skin basking in it, trying to ground his strength in the proof of Spock's existence. Don't leave.


T'hy'la. Stay.

He fell asleep to the chant of always.

Spock let Jim sleep for nearly three hours. Less than half way into that time, Beta came to collect her operative and was oddly unperturbed to leave with only his gear. Jim remained sheltered in Spock's body through the entire near-silent ordeal, so deeply lost to his dreams that he didn't so much as twitch when Beta leaned over to check him for signs of injury.

"He is well," Spock informed her, menace laced under the words.

Beta, who was not stupid, took a step back. "I've never seen him sleep like that. Usually he wakes up if someone drops a tissue on the floor in the hall two corridors down from him."

"Perhaps he lacked an environment conducive to proper rest habits. As you can see, that is not the case here. Your persisting interest in his health had been noted."

Taking that as the dismissal it was, Beta slipped from the room, content to believe she would never see either Starfleet officer again.

Worse than the meeting with Beta was the explosion from McCoy when Spock finally returned with their captain.
"I thought you were both dead! Don't ever do that to me again!" was the basic idea behind the most prolific rant Spock had ever witnessed, though it might also have contained a negative sentiment expressed toward the amount of paperwork associated with the death of a command team.

Jim bore it with unusual patience, allowing his friend to poke and prod and attack him with hypos until the diatribe began to wind down. "I'm sorry," he said at last, soft and heartbreakingly sincere.

McCoy faltered, hazel eyes darting up to lock with blue. He sighed, hard and unsteady, rubbing his forehead with fingers that shook. "I'm too old to train a new best friend, Jim," he replied gruffly. "You've got responsibilities now; you don't get to just run off and die anymore, not with a whole ship of people who just barely got used to you being captain. That's not the kind of fucked up legacy you want to leave."

"I know. You're right. You both are," he added, turning to include Spock, who stood beside him. "I can't go after her, and I can't just let her go. So I'll have to try the third option."

"The admirals," Spock said.

Jim nodded. "The admirals. You were right about that, too. They can use me and Hunter as witnesses or evidence or whatever. I can give whole lists of operatives who died, including when and why, while under her command." He shrugged. "It's somewhere to start, anyway."

As it turned out, the admirals agreed. "Send us what you can remember," Archer ordered, one finger tapping thoughtfully on his desk as he considered the benefits of using Hunter. "I've already got a unit tracking Alpha. They're the best, so that part of it shouldn't take long, but we'll need to keep you out of Peters' range until we can file formal charges. There's no telling what she'll do now that we're coming after her." He arched an ironic brow at Kirk, guessing the response to his next question. "Don't suppose you'd be interested in leading a promising new unit?"

Jim quirked half a smile. "What're they called?"

"The Hunt."

The former operative nodded thoughtfully. "That's a definite improvement, sir. And while I'm flattered you'd give them to me, I'm gonna have to respectfully decline." Jim looked over the top of his monitor, a full smile bowing his mouth when Spock met his gaze from across his quarters. Something pleasant hummed in the air between them, ripe with promise as heat pooled low in his belly. "Beta could use a promotion, and this is where I'm supposed to be."

Archer rolled his eyes. "Sap," he muttered. "We'll keep you updated on what's going on. Be careful. We don't know where Alpha's hiding, and Peters is still dangerous."

"Yes sir," Jim agreed, thoroughly distracted by dark Vulcan eyes promising any number of wicked entertainments for the remainder of their three full days of medical leave. Archer, who was very familiar with the working of Jim Kirk's mind, closed the communications link in an act of self-preservation.

He was just in time.
Claiming Atlas

Spock found Jim lying on the edge of a cliff that rose just over the forest canopy of Danix III. He had the stock of a long range rifle tucked into the meat of his right shoulder and was peering through the sight with single-minded focus. After nearly a full minute of silence, Jim pulled the trigger in a precise, smooth motion. A solid projectile, rather than phaser fire, shot from the weapon.

Somewhere in the forest below, someone began a long stream of variable and impressive cursing. Judging by the voice, it was Ensign "C.C." Giotto.

"…Sir," Spock said at length.

"Hello, Spock," Jim greeted casually, barely moving as he sighted a new target.

"Jim, am I correct in understanding that you have just shot one of your Security officers?" The captain fired; seconds later, another voice joined in Giotto's chorus of profanity. "Twoof your Security officers?"

"Don't worry so much, Spock. It's just paint pellets."

"…Paint pellets."

"And I wouldn't be shooting anyone if they'd just stop being such easy targets." He huffed, lifting his eye from the sight to glare at the canopy that stretched before him in the pallet of reds and blues that made up the majority of Danix III's vegetation. "I mean, we've been at this, what…nearly four hours now?"

"Three point seven hours."

"Three point seven hours," Jim echoed immediately. "It's basically Capture the Flag, for God's sake." He shook his head on another faint sound of disapproval, turning his attention to the sight again. "Giotto'd better figure this out pretty quick, or he's gonna owe me a hell of a lot of really expensive alcohol." He picked off another member of his Security force, which had gone with him to the planet's surface for the benefit of the captain's safety. They were meant to be bodyguards, not playmates. "Oh look, they're strategizing. Finally."

Instead of exasperation, Spock felt a rush of deep fondness as he studied the long lines of Jim's body. "Are the admirals aware that you are in the process of training your own special operations unit, Jim?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Spock." He took pity on his team by twisting onto his back, splaying himself just so as he settled a wicked smirk on his Vulcan First Officer. "We're simply taking advantage of our latest in a long fucking line of survey missions to have a little fun. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Spock's expression gentled in a dozen minute ways that only Jim would see. "Indeed not."

"So what brings you planetside?" the captain wondered, studying Spock thoughtfully. "Weren't you and the botany labs gearing up for an all-shift science marathon? Don't you have a lot of new specimens to…dissect and label and study, or whatever it is you do?"

"Yes," Spock agreed. He tucked his hands at the small of his back as he catalogued the image of Jim stretched out on ground so dark it was nearly black. "However, none of the experiments require our
Jim sighed deeply. "New orders came in, didn't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"We're going to do another survey of another planet without any sentient life, aren't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's gonna take at least a week to get there, and we're supposed to stay at least a month, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wonderful." Jim rolled back onto his stomach. "I might do a base jump with Sulu later," he said distractedly, most of his attention focused on sighting his team. "He and Chekov have been throwing paper airplanes off this huge cliff nearby all day, and they're pretty sure they've found a spot where the odds of it going poorly are so slim it's practically safe. Which, by the way, takes some of the fun out, but we're trying to be responsible." Spock watched him adjust his hold on the paint gun, the tilt of his chin, and the placement of one elbow on the soil before peering into the sight again. "…Best not to tell Bones about it, though. He never understood the whole jumping-off-a-cliff thing. I mean, it's not like we're doing something dangerous." He shot another of his officers, causing the whole group to swear and shout. "We have parachutes."

"…Jim," Spock said carefully, "perhaps…jumping off a cliff is not the most productive use of your energy."

"So what else should I do?" He continued shooting his security team, causing a flurry of motion in the forest below. "Scotty's so deep into the project he's working on that he'd have to take a day just to bring me up to speed before I could work with him. Furthermore, I can't be there all the time because of my other duties, so he'd have to catch me up every time I left. We're talking weeks' worth of lost time. I couldn't do that to him. The other departments are reporting pretty much the same levels of working efficiency, so the best I can do is pop by and say hello, which usually results in about an hour of being talked at while the department heads tell me every detail of what's going on."

The Vulcan considered his captain's behavior over the last few missions. "Your interactions with the department heads decreased for what you perceived to be their benefit, not due to lacking interest on your part. You began training Ensign Giotto as a constructive outlet for the energy you could not reasonably expend elsewhere."

"Well, yeah, kind of." He smirked over his shoulder, a coy, wicked expression that increased Spock's pulse in a predictable—if not entirely useful—manner. "Of course, I could have expended the energy in more…creative ways. But you're in high demand of late. And Giotto got potential." He settled fully against the weapon, sensual to serious in the flutter of a Vulcan heartbeat. "I can't make him Head of Security because he just isn't ready yet, and he won't be for a few years, no matter how fast a track I put him on. But in the meantime, it'd be downright negligent of me to not use some of what I learned to make him the most dangerous SOB on board. He's got the build for it, both physically and mentally. I'm honestly surprised no one recruited him. I mean, we're the flagship. Not all our missions are going to be this mind-numbingly dull; we need a specialized unit to respond when shit goes bad."

All in all, a highly logical use of time. "And…this game? Capture the Flag?"

"It's training for them and training for me. They get to put theory into action, and I suck at sharp
shooting. That's what Hunter was for—not that kid, I mean the Hunter before him, the one he replaced. All I can get with any kind of consistency is shoulders. I'm going for chest-shots. If not for the heat-scope, I wouldn't even get that. I'm a fucking close-combat specialist, so they never put me through the upper level marksmanship courses. And, damn it, now I'm missing entirely. Fuck, I hate sniping."

After a moment of quiet observation, Spock knelt by his captain, splaying his fingers along the psi-points on the right side of his face. "Be calm, Jim," he murmured, supplementing words with warm tendrils of serenity that brushed through the tension coiled tight in his t'hy'la's mind.

Jim shut his eyes, resting his forehead lightly against the scope. "It's hard, he thought, quiet and exhausted. I should be out there doing something, not just waiting around for news. They're wasting the flagship on survey missions. It's wrong; it sucks. I hate it.

"It is not wasteful of Starfleet to protect its best captain," Spock argued, trailing his fingers over the exposed back of Jim's neck in an absentminded massage. "You might perceive this as an exile, of sorts, and you would naturally be inclined to resent such an assignment, especially due to your background as one who would usually solve situations like this one. However, I cannot allow you to fall prey to the stress you are experiencing. Train Giotto if it pleases you, but kindly refrain from needless acts of self harm. Throwing yourself off a cliff might temporarily supply you with the adrenaline to which you are accustomed, but it would be a loss of great personal importance to me if something were to go wrong, and Starfleet might take issue with you galvanizing one of their helmsmen into such an end."

"It'd be hard to try me for command negligence if I were already dead from splatting onto an alien world," Jim relented with a long sigh. "Besides, there's no coming back from the humiliation of dying on a routine low-hazard survey mission. I guess Sulu and Chekov will just have to keep amusing themselves with paper airplanes today. Hopefully Sulu will survive the disappointment."

"They seemed content to continue pursuing their current activity when I approached them before coming here, sir. There is no reason to harbor any lingering concern for their emotional well-being."

Jim laughed, shaking his head ruefully, and finally peered through the scope again. "Man, you would talk them out of the base jump before ever coming to me about it. Sneaky Vulcan." Spock left his hand where it was, warm and comforting in Jim's hair, as his captain sighted his last target. Jim took a deep breath; pulled the trigger; exhaled. The paint pellet exploded in the center of Giotto's chest, eliciting a howl of displeasure mixed with pain, and Jim smirked. "Okay, I think I'm done picking on them now." He stood with a stretch, slinging the rifle over his shoulder when Spock handed it to him. "It's about lunch time now, right? You can tell me about the next mission while we eat. I'm sure it's fascinating."

"Indeed." Before Jim could hail his ship, Spock extended his middle and index fingers.

Jim mirrored the gesture immediately, touching their fingers together in the Vulcan kiss that Spock had taught him months ago, taking comfort in the warm tingle the spread slowly up his arm. "I'm sorry," he said at last. "I know I've been...difficult lately."

"No more so than usual," Spock replied placidly.

The Human grinned, as his Vulcan had intended. "Two to beam up?"

"Of course, sir."
In order to prevent another scheme like the base jump from cropping up unexpectedly, Spock tried, with varying degrees of success, to keep Jim busy. This necessitated the assistance of the entire primary bridge crew, several department heads, Jim's not-a-black-ops team, and every person aboard the ship with even a passing interest in self-defense.

The months following their mission on Danix III taught the bridge crew an important lesson: their captain was very difficult to successfully distract and not a little bit crazy.

Sulu tried to bring Jim into the folds of the botany lab by showing him how to catalogue newly discovered specimens according to their potential uses. Jim took this as tacit permission to raid the databases for a list of all the poisonous plants currently aboard the Enterprise. Not long after this list first came into Jim's possession, the captain had lunch with C.C. Giotto and several other security officers. Those close enough to their table to eavesdrop got a crash course in the distillation and proper application of weaponized plant matter. Jim handed the poison project over to one of the officers in his team who cross-trained in the science department. Sulu didn't let any of the individuals who took part of that conversation into the botany labs without careful supervision, which was widely regarded as a useless strategy. They got what they needed whether or not cameras were tracking them.

Scotty, as everyone knew, had something of an evil genius lurking in him, so it came as no surprise when he began using his rare moments of down time to lock himself in a lab with Jim, C.C., and a mysterious parcel that arrived and left in a small black satchel. The only aspect of the arrangement that struck anyone as odd was the eventual inclusion of Chekov, although none of the witnesses were quite brave enough to question it.

Uhura's attempt to teach Jim a few new dialects died a quick death when Jim began using her to develop a coded language he intended to have his team use in hostile environments. His usual tactic was to ambush her with nonsense words strung together in the loose facsimile of a sentence and then wait to see how she translated it. (Jim's favorite word so far was crevulate, which apparently meant whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it to. Nyota couldn't even determine if it was supposed to be a pronoun or verb; Jim took this bafflement as a sign of victory.) The whole situation was pushing Nyota toward an edge that would likely end in violence, so Spock politely directed Jim's attention away from her whenever he noticed the two conversing after shift.

When Jim wasn't using the command crew to further his own agenda, he occupied himself by organizing self-defense classes. They ranged in skill from beginner to advanced, which he and Spock taught together. It didn't take long to realize that the classes were driven by the same line of thought as Jim's spec ops team: if his people had to (eventually) go into danger, he wanted them prepared.

Spock was the only person whose distraction tactics didn't, in some way, twist back around to Jim's nearly pathological need to protect his people. No one really cared to examine the specifics of this anomaly.

"If I hear one more thing about that black ops team he isn't training," Uhura exclaimed over a lunch meeting with the rest of the command crew, "I'm not going to wring his scrawny neck! No offence to the captain's particular brand of insanity or anything, but when did he becomes so obsessive?"

"Oh, no, this isn't something he became," McCoy snarled, stabbing his lunch a little too firmly. "He's always had God damned obsessions. They just…rotate, so they're harder to notice. You lucky bastards didn't get the privilege of watching him concoct that Kobayashi Maru disaster. After it whooped his ass the second time, everything he did or thought or studied was about that damned subroutine. In layman's terms," he huffed, rubbing his forehead as though he could forestall the headache that always developed when he thought about those long months before Jim beat the
test, "he was fucking obsessed. I only helped him in the simulation 'cause I was so damned relieved the thing could finally be over." He pointed at Spock with his fork, eyes narrowed. "And then this guy shows up, and fuck me sideways if that didn't just give Jim something else to obsess over. Good job, by the way, you green-blooded hobgoblin. Now he'll never shut up."

Spock lifted an eyebrow but otherwise declined to respond.

"Where's the captain now?" Sulu wondered, peering around the officer's mess as though Jim would materialize.

"He is training the team," Chekov replied promptly. His eyes lit with boyish excitement. "Commander Scott and I helped him create laser weapons! The mathematics used in their design is very elegant. He is using them with the team in engineering now. Later he says he will show me, too! Is good, da? We will have much fun!"

Uhura shut her eyes. "You armed the captain with lasers?"

"Ah, but not powerful ones. They are for shooting sensors placed on the body, as part of a game."

Sulu revealed his true colors by looking interested. "Laser tag? You think he'd let me play a round?"

Chekov beamed at him. "Da! We can be teammates, Sulu! The team will not know what hit them."

"Absolutely," Sulu laughed. They bumped their fists together, bending their heads to talk strategy.

"They can't come to these meetings anymore," McCoy told Uhura firmly. "They've still got the mindset of cohorts, and I already told Jim he doesn't get any of those."

"…If we were on different teams, I could legitimately shoot the captain," Uhura realized.

The doctor threw his hands in the air. "His lunacy's catching!"

"Oh, come on." Uhura nudged him in the side with a wicked grin. "We're going to go and shoot the captain. Repeatedly. You're telling me you honestly don't have any interest in taking part of that?"

When the game finally wound to a close, no one could accurately calculate which group won. The team was better trained, even after so short a time, but Scotty had ultimately joined the rest of the command crew's Get Jim effort, which gave his group a distinct home field advantage. (The laser grenades Chekov helped him rig up didn't hurt their cause, either.)

Jim used the impromptu grudge match in the ruthlessly opportunistic manner that had become his trademark, letting C.C. take point in order to observe and correct his leadership style. C.C. executed what amounted to a guerrilla war on the command crew, herding them into a corner with a complicated series of fake-outs and redirection. By the time they realized what was happening, it was too late. C.C. demanded total surrender. McCoy got in a last shot at Jim before they pried the laser weapon out of his hands.

Spock, who had declined an invitation to participate, acted as judge. His final verdict was that all players had sustained more injuries than could be considered reasonable given a Human's physiology. Everyone was dead. The game, therefore, was a double-loss.

The captain took this news with a burst of laughter that drew grins from all the crew who heard it.

In their quarters that night, Spock sat on the edge of the bed and watched Jim disrobe, cataloging each new bruise blossoming on golden skin. "While your single-minded dedication to training your
crewmembers to survive any situation is admirable," the Vulcan observed at length, "it would perhaps benefit you to engage in at least one activity that did not, in some way, directly relate to that topic."

Jim lifted his eyes from the examination of a particularly colorful bruise above his left elbow, blue eye dancing with amusement. "Perhaps then, Mr. Spock, you might suggest such an activity."

"Certainly, Captain." When Jim finally approached him, Spock reached out to lace their hands together, savoring the sweet electric rush that spread from his fingers to the tips of his ears and all the way down through toes that curled against the floor. The Vulcan used their link to draw his captain close, pressing their foreheads together. "Tomorrow we will arrive at Vaivi VII."

The Human snickered, eyes drooping shut. "It's never gonna get old hearing Chekov say that."

"You are easily amused," Spock noted fondly. He slid forward, stroking his cheek along Jim's before burying his nose in the strong pulse thundering at his jaw. Cool Human fingers tangled in his hair, cupping the back of his head and neck as tension slipped from Jim like a cloak he could discard, if only for the moment. Spock's lungs filled with the scent of Jim's life twice before he continued. "When we are safely in orbit, I would request your presence on the surface."

"You want me to beam down with you? Are you anticipating a problem?"

Spock snuck his free hand under Jim's casual sleep shirt, splaying his fingers along the bumps of a long spine. "Quite the contrary. The planet is reported to be both serene and quite beautiful. Rare mineral deposits give rise to geodes of impressive size that are said to scatter the ambient light in a most pleasing fashion. We might take advantage of such a location by partaking in a traditionally portable meal prepared with the intention of nourishing two individuals."

For a long moment, Jim was silent. Spock felt his amusement and affection curl through their bond. "...Spock." He bent to hide a kiss behind the delicate point of an ear. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Illogical Human," Spock sighed, leaning into Jim's attention.

Jim trailed a dozen more kisses from the ear around to Spock's mouth. "Stuffy Vulcan," he laughed against warm lips, blue eyes bright with the lines of silver Spock's mind painted there. "Of course I'll go on a picnic with you; you don't even have to ask. You never need to ask me for anything, okay? Whatever you want, it's yours."

Spock decided the most logical response to this statement would be to test for its outer limits. Despite concerted effort exerted over an extended period of time, he never found any. The results were quite satisfying.

Vaivi VII glittered in mid-day sunlight, a crystal landscape sending flairs of light dancing across the ground. Jim materialized on the world with Spock at his right shoulder and immediately felt as though he'd been transported inside a kaleidoscope.

"It's beautiful," he realized, tangling his fingers with Spock's to transmit some small measure of the wonder filling his mind.

Spock communicated the mental equivalent of a smile. "Do you wish to explore a little, or would you prefer to partake in our meal?"
"Food first," Jim decided. When Spock withdrew his hand to spread the traditional checkered
blanket, a slight frown furrowed the Human's brow. He looked around as though faintly confused.
"How close to Earth normal is the gravity here, anyway?"

"Vaivi VII has seventy-six point three-nine percent the gravitational force of Earth. It is a small
difference, though some have reported feelings of buoyancy."

"Buoyancy?" Jim passed his eyes over the surrounded geography, turning a slow circle. "Huh. Not exactly what I'd call it."

Spock peered into the basket Jim had insisted they use to transport their meal. "What would you suggest instead, Captain?"

"I… Not really sure." He lifted one hand to rub at his temple, frowning absenty. Spock looked over sharply, alarmed by the confused note in his t'hy'la's voice. "Maybe… heavy? You don't feel that weight? It's really heavy here. I can even feel it in my head."

The Vulcan rose quickly to his feet. "Jim," he said, reaching for his captain.

Jim turned, expression vaguely dazed, pupils huge and dark within circles of molten silver. "Don't you feel that?" he whispered.

Spock had time to shout, "Doctor—" into his communicator before Jim's whole body arched, eyes wide and silver and unseeing, hands clawed and mouth opened in a voiceless scream. He toppled backwards, caught and cradled by his First Officer, who held him desperately close, folding their bodies together as ten long fingers struck for psi-points. Transportation energy sizzled beside them, but Spock didn't hear it.

He dove for Jim's mind, racing across their link to find and protect a life more dear than his own. The whole of Jim's mindscape, usually lush and open and bright, was under attack. All that he was had been pressed and contained into a desperate writhing collective under the weight of some vast, alien Other that hammered at his weak Human defenses like a gale wind. Spock tried to layer new protections, tried to shelter Jim in the strength of decades of Vulcan training, tried to offer harbor and safety and home.

But he slid across the Other, water over glass, unable to reach through to Jim's psyche.

Jim! he screamed, mind flooding every corner of the growing darkness that had once housed the boundless energy of his t'hyl'a. Protection turned to violence as he called on the ancient heat of his blood to attack the Other, spiking thoughts like lightning against the power separating him from Jim. He fought for any weakness, for a crack or splinter, for the smallest of all gaps through which he might reach the cracked and wailing mind of the only being in any world that truly mattered.

Thoughts like a hammer on a nail, driving force concentrated into a single spot and there, a crack!

He fled, flew, tore through the opening, racing for Jim, stretching forward and faster and now.

The Other shook and snarled, crushing Jim even as it took care to leave Spock unharmed. The injustice of that cut through Spock like a thousand blades that he turned outward, twisting them around to use as another weapon, forcing the Other further away. The first tendrils of his thoughts touched Jim's, linked with his agony and taking comfort in it, because even agony was proof of life. Jim keened, inarticulate with pain, and tried to curl into Spock with the instinctive need of a child seeking comfort. Spock cocooned him, all warm thoughts and healing and safety.

Spock, Jim whispered, shaky and wounded and living, God, still alive.
I am here, t'hy'la. I will not leave you. Stay with me, Jim, stay close—

Spock, what—

The Other screeched, tearing great greedy claws into Jim, reaching all the way through, breaking him down and apart and away, searching for cornerstones that it crushed in its merciless grip. Jim grew suddenly silent, a candle snuffed with a breath of air, and crumbled in Spock's arms.

No! Spock screamed, racing after the last fading echo of Jim's lifeforce. It slid through his fingers even as the body of his only, perfect fit stuttered and strained and then grew still. Jim Jim Jim, Spock's mind wailed, twisting useless seeking circles in the empty mindscape, trying to fill it with his own memories and fear and love. T'hy'la Jim don't go Captain stay Jim Jim no

And No! the Other echoed, horrified realization ringing across the vast darkness. Oh no, no! Trickery! What have we done?

Jim Jim Jim, Spock begged, frantic and lost. Jim Jim Jim

There was nothing.

Jim Jim Jim.

There was nothing.

Jim.

But there was nothing.

What have we done?
Jim was gone.

Spock drifted, lost to reason, pieces of himself reaching for a presence that could no longer respond.

Jim was gone.

Waves of grief rolled through Spock, dark as his anguish, seasoned with the bitter taste of loss. He crumbled inward, crushed under the prospect of existing alone again, now that he had known what it was to be whole.

Would everything be lost to him? First his mother and Vulcan and now even—

The Other tore Spock from his mourning with a shock of frantic commands.

*We cannot call him back from where he is,* it thundered in the empty space that had been Jim. *You must reach him, Vulcan! Bring him back so we can fix what was broken.*

Spock replied with fury blacker than any known since the Vulcan reformation. *You will pay for taking what should always have been mine!* He attacked with the shards of his agony, jagged and lethal.

The Other batted them away with thoughtless ease, exponentially more powerful than Spock had anticipated. *Find him!* it demanded. *Before the echo fades, find him!*

*How—*

*In the way of your people, for the sake of his life, find him!*

Words rose from the oldest memory of Spock’s heritage, an expression of his broken desperation to be linked with Jim wherever he was. It guided him unerringly to the purest method of joining two minds forever, beyond even death. *Parted from me,* the Vulcan whispered, watching the vow spiral outward like ripples on the surface of a lake, *and never parted.*

Energy coalesced into a fragile connection, a spiderweb forged through their mutual devotion. Spock’s oath found strength in an unexpected bubble of hope that shivered down the bond, moving from him into the endless dark and beyond to seek and be one with his mate. There was nothing.

Except…

He followed the energy with single-minded determination, discarding the stutter of his heartbeat and the stillness of his lungs as he pushed his way into whatever place Jim had gone. If he reached the end and found nothing, he would be unable to return.

If he reached the end and found nothing, he would have no desire to return.

*Never and always touching and touched.*

The web thickened into a cord, elastic enough to bear any change, strong enough to withstand any trial. Spock raced down the connection, hungry for any sign of Jim.

He hit an unexpected barrier, striking the surface with the ring of a raindrop on crystal. His mind spread along the obstruction, trying to find shape enough to calculate a weak spot.
Just beyond his reach, Jim was scattered in a million points of starlight that resonated faintly at the echo of Spock's effort.

*We are one,* the Vulcan begged, forcing the thought through the obstacle separating him from his *t'hy'la,* desperate for even a glimmer of recognition. The starlight drifted slowly closer, gathering in clusters at every point Spock's thoughts contacted the barrier, beading together like mercury. *Please, Jim, t'hy'la, don't you know me? Can you not hear me? Never parted. Always touching. We—We are—*

*. . . one...* the starlight whispered.

*Ah!* The Other flooded around Spock, pressed against the barrier as far as it extended in every direction. *There! Dappled sunlight and rain—pool him back together!*

Something moved through Spock like lightning, blanking his consciousness for a countless stretch of seconds. When he regained himself, he was back in the vast nothing of Jim's mind with the Other at his side. *Here,* it said, remorse heavy in the word. It cupped mental hands around a small pool of golden light, waiting until Spock formed matching hands before passing the light to him. *We will wait for you. For judgment. But take your time with this.*

Spock didn't hear the words. He didn't register the absence of the Other when it left, nor did he notice the restored beat of his heart or function of his lungs.


The gold in his hands was *Jim.*

He curled around the light, encasing it in relief and his love.

*Jim...*

The light stirred, moving as though to rise from Spock's hands but ultimately lacking the energy.

Spock smiled, sending a breath of affection over the gold. It scattered like dust caught in wind, swirling around the strength of a Vulcan mind to settle in a cloak along the most powerful lines. Emotions woke from the gold slowly, uncurling with cat-like grace under the warmth of Spock's attention.

*. . . love...?*

Triumph thrilled through Spock. He twisted around the light, coalescing into a single star that burned more brightly with every beat of a Human heart. *T'hy'la, oh, t'hy'la, how I grieved for thee. Wake up! I am here; I am always here. Do you know me?*

*. . . never parted...*

*Yes! Bonded, t'hy'la, forever. Do you know me?*

The starlight turned and stretched, seeking definition, trying to order itself. Jim had rebuilt his mind over and over throughout his youth, organizing or discarding information until all that remained were the parts that would facilitate his survival. He learned to keep closest to his heart the things that defined his singular existence as *Jim,* remembering them when all else faded, and the only thing he knew now was—

*Spock. That's your name: Spock.*
Yes.

And…I'm…

Spock curled around his t'hy'la's fledgling consciousness, sheltering him in the protective heat of endless Vulcan summer. Jim, he murmured to every corner of the empty darkness, infusing the word with the depth of his devotion. Captain Kirk, my James…

Jim's mind shivered, painting itself along Spock's. The Human explored all the places they touched, finding more of himself in Spock, using the clarity of Vulcan memories to organize the pieces of his own that still hung loose. When he found the connection that had led Spock to his side, he touched it, and gasped when it opened wide in his heart. Are… This is… Did we get married…? Oh! Spock, it's warm here. Can you feel that?

Yes. Spock twisted himself in Jim, lending him strength to heal the wounds inflicted by the Other, to piece together the scattered puzzle of his mind. In time, they would have to surface, to demand answers both for the attack and the horrified regret that followed in its wake. For now, though, Spock offered himself to Jim, holding nothing back, and wondered at the joy that came of their sharing. I feel it, Jim.

Outside the universe built of Spock and Jim, Dr. Leonard McCoy was having a fit. He knelt over the tangle of limbs that was the command team of the USS Enterprise, tricorder in one hand even as he hesitated. Jim was stretched out on his back, Spock draped over him with both hands locked to all the captain's psi-points. Their eyes were closed, their bodies lax. When McCoy first beamed down, his tricorder registered wild fluctuations in brainwaves, spikes and dips that couldn't be explained. Jim's biorhythms started to falter.

Then Jim died.

Then Spock died.

Spock came back.

And now Jim…?

McCoy swatted at the first security officer who tried to separate the First Officer from his captain. "Who told you could touch my patients?" he snarled, arming himself with a hypo. "Get away, you'll make it worse! Set up a perimeter or something, God, I thought Jim was training you to be useful!"

Giotto inclined his head. With only that for an order, the full team of seven spread out among the towering crystal spires, slinking noiselessly across the landscape.

If McCoy cared at all, he might have been impressed. As things stood he barely registered Giotto settling into a defensive crouch nearby. The doctor's tricorder absorbed all his attention, sending him impossible messages of reestablished cardiac rhythms, of erratic brain waves synching into calm, recognizable patterns. "What the hell, Jim?" he asked in a harsh whisper. "What have you gotten yourself into this time?"
"The fault is ours," a soft voice echoed through the crystal field.

Giotto shot to his feet, phaser held unwavering even as it sought a target. McCoy sunk closer to his friends' vulnerable bodies, grip firm on his hypo.

"We were tricked into breaking something beautiful, an act for which we express our deepest regret."

"Oh yeah?" McCoy swallowed to clear the roughness from his voice. "And what's that got to do with us?"

"Everything," the voice replied, hushed whisper offered directly into his ear.

The doctor flinched violently, nearly toppling onto the pile of Jim and Spock. He scrambled to get away from the geode directly behind him, fist one hand in the uniform shirt of each of his friends. They were probably too heavy to lift on his own, but that didn't mean he wasn't gonna try if anything decided to attack.

Giotto, meanwhile, paced forward with the smooth grace of a hunting cat, planting himself in front his superior officers with his weapon trained on a dark shadow gathering within the crystal. "Identify yourself," he barked.

"We are not your enemy," the shadow promised. It twisted and writhed in the crystal, slowing taking on a humanoid shape. One dark hand pressed against the glittering shell; then it pushed though, stepping out like Alice from the looking glass.

Giotto flicked his phaser to a higher setting.

"Jesus Christ," McCoy rasped.

The shadow stood before them, tall and expressionless, wearing the guise of the Alpha of the Dogs of War. "This is the one," it said in a voice that still echoed from every crystal in the clearing, "who told us to kill your captain. And so, filled with hate for him, we did."

(Why is it so dark here?
You were driven out. The light went with you.
I can make it bright again?
You must. And look: You already are. Every corner you touch is lit as once it was.
Will you help me?
I am helping.
How?
Rest here with me when you are tired; turn to me when you are lost. Draw strength from my strength. I am with you.
Parted and not. Touching and not. One, forever.
Yes.
...Spock. We are married, aren't we? I think that's what this connection is. Is it?

Go and find out.

You'll be here?

I will.

"Hate? Just what in hell did Jim ever do to you, anyway? We've never even beenin this fucking quadrant before!"

"It is not your captain we hate," the shadow corrected McCoy, soft with regret as it cast Alpha's gaze down on Spock and Jim. Giotto shifted to block its line of sight. It turned its attention back to McCoy, indicating its form with one hand. "We hate the one who looks like this. He came here and killed—killed many of us. Destroyed a spectrum of crystals in the southern valley. An entire Voice—gone."

McCoy shook his head, trying to understand. "A spectrum of what?"

The shadow indicated the amber spires around them. "We are a collective Voice formed of all the whispers held in these crystals. Each stone is a whisper, whole and unique. Together, we form the Voice to better interact with those not of our spectrum."

"Spectrum," the doctor echoed blankly.

Giotto finally lowered his weapon, expression flabbergasted. "The different colored crystals—" He hesitated, glancing back at McCoy before wetting his lips and facing the shadow again. "We—The science department noticed different colored crystals in different parts of the world. Sapphires in the polar north and south; amethyst in west; onyx in the valleys. Are you saying that each different kind of stone is a whole different—tribe?"

The shadow inclined its head. "That is a simple way of understanding our cousins, yes."

"What has this got to do with Jim?" McCoy demanded.

"This being came here," the shadow explained, indicating its mimicked shape again. "When he landed, we watched. We had not seen one like him since the first ships came, and he was not like what we remembered. We touched his mind only lightly, curious but careful. We did not want to cause harm. If we had looked more deeply—"

"He would have killed them anyway," Giotto said in a dark voice. He glanced back at McCoy again. "I think I see where this is going."

"In our grief at the loss of a dear cousin," the shadow agreed, eyes downcast as it lost some of its shape to the despair still running high in every whispered facet of its consciousness, "we sought an explanation from his mind. As deeply as we could push in the short moments before he left, we asked him why. We found orders, very clear in his thoughts, from Captain James T. Kirk, to come to us and do as much damage as possible before Kirk himself arrived. Grief became rage, and we waited."

McCoy shut his eyes, head bowed, palms flat over the thud of a Human heart and the rapid hum of its Vulcan counterpart. Oh God, he thought. Oh Jim. Months of milk runs and she still found you.
He and Giotto shared a look of vicious resolve.

Somehow, someday, in some terrible way, Peters would pay for this.


We can't stay here.

No.

Not forever.

Not even for long.

Will it ever be like this again?

Would you desire such a thing?

…Maybe not completely. But I like this. It's warm here.

My 'thy'la, search your mind. Study what exists between us.

Why should—oh!

You see? There is no need to linger here. Our bond will always be warm.

)

"We broke Kirk's mind to collect revenge for those broken under his orders," the shadow explained. Its expression buckled with regret. "Once he was gone, we saw how the Vulcan suffered, and thought it...odd that a creature like Kirk would be able to inspire such devotion. We looked deeper and learned the truth of what we had done. It was the Alpha, on Admiral Peters' orders, who used us as a weapon against—a good man." It indicated the pair of Starfleet officers lying still on the ground. "We repaired what we could. The rest is up to Spock and Kirk. They have done something we do not recognize, making their minds a single unit more complete than even what the whispers become when they join into the Voice. This bond may be how Kirk is saved in the end." It linked its hands, head bowed as it dropped Alpha's form, becoming a shadow against amber once more.

"We regret."

McCoy exhaled a shuddering breath, lifting his hand from Spock's side to scrub at his own forehead. "They need to wake up soon," he said flatly. "If they can. I need to talk to them, make sure they're alright."

"We need to get them back up to the ship," Giotto agreed. He holstered his phaser and turned to the amber Voice. "The real bad guy here is Peters. She needs to be locked away where she can't hurt anyone anymore, but we're having trouble pinning her down. But this—this is murder by proxy. Or at least attempted murder. If we can just— Will you give a statement?" he asked. "You don't have to come with us, mostly because I think you probably can't come with us, but we can record something. Have it witnessed by someone important. Maybe we can put you under some kind of oath and have Lieutenant Uhura contact one of the admirals—the good admirals, Pike or Archer or Barnett—to view your testimony. It's just—" He motioned helplessly. "This is what we've been waiting for. It isn't something Peters can maneuver out of. We've got her, if you'll help us."

All around them, vague black clouds of energy formed in the amber geodes, shifting as though the
solid crystals were filled with water. Each of more than three dozen shadows joined voices to whisper, "We will."

( 

Ready? 
Together, then. 
)

Spock stirred.

And Jim opened his eyes.

He managed half a smile. "'lo, Bones. What'd I miss?"

Spock conducted the official interview himself, calm and logical with Jim's thoughts resting quietly in the back of his mind. He knew when McCoy's medical examination ended, knew when Jim settled in their quarters, knew when he drifted into a deep and untroubled sleep.

It was...comforting.

The amber Voice provided its testimony to Archer, Barnett, and Pike via highly classified subspace transmission, explaining the nature of its existence, the extent of its loss, and the method of Peters' trickery. Once they had the information they needed, the admirals offered their thanks and began taking all the steps necessary to arrest Peters. Within a few months, there would be a trial. After that, Jim's crew was owed a considerable amount of shore leave.

They called the Enterprise home.

"Your help in this matter is greatly appreciated," Spock told the amber Voice, hands locked behind his back. Giotto's team had already beamed back aboard, giving Spock a few minutes to tie up whatever loose ends remained.

"We nearly committed a great evil," the Voice protested softly, words whispering through fields of amber as it stepped back into its crystal. "If you had not been already in his mind, we would not have had the time to call him back."

The odds of Jim surviving his encounter with the Voice had already occurred to Spock, to the eighteenth digit. He preferred not to dwell on it. Instead, with Jim warm and comfortable in his thoughts, the Vulcan lifted his hand in the traditional salute of his people.

"Before you leave," the Voice said, pressing one dark, insubstantial hand against the largest facet of its home, "there is one more thing we took that must be returned."

Spock grew very still. "Explain."

"We do not...kill...simply by shutting down a mind. We search for the foundation and—remove it."

The Vulcan remembered with perfect clarity the moment this amber-voiced Other had located Jim's cornerstones, crushing them with ruthless intent. "It would, perhaps, benefit you not to speak to me of this any further."

"It is important," the shadow insisted. It curled its hand into a fist before pushing it into the open air.
"One of the stones we took was...something that might be inaccurately called Jim Kirk's last breath. It contains the final beats of his heart, the expiring exhalation of his lungs, the ultimate rush of energy through his body. We took it to rob him of his life—something you unexpectedly gave back to him by offering your mind to him. So, here: a final chance for him, if ever you have need of it."

The stone that dropped into Spock's hand was small, less than an inch long, a crystalline teardrop of purest blue. It glowed faintly in the cradle of his palm, thrumming with an unfamiliar energy.

"In time, it would have made a beautiful Voice of its own," the shadow said in fading tones as the consolidated consciousness broke down into its component whispers. "Perhaps even it would have filled the space in all our minds left by the death of the spectrum. But it is not ours to nurture. It is yours, Spock of Vulcan. Guard it."

Spock curled his long fingers around the crystal. When he looked up, the Voice was gone. He pressed his comm.

"One to beam up."

When all the forms were submitted, and McCoy was done fussing over brain scans, and the Enterprise set its course for Earth, Spock found himself removed from the duty roster for an entire shift rotation. Jim was banned from work even longer: three days that everyone knew would drive him crazy, once he woke up.

With how deeply he was sleeping, it was hard to guess when that would be.

Spock tried to keep himself busy, first with official business, then with meditation when McCoy caught him trying to work while on medical leave. But meditation just gave Spock more time to examine his new bond with Jim, which invariably led him back to the math that proved (to the eighteenth digit) how close he had come to losing Jim forever.

Because Jim had died.

So he roused himself from meditation and turned his mind to a more useful task. By carefully deconstructing a few decorative items collected throughout his lifetime, Spock collected enough thin strands of silver to begin weaving a band around the teardrop given to him by the Voice. The work was delicate and time consuming, offering him a distraction for at least half of beta shift.

Then the teardrop was a pendant hanging from sturdy chain around Spock's neck, its hum against his bare skin a constant reminder (to the eighteenth digit) that Jim had died.

Jim had died.

Spock rose from his desk, something uncomfortable twisting in his chest. He paced the length of the room twice, thoughts brushing the sleepy warmth of Jim's presence in his mind. They were connected now, bound together beyond any end, because—

Because once, in Spock's arms, Jim had died.

The Vulcan strode into the sleeping quarters he shared with his t'hy'la, standing at the edge of the bed to stare down at the beautiful face relaxed in slumber. Jim was on his stomach, half curled around a pillow, legs sprawled carelessly. Spock knelt by the bed, eyes locked on the flutter of Jim's pulse in his throat. He nearly touched Jim's lips, fingers close enough to feel the warm breath cycling though Jim's lungs.
Proof of life, no matter what a bunch of digits (even eighteen) might predict.

Spock stood fluidly, shedding everything he wore but low-slung sleep pants and a pale blue crystal, and folded himself over Jim, tucking the cool Human body along his own. He buried his face in the curve of Jim's shoulder, pressed one hand flat over the steady beat of a Human heart, and felt the tension drain slowly from his own tense frame. Even in sleep, Jim recognized his new bondmate. He hummed softly, shifting closer to Spock's warmth, and settled in boneless content.

Jim had died.

But he wasn't dead.

Spock shut his eyes and let that thought satisfy him.

When McCoy arrived hours later, they were still curled together, deeply asleep. He snuck back out immediately, setting the privacy lock on their door.

Just this once, hypos could wait.
The trial of Peters and her dog began on a Tuesday to little fanfare and almost no media coverage. As Jim had predicted, the officials in charge of the specialized operations units were working industriously to keep the entire matter quietly "in house". With the Enterprise orbiting Earth for the first time in nearly a year, it wasn't a difficult task. Reporters and civilians alike were fascinated by the flagship and its travels; the frenzy its return caused was more than sufficient to conceal what was officially logged as a "disciplinary hearing".

"This sucks," Jim groaned, slumping into the lavish suite Admiral Pike had secured for their stay at command. He shuffled over to the bed, sitting heavily on the edge. After a moment of exhausted silence, he leaned back on his hands, head hanging back limply, and began attempting (with little success) to toe his right boot off while still wearing the left. Defeat came in the form of a long sigh as he sat up to actively work the footwear off. "We've been here years now."

"Thirteen point seven six days," Spock corrected absently, conducting his routine inspection of the suite's security protocols. When they were engaged to his satisfaction, he turned to study his bondmate, who froze in the act of preparing to heave his boot at the wall.

Jim offered a sheepish smile, dropping his projectile on the floor with a muted thunk. Spock lifted an eyebrow, and the Human flushed faintly, pointedly turning his attention to wrestling with the second boot. "So, uh…how much longer should this thing drag on for?"

Spock crossed the distance between them in three long strides. He knelt and settled his hands on the boot, waiting for Jim to relinquish his hold before gently sliding it off. "I could not hazard a guess," he admitted, petting a hand through golden hair just to watch Jim's eyes close. "Even if both sides began and concluded their closing arguments within the next three days—which is unlikely, given the severity of the charges—there is no way to gauge how quickly the tribunal will reach its decision, to say nothing of the time it will take to decide upon a fitting punishment."

"You think they'll get a conviction?" Jim's gaze settled low on a middle-distance as he ran through the trial. "It's a bit of a stretch, isn't it? Attempted murder, I mean. We've got negligence, sure, but—"

"Attempted murder by proxy for her use of the Voice," the Vulcan interrupted firmly. "And conspiracy to commit murder for her arrangement with Alpha. There is overwhelming proof to support the allegations levied against her. The evidence is too strong, t'hy'la." Spock stroked a thumb over Jim's cheek, tilting his head until their eyes met. "She will not escape."

For a moment, Jim hesitated. Then he sighed again, leaning into Spock's touch. "Even if she's convicted," he whispered, quiet and desperate, "she'll get away. I don't know how to keep you away from her, Spock. She won't give up."

Possessive fury burned hot in Spock's blood, flooding Jim's eyes with molten silver. "She cannot have you."

Jim huffed. "It's not me I'm worried about." He offered a lopsided smile, pushing the constant hum of paranoia aside to replace it with honey sweetness as he tugged Spock close for a long, lingering kiss.

After a few heartbeats, Spock shifted, trailing long fingers down the line of Jim's leg to grip the back of his knee. "The trial is too heavy on your mind," he murmured to the soft skin just behind Jim's ear. A breath of air stuttered and broke as shudders trembled down the captain's spine. "Allow me to offer a suitable distraction."
"By all means," Jim gasped, wriggling eagerly out of his tunic and undershirt when Spock pushed them out of the way. "I'm all about distractions." He wrapped both arms around Spock's shoulders, head dropping back as Spock breathed hot over his collarbone.

Spock's computer chimed in the next room, indicating the receipt of an urgent message.

Both Starfleet officers froze.

The chime sounded again, demanding and obnoxious.


Spock planted a patient kiss against his temple before rising. "I will return momentarily," he said firmly. "Do not move."

"Won't," Jim agreed, flopping bonelessly on the mattress.

Spock left him there, attending his messages. The newest contained a brief summary of the previous three days' activities and was accompanied by a small file. As it began loading, someone knocked on the door to their suite.

"I got it," Jim called, voice moving away from the bedroom.

The attachment was an image of a two-dimensional chess board, empty save the black queen and rook. The white king lay sideways, toppled by the opponent's victory.

Across the bottom of the image was a single word: checkmate.

Jim.

Spock shoved himself away from the terminal, sending the entire desk skittering across the room. Adrenaline flooded his system as he sprinted through the suite. "Jim!" he called, straining every sense for any hint of his bondmate, who had opened their sealed quarters without anyone nearby to lend assistance if—

But they were in custody. Peters and the Alpha were both being held in maximum security cells, separated with an entire prison and three tiers of guards between them. Alpha might be skilled, but no one possessed the ability to escape such a facility. No one.

"Jim!"

The door was open. Jim was gone. Even their bond was silent.

Every morning, Peters and Alpha were loaded into a single transport to be taken to the courthouse. Every evening, they were returned to that same transport. It was a schedule that had taken on an edge of ritualism, and if anyone in the world had the propensity and training to take advantage of routine behaviors, it was this pair.

Damn.

Damn it.

They had been outmaneuvered.

The door bent under Spock's grip as his body tensed with rage.
She could. *Not.* Have him.

Spock turned sharply on his heel, every motion expressing precise fury. He gathered only his vital belongings and Jim's boots, collecting his communications unit as he stalked from the room. "Spock to *Enterprise,*" he said, voice level and chill enough that the responding ensign's reply rang with nervousness.

"Transporter room here, sir."

"One to beam up."

"...Er, sir, there's—"

"One to beam up, *now.*"

"Yes sir!"

Spock was striding off the pad the moment he materialized on it. Before he reached the hallway, his communicator beeped. "Spock," he answered flatly.

"Spock, it's Pike. Listen, you need to keep a close eye on Jim, we've just gotten word that—"

"You are too late, sir. He is already gone."

Silence rang across the unit. "You sure?" Pike asked, hushed with rising fear.

The Vulcan felt ancient fires light his blood and paused in the hallway, eyes shut and jaw clenched as he fought the deeply instinctive need to kill—*something.* "He was taken from our *secure* Starfleet lodgings," he managed at last, eyes still shut as he worked to leash his concern, to somehow mute the constant frantic hum in the back of his mind screaming *Jim should be here.* "I received a message flagged as urgent and had gone to the back room to retrieve it. While I was occupied, someone knocked on our door. Jim responded. When I opened the message, it was an itinerary of our last three days, which I now understand was meant to be a threat. They have watched us for three days. An attached image file was a completed chess match; black was the victor. It contained only the word *checkmate.*"

"What's the significance?" Pike asked, muted noises in the background indicating the mess he was no doubt creating as he worked to collect information from Spock and contact the other admirals simultaneously.

Spock drew another long, quiet, steadying breath that pressed his emotions down even as it fueled them. The pressure in the center of his being was growing; eventually, something would give.

Irrelevant.

Any upcoming meltdown would wait until Jim was safely returned to the *Enterprise.*

"Whenever Jim spoke of the...situation with Peters, he often relied on the metaphor of chess to prevent himself from breaching too many of the Hounds' codes of conduct as they related to secrecy."

"She found out."

"Yes sir."

All background clatter on Pike's end halted. *How?* he wondered bleakly.
The line of Spock's shoulders tensed. "We were outwitted."

"Well how do—"

"With all due respect, Admiral," Spock cut in, lifting his chin as cold resolve settled in all the places aching for Jim, "my intent at this point is to recall the crew and launch a rescue mission. The crew of the Enterprise is well suited to this endeavor, increasing our odds of success by nearly three hundred percent compared to any other vessel."

"…Putting your odds at what, Commander?"

"That is irrelevant," Spock said dismissively, pacing toward the turbolift. "I will recall the crew and begin the search. Meanwhile, it would be to the benefit of the Admiralty and Captain Kirk if you began investigating the details of the escape of two maximum security prisoners who then kidnapped the commanding officer of Starfleet's flagship from under Starfleet's concerted observation—again."

"We've already started," Pike agreed darkly. "Spock—they killed their guards. Eight of them. All of their weapons are missing. You have to consider the possibly that Jim's already—"

"I will contact you with pertinent details relating to this mission, providing I am certain of the transmission's security."

"Of course, Commander. Good luck."

"Luck is illogical," Spock replied before terminating the link. "I will not fail in this, Admiral Pike. She cannot have him."

When he stepped onto the bridge, cold and dangerous, his unsuspecting subordinates leapt to their feet with a chorus of "Sir!"

He slanted a glance at the ensign sitting at the communications terminal. "Recall the crew," he ordered, words clipped. "Begin with the senior officers. When Lieutenant Uhura arrives, report to the transporter room to assist with oncoming traffic."

The ensign opened her mouth, obviously shocked, but stopped herself from saying anything other than, "Yes sir."

When Jim's command crew was gathered, confused but wary, on the bridge, Spock succinctly informed them of the most recent affront to their captain.

"Kidnapped?" Sulu echoed, furious and appalled. "Again? Is there just never any security around him or something?"

Uhura, for her part, began swearing, making impressive use of all the languages and colorful metaphors at her disposal. She stalked over to her station, glaring until the relief ensign skittered away. Then she dropped to the floor, sliding under the panels so she could reach the guts of her highly specialized and sensitive equipment. She twisted her fingers into the wires and yanked, pulling several out entirely, all the while snarling to herself.

"…What're yeh doin'?" Scotty asked at last, and very hesitantly.

"The captain's out of my sensor range," she snapped from deep within the unit. "I have to bypass some of the internal redundancy filters to boost the signal strength to its maximum, and then go a little bit further until I find him. And I will," she hissed, stripping two wires before twisting them together and shoving them back into the station, "find him."
Her fellow officers stared at her for a long heartbeat. "I like this ship," Scotty said at last, heartfelt and helpless. He scooted over to Uhura, muscling in beside her to lend a hand. "Come on, lass. Let's give this old girl all we've got."

"Way ahead of you," Uhura agreed.

"To your stations," Spock ordered the remaining crew. "Admiral Pike will contact us with the flight path of Peters' escape vessel as soon as it is isolated. We must be ready to pursue the moment that information is communicated."

"I will trace all likely ion trails," Chekov said, sliding into his seat even as his fingers flew over the keys. "This way, we will have more information available when Command contacts us, and we can use the varied data points to extrapolate likely routes."

Sulu joined Chekov at the helm. "I'll prepare the Enterprise for emergency launch," he said, running through the appropriate check-lists. "We won't waste any time on parking brakes this go around, sir."

Spock inclined his head but didn't reply.

McCoy lingered on the bridge with his arms crossed and shoulders hunched, jaw clenched tight as he watched Jim's best team throw themselves into achieving the impossible. "You're gonna find him," he informed the command crew. "Before she breaks him or kills him or worse, while there's still somethin' I can stitch back together, you'll find him. Right?"

"We will find him," Spock swore as the others worked. "He is our captain, and she cannot have him. Not in life. Not in death. He is ours."

McCoy nodded sharply. "Good. You just make sure it stays that way. I'm gonna get his usual bed ready. God damn Jim Kirk," he muttered to himself as he stepped into the turbolift.

Spock settled in his captain's seat, sitting tall and brittle, and turned his attention inward. Their bond still existed, dampened though it was by some unknown outside force. He touched the stone that hung under his shirts, pressing it against the skin of his chest. It warmed with his attention, opening like a conduit into which Spock poured his devotion and resolve, filling their bond nearly to overflowing. The spider's-thread that now linked them thickened only minutely, barely enough to assure the Vulcan that Jim was alive.

But Jim was alive.

_I am coming for you_, he told the faint, vague impression of Jim. _Be strong._

"Sir, we've got a heading!"

"Very good. Mr. Sulu, all ahead full."

"Aye, sir!"

_I am coming._
Jim's first thought upon opening his eyes in an unfamiliar room was, *I fucking hate Peters*. He rolled onto his side, bracing his weight on one forearm as he coughed weakly, waiting for the dizzy spell to pass. When he could push himself into a sitting position without reeling, he took stock.

The room was small, containing nothing but Jim and the outdated biobed upon which he rested. No windows and only one locked door. He had no boots, no phaser, no communications unit, and no idea where he was.

On the upside, he had a pretty good guess as to the *who* and *why* of the situation. Spock was probably already on his way to…wherever this was. And at least he'd had the sense to grab his uniform shirts before answering the door. As attractive as his unclad chest might be, it bolstered his resolve to look down and see command gold instead of slick black. It helped him remember that he wasn't Peters' dog anymore. James T. Kirk was a Starfleet captain, and she *would* pay for taking him from his people and post.

…Still. Having no boots kind of sucked. It was hard (but not impossible) to strike fear into the heart of an opponent in socks.

Eh, whatever. It's be a challenge.

"Hey!" Jim shouted, levering off the bed. He stalked over to the door in order to give it a swift kick, which would actually have been a better idea with boots. "You'd better let me out of here, you psychotic bitch! I've got an appointment with the Admiralty tomorrow!"

No one responded, which was okay: He hadn't expected them to.

After a few more seconds of silence, Jim sat on the edge of the biobed, forehead furrowed as he turned his attention as far inwards as he knew how. Spock was in there somewhere, he just knew it, if he could only figure out how to contact him…

There. A thin, fragile connection, too cold and silent. He couldn't follow it, could barely touch it. The bond wasn't supposed to burn like frostbite. What the hell was going on?

"Spock," he whispered, eyes shut. His clumsy mental grip locked tight around their link, pushing stubbornly through the ache of contact. "Where are you?"

*If she's hurt you*, he thought at his t'hy'la, *I'll wipe her off the face of whatever planet this is.*

Before he could strain to see if Spock would—could?—respond, the keypad outside his door beeped with an entry code. He committed its melody to memory for later use—55437 or 33415, depending on the make and model of touchpad (assuming she was using standard equipment in an unaltered facility).

*This is basic training, Peters; what are you planning?*

A teenaged black ops technician stepped into the room, door sliding shut and locked behind him, skinny arms loaded with a familiar bundle of items with a helmet hooked on one hand.

"I'm not wearing that," Jim said immediately.

The tech froze, eyes wide with shock. "Er," he managed.

Jim offered the kid a warm but cocky smile, smoothing his hand down the line of his Starfleet uniform. "What I've got is enough for me."
"Er," the tech said again, cheeks red while he took Jim in head to toe. "Not even the boots?"

"…Well." Jim sat. "Maybe just the boots."

The tech dug into his pile with his free hand, shifting carefully until he produced a glove, which he held out to Jim. "These too?"

Jim's smile went lopsided. He motioned the tech closer, bypassing his offering to root through the pile. Knee boots popped out after a sharp tug. "This is all I need. Thanks, though."

While the kidnapped captain pulled on his footwear, the aide hesitated nervously. "It'll help," he said at last, a little desperate. "With the run you've got to make," he explained when Jim glanced up. "The suit would really help. You'll need it."

"What I need is to be returned to my ship," Jim countered placidly, tapping each heel against the hard flooring to settle the boots. "Her gear won't help with that." For a long moment, he studied the tech, assessing him with a passive expression. "What you're doing is called aiding and abetting," he said as length. "This is a crime. And not a small one. My First Officer could probably quote you a whole list of serious offences that you'll have to take partial responsibility for—just by standing in the room."

The tech lifted and dropped one shoulder in an exhausted shrug. "Not like I can get away. Die here, die in prison—it's all the same to me."

Jim nodded. "One of those, huh? What's your name?"

"…Thomas."

"Thomas," the captain echoed, gracing the boy with a warm smile. "Listen, I might not know what you did to get sucked into this, but I can guess it's been pretty shitty for you."

"Understatement," the boy sighed.

"So I'm not going to make that worse for you by trying to use a delicate combination of psychology and brute force to get you to help me here."

Thomas looked slightly suspicious. "…That's awful generous of you."

Jim gave him a wide, brilliant smile that brought the blood to his cheeks again. "You know I'm not going to put that suit on."

"Yeah, you said that."

"But I do need something from it. So why don't you leave all that here with me and tell Peters that I refused your help? Tell her I said I'd do it myself."

"Why would I do that?" the boy demanded, frowning darkly as his grip on the suit tightened. "You know how much trouble I could get in for that?"

"None," Jim guessed. When Thomas stared at him, he shrugged again. "Listen, all she probably said was, like…get that suit to Kirk, or something. The suit's here; I don't need your help with it. Mission accomplished. Besides, she's kind of crossed a major line at this point. There isn't any going back from here. You'll be free of her within a few weeks, whether or not you leave that thing. But, if I you leave it, I can promise you'll be free within the day."

Thomas hesitated once more, torn between an impulse to flee and the desire to fight. "Promise?" he
whispered.

Jim nodded. "Promise."

"...Why do you need it? What good's the suit if you can't even put it on?"

"You're better off not knowing," the captain admitted. "Plausible deniability."

The boy smiled bitterly. "Can't turn you in if I don't know anything?"

"Something like that." When he continued to hesitate, Jim said, "If it'll make you feel better, I can knock you out before I take it. But, Thomas, you have to understand that I can't let you leave with that suit."

Thomas scowled. "You're not even armed, what can you—" Jim rose to his feet, fluid and cold, expression utterly blank. Thomas stiffened in fear, his breath hitching loudly in the small room. He held his bundle out to Jim, who took it with an almost sad smile. When his fingers fumbled with the helmet, Jim took that, too.

Before the boy left, Jim set a hand on his shoulder. "How many of you are here, Thomas?"

The teen shrugged. "Just me. The others were at Command, helping with the trial. I'm the newest intern, so I didn't know enough to be helpful. They left me here. Starfleet probably absorbed them already." He sighed, deep and weary. "Lucky me, huh? Man, this program was supposed to fast-track me into the medical program. Now I'm some kind of stupid abductee or something. A felonious abductee, which wasn't in the program description, by the way. Worst internship ever."

One corner of Jim's mouth ticked in a surge of amusement. "You're a master of understatement. Look, I'm not gonna leave you here," he swore. "When this is done, you'll go with me. I'll stop them from prosecuting you; Pike'll help me get you in the academy. You'll have to test into the med program on your own, but my CMO can probably recommend a good study plan. I'm sorry this happened to you, kid. Peters is a bitch."

Thomas snorted, shaking his head ruefully. "Now who's the master of understatement?"

Then the captain inclined his head toward the door. "It's gonna get ugly. Go someplace safe, but not too far. We won't leave without you."

"...How exactly do you plan on getting out of here?" Thomas asked softly.

Jim ignored the question. "Go away before she comes."

When the kid was gone, Jim tossed the suit in the corner, sitting on the biobed with the helmet cradled in his lap. He ran his fingers along the interior seams, searching for the thin strip of pliable material that covered the speakers. His nail caught on the slightly upraised edge; he dug and picked at it until he wires were exposed. Then he dismantled the helmet, stripping out input and output devises, relay units, transmitter coils, antennas, and the silicate programming bands. When he'd gutted it thoroughly, he resealed the helmet and tossed it on top of the suit.

Survival training for black ops had included a wide range of "vital information" courses. Once of them had been devoted to communicating with friendly ships, no matter how far away they were. With the appropriate base elements, Kirk could build a comm pretty much from scratch.

Whether or not it worked was another, nothing for it now but to try.
He grabbed the tiny receiver box and pried the casing loose with his thumbnail, accessing the wiring. Eh, too delicate. He fetched two of the long spinal needles from the suit and used them to gingerly maneuver the wires, careful not to disturb the lithium core and damage his only available power supply. Too many painstaking seconds later, he was able to work a ground free from the tiny solenoid.

This shit was way easier in the labs.

Jim laid the ground against one of the silicate bands, working the exposed wire beneath a the power node with the point of a needle. When that connection was as secure as he was able to make it, he forged a second one—positive this time—before he moved on to the transmitter coil, using the same technique to wire it directly into the battery and, hopefully, boost the range of his signal.

For several long minutes, he twisted and connected and fiddled, working in total silence. He flicked the unit on a couple of times, gauging his progress and fine-tuning the system. Satisfied he'd done the best he could with what was available, he stood, tucking the microphone just under his collar. Leaving it under the shirt pretty much guaranteed he wouldn't hear for shit, but if Peters saw even one wire, she'd definitely have him strip-searched for the rest of the unit.

If he could sneak it by her, though...

Jim anchored the device behind his left hip, turning it to the on position. He set the broadcast to the least-used channel he could think of, staking his survival on Uhura's ability to monitor all Federation frequencies. As long as he kept a steady stream of out-going noise, she'd eventually hear it. Probably. If they were searching for him. In this specific area. Which he didn't know himself, so how the fuck would Uhura even know to—

Yeah, well, nothing for it but to try.

Jim engaged the unit. "Testing," he murmured, sotto voce with lips barely moving. "Captain Kirk hailing the Enterprise on, like, the only channel one in the whole universe has never heard of. Kirk to Enterprise; Enterprise, did I just win the lottery?"

He didn't expect a response, so he wasn't disappointed when none came. Really.

(*Fuck, he thought instead, I'm boned.*)

Then the door opened and Peters stepped in, Alpha off her left elbow. Behind her to the right stood Dr. Nixon, the heartless head of the Hounds' research program.

*Fuck. I'm totally boned.*

"Welcome back, Kirk," Peters greeted.

"Can't we just skip this part?" Jim suggested. "The witty banter, I mean. You don't really have the personality for it, and I hate having to compensate. Just tell me whatever torture you've got planned, and I'll start trumping your ace, okay?"

"Make note of the subject's initial attitude," Peters instructed Dr. Nixon, who was already tapping a stylus against her data PADD.

"All right, we're going for ominous, then. I'll give you extra points for crazy-as-fuck since, hey, you've earned them." He narrowed his eyes at Peters, hands clenched by his side but body loose to respond to an attack. "What do you want with me, Peters?"
"Eventually," she replied calmly, "I want you to die, Kirk. You took my team from me."

"Hey, let's be fair, you did that to yourself when—"

"So I have an obstacle course for you to run—"

"I'd like to opt out, thanks."

"You're going to run it," she said, eyes cold as her smile. "You won't survive it, but you'll give me some good training data. I've never had an operative like you. If it weren't for certain…unfortunate personality traits—"

"Oh, like not being insane? Or valuing the lives of my subordinates, you megalomaniacal fuck—"

"—you might have been the best. Do what you can in the course, and when you're done Dr. Nixon will examine your corpse to catalogue your physical failures."

Jim startled. "She'll what?"

Alpha's smile was ruthless. "Never heard of an autopsy, Kirk? Not surprising, frankly. You might have those idiots you work with fooled, but we know you better than that. You're a moronic self-centered jackass playing at being smart."

"Since when do dogs speak without permission?" Kirk asked dismissively. "Go back to this bullshit about an autopsy. What makes you think I'll just lie down for shit like that?"

"You'll be dead," Peters told him.

"Yeah right. Let me put that at the top of my to-do list: Fail at another one of Peters' remedial and uninspired training courses."

Peters stepped aside just as Alpha surged into the room. He backhanded Kirk before he could dodge, knocking him to the floor. Jim caught himself on both hands, wrenching his legs around with a low snarl. One heel cracked across Alpha's chin, dazing the operative enough so he stumbled against the wall. Jim flipped onto his feet, expression still twisted with rage. "Now we're even, fucker," he hissed, wiping a hand across his mouth to clear the blood. He spit at Alpha's feet. "Don't forget I consistently kicked your ass at hand-to-hand."

"Not tired," Alpha informed him tightly. "Not with drugs in your system. Not on high alert in a hostile environment. If I've planned this course correctly, I'm the one who gets to kill you."

"Not fucking likely."

"You have ten minutes." Peters motioned to Alpha, who obeyed her instantly, and Nixon, who was still working on her PADD.

When they were gone, Jim slammed his fist into the locked door, shouting his rage. Then he pressed one finger to the transmitter over his hip. "You'd better be listening, Uhura," he whispered harshly. "I'll need a recorded witness statement of this for when they ask me why I tore that son of a fucking bitch apart."

For the next five minutes, he paced, restless and filled with the wild anger that had fueled every bar fight in his life. If Spock had been able to see him, he might call his determination to flay Peters alive
Illogical.

*Spock.*

Jim shut his eyes, drawing a deep breath that he released in a slow, shuddery exhale.

God, *Spock.—Spock.*

What did it matter if he got revenge on Peters if he died afterward? If he killed Alpha first, Nixon would take him apart once he was dead. Spock would eventually find this place—wherever it was, because Spock was a stubborn bastard—and have nothing to show for it but a dissected corpse. Bones would see his body and understand to the last detail what had happened. Uhura would have to send the reports to Command, and everyone would know. Jim couldn't do that to them. The victory of killing his enemies wouldn't—

It wouldn't be worth the cost.

*Fuck.* He had to actually *survive* this, to focus not on showing up Peters' projections of Jim's abilities, or finally, *finally* shutting Alpha up for good, but on keeping himself alive and fixable until help could arrive. He had to wait, and trust, and be *rescued.*

God damn it, when did he turn into the princess of this situation? Bones would *never* let him live this down.

Still. At least he could be a self-locating princess. He already had a plan for contacting his communications expert, so all that left was…

*Spock. Can you hear me?*

He settled on the edge of the biobed, turning his thoughts deep inward. Anger bled some of the effectiveness from whatever drugs Peters had him on, and he used the strength of his fury, the unbending force of his determination, to reach for his bondmate.

*Find me,* he thought, trying in whatever way he could to send Spock the mental equivalent of a flashing "*Your Captain Is Here*" arrow. *I can't get out of here alone. You have to find me before Peters gets her way. I'll do what I can,* but…

"*Kirk to Enterprise. Uhura, are you there?"*

*Spock. I'm here.*

"I'm kind of up shit creek, Uhura, and I'm can't wait forever."

The door slid open at the sound of a buzzer. Jim immediately slunk to it, peering out into the dark hallway beyond.

Great. More with the *ominous* theme Peters seemed to be working.

"…Hey!" he hissed into the tiny microphone in his collar. "Uhura! Listen!"

*Find me!*

He moved into the darkness and began his trial.
Claiming Atlas IV

Jim had a problem.

Not with Peters' run, which was every bit as predictable and rudimentary as expected. He'd torn his clothes and collected enough trophy wounds to whip Bones to a froth, but none of it was bad. Water hazards, booby-traps, and chemical weapons aside, the entire thing reminded Jim of nothing so much as a brisk jog through the twisting halls of Starfleet Academy, late for class or running an errand, no pressure other than some unspoken timeline.

Which was where the real issue started. So far, Peters hadn't interfered on Jim's run in any meaningful capacity. Maybe she really did want an example to show future generations of psychopathic minions-in-training, or maybe she was waiting for the inevitable slipup that would lead to Jim's ultimate failure. Whatever the cause, eventually her already limited patience would snap, and she'd take a more active role in killing him. Jim didn't really want to be in the area when Peters made that decision.

The problem would be contacting Enterprise and getting beamed out of the facility before the endgame. But the admiral was notorious for her practice of total external isolation during training runs, which meant the whole containment area was probably shielded to prevent outgoing/incoming transmissions. If Uhura was going to pick up on Jim's signal, he had to be outside the blackout zone, but all the rooms and hallways he'd found so far only looped back to a central corridor that curved enough to heavily suggest that it was, itself, circular. The air vents were too high to reach on his own, and all the furniture was bolted to the floor.

So how—?

Jim's plotting was interrupted by a heavy figure tackling him mid-run, knocking him sideways into and through a panel in the wall that vanished as he tumbled through it. Combining shielding and holographic interfaces to simulate a wall where there wasn't one, nice, his crew could probably—

"This is what they call the best operative? Gotta say, I'm not impressed. You didn't even know I was there."

The starship captain twisted onto his feet, maintaining a defensive crouch as he scanned his new environment. It looked like an interrogation room, nothing but space, two chairs and a table, all of it washed with harsh lighting designed to cast ominous shadows. He glanced up briefly, blue eyes lingering on the vent access panel that would be just out of reach even if he stood on the table. His eyes returned to his opponent.

…Just out of reach.

A smirk touched one corner of his mouth as he straightened. "Hey there, Alphie. Y'know, this might sound kind of incredible, but you've just solved all my problems."

The Alpha bared his teeth. "The only problem I've got is you, so I guess that makes us even. Or it will, once I've broken your neck. Gotta love kill orders, huh?"

Jim ticked his shoulder in a shrug. "I wouldn't know; I was never so bad at this job that I had to resort to killing." He shifted over to the nearest chair, giving it a light tug.

Just like all the others: bolted down tight.
Alpha took the space Jim had relinquished, forcing Jim to continue to move away until they were circling each other, slinking and low, around the interrogation table. "Kill orders are held in reserve for the operatives who can actually handle them."

"Lap dogs, you mean. No questions asked. I was always a little too busy actually thinking to go for that whole blind devotion thing you've got going. Shows what I know, right? Here I am, practically a nobody, barely a flagship to my name, and you're—Oh wait, that's right." His smirk curled into something cruel as his muscled coiled in preparation for an attack. "You're a wanted felon. What are the perks of that, anyway? Besides the glory of shoot-on-sight orders, I mean. You think you'll get your own room on the penal colony? Or maybe you're looking forward to sharing space with an attractive lifer named Bubba."

"Fucker," Alpha snarled, lunging at Kirk, who stepped away from the table and out of range with his face arranged into an expression designed to infuriate. "Like you've got room to speak," the operative spat. "You think we don't know about Vaivi? About you and First Officer Spock?"

Kirk's face grew still and cold. "You don't know anything."

Alpha laughed, dark and bitter with triumph. "We know everything. If I'd understood how easy it'd be to knock you down a peg, I'd've shot that asshole months ago. His blood was pretty, wasn't it? Like a painting."

"Shut up."

"Yours might not be as pretty, but probably more satisfying. Don't you think? Maybe I'll take a picture, send it to your little bondmate. Or, hey, maybe he'll see the last few minutes through your link, if the drugs wear off in time. What I wouldn't give to see his expression when I crush the last bit of breath from your lungs." Alpha gave a faked shiver, pulling air through his teeth in hiss. "The very thought of it is just...exciting."

"You're sick," Kirk spat, pressed nearly against the wall in an attempt to put space between him and the madman.

Alpha snickered. "That's rich, coming from the Vulcan's bitch."

Jim snapped.

He rushed Alpha, using one of the fixed chairs to launch himself over the table. Alpha laughed right up until Jim caught him around the shoulders and drove a knee into his solar plexus, forcing the air from his lungs. The larger man landed on his back with a gasp of pain that turned into a snarl. He bucked Kirk off, rolling over and onto his feet while Jim slunk out of his reach, low and dangerous with an expression like a promise.

"You should never have been an operative," Alpha hissed.

Kirk didn't respond, eyes sharp and focused, tracking every movement, body feral with the intensity of his concentration.

For a moment, Alpha nearly understood, nearly saw in Kirk what the black ops unit leaders wanted so badly, nearly thought Maybe we should try to take him alive, to keep him for ourselves...

But then Kirk was shifting, attacking like his body was more of a weapon than knife or phaser, and Alpha didn't have any attention to sacrifice on thoughts. He shifted and ducked, blocking Kirk's first blow only to back into the follow-up, sunk deep into the unprotected flesh below and behind his ribcage. If he weren't in his suit, it might have been enough to drop him.
Except he was in his suit.

Instead of falling, he snapped forward, twisting to jam an elbow into Kirk's midsection. Without the protection of the suit he'd refused, no way he'd be able to withstand—

Kirk stumbled backward onto the table, shifting back a degree further to allow room for the kick he slammed into Alpha's side, chasing it immediately with another to the operative's jaw, and Alpha wasn't wearing a helmet to protect against the explosion of light behind his eyes. Reeling, he staggered sideways, reaching out to steady himself against the wall.

"Close combat specialist," Kirk murmured, low and deadly, slinking around the table like a hunting cat closing in on its prey. "All you were ever good for was relaying orders. If you've got a blade, now's the time to use it."

Alpha automatically reached for the knife all operatives kept in their boots. The breath stilled in his lungs when his fingers met nothing but air: Peters, who knew Kirk's fighting style, had forbidden the introduction of any weapons into the simulation. "If they're available in any capacity, Kirk will eventually get his hands on one," she'd said.

She was probably right.

Not that he needed them.

"Too bad," Kirk said, nearly conciliatory, too close, too fast, and Alpha thought—

Fuck. I should have brought a gun.

Kirk attacked, dirty, quick, darting through holes he poked in Alpha's defense, slipping away before any form of retaliation could touch him. His blows always stuck the weak points in the suit's design, hitting seams and ports, driving needles deeper than they were designed to go, manipulating his opponent's strength until it was just another type of weakness. He turned and ducked, forcing Alpha to follow, dizzying him in the effort.

Alpha was the leader of a spec ops team, trained as a broad-spectrum operative to act, in emergencies, as an all-purpose stopgap. Unless someone was injured or killed, he did nothing except analyze a situation, decide the best person to use, and issue orders. He had someone to pick targets off from a distance; he had someone to follow trails through a forest in the dark; he had someone to send into a mêlée. What was the point in honing his own skills if he had a veritable arsenal at his command in any given mission? In a pinch, he served well enough. But he could not out-shoot his sniper or hide from his tracker, nor would anyone expect it of him.

In a similar manner, he could not out-fight his close-combat specialist, who had been trained over a series of years to fill this role.

He might have had a chance if Kirk had taken the time to taunt or boast or tease. If Alpha ever had enough breath to goad, Kirk might have been pushed off the tight, dangerous axis that kept him a perpetual step-and-a-half ahead.

But he didn't.

Instead he harried weak points. He established and maintained an advantage. He did exactly what he was trained to do until Alpha was pinned to the table, struggling to break a strangle-hold that was slowly, inexorably, ruthlessly choking him out.

They had underestimated him.
"You're lucky the Vulcan isn't here," Kirk murmured, low and deadly. "He'd've snapped your neck by now."

"Vulcans," Alpha gagged, "wouldn't—"

"This one would." Kirk released him unexpectedly, grabbing double handfuls of his suit to slam him against the table. "Tell me what she gave me. What drug did she use? How do I get rid of it?"

Alpha tried without success to get some leverage. "Like I'd ever tell you—"

Kirk pushed his elbow into the hollow of Alpha's throat. "Not even to save your own life? I know how much you value it." The captain slammed him against the table again. "Tell me!"

When Alpha didn't immediately respond, Kirk snarled, fury rising bright in his eyes until they were nearly silver.

Except, Alpha realized with a jolt, not just nearly.

"What's wrong with your eyes?"

Kirk sneered. "As a distraction tactic, that sucks."

"No, you freak, they're silver. What did you do?" Alpha scowled. "I knew it wasn't natural; you're on drugs."

At first, Kirk seemed startled. Then all at once relief melted the ice in his gaze, though his grip didn't relax so much as an inch. "Silver, huh?"

"Druggie," Alpha hissed. "They'll kick you out of the fleet for a narcotics habit!"

The last thing he heard was Kirk's tolerant laugh, the last thing he saw an indulgent smile. "I guess it's a habit, kind of. Not one I plan on kicking, though."

Kirk moved, right hand snapping down in a hard, crushing blow.

Light exploded in Alpha's vision again.

Then darkness.

Then nothing.

When he was well and truly unconscious, Jim pushed his body around until it was a pile on the table, using the added height to reach the overhead air vent. "Who's the bitch now?" he muttered, pulling himself into the duct system with a muffled grunt of effort.

He breached their system, crawling outside the containment area and its signal blackout. "Kirk to Enterprise," he whispered. "Come in, Enterprise. You won't believe what I've been through today."

As he began a verbal litany against the woes of being expected to perform his duty without any sort of caffeine, he also reached out with his mind, a gentler message curling ever outward. He babbled and crawled and stretched for what seemed like hours.

Until Spock? he called.

And at last, finally, warmth flooded his mind.
Jim!

For just a moment, he paused in his escape, fell silent in his monologue, and rested his forehead against the cool metal beneath his hands. A smile curled his lips.

What took you so long?

From a clinical perspective, the atmosphere aboard the Enterprise was fascinating.

The crew was somber, quiet and intense in their efforts to locate Captain Kirk. They moved through their duties with a fierce kind of desperation. Security personnel gave the general impression of a caged animal, longing for a fight more than simply waiting.

Yet morale did not suffer. Security did not attempt to create interdepartmental conflicts in an attempt to sate some of their bloodlust. No one broke under the stress that mounted with every passing moment. Instead, the crew drew together, a dangerous united front that did not appear willing to accept defeat in this.

In the beginning, Spock's main concern had been Jim's special operations unit. He thought they might cause trouble, get in the way of other departments or put themselves forward. But Giotto's team was unusually quiet, sequestered in a room given to them by the captain for the purpose of working on a "special project." If Spock had the time, he might have been worried.

He didn't have the time.

"Lieutenant, status report."

"Still nothing, sir," Uhura replied immediately, eyes shut, head tilted as she focused her entire body to listening. Her concentration was such that she appeared to believe she could make a signal appear if she simply willed it hard enough.

Spock glanced at Sulu, manning the navigations consol on his own while Ensign Chekov worked with Scott in engineering to prepare Enterprise for warp. Without turning to look at the acting captain, Sulu shook his head. "Still nothing, sir," he echoed.

They both looked at Spock, silent in their request. Spock's lips thinned. "Nothing," he said, eyes dropping to his hand where it rested on the arm of Jim's command chair.

"But how could they block it?" McCoy asked rhetorically, arms a furious knot where he stood behind Spock. "I've never heard of anything that could interfere with a Vulcan mating bond." He scowled. "Not like I would, though, with how secretive y'all are about anything important."

Spock ignored him. "There are neural inhibitors that can be injected to dampened any number of cognitive functions. It might be theorized that—"

"Oh!" Uhura cried suddenly. "Shut up, all of you, I can't—"

Everyone straightened.

Uhura's fingers flew over her consol. She patched into engineering. "Scotty, I need more power at my station."
"Lass, I've given ye all I've got, I cannae—"

"I need more power at my station now, Scotty."

"...Aye, Lieutenant."

She cut him off with a flicker of one finger, attention diverted to the static-filled, broken communication on a wholly unused channel that she was sure had contained the voice of—

"—sanctimonious son of a bitch, if you get my meaning."

"Spock!" she cried, routing the signal through to the bridge so everyone could hear. "I found him!"

"—and then he called me a bitch. *Me. A bitch.* The nerve of some people, right? I mean, at the very least I'm an asshole. I've earned that distinction by now, haven't I? So I hit him until he stopped moving and used him as a stepstool and I was all *who's the bitch now?* but no one was even around to tell me how cool I am, which is a damn shame 'cause I was freaking awesome. Then I got into the air vents which are probably outside the blackout zone so if you manage to find my obscure signal you might be able to hear me, thus our enchanting conversation. Not bad for a hick, huh, Uhura?"

The Communications expert covered her face with one hand to hide the sudden trembling of her mouth. "My name's Nyota, Jim," she said tremulously. Then she coughed to clear her throat, brushed impatiently at the tears in her eyes, and sat straight, shaking out her hair and settling her fingers on the controls again. "Sulu, I'm sending you the point of origin of this signal."

"—didn't even have a cup of coffee ready for me, I swear to God, doesn't anyone in this outfit have any brains—"

"Got it, Uhura. Plotting a course." After a moment, he crowed, "There! Thirteen hours at Warp Four, sir!"

"Connect me with engineering," Spock ordered.

"—then I was thinking maybe it'd be more elegant to just hog tie her, 'cause she an animal, right? Get it? But that involves actually touching her and, hello, cooties—"

"Scott here, sir, what can I do for ye?"

"Warp Four is insufficient. You must press for more."

In engineering, Scott traded a dubious look with a grime-streaked Chekov. "Sir, we cannae change the laws of physics. I'm not sure there's anything left to—"

"Lieutenant Sulu is placing our arrival at Captain Kirk's destination at thirteen hours if we travel at Warp Four."

Scott startled. "Yeh found him? How did yeh—"

"The statistical probability of his continued survival after four hours drops to twenty seven percent and continues to decline at a rate of thirteen percent every half hour thereafter."

"Sir, I—"

"He will be dead in thirteen hours, Mr. Scott."

Chekov bit his bottom lip, rubbing absently at a streak of grease on his left cheek. "...We could
always—"

The Chief Engineer frowned thoughtfully, calculations wild in his eyes. "Aye. We could do that." He hit the comm unit. "We'll get her goin' Warp Six in no time, sir, don't worry yerself about it."

Trepidation laced the silence that followed his pronouncement. "Mr. Scott, how do you propose to achieve that?"

Scott glanced at Chekov again. "Er, all due respect, Commander, yeh probably don' really wanna—"

"Mr. Scott," the acting captain said firmly, "you will report your plan in detail before it is approved, and you will refrain from beginning absent that approval."

"…Yer breakin' up, Commander," Scott said at last. "I cannae hear anything. Are yeh still there?" He cut the transmission with a burst of static before Spock could respond.

Chekov hesitated before venturing, "…That is cheating, Mr. Scott."

Scott turned away. "It's for a good cause, lad. Plausible deniability, an' all that."

"Ah, no, Mr. Scott, I was not intending to criticize. I only meant that..." He shrugged a little hesitantly when Scott glanced back at him. "To me, it seemed very much like something the captain would do."

The engineer grinned. "Aye, lad. That it was. Now, enough with this chatter! Let's get to work!"

"Yes, sir!"

Within ten minutes, the Enterprise began her trek toward the captain that had been taken from her. Spock sat perfectly straight, perfectly still, his thoughts turned inward, chasing the strengthening cord that linked him to his bondmate.

_Jim_, he whispered. _Jim._

Until, _Spock?_

Triumph rushed from him, warm with exhilaration and love.

_Jim!_

Jim's relief was nearly crippling. _What took you so long?_

_We are on our way, Jim, we know where you are. You must wait for us._

_I can't stay in these vents forever, but I'll do my best._

_You must not be captured!_

_Preaching to the choir there, t'hy'la._

Spock shut his eyes.

"We've reached Warp Six, Commander."

"—couldn't make these vents any smaller if they tried, God, it's like crawling through a fucking straw—"
Better hurry, Spock. Not sure how long I can keep this up.

Spock put a comm through to the room where Giotto and his team were waiting. "Prepare to retrieve the captain. We will reach him in one point three seven hours."

"Aye, sir," Giotto replied immediately.

**Jim. We are nearly there; wait for us.**

"—you guys had *better* be nearly here, it's cold and I ripped my shirt—"

"I'll get sickbay ready," McCoy muttered, taking his leave from the bridge.

"—and, hey, what happens if I run out of vent? Also, I'm probably putting off a heat signature like a really big rat or something. If Hunter were here I'd be pretty fucked, but lucky for me he's… Well, he's sort of dead and that sucks, but it's the thought that—"

Spock sent his confidence through the bond, his sincere, logical belief that they would reach Jim before anything else could happen to him.

Jim's response through both mediums was laughter, since something always seemed to happen, but his mental distress settled, comforted by Spock's reassurance despite his lingering anxiety.

**Jim. We will come for you.**

*I know,* he replied. *I just don't know if—* Visions of Peters and a doctor and dissection, of blood and death and *a little too late.*

**It won't happen. Jim, t'hy'la, I would never allow them to—**

A jolt of adrenalin spiked through Spock, residual from Jim as the captain cursed over his communicator in a crash of sound.

"Fuck!" he hissed, the pounding of his feet echoed by at least three other people giving chase. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck, I have to be quiet for a little while, *son of a bitch,* Kirk out!"

Jim fell utterly silent, leaving barely a hum in Spock's mind that the Vulcan didn't dare prod for fear it would make his bondmate's situation even worse.

"Spock," Uhura gasped, eyes wide, "what—"

"Monitor his frequency," he said flatly.

She swallowed visibly and nodded, turning back to her station.

He sat back and waited, tensed and coiled, helpless and filled with anger. Peters would pay for this.

Peters would *pay.*

---

Jim fell through a weak panel in the vent system directly into a four-person team sent out to patrol for him. Cursing vividly, he cut communication with *Enterprise* and raced down the hall in the direction
he hoped was away. They ran behind him barking like sea lions, loud but incomprehensible, all their gear clattering in warning.

Sirens began to blare down the hallway, sterile lighting replaced with red as the complex went on high alert. Even as he ran, Jim grinned.

*All this for me? They shouldn't have.*

(They really shouldn't: Operatives were trained to flourish in high-stress environments, including one filled with wailing alarms and bad lighting. Whatever staff Peters had probably lacked sufficient simulation hours to prepare them to courses to function at full capacity in an alert setting. By following protocol, Jim's hunters had stacked the deck in his favor.)

When Jim's lead on the search-and-capture team was big enough, he ducked through the first open door he came across, tucking into the shadows to wait. They charged by less than a minute later, shouting into comm units about his last known location.

Perfect.

Jim crept out of the room, slinking back in the direction he'd come, ducking out of sight whenever he heard approaching feet. They seemed to be coming from the same general direction; a monitoring or control station? And if they were all spread out looking for him, who was guarding that room now?

If he managed to overtake an internal station, could he keep it until *Enterprise* arrived?

"Nothing for it but to try," he muttered, ghosting down the long hallway.

It was surprisingly easy.

The guards moved in pairs, the pairs in shifts, establishing a pattern for Jim to manipulate. They almost caught him a few times, resulting in brief scuffles or chases that inevitable ended with Jim stuffing unconscious guards in empty rooms. He collected a few more angry cuts that dripped dark red onto the flooring until he patched them with bits of other people’s torn clothing.

His advanced continued, slow and methodical, until he was directly outside the room. He waited, trying to guess how many would be inside, if there would be monitors or locking systems, if he’d have any way of contacting the *Enterprise* or Starfleet Command.

Maybe there’d even be evidence of what they’d done with this facility before unleashing Jim upon it.

He hacked the keypad, shorting the locking mechanisms to force them open.

Success.

The room was dark, so he snuck inside and locked the door behind him before saying softly, "Computer, lights at seventy percent."

Peters was there, facing him from the comfort of a high-backed chair. On her right stood Dr. Nixon; on her left, Alpha, injured and furious but obviously spoiling for a second round.

"I thought you'd breach the containment unit nearly an hour before you actually did," Peters observed, crossing her left leg over the right. Jim's eyes lifted to the wall of monitors behind her. Each held a different segment of Jim's test, from the moment he stepped out of the staging room to his hacking of the keypad outside.
All of it. They had planned for all of it, anticipating his ability to rise above a typical simulation. The whole building, all the staff, every vent and shadow, it had all been part of the program.

And he had fallen for it.

Jim's hand curled into fists. "You won't get away with this."

"We already have," Peters informed him. "The red alert was a signal for my people to start evacuation procedures. By the time anyone finds you—or what's left of you—we'll be long gone, building an army of operatives trained to meet and surpass the standard you supplied us with today." She tilted her head to indicate Nixon, who was absorbed in the PADD in her hands. "My doctor has enough raw data from the sim that we needn't linger for an autopsy."

"That's a shame," Alpha snarled. "I was looking forward to cutting into you, Kirk."

"You had your chance," Peters reminded him. "You said you could defeat him, and you failed. Don't forget that your training will be based on his scores, too."

Alpha scowled and dropped his eyes.

Jim took a deep breath, fighting to control his anger. "So what are you going to—"

Before he could fully understand what had happened, the energy from Peters' phaser was already washing through him. It felt like the shock of falling into ice water, the burn of sleeping in direct sunlight, the scream of lungs denied oxygen. His extremities tingled and grew numb. He tried to breathe, just once more, tried to remember how to reach for Spock.

He fell to his knees.

Peters and her people stepped around him and out the door.

He toppled to the floor and thought how strange it was not to hear his heart beating in his ears.

Shouldn't his chest move?

Shouldn't his eyes blink?

Shouldn't his blood be warm?

On the bridge of the Enterprise, Spock grabbed his head with both hands and screamed, a pale, broken sound.

Then there was darkness.

And he was grateful for it.
When Spock regained himself, the world was still senseless.

McCoy was there, mouth pressed into a hard line, stress and fear tight around his eyes. He had a PADD in one hand but was uncharacteristically silent. He didn't require clarification regarding what had happened or insist Spock remain in observation. The lack of yelling and ranting peppered with acerbic sarcasm should have felt like a reprieve.

Except.

Somehow the doctor already understood what had happened, what total collapse in a bonded Vulcan meant. The silence was no reprieve; it was Dr. McCoy attempting to devise a manner of inquiring after the specifics of Jim's death.

Spock shut his eyes, unwilling to ever have that conversation.

McCoy took the implied suggestion and stormed away. "You've got a visitor," he growled over his shoulder.

The Vulcan focused on the figure that stepped up to his bed, distracting the hollow of his mind with the details of Ensign C.C. Giotto's cold and dangerous face.

"Orders, sir?" he asked, tone a perfect match for his expression.

"Find her," he said. The words were born of grief and wrath and the ancient screaming rage of his ancestry, and he could not be certain whether he spoke them in Standard or High Vulcan. He doubted it mattered. "Prevent her goals. Destroy her plans. Break her dog. Lay waste to all who gather around her. Ensure that she comes to regret ever hearing the name James Tiberius Kirk."

Whether he understood the orders or just the intent behind them, Giotto saluted sharply in acknowledgment before stalking, cat-quiet, from the room.

Once he was gone, Spock sat up, head hanging as he made an absent attempt to organize his thoughts.

He was unsuccessful.

It didn't really matter.

McCoy strode back into the room. "I want to put you on a regimen of neural-inhibitors. You need something to take the edge off if you're going to—"

"How far out are we?"

The doctor blinked, apparently startled by the abrupt question. "Far out from what?"

Stupid. What else was there, anyway?

"...The landing party's getting ready to beam down," McCoy said, eyes flickering over Spock's neutral expression. "They're in the transporter room."

Spock rose fluidly to his feet, straightened his Science tunic, and stepped toward the exit.
McCoy attempted to stop him only once, by resting a hand on his shoulder. Whatever he saw in Spock's eyes when the Vulcan turned to him caused him to both snatch his hand back and decide upon a different tactic. "Gimme a sec to grab my medkit, all right? You can call over and tell them to wait for us."

Though he didn't respond, Spock agreed by crossing to the communications unit.

They beamed down with six security personnel into honeycombed hallways that were only weakly lit by emergency lights running along the floor. Spock navigated the labyrinthine corridors as though he were as familiar with the station as the Enterprise. Periodically he sent pairs of security officers down splintered halls until only McCoy remained with him.

At least he had the intelligence to maintain his quiet. They were close now.

And Spock had no room left in him for talking.

It took fifteen minutes of walking in utter silence before McCoy realized that Spock was following a blood trail.

Or, he amended after watching the way Spock never so much as glanced at the tacky red stains, there was a blood trail that coincided with whatever trail Spock was following.

In the end, they reached a door. Because the station was running on failing emergency power, it barely cracked open when McCoy started pushing buttons on the keypad.

So, after a few wasted minutes of frustrated cursing, Spock stepped around McCoy to stick his fingers in the crack and open it himself, all but crumpling the door in a cacophony of squealing metal.

Jim was on the other side.

His was stretched out on his back, legs tangled in a way that indicated he had fallen on his stomach and then been moved. His Starfleet uniform was torn; cuts and bruises littered golden skin leached pale by lighting and an inactive cardiovascular system. His face was still, but not peaceful.

Just empty.

A boy knelt by Jim, eyes huge in fright. A crash cart was by his side, ready but unused. The kid had probably been the one who moved Jim in an attempt to revive him.

Useless.

"Identify yourself," Spock ordered, eyes cold as he examined the boy, who startled badly.

"Uh," he stammered, babbling with nerves, "I'm... My name's Thomas, I was—Well, kind of I was tricked and then press-ganged into working for Admiral Peters as a medical aide? I was just trying to help, because he was nice to me, but..." He motioned at Jim's body futilely. "There wasn't anything that could be done by the time I got here. I'm...I'm really sorry. He seemed like a really good guy. I liked him."

McCoy muscled in between the boy and Jim, scanning Jim's vitals with brisk efficiency. He checked his tricorder's readings three times before wilting visibly. He lifted his eyes to the Vulcan's. "Spock," he said sadly, lowering his instrument.

Before anything else could be added, Spock crouched at Jim's side, drawing him up and out of his
awkward sprawl, shifting him into a better position. He waited while McCoy scanned again.

"Spock," the doctor said, trying to make Spock read the results. "Listen, there isn't anything— You tried. God knows how you tried, and I'm sure it was a comfort to Jim."

Spock shook his head, cradling Jim closer. "No."

"You have to face facts. What is can't be changed, right? You have to—"

"No, Doctor, I do not have to—"

"Damn it, man, he was my friend too! But there's nothing—"

"No!"

"He's dead, Spock!"

Spock sucked in a sharp breath, shaking his head again. He curled around Jim, burying his face in the cold curve of a neck, clutching him tightly.

No. Just—

No.

"We'll give you a minute," McCoy offered softly, tugging the boy with him when he rose and stepped out of the room.

Spock was only peripherally aware of their absence. He shifted Jim closer, searching for heat in a still body, and found—

Warmth.

 Curling and fond, tired and fading, but warmth, just the same.

Not in Jim, not even from himself, but from the small stone hanging from a delicate silver chain around his neck. Forgotten in the horrific silence that tore Spock's mindscape to pieces, it sang now in faint echo of the welcome Jim would have given him if he weren't—

But this was Jim. The final beats of his heart. The expiring exhalation of his lungs. The ultimate rush of energy through his body.

A final chance for him, if ever Spock had need of it.

Would he ever need anything as much as this?

He tore the chain loose, twisting the stone between his forefinger and thumb to clear the intricate binding he had laced around it. When it was free, he held it up to his eye, heart racing and frantic in his side as it glowed, pale blue bright in the surrounding darkness.

Another shift let him cradle Jim against one shoulder as he considered how, exactly, to get the last breath back into Jim where it belonged. He suspected he would get only one opportunity, so he had virtually no leeway for experimentation. Pressing it against Jim's skin did nothing but warm it. If he somehow managed to make Jim swallow it, the breath would stick in his stomach. Inserting it into Jim's airway was ridiculous and would likely result in nothing save severe secondary injuries, including a lacerated trachea.
If there was air in the stone, Spock had to free it into Jim's lungs, had to get Jim to inhale.

But Jim's lungs weren't functioning.

So how—?

When the solution finally came to him, Spock nearly snarled at himself for missing something so obvious.

How else?

He popped the gem into his own mouth, carefully tilting Jim's head back before pushing the stone between his back molars. When he thought he was ready, Spock held his breath and bit down hard, until the crystal shattered under the pressure.

It felt strange in Spock's mouth, a chilled swirling mass that felt heavy enough to be liquid but moved like a gas. Without pausing to analyze it, Spock bent forward, locking his mouth over Jim's.

He exhaled, deep and strong, forcing into Jim's lungs a combination of Spock's own breath and Jim's.

Please, he thought, trembling as Jim's chest expanded and then stilled. Please, t'hy'la.

Parted and not. Touching and not. One, forever.

You promised.

In a move so sudden it shocked Spock into breaking away, Jim gasped, a desperate, hungry sound, back arched and eyes wide, hands clawed and frantic as they pawed at the Vulcan mindlessly. He coughed and writhed, sucking air in pain gasps, limbs flailing and wracked with spasms as countless halted systems resumed higher functions.

Jim blossomed warm and wild in Spock's mind, lost but familiar, seeking the only anchor that had ever existed for him, sinking deep when he found it already reaching back for him. The Vulcan twisted tight around his bondmate's chaos, so violently relieved that the emotion was disconcertingly close to full-blown hysteria.

Not that either one cared.

T'hy'la. T'hy'la.

Don't do that again.

Spock may have called for the doctor. McCoy also might have simply heard the commotion and come running. Either way, Jim was soon pried from Spock's hold and stretched out on the ground, one hand still clutched in Spock's as McCoy worked with the boy, Thomas, as his assistant to stabilize the captain.

"Does this kind of thing happen a lot?" Thomas demanded of McCoy, young hands trembling while they held an assortment of hypos for the doctor.

"More than you'd guess," McCoy grumbled.

"In ten years," he told the CMO, eyes glittering with adrenaline and the sweet, heady wave of triumph pulled from the belly of defeat, "I'm coming for your job."
McCoy rolled his eyes. "Whatever, kid. Like you'd last a day." He stabbed the last hypo into the warming skin of Jim's neck before pressing his comm. "McCoy to Enterprise."

"Uhura here. Doctor. Is he…?"

"We found the captain," he said curtly, belying the words by stroking a hand gently through Jim's sweat-soaked hair.

Under normal circumstances, Spock might have felt concern over the ill-timed development of a fever now.

These were nothing like normal circumstances. If anything, he exalted the dark red cheeks and heavy breathing. Jim's blood was circulating; his lungs were functioning. His immune system had recovered enough to rage war against the entire experience.

It was so much better than the alternative that Spock thought of a fever, for the first time, with a sense of fondness.

"Tell sickbay to get ready for him. He's a mess."

The cheer that rose from every throat on the bridge echoed down the secure channel. When Uhura spoke again, her voice was noticeably tight with tears. "You mean…?"

"He's alive, Lieutenant, and I intend to keep him that way. Get ready for four of us to beam up."

"Yes sir," she managed to choke out.

"Can you carry him?" the doctor asked, visibly weighing Spock's frayed but healing self-control.

Without responding, Spock stood, Jim cradled carefully in his arms. He was limp and exhausted, cheeks flushed and eyes glassy, but he breathed and sighed and lived all on his own.

Spock rested his cheek briefly against the sweat-dampened golden hair and shut his eyes in a rush of love and gratitude.

Thank you, Jim. For living.

You came for me, Jim thought faintly in reply. I waited. For as long as I could. I tried, because I thought you were coming, even though no one's ever…

I will always come for you.

I love you, Spock.

Taluhk nash-veh k'dular, my James. I cherish thee.

From a distance, they heard McCoy call, "Four to beam up."

They vanished from the hell Peters had built, rematerializing back aboard the Enterprise.

"Jim," Spock whispered after a heartbeat of surprise. "Can you open your eyes?"

Jim fought to, lifting his head slightly higher

They were waiting for him. In gold and blue and red matched against black, they waited for him, an endless line of crew stretched down both sides of the hallway, starting with his command team. Their
backs were straight, their heads high, at perfect attention.

"Captain on deck!" Lieutenant Commander Scott barked, and all of them, in a sea of motion, snapped regulation salutes.

From the depths of Jim's exhaustion, a smile grew, warm and brimming with his love for them. They can stop. I don't need them to do this. Tell them it's okay to stop.

But the gesture wasn't just for Jim's benefit, and they both knew it. So Spock kept his silence even when Jim burrowed tiredly into his shoulder.

Jim's crew maintained their show of respect as Spock carried their captain down the hall to the turbolift, which was open and waiting for him. Uhura crumpled a little when he passed, shoulders curved as she cried, but fought to hold her stance. When the lift shut, she folded completely, hands over her face and shoulders heaving. Scott pillowed her against his shoulder, murmuring Gaelic nonsense to offer what comfort he could while the rest of the crew returned to their stations.

"When Spock collapsed," she gasped after a long silence, "I thought—I thought he was dead, Scotty. I thought I didn't find him fast enough. I thought she killed him."

"Aye, lass. So did we all."

"I thought I failed him."

Scott shook her, gently but firmly. "You dinnae fail him, Uhura. You detected his signal in a sea 'o nothing, and we would never would've found him otherwise. He's alive because you brought us to him. Let that be enough, and go about your day comforted by it."

"I can do that," she said in weak mimicry of their young navigator. "It's a good idea." For a few seconds, she just sniffled, composing herself. She scrubbed her hands over her face to brush away the tears, then stepped back as she exhaled shakily. She stilled, expression hardening. "I think," she said, slow and deliberate, eyes locked over his shoulder, "there's one more thing I need to find first."

When Scott turned to follow her line of sight, what he saw was C.C. Giotto, flanked by the others Jim had spent all his free time training.

A wicked smile curved his mouth.

"Now that's a good idea."

McCoy settled Jim in a biobed and refused to let him move. The readings fluctuated often enough to keep him on the edge of paranoia, spiking and plummeting erratically. He kept Chapel and Thomas hopping, running around sickbay for an eclectic combination of chemicals and homeopathic remedies.

What little warning he did get when Jim's system was about to go wonky came from Spock, who had stationed himself beside his captain, taken one of his hands, and all but turned to stone. McCoy suspected Vulcan mind-voodoo and tried not to disturb him.

It didn't hurt, of course, that Spock was acting as a kind of oh-shit early detection system by quietly saying, "Doctor," right before Jim's fucked-up body kicked up another problem.

The interval between episodes was lengthening, thank Christ. Eventually they should stop altogether, though McCoy made sure to glance at Jim's impossible allergy chart before thinking in terms of an actual prognosis. If there was any kind of strange physiological tick that could be developed as a
side-effect of being functionally resurrected (which, by the way, what the fuck?), Jim Kirk would develop it.

Eventually, somewhere around the thirty-hour mark, McCoy felt comfortable enough to wake Thomas up and send him with Chapel to find temporary quarters.

"Remember," Thomas yawned in warning as he left, "this job is mine in ten years."

"Nurse," McCoy said to Chapel, "the toddler is showing signs of psychosis, which is concerning in someone his age. See if he can sleep it off. Although I'd guess the prognosis is dim."

Chapel laughed and towed a grumbling Thomas away.

Two point three days later, while most of the medical staff was sleeping and only Spock was with him, Jim woke. His eyes opened in thin slits of electric blue, drifting over to Spock at his side. He licked his lips, squeezed the Vulcan's hand, and whispered hoarsely, "Hi."

Spock, who had known his t'hy'la was working up to consciousness for nearly an hour, placed an ice chip on his parched lips. "You should sleep more, if you can."

Jim shook his head weakly. "Not tired."

"You are. But I will answer your questions." He fed Jim more ice slowly, monitoring his reaction to each new piece through the strong, warm hum of their connection. "The crew is concerned for your health but otherwise well. We are returning to Starfleet Command to be debriefed and then sent on an extended shore leave."

"Yay," Jim rasped, eyes drooping shut against his formidable will.

Spock ticked an eyebrow. "Indeed." When Jim's eyes fell shut completely, he moved the cup of ice back to its place on the bedside table. His other hand, as ever, remained locked with Jim's. "As for Peters, her dog and her second-in-command Dr. Nixon were captured and brought to trial by the special operations unit known most commonly as Archer's Hunt."

A thin laugh shook Jim. "That's perfect. I bet their unit emblem is, like…an archer and…hunting dogs and maybe…a hawk or…cat…"

"They were found guilty of a great number of crimes including attempted murder of a Starfleet captain and conspiracy to commit treason."

"That's a bad one," the captain whispered, more than half asleep already. "Penal colony near…that place with the…thing…"

Spock let his smile curl down their bond, settling warm in Jim's sleepy thoughts.

"At least it's done," Jim said faintly, fingers tightening on Spock's. "It's finally done."

"It is," Spock agreed, brushing the hair from his captain's eyes. He bent close to press a chaste kiss against dry lips.

"'s twice now."

"Twice what, t'hy'la?" the Vulcans asked softly, stroking what soft, warm skin was available to him.

"You saved my mind and then…m'body… I guess I owe you pretty big now."
"I did it as much for myself as you," Spock admitted, fingers dancing over Jim's pliant mouth. "I love you, Jim. I will not live without you." He felt a smile curve the lips he touched. "Sleep now."

For the first time in his life, Jim obeyed without protest.

The ordeal involved in getting Jim, who was still recuperating, successfully set up on his shore leave was intense.

For the first week Enterprise was in space dock, McCoy refused to discharge Jim from Starfleet Medical. Jim attempted to sign out AMA and got to witness his best friend tear the official form to shreds right in front of him.

He would have laughed if something about McCoy hadn't been screaming silently of grievous bodily harm. (And the bastard would know which parts of him could sustain more abuse; he was annoyingly thorough like that.)

When he was finally released, McCoy followed Jim and Spock to the quiet penthouse with the gorgeous view of the pacific ocean that Starfleet had arranged for them by way of an apology that kept Jim extremely close to medical aid.

"This is ridiculous," Jim grumbled while McCoy swept the entire place for potential allergens that he was collecting in a large sack, grumbling his intention of dumping them on Admiral Pike's desk. ("Safe my Southern ass!") "You have a daughter, Bones. Go bug her."

"I'm not listening to you," McCoy reminded him.

Spock assisted Jim in his effort to settle in a large, well-cushioned arm chair. "That's not exactly news, Nanny McCoy."

McCoy hurled a lumbar pillow at him but otherwise didn't respond. He moved into the bathroom; almost immediately he crowed, "Tea tree oil! Ha!"

"Is he playing Anaphylactic Bingo or something?" Jim asked rhetorically. "What does he get if he wins? And does no one else find this slightly creepy?"

Spock stroked the curve of Jim's ear, tugging it lightly in admonishment. "He is your friend."

"And illogically concerned."

"It would only be illogical if the sack he is carry were not filled with items almost sure to close your already compromised airways."

Jim sighed, flopping back against the lumbar pillow with an expression of resigned irritation. "I want you to know," he told Spock firmly, "that this is my most ferocious pout."

"Still not better than Chekov's," Bones called from the bathroom.

A message chimed on the communications unit, sending an irrational spike of ill-ease through Spock before he quickly mastered it. "I will return shortly," he told Jim. "Do not move."

"Won't," Jim agreed, shutting his eyes.

When Spock read the message, he assumed at first it was incorrect. McCoy emerged from the bathroom in time to register the unnatural stillness in Spock's body. He muscled close to read the message; his face twisted in a victorious snarl. "No one deserved it more," he spat. "I'm goin' to give
This to Pike. You be good," he ordered his captain before stalking from the premises.

By that time, Jim was sitting straight, on full alert. "What happened?" he demanded.

Spock crossed the room to sit by him. "Peters is dead, Jim," he said. "As are Alpha and Dr. Nixon."

Jim blinked. "…What?"

The Vulcan inclined his head. "According to Admiral Archer, they escaped from the penal colony in a short-range shuttle that was neither built nor ever intended for any kind of deep space travel. They were being tracked when their ship fell into the orbit of a red giant star. They were unable to reach escape velocity and were consumed. They are dead."

"Dead," Jim echoed numbly. He licked his lips. "How sure are they?"

"Their level of certainty is set at one hundred percent. Peters, Alpha, and Nixon were on the shuttle. The shuttle was pulled into a sun. They were either incinerated or suffered from heat stroke and then were incinerated. But, Jim, they are most certainly dead."

Jim gripped Spock’s hand, eyes shut and expression smooth. "So this is what that feels like," he murmured.

"What do you mean?" Spock asked carefully.

The captain favored his First Officer with a bright, wild grin. "Freedom." He pulled Spock close, tangling himself in the heat of a Vulcan body. "I'm finally free, Spock. You should really help me celebrate."

"As you wish," Spock breathed into his mouth, and said little else of importance for many hours afterward.

Peters did not fall into a star and incinerate.

She walked her purloined ship with the grim confidence of hard victory, already planning the next three steps, mentally organizing the camp she would build for her recruits. Even if rumors of Kirk's impossible survival were true, she still had his data.

Actually, his living was almost like a gift. She would use field courses developed from his missions to train the operatives that would kill him and seize the Enterprise for her new fleet. Best of all, he would never see her coming.

"Status report," she ordered, stepping into the engine room to check on Alpha's progress in turning a delivery shuttle into a small cruiser.

When she found him, he was dead.

Someone had broken his arms, legs, and neck. It was silent. It was brutal.

It was a message.

"Nixon," she called into her communicator, running through the low hallways toward her doctor's make-shift data processing lab. "Nixon, we've been compromised, you have to—"

Too late.

Nixon was dead, gagged and blindfolded with her own observation equipment, hung from the
ceiling with the cords of the recording gear she had used to monitor Kirk. His files were wiped, the PADDs containing backup copies systematically opened and laid out.

Another message.

Peters used the butt of her phaser to smash the panel that powered the lights. The ship went dark. She slunk through the corridor on her way to the bridge, which was the only room worth attempting to barricade.

She could still build her army without her Alpha. Even without Nixon. All she had to do was survive, as she had for years.

The bridge was clear, consoles beeping quietly, rhythmically, in time with the deliberately calm beat of her heart and the measured breath in her lungs. She locked the doors, ruining the keypads so no one could follow. Then, with her back to the monitors and both entrances in her line of sight, she waited.

"Find her," a low, dark voice whispered, coming from the deep shadows she herself had created. She leapt from the consol, phaser tight in her grip as she sought something to sight—anything in the darkness to make a target.

But nothing moved. There was no sound of breathing, nor of a shifting body. Just the darkness.

"Prevent her goals. Destroy her plans."

Her ship veered sharply off course, tossing her to the ground with a sharply exclaimed curse. She scrambled to her feet but could not locate her phaser again. "Who are you!" she shouted. "Show yourself!"

"Break her dog."

The screen behind her flickered, blacking out before showing looping footage of her best and final operative being tormented and killed by figures that never quite stepped into frame.

"Lay waste to all who gather around her."

A second film began: the systematic execution of her doctor.

"Ensure that she comes to regret ever hearing the name…"

Finally her enemy emerged, a group of three tall, powerfully built men. They were dressed in black but armored with strategically located guards to protect their vitals. The gear had been cannibalized from the operative suits currently in use, but had shed much of the weight and nearly all of the monitoring equipment. Each operative bore on his left pectoral a slightly iridescent black Starfleet emblem, taking them instantly from the ranks of official spec ops warriors, who were never branded in case they were caught.

These were not men who had come here with the knowledge of an admiral. They were not a team on a mission. These three belonged to—

"James Tiberius Kirk."

Their faces were hidden behind featureless black masks formed of two pieces. One covered everything from forehead to nose and cheekbones. The lower half fit over mouth and jaw but was removable, as evidenced by the spokesman, who held his in a gloved fist.
No prints, if anyone even bothered to investigate. She glanced at her new trajectory and felt a wave of what might have been despair.

No investigation if she and her unstable ship and murdered crew were sent into a star.

Clever of them, really.

"Will you monitor my frequency?" she asked of them, vicious in her defeat. "Will you listen to my screams as my ship melts around me?"

She felt a jolt and looked down.

Blood poured from her stomach from the phaser fire, coming not from the three men but one of the two additional who had lingered in shadow, unseen.

She lifted her eyes to the leader. "This is murder," she said around the blood dripping from her mouth.

"I am a security officer aboard the Starfleet flagship Enterprise," he replied, "whose captain you will try to kill as long as you draw breath. Believe me when I say: This is actually in my job description."

Without any visible command, all of his operatives fired.

She never knew which of them killed her.

Months later, Jim was lounging on his bed aboard the Enterprise, studying a list of potential orders and trying to get Spock to name a favorite without any success.

"My pick would be deep space exploration," Jim said, tipping his head just enough to watch Spock securing the last of their personal belongs in preparation for launch. "I mean, space is the final frontier, right? If we're going on a voyage, that should be it. We're the flagship. Right?"

"That is an accurate observation."

Jim rolled his eyes. "You're no fun at all since I got better."

Spock ticked an eyebrow at him until he flopped back with a grin.

Shortly thereafter, Jim's PADD chimed. "Orders!" he crowed, jackknifing into a sitting position. He scrolled through his messages to access the new one. "Ah, damn, it's not orders, it's just—Hey, it's from Thomas!" Spock glanced back to find Jim smiling brightly. "He got accepted into the advanced med track. Awesome, he'll be available to transfer onto the Enterprise in just five years. We can wait that long." Jim added to his bondmate, "right?"

"Indeed," Spock agreed blandly. "I look forward to nothing so much as the day when he becomes a permanent addition to Dr. McCoy's medical team, where he can begin to set traps and physical challenges designed to drive your CMO into early retirement."

Rather than chagrined, Jim seemed delighted. He laughed and shook his head. "Man, that'll be great."

"We shall see how you interpret the potential for anarchy five years from now."

"Tons can change in that amount of time," Jim agreed, absently composing a reply for his young friend. When another message chimed, he ignored it just long enough to send Thomas' reply, then pulled it up. "Yes!" he cheered, popping up from the bed as he scanned the official document. "Our
five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.” He grinned at Spock again. "I like the sound of that."

"Somehow," the Vulcan replied, cool and level, sarcasm expressed fully in the dry tingle that itched down their link, "I am singularly unsurprised." He handed Jim his Command tunic.

"After the first two years," the captain added without rising to his First's bait while he tugged the shirt over his head, "this should be a snap. No megalomaniacal admirals, no pirates, no crazed perpetrators of genocide. Just a nice, relaxing cruise through unexplored and potentially hostile space. And think! When we get back, Thomas will be ready!"

Spock tilted his head thoughtfully, hands clasped behind his back to subdue the urge to put Jim's golden head back into some kind of order. "Do you suppose it is too late to request a transfer?"

Jim laughed, exactly as Spock had known he would, and pressed their bodies close before saying, "You know you'd miss me too much to transfer. Besides, who'll save me from myself if you're not there?"

The Vulcan submitted to the thoroughly logical impulse to ensure his captain continued to present a professional figure by petting his hair into place. "Another accurate observation."

"Sap," Jim teased. He tugged at the edges and seams of his uniform until everything sat perfectly, combing one hand through his hair to absently ruin Spock's efforts. "Alright," he said at last. "Ready to do this thing?"

"I am," he agreed, following Jim to the door.

Jim stepped out of their quarters into the hallway, turning back to smile at Spock. He held out his hand. "Walk with me?" he asked.

Spock tangled their fingers together, eyes bright with warmth. "Always."

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